Contested voices? Methodological tensions and the politics of knowing in creative visual research with children

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the body of work within the social studies of childhood on creative visual methods and the emerging critique on the participatory assumptions of child-centred creative visual methodology. Drawing on ethnographically informed research with a group of children aged 8-12 which utilised a range of creative methods including child-led video and photography, the paper provides a methodological focus on the children’s interactions with the adult research team, each other and with the children whom they filmed, interviewed and photographed. The paper suggests that attention to the dynamics between children as researchers and participants is essential for understanding how children’s voices are made (and diminished) in child-led creative visual methods. Methodological attention to the ways in which children’s voices are differently (and unequally) heard in the research encounter is essential for evaluating what such methods bring to research with children and challenges theorizations of a singular children’s voice suggested in the literature.

Key words

Knowledge production, children and young people, participatory creative visual methods, methodology

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Introduction

Within the social studies of childhood there has been increasing emphasis on working participatorily with children in order that they might set research agendas and participate in more equal ways (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Hunleth, 2011; Thomson, 2008; Van Blerk and Barker, 2008). This has included the development and application of a range of seemingly child-oriented creative practices which encompass art, photography and video methods. The inclusion of children in this way is frequently presented as a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of children from passive objects of ‘becoming’ to active, knowledgeable social agents (James et. al, 1998; Morrow, 2008). Although not without its critique (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008) this movement is increasingly associated with the rapid growth in the adoption of an immense range of creative and ostensibly child-centred methods including video and photography walking tours, mapping and art-based approaches such as drawing and collage (c.f. Besten, 2010; Mannay, 2010; Morrow, 2000, 2008; Sutton, 2009; Sutton et. al. 2007; Trell and Van Hoven, 2010). As a number of commentators have noted, this constitutes an important and genuine attempt to include children in the production of knowledge where previously their experiences have been marginalised or indeed absent. This is seen most particularly (although by no means exclusively) within the emerging field of children’s geographies in which researchers have actively embraced theoretical developments within the sociology of childhood to redefine and politicise children’s use of space and their own engagement with children and young people through less hierarchical practice (Holloway and Valentine, 2005; Horton, Krafth and Tucker, 2008 and Schafer and Yarwood, 2008:121). A central focus of this work has been to understand, explore and challenge children’s experiences of exclusion and inequality (c.f. Besten, 2010; Haw, 2008; Schafer and Yarwood, 2008; Sutton, 2009) in ways which constitute an important corrective
to large-scale survey-based research which reinforce often negative assumptions about children’s lives and more particularly those of poorer children (Morrow and Mayall, 2009).

A key principle underpinning the deployment of creative methods is that engaging children in practical tasks of their choosing enables them to give voice to their experiences in ways which are meaningful to them which are not reliant on verbal competencies (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Hunleth, 2011; Tinkler, 2008; Wright, Darko, Standen and Patel, 2010), a view which is also predicated on the epistemological principle that knowledge produced by children about children’s experiences offers a ‘better’ understanding of these experiences than that generated by adults (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). However, within the social studies of childhood literatures and more particular within the field of children’s geographies and cultural studies these claims are increasingly subject to challenge and contestation. These include concerns regarding the over-privileging of children’s knowledges and, more particularly, the valorising of the all-knowing and all-seeing child who has unique insight into his/her own life and the subjective reality of his/her peers (Buckingham, 1991).

Whilst this reconceptualising of the child is, arguably, an important corrective to the historical positioning of children as ‘incompetent, unreliable and incomplete….objects to be studied’ (Fargas-Malet et. al., 2010: 175) its replacement with the ‘wise, liberated child’ (Buckingham, 1991) is similarly ontologically and methodologically troubling. This is in part because an epistemology of this kind ‘assumes that people are transparently knowable to themselves’ and risks privileging their ‘voices’ as the most authentic source of knowledge about themselves and their lives. (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008:502). The idea of the all-knowing and individuated subject is antithetical to developments within post-structuralism
and post-modernism, including feminist theory in which knowledge is recognised as inevitably relational, partial and co-constructed (Haraway, 1991).

