

1

WHY BECOME INVOLVED IN RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD?

This introductory chapter outlines the context and importance of research in the early childhood field. It introduces the early childhood landscape, providing an historical account of how it has been positioned and what has been privileged. This provides the context within which the challenges specific to early childhood research are located. The sensitivities surrounding researching with young children in early childhood settings are acknowledged as needing thoughtful consideration in the research design and research process.

Key chapter questions are:

- Why research?
- What do I need to understand about the nature of research?
- Why research in early childhood?
- What do I need to know about the early childhood field so that I can understand the current context?
- How have children been viewed?
- What are some of the complexities surrounding research with young children?



While this book draws from a range of research experiences, from novice to more experienced researchers, this chapter specifically introduces two student researchers, Amy and Lara, whose research journeys we follow throughout the book. Their research journeys, along with all the other examples, provide more practical insights into the world of research in early childhood. The experiences of all researchers who have contributed their research stories to this book demonstrate that research perhaps is not as straightforward as one might think, yet can

be very rewarding not only for the researcher but also for the early childhood field.

WHY RESEARCH?

There are a number of reasons why people engage in research. Often it is because they are obliged to as a requirement of a course or to meet certain job criteria. There are, on the other hand, others who feel a deep commitment to explore and investigate issues to inform practice or to shape policy, and in their jobs have the capacity to undertake such research. When you mention the term 'research', you will find that it draws different reactions from different groups of people. Undergraduate students often fear research units in their courses, considering them difficult, complex, and something that is beyond their realms of understanding. 'It's like another language' was how one undergraduate student described her initial engagement in the research process. Some may view research as daunting to begin with, while those who are more experienced researchers, or who can see the potential of the impact on practice that research can have, tend to see it as exciting, rewarding and worthwhile. Whichever view you now hold, we hope that by engaging with this book and the experiences and journeys of the researchers' who have so willingly shared their experiences within the book, you will gain an understanding of the importance of research and the impact it can have on the lives of others as well as your own.

Research offers an opportunity to examine practice, to search for knowledge, to satisfy curiosity, to prove or disprove a theory or hypothesis. 'More and more we need high quality research to promote new knowledge because the world is ever changing. This provides a sound knowledge base upon which to respond to change' (Aubrey, David, Godfrey, & Thompson, 2000, p. 6). It is rightly perceived as a carefully planned, systematic investigation of an issue, incident, experience, trend, event, or fact, usually conducted to find out further information or to improve a situation. Being involved in empirical research, research that gains knowledge by direct or indirect observation, experience or experiments, enables the researcher to collect data about people and contexts using a range of methods and to consider the impact of such data. Engaging in pure research (basic, fundamental research) advances fundamental knowledge about the human world supporting or refuting theories. This is where a general explanation is developed relating to an issue or situation, establishing cause-and-effect relationships between variables. It will be for others to explicate the usefulness of the theory for practice, thereby

translating your research into practice. When research is in the social sciences, concerned with society and human behaviours, it becomes more complex as it impacts on the lived experiences of the participants either directly or indirectly, which calls for close attention to the ethical issues this raises. There is no question that research is a complex process, and at times problematic, which 'demands the ability to be both reflective and reflexive' (Aubrey et al., 2000, p. 5). Researchers experience many issues that need careful consideration to ensure their research is not only conducted in an ethical way, employing appropriate methods to obtain the data, but that the findings are sound and can lead to change or the confirmation or expansion of knowledge.

WHAT DO I NEED TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE NATURE OF RESEARCH?

'Those who are more experienced know that research is often tedious, painfully slow, and rarely spectacular. They realize that the search for truth and the solution of important problems take a great deal of time and energy and the intensive application of logical thinking' (Best & Kahn, 2006, p. 28). In reality the research process is often not as streamlined or straightforward as appears in books. A research professor once advised 'research is often rather messy and you need to keep this in mind, believing it will all make sense in the end'. There is a 'messiness' about research as things are not always clear at the start and only develop clarity as the research process continues and becomes more refined. Things are rarely black and white and easily definable. As Walford (2001) suggests, 'the real world of research is one of constraint and compromise' (p. 5). However, by working through the research process you have the potential to make an impact at some level with the eventual findings.

