Using participative techniques to mediate power relationships between the researcher and child participant

Abstract

Purpose: This study explores how power dynamics affect research with children, focusing on how the projected and perceived role of the researcher and the use of participative techniques, can mediate power relationships between the researcher and child, and impact children's agency.

Methodology: The research formed part of a wider study on children's digital device use, with children aged 4 to 11 in a UK school. Eight pairs of children participated in buddy interviews, completing several creative and arts-based activities using a choice of equipment and materials, including PlayDoh, LEGO and, most innovatively, Minecraft.

Findings: The study found the researcher's projected role, and children's interpretation of this, impacted the power relations in the interviews. A consistent projection was challenging however, and it was necessary for the researcher to adapt their role according to children's needs and behaviour. Offering children a choice of activities was an effective power sharing strategy, and children's absorption in these tasks provided a wealth of data from observations and children's on-task 'chatter'.

Originality: Using Minecraft as a participative method enabled the children to use their superior technical abilities to take power in the interview, and show their own personal geographies virtually in 3D, and offers potential for other qualitative researchers in conducting research with the agentic child.

Keywords: Agency; Children; Digital; Foucault; Methodology; Minecraft; Participative; Power; Relationship; Researcher; Role; School

Paper Type: Research Paper

Introduction

The 'new sociology of childhood' which emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s (James *et al.,* 1998; James and Prout, 1997) emphasized children's agency, repositioning children as 'subjects' rather than 'objects' of interest (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008). Prior to this, children were seen as passive bystanders or products of 'universal biological and social processes' (James and James, 2004, pp.23-27). The reconceptualization of children as active participants in society (James, 2009), with their own behaviour, attitudes, likes, and dislikes, highlighted the need to involve children in research about their own lives, and give them the opportunity to express their own views (Pinter and Zandian, 2014). Research is now conducted 'with' rather than 'on' children (Darbyshire *et al.,* 2005; Thomas, 2017). In the context of consumption studies, Chitakunye (2012, p.208) identified that more research into children's consumption practices is needed from the child's perspective; authentic voices from active participants rather than parents' 'distortions or misrepresentations'. Recognising children's agency is more relevant in today's digital society than ever, with increasing numbers of children exercising their independent agency everyday, as they use smartphones and tablets unsupervised to entertain, inform, communicate, and express themselves (Ward, 2016).

The choice of research methods can facilitate or create a barrier to children's independent participation and their right to have a voice. This is complicated however by the power relations that exist between child participants and adult researchers. The research discussed in this paper is part of a wider study that

investigated the influence of digital on children's brand choices. We explore here how power dynamics affect research with children, focusing on how the projected and perceived role of the researcher and the use of participative techniques, can mediate power relationships between the researcher and child, and impact children's agency. Understanding these two aspects have implications for both academic and professional market research studies.

Power dynamics between the adult researcher and child participant

Power relations affecting children's participation in research come into play even before data collection has started, when the researcher decides whether the minor is a competent subject to take part in the research (Lewis, 2004), and when the child's parent/guardian grants permission for their child to participate (or not). Power relations between adult researchers and child participants are impacted by perceptions of researchers' preordained power because of their grown-up and professional status, (Nelsen, 2006), and by the way in which the researcher may use their status to guide the discussion or keep the conversation on track (Robinson and Kellett, 2004). However, children can exercise power themselves during research encounters, through the way they 'adopt, change or redirect the tasks in which they are engaged' (Groundwater-Smith *et al*., 2015, p.60), potentially using their power to subvert researchers' intentions (Robinson and Kellett, 2004).

Power distribution across social settings and relations has implications for conducting research with children. Research in the school environment brings power dynamics associated with that setting, with researchers entering the school becoming temporarily enmeshed in a pre-existing and complicated network of power relationships (Gallagher 2008a) between pupils, teachers, senior leadership, parents, and education authorities. The often ad-hoc nature of research restricts the time available to develop rapport and trust with participants, and the nature of power is temporal, with high stakes, as the adult

needs the child to co-operate, the child has the right to withdraw, the headteacher/parent/guardian can prevent access to the child, and the child wishes to gain an incentive for participating.