A further challenge centres upon the ways in which child-led research methods are practically accomplished in the context of research which, despite a rhetoric of inclusivity, are inevitably driven by adult research agendas, time-frames and priorities (c.f. Gallacher and Gallagher 2008; Gillies and Robinson, 2010 and Hunleth, 2011). As Holland et al (2010:362) suggests much of what passes as creative participatory methods with children are in fact highly managed encounters between adult researchers and children which in turn are very much reliant on institutionalized educational practices and children’s ‘schooled docility.’ Furthermore work by Lomax et. al. (2011: 238) suggests that, even when researchers employ creative methods not learnt in the class-room, children’s efforts to portray their lives in ways which are meaningful to them may be curtailed by the constructions of children and childhoods deployed by the adults around them.

**Methodological challenges of creative visual methods: Uncovering and understanding young people’s lives?**

As Holland et al (2010: 361) suggests then, ‘an extensive literature is developing that debates, critiques and theorizes the impetus towards more participation of children and young people.’ However, while they and others, provide a robust critique of the participatory assumptions implicit in creative approaches, including a much needed focus on the ways in which children are positioned by and respond to adult researchers, there has been much less attention afforded to the dynamics between children themselves and the ways in which their evolving relationships may dynamically shape their participation in creative visual research.
In common with Buckingham (1991:228) it is suggested that childhood research has been beleaguered by theorizations of the child and children’s participation as ‘homogenous and undifferentiated’ allied to which is the conceptual simplification of power and empowerment as hierarchical and unidirectional; something that adults can give (or take) from children (see also Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). This obfuscates the ways in which children may themselves dynamically shape and organise their worlds and how this may be unequally exercised between children. The question of who participates and how is therefore crucial for claims that child-centred creative methods are inherently participatory and is of central concern in this research. Within this context, the additional critique offered by Hunleth (2011: 81) in which she examines child-led research methods in order to explore what such methods accomplish for the adult research agenda and how they may ‘shape and constrain understandings of children’s perspectives, knowledge and actions’ is of critical relevance. As she suggests, these questions need serious methodological attention if researchers of childhood are to make claims about the ways in which participatory and creative methods enable children to articulate their experiences and the status of the knowledge that is produced.

It is from this perspective, motivated by a theoretical and methodological commitment to examine how child-centred research agendas might (or might not) be practically accomplished and what they might offer in terms of a (better or different) contribution to understandings of contemporary childhoods that this research with children and young people was conceived. In this way the research aimed to explore children’s experiences of living in a poorer neighbourhood from their perspectives but with a focus on critically examining participatory and creative ways of working. The paper will now briefly describe the research setting, participants and methods before the main focus which is to critically examine the
ways in which the children worked with each other in the production of the creative media in
order to theorize and make sense of these media and their potential to offer insights into
children’s lives.

‘Proper places’?: Research origins and children’s neighbourhood contexts

The research took place in a large, relatively affluent town in central England but, more
particularly, within one of the most deprived wards within that town. Neighborhood and
ward-based statistics paint a picture of a multiply and disproportionately impoverished
neighbourhood (Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2011). Child well-being on the estate (as
measured by material well-being, health, education, crime, housing, environment, and
children in need) is amongst the lowest 10% in the country (Social Policy Research Unit,
2010) while income poverty on the estate (defined by the proportion of adults claiming
income support, incapacity benefit and disability living allowance) is more than double the
UK and city average. Life expectancy corroborates the social gradient in health inequalities
at 12 years lower for estate residents than for those of their wealthier neighbours (Marmot,
2010).

The estate’s difference from its more affluent neighbours is captured in local media
representations in which the poorer health, exam results and ‘workless-ness’ of its residents
serve to sustain the estate’s reputation as an undesirable and ‘improper place’ (Popay et. al.
2003) in ways which are embodied in and reinforced through its distinctive and stigmatizing
design and architecture. Built during the 1970s as part of mass re-housing and ‘slum
clearance’, the non-traditional construction of the dwellings, unconventional layout of its
streets and walkways and its higher than average proportion of social housing (two-thirds of
housing stock) sustain and contribute to its reputation as housing for ‘slum dwellers’
(anonymised source) in ways which denote it as a working-class neighbourhood and its residents as ‘passive, stuck and disconnected’ (Hanley, 2008: ix). The assumption that no one who could, would choose to live in such a place is symptomatic of local and wider public discourses in which places are socially ranked and social difference structured through discursive categorisations of poorer people as ‘rough’, ‘undeserving’ and ‘unreliable’ (Jenkins, 2000:12; Brent, 2009; Rogaly and Taylor, 2011).

