

**Keeping them in mind:**  
**A reflexive study that considers the practice of social**  
**research with children in Australia**

Submitted by

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## **STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP**

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committee (where required) or a relevant safety committee if the matter is referred to such a committee.

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14<sup>th</sup> December 2012

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study provided a group of experienced researchers the opportunity to reflect on their practice and the practice of research with children in Australia: to consider how they understand children and childhood; and how their research is underpinned and influenced by the assumptions they hold. It asked researchers to consider how factors in the research environment (i.e. funding bodies, ethics committees, the broader academic field) influenced their research practice: the tensions that they have encountered and navigated their way through the often complex and 'messy' world of children's research. The study highlighted the ways in which 'vulnerability', 'competence' and 'participation' are understood by the various players within the research field, and the tensions that exist when contradictory views emerge. It promotes reflexive practice as a way of managing theoretical and ethical tensions and creating new conceptions of childhood.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many years ago I sat with Jason, a young homeless man, at the Thomas Cahill Cottage drop-in centre in Canberra, talking to him about the many challenges that he faced. He was looking at a group of businessmen across the street, and remarked that they, like many others, “either didn’t know or didn’t care” about his situation, or that of other young people facing hardship.

Throughout this project I have been heartened to meet and learn from a group of researchers whose lifeworks have been to listen to children and young people, to shine a light on their experiences in an attempt to help the community know *and* care about the lives of children and young people, and fundamentally, to make change for good.

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As I complete this PhD, I hope that this work will help those researching children and young people now and into the future so that young people like Jason will someday live in an Australia that has been given the tools, knowledge and insight to know and care.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of the rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not.* (Petrarch as cited in Rothenberg, 2002, p. 4)

## ***1.1 Introducing the thesis***

Over the past 30 years a growing number of Australian researchers have directly engaged children in studies about their lived experiences and the issues that affect their lives. Although the academic community in Australia has generally supported this practice, dialogue about the ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical tensions and challenges has been limited, as has the academic field's engagement in collaborative reflexive discussions. As a result, the growing community of researchers studying children has, at times, been criticised as being immature, atheoretical and in need of greater scrutiny.

This qualitative study provided a group of experienced researchers the opportunity to reflect on their practice and the practice of research with children in Australia: to consider how they understand children and childhood; and how their research is underpinned and influenced by the assumptions they hold. It asked researchers to consider how factors in the research environment (i.e. funding bodies, ethics committees, the broader academic field) influenced their research practice: the tensions that they have encountered and navigated their way through the often complex and 'messy' world of children's research.

This thesis argues for and stresses the importance of reflexive practice; as an endeavour for the individual practitioner, for teams of researchers and for the broader academic field

within which research is conducted. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of reflexivity, on standpoint theory and on the work of the early pioneers of the Childhood Studies movement, it provides a critical analysis of past and current practice. One of my premises is that the way that children are constructed by individual researchers, and within the teams, systems and academic fields within which they conduct research; will ultimately affect the type of research commissioned, the methodologies adopted and the level of engagement children enjoy throughout the research process. Exploring notions of vulnerability, competence and participation, I will account for researchers' approaches and the ethical, methodological and ideological challenges that emerge.

I conclude this thesis by presenting a reflexive practice framework that might be used by future children's researchers to account for their theoretical assumptions and to ensure methodological and ethical transparency.

## ***1.2 Introducing this chapter***

The purpose of this first chapter is to place this study in its historical context and provide a rationale for its discussion. Recognising that no research is conducted within a vacuum, without being influenced and affected by the biography, the experience and the developing worldview of the researcher; I begin by outlining my journey towards this piece of research: the biographical, historical and academic context within which it was carried out. As such, I will account for how my own personal and professional experiences facilitated the development of the project, before placing it alongside similar projects conducted with other groups of social researchers working with other groups of participants, and the emerging literature on how best to critically engage in a dialogue about the practice and process of conducting research.

### ***1.3 The influence of the personal and professional***

One of the key assumptions underpinning this thesis is that the way social researchers approach research is guided heavily by their own experiences, theories, values and ethics; and there is great benefit, if not a duty, to be upfront about these when reporting their findings. As Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong (2000, p. 123) argue:

*Our obligation is to come clean “at the hyphen”, meaning that we interrogate in our writings who we are as we co-produce the narratives we presume to “collect”, and we anticipate how the public and policy makers will receive, distort, and misread our data. It is now acknowledged that critical ethnographers have a responsibility to talk about our identities, why we interrogate what we do, what we choose not to report, how we frame our data, on whom we shed our scholarly gaze, who is protected and not protected as we do our work.*

This is particularly the case in the social research domain and requires the researcher to not only reflect on their own practice but also to account for it in their musings.

#### ***My childhood***

I am a child of the 1970s, born into a white, middle-class Catholic family of seven children in the newly established Australian national capital, Canberra. My childhood was not unusual for children of that time and place: my mother cared for us at home until my mid-adolescence while my father worked in the Australian Public Service. Reflecting the attitudes to parenting of the time, and because there were many of us to raise, my parents had clear views about their authority as adults and high expectations about how the family would interact. We were disciplined (wooden spoons were scattered about the house and car) but our parents were not cruel or vicious and spent much time demonstrating their

love and care. As my parents became more accustomed to parenting, they reasoned with us more and (from my point of view) became more lax as progressive siblings grew.

Raising a large family on a single income was undoubtedly difficult for my parents and required them to make many sacrifices. I remember wondering why they would give up many of the luxuries of adulthood and noticed in my later years that they often put their needs behind ours. They had their faults but we were always taken care of and (mostly) always felt loved. Their successes as parents were achieved with the help of a large support network of friends and family who helped my folks manage through some of the leaner times.

Being children of the 1970s and 1980s my brothers (and later my sisters) and I enjoyed relative freedom during the school holidays of late primary school and often ventured into the bush behind our house, to friends' houses or to parks after school and on the weekends. Although we were warned about the hazards of 'stranger danger' we were known across the suburb and mostly felt safe. One of the many benefits of having older brothers was that I was never bullied (not by strangers, anyhow). The responsibility for looking after younger siblings was indoctrinated into the Moore family and I soon became accustomed to caring for, being around and being interested in those younger than I.

I don't remember having many in-depth philosophical conversations but I do remember being attracted to spending time with my parents and the many adults that visited the family home: aunts, uncles and other relatives; my parents' friends; members of the local Catholic parish; and neighbours. I might have been described as precocious or just needing attention after both literally and figuratively standing in the shadows of my two older brothers. Through these interactions I was exposed to a range of new ideas and observations not always made privy to children during this period.