Researcher roles

Power relations can be acknowledged by the researcher adopting a role during research with children, to manage the interplay between the generations and the data collection process. Mandell's research (1988) has been a significant contributor to the literature around researcher roles with her 'least-adult' approach. Drawing on Waksler (1986) and Goode (1986), Mandell (1998, p.40) proposes 'suspending the ontological terms of child and adult' to allow the researcher to fully enter the children's world. This 'least-adult' approach involved rejecting ordinary forms of adult-like behaviour such as 'authority, verbal competency, cognitive and social mastery' as well as not directing children's behaviour or play or disciplining them. James *et al.* (1998) and Elton-Chalcraft (2011) question the necessity of assuming the 'least-adult' role however, and diluted versions have since been adopted, such as 'interested idiot' (Darbyshire *et al.,* 2005), which places power with children, asking them to explain how to play to an adult, but avoids adults needing to act like children. Chitakunye (2012, p.215) similarly adopted the role of a 'friend' willing to 'learn from [children] and their experiences', although it is not reported whether the children accepted this. In contrast, some researchers have either adopted, or been perceived by children to adopt, a 'teacher' or 'teacher-like' role, particularly if the research is perceived as school work (Gillies and Robinson, 2010, p.103; Hill *et al.,* 1996). Other researchers have attempted to find a middle ground, Elton-Chalcraft (2011), referring to Kvale's metaphor (1996, pp.3-4), saw her role as a traveller, 'on a journey that leads to a tale to be told', and attempted to break down the 'superior adult/inferior child power status' by sitting with the children, lining up outside, and not reprimanding them in the playground. Allen *et al.* (2012) identified the researcher's role as a 'steward', in their responsibility for preserving the words of children when conducting research in a tribal community, and Yee and Andrews (2006) noted the need

to be a 'good guest', when conducting research with children in their homes, and trying to balance professional demands versus social obligations.

Participatory research with children

Participatory research can offer a way to rebalance power and reduce distance between the researcher and the child (Kuchah and Pinter, 2012; Pinter *et al.,* 2013). Participative techniques involve the sample in the research process (Mayhew, 2009), providing a more collaborative and empowering exchange between the two parties, thus shifting the balance of power. The range of techniques that can be employed within participative research include drawing, photography, model-making, scrapbooks, collage, feelings boards, graffiti boards, modelling, video, mapping, diaries, drama, music, storytelling, painting, cartoons, timelines, unfinished stories, sentence completion, props, and vignettes. Punch (2002) proposed that the choice of methods is dependent on not only the age, competence, experience, preference, and social status of the child in question, but the cultural and physical environment, the research objectives, and the researcher's competence.

'Task-based' activities can help children to express their ideas and opinions more easily than 'talk-focused' activities (such as interviews and surveys), and can also help the researcher to establish their role with the child through building rapport (Harden *et al.,* 2000). Task-based activities such as drawing or photography provide stimulus for discussion (Groundwater-Smith *et al.,* 2015), for example Pimlott-Wilson (2012) found that using LEGO modelling helped children explain their cultural experiences and the roles of members of their family. Offering a choice of methods can increase children's agency and address the differing cognitive, communication, and social needs and abilities of a range of children (Dockett *et al.,* 2011), as well as catering for differences such as class, age, gender, disability, ethnicity or culture. This approach is supported by Clark's multi-method Mosaic model (2004), where a range of methodologies

were used with children, including observation, child conferencing, photography, tours, map making, and interviews.

However, there can be challenges in implementing participative approaches with children. Children can divert the process (Pinter and Zandian, 2014), for example Butterworth and Murfin (1999) found their pilot study was thwarted when their sample of 4-year-olds remained aware and intensely preoccupied by the video camera. Arts and play-based techniques may not suit all participants (Carter and Ford, 2013; Dockett *et al.,* 2011, p.73) and may lead to children struggling with the methods on offer, becoming bored or disruptive – bringing power into play (Gillies and Robinson, 2010). It should also be recognised that participative approaches are still bounded by the adult, again demonstrating the potential power play between the child and the researcher.

Theories of power

Foucault's (1978) theories offer greater understanding of the role of power when considering children's participation in research (Gallagher, 2008a). Foucault theorised power's connection to knowledge and the relationship between the individual and institutions. Four key principles from Foucault's work are as follows: power is not a possession, it is a 'system of relations spread throughout society' (Mills, 2003, p.35); power is not a negative concept as it is 'productive in its effects'; power can only be understood by connecting it to 'forms of knowledge and discursive practices'; and 'any relation of power can be resisted' (Schirato *et al.,* 2012, pp.45-49). These have several implications in a research context.

