

Designing Research for Different Purposes

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There is no single or most effective way in which to conduct childhood and youth research but a range of approaches which have evolved across many different disciplines. Consequently, there are contrasting, and at times conflicting ideas about what childhood and youth means as well as the methods best suited for research with children and young people. There is also the rhetoric of impact, which assumes that research can in some way influence the lives of children and young people by producing knowledge which can inform policy and practice.

This chapter focuses on the wide-ranging purposes for research and encourages you to consider the diverse contributions that investigations can make to how we understand children and young people and how such knowledge can influence policy and practice. To address each of these themes I draw upon traditional research examples as well as more contemporary studies that colleagues and I have been conducting at The Open University in conjunction with partner institutions; including the University of Oxford *Young Lives* study, and the University of Worcester *Work-based Research Project*. Each example illustrates a distinct methodological approach and research purpose and draws upon different combinations of academic discipline, spanning education, health and social care. Despite their differences, they each share a commitment to developing greater understanding of the lives and experiences of children, young people and their families.

Diverse research perspectives and purposes

Childhood and youth is a broad field which has been investigated over the years through qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. This opening section sets the scene for on-going discussion throughout the chapters in this book regarding the variety of purposes served by childhood and youth research; how investigations are shaped by different disciplines and how such a diverse body of research can influence how we think about and work with children, young people and their families.

In this first section I concentrate on research within the area of family life. By focusing on one aspect of childhood and youth, I address the different ways in which researchers set about their studies with distinct purposes; how they are important in very different ways and connect with theory, policy and practice.

Research exploring the family

As Douglas (2004) indicates, family experiences may be understood from a variety of perspectives which address genetic and blood-tie relationships, social and cultural dynamics, economic and legal aspects of family life and draw upon diverse academic disciplines including psychology, sociology and anthropology.

Historically, psychologists interested in children and young people applied quantitative approaches to produce knowledge about how and why children and young people behave in particular ways, often using experiments to test a particular hypothesis or evaluate relationships between variables. A variable is something that can be changed or manipulated, such as the attributes of age or gender, and these are generally examined in psychological investigations to determine if changes to one or more variables result in different research outcomes. Psychological research has tended to focus on discrete aspects within family life,

such as parenting style (Baumrind 1966), and children's social and emotional development (Erickson 1968), with a strong emphasis upon developmental trajectories (Piaget 1962) which mark out childhood as a period of socialisation and as a transition to adulthood. Much quantitative research has concentrated on family structures to examine, for example, parent and child separation and the impact of parent divorce and separation upon children and young people (Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001). Take for instance Bowlby's well-known study of attachment.

Bowlby (1969) was interested in exploring how families interact. Whilst working as a psychiatrist he noted a relationship between early separation and later emotional problems in the children he worked with, and he devised a quantitative study to examine this. He selected 88 children (aged 5–16) and interviewed their parents, questioning them about early experiences of separation. The children were divided into two groups. Group 1 comprised 44 children who had a criminal record for theft. Group 2 comprised 44 children who Bowlby classified as 'disturbed' but 'emotionally functional'. Bowlby found that 14 of the child thieves displayed an 'affectionless' temperament, characterised by limited affection, shame, or responsibility for their actions. Almost all of these children had experienced early separation from their mothers in foster homes or during times spent in hospital. Only seven children from Group 2 had been separated from their mothers. The evidence appeared to support Bowlby's hypotheses that affectionless temperament was caused by maternal separation in early life, however the evidence was not conclusive. Biographical details about each child had been collected retrospectively, based on what parents could recall. In addition, the evidence, whilst inferring a correlation, did not confirm causation. Critiques of Bowlby's early work suggest that whilst an association may have been evident, affectionless temperament could be influenced by a range of other factors which had not been considered during the study (Rutter 1979; Schaffer and Emerson 1964), such as the nature of the child's

relationship with their parent and other family members as well as the child's experiences of care and support during periods of separation from their caretakers. Other variables, such as education, diet and parental income may also impact upon a child's social and emotional development. This is not to point out the failings of Bowlby's theory, but rather illustrate the many complex factors which are important within family experiences and the different ways in which research can examine family life.