I provide this thumbnail sketch of my childhood, because like the researcher participants you will meet in later chapters, my experiences as a child undoubtedly shape the way that I think about, observe and account for childhood. My views about children and what children should expect from families is very much shaped by my own experiences as a child, as are my views about what children are capable of doing and thinking. The way that I understand children has changed through my development and is now informed not only by my experience but also how I reflect on those experiences using an adult lens. I am not in a position to determine how what I actually experienced is different to how I now recall those experiences as being, but regardless, these life events, relationships and insights will forever affect the way that I conceptualise, consider and respond to children as a result.

In some ways my childhood was not dissimilar to that of many of the children with whom I work (I was reliant on adults for safety and protection; I valued and was shaped within a family; I went to school, played and explored the world), but in many ways was dissimilar to that of others at the time (7 child families were and are a rarity; my family was well connected and enjoyed high social capital; I enjoyed a fairly trauma-free existence) and now (adults were not as paranoid about presumed risks; more time was spent unaccompanied and outdoors; adults outside of my family seemed more involved in my rearing). It has only been through reflective activities that I have come to the realisation that my childhood might have been different to that experienced by other children at the time, and additionally, that the childhood that my peers and I experienced in the 1970s and 1980s is different to that experienced by children today.

I will consider this realisation more theoretically in *Chapter 2: Deconstructing Childhood* in which I will look at how childhood has been conceptualised in the academic field. This

discussion sets the backdrop for the thesis and introduces the notions of childhood vulnerability, competence and participation.

### *Practising as a youth worker*

As an older brother, cousin and babysitter I spent considerable amounts of time with children in my teenage years and developed a level of satisfaction in caring for them. This carried into my college years when I began volunteering in a camp holiday program for the Society of St Vincent de Paul - taking children from tough backgrounds away during school holidays and providing them with what we described as "positive and nurturing experiences". During university I continued with these camps, and was approached to work in a residential program for children with disability and those who had been removed from their parents. In both of these roles I developed an understanding of, empathy for and a commitment to children and young people who had experienced 'difficult childhoods'. Underpinning the way I worked with these children were certain expectations about childhood which I believed parents, communities and the society had neglected to provide. These were shaped by my own childhood experiences but also the organisations and institutions within which I worked.

In 1996 a close friend of mine, Sean Welsh, drowned at one of the St Vincent de Paul children's activities. This accident had a profound influence on me - it was the first real experience of grief and loss that I had encountered in my young adulthood. Although I was unaware of it at the time, I think this experience led me to establish a series of programs for young carers - children and young people who have caring responsibilities in a family where someone has an illness or disability. To varying degrees each of these children were experiencing some form of loss, with many of them preparing for the death of a loved one. My work with young carers has continued to this day, as I continue to



empathise with their situation, am intellectually intrigued by how young carers are constructed, and emotionally connected to 'the cause' as a result of the many relationships I've formed with these kids. After some convincing I moved into 'youth work' in 1999, working predominantly with homeless, drug-using and marginalised young people. Although the nature of youth work as a profession is fairly ambiguous, philosophical principles and practice approaches assert that children and young people should be considered as individuals in their own right, should be afforded the right to participate in decision-making, and should be protected from harm - views that have also underpinned my research practice.

Deciding to jettison the Asian Studies / Law degree I had begun for something 'more useful', I switched to an Arts degree, majoring in Anthropology and Sociology. At the Australian National University I was introduced to the work of writers such as Paolo Freire, and to emancipatory research. Although I took a number of Youth Studies units, I found their focus on raves, drug culture and bohemianism less aligned to my work with kids than some of the law units I continued to enrol in as electives. However, in these courses I was introduced to thinkers such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, the ghosts of whom sat with me as I wrote this PhD.

### *My work at the Institute of Child Protection Studies*

For the past 8 years I have worked at the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University. I was invited to join the team because I had experience in working with children and young people, particularly in projects that elicited their views and promoted their voices. Although I had conducted two research projects prior to my commencement, I did not feel totally prepared for working in an academic role and researching children on sensitive issues such as family homelessness, parental drug misuse

and young caring, or about their involvement in statutory systems such as child protection and youth justice. Alongside a number of social workers who were in a similar situation, and working closely with our director, Professor Morag McArthur (who later became my PhD supervisor), we engaged in a process of action learning; in which we developed research projects, conducted studies and reflected on our wins and our mistakes through ongoing dialogue and debate. For much of the time I felt as though I was feeling my way in the dark: afraid that I would fail the children with whom I was working or produce reports that did not meet the academic standards that were forever looming.

In retrospect I consider that academics in our university and within the broader field look at our work with a sense of curiosity. Our view that children should participate in studies, and our belief that their involvement enhance and broaden our findings, was not actively challenged but there did seem to be a level of hesitation about our approach and our methods. Researching in a centre with 'Child Protection' in its name seemed to unsettle many of the adults we encountered: be they colleagues, other academics, ethics committees or parents – each concerned that we might engage children in discussions that were potential harmful or deemed 'inappropriate'. Rather than refuting these concerns, we decided it was important to be open and honest about our work, our views about children and our practice. This was often easier said than done as we too were clarifying and reconfiguring our views through ongoing debate and discussion.

In 2005 I established children's reference groups to guide our work and give us feedback about our approaches. Although these groups were often established after projects were in full flight, and when research aims and questions were already conceptualised, we believed that children could help us understand what might be the best ways to approach them, make meaning of their contributions and present their views in meaningful and appropriate ways. Our beliefs were proven true: with children displaying a great capacity

to understanding the research process and to guiding us through the dilemmas that we encountered.

In considering what was already known and what was already experienced, we hoped to find answers in the growing body of literature focusing on children's research. Although writers in the area provided us with clues about methods and sometimes methodologies, our concerns about the ethics, the implications and the dilemmas of researching children were often left unresolved, or in many cases, exacerbated by what seemed to be conflicting and undoable advice provided by ethicists, practitioners and childhood advocates.

My view was that we needed to not only be clear about our own practice within our team, but wherever possible, to be explicit about it within our research reports and journal articles. As such, we began including observations about the problems we encountered and the ways that we stumbled through them in our written work. Colleagues in other areas appeared to appreciate our work, particularly when it was grounded on what children had told us, but there was a quietly held view that our ponderings primarily related to methodologies and methods rather than the ontologies and epistemologies that underpinned our work, and the structural, political and practical forces that were in play around us.