In relation to the first principle, if power is not a possession then neither the researcher nor the child can own it, and either party could take it or share it during the research encounter. Foucault sees power as performed in a particular context: the actor might yield to the force, contest it, or react according to the

relations they hold within a family, social context, or institution. For example, a child may adhere to a predetermined behavioural code in an interview at school or home - all children must be polite to visiting adults. Equally, a child may seize control by refusing to co-operate, losing concentration, or misbehaving. Secondly, power can be productive in an educational and family context by facilitating children's development of life skills and knowledge through rules, constraints, and reward and punishment. However, in a research content, children may say what they think the researcher wants to hear, in order to please or to gain promised incentives (Nelsen, 2006), rather than speaking and behaving freely. In line with the third principle, it is impossible to remove power from the equation when conducting research with children (or with adults, for that matter), but acknowledging these power relations can lead to greater insight, hence the focus in this paper. The final principle proposes that where power is exercised, resistance will follow. This has implications for non-compliance from research participants, where children may utilise their agency to 'exploit, appropriate, redirect, contest or refuse participatory techniques' (Gallagher, 2008b, p.137). This could also mean certain groups being excluded from research due to their lack of conformity with prevailing systems, such as a lack of engagement, rejection of methods, or challenges in participating in the set methodological form (Darbyshire *et al.,* 2005; Elton-Chalcraft, 2011).

Conceptualising the researcher – child power relationship

It is suggested from the above review that the power relationship between child participants and adult researchers can be seen on a continuum from dominant to sharing to submissive, where either the researcher or the child could take (or be offered) the position as the dominant or submissive party. The researcher roles discussed previously can be placed on this continuum to illustrate their relative position.

1. Submissive power relationship: the researcher yields or loses power to the child. This could be through full empowerment over participative activities or a child-centric approach, adopting the 'least-adult'

(Mandell, 1998), 'interested idiot' (Darbyshire *et al.,* 2005), or 'friend' (Chitakunye, 2012) roles. Equally this could illustrate the researcher's failure in conducting the interview, with the child taking advantage of an adult perceived to lack power (such as Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) who lost control of their notepad).

2. Sharing power relationship: indicates equality in the power held by the researcher and child, recognising the child as subject and social actor rather than object, but acknowledging the researcher's guiding hand throughout the discussion. It empowers the child to act as co-researcher/partner or choose participative methods. Roles that have been adopted to take a sharing approach include 'steward' (Allen *et al.,* 2012), 'traveller' (Elton-Chalcraft, 2011; Kvale, 1996), and 'good guest' (Yee and Andrews, 2006).

3. Dominant power relationship: a traditional adult-centric approach with the child as object of enquiry. Kellett (2004) observed most adult-led research about children is conducted in schools where 'power is heavily skewed towards adults and (…) where children are least able to exercise participation rights'. Dominant roles include 'teacher' (Hill *et al.,* 1996), 'teacher-like' (Gillies and Robinson, 2010), 'least teacher' (Swain, 2006), and 'parent' (Elton-Chalcraft, 2011; Mandell, 1988; Yee and Andrews, 2006).

This conceptualisation follows Foucault (1977), Gallagher (2008b), and Holland et al., (2010) in viewing power between the adult researcher and the child participant as dynamic and relational, and both empowering and constraining in different contexts. Tesar (2014, p.362) draws on Havel (1985) to show how children are 'central to power relations as they live their ordinary childhoods'; but are constrained by society's system to which the child, parents and teachers all conform, with the child self-governing 'within the acceptable level of freedom and independence'. If the child conforms in this public sphere, then the Havelian view is that the 'difference between the private and public self' is 'separated by a deep

abyss' (ibid, p.362). This study's focus on children's private digital lives explored that plurality as they built their own brand relationships away from their parents. The potential impact of these power dynamics on the effectiveness and outcomes of research with children indicates the need to better understand their effects and how these can be managed. This study therefore focuses on two key areas. Firstly, we explore how the researcher can project a role, how this is perceived by child participants, and how this affects the power relationship. Secondly, we explore the use of participative techniques, and how these can mediate power relationships between the researcher and child, and impact children's agency.

Methodology

The power dynamic between adult researchers and child participants was examined as part of the wider study into children's digital device use and consumption behaviours. The research was completed prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns in the UK in March 2020 (which have had further implications for children's device usage). The research took place in a primary school in the East of England, with which the lead author had a prior connection as a parent, and whose broad social and cultural mix, and rural/urban location reflected the region's demographics, with predominantly UK/EU nationalities (UK Census, 2011).

