Developing Participatory Methods to Include Young Children's Voices in Research

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ABSTRACT

This clinical tutorial draws on a case study to demonstrate how researchers can design studies that access the voices of even the youngest children. The case study explored young children's perceptions of reading at a time when government policy directs that reading should be taught through a systematic synthetic phonics "first and fast" approach and assessed using the phonics screening check. This collective case study, set within a single primary school, used a range of tools designed within a listening framework, to explore the views of seven 5- to 6-year-old children. By reflecting carefully on the methodology used in this study, this article demonstrates how children can be skilled and insightful participants in research provided they are given activities that allow them to engage, respond, and communicate in ways appropriate for their age. This tutorial has implications for all those interested in conducting participatory research with young children.

KEYWORDS: participatory methods, reading, listening framework, children's voices

Learning Outcomes: As a result of this activity, the reader will be able to:

- Justify why it is important to include the voices of young children in research.
- Explain the concept of a "listening framework" and apply it to various research contexts.
- Summarize the issues arising when conducting participatory research with young children.
- Discuss how to design research activities that position children as "active" and "expert" participants.

Over the last two decades, it has become increasingly recognized that it is important to include the views and experiences of young children in research. Work in the sociology of childhood (see for example James & Prout, 2015) has challenged traditional views of what it is like to be a child and raised an understanding of how such constructions vary

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across time, place, and cultures. From this perspective, children are now seen as competent social actors, who can alter the conditions of their own childhood and for whom adult definitions of their needs are not wholly sufficient (Mayall, 2002). Given this shift, it was once common for researchers to consider children below the age of about 7 as "not viable as interviewees" due to their young age (Kellett & Ding, 2004, p. 167). Over time researchers have come to acknowledge that if we want to receive valid information about children's views, then we must find ways to talk directly to the children themselves (Scott, 2000; Langston et al, 2004). This is important as previous studies have indicated that young children inhabit a social world of which adults "have only a limited understanding" (Cremin & Slatter, 2004, p. 458). This was demonstrated in Scott's (1997) earlier research, which showed that parents tend to portray a much "rosier" picture of their children's health and well-being than the children themselves, thus emphasizing the need to find ways to access children's voices in research.

The belief that research should be done *with* children rather than *on* children has resulted in the development of participatory research methods, specifically designed to access the voices of children. Participatory research has been defined as "research designs, methods, and frameworks that use systematic inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by an issue being studied for the purpose of action or change" (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 1). However, despite the growing popularity of participatory methods in social and educational research, there remains some doubt as to how such a methodology might be applied to data collection with very young children. The purpose of this article is to explore the issues arising when research is designed to collect data directly from young children, with a view to supporting other researchers and practitioners in designing research activities that are ethical and methodologically sound. In order to do this, this article presents an example of a research design to investigate 5- to 6-year-old children's perceptions of reading.

This study (Newhouse, 2024) was inspired by the first author's role as a primary school teacher and later as a special needs coordinator in a primary school in England over the period 2005 to 2021. During that time, she saw a significant change in the way children from 4 to 7 years old were taught to read, which moved from a broad, multistrategy approach to an increasingly structured approach dominated by a focus on systematic synthetic phonics. In 2012, the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) was introduced; this is an assessment tool designed to measure each Year 1 (aged 5–6 years) child's ability to decode using synthetic phonics. This test is comprised of 40 words, half of which are pseudo words, meaning these are "made up" words that conform to regular phonological patterns representing the grapheme-phoneme-correspondences taught sequentially through synthetic phonics instruction. The purpose of this study was to explore Year 1 children's perceptions of reading and understand the factors that influenced their perceptions, at this point in their school careers.

The aim of this research demanded that a participatory approach be used to collect data directly from the children themselves. The design of the research tools was initially governed by two factors. First, as the intention was to gain a holistic understanding of how the children perceived reading and the different factors that molded their views, it was necessary to create a broad range of data collection tools that would explore what the children said about reading and how they acted during reading-related activities. In order to provide context to this data, parents and teachers were also interviewed. Using multiple tools also allowed the data to be triangulated, which is an important way of developing trustworthiness in case study research (Yin, 2013; Heesen et al., 2019). Secondly, there was a need to create data collection tools that children of this age would be happy to engage with and which would enable their voices to be heard.

This clinical tutorial will support researchers in a variety of fields, including health, education, social work, and so on, to design studies that allow children to participate in research as active respondents. The article begins with a review of relevant literature concerning the design and implementation of participatory research methods with young

children. The issues raised in the literature are then illustrated in a case study, which demonstrates how children can be positioned as "active" in the research process, and "expert" in matters that affect them and their lives.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature reflects on the specific issues that arise, and need to be addressed when designing research tools to access the voices of young children. Beginning with an introduction to the Mosaic Approach, as an example of a "listening framework," the review emphasizes the importance of considering the affordance and limitations of specific activities, as well as factors such as the role of the researcher when implementing research activities with young children.