This concern was highlighted at a Think Tank I attended in 2008, at which a group of researchers working in the field came together to reflect on their practice and share their observations about the things they had learned through their experience of working with children. The Think Tank opened my eyes to the many ontological, epistemological, methodological and practical challenges and dilemmas that others were grappling with, and highlighted the need for further discussion and debate about where we, as a field of

researchers, needed to go. One key outcome of the day was the shared view that those of us working in the area needed to critically reflect on our practice and share our learning in more open and critical ways. This was to not only build our knowledge but also to build our confidence and ability to adequately respond to those who did not share our views. By constructing robust research practice and theoretically and methodologically sound processes we hoped that our collective research might be further justified and promoted.

## ***1.4 My journey to this project***

### *Impetus for the project*

As I have alluded above, over the past sixteen years I have had the privilege of working with thousands of children and young people. Many of them have come from backgrounds filled with risks and difficulties: children living with parents who use illicit drugs; young people living on the streets or in out-of-home care; families living in poverty. Although these children, young people and families are popularly presented as being ‘deficient’, ‘lacking’, or as being ‘victims of their circumstances’, I have often encountered significant resilience and capacity, a sense of optimism and a generosity of spirit.

I was heartened, therefore, in my early studies to discover the new Sociology of Childhood movement, which challenged limiting notions of children and young people and highlighted the important and valuable contribution they make to their communities. These sociologists argued that children and young people have capacity and should be afforded the same rights as other citizens – often assuming adult roles and responsibilities and contributing heavily to their families, neighbourhoods and societies (James & James, 2008; Prout & James, 1990; Qvortrup, 2001). They have argued that paternalistic constructions of children are disempowering and oppressive, and disallow children the

opportunity to be afforded the rights and opportunities they deserve (James & James, 2008).

New ways of considering children and young people have become more popular and have pervaded popular culture. Children are asked about their opinions, take on leadership roles in their schools, are recognised for the contributions they make to their communities and are asked to make difficult decisions (like where they would like to live after family separation). Although this engagement is often tokenistic, the sentiment is that children have the right and, in some cases the responsibility, to take some control over their lives and contribute to their communities. In fact, some commentators have argued that the pendulum has swung too far the other way: that children and young people's engagement in the adult realm has restricted their opportunities to experience childhood, that their involvement has exposed them to adult knowledge prematurely and that their childhood innocence has been jeopardised (King, 2007; Lee, 1998, 1999). Critics of the Sociology of Childhood movement have suggested that in promoting children's agency (their capacity to participate and change the social structures within which they live), their inherent vulnerabilities and incapacities have been understated and that, as a result, there is greater potential for exploitation and harm.

These observations are confronting to those of us who work with children and young people – particularly when one recognises that good intentioned practice might actually lead to negative outcomes. We are challenged, then, to reflect on the ways in which we consider children and childhood and how this affects our practice. In the research and advocacy arenas where facts and findings are used to justify policy, we must consider how what we think about children affects what we learn about them and how we use this to influence change. As one of the early pioneers of the Childhood Studies movement, James (1999, pp. 231-232) observed:

*The intriguing possibility addressed here is that we, as researchers, may also be contributing to the socially constructed character of childhood. Along with other adults involved with children – teachers, youth workers, child-health professionals, parents – do we, through the kinds of accounts we offer of children's lives and the kinds of experiences which we subject children to also thereby contribute a great deal to the implicit shaping of those children's lives? If the answer to this question is 'yes' then it behoves us to explore in some detail, and with critical awareness, the possible implications and outcomes for children themselves of our particular views of the way the world works and of children's place and position in that world. In brief, we need to become more reflexive about our research, recognising that our accounts of childhood are intimately marked by the particularities of our own stances towards children.*

This is a question that I have mused over in my work as a researcher with the Institute of Child Protection Studies. Here, we have asked children and young people to participate in studies to elicit their views and experiences on sometimes confronting and difficult topics: children have spoken about family breakdown, of grief and loss, of systems abuse and of feelings of hopelessness and despair. With the expectation that their participation will be of benefit to others experiencing similar difficulties, children and young people have laid their lives bare. It has been important for me, then, to be ever mindful about how they are involved and what negative consequences might occur for them and others.

In preparing for this research enterprise I have reconsidered the work of writers such as Paolo Freire and discovered others like Pierre Bourdieu and Ian Hacking who highlight the potential threats in research. Among these is the further promotion and legitimisation of disempowering constructions and of individualising sentiments (that place blame on victims) that influence policy and practice. In the area of human service delivery, in which

I am both engaged and interested, this can lead to poor outcomes and to further marginalisation and disempowerment. This, according to Bourdieu (1977), occurs at the same time in which the researcher receives accolade and opportunities to attain prestige, power and influence: benefiting from the knowledge, intellectual capital and experiences of the research subjects with no responsibility to share these prizes. These writers have argued, therefore, for researchers to account for their actions and justify their positions.

### *Introducing my research*

It is with both sociological interest and a level of personal intrigue (and anxiety) that I embarked on this research journey. I saw it as an opportunity to reflect on my own practice: particularly the assumptions that I bring to my work and the influence that these have on who, how, why and to what end I do what I do. In engaging key researchers, I also hoped to further some important discussions at a pivotal point in the history of research with children – a time in which there is an increasing interest in children and childhood, and methods and methodologies; but not necessarily on the politics of doing so. In conducting this study, I hoped to better understand the way that children are constructed - as vulnerable, as incompetent, and as social actors – and how these notions play out in research practice.

Fundamentally, the research questions this project attempts to explore are:

*What are the underlying assumptions, beliefs and values held by researchers about children that underpin their research with children?*

*How do these assumptions, beliefs and values influence the broad research process?*

*How might reflexive practice be used to understand, account for and help guide the practice of research with children?*

I hope that my work will lead to the development of a framework on which I will continue my career in social research, and, more optimistically, help others grappling with similar issues and challenges (and those who are not!).

## ***1.5 Putting this study in context: understanding the history of research with children***

### **Defining childhood in relation to age:**

As will be seen in *Chapter 2: Deconstructing Childhood*, there is great debate as to how childhood is best defined, with age and age range being two of the more contested areas under consideration. However, common practice has been to describe the period of life of humans under the age of eighteen as childhood, with subcategories including early childhood (0-4 years), middle childhood (5-9 years), late childhood (10-14 years) and adolescence (14-17 years).

For the purposes of this thesis, I will use these category descriptions and use the terms ‘infants’ to describe humans under the age of 5, and ‘young people’ for those aged 14-17 when needing to make distinctions about their experiences and researchers’ approaches to their work with them.