The research began as a collaborative exercise between the lead investigators of an ESRC funded Seminar Series, Visual Dialogues: New Agendas in Inequalities Research, and a local Action Learning Project (ALP). The ALP, which was funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, was set up to explore the quality of life in a ‘disadvantaged’ neighbourhood. Aspects of the ALP were predicated on assumptions about the neighbourhood’s lack of community and anti-social behaviour and, at the time of the fieldwork children and young people on the estate were subject to dispersal orders to remove ‘anti-social yobs’ (anonymised media source). This was the result of complaints by a local bus company about damage to vehicles and ‘drivers abused by young people’. This proposal had the support of a local counsellor, who publicly stated the importance of ‘strong action’ in order to protect ‘local residents and local businesses serving the area’ (anonymised community newsletter). This is mentioned as illustrative of the local and national political climate in which the lives of economically disadvantaged children and their parents are increasingly regulated and policed (Brent 2009; Holloway and Valentine, 2005; James, Jenks

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2 A key objective of the seminar series was to explore the value of visual methods for providing insights into peoples’ lives and how these might inform policy and contribute to wider public conversation about social inequalities. Further information about the seminar series can be found at www.visualdialogues.co.uk.

3 This source and others in this section are anonymised in order not to identify the neighbourhood in which this research was undertaken. This is of particular relevance in this project which includes images of the child participants. For further discussion of the ethical issues generated by participant visibility and the implications of researchers’ practices on data integrity see Wiles et al (2008; 2010).
and Prout, 1998; Layard and Dunn, 2009; Lashua, 2010 and Minton, 2009) and symptomatic of the recurrent problematisation of children and young people’s use of public spaces.

As Holloway and Valentine (2005) and others (Hendrick, 2003; Kehily, 2010; Ward, 1977) suggest, anxieties about children’s social visibility are connected to powerful and contradictory cultural constructions of childhood which continue to be mobilised in contemporary Western societies which frequently coalesce around children’s visibility and particularly about where and how they play. Analyses by Gillies and Robinson (2010); Kehily (2010) and Hendrick (2003) suggests that the problem is not so much the opportunities available for children to play but society’s conceptualisation of children as threatening and disruptive which renders playing out an increasingly problematic activity. This problematisation of children’s use of public space is captured in Waiton’s (2001) examination of the way teenagers are increasingly presented as being at risk, or a risk to others. As he notes, ‘free play’ (hanging out with friends in the street), is increasingly constructed as an anti-social activity, fuelled by curfew schemes and sustained through pervasive negative stereotyping of poorer children (Morrow and Mayall, 2009; Sutton, 2009; Weinger, 2000). As Connolly and Ennew (1996: 133) suggest ‘to be a child outside adult supervision, visible on city centre streets, is to be out of place.’

Moreover, despite the extensive literatures mapping the harmful effects of child poverty there has been much less attention paid to exploring how poorer children themselves experience living in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This is a significant oversight given the complexity that has been noted within the social science literatures on conceptualising the social mechanisms within disadvantaged neighbourhoods which shape children’s experiences. As Pinkster (2009: 324) suggests, ‘there is a need to study the interplay between neighbourhood conditions and other social contexts such as school, family or peers.’ Further
conceptual weaknesses are suggested by Morrow and Mayall (2009) in their influential paper critically assessing attempts to measure children’s, including poorer children’s, well-being. As they suggest, such research involves cultural assumptions which are symptomatic of wider societal confusion about how children should experience childhood and which reinforce and perpetuate the idea that contemporary childhoods are problematic and lacking.