Sociological researchers typically employ a number of methods to examine how children and young people experience family life within interconnected social systems. Through survey studies, for instance, which allow for the broad analysis of large populations, sociological research into trends in family demographics has demonstrated that family structures are exceptionally diverse and include extended, single parent, foster parent and stepfamilies (Morrow 2009). In contrast, ethnographic approaches, which build upon a long history of anthropological research, tend to gather in-depth data about smaller research cohorts, in an attempt to gather perspectives through case study analysis of lived experience. For example, sociological studies that have adopted an ethnographic approach have looked at contrasting family structures across cultures to reveal the complex social and emotional ties that make up family experiences (Carsten 2004). Through these diverse methodological approaches, and in contrast to the psychological research by Bowlby cited earlier, sociological research has revealed that experiences of family life can depend on a host of interrelated factors, including individual personality, sibling relationships and social and cultural contexts. Family structures can alter for a variety of reasons, reflecting changing circumstances such as war, famine and poverty. Families may be nuclear, extended, polygamous – when a man lives with several wives – and in rare cases polyandrous – when a woman lives with several husbands (Montgomery 2009).

Early psychological and sociological research typically relied on adult interpretations of the family and did not include the views of children and young people – it was mostly research *on* rather than *with* children and young people. The field of Childhood Studies, as discussed in the introduction to this book, evolved from interdisciplinary work across sociological, psychological and anthropological research to recognise children and young people as active, competent social beings (Prout and James 1997) who can impart important messages about their own experiences. Morrow (2009) claims that the emergence of Childhood Studies represented a significant shift from examining children and young people and how they are socialised *within* families to include approaches which appreciate children and young people's agency in influencing their own lives; constructing their own meanings about family life and so providing opportunities for them to share their own views on issues such as parental separation (Brannen et al. 2000) and stepfamily life (Mayall 2002). Related to this, Roberts (2004) traces developments across policy and practice which promote the rights of children and young people to be consulted on issues which influence their everyday lives.

Despite, and perhaps partly because of, differences across the academic disciplines, childhood and youth research has produced rich insights into family life. Bowlby's work, for example had a profound impact upon our understanding of the significance of caretaker and child separation. This work provided a firm foundation for later research, carried out by Robertson and Robertson (1989), which has contributed to making changes to the support of children and young people during hospital care, and acknowledges the importance of minimising child and caretaker separation. These research insights have contributed to changing views of family life and are reflected across national and international policy and practice frameworks. For example, The Convention on the Rights of the Child treaty (United Nations 1989) sets out basic human rights – for all children, without discrimination – to

survival, protection from harm, abuse and exploitation, the right to develop to their fullest potential, and the right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life (Ivan-Smith 1998). There are now a range of services within the UK which acknowledge the diversity of family living and the importance of providing support and guidance (Foley and Rixon 2008). Family centres within the UK have been established in recent years to provide a cohesive and integrated system of support on issues related to health care, education, family welfare and youth justice.

Research across the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology and childhood and youth studies have contributed to a growing understanding of children and young people. Using the example of the family, you can begin to appreciate the varied purposes for research. This chapter does not promote one approach as more effective than any other but is organised to illustrate the distinct ways in which researchers can study aspects of childhood and youth and how their work can be influential in different ways. Research can influence the way we think about and understand children and young people and is reflected across policy and practice developments. The relationship between research, theory, policy and practice however, is complex. Our perspectives of childhood and youth have changed and research continues to add to our understanding in ways which contribute to existing knowledge. But how is this achieved?

How can research influence knowledge and understanding?

There are many ways in which research can inform how we think about and understand children and young people, some of which are discussed in Chapter 1. Investigations can add to existing bodies of knowledge which explain how and why children and young people behave in certain ways, providing new ways of understanding things which perhaps had not been considered before. Investigations can also challenge what we consider to be basic

common sense. In addition, research can explore different ways of engaging with children and young people. Such a range of choices and possible avenues for investigation naturally incur disagreements. Rather than being a shortcoming, such disagreement can present researchers with a number of opportunities to advance knowledge through discussion and debate (McKechnie and Hobbs 2004). This leads on to another issue; how research ideas are shared within and across different academic, professional and policy focused communities. These themes are introduced here, using an example of one research study which explored children's literacy practices. This example illustrates how research can find new ways of studying children's experiences, enrich research knowledge and lead to the sharing of that knowledge through research dissemination.