The Mosaic Approach

In recent years, many participatory studies with young children have drawn on the principles of the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2001, 2011; Clark, 2017). This is a collection of methods used to access the views of participants for whom conventional data collection tools may not be appropriate. The Mosaic Approach features two important strands: firstly, it is an array of data collection tools based on a "framework of listening" and, secondly, it advocates the careful piecing together of the information gathered, including reflection and interpretation. Clark (2017) describes listening in this context as an active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting, and constructing meanings which should not be limited to the spoken word. The framework of listening revolves around a number of important principles. These include that it is a multimethod approach recognizing the different voices of the children; that it treats children as experts and agents in their own lives; that it is reflective in including the views of children, practitioners, and parents in addressing interpretation; and that it is adaptable in that it can be applied in a variety of early childhood contexts. A framework of listening, adapted from this concept, but created specifically for this study, is set out later in this article.

In their first study using this approach, Clark and Moss (2001) set out to discover what it was like for young children younger than 5 years to be in their nursery environment. Data collection tools included observation and child conferencing, as well as more innovative participatory methods such as the use of cameras, tours, and mapping. Together the data collected, using the various tools, allowed the creation of a living picture of what it was like for the children to be in that environment. Observations were recorded as field notes and researchers created narrative accounts centered on groups of children playing together. The records of play were then discussed with practitioners and the children themselves. Other components of the mosaic included child-led tours of the institution, role-play activities, and children's own maps and drawings of the environment. The second stage of this approach was to bring together all of the data collected from each part of the mosaic. This was achieved by using thematic analysis, where themes that appeared most frequently across all the data sets were picked out.

Since this first study, elements of the Mosaic Approach have been developed by other researchers and practitioners to support them in listening to young children's perspectives in various contexts including social work (Holland, 2004). Many educational researchers have also drawn on elements of the Mosaic Approach, especially when seeking to address young children's views on literacy. For example, mosaic-style methods were used to explore what children (aged 6–16) thought literacy was, in the context of a community-centered library in England (Pahl & Allan, 2011). Described as a participatory project, children led much of the research process themselves, using tools such as community walks, auditing literacy materials in local shops, using video cameras, and making scrapbooks. One key finding from this study was that the children's perceptions of literacy included some practices that were invisible to adults. For example, Pahl and Allan (2011) found that children saw literacy as a connective practice that linked aspects of their everyday lives.

There is much to be learned from looking at the way the Mosaic Approach has enabled

researchers to improve their understanding of children's perspectives in a range of contexts, often resulting in new or unexpected findings. However, developing an array of research methods is not sufficient in itself to ensure that young children's voices are expressed and heard. Punch (2002) warns that we must be careful not to assume that research techniques are methodologically robust simply because they are "child-friendly" but that there is a need "to critically reflect on the affordances and limitations of such techniques, so as to be able to defend the viability of our own research design" (Levy & Thompson, 2015, p. 113). It is therefore important to understand what is needed within a research activity in order for it to be effective in eliciting the voices of young children.

Engaging Young Participants in Conversations

Much of the literature reporting participatory studies with young children has considered various ways in which to encourage children to talk—in other words, to design activities that are alternatives to the traditional interview. In particular, previous studies have indicated that some researchers have used objects and pictures to encourage two-way communication between adults and children. Flewitt (2014), for example, noted that "having something to share which is of interest to the interviewer and the interviewee(s) can create a reciprocity and a bond of communication which encourages common engagement" (2014, p. 144). This "something to share" might take the form of props or objects, pens and paper, sand, pictures, or even the use of drama or storytelling (Flewitt, 2014). Other researchers have shown how the use of third-party, or projection techniques, can be particularly effective when encouraging young children to talk. An example of this is Levy's (2011) use of interview-with-a-puppet activities. Levy based her study on the concept of the interview but sought new interview-based tools that would generate valid data from children as young as 3 years old. A key part of this was the use of a play-orientated structure to provide a familiar context for the children. Levy chose third-party techniques using a puppet (Charlie Chick) who invited the children to demonstrate to the puppet what reading is and to describe how they felt about reading. Levy also used small-world play materials and familiar play equipment to encourage a conversation about the children's perceptions of screen and paper-based literacy, especially in relation to their home environment.

Creating a distinction between the researcher's role and that of a teacher also helped to reduce the expectation from the pupil that the researcher would provide guidance to them in the way a teacher might. Freeman and Mathison (2009), for example, describe the principle of reciprocity in which the child is seen to gain something themselves from the research; this notion of reciprocity can help reduce the potential power inequality between the child and the adult researcher (Eder & Fingerson, 2003). Moreover, the use of third-party or projection techniques has been seen to be effective in helping overcome the temptation for children to say what they think the adult wants to hear (Cohen et al., 2011).