Creative contexts: methodological challenges, meanings and processes

It is from the theoretical standpoint of childhood studies and the sociology of childhood in which children are recognised and valued as competent social actors with knowledges about their social worlds (James et. al. 1998; Sutton, 2009) that this research, to explore children’s everyday experiences of living in a poorer neighbourhood, was undertaken. The research started with the premise that children should be able to opt in (and out) of the research freely and should define the research questions and methods that they wanted to work with. This approach generated a series of interconnected research projects in which children drew on a range of creative visual methods, including participatory video (Kindon, 2003; Lomax et. al., 2011; Shaw, 2007); video and photography ‘walk-alongs’ (Trell and Van Hoven, 2010); video-interviews and photo-portraiture including self-portraiture (Cox, 2011) in order to explore issues of: friendship and migration; spaces and places to play and places they liked and liked less. A total of thirteen children (seven boys and six girls) aged eight to twelve took part in the research each of whom, with the exception of two boys⁴, lived within walking distance of the out-of-school play scheme through which they were invited to participate. The project was managed in accordance with British Sociological Association (2002) and the

⁴ Two boys, aged 11, joined the project in April 2011. Whilst they did not live on the estate, they had strong associations with it, attending the out of school club after school and during school holidays. They also had significant family and friendship connections to the estate, attending the same secondary school as many of the children from the estate and having elderly relatives in the sheltered housing (which one of the children interviewed as part of the project). The involvement of these two children highlighted the ways in which Brent (2009) and Rogaly and Taylor (2011) theorize community as extending beyond geographical boundaries.
university research ethics framework and was informed by the literatures on visual research ethics and ethical research with children (Gillies and Robinson, 2010; Holland, Renold, Ross and Hillman, 2010; Morrow, 2008; Wiles, Coffey, Robinson and Prosser, 2010). For reasons of space this paper will not cover the important ethical issues which our visual work generated. For analysis of some of these, including the ways in which children’s own moral agency and representational practises shaped the process and outcome of the research see Lomax et al. (2011) as well as useful analysis by Holland et al. (2010).

The children’s commitment to documenting each others, and residents’ lives resulted in a series of creative visual outputs, including:

- A four minute film featuring interviews with children and adults about their experiences of living on the estate and making visible their own and residents’ use of the parks and green spaces on the estate.

- A series of video-interviews with children and older adults attending, respectively a lunch and breakfast club which explore memories and experiences of moving to the estate.

- A portfolio of portraits of the children themselves and other residents colour-washed, mounted and displayed on ‘photo-trees’ for local and national dissemination.

The film, photographs and interview material thus offer insights into residents’ (adults’ and children’s) ideas about what constitutes a good place to live (friends and friendship, parks and places to play) as well as negative aspects about the estate which compromise this
(vandalism, ‘un-neighbourly’ behaviour and poor maintenance of the fabric of the parks and on the estate generally). These findings and a description of the methods and phases of the research are discussed elsewhere (Lomax et. al, 2011) this section attending to the ‘messy, fallible, faltering nature of the research in practice’ (Horton et al, 2008: 340). Such attention is necessary not least to position the research as ‘removed from the neat, idealistic ways in which research (is) presented in many academic accounts’ (Horton et al, 2008: 340 (although see Gillies and Robinson, 2010 for an important exception) but more than this it foregrounds the significance of an epistemology which values and interrogates the challenges, difficulties and uncertainties generated by creative participatory research. A focus on these situated practices has the potential to offer a more nuanced understanding of participation and, as such, constitutes an important corrective to the assumptions which underpin much creative research in which:

‘the suggestion that methods are child-led and child-oriented effectively circumvents the need for further discussion of the social dynamics that shape data-collection and analysis’ Hunleth (2011: 82).

The remainder of the paper therefore provides a methodological focus on these situated practices as they are made visible during the course of the research.