Within the school setting, children are instructed to follow rules and adhere to behaviour policies. In this way, they are bounded by 'governmentality' – Foucault's term for the 'conceptual architecture of the modern liberal state' (Ball, 2012, p.60), with its influences upon social behaviour through pre-existing and complicated networks of power relationships (Gallagher 2008a; 2008b). The selected school was certainly one that prided itself on 'good behaviour' and discipline. However, to answer the study's objectives around children's digital device usage and their connection to brands online would require those young subjects to share something of their own personally constructed domain. According to Havel's philosophy, these private spaces are 'outside of the public sphere' (Tesar, 2016, p.4), and create 'alternative

experiences', for these young people (ibid, p.3). Tesar argues too that children are social actors and can challenge power structures as 'rebels' and make their own decisions. This suggests that children would still be able to act agentically within the school setting. Other settings also have barriers for conducting research of this nature. For example, in a home setting, children can be constrained by their parent's presence, and researchers face conflicting demands of being a 'good guest' and answering research objectives (Yee and Andrews, 2006). Public settings have ethical and practical challenges for recruitment of child participants. The school setting was therefore deemed the most appropriate for the study.

The study involved semi-structured buddy interviews, focusing on childrens' use of digital devices. Buddy interviews were intended to redress the initial power imbalance between the adult researcher and child participants, as previous studies have found that children find these type of interviews 'less intimidating and embarrassing' than focus groups (McGivern, 2013, p.163) and more 'comfortable' than individual interviews (Jones and Glynn, 2019, p.105). The pairs were separated by gender, to encourage the children's free creative expression, as they may not have wished to do certain activities with or in front of the opposite gender. A boy and girl pair were selected from each Key Education Stage (KS) in the school, specifically Foundation (ages 3-5), KS1 (ages 5-7), Lower KS2 (ages 7-9), and Upper KS2 (ages 9-11), in order to explore any differences according to age or cognitive stage. This gave a sample size of 16 children, split equally between boys and girls.

The interviewer selected the role of 'researcher' to project during the interviews, as a 'sharing' power position that could support children's willingness to engage in participatory research activities and to realise their agency. A 'researcher', as a visitor to the school, could project professional expertise in undertaking research, but also show their interest in learning about children's digital lives. A submissive 'least-adult' role was not appropriate as the interviews were to be conducted in an open-plan area and the interviewer would need to maintain sufficient authority to ensure children adhered to the school's strict behaviour policies and did not disturb other classes. At the same time, the interviewer also wanted

to avoid adopting a fully dominant 'teacher' or 'parent' role, that could prevent children from expressing themselves freely in relation to their digital device usage.

To explore the effectiveness of this projection, at the end of the interview, children were shown a sheet with pictures to represent the different roles the interviewer may have taken. The pictures were provided as prompts for the children to add their own interpretations of the role and what the researcher was like (one pair suggested alien green skin and antenna like Zog the Alien, who was used in the participative activities). These included pictures of a child (to represent the 'least adult' role), adult, teacher, teaching assistant (TA), and parent, to cover roles which would be familiar to even the youngest children. The children understood their teacher as someone responsible for the class, compared to the teaching assistant who helped the teacher. The 'researcher' role was represented by a picture of someone sitting in an office, who looked friendly and not too formal, surrounded by papers and equipment. Children were asked which picture matched their idea of the role the interviewer had taken during the interviews and could also choose a 'mix' or 'something else'. The children were encouraged to have their own opinion within the buddy pair and to avoid collusion.

Ethics approval was gained from the authors' university ethics committee before data collection commenced. An invitation to participate, along with the study information sheet and consent form, was emailed to all parents by the school office. Class teachers judgement sampled appropriate buddy pairs from amongst the children whose parents had given consent for them to participate. A small incentive of a goody bag was offered to participants. Parents and teachers initially discussed the research with the potential child participants, then the interviewer (the lead author) used a child-friendly visual story consent form to gain children's informed consent. The length of the interview, types of activities they might be involved in, and what to do if they were unhappy or worried, were pictorially represented on the form and also fully explained by the interviewer, with children marking consent with a sticker of their

choice. This ensured the form was inclusive for the range of reading, writing, and cognitive skills of the child participants. Finally, the interviewer asked children to invent their own codename, to provide anonymity and further engage them in the consent process.