Similarly, using storytelling, where perceptions can also be expressed in the third person, has been found to be particularly advantageous as it allows the dialogue to be led by the interviewee. This technique also enables many children to engage effectively in research activity, regardless of their literacy attainment and is therefore socially inclusive and suitable for children in the early stages of their education. This was demonstrated in the work of Davis (2007), who investigated why some primary school-aged children like or dislike reading. Davis (2007) compared the use of traditional interviews with the use of storytelling activities and found the latter to be particularly revealing when used with children aged 6 to 8 who had reading ages below 8 years and 6 months.

An alternative approach was used by Hanke (2014), who created incomplete cartoon-style drawings representing some familiar features of guided reading.[1] The researcher was present as groups of children completed the drawings, and in some cases mediated what they

[1] *Guided reading is small-group reading instruction designed to provide differentiated teaching usually centered on a shared text.*

wanted to draw. Hanke (2014) commented that the process of completing these drawings enabled young pupils to make unexpected insights regarding their guided reading sessions. This resonates with Clark's assertion (2017) that when creating activities to listen to children, researchers do not necessarily need to involve the spoken word.

The literature presented in this section has shown how researchers have not only used artifacts (including storytelling) within their research design to motivate and engage young children, but as methodological instruments to facilitate talk and promote the acquisition of reliable data from young children. Building on this, the next section explores how this literature was influential in designing the tools used in the case study.

Developing Methods for the Case Study

As with all research, this study was designed to meet a specific set of research needs; however, the commitment to listen to young children's voices meant that a number of particular considerations were made during the methodological design of this study. Drawing on the work of Clark and Moss (2001) and Levy (2011), it was felt that some kind of mosaic of activity would allow the data to be triangulated and therefore ensure that the children's voices were being reliably interpreted. That meant that the study would include a variety of child-friendly activities, but it was recognized from the outset that understanding the characteristics of this particular age group was important when designing the tools. For example, Levy (2011) successfully used a glove puppet in her research with 3- to 5-year-olds, but there was a danger that the slightly older children in the case study may have felt patronized if asked to talk to a puppet. Given that there were clear advantages in using some kind of third-party approach, this study therefore used an unfinished storybook as a conduit between researcher and child, as discussed in the next section.

The design of the research was also influenced by the fact that this study was not looking at a phenomenon at a particular point in time (as seen in the Clark & Moss study) or attempting to compare children's responses across time or across cohorts (as seen in the Levy study), but was seeking to understand how certain factors had influenced children's perspectives. This had implications for aspects of the research design. Firstly, it was decided that the activities would be carried out on a one-to-one basis with each child, rather than using group or collaborative tasks such as focus groups, child conferencing, or filmmaking. Secondly, given that the study sought to explore who or what influenced the perceptions of reading that these children held, it was important to hear the views of parents and teaching staff and to gather and analyze some of the contextual data around each child's experiences of reading.

In brief, this study was made up of a mosaic of different research activities, including contextual interviews with parents and teachers. The use of participatory techniques involving age-appropriate activities and materials ensured that the children's voices were elicited and heard; the data from the children included drawings, talk, the outcome of sorting objects, photographs, and observations of the children. The next section provides a detailed overview of the various activities designed to access children's voices in this study.

CASE STUDY: DESIGNING RESEARCH TOOLS TO UNDERSTAND THE INFLUENCE OF SYNTHETIC PHONICS TEACHING ON CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF READING

The design for this study was a collective case study, based within a single Year 1 class, in a primary school in England. Year 1 is the second year of formal education in England when children are 5 or 6 years old. Children are required to pass the Phonics Screening Check during the summer term of that year. Failure to achieve the given pass mark results in pupils having to re-sit the test the following year. The school was selected purposely as it was the school where the first author worked as a special needs coordinator. Seven participants were selected based on their range of ages within the class, gender and family position, and reading attainment (according to teacher's assessment).

Table 1 Demographic information

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age at start of study	Position within the family	Reading attainment
Beth	Female	5 y 8 mo	Youngest of 2 siblings	Below age-related expectations
Katie	Female	5 y 10 mo	Oldest of 2 siblings	At age-related expectations
Lily	Female	6 y 5 mo	Oldest of 2 siblings	At age-related expectations
Maddy	Female	6 y 6 mo	Youngest of 3 siblings	Above age-related expectations
Robbie	Male	6 y 7 mo	Youngest of 2 siblings	Above age-related expectations
Tommy	Male	6 y 6 mo	Oldest of 2 siblings Also had older half-brother	Above age-related expectations
Zac	Male	6 y 6 mo	Third of 4 siblings	At age-related expectations

All children were monolingual and spoke English as their first language which reflected the population of this school. One child was of mixed cultural heritage. Table 1 sets out the demographic information for each child participant.