Across the disciplines, children have been engaged in research for centuries. In fact, seen as not-yet-adults, of lesser value and with no rights to dissent, children were often used as research subjects in lieu of adult participants. As James and Prout (1997, p. 13) observe, “the child [was] portrayed, like the laboratory rat, as being at the mercy of external



stimuli”. In the medical arena, children in orphanages were injected with viruses and vaccines to test their potency, spinal taps were administered to test their level of harm and poor children were inoculated with herpes all in the name of science (Glantz, 1996). The negative impact that children experienced as a result of their participation in these endeavours was justified by researchers who stressed the positive benefits for the community at large. It was often driven by a belief that children were pre-formed and could therefore provide scientists with an understanding of what the individual was before and in the process of becoming human (Glantz, 1996).

In response to these and other unethical practices dramatically highlighted in the Nuremberg trials, a new wave of protectionism followed: children’s vulnerability was asserted and strict ethical codes were developed to shield children from harm (Moore, McArthur & Noble-Carr, 2009). The unanticipated by-product of this protectionism was the increasing exclusion of children from participation in broadly focused studies (i.e. those that relate to children as members of particular populations, such as cultural backgrounds, disadvantaged groups) and from studies that relate to their experiences of childhood. Instead, adults’ views about children and their beliefs about how children experience and understand the world were used in lieu of children’s own accounts.

In the 1970s a new approach emerged and became the dominant discourse used to understand and explore the experiences of children and childhood, particularly within (but not limited to) the field of sociology. The new Sociology of Childhood (or Childhood Studies as it is otherwise known) challenged how children and young people were engaged in research as part of a broader agenda, which critiqued formerly dominant accounts of childhood. These sociologists believed that older accounts, namely normative developmental approaches and socialisation theories, promoted children’s vulnerability and cast them as having limited competence and social agency. Instead, they contended

that children are active agents who experience the world in different ways to adults, and conceptualised children and childhood as being distinct to adults and adulthood, therefore requiring specific attention (Alanen, 2000; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994). They asserted that children should be actively engaged in these processes, because as social actors, they participate within, shape and are shaped by the communities within which they interact (Beazley & Ennew, 2006). They justify this by arguing that children have the capacity to competently reflect and interpret the social worlds within which they exist (Jenks, 1982). This construction of children and young people as individuals who play a part in the social and political life of their societies has become dominant, shaping the way that we think about them (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2004; Davis & Hill, 2006).

This sociological construction has influenced and has been influenced by work done by social geographers (Barker & Weller, 2003b; Skelton, 2008), developmental psychologists (Walkerdine, 2004), early childhood practitioners, teachers and educators (Woodhead, 2006), legislators and those working with children across the domains of health, the law (Funder & Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1996), welfare (Makrinioti, 1994; Thomas, 2004), politics (Wyness, Harrison & Buchanan, 2004) and economics (Zelizer, 1994).

At the same time, the different but often complementary children's rights movement gathered momentum, asserting that children should be provided opportunities to participate in research not because they are active agents but because participation is, in itself, a human right (Beazley & Ennew, 2006). This has been codified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991), particularly Articles 12 and 13 which provide children the right to express their views freely and in all matters affecting them. Kjørholt captures the significance of developments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on children's participation:

*[D]uring the last fifteen years, the emphasis on children as social and political actors holding special rights in decision-making processes at different levels has been overwhelming. The notion of children as independent individual citizens with democratic rights in many ways represents a qualitatively new perspective on childhood. (as cited in Fitzgerald & Graham, 2009, p. 64)*

These Sociology of Childhood and children's rights discourses have had a significant impact on the field of social research in a number of different ways. Firstly, children are now often considered the objects rather than the subjects of research and therefore researched 'in their own right' (Prout & James, 1990, p. 8). This research primarily focuses on their experiences 'in the here and now' rather in relation to their future adult becomings (Qvortrup et al., 1994). Secondly, the types of studies that have been conducted have changed considerably: rather than focusing on how particular social issues affect children or how children are engaged in particular processes, new projects have also considered how children have encountered, understood and influenced the environments within which they live (Melton, 2005). Thirdly, there has been a growing interest in considering how children might best be included in social research: as both research subjects but as broader consumers of research. This has primarily led to an increased interest in research methodologies and methods which might best elicit children's thoughts and opinions (Bessell, 2008).

### *Challenges to the Sociology of Childhood and a lack of reflexivity*

The dominance of the Childhood Studies movement has been considerable but, as alluded to above, it has generally been under-scrutinised from within and from outside the sociological community (Lee, 1998). A number of observers have noted that developments in the areas of neurology and child psychology (for example see: Nelson & Bloom, 1997;

Rutter, 2002) have challenged some of the underlying criticisms the approach has to developmental psychology, while ongoing critiques of sociologies that primarily focus on the individual's agency without considering the structures within which the individual exists have cast a shadow on some of the approach's fundamental claims (King, 2007). Lee (1999), for example, observes that the practical implications of constructing children in a way that emphasises their capacities and agency but potentially understates their vulnerabilities has been relatively unappreciated and that the universalising of children's experiences, particularly in regards to age, have been unhelpful.

In addition, it would appear that although there has been a considerable burgeoning of the literature in regards to the rationale for adopting this sociological approach and some of the ethical and methodological implications of doing so, there appears to be a limited level of reflection about how the discipline itself is developing, nor a critical account of some of the underlying assumptions and new knowledge that has developed alongside its growth (King, 2007). King (2007) argues that with limited academic vigour, the limited scientific validity of some of the movement's assertions must also be acknowledged and the implications of this explored.

Criticisms related to a lack of reflexivity and rigour are not unique to the Sociology of Childhood – similar observations have been made of other movements within the sociological community, particularly those that stress individual agency (Breuer & Roth, 2003). Even when sociologists in these areas claim to be reflexive, French sociologist Bourdieu and others (Bourdieu, 1993; Breuer & Roth, 2003) observe that it is limited, centring solely on the individual researcher or theorist and their approach to the development of knowledge rather than the discipline as a whole. This is visible in the area of Childhood Studies, with most reflexive activity focusing on the researcher's use of particular methods, on children's engagement as research subjects and participants, and on

some of the ethical considerations encountered in the research design and delivery (Davis, 1998).