In order to help you better comprehend some of the 'messiness' and complexities of research in general, and researching in early childhood specifically, we, the authors, have drawn on our own experiences and the experiences of others in an effort to provide true to life examples. These glimpses of research in action are drawn from the education, health and community services sectors due to the interdisciplinary and holistic nature of early childhood. They concentrate on research undertaken with young children or issues related to early childhood. The research examples also represent different types of research, methodologically and in capacity and purpose, from an undergraduate honours thesis to large-scale research projects run by teams of researchers. These research projects are drawn from different countries of the world, with

a concentration on Australia and the United Kingdom. What should be clear to you by the end of the book is that every research project is unique, with differing demands placed on the researcher. It is reassuring to think, however, that there is a process which you can follow for undertaking research, so by thinking through the design of your research project will in fact give you some clarity on where your research is heading.

WHY RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD?

As we move along in the twenty-first century there is a strong emphasis emerging all over the world in policy documents and government initiatives for evidence-informed practice, none more so than in the early childhood field. For example, in Australia, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2006) nominated four priority areas for Australia as part of the Australian Government's National Reform Agenda in terms of building its human capital. Of the four areas, one focuses directly on high-quality early childhood programs to promote the wellbeing and development of Australia's children. In response to this policy reform, all Australian governments agreed to explore ways in which more can be done to provide children with the best possible start in life. Building a strong platform for healthy development and effective learning in the early years is linked with the provision of nurturing and responsive quality experiences and programs. Early childhood is in the spotlight and as such there are many opportunities for research in this area to inform policy and practice.

The importance of a young child's early years cannot be overstated as the research evidence concludes that the early stages of life lay the foundation for all future development. The ramifications of this is that action will make a difference in these significant years as long as it is targeted, well designed and thoughtfully executed (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Schonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This is where research can play a vital role, as actions can only be successfully tailored if informed by evidence, and this evidence comes from sound research. With new research relating to teaching and learning, and innovative projects in Australia and other countries, we see the expansion of the professional knowledge base related to quality practice in early childhood. For example, in Australia, there is a questioning of beliefs that have underpinned curriculum production and early childhood advice for at least the last 40 years. The ramification of these changing times is that early childhood policy makers and practitioners need to be prepared to rethink the field and their

own professional activities, exploring the origins, sustainment, and changes in attitudes and practices over time and how current processes are linked to the construction of good practice from an informed point of view. Without the use of information-gathering critique incorporating the range and variety of needs and responses, early childhood education and care 'can only foster dominant perspectives; the field thus functions to silence the voices of diverse others' (Cannella, 1997, p. 17).

Research can act to expand definitions of what constitutes quality practice. For example, when taking a holistic approach to early childhood, research can advise the formation of cross-portfolio, inter-sectorial and interdisciplinary partnerships that can make a difference in young children's and families' lives. This linking of services is reflected in the evidence that calls for new ways of working across the Children's Services sector boundaries that exist between education, care, welfare and health services, ensuring that practice is inclusive of all children and families (Siemon, 2002, p. 2). It is suggested that universal, secondary and statutory service responses need to form more unified service systems where each level of service builds on the strengths of the others in order to address increasingly complex needs. Therefore, current government reforms require new and consistent policy and practice agendas, focusing on children's wellbeing, education and care. These need to be informed by research.

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD SO THAT I CAN UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT CONTEXT?

The early childhood field has been described as diverse and multidisciplinary, which has grown from a long tradition of care and education. The very act of defining the early childhood field becomes quite problematic when you consider the diverse settings that young children and their families attend, the multidisciplinary nature of the field, as well as the age range of children served (birth to eight years being the internationally recognised early childhood period). There are complex layers and connections between government and non-government organisations led by voluntary and religious groups, education systems involving government, independent, Catholic and other religious schools, community organisations, free-market forces, small business owner-operators and health systems. If we take Australia as an example, we see how separate histories and traditions of early childhood 'care' programs and 'education' programs have resulted in substantially different goals, purposes and practices in childcare,

preschools, kindergartens and nurseries. These differences have been reinforced by policy, funding and administrative divisions within and between the sectors and at the government and local levels.