‘Performing place: Friendships, neighbourhood and play

The images and photographs generated by the children suggest that friendship and places to play are important and positive elements of life on the estate and indeed, all the children and young people participating in the research articulated the significance of the estates parks and green spaces for their friendship networks and play. Additionally, the children expressed,
through their photographs, video-recordings and interviews, their negative feelings about aspects of the estate which threatened this. However, of significance is the ways in which these aspects of children’s lives were brought into view through children’s embodied engagement with the participatory research process. As the video clips and photographs depict, the children spent a great deal of time, during the course of the field-work, playing in ways which were performed and posed for the camera but also constituted part of their everyday movement around the estate. For example, as image one displays, the short journey to the estate’s shops to interview residents was not walked but ‘skipped’ with arms linked in an intimate display of friendship. Similarly, trips to film in the park proceeded at the children’s pace, allowing for multiple diversions to swing from trees, play in shrubbery, stroke dogs and jump over bollards (image two) in ways which made visible and brought to life children’s social connectivites and the importance of seemingly insignificant smaller green spaces and walkways which played an important part in children’s everyday geographies. Additionally, the video footage illustrates how the children’s activities were performed to constant chattering, singing and joking in ways which can also be understood as being made for the camera and through which membership of particular social groups was both cemented and celebrated. This is exemplified in the relationship between two older girls, both of whom were new to the estate. Their developing friendship is caught on camera as they gravitate towards each other, share jokes and skip and hang upside down on monkey bars (image three). Despite the conspicuous presence of this friendship, it is important to stress that it was not conducted in a way that excluded others. As image one displays other children did spontaneously move in and out of the girls’ relationship. However, it was noticeable that, initially at least, the younger girls lacked the confidence to join in some of the older girls’ rituals.
Analysis of the footage shows, in addition, a generous capacity, on the part of each of the children, for democratic decision making and a commitment to supporting each other with the technical and social complexities of film-making and interviewing. These dynamics were strongly in evidence during editing when the children displayed considerable sensitivity about the selection of images and footage to be used in the final film, demonstrating an awareness of who had shot which sequences and why this might be important to include in the final edit. It is also important to note the ways in which the older children helped the younger ones during the course of the film-making and fieldwork. Not only did this include assistance with the operation of the cameras but they also made great effort to ensure that everyone would appear in the final film. This included taking a number of photographs, such as posed and ‘natural’ pictures of the younger children playing on the bouncy castle (image four) and patiently video-taping one of the younger boy’s street dance performance. In addition, the two younger boys, encouraged by the other children, participated in the selection of images of themselves for inclusion in the film’s credits during the final day’s edit. What was significant about this was the ways in which the older children appeared to recognise the different needs and competencies of the younger boys, proactively seeking to involve them in ways which recognised their performative skills. However, as the following section now discusses, children may also inhibit the participation of others both intentionally and unintentionally.

‘You like Justin Beiber?!!!!!’: Child-led exclusionary practices in participatory research

This section now considers the ways in which children may deliberately or inadvertently exclude or diminish the participation of other children. Whilst overt exclusionary practices were rare, these did occur occasionally in the research and took the form of explicit social denigration, e.g. of other boys. Girls also experienced this with two of the girls arguing on the
first day of fieldwork and, as a consequence of which, one of the girls left and did not return. Whilst these overt exclusionary practices were rare, there were several examples which suggest that, for children taking part in creative research there are a whole set of social dynamics to manage. This was made evident over lunch on one occasion when one of the boys let slip during a discussion about ‘X Factor’\(^5\) that he liked popular music by Justin Beiber, an admission which generated a great deal of mirth from the other children and some teasing in which he was positioned as ‘un-cool.’ While research with adults, and more particularly focus group research (Silva and Wright, 2005) offers extremely useful insight into the ways in which ‘taste’ structures adult relationships and participation in research, there has been little focus, to date, on this as a dynamic force in participatory research with children. In contrast, this example highlights the ways that children’s voices may be mediated by hierarchies of ‘cool’ that exist within children’s culture and through which some children’s contributions are more highly valued (by other children) than others.

The paper now explores the ways in which children may inadvertently stifle other children’s voices during video-interviews and the complexities that this generates for the children involved, those working with them and the quality of the data that is produced. As the paper has outlined, child-led interviewing was an integral part of the research, a skill which the group were keen to develop and one which they planned and practiced with each other prior to interviewing other children and adults on the estate. However, as we might ourselves recognise from our own research experience, the skills of managing recording equipment, asking questions and listening to respondents takes both practice and experience which was necessarily limited by the practical and logistical constraints which framed the research.