## ***1.6 The nature of this thesis***

One of the key challenges put to qualitative researchers relates to the way that voices are presented in research reports and the ways that these voices ultimately influence the promotion of new theories and understandings. Recognising that the author has a voice, that participants have a variety of views, experiences and approaches and that these voices sit within a broader conversation about the social world within which they exist, qualitative researchers are encouraged to: ensure that no one voice is given prominence to the exclusion of others; and that, where possible, the differences of opinion (among participants and between the participants and the author) are made explicit (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). As Darlington and Scott (2002) put it, the key challenge is ‘to find a place for all the perspectives involved’.

Darlington and Scott (2002) explore a number of different ways in which qualitative research is presented and have developed a framework to help researchers choose an appropriate style and structure. They draw on the work of Padgett and identify two dimensions that relate to the sensitive issue of voice. These dimensions are the etic-emic and the reflexive-non-reflexive:

*The etic-emic relates to the extent to which a report is written from the perspective of the research participants (emic) or an objective outsider (etic). The non-reflexive-reflexive dimension reflects the extent to which the researcher’s experiences are included in the report. By intersecting the dimensions, we can*

*imagine four quadrants, each representing a different approach to writing a report.* (Darlington & Scott, 2002, p. 160)

For the purposes of this thesis, I have adopted an etic-reflexive approach to present the data and promote the views and experiences of the participants as understood by me, the partial observer. Throughout this thesis I have attempted to promote the voices of each participant: drawing heavily not only from the interviews and conversations I had with them but also from their written work. I have denoted quotes from interviews in bold and finished each with the initials of the contributor to help readers distinguish one researcher participant from each other. When I have drawn from their written work, I have explicitly acknowledged their contribution using their full names.

I have also attempted to place myself within the research, making observations about how my findings relate to my own experience in the research domain and the challenges and opportunities that I have experienced when confronted by similar issues and challenges. I have included these reflexive observations in boxes, titled 'Reflexive Notes'.

### *The thesis structure*

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. **Chapter 2** puts the study into context, considering the historical positioning of children and the various ways that children have been conceptualised in the past. I draw on 12 different concepts of childhood, including those which characterise children as being born inherently evil, innocent or empty; those that characterise childhood as being a period of development towards adulthood; those that focus on vulnerability and incompetence; and those which recognise the ways that children are influenced and influence the worlds around them.

In **Chapter 3**, I review the literature on reflexivity and account for the ways that these approaches to reflexive practice have influenced the way that I have shaped and conducted my study. I draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and argue that as well as encouraging individual researchers to engage in reflexive activity there is merit in engaging in collective activities within research teams and within the broader research context within which research is being conducted.

**Chapter 4** provides an account of my methodological approach to the study and my choice of methods. It highlights the challenges inherent in conducting insider research and the ways I used reflexive practice to respond to these in practice. In it I provide an overview of my data gathering and analysis and my presentation of findings. It introduces my researcher participants and their experience in the field.

**Chapters 5, 6 and 7** present my findings related to the practice of research with children as told by the researcher participants in my study and within the broader academic context within which the research is practised.

**Chapter 5** focuses on vulnerability. I begin by exploring the researcher participants' notions of childhood vulnerability and explore how these have influenced their practice. Recognising that concerns about vulnerability underpin many of the ethical issues and dilemmas that ethics committees scrutinise and researchers encounter throughout the research process, I explore how these concerns play out and how they often restrict children's participation. Challenging some of the popular notions of childhood vulnerability and promoting the realisation that children's vulnerability is often shaped by their positioning in society and unequal power relationships, researcher participants talk about their ontological assumptions about childhood and how these influence practice.

**Chapter 6** focuses on notions of competency and incompetency. In it researcher participants challenge the view that children are inherently incompetent, suggesting instead that they experience and interpret the world in different but no less valuable ways to adults. They argue for a greater understanding of children's capacity to engage in research and for constant negotiation and 'checking in' with children to ensure that methodologies and methods respond to their needs and wishes. Realising that children are often excluded from research by gatekeepers who hold opposing views, researcher participants argued for ongoing dialogue to manage tensions and disagreements and to open up opportunities for children's engagement in meaningful and appropriate methodologies.

**Chapter 7** explores notions of children's agency and participation. Researcher participants share their insights on how children shape and are shaped by their environments and their experiences and how participation in research might open up opportunities to hold competing theoretical assumptions at the same time. Recognising that participation in research has been problematised, researcher participants describe what they consider to be characteristics of good practice in participatory research projects.

**Chapter 8** draws these findings together and promotes a reflexive framework that might assist researchers to consider and account for their ontological, epistemological, ethical, and methodological approach to research, and the ways that they manage emerging challenges and tensions through reflective practice. I conclude with some observations about my research journey and the possible contributions this study might make within the broader academic community.



## ***1.7 Summarising the chapter***

In this chapter I have put this project in context: describing my own journey to research and how my own personal and professional experience motivated me to engage in a project that considers how research is conducted with children, and how one's own biography, ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions shape our practice. In this chapter I accounted for the development of the field of Childhood Studies and its progress and proposed limitations. I proposed that reflexive practice might help those working within the field to overcome some of the challenges that emerge, and ultimately conduct better research with and for children.

In *Chapter 2: Deconstructing Childhood* I will consider how childhood has been popularly understood over the ages, in order to provide the reader with an understanding of how theories have emerged and evolved over time. I will draw on aspects of these conceptualisations throughout this thesis, particularly in relation to vulnerability, competence, agency and participation.

## CHAPTER 2: DECONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD

*[T]here is no benchmark of undisputed 'truth' that tells us what children are; there are merely different categories, each of which tells us a different truth about what children are. These categories 'work' for us in the way that they do – they make sense to us – only within the context of the society and culture in which we live ... In another place or at another time the concept of 'childhood' – which seems so self-evidently real to us – would be something different. Or it might even be quite meaningless.*

(Stainton Rogers, 2001, p. 27)

*Just what after all are we to make of children? ... after centuries of debate we have still not achieved any consensus over the issue of childhood. What remains perpetually diffuse and ambiguous is the basic conceptualisation of childhood.* (Jenks, 1982, p. 9)

### 2.1 *Introducing the chapter*

There is general agreement that childhood is a socially constructed category, which has been used to denote different experiences for children of varying ages at varying times. Certainly, we cannot deny that children possess some distinguishing features, yet we also must be aware that how we respond to their differences has varied over time. In recent times, childhood theorists (including Cunningham & Morpurgo, 2007; Hendrick, 1997; James & Prout, 1997; Montgomery, 2009) have attempted to unpack and understand how children are constructed and perceived in modern times. These theorists have posited that over the past four centuries, varying concepts of childhood have emerged and become dominant, shaping common-sense understandings of children and childhood, influencing

the theoretical and political positioning of children as individuals and as a social category, and proposing ways to best raise, educate and relate to children throughout this period in the human lifecycle. Although the different constructions have become more and less popular at different times, aspects of each of these constructions are observable in modern times.