Countries differ as to the history of their early childhood services, and so you will be well placed if you spend time trying to gain a sense of this history and how the sector has been positioned over time, thereby acquiring an understanding of the subtleties that may impact on your research. In Australia, 'education and care has evolved in a somewhat haphazard way in response to varying community needs within changing ideological and socio-political environments' (Elliott, 2006, p. 2). This has manifested into a care–education dichotomy in the early childhood field, and the inability of policy and professional groups to transcend the care–education distinctions has resulted in a two-tiered system of early childhood education and early childhood care. What this means is that there are different requirements as to staff qualifications and professional standards, different regulations and licensing processes, resulting in differing levels of pay, resource provision and working conditions for staff. Yet, despite this, Australian early childhood education and care services are generally considered to be well developed and well established by international standards. It is this type of background information that helps you, as a researcher, contextualise the current context you are experiencing.

HOW HAVE CHILDREN BEEN VIEWED?

The modern notion of childhood came into existence as a consequence of the creation of the nation state and the rise of capitalism (Prout, 2005). Political, economic, technological, social and cultural changes paved the way for new social and cultural possibilities as people were freed from old forms of social control. Traditional religious beliefs were challenged, which created conditions for rationalist and individualist ideas and values. Played out over time and shaped by different circumstances, the modern idea of childhood transpired. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a dominant image of childhood was universalised with the introduction of mass schooling and new laws that sought to provide children with greater protection. This resulted in a more sentimental view of children that emphasised their innocence and vulnerability (Prout, 2005). The institution of childhood was further questioned with the rise of feminism and other social movement in the 1970s and 1980s (Johnny, 2006). By the mid-twentieth century all children were thought to be entitled to certain common elements and rights of childhood and were seen as competent.

The early childhood sector also has a history of different images and beliefs about children and the way that children learn and develop. What is certain is that this 'history of childhood', along with other factors concerning the way society conceptualises infants and young children, influences how early childhood and young children are defined. As someone researching in the early childhood field, understanding the perspectives of others, related to the nature of children, will help you appreciate why there could be issues around access, participation and the protection of young children.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE COMPLEXITIES SURROUNDING RESEARCH WITH YOUNG CHILDREN?

With children now being acknowledged as capable and competent, having agency and rights, there is more widespread acceptance of the importance of involving young children in research that relates to their own lives. The form that this involvement takes can vary, such as a shift from children being the object of research, to actively participating in the research process itself. In one study, which focused on childhood wellbeing – How to grow up happy – Thoilliez (2011) positioned the child participants as 'interlocutors' able to 'contribute to conceptualizing what a child would need in order to be happy' (p. 328). This is based on the notion that young children are able to give their opinions about issues that impact on their lives, and that they have a right to do so. As Jover and Thoilliez (2011) acknowledge, 'children have rights, and not just rights to protection, but also the right to express themselves and be heard on matters concerning them' (p. 128). Lundy (2007) proposes that four elements need to be present – space, voice, audience and influence – for children to have both the right to express a view and the right to have their views given due weight. It is argued that it is not common for all four elements to be present in the research, with the latter two elements often missing. These elements are defined as:

- 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.

Thought needs to be given to how children and their views are represented within the research, how data are interpreted, who is involved in this process, and the power dynamics and status that already exist

between adults and children. We need to be reflective about the assumptions we draw relating to children's perspectives, interests and attitudes (Mayall, 2002). We need to be mindful that our position as an adult implies superior knowledge. This means that methodological approaches and ethical considerations need deliberation. When considering methodological approaches the researcher must choose strategies which allow children to feel comfortable and confident in what is required of them, and draw on young children's communication strengths. Incorporating multi-modal means of communication, such as drawing, taking photographs and conversing with children about their experiences, enables researchers to gain a more comprehensive view and better represent children's understandings. As Mayall (2002, p. 121) states 'good information about childhood must start from children's experience'. Ethical issues revolve around access, the notion of informed consent, ownership, confidentiality, protection, and feedback. It has become a practice for some researchers whose research involves young children, to reflect on the research process itself and the power relationships between the researcher and the researched (Bolzan & Gale, 2011; Mayall, 2002) in an attempt to distribute the power base more equally. This means the adult researcher will need to relinquish the power, finding ways for children to realise that they have power. One way of achieving this is to take the position of a 'least adult role' (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000) where the researcher allows the children to lead the interactions. In this scenario, the children initiate contact, determining when the researcher is invited into their conversations or play, and decide the agenda. This means having conversations rather than interviewing children as they then have control and set the pace and the direction of the dialogue. The power dynamics certainly need careful consideration when research involves young children to ensure the integrity of the data and analysis. Researching with children also demands the researcher to be somewhat flexible and open to changing methods during the research process. Once children are positioned as collaborators in the research process, the researcher must be flexible enough to take up children's ideas about the research as it progresses.