A framework of listening was created specifically for this study, represented in Fig. 1 by a Venn diagram which shows three interlocking circles, labeled as child-focused methods, home-focused methods, and school-focused methods. Within the center circle are data collection tools that acquire data directly from the child participant, using a range of participatory tools allowing each child to demonstrate their perceptions of reading, through talking, drawing, using pictures, and direct observations of the child during school activities. This was designed to give a broad balance between what the child said and what the child did. These tools will be described fully below.

However, this study also recognized the significance of the other voices involved in the child's life and learning, and therefore it was important to collect data from the two most relevant contexts for that child—the home and the school. Overlapping areas of the diagram below (see Fig. 1) represent where data

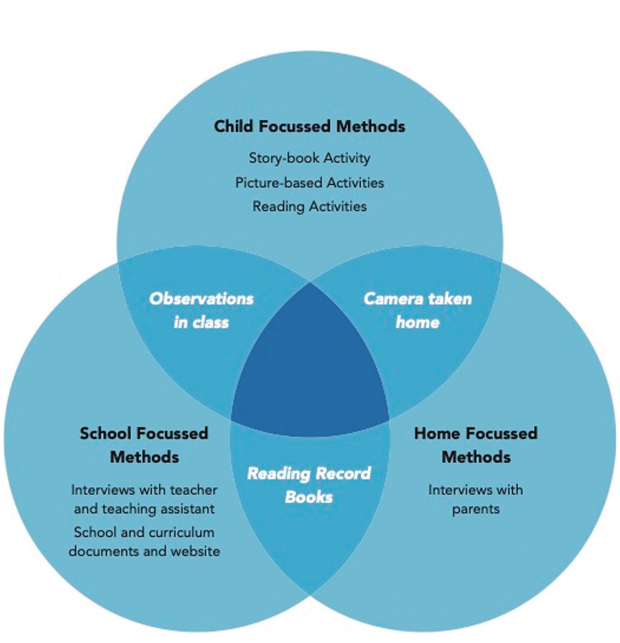

Figure 1 The listening framework.

collection tools cross between domains, such as during observations of the children within the classroom or where the children used disposable cameras to take pictures of reading at home.

Child-Focused Methods

All the child-focused research activities described in this section, apart from the observations of the children within the class, were implemented with one child at a time with the researcher, and all were audio recorded.

THE STORY BOOK ACTIVITY

The child-focused interviews in this study were built around a custom-made "incomplete" storybook. The story contained either a female or male child character, and each participant was asked to choose which version they wanted to work with. It was important to make the characters as closely identifiable with the participant's own experiences and understanding of themselves so that they could put themselves in that character's shoes. The children were able to choose from a boy or girl version and no assumptions were made about which gender they would choose. *Amy and the Alien* and *Andy and the Alien* were stories about an alien who came to Earth and saw a young child, of a similar age to the participants, reading in the garden. The alien, who had no concept of what reading was, then asked a series of questions within the context of the story (see Fig. 2 for an excerpt from the book). Each participant was responsible for Amy or Andy's responses, filling in the blank spaces facing the narrative by talking, writing (or asking the researcher to scribe), or drawing. The children's perceptions of reading were further explored through the activities engendered in the book, such as asking them to name or draw an object that helps people to read and giving them the opportunity to create an ending for the story.

The questions and activities in the book were structured around six central questions: What is reading? Why do you read? Where do you read? How do you learn to read? Who or what helps you learn to read? What do you like/dislike about reading?

PICTURE-SORTING ACTIVITIES

The Picture-Sorting activities were composed of three separate activities that used different sets of picture cards. These were called *Is it reading? Who can read best?* and *Fake or real words?*

In the first activity, the participants were given a set of 11 picture cards and asked to sort them into two columns, one for objects that the children thought involved reading and the other for those that did not involve reading. The images on the cards included (1) a page from a comic book; (2) a set of book front covers; (3) a phone screen with text conversation visible; (4) an iPad with a Lego game on the screen; (5) a page from a reading scheme book

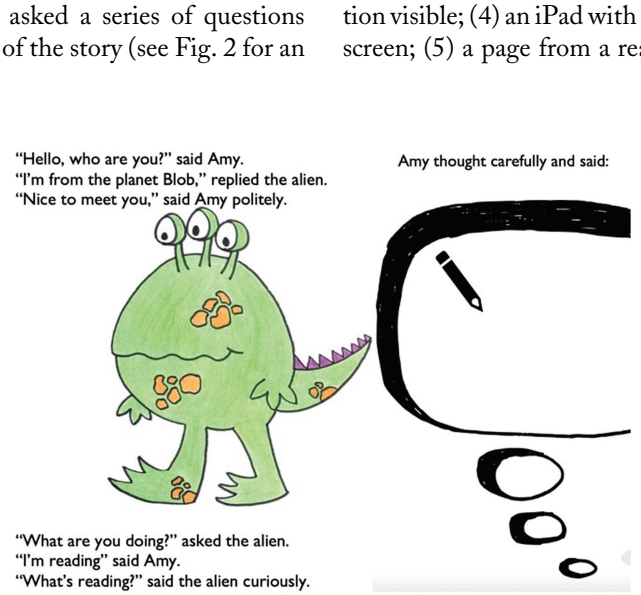

Figure 2 Amy and the Alien.

which would have been familiar to the children; (6) a story book with pictures but no words; (7) a set of fake words; (8) a bike; (9) a sound mat with phonics sounds and matching pictures that children used in their classroom; (10) a McDonald's sign; and (11) a pizza.

