Appropriate methods to empower children as curriculum co-designers

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Framing

- **Article 12 and Article 5 of Convention on the Rights of the Child** identifies a child's rights in in 'expressing themselves' in decisions that affect them including educational ones according to evolving capacities (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010).

- **Added-value of involving children**; adults do not always have insight into children's lives to make informed and effective decisions about form and content of curriculum that can best serve children's needs (Alderson & Morrow 2004; Davis 2009).

- Contributing their perspectives provides for **culturally responsive EE** that is grounded in their real life experiences.

- **Elementary school children voice and perspective still largely absent** from the curriculum development discussion.

- **Scarcity of descriptions regarding methods** that can help adults to access children's knowledge, values, attitudes, and opinions regarding curriculum. **Methodological concerns** : competence, gaining access, ethical issues, participation (Moore et al., 2011)

Research Focus

What is the meaning of 'appropriate' methods for empowering children in designing curriculum?

Conceptualizing empowerment

- **Typology of participation** recognizes that there are degree of involvement -- ladder of participation (Hart, 1997), participation as a function of opportunities (Shier, 2001); a function of youth/adult control (Wong Zimmerman and Parker's; 2010).

- Underlying this study was an understanding of the multidimensional nature of participation --**beyond that of merely giving 'voice'** (Lundy, 2007) :

  Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view

  Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views

  Audience: The view must be listened to

  Influence: The view must be acted upon as appropriate

Methods

- **Issue of access greatly facilitated by the context**: schools, a community-based environmental organization and a university research team involved in creating a child-informed multicultural environmental education curriculum

- Research conducted in **three elementary schools** located in a district in Montreal where immigrants and nonpermanent residents comprise 67.6% of the population with low SES. Students **high cultural diversity**

- 98 grade 4 to 6 children participated (54% girls 46% boys) for a total of 15 'focus groups' which lasted 1.5 hrs (two class periods)

- Refer to **'focus groups'** to collectively create shared meaning and knowledge (Krueger & Cassey, 2009) but design critical

Dominant Themes

Creating Spaces

Establishing the relationship

Being mindful

Pacing

Giving voice

Diversify format

Imaginative what 'if questions'

'Dotmocracy' adapted

Providing for audience

Peer group

Recognition of contribution

Having influence

Defined curriculum approach

1. Creating space

Establishing a relationship. Setting the scene is key since the quality of the relationship between the researcher and the participant influences the quality of the data generated but also because we were engaging children in roles and activities that **run counter to their usual experience.**

Started with introductions with everyone identifying themselves with an animal and explaining why. It made the children feel at ease, connect with the researcher, and introduced the topic of the environment.

« Mon nom est XX, si je serais un animal je serais un chien parce qu'à chaque jour on te donne de la nourriture gratuite, et c'est ça. »

« Moi je m'appelle xxx et si j'étais un animal je serais un dauphin parce que j'aime beaucoup les dauphins et que je trouve que c'est intéressant un mammifère qui peut respirer sous l'eau. »

1.Creating Space

Being mindful: As researchers we had to remain mindful of many issues: inclusion, reminding them of the focus of the activity, and the group dynamics.

Researcher had to listen careful (talk just to probe and ask questions), be tuned-into the group dynamics, and know when to invite the participation.

Critical for researchers to mindfully
use their body language to create a new and
more equitable power relationship
with the children.

1. Creating Space

Pacing: If sessions are too long, the quality of children's responses can deteriorate (Morgan et al., 2002). Although short time needed to be 'flow' --move fast enough but not too fast in order to maintain them engaged. Pay attention to how the activities come together and how long is the conversation and need for energizers.

2. Giving Voice

Diversify format : Key to vary the format to reach out to different children. In doing so the dynamics also changed amongst the children and with the researcher. Children were more at ease. Different youth participated depending on the activity also gender differences. A questionnaire and a body map as a visual also helped to engage in a different type of conversation

3. Giving Voice

Imaginative what if questions: Qualitative researchers may try to keep keep hypothetical or "what if" questions to a minimum, however, children found these types of questions liberating, breaking down self- or other-imposed limitations and boundaries.

-« On peut faire vivre des lapins dans ma classe pour les observer
- Pour montrer comment ils vivent, comment ils prennent soin, qu'est-ce qu'on fait
- Un garçon, une fille
- Non pas des bébés
- Parce que tu veux les regarder baiser c'est tout.
- Durant la nuit quand personne n'est là, OK.
- Tout ça sentir un peu mauvais puis on devra changer leur cage.
R: Vous avez des responsabilités comme ça, oui
- Oui
R: Et de quelle couleur seraient les lapins?
-   Blanc et noir

2.Giving Voice

'Dotmocracy' adapted: Children were asked to give their appreciation on different types of environmental activities (fieldtrips, planting etc). Another method of seeking children's perhaps less open but kids really enjoyed.

*« J'ai aimé quand on collait les petits ronds et qu'on donnait notre avis, **au moins, on ne le gardait pas juste pour nous, mais on le donnait à tout le monde et on pouvait dire qu'est-ce qu'on pensait de ce qu'on apprenait**. »*

3. Audience

Two audiences: In the immediate reality there is their **group of peers and the researcher** which as we know developmentally is particularly important in early adolescence.

Then there is **giving recognition for their contributions**. Therefore, contained within the parental consent form was the provision that if the child participated in the project, his or her name would be used as a contributor to which 90% agreed.

4. Influence

Defined curriculum approach: Children influenced the curriculum by defining what would be the essence of the curriculum. Their contributions served to highlight how really effective MEE from their perspective was paying attention to how it was being taught, where knowledge, heart and action were most effective to their learning.

« Oui, parce que si on fait des actions sans savoir qu'est-ce qu'on fait, genre, ça sert à rien, mais si on a des idées, on ne peut pas les mettre en action, ça sert à rien. » Je pense qu'il faut que tu aimes l'environnement pour penser à de nouvelles idées et faire des actions. »
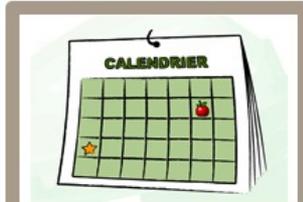
« *R. Comment veux-tu que l'enseignant soit?*
P1: Joyeux.
P2: Quand on joue on trouve que c'est pas *plate* du tout. T'as de la joie et t'es content. »

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Implications

- Relevance of this multidimensional view of participation **as a lens for engaging children meaningfully in research**. This research suggests that **respecting the dignity of the child** in research processes requires paying attention to both how we know and what we do with that knowledge-- they are interconnected.
- The significance however is that children were provided with appropriate methods to share their views, perceptions in a way that respected them as competent subjects.
- This study raises the questions: why can we not engage more children in design/evaluation of curriculum so that they are not just recipients of curriculum. Some strides have been made in other areas of program and services but less in the area of education given perhaps the long-standing hierarchical nature of the student-teacher relationship.

Implications

- For MEE to be 'relevant/responsive to our changing world' we need to continue this work with children so that it becomes more of a reflex. Doing research with children is a **craft** (Kvale,1999) which involves seeking **congruence** between the design and the object of your study.
- It requires stretching our methodological boundaries– including play, creativity and being mindful of how you present yourself your own energy-- but unlike in the case of women or indigenous peoples the challenge is that elementary children are less able to speak for themselves in advocating/ theorizing so it requires researchers who are committed and see the value in working through approaches that are 'appropriate'
- Coming back to the conference theme "To know is not enough" What this research suggests is that **respecting the dignity of the child** in research processes requires paying attention to both what we do with the knowledge as well as how we collect that knowledge-- they are interconnected.

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