Issues such as these will be unpacked further as you work your way through this book and read the experiences of other researchers. There are benefits to engaging children in research, such as building a positive sense of agency, enhanced social competence and relationships, critical thinking, metacognition and creativity (Fielding & Bragg, 2003). However, if committed to privileging children's voices in research, and acknowledging that they have rights in the research process which are equal to the rights of adult research participants, then thought must be

given to how this can be accomplished in an ethical, responsive, respectful and effective way. Children are also members of families and communities. As researchers undertake projects with children they are often linking in with families. They may also find themselves focusing on particular issues pertinent to the adults in children's lives. Many of the considerations for researching with children should also be respected as researchers work with parents and within communities.

RESEARCH JOURNEYS: AMY AND LARA

A feature of this book is the research journeys of two doctoral research students, Amy and Lara. Their stories are woven throughout many of the chapters, illustrating how they dealt with different aspects of the research process, what they thought at the time, and how this impacted on what they did next. So while we dip in and out of the research projects and experiences of others in a somewhat eclectic way, we follow the complete journey of both Amy and Lara, charting the challenges and successes they experienced as they worked towards their doctoral qualification. Their accounts are reflective and frank in the hope that other student researchers can identify with them. First, we will introduce Amy, followed by Lara.

Amy was based in Australia and was extremely interested in exploring children's early gifted development. When she began her research Amy didn't have any 'fixed ideas' about what giftedness was. She saw IQ as just one of many indicators of what can be advanced thinking or development. Amy explains her interest in the topic as follows: 'It's just the whole issue, I suppose, of early intellectual development and what promotes it. I think gifted development is an interesting example of intellectual development that can perhaps teach us things about intellectual development across the whole population.' Amy followed this interest by looking at the pretend play development of a group of infants and toddlers, taking pretend play as a measure of their cognitive development, and the maternal interactions in that development and how they promoted children's play and thinking. Amy's thesis was entitled: 'Relationships between early pretence, mother-child interactions and later IQ: a longitudinal study of average to high ability children'. Her Abstract is included here to give you a sense of her research work, and to help you put her story as a researcher in context. Amy was invited to be featured in this book as she undertook a quantitative study, which went against the more qualitative approaches usually undertaken for the topic. Applying this approach challenged Amy in many ways, as you will read in the various chapters.