The cards, therefore, included objects that quite clearly did not involve reading, including the bike and pizza, and those that more obviously did, such as the reading scheme book. However, there were other images for which the answer to the question does it involve reading was less certain.

The intention of this activity was to explore the contexts in which the children believed reading was taking place. For example, the activity investigated if the children believed that a book without words could still be read and if they thought a phone or tablet with words could be read. Prompts were used to ask children to elaborate on their decisions or to ask what they were thinking when they hesitated over a particular choice; for example, "What were you looking for, when you were thinking about what goes where?"

The second picture activity, *Who can read best?* explored the participants' understanding of what made someone a good reader and how being a good reader might be perceived. This activity featured three pictures—a photograph of a young girl, a photograph of a young adult or teenager, and a photograph of an older lady. The children were asked to order the pictures from the most able reader to the least able reader and explain the reason for their choices. All three pictures were of females. It was important to ensure that the characters in the pictures were of the same race and gender so that children were making decisions based on the age and "perceived" experience of the people in the photos, rather than on other factors such as gender. Again, the pictures were of white people because this most closely reflected the ethnic background of the participants. There was no specific reason for choosing female rather than male faces. Follow-up questions included asking the participants how they would know who the best reader was and how they could find out.

The third activity, *Fake or real words?*, mimicked a task seen in the class in preparation for the PSC. The children were given a set of words—some pseudo and some real—and asked to put them under a treasure chest if they thought they were real words and under a dustbin if they thought they were "fake." The fake words such as "prout," "franp," "taib," and "sprake" were mixed with real words including "beef," "snake," "trace," and "shout" (see Fig. 3). The children were asked to talk about their reasons for making their choices in order to understand the strategies they were using to make decisions when they did not recognize the word they had sounded out.

DISPOSABLE CAMERA ACTIVITY

This activity provided an insight into reading which took place within the children's homes and served as a stimulus for a discussion about reading in the home with both the children and their parents. It was important that these photographs were used as a prompt for conversation, rather than exclusively analyzing the photographs themselves. Each child was sent home with a disposable camera to take pictures of "reading" at home. The children were shown

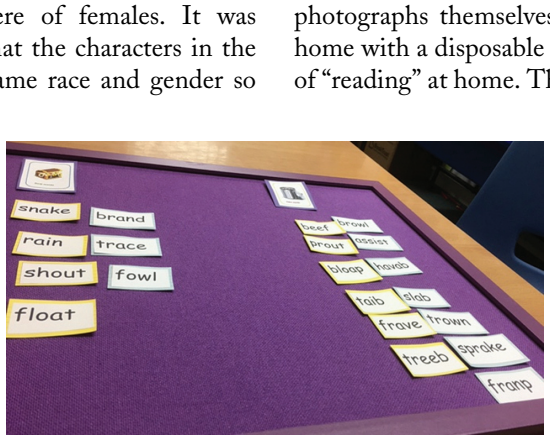

Figure 3 Sorting fake and real words.

how to use the camera and instructions for parents on how they could support them if necessary were also included. The photographs were developed and printed and used to prompt discussion with each child and later with their parents.

READING ACTIVITY

The children were asked to choose one book from a set of four books (see Fig. 4) to read and discuss with the researcher. The books were deliberately not chosen from the children's classroom, as an attempt was made to avoid including very familiar books in the selection, However, the way the children interacted with these texts and the choices they made about which book to read were more important than making sure the books were unfamiliar. It was recognized from the outset that the children may have seen some of the books before; for example, some of the participants recognized Winnie the Witch from the TV series.

The books varied in reading difficulty from a picture book with a few words on each page to a chapter book, but the children were not given any direction as to which they should choose. After looking at each book, they talked about why they had chosen that one and they then read a few pages. Notes were made on a transcript about their reading and the strategies they were using. As they were reading, the children were encouraged to talk about what was happening in the text and what they thought might happen next. In the end, there was a discussion about the kinds of books they enjoyed the most and whether they preferred to read at school or at home.