Example 1: Inclusive early literacy practices

In this project the researchers, Flewitt, Nind and Pahl (2009) set out to explore the communicative experiences and literacy practices of three 4-year-old children identified with special educational needs who each attended special and mainstream early education settings, as their parents felt this combination would offer their child 'the best of both worlds'. To better understand the complicated lives these children led, and how they communicated and interacted in the very different environments of their home, a special setting and a mainstream setting, the researchers decided to use ethnographic, video case studies along with detailed analysis of how the children communicated not just through words, but through multiple 'modes', that is, through their gestures, body movements, facial expressions and gaze direction. Some of the research findings about one of the young children, Mandy, are discussed here.

Flewitt et al. (2009: 214) argue that for many young children identified with special educational needs during the early stages of their lives, it is often not clear what levels of literacy they may achieve. A 'skills-based approach' to understanding and exploring literacy assumes a 'normative pace' in which children move through stages of literacy development, often according to age and what is perceived as appropriate to their cognitive development. In much academic literature, language and literacy are defined by well-established traditions within psychology, with a strong emphasis upon developmental trajectories. As a consequence, language and literacy development are often viewed as universal processes. This view is reflected in policy and practice within the UK where literacy is emphasised as a curricular goal underpinned by the development of competencies in the skills of reading and writing. Such a perspective can be potentially limiting, but there are alternative approaches, as Flewitt et al. (2009: 212) suggest:

If literacy is viewed as embedded in social practice rather than as a set of technical skills concerned with reading and writing, then separating children from literacy experiences due to perceptions of their cognitive ability effectively devalues how they construct meanings in the social worlds they experience ...

Flewitt et al. (2009) propose that a broader analysis of literacy as a social process focuses on how young children use a range of shared sign systems in their meaning making, and that these vary according to the interpersonal and social settings they find themselves in. Multimodality draws on linguistic theories of communication known as social semiotics (Halliday 1978). This approach considers how we all make choices when we are communicating, and these choices depend on how we perceive the social situation we are in. In early years research for example, this approach has been used to illustrate how children learn to communicate and become literate in many different ways, not just through

language, but through learning to use combinations of different modes, such as gesture, gaze, movement, etc.

In order to capture the in-depth data that is required to explore and better understand the literacy practices of young children with special educational needs, the researchers in this study applied a qualitative approach, using observations, interviews with parents and staff, and diary notes completed by researchers and parents. Video observations were conducted both at home and in the different educational settings that the children attended. This allowed the researchers to capture the multi-modal nature of Mandy's interaction and meaning-making across each setting rather than limit the analysis to more language-focused conceptualisations of communication.

The research revealed contrasting perspectives on what could be regarded as a literacy practice and showed how some definitions can potentially limit how children such as Mandy are perceived. These contrasting perspectives are reflected in the title of this research article ('If she's left with books she'll just eat them'):

... Mandy's mother acknowledged her daughter's less conventional exploration of books: 'If she's left with books she'll just eat them'. At this time in Mandy's young life, books were literally indigestible for her if left on her own, although she tried her best to devour them. However ... with guided support in inclusive literacy events, books and other literacy artefacts became a rich source of mutual enjoyment and shared multi-modal meaning-making. (Flewitt et al. 2009: 214)

Flewitt et al. raise an important issue as they reflect on the design of their research which considered literacy in its broadest sense and enabled the research to move beyond solely addressing 'talk'. The research reveals different viewpoints in terms of how literacy events are conceptualised, how they are practised in education and care settings and also how they are interpreted through research. Relying upon psychological models of cognitive

development can create a narrow focus and limit opportunities to examine a much broader understanding of communication and literacy. This research challenges conventional ways of thinking about literacy and has implications for how literacy is defined and understood by researchers, academics, practitioners, parents and others interested in language and literacy. It also addresses methodological issues in terms of how researchers design their studies to produce knowledge about literacy practices which can include all children and not just those who rely on 'talk'. If the researchers in this study had only paid attention to the children's language, then they would not have been able to gain these insights.