The interviews lasted on average 35 minutes and involved participative creative and arts-based tasks, aimed at giving the children an active choice and enabling them to express their ideas and opinions (Carter and Ford, 2013; Gillies and Robinson, 2010; Harden *et al.,* 2000; Pimlott-Wilson, 2012), acknowledging that children do not all have the same interests or skills (Carter and Ford, 2013). Children were able to choose how they engaged with the tasks, including through drawing and colouring, modelling with PlayDoh, playing with dolls house furniture, building with LEGO bricks, and using the computer game Minecraft. Using Minecraft was a novel approach for conducting research with children, and to ensure that children could access it safely, two tablet devices were used without internet-enablement and a fresh password protected customer account was created. The children were asked in the interview if they could use Minecraft, before the option of playing the game in the task was suggested. The range of tasks and materials were appropriate to help participants explain their use of digital devices, and also offered the opportunity to explore power relations between the children and interviewer when completing the activities.

Children were asked for their permission for the interviews to be recorded and were involved in the recording process by the interviewer asking them to check the camera was working, and observe their buddy through the lens, before confirming their consent. Recording the interviews enabled the collection of on-task 'chatter' (Horgan, 2017), with the interviewer observing the children as they engaged with the tasks, and asking them simple questions, to get them to explain what they were doing. Data from the interviews therefore included video footage, as well as the artefacts that children produced. The

researcher produced transcripts from the footage and these were uploaded to NVivo, and the children's artefacts were analysed alongside the transcripts of their chatter as they engaged in the task, and then their description of what they had produced (Carter and Ford, 2013, p. 99). Thematic analysis was used to handle the data in a rigorous and structured fashion, through the steps of data familiarisation, generating codes, searching for, and reviewing themes, and finally reporting on the data (Nowell *et al.,* 2017). An inductive approach was used in generating codes, so that the codes were identified from the data itself rather than imposing a predetermined framework on the data. The findings from the analysis are presented below.

Findings

Role projection and perception

The interviewer aimed to project the role of 'researcher' during the interviews through their behaviour and interactions with the children e.g., they explained the purpose of the project and how the recording equipment was set up, allowed children to choose their own codenames, and offered a range of activities that were designed to appear fun and interesting, and distinct from school work. Enabling children to choose their own codenames was an effective power-sharing strategy, with the choices suggesting that children felt able to present themselves to the researcher quite openly without fear of punishment, judgement, or disapproval (unlike to a teacher or parent). Half of the girls chose gender neutral or male character names (Stuart, Taylor, Jellyfish, and Bob the Minion), whereas seven out of eight of the boys chose obviously male characters, and were perhaps trying to establish their status with the interviewer though their codename e.g., Mr Awesome, Spiderman, James Bond.

Children's perceptions of the interviewer's role, when asked at the end of interview, varied widely. From the group of 16 children, three solely identified the role that the researcher intended to project (with the picture interpreted as an 'office worker'/'computer person' as an approximation of 'researcher'). Three

children said ‘teacher’, two said ‘grown-up’, three said a mixture of ‘teacher’/’TA’/’Mum’, and another also added ‘office worker’ into that mix. The full breakdown is shown in Table 1. These varied projections can be attributed to the need for the researcher to adopt a secondary role at various points in the interviews, due to differences in children’s behaviour and needs.

[Table 1]

The youngest children, aged 4-5, were shy, but gentle encouragement and showing interest in their contributions helped them to open up. Children in Reception and Year 1 were most likely to ask for permission to participate in activities and were tentative when testing boundaries: ‘Do we have to do whatever game you say?’ Interviewer comments veered towards instructional and teacher-like (such as telling children to pull in a chair), or nurturing and parent-like (to reassure the youngest girls). The role perceptions from these year groups were mostly ‘teacher’ or ‘grown up’, both on the dominant end of the power spectrum. Even more pronounced, one child thought the researcher had God-like status because of their high levels of knowledge. The boys aged 6-7 were cheekier and physical, leaping up to check the camera and challenging the interviewer, e.g., ‘You’ve forgotten what my [code]name is, haven’t you!’, but still looked for approval for good spelling. They were more confident in giving instruction, such as how to spell a codename, and revelled in being the subject of interest in the interviews. There was a match here between the intended projection of a ‘researcher’ and the children’s perception, with the boys interpreting the interviewer’s role as ‘office worker’ and ‘computer person/alien’ (again, indicating the confidence of the boys in being cheeky to the interviewer).