In this chapter I will provide a brief account of the context within which current thinking is situated and then present twelve of the more dominant constructions and consider, briefly, how they continue to shape the way we currently consider, understand and respond to children and childhood. At the end of this chapter I summarise the key features of each conceptualisation.

In chapters 5 – 7, I will consider how researchers believe notions of vulnerability, competence and agency (major themes highlighted in interviews and within the literature) have influenced their work – how their theories of childhood lay a foundation for what they do and how they do it, and how these theories align and converge from those inherent in the academic field and within society more broadly.

## ***2.2 Understanding the context***

Childhood has been constructed and considered with vehement enthusiasm for many centuries: religious leaders, politicians, educators, poets, philosophers, physicians and research academics have written extensively on what it means to be a child, how children experience childhood, how children should be raised, how adults should relate to them, how their needs might be met, and how their behaviours might best be understood and fostered, curbed and curtailed. Passionate public debate around issues such as smacking, juvenile detention and public education lend weight to the view that childhood is one of

the most oft-considered periods of the human lifecycle, and issues related to childhood the most important of modern times. As Rose (1999, p. 121) observes:

*Childhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence. In different ways, at different times, and by many routes varying from one section of society to another, the health, welfare, and rearing of children have been linked in thought and practice to the destiny of the nation and the responsibilities of the state. The modern child has become the focus of innumerable projects that purport to safeguard it from physical, sexual and moral danger, to ensure its 'normal' development, to actively promote certain capacities of attributes such as intelligence, educability and emotional stability.*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'childhood' as "the state or period of being a child", a definition that has been in popular use since the tenth century. Like sainthood or bachelorhood, 'childhood' has been considered a somewhat bounded state or condition rather than a type of person, commonly framed as a thing or a possession that "may be given, lost, stolen, or even disappear" (Thorne, 2009, p. 19). This conceptualisation of childhood as being a thing or a state has been problematised in recent times, with Thorne (2009, p. 19), among others, observing that: "the reification of childhood as a relatively stable 'thing' fuels dichotomous thinking and glosses ambiguity, ideological struggle, cultural variation, and historical transformation."

Most modern commentaries on the social constructions of childhood begin with an examination of the work of Phillipe Aries (1962), who asserted that childhood as we now know it is unique to this point in history. In his analysis of artistic representations of children from the middle ages onwards, Aries suggested that childhood was relatively non-existent in previous times, with children either being considered as miniature adults (and

as such a non-distinct group of individuals) or not considered at all (due to the fact that life expectancy was considerably low and adults were, as such, reluctant to become too attached to children as individuals or as a group). He noted in *Centuries of Childhood* that:

*In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny, or his cradle rocker, he belonged to adult society. (1962, p. 125)*

When children were recognised in artistic representations they generally appeared with adults who shared similar facial expressions, were engaging in similar activities and with similar cultural markers (including dress). His analysis suggested that it was only in the seventeenth century that children attained a distinct place in artwork, which he believes was due to a growing idealisation and affection of children occurring at the time.

Aries' work was incredibly influential, not only for those considering the representation of children in artwork but also in contesting the notion that childhood was a natural phenomenon. Drawing on his work, others observed that as children did not hold a distinct place in historical art, nor did they hold a distinct place as an ideological construct. Although Aries' methodology and fundamental claims have been challenged by a number of historians and sociologists who have shown that children were represented in different ways to adults as early as the sixth century (Cunningham, 2005; Pollock, 1983; Shahar, 1990), what he did provide was a framework upon which others could claim that the

modern construction of childhood is different to that of previous ages, and that this construction is influenced by the social, political and economic context within which children exist. As Archard (2004, p. 19) puts it:

*What the past lacked was our concept of childhood. Previous society did not fail to think of children as different from adults; it merely thought about the difference in different ways from ours.*

Although he recognised the flaws in Aries' work, Archard continued to draw from it to make some important observations about the development of the modern construction of childhood and how it might be understood. Firstly, he observed that there is a distinction between a concept and a conception, arguing that to have a concept of childhood all there needed to be was a differentiation of the child and the adult. Drawing on a number of texts, Archard showed that children were differentiated linguistically - there were words that referred to specific stages in life such as *infantia* and *puerita*; and different expectations in regards to the role and function in the community. As such, Archard challenged Aries' observation that childhood didn't exist, and argued that their conception is different to that of today: that the way that we consider them, relate to them and understand them is quite different. For example, in earlier times people did not always believe children should be shielded from sexual knowledge (Shahar in Cunningham, 2005), which differs from present-day conceptions of childhood whereby children are often protected from such information. As such, Ariès highlights that conceptions of childhood have been transformed. Archard and others argue that this is historically situated and must be understood in regards to the social, political, moral and economic context within which they operate.

It should be noted here that dominant conceptions (or constructions) of childhood are predominantly developed by adults and do not necessarily reflect “the cultures which children construct for and between themselves” (James & Prout, 1997). The conceptions listed here are also primarily those dominant in developed Western societies and may be incongruent to those popular in other cultures and societies (Pupavac, 2001).

Rather than suggesting that these conceptualisations have been evolutionary, I will argue that certain aspects of each play out in different ways within the modern arena.

### *1. The Evil Child*

Children have not always been cast in a positive light. Because of the high rates of child mortality, coupled with a view that they were a financial and practical liability, children were predominantly treated ambivalently in prehistoric and early Christian times. When they did survive, they were often constructed negatively: born with original sin and inherently evil, as evidence of their parents’ intimacy which itself was deemed unsavoury (Thane, 1981).

For those adopting the ‘evil child’ construct, harsh punishment was considered not only appropriate but in many cases necessary to raise children, and the protection of children was not considered to be the responsibility of the broader community or the State (Richett & Hudson, 1979).

This conception of the ‘evil child’ allowed for widespread practices of infanticide, incest and significant maltreatment of children. Those considered less than perfect were often drowned, exposed to the elements or starved to death. Children were punished harshly for crimes, under the belief that antisocial attitudes might be thrashed out of them. This approach to child-raising remained dominant throughout the following centuries, as

demonstrated in the sermons of John Wesley, the Methodist leader, who urged parents to “break the will of your child” so as to “bring his will into subjection to yours that it may be afterward be subject to the will of God” (as cited in Hendrick, 1997, p. 35).