OBSERVATIONS

Observations took place across the whole data collection period in the Year 1 classroom. Observations of phonics lessons were focused on the period before the phonics screening check in mid-June as phonics was not taught as frequently after this time. Twelve lessons of various durations and different subjects were observed. The focus during each observation was to determine how each child engaged with reading within the context of each lesson, whether this was during a structured lesson with the whole class, while participating in group activities, or during less structured activities. On a few occasions, the purpose of the observation was more specific, such as observing a particular child during a guided reading session, as signs of anxiety had been identified in an earlier observation. Field notes were taken and these were then written up into a lesson report. The principal researcher used her own system for taking field notes which were standardized across the different observations. It included organizing the notes into sections such as "what the child did," "what the child said," and the context in which this happened. These reports contained the context of the lesson, so that it was clear what the children were being asked to do and how and where they were learning, in order to put their words or actions into context.

School-Focused Methods

School-focused data collection included all data collection which was sourced directly from the school and its staff. The data here were rarely linked to an individual child but included information on, for example, the ways in which children were taught to read, strategies to support children, and teachers' perceptions of phonics instruction. This was particularly important when considering what or who influenced the children's perceptions of reading. Semistructured interviews were conducted with the class teacher and class teaching assistant to probe their understanding of the key skills and strategies they thought were required for reading and to ask about their own experiences of learning to read.

Various school documentation relating to reading and phonics was explored, including literature sent home to parents and carers that outlined the school's approach to teaching reading and how the child should be supported at home. Written documentation was analyzed in the same way as audio transcripts. As this was regarded as supplementary data, techniques such as discourse analysis were not used. However, these data were analyzed in conjunction with informal discussions which were held with the teacher and the teaching assistant to further ascertain how reading and phonics were taught, assessed, and timetabled. These conversations

Figure 4 Texts offered for reading activity.

were ongoing throughout the research period and were recorded as field notes.

Home-Focused Methods

One parent of each child was asked to participate in a one-to-one semistructured interview. Key topics for the parent interview included (1) what their child liked to read; (2) who the child liked to read with or to; (3) whether their child thought of themselves as a good reader; (4) how keen their child was to read including any reluctance or anxieties over reading; (5) whether their attitude to reading had changed since starting in Year 1; (6) reading activities taking place in the home; (7) parents' own experiences of learning to read; and (8) how confident they felt in supporting their child to learn to read.

The same parent was then asked to look at the photographs that their child had taken with the disposable cameras. Questions were asked about the circumstances and choices made by the child in taking these pictures. The children had already seen and discussed the photographs; so, some of the questions were following on from the child's comments.

Ethical Considerations

This article has so far discussed methodological considerations in designing participatory research with young children. Given that issues such as managing power imbalances between researcher and child have been raised a number of times, it is clear that ethical considerations are an essential component of this research methodology, both in terms of tool design and data collection conduct. The ethics of working with children as young as 5 and 6 was therefore a fundamental consideration within the case study. Of particular importance was addressing the potential power imbalance between researcher and child participants. Designing tools that would minimize the power imbalance was a methodological consideration as already discussed; however, it was also an ethical one as it prevented the children from being directly questioned about themselves. This is important as it is unlikely that a young child would be able to tell an adult researcher if they were uncomfortable in being asked direct questions about themselves. Techniques to minimize the power imbalance included the use of third-party activities, such as asking the child to role-play a character, or focusing on pictures or objects that the children were asked to sort or order. Such techniques have been shown to help minimize the effects of a power imbalance in research (Cohen et al., 2011; Levy, 2011). Importantly, when more direct questioning was used with the children, care was taken to ensure that the children were comfortable and that they were aware that they could refrain from answering a question if they wished.

CASE STUDY: DISCUSSION

Findings from this study indicated that the research design was highly effective in encouraging these children to share their views and perspectives on reading. The following section discusses this firstly in relation to the notion of giving children power and agency and then in relation to the specific ways in which the research design allowed the child's voice to be heard. The discussion is concluded with a reflection on the value of including the voices of salient adults within a study that is designed to hear the voice of the child.

The Child as the Expert

A significant finding from this study was the importance of treating the child participant as an expert within this area of research. This entailed giving the child power and agency within the data collection activities and in respecting their ability to reason and express their responses to the questions.

In the story book activity, for example, the children were asked to play the role of a girl or boy informing the alien about reading. There were two ways in which this gave the children power and agency over their responses. Firstly, they were able to answer the alien's questions from the standpoint of the knowledgeable figure who was already acquainted with reading and therefore their answers were valued by the alien. Secondly, the researcher asked the children for their help in writing this story, positioning them as joint authors in creating the book. This not only helped deflect from the

power imbalance between the researcher and the children but put the child in the position of expert in this context.

In activities where children were given power, such as the story book activity, their responses were mostly creative and eloquent. The children used information from their personal experiences with reading at home and at school, to inform their responses to the alien's questions. Their responses also demonstrated a sense of empathy toward the alien's situation. All the children were able to imagine a world for the alien outside the confines of the story, suggesting, for example, that he goes home and reads to his mum and dad or to his friends. This showed how the children were drawing on their own context and experience when responding to the alien. Throughout the conversation, they switched freely between responding as themselves and talking as the character by saying what ***they*** would do as well as what Amy or Andy would do, which suggested that the activity was successful in eliciting what the children believed, without directly questioning them about themselves.