The researchers in this study also built upon the relationships with parents, practitioners and academic colleagues that they had developed throughout the investigative process to communicate their findings in a variety of ways. This research was disseminated through academic journal articles, chapters in books and articles in popular magazines that are bought by parents and practitioners. It therefore influenced knowledge and understanding about the literacy abilities of young children with special educational needs by contributing to on-going academic and public debates about how the abilities of young children with learning difficulties can be overlooked and about the nature of literacy practices, how they are defined and how they are studied. Reaching out to different audiences for their research and sharing their findings with parents, academics and professionals was an important consideration for these researchers.

Research of this kind offers scope for practitioners to consider their own practice and how children are conceptualised in relation to their education and care labels, which shape and often limit practitioners' and professionals' expectations of what children can achieve – how they can be 'enabled' by those around them rather than 'disabled'. This research also examines how professional practice can be developed to be more observant of and responsive

to individual children's capabilities. In this way, research can contribute directly to professional practice.

However, the relationship between research and practice is not always clear-cut and closer inspection reveals issues concerning the application of research to practice. Edwards (2004: 258) states that sharing research is not simply a matter of making research 'accessible and available as commodities' but rests upon a complex process within research practice, where researchers must reflect carefully upon which issues are likely to be deemed relevant and of interest to policymakers and practitioners.

How can research contribute to professional practice?

Many authors have drawn attention to the tendency within social science to examine issues that do not always reflect the experiences or interests of practitioners as well as children, young people and their families (Crivello and Murray 2012). Research findings rarely feed directly into practice (McKechnie and Hobbs 2004) and it is often difficult to generalise from knowledge which reflects distinct and at times idiosyncratic aspects of professional practice. Sharing knowledge is a complex process. How then can research be designed to contribute to practice in ways which might be beneficial to practitioners by representing issues which resonate to those most affected and which can be shared in ways which are productive?

Professional practice has and continues to be the focus of research across many fields, including education, health and social care. The analysis of professional practice can be undertaken by academic researchers, policymakers and practitioners. The next example discussed here details research undertaken by myself and colleagues in collaboration with practitioners at the University of Worcester (see Cooper and Ellis 2011) and draws upon the reflections of one practitioner researcher, Carole. Practitioner research refers to the gathering

of data by practitioners, within case study/professional contexts, with the intention of developing greater knowledge and understanding about their own practice and/or about the practices that operate in the setting where they work (see this volume, Chapter 13). The idea is that by critically analysing practice, practitioners can action change and develop their practice based on greater insight (Tricoglus, 2001). Practitioners can draw upon a wealth of different approaches to critically examine their own practice, including action research and ethnographic enquiry, for example. As an experienced practitioner working within an education/social care context, Carole reflects on the value of ethnographic practitioner research for identifying service user needs and how the identification of need provides the impetus to develop and improve practice within multi-agency professional contexts.

Example 2: Enhancing paternal engagement in a fathers' group at a children's centre

My aim is to raise paternal engagement and I need to find out what are the barriers or problems that stop fathers from engaging in services we currently offer...
(adapted from Ellis 2007)

As an experienced family support worker within a multi-agency professional team supporting family engagement with local services, Carole was keen to explore why fathers did not engage with the services on offer at their local Children's Centre. She set out to design an ethnographic research project, using observation, interview and questionnaire analysis, which could address the feasibility of establishing a 'fathers' group'.

Carole's research was situated within policy frameworks which recognise the need for professionals to support families (*Every Child Matters*, DfES 2004) and promote fathers' participation and engagement (*The Children's Plan*, DCSF 2007; *Aiming High for Children: Supporting Families*, DfES 2007). Fathers are a 'hard-to-reach' group, as Carole

acknowledges upon reflection of her experience within her workplace where father engagement was low:

Our services offer early education integrated with child care, family support and outreach to parents and children and we should be engaging with fathers who previously have been excluded from services and whose children are at risk of poor outcomes... (Ellis 2007: 5)

A key question for Carole was how she could gather evidence which would allow her to consider the viability of establishing a fathers' group when she had such little contact with fathers. She drew upon her own professional knowledge working in the local community with other multi-agency social, education and healthcare professionals to establish contacts with local ante-natal groups, where fathers were present, along with church-led community fathers' groups.