The girls aged 7-8 were very similar to the girls aged 4-5, asking for formal instruction and permission. Both sets were the youngest classes in their respective schools (infants and juniors), and this position may have made them keen for reassurance. One child perceived the researcher as an ‘office worker’, and the

other as 'teacher'. In contrast, the boys aged 7-8 were most challenging. They lacked concentration and were 'naughty' e.g., making faces at the camera and constantly rocking their chairs to the point that the parental trick of bribery was used by the interviewer: 'I might let you have a go at my computers in a minute.' Their perception of the interviewer was as a 'TA' (who they viewed as a lower authority figure) and 'baby' (because they were asked 'easy' questions about the internet), indicating their view of the interviewer as holding a submissive position on the power spectrum.

The oldest children aged 10-11 had attained a different stage of cognitive and digital skills development and the interviews took a different tack. The interviewer's role was interpreted as a guide or someone with the answers to troubling questions (for example, one child asked 'how old do you need to be when you use Facebook?'). One girl chose 'NSPCC (children's charity) adviser' and the other a mix of teacher/TA/mum; the boys felt a teacher/TA who you could talk to, and a teacher/mum who could check on you. In contrast to the 7-8 year old boys, the TAs were not seen as lower authority figures, but as people with more time to talk and resolve problems. The children discussed the stress of end of school exams, and were concerned about potential threats in the digital world (such as online predators and bullying). They perceived the interviewer as someone not just in authority but as someone who would listen and help, indicating a more equal power dynamic.

Participative techniques

Children were asked to complete three tasks as part of the interview; 1) My Family - introduce the members of your family and the houses that you spend time in, 2) Zog the Alien - tell Zog about the internet, 3) Digital spaces - create the space where you most often use your digital devices. Children were provided with a range of materials which they could use to complete the tasks, including arts equipment, PlayDoh, LEGO, Minecraft, and a doll's house. The children appreciated the choices, and even the very youngest felt able to express their preference: 'Can we do whatever game we like?', 'I would like to do

modelling' (Pair 1, Foundation Girls, Age 4-5). LEGO was a popular choice when mixed with doll's house people, and the children enjoyed populating their digital spaces with dolls that shared the same colour hair as family members. PlayDoh proved a popular medium, but also caused some challenges. It took some time to get new dough out of the tubs, which was a good icebreaker but wasted interview time, and it also encouraged some of the more boisterous children to get over-excited, with Spiderman turning it into a fight between two pots of PlayDoh. Opening and preparing the PlayDoh beforehand would have saved time, but the children took a great deal of pleasure in the pots being brand new: 'These are my favourite colours. All of them.' (Pair 2, Foundation Boys, Age 4-5). Children demonstrated the perceived higher power status of the researcher by asking very carefully and politely if they were allowed to mix the colours (Pair 2, Foundation Boys, Age 4-5). The researcher had to adopt a 'teacher'/'parent' role at one point to prevent one boy (Pair 6, Key Stage 2, Age 8-9) from eating the PlayDoh (which he had apparently done before).

The tasks caused consternation for some of the children as they tried to match their ideas to their creative abilities: 'I normally don't do stick men but I am now,' (Pair 5, Key Stage 2 Girls, Age 7-8). Some children immediately claimed they couldn't do it: 'I can't build that,' (Pair 4, Key Stage 1 Boys, Age 6-7). The interviewer gave the children encouragement and ideas on how to start, when needed: 'You could make the outline of your room or the furniture' (Interviewer). The children particularly engaged with Zog the Alien and joined in the make-believe. When asked if they'd heard of the planet Ziggle and if they had visited it on holiday, Tickerman responded: 'I just go to Mars on holiday!' (Pair 2, Foundation Boys, Age 4-5). However, in some instances, the children were limited by the modelling materials, and made things they could make, rather than things that would actually help Zog to understand the internet: e.g., Elsa2 planned to make a fish (Pair 1, Foundation Girls, Age 4-5).

The boys in particular became very absorbed by the creative tasks and started humming to themselves, making banging, fighting, and flying noises (Pair 2, Foundation Boys, Age 4-5), and singing (Pair 6, Key Stage 2 Boys, Age 8-9). It was important to gauge when they had enough and needed to move on, however:

> Spiderman: Well, my idea is in my head, in my brain, MY BRAIN, and now my brain's blown up...
>
> Interviewer: Your brain's blown up? We don't want that do we!
>
> Spiderman: By a grenade!
>
> Interviewer: Okay, so as your brain has blown up, shall we do a different activity?