It was notable, however, that in activities that more closely resembled a task they might be set in school, such as in the *Is it reading*? activity where they were asked to sort pictures into columns, some of the children started to question if they were correct or not, and even asked for the researcher to tell them what the other children had done. During this activity, Zac insisted on leaving one of his pictures in the middle because he was reluctant to commit, risking the possibility of "getting it wrong." Sorting pictures is something the children did quite frequently in the class and it seemed that the closer the activity was to what they perceived to be schoolwork, the more concerned they were with being right and the less confident they appeared in offering their own opinions. In contrast with the story book activity, the children's sense of agency seemed to diminish during the sorting activities, as they became more concerned with completing a task successfully. This has substantial implications for others who are attempting to design participatory research tools, as using familiar classroom-type activities may not always be useful.

Another way in which this study gave autonomy and power to the children was in providing variety and choice in the way they responded and recorded their responses. For example, in the story book activity, the children often chose to draw or write their responses in the book, even though they knew they could respond verbally. Some children spent several minutes deciding which colors to use, others drew, or wrote with great care while others scribbled quickly. A few children asked the researcher to scribe for them. The act of drawing and writing appeared to be important for the children as they seemed to want their responses to be part of the actual book, whether this was in the form of their own inscription or scribed by the researcher.

The disposable camera activity also gave the children agency over what they chose to photograph. Beth, for example, had taken five pictures of her school reading book open at different pages and one of her reading this book. The other pictures were of her rabbits, her friend, her friend's mum, and her friend's garden. Having been asked to take pictures of home reading, it was interesting that Beth had chosen to take pictures that were not related to reading. On discussion with her mother, it was revealed that Beth was reluctant to read at home and that reading had become a source of confrontation between Beth and her mother within the home environment. Beth's mother had encouraged her to take some pictures of reading, which Beth did, however, she also asserted her agency by taking pictures that were not related to reading.

The activities in this study were also seen to allow the children to take time to reason and give a genuine opinion. This was exemplified in one of the picture sorting activities with Lily. The following conversation took place after Lily had placed the pictures under the respective headings:

R—What made you decide which ones to put where?

L—I think I'm looking for words to go on the reading one.

R—What about this one (book without words). It doesn't have words.

L—Yes, but you can tell it (the story) without words.

R—What about this one (the comic)? Why is it not reading?
L—I think they just look at the pictures.

Lily initially reported that she was looking for artifacts that had printed words as examples to go under the "reading" heading, but when offered the wordless picture book she then reasoned that what you did with the artifact would also determine whether or not it could be read. She reported that although the story book did not have words, you could still "tell it" which assigned it to the reading column. However, she went on to argue that the comic was "not reading" because when people look at comics, they "just look at the pictures," suggesting that comics did not provoke a need to "tell" a story. This demonstrates how the activity allowed Lily to provide a sophisticated and insightful response that may not have been forthcoming within a more traditional research activity such as an interview.

Similarly, the children were also seen to be trying hard to reason during the *Fake or real words?* activity. They were asked to put the real words under a treasure chest and the fake (or pseudo) words under a dustbin. This was an apparently simple task if the children were able to read each word accurately and understand the meaning of the word. However, the activity revealed that the children sometimes misread a word or came across a word they did not know and therefore could not tell if it was a real or pseudo word. In these cases, the children tried hard to find clues to help them with this task. One child reasoned that a word was "not real because I haven't heard it before" (Lily), but some of the children drew upon their phonetic knowledge as well as their general knowledge in order to try and identify whether a word was real or fake. For example, the word *fowl* caused particular confusion and none of the children identified the correct meaning of this word. However, some of the children identified it as a real word aligning it with *foul* (as in football) or *foal* (a baby horse). Robbie's response was especially noteworthy; following a pause he responded, "Well there is a football foul but I don't think it is the right spelling." This shows how Robbie was drawing on his linguistic knowledge as well as his knowledge of football in order to give a convincing and well-reasoned response. Moreover, in a similar activity Zac was observed trying to decide whether *vempt* was a real word or not. He concluded that as he could not at the time think of any real word beginning with *v*, that all words beginning with *v* were therefore fake. Although this was a clear misconception, the activity allowed an insight into the way in which Zac was attempting to find patterns in language in order to help him to complete the task.

Encouraging Children's Voice

In designing the methodology for this study, two factors appeared to be particularly effective in encouraging the children to speak and respond during the research activities. Firstly, the various objects and pictures which were used to engage the children and provide a stimulus to conversation were highly effective. Secondly, as the study allowed time for the researcher and child to get to know one another, the quality of data collected was facilitated by the developing relationship between researcher and child participant.