Amy's Abstract

Little is known about the early development of intellectually gifted or high ability children, and the role of caregiver interactions in that development. The aim of this study was to investigate relationships between early development and interactions, and later IQ. Participants were 21 mother-child dyads, many of whom were recruited on the basis of having a greater than usual likelihood of showing advanced development. Based on Piaget's theory on the cognitive implications of children's emerging pretence, pretend play development was selected as a measure of early development. Level and frequency of play were used as variables, based on Brown's (1997) Pretend Play Observation Scale. Mother-child interactions were examined for levels of stimulation and challenge, within the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [Vygotsky, 1978], and the related construct of scaffolding. Interaction measures included level and frequency of maternal play modelling, and mothers' use of different types of verbal scaffolding, including categories of total verbal and play comment, and higher order categories of total higher order, didactic, analogical/transformational and metacognitive. Dyads were videotaped in monthly play sessions when children were aged from 8 to 17 months. Data analyses were based on three five-minute samples containing the child's highest level of play demonstrated within each age range of 8-9 months, 11-13 months, and 16-17 months. Children were assessed at 4.5-6 years on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (FE). Results showed that children's global IQ scores ranged from 96-150, with a mean of 123. Results for verbal and abstract-visual sub-scales were similar. Unexpectedly, the group as a whole demonstrated advanced levels of pretend play, with all children showing at least emerging pretence at 8-9 months, and most demonstrating pretend transformations by 11-13 months. All mothers modelled play levels in advance of age-typical expectations for children. A series of ANOVAs, based on higher (HGIQ) and lower (LGIQ) IQ groups, showed no significant relationships between play levels and global, verbal or abstract-visual IQ. A series of Mann-Whitney U-Tests were used to analyse data on child and mother play frequencies and maternal verbal scaffolding. At the 11-13 months session, HGIQ dyads showed higher frequencies of child play, and lower frequencies of maternal play modelling, than LGIQ dyads. This suggested faster learning by HGIQ children, and earlier transfer of responsibility for dyadic activity to children by HGIQ mothers. Mothers in the HGIQ dyads demonstrated more pretend transformations and engaged in more analogical/transformational utterances than mothers in LGIQ dyads, at the 8-9 months session. At the 11-13 months session, HGIQ mothers continued to demonstrate more frequent analogical/transformational verbal scaffolding, as well as significantly more metacognitive utterances than LGIQ mothers. The results provide evidence of advanced development in high ability children from the first year of life. The findings also support the notion that the caregivers of high ability children engage them in challenging and stimulating interactions from an early age. The findings of advanced play levels for the whole group are attributed to intensive maternal scaffolding, data analysis procedures, and the provision of supportive play materials.

Our second featured researcher in this book is Lara. Lara was based in the United Kingdom during her doctoral studies and her research started as a project that was to include two topics. One topic was the way that graphic symbols were used with young children aged 3–5 years in the classroom, and the other was the collaboration between staff in a Foundation Stage setting. (The Foundation Stage is the curriculum phase in England for children aged Birth to Five years. This study refers to Nursery and Reception age groups – children aged 3–5 years). The choice of the topic and setting were heavily influenced by Lara’s work as a teaching assistant in schools in the United Kingdom with young children, and using graphic signs and symbols with these children. Lara was at the time looking to change jobs and identified a studentship which was a doctoral project that was going to be in an associated topic set locally. For Lara, it was a case of perfect timing for her to undertake higher degree research and be supported financially while she did. Lara’s thesis was titled: ‘An investigation exploring the experiences of a range of practitioners using graphic symbols with children in Foundation Stage (3–5 years) school settings’. Lara was invited to be featured in this book because she took a contrasting approach to that of Amy, and also because her research was part of a larger project, which again has different ramifications to other research projects undertaken by some students. Lara’s Abstract follows so you can understand the significance of her research and its findings.

Lara’s Abstract

The primary objective of the research was to explore practitioners’ experiences of using graphic symbols with children in Foundation Stage (3–5 years) school settings. For the main study, 44 interviews were conducted with teachers, teaching assistants/nursery nurses and speech and language therapists. These were conducted face to face by the researcher and were all located within the East Midlands (UK). The findings of this research were developed as a framework of themes and subthemes. There were four major themes identified in the data and 15 subthemes, reflecting the major repeating ideas and patterns in the data. To further explain these themes and subthemes and ‘tell the story’ of the data set as a whole, a theoretical framework was developed. This theoretical framework encompasses two original theoretical constructs explaining the data, ‘models of reasoning’ and ‘perceptions of professional roles’. These constructs explain the ways that practitioners referred to their experiences of thinking and reasoning about how to use symbols, as well as how they perceived their own role in the implementation of symbols and the roles of other practitioners they worked with. Particular attention was paid to their experiences of collaborative working when using symbols and the findings suggest that professional roles are sometimes unclear and that opportunities to communicate with other practitioners

are not always consistently available. The research demonstrated that the use of symbols in Foundation Stage school settings is common among special and mainstream provision and that symbols are used for a wide variety of purposes with children with a wide range of needs.

USING THIS BOOK

We would encourage you to use this book as a compass point – take what is relevant to you and your research, and from time to time use the book to check your bearings. It is not designed to be prescriptive, but rather as a text you can dip in and out of depending on where you are in your own research journey. It is hoped that you will find something of value within the chapters to assist you with your research. Each chapter is structured around questions which one could ask relating to the chapter topic, with each chapter concluding with reflective questions for you to ponder in relation to your research project. We wish you well on your research journey!