In modern times, aspects of the ‘Evil Child’ are revealed in debates about how best to respond to children who display ‘anti-social behaviours’. Punitive and pain-based responses to anti-social behaviours, such as the public naming and shaming of young offenders are underpinned by a view that left unchecked, children will continue their ‘evil ways’ into adulthood (Brendtro, 2004).

## *2. The Empty Vessel: the child as the reproducer of knowledge, identity and culture*

The ‘Evil Child’ view of childhood was challenged in the late seventeenth century by a series of writers, including the influential John Locke (1632-1704), who in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) asserted that children were not innately anything, let alone innately evil (Locke, 1979). His notion of children as *tabula rasa* (empty slate) asserted that children were born as empty vessels and were shaped by their environment and their experience. He argued that if provided with the right childhoods, children could grow to become fully functioning adults.

Locke’s conception of childhood sat within a period which claimed to provide children with “a New World”. He was revolutionary in that he recognised that each child was different and that early influences and their individual nature shaped their development and provided a framework for future conceptions (namely developmental theory).

As children are born without a natural knowledge of virtue, Locke also believed that early education greatly shaped their development, where even “little and almost insensible



impressions on [their] tender infancies have very important and lasting consequences" (as cited in Sumser, 1994, p. 4). Unlike his predecessors, Locke believed that children reasoned as early as they acquired language, and observed that they appreciated adults who recognised this and gave them opportunities to use these reasoning skills.

Locke also contributed to constructions of childhood, by promoting parental obligation in childrearing in a way that was not prominent in previous times. Arguing in *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke notes that parents must "take care of their Off-spring, during the imperfect state of Childhood" and "inform the Mind, and govern the Actions of their yet ignorant Nonage" (as cited in Williams, 2006, p. 88). He argued that it was important for parents to treat their children as rational human beings, so as to guide them towards good actions. He continues in *Some Thought Concerning Education* (1836) (Locke, 1968, p. 10):

*The well educating of their children is so much the duty and concern of parents, and the welfare and prosperity of the nation so much depends on it, that I would have every one lay it seriously to heart [...] set his helping hand to promote everywhere that way of training up youth, [...] which is the easiest, shortest, and likeliest to produce virtuous, useful, and able men in their distinct callings; tho' that most to be taken care of is the gentleman's calling. For if those of that rank are by their education once set right, they will quickly bring all the rest into order.*

He saw education as a pivotal aspect of childhood, observing that "nine parts out of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education" (Locke, 1968, p. 10).

So passionate was he about the provision of quality education to children, that Archard (2004, p. 217) argues that Locke provided us with the "the earliest manifesto for 'child-centred' education", driven by his idealism and dedication to empirical study.

Although Locke recognised that childhood was a period in and of itself, his theory centred on the child's becoming, rather than their current selves, and placed greater value on whom they might come to be. Locke's view was that this becoming was sped up when children were provided the structure to do so: "The sooner you treat him as a man, the sooner he will begin to be one."

The view that children are 'incomplete' remains prevalent in modern times and underpins much of the policy and practice that relates to the childhood experience. In her examination of modern American society, for example, Arlene Skolnick (1975) argued that such conceptions of childhood have led to legal restrictions being placed on children which have ultimately excluded them from engaging in certain activities – such as voting, working, driving, buying and drinking alcohol, entering into contracts and marrying. By restricting children's engagement in some of these activities, particularly in relation to voting, entering into contracts and working, children have little power, independence or control over their lives. By 'protecting' children, some have argued that we have also disempowered them and rendered them subservient to adults (Mason, 2008).

### *3. The Innocent Child*

While John Locke was espousing childhood as a period of growth, others began to propose that childhood needed to be considered a period of innocence in which children were shielded from the evils and vices of adulthood, and instead be provided with idyllic lifestyles in which they enjoyed a carefree experience (Richett & Hudson, 1979). Images of children as innately evil were replaced with innocent ones: children were commonly portrayed in art in angelic garb, in romantic settings surrounded by the beauties of nature. Rousseau, for example, promoted a new understanding of childhood in his seminal work *Emilé* (Rousseau, 1979) in which the natural goodness of children and childhood was

asserted. The divide between childhood and adulthood was now marked as a process of steady decline from innocence to corruption.

Unlike Locke who couched childhood in terms of becoming, Rousseau saw childhood as being a discrete and important period of life, and argued that it should be valued in and of itself. Similar to Locke, Rousseau argued that rather than harshly disciplining children, better progress could be made if children were provided natural environments within which they could develop at their own pace.

Rousseau challenged Locke's view, however, that children had the capacity to reason, publicly criticising his emerging theory:

*Locke's great maxim was to reason with children; and it is the most popular method at the present day. Its success does not appear to recommend it; for my own part, I have never seen anyone so silly as those children with whom they have reasoned so much. Of all man's faculties, Reason, which is a combination of the rest, is developed last and with greatest difficulty; yet this is the faculty which we are asked to use for the development of the earlier. It is the climax of a good education to form a man who is capable of reason; and we propose to educate a young child by means of his reason! This is beginning where we ought to end, and making the finished product an instrument in its own manufacture. (Rousseau, 1964, p. 95)*

This lack of capacity was dominant at in the late eighteenth century and, as will be discussed later, has shaped the way that we think about children, childhood and their participation in the life of the nation.

So too has it repositioned the placement of adults and adulthood. Constructions of the innocent child propose the view that childhood is located as distinct from adulthood and that it is the responsibility of adults to care for the young: the incompetent, vulnerable and dependent. Under this conception, children should be and deserve to be loved, nurtured and guided by caring adults so that these innate qualities might manifest.

Both Locke and Rousseau provide detailed accounts of childhood and what they considered the natural state of childhood to be, and from these, proposed models for the most appropriate ways and means to raise and educate children. During this period, there was a growing acceptance that childhood was a discrete period of time, that children had specific needs, and parents had responsibilities to care for them in their own right. Their value was considered both into the future but, increasingly, within the age they inhabited.

Tenets of Rousseau's construct emerge and re-emerge in modern times. For example, Montessori schools, where children are provided with relatively unrestricted environments within which they direct their own learning, have become increasingly popular and stress the importance of gentle and nurturing educations who "stimulate life, leaving it then free to develop" (Montessori, 1912, p. 115).

