

**Sandpit Dilemmas:
Challenges of researching young children**

Gaye Mackenzie BA Hons

**This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy of Murdoch University 2005**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution

.....

ABSTRACT

In the past twenty years there has been a movement against the tradition of positivist, scientific research that treats children as the 'object' of research. This movement has been led by the sociology of childhood literature but also has supporters in disciplines such as developmental psychology and early childhood studies. Research within this new paradigm often seeks to gain the perspectives and lived experiences of children, giving them a voice through naturalistic methodologies such as ethnography and informal interviews. However, giving children a 'voice' has not been purely an academic endeavour. Supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) which stipulates that States should assure that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, there is a push at all levels of government for children to be given a chance to express their views on issues that concern them. In Australia and overseas, the consulting of children on issues that concern them has become more commonplace. Thus in both research and policy development, methodologies which enable adults to get closer to the world of the child and to hear their views are being explored.

Deleted: 1

Deleted: participate and

This thesis explores some of the issues involved in this form of qualitative research with children. It does so through combining theoretical exposition and systematic reflection with the author's own empirical research which sought to gain an understanding of young children's views of 'difference' through an ethnographic methodology.

Part One provides the theoretical base for the thesis, by exploring how 'the child' and childhood have been conceptualised within western thought. Drawing on the sociology of childhood, it also probes a number of the implications of this tradition and examines how it has shaped research on children both in terms of the methods that have been employed and the topics that have been of interest.

Deleted:

Both chapters in Part Two focus on the empirical component of the study. The first is an extended methodology chapter which explores not only the method employed and the research setting but also some of the challenges that the author faced in the field and a discussion of issues such as ethics and the status of the researcher. Using logs of the children's activities and the author's field journal, the next chapter explores how the initial research question altered and the issues that came to the fore during the research.

Part Three reconsiders a number of the theoretical issues raised in Part One in light of the fieldwork discussed in Part Two. It asks how certain ethnographic studies, claiming affiliation with the sociology of childhood, nevertheless ended up with depictions of children not far from the positivistic studies their authors had critiqued. It argues that this can be explained by the persistence of a 'problem centred' adultcentric frame which privileges understanding of a particular issue (e.g. the development of racism in children) over the actual experiences of individual children. Given the renewed interest in consulting children this proposition has practical as well as theoretical significance as it reveals how easy it is for slippage to occur and the importance of preventing it.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
CONTENTS.....	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction.....	1
The Structure of the Thesis	6
PART I.....	11
Chapter 1: What Is the Child And Childhood?.....	12
The Child as the Nation's Future	14
An Ideal Childhood of Innocence and Fun	36
Possible Consequences of the Dominant Conceptions.....	40
Conclusion.....	49
Chapter Two: The Shaping Of Research On Children	51
The 'Knowable' Child.....	51
The sociology of childhood and research	66
Giving children a 'voice' in policy.....	73
Conclusion.....	77
Chapter Three: Researching Children And 'Difference'	78
Fixing the social problem of racism and prejudice – from the bottom up... ..	79
The 'Knowable' Prejudiced Child.....	86
Critiques	91
The use of qualitative methods to study prejudice.....	96
Conclusion.....	99
PART II.....	101
Introduction to Part II	102
Chapter Four: Research, Researcher And Ethics	103
Introduction.....	103
Methodology.....	103
In The Field	111
Concluding Reflections.....	133
Chapter Five: Observing The Children	135
Introduction.....	135
The Children in their Context.....	135
The Children.....	148
Constant movement: the social world of the children	154
Concluding reflections	178

PART III	181
Chapter Six: The Purpose behind the Purpose	182
Social Problems and the ‘misuse’ of methodology	184
A study of racism or of children?	192
Researching children, not ‘the child’	201
The importance of being clear about the purpose of research	213
When Purposes Collide	216
Conclusion.....	224
Chapter Seven: Implications for Practice	227
Inclusion – in the here and now	227
And what of the children?	236
Bibliography.....	239

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support and co-operation of many people. I would like to thank:

The Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs and the City of Fremantle for their support both in monetary terms and also in supporting the path that the research would come to take.

The staff and children at the childcare centre for their time and co-operation.

Friends who have offered support throughout the darkest hours and have also provided practical help with reading and editing. Particular thanks goes to Liz, Vicki, Loraine and Allison.

My supervisor, Trish Harris, who throughout the process has become a very dear friend. Her support and guidance has enabled me to complete a thesis that is true to who I am and says what I want to say. I cannot thank her enough.

To Peter, Ryan and Steven, for their support through all of the ups and downs and for believing in me. Writing a thesis requires sacrifices and often the main sacrifice was time spent with them. Words cannot express my gratitude to them.