Carole designed her research so she could establish contact, build relationships and through these relationships gain insights into fathers' views and experiences. Carole utilised her regular contact with other service users, particularly mothers, with whom she had regular contact, to devise a questionnaire which she could distribute to fathers within her setting via their partners. She also extended her ethnographic approach to observe and gather field notes in various fathers' groups which were well established within her local community:

Attendance at a fathers' direct conference gave me many issues to consider and reflect on, the first and foremost was to address my personal view of paternal engagement and would my views prohibit me from actively encouraging fathers to engage in sessions that we run from the centre ... The research has contributed to a greater understanding of a father's engagement from a male perspective ... Attendance at fathers' groups gave me insight into issues men face. (Ellis 2007: 8)

By accessing and observing within different groups and gaining some insight into how fathers felt in relation to engagement, Carole was able to consider some of the issues fathers face and to identify how she could use these insights to inform her own professional practice. This was particularly evident in her description of a critical incident when joining a local community fathers' group;

Being in this male environment was sometimes uncomfortable. I heard a comment that was directed at me deliberately by one respondent who said, 'we don't have mums here, it's for dads only'. I found that this made me empathise with fathers who access services that we provide that are predominately female environments and how acceptance into a group is important to feeling valued and welcome. (Ellis 2007: 14)

Carole presents a personal account of what she learnt during her research and demonstrates how she was prepared to be challenged, to be critical of herself and to make changes where necessary. She reflects on how research enhanced her early years professional knowledge and enabled her to examine her personal practice and personal views. It also involved looking at change that would improve the quality of the services she offered to the families she supported.

By researching her own practice and addressing the views of fathers, Carole recognised the need to develop more paternal engagement, which she felt would enhance the child-focused family support provided within her own professional setting. Carole used her research findings to share more widely within her professional setting. Exchanging ideas and sharing local knowledge are important aspects of multi-agency professional practice. For Carole, this was a key feature of her professional role within the Children's Centre. Carole reflected on the value of exploring and scrutinising her own practice and the needs of the

families she supported in order to consider how she could develop her practice to respond to diverse needs. She used her local knowledge to share with colleagues within her setting.

This example illustrates one way of conducting practitioner research which can inform professional practice. It is by no means the only way. The research conducted by Flewitt, Nind and Payler also had an impact on local practice, and has been read by a wide practitioner audience, with potential wider impact. On a more local scale, ethnographic research, like Ellis' study, provides opportunities for practitioners to examine their own practice. Through in-depth critical analysis practitioners can examine the needs within their own professional settings and consider different ways of meeting such needs. The value of any research rests upon how it can influence and inform. This can mean how it is useful within a particular local context or how it can be useful for others across different professional contexts. Research does not necessarily provide answers or indicate ways of working which can be transposed neatly across different contexts, but what it can do, as Nias (1993: 146) suggests, is provide ways of 'looking forward'.

Debates have questioned how research about any one setting or field of professional practice can be generalised and be relevant to other quite different professional sites and contexts (Schofield, 1993). The value of research for professional practice rests upon its capacity to offer insights and understandings which can transform ways of working (Edwards, 2004). Of course not all research is useful in exploring ways to develop and improve professional practice, and not all research will necessarily have positive outcomes. For example, Hammersley and Scarth (1993) draw attention to the misuse and misrepresentation of research in practice. Policies and professional practice designed to support children, young people and their families have been criticised for drawing upon research approaches which define childhood and youth in universal terms and neglect

contextualised, local and cultural experiences (Durand 2010). Furthermore, policy is not always underpinned by robust research findings and the process through which research findings become translated into policy is neither linear nor straightforward.

How can research feed into policy?

The relationship between research and policymaking is multifaceted, and research findings may often be at odds with policy initiatives. Policymaking reflects a politically charged arena where decisions are often made in the interests of what is deemed ‘best for’ children, young people and their families in the absence of research evidence (Crivello and Murray 2012). In recent years there has been mounting pressure to ensure practice and policymaking is more evidence based (Roberts 2004). But who decides on the issues which are important? Do adult researchers and policymakers share the same concerns as children, young people, their families and the practitioners who implement policies? How are the rights of children and young people situated within research practice?