(Pair 2, Foundation Boys, Age 4-5).

For the third task, the youngest groups of girls mixed mediums by using PlayDoh with doll's house furniture to create their personal spaces, with one girl recreating her living room carpet through a mixture of PlayDoh colours (Pair 1, Foundation Girls, Age 4-5). The children who had experience in using Minecraft were keen to use this for the task. The down side to this was that any other activity was seen as a poor substitute by some children: 'Where's the Minecraft? That's not Minecraft' (Pair 6, Key Stage 2 Boys, Age 8-9). Using Minecraft allowed the children free creative rein and the chance to display their technical skills. This was apparent when the pair of boys in Key Stage 2 recreated their personal space at home with the addition of spawned pigs[1]! This was a power play, with the children completing the task requested by the researcher, but on their own terms, and with a lot of excitement! This was the opposite to the oldest boys, who also spent a great deal of time using Minecraft, but who were relaxed and completely let down their guard, talking extensively about their concerns about the digital world during the process.

[1] A feature of Minecraft is the ability to breed farm animals from blocks. This requires skill and the children had learned how to use this feature through online tutorials.

Implications for research and practice

The study found that the interviewer's projected role of 'researcher', and children's interpretation of this, impacted the power relations in the interviews. The role enabled the collection of data to address the study's research questions in a busy school environment, without disturbing other classes and ensuring the children stuck to their school's strict behaviour policies. Equally, through 'sharing power' the children were willing to talk openly about their use of digital devices, even telling stories about how they had deceived their parents to get extra time online and used computer games to deal with the stress of government tests. The children did not feel constrained by the researcher's role, many choosing gender neutral names or their gaming tag to label themselves. Projecting a more dominant or submissive power status may not have yielded such insightful results.

However, a consistent projection of the 'researcher' role was challenging, and was not always suitable. Both the youngest and oldest children asked for more support and advice, and the shy children needed a more nurturing approach to encourage them to engage. Others needed a firmer hand to ensure they didn't hurt themselves or contravene the school's rules. This indicates that although one role may be selected and actively projected, secondary roles are important to meet the needs of children at different ages and stages. Also, as Foucault (1977) notes, power and knowledge are connected and power cannot be taken out of the equation when conducting research with children. Therefore, even when the researcher does not deliberately take a role, participants will still form their own views of the researcher's power position. Academic and practitioner researchers should think carefully about both their intended role and how they will manage challenges and changes to their role, before the research encounter.

To support children's researchers, we present in Table 2 a toolkit of researcher roles that can be adopted in qualitative research with children. This encompasses both those roles previously discussed in the literature, and those identified and explored in this study, and offers a new way of viewing the phenomenon of the role of the researcher in children's field research according to power status.

[Table 2]

In determining the most appropriate role to adopt for a study, researchers should consider the research objectives, setting, existing power relations, and whether they are aiming for a dominant, sharing, or submissive power status. Researchers should consider how their status may be perceived by children and the impact on children's agency e.g., too high status and children may be cowed, whilst too low and the research may derail. The spectrum of roles outlined in the toolkit also illustrates the options available for when a primary role projection may need to be subordinated to the demands of a particular participant or situation, and a different role is required. This offers a new way of viewing the phenomenon of the role of the researcher in children's field research according to power status, drawing on the work of Foucault (1977), Mandell (1988), Gallagher (2008b), and Tesar's views on Havel (2014; 2016). Other roles identified in the literature, such as 'feminist, ' were not considered in this study due to the age of the children involved, but could be of use in transformative paradigms (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.9), and would be worthy of future research.

For researchers seeking to establish shared power relations, the study supports previous authors in finding that offering children a choice of participative techniques enables them to realise their agency (Carter and Ford, 2013; Gillies and Robinson, 2010; Harden *et al.,* 2000; Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). The use of Minecraft

was particularly effective in this, with children using their superior technical abilities to take power from the researcher and show their own personal geographies virtually in 3D. This study was limited in scope, with the focus on a small sample of pupils within one school, and Minecraft was only offered to children who already had experience playing the game. Greater incorporation of digital methods offers potential for qualitative research with digitally native children, in line with their own increasing agency through personal access to digital devices such as smartphones and tablets. Further research should therefore explore wider uses of Minecraft, as well as other video games, for gaining insight into children's lives.

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