Within all research activities, the children were quick to interact with whatever objects were laid in front of them and this provided an immediate prompt to discussion. The physical action of handling objects, whether this was pictures, books, their own photographs or the coloring materials provided with the story book, was an immediate focus for the children and appeared to deflect attention from there being a pressure to answer any questions directly. Children had a natural desire to handle, play with and talk about these resources, and it was recognized from the outset that it was important to allow them to do this in their own way and own time before focusing their attention on the questions. As they talked, children naturally brought experiences from home and school into their discussions. In particular, the story format enabled them to talk freely about their own experiences without being asked direct or intrusive questions. For example, Beth, responding to the question about what things could be read said:

I've got a book but it only has pictures in because it is a book with pictures of when I went to other countries like France and Disney Land Paris - and Alton Towers was so fun – I saw my cousin there.

Each child was different in the way they chose to respond within the activities, and it was an important element of this participatory approach for the researcher to develop this understanding of each participant. For example, some children were quite reticent or shy at the start and needed time and reassurance; others chatted away happily throughout the activities and one child tried to be entertaining. Some children talked freely about their achievements while others needed encouragement to speak about such things. The sociocultural approach to this research meant that such differences were embraced and the factors behind these attitudes were explored, all of which contributed to the creation of each individual child profile.

Because of these differences, it was difficult to generate a set of prompts that could be used uniformly with all the individuals. The pilot of the story book activity showed that prompts would be necessary but these varied from child to child. For some children, the prompts given were more about encouragement to speak and reassurance, rather than re-wording the questions. Other children needed prompts to bring them back to the activity when they got carried away with their own stories. This demonstrated how the activities within this research design allowed the children to express their own ideas and experiences in a manner that felt comfortable for them.

Listening to Voices around the Child

Given that a major aim of this study was to listen to the voice of the child, it may seem contradictory to include the voices of adults around the child, however this proved to be a valuable component of the listening framework upon which this study was centered. There were three main ways in which the parent interviews in particular contributed to both the validity of the data and the depth of the analysis. First, the children's responses were largely validated by what their parents said. For example, Lily's mother described Lily as being very keen to do the right thing, to "do things properly" and to be a "good girl." She also reported that during their reading interactions Lily would be put off if she could not sound out or pronounce a word properly and would sometimes ask to read something else. This concurred with the way Lily spoke about her own reading, saying that the reading level she was on was "quite good" and stating that she preferred to read school reading texts than other books because "I like the levels." Second, the children would sometimes talk about things or events that were not entirely clear from their descriptions. Context was then provided by the parent's own responses during their interviews. This was particularly evident during the camera activity where the parents were able to explain why a child chose to take a particular photograph. For example, one of Zac's photographs showed a box of biscuits. His mother explained how Zac had a peanut allergy and therefore they needed to read the labels to check that there were no nuts in the biscuits. This was clearly an important aspect of reading for Zac, but this information would have been lost if Zac's mother had not explained the context.

Finally, on other occasions divergences in the responses of the parent and child provided the study with nuance and depth. An example of this disparity was where the children and adults talked about bedtime stories. Most of the child participants reported that they preferred to read by themselves or to others rather than being read to. This often contradicted the accounts of their parents who said that their children still cherished these interactions and would become cross if they were deprived of a bedtime story. Given the wider data set, there is evidence to suggest that children in this study were concerned about being seen to read accurately and may therefore have been reluctant to report that their parents were reading to them. Moreover, as the children defined reading as "sounding out," where they used phonetic strategies to decode print, many of the social interactions with texts, such as sharing books with parents, were unlikely to be regarded as proper reading. This again meant that the data provided from parents allowed a deeper understanding of the children's views to emerge.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how even young children are capable of making insightful and important contributions to research when their voices are elicited through a sensitive and considered research design. The children participating in this case study were eloquent and engaging in their responses, and naturally drew on their own experiences at home and at school when responding to questions. The key to enabling these voices to be heard was the creation of a methodology that allowed ideas to be communicated through an age-appropriate medium, and to be interpreted with knowledge of that child's context and experiences. In this regard, this study makes a particular contribution to this field of conducting participatory research with children.

The children's responses were particularly insightful when they were given power and agency during the activities. Previous research has shown how third-party techniques, using objects and pictures can help engage young children and reduce power imbalances that exist within adult to child relationships (Levy, 2011). In this study, situating the participating child as the expert who was helping and informing the alien in the story allowed the children to rise to this position and talk confidently about their knowledge and views. This was also seen in the disposable camera activity where the child took charge of what they chose to photograph at home. It was noticeable, however, that the closer the activities came to familiar school tasks, the more the children were concerned about providing correct answers and the less they were prepared to share their views and perceptions. These activities put the child back in the role of "classroom learner," rather than "expert knower," which prevented them from freely sharing their voice. This article therefore concludes that there are a variety of innovative and engaging tools that researchers can use and design when working with child participants; however, if researchers really want to access the voices of young children in participatory research, they must position the child as an active and expert participant in their research design.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
None declared.

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