The next research example details the longitudinal *Young Lives (YL)* international study of poverty. This project (<http://www.younglives.org.uk/>) provides a unique example of a longitudinal international study (2001–2017) which seeks to explore the local realities and experiences of 12,000 children and young people living in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam (see Chapter 16 for a researcher’s account of one aspect of this study). *YL* uses a combination of approaches and methods to examine experiences of poverty across a range of local and global perspectives, and it promotes the rights of children and young people to contribute to research on matters which may affect their lives.

Example 3: Researching young lives

If *Young Lives* research is to contribute to policy change that translates into visible grassroots impacts for children and their households, it will be important to invest in fostering in-depth, longer-term relationships. (Thi Lan and Jones 2005: 8)

The *YL* international study contributes to an existing body of literature which recognises the barriers and sometimes poor linkages between research, policy and practice. It sets out to strengthen these linkages through careful research design and dissemination, and by focusing on three broad themes; the dynamics of childhood poverty, experiences of poverty and transitions.

In order to examine experiences of poverty and how these can be improved, the *YL* research team designed a longitudinal research project which could explore the life paths that children, young people and their families follow, in order to understand diverse needs and what strategies may help to support and break the ‘cycle of poverty’. During the early stages of research planning, the *YL* team recognised the importance of building long-term relationships with policymakers, practitioners, children, young people and their families.

The emphasis upon relationships within research practice is important here and reflects the way in which the *YL* project has been devised to promote ‘ongoing consultation’ and ‘discussion of relevance’, throughout the research process, and to maintain a clear dialogue between researchers, policymakers and practitioners, as well as children, young people and their families (Crivello and Murray 2012: 2). Consultation recognises the importance of multiple views and stakeholder interests. The emphasis upon establishing relationships is also evident in the channels of communication that are implicit within *YL* and which enable all stakeholders to share their ideas and feed their views back throughout the study. Crivello and Murray (2012) suggest that this approach re-conceptualises dissemination and shifts the emphasis away from sharing research findings as outcomes at the end of the research process,

towards regarding dissemination as an on-going process of consultation, negotiation and knowledge exchange.

As a collaborative project, *YL* draws upon expertise across a number of academic disciplines, including anthropology, economics, education, health, psychology and sociology in consultation with local community families, children, young people, practitioners and policy makers. This promotes a holistic approach which recognises the importance of studying individual children and young people and how their experiences and views of poverty are shaped by personal, social and cultural contexts; for example, how the influences of family life, school, leisure time, healthcare, work and economic forces combine to impact upon experiences of poverty.

YL combines quantitative data collection – a survey of all 12,000 children, young people and their primary caregivers – in conjunction with qualitative analysis with a smaller, sub-sample, in order to:

... share some of the children's own perspectives on the world and their reflections and responses to our research – in their own words. This is an essential part of the *Young Lives* approach – to ensure children's voices are heard and their participation is a core value of the study (<http://www.younglives.org.uk/what-we-do/children's-perspectives/children's-voices>).

Longitudinal projects like *YL* are based on engagement and repeated observation of the same children, young people and their families over long periods of time. Applying a combined, mixed-method approach facilitates a broad-based understanding of the range of issues and experiences of growing up and experiences of poverty. Repeated observation enables researchers to examine the same children, young people and their families and how

their experiences of poverty change in relation to life transitions. In this way, the *YL* team set about building in-depth case studies of local experiences across international contexts.