\(^5\) A ‘reality’ T.V. show in which members of the U.K. public audition and perform on national TV and are judged by a celebrity panel and weekly public phone voting system. At the end of each series, the most popular contestant/act is awarded a recording contract, [http://xfactor.itv.com/](http://xfactor.itv.com/).
Specific difficulties centred upon the tensions which became apparent around enabling children to choose their methods and give them the skills to enable them to apply them whilst also ensuring that views of adults and other young people on the estate were heard and respected. This was compounded by the desire (mine and the children’s) to make use of opportunities offered as they (often spontaneously) arose and were made available. As well as necessitating careful and sensitive management in the field this decision had important consequences for the ways in which interviewees (including other children’s) contributions were generated (or not). This included an occasion when the children forgot to turn on the camera (of a fine interview in which an 11 year old boy articulated his dismay at vandalism and damage to park equipment and which invokes his concern for animals). More common was a directive interviewing technique in which children occasionally interrupted interviewees and fired questions in ways which did not always acknowledge interviewees answers and, in so doing, closed down opportunities for others to speak. For example, on one occasion, Rory (11) on reaching the end of his list of interview questions tells his interviewee, Carly (aged 10) ‘that’s enough’ cutting across her answer and switching off the camera. While in this example Carly was, arguably, able to re-assert her knowledge and authority by pointedly leaning over Rory during a subsequent interview to explain that he had ‘missed a bit’ (a comment which referred to his skipping one of the questions on his interview schedule) it does bring into view an important concern both about the quality of the data that is generated by children on behalf of other children and the ways in which child-led methods might mitigate against the hearing of children’s voices more generally.

Discussion and concluding remarks
Following Gallacher and Gallagher’s (2008) and others critique of the participatory assumptions of child-led research, this paper has suggested a critical focus on the ways in
which children may drive and shape research and the ways this may be unequally experienced by individual children during the research process. Through a focus on the dynamics of children’s relationships as they work together to plan, produce and disseminate the research the paper attends to the ways in which knowledge production is shaped by children’s social relationships.

These analyses suggest that child-led creative methods may offer important insights into the lived experiences of children’s social geographies and, within the study of social inequality can provide an important challenge to persistent negative stereotyping of poorer children’s lives. In contrast to wider negative media representations of children’s lives in poorer neighbourhoods (Brent, 2009) children’s creative outputs (portraits, photo-mosaics and film) challenge and disrupt the persistent and damaging representations of poorer children as ‘unhappy, unloved and out-of-control’ (Morrow and Mayall, 2009) providing an important counterpoint to images which stigmatise poorer children.

However, I would suggest that creative visual methods do not in themselves provide a fail-safe shortcut to children’s experiences and would advocate methodological caution in their use and application. Rather, as these analyses has made clear, children participate in and engage with creative methods differently and unequally and in ways which provide a challenge to the assumptions in some childhood literatures that creative methods side-step verbal competency. Rather, children’s verbal skills are crucial to the ways in which children and young people are able to negotiate their place within the peer-led research group and with the adults and children they encounter, photograph and interview. Moreover, children’s unequal resources in this respect suggested important differences between children’s individual participation, challenging the view, implicit in much childhood research, of a
singular ‘children’s voice’. It is suggested instead that creative research with children generates multiple voices and experiences which are negotiated in and through the research process and which researchers must be attentive to.

A final issue that the research highlighted relates to the assertion that child-led research offers a better understanding of children and childhoods. The evidence presented in this paper challenges this, suggesting instead that it offers different rather than superior knowledges. As the paper explored, this is exemplified in the ways in which child-interviewers could be seen to limit and close down opportunities for other children to narrate their lives. However, as has also been suggested, viewed carefully, these data are also enlightening. The diverse ways that the children responded to the research; stories they told and knowledges that were produced offer alternative insights into children’s experiences than is available to adults. More particularly a methodological focus on the dynamic ways in which creative visual data are produced in and through children’s embodied engagement with the research makes visible children’s perspectives in ways which disrupt adult-centric discourses offering an important corrective to media, policy and academic narratives about the lives of poorer children.

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Image one: Skipping to the estate’s shops to interview residents (video clip)

Image two: The journey to the park: Allowing for multiple diversions (digital photograph)

Image three: Upside down on monkey bars whilst playing clapping games (digital photograph)

Image four: Younger children playing on the bouncy castle (digital photograph)