PARTICIPATORY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL EXPLORATION NEEDED!

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Abstract. The pace of change in participatory, rights based qualitative children’s research has been remarkable. Not that long ago children were framed as objects of adult study whose alleged immaturity, unreliability, capriciousness and unformed mini-adult status rendered them capable of little else. Pioneering participatory researchers with children have provided a strong theoretical point of departure from the old order and developed new qualitative methods. A recent analysis of the state of the field review reaffirmed how qualitative research with children fulfills qualitative researchers’ emancipatory aims and proposed a number of questions for further theoretical and methodological exploration. In this review and discussion paper we continue the tradition of epistemological and political reflexivity challenging the old and imagining the new. We address three of the questions from the recent review of the status of the field. Question one is about the choice between studying concerns in children’s here and now with bigger questions about citizenship. Secondly we ask how we consider and express truth claims as we throw off the shackles of adultism within the qualitative tradition’s theoretical perspectives on multiple realities created and recreated during research. Our third question explores how and why this new paradigm must go beyond the European roots and verbal methods and fulfill qualitative research’s emancipatory mission by embracing different cultural understandings and expanding our methods. Our review paper examines the methodology and findings from studies in Australia and New Zealand as case studies to address these questions using critical reflection: a rigorous and transparent process involving a reflective journal or equivalent, trusted colleagues for feedback, and the time and space to think and revisit material. We operationalize this by describing each of the three questions in turn and suggest tentative answers by reflecting on pertinent studies, including critical perspectives on our own work. Finally, we use our reflections to propose ways forward to reconstruct an emancipatory approach to qualitative research with children that stands on the shoulders of the pioneers in our field. Drawing on participatory action research, we propose a formal participatory first stage of research to develop the most appropriate research question and methods: including principles to select the range of participants for study. This first stage should lead to a formal partnership which creates the collaborative and bridging spaces characterised by sufficient trust and safety to enable the more difficult discussions about our third question of accelerating existing moves from European roots. These modest proposals are derived from epistemological reflexivity which considers how the study design and processes shape research; but to come up with more detailed methodological guidance, we suggest stepping back from methodological musings and engaging in more theoretical reflection. We draw upon Bourdieu’s sociology of power to propose a new form of reflection: political reflexivity: exploring the macropolitics of institutional silencing and exclusion and examining power dynamics of research relationships.

Keywords: children, participatory methods, new sociology of childhood, children’s rights, qualitative methods.