The significance of longitudinal research rests upon its capacity to unveil patterns of change and development in the lives of selected groups of people and so provides insight into everyday life. The *YL* project has developed various approaches to engage with children and young people. Thi Lan and Jones (2005) describe two forms of participation developed in Vietnam as part of their research:

in Young Lives Vietnam, children have been given opportunities to express their concerns and those of their families and communities to local policy-makers. Two major forms of child participation have been developed: provincial Children's Fora and Young Journalist Clubs. By involving children in the Young Lives project, the aim is to produce more reliable information about children because no one can understand children and children's needs better than themselves. Moreover, children's voices will constitute a very good reference resource not only for policy-makers and the community, but also for future revisions of the Young Lives surveys and research. Thi Lan and Jones (2005, p.12)

In order to represent the childhood voices, *YL* carried out a series of participatory projects. This led to the making of a film 'Voicing Experiences' (<http://www.younglives.org.uk/what-we-do/children's-perspectives/india-participation-film>) which derives from a series of theatre workshops held with children and young people from three different communities in Mahaboobnagar and Hyderabad in India, portraying their lives over a period of six months. It uses children's and young people's own words and performances to communicate their own views on poverty in which drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, parental injury and pressure to drop out from school and work are just some of the topics raised.

Longitudinal research projects, such as *YL*, are exceptionally far reaching in terms of their scope. They provide data and insights which are relevant across education, health and social care sectors and so are of interest to parents, policymakers and practitioners, as well as children and young people. Longitudinal research can achieve such broad reach by virtue of addressing a number of themes, working with a large participant sample across an extended period of time over which change and development can be observed.

This type of research not only focuses on views but acknowledges the possibility that children and young people may raise themes and share experiences which perhaps would not be considered from an adult researcher perspective. During their analysis in Ethiopia on the effects of poverty following bereavement, Crivello and Murray (2012: 3) describe how the everyday concerns of young people whose parents had died tended to centre around the risks and impact of poverty rather than their 'status as orphans', and this finding challenged the researchers' own assumptions. Similarly, the book *Changing Lives in a Changing World: Young Lives Children Growing Up* (Van der Gaag with Pellis and Knowles 2012) provides a series of 24 stories from *YL* children and young people who describe the issues affecting their lives. Seble's story provides a unique insight into a young woman's experience growing up in Ethiopia. Seble and her mother talk about girls' decisions to marry and how these are set against cultural assumptions and practices such as female genital cutting. *YL* continues to explore how many Ethiopian girls insist on getting married young or undergoing female genital cutting. Traditionally, both practices are perceived as a way of protecting girls and keeping them safe from sexual activity outside of marriage, which is regarded as socially unacceptable.

Seble's story offers a glimpse into aspects of her life experience and how this has changed since getting married. She also touches upon social practices within her culture, such as her

relationship with her mother since marrying and the protection that marriage affords. Personal reflections such as these enable *YL* to explore children and young people's experiences as they interact with diverse social and cultural influences. This provides the capacity for further research to identify the needs of young people, such as Seble, and to focus on the systems of support that are in place.

The *YL* research project illustrates how research can be designed to address the importance of relationships within research practice and how these can be maintained to accommodate knowledge sharing, consultation and dissemination as an ongoing process. Longitudinal research has the capacity to combine methods and approaches over an extended time period which allows researchers to track and examine in-depth experiences as they change and respond to social and cultural forces.

This chapter has provided brief examples of three very different research projects to illustrate that issues related to policy and practice can be addressed in a variety of ways (Nutley et al., 2002). Research can take many forms and in this chapter you have considered how contrasting approaches, including longitudinal, survey and ethnographic case studies produce knowledge in different ways and consequently influence how we understand and work with children and young people. If policy and practice are to be informed by research, then we need to explore possible connections, such as how research can address questions that are considered important or useful to practitioners and policymakers at particular moments in time, and research which represents the views and experiences of children, young people and their families (Edwards, 2004). We also need to reflect on how investigations can be designed to examine local and global issues and how knowledge is shared across diverse academic, policy and practitioner communities.

Summary

Childhood and youth research represents a broad interdisciplinary field and draws upon a variety of different ways to produce knowledge about children and young people. Research can be designed in a variety of ways to serve different purposes, and in so doing can make distinct contributions. Research continues to advance new ways of thinking about children and young people and contributes to existing and well-established bodies of knowledge. Through careful consideration of how investigations can build relationships which represent service users as well as service providers, research can develop as a process of negotiation, knowledge building and sharing, and provide clear linkages between research, theory, policy and practice. Such a process has the capacity to produce knowledge which can deeply influence the lives of children, young people and their families.

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