#### *4. The Romantic Child*

As a result of the Industrial Revolution and spurred on by anti-aristocratic social and political norms, Romanticism as an intellectual movement emerged in the late eighteenth century. Drawing on Rousseau's 'original innocence', the 'Romantic' thinkers and artists (including Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth) proposed that childhood was not a state of becoming but a preferred state which was gradually lost as adulthood progressed. In this conception, Blake saw childhood as the *source* of innocence, a quality which needed to be

kept alive into adulthood if satisfaction and nourishment was to be achieved. Childhood was romanticised and grieved by adults. As Schiller argued in 1795:

*They are what we were; they are what we should again become. We were nature like them and our culture must, through reason and liberty, lead us back to nature. They are at the same time a rendering of our own lost childhood which remains for eternity our most cherished possession.* (as cited in Sky, 2002, p. 364)

Coleridge, on the other hand, saw childhood as being a period during which blessings from God, rather than natural virtues, were bestowed on infants “so much so, that childhood came to be seen as the age where virtue was domiciled, and everything thereafter was downhill rather than upward toward maturity” (Hendrick, 1997, p. 36). For Wordsworth, childhood was a time filled with virtuous childlike qualities, which were lost at the moment of its completion. It became a ‘lost realm’ since “growing up becomes synonymous with the loss of ‘Paradise’” (Hendrick, 1997, p. 36).

These Romantics also proposed that children understood and experienced the world in different ways to adults: that imagination and play were central to their experience and to how they related to each other and to the world around them. Carpenter observes that previously, there was:

*No question of children having an independent imaginative life of any importance, or of their being able to perceive anything that was invisible to adults. The only necessity was for instruction to be poured into their ears, and the only argument was about what sort of instruction it should be.* (as cited in Sky, 2002, p. 363)

Children’s knowledge was not only recognised during this period, but also highly valued. As Wordsworth wrote in *Lyrical Ballads*:

*Oh dearest, dearest boy! my heart  
For better lore would seldom yearn,  
Could I but teach the hundreth part  
Of what from thee I learn* (1800, p. 63)

These constructions were influential in the childhood labour debates of the time in which reformers drew on Romantic and Rousseauian ideals advocating against the employment of children in factory work, presenting such roles as being incongruous with childhood: a period in which the individual should be protected from the harshness and danger of adulthood.

Such concerns about children's labour continue to this day and underpin much of the discourse surrounding the experience of young carers (children and young people who provide care to a relative who has a disability, illness, mental health or alcohol or other drug issue) (Halpenny & Gilligan, 2004). Concerns about not providing children with 'ideal' childhoods permeate popular, academic and policy-focused discussions, and often blame parents and communities for 'failing' their children (Olsen, 1996), without recognition of the structures and systems that cause disadvantage and poor outcomes for children (McLaughlin & Dietz, 2008).

### *5. The Evangelical child*

Although this conception of childhood was popular for some time, the suppression of liberties following the French Revolution, demand for free labour and destruction of the 'moral economy' emerging from the industrial revolution again reoriented adult-child relations, and modified the way that childhood was considered economically, politically and educationally. The Evangelical Revival at the end of the eighteenth century again

promoted the notion of original sin and argued for the redemption of children. Hannah More, Founder of the Sunday School movement, asked:

*Is it not a fundamental error to consider children as innocent beings, whose little weaknesses may, perhaps, want some correction, rather than as beings who bring into the world a corrupt nature and evil dispositions, which it should be the great end of education to rectify?* (as cited in Hendrick, 1997, p. 37)

In presenting a challenge to both Rousseau and the Romantics' conception, Evangelicals sought to position childhood separately to adulthood and, by doing so, warrant a significant investment of time, thought, concern and money into the raising of children. Childhood was considered different to adulthood; in the sense that childhood had its own nature and was not simply an immature condition leading to adulthood. It was also more clearly defined in relation to adulthood: in 1833, a Royal Commission, drawing on physiological evidence related to puberty, claimed that at the age of 13 the period of childhood ceased and subsequent legislation codified this pronouncement (Cunningham & Morpurgo, 2007).

Within an industrialising and urbanising nation, childhood was cast within notions of family and the domestic ideal with its emphasis on duty, love and respect. As a by-product of this new idealism the optimism of Rousseau and the Romantics gave way to a pessimism and alarmism of evangelical thought, where adults (and parents in particular) were pressured into raising children in punitive and isolating ways.

Up to this time, the employment of children was widespread and considered beneficial to children who could not only contribute to their family's financial position but also develop skills and economic, social and moral principles (Zelizer, 1994). However, during this period there grew a view that employment corrupted children, exploited them and denied

them their 'childhood'. At the same time, child labour was seen to divest the 'Order of Nature', where adults (particularly men) were highly reliant on children to meet their family's financial needs and often missed out on employment opportunities as employers recruited cheaper and more malleable children to assume unskilled tasks.

This new protectionism was a divergence from earlier conceptions of childhood in that children's vulnerability and dependence on adults became more popularly asserted. The victimisation of child labourers, the sexual harassment of girls in the workplace and in broad adult company, and children's exposure to adult knowledge, experience and immorality were all reasons why evangelists called for more protection of childhood; and somewhat willingly, their exclusion from public spaces, civic engagement and dialogue about their positioning and experiences.

Childhood, as a universal category, was also defined for the first time in legislation. Children from all classes and living in broad geographies were all considered similarly: "They are, of all human beings, the most lovely, the most engaging, the most of all others claiming protection, comfort and love. They are CHILDREN" (Cunningham, 1991, p. 64). As such, childhood wasn't just the domain of middle and upper class children.

This focus on children, particularly those from lower classes and those deemed to be 'disadvantaged' continues today. Similarly, with increasing concern about children's safety (from adult predators, from risks in the environment, from their own risk-taking), children's lives are often restricted to places and spaces in which they can be supervised by adults, engage in adult-led and initiated activities (in contrast to child-led explorations and unstructured play) (Pain, 2006). This focus and these restrictions are underpinned by elements of the Evangelical Child conception.



## 6. *The Delinquent Child and the Child in Need of Educating*

As the innocence of childhood was codified in legislation so too was delinquency for those aged 7 to 16 (Gillis, 1975). This conception of childhood stressed the vulnerability of children to immorality and criminality when exposed to adult manipulation and neglect. Although ‘evil’ as a natural state no longer held currency, there was a pervasive view that there always remained a potential for delinquency which must be understood in relation to the child’s experiences of being parented, educated and socialised. Children not parented adequately or educated appropriately were seen as “independent, self-reliant, advanced in knowledge of evil but not of good, devoid of reverence for God or man, utterly destitute of any sound guiding principle of action” (Hendrick, 1997, p. 42), and in need of significant reform. As Hendrick quotes from reformers of the time, children displaying these undesirable behaviours needed to be re-educated:

*... he has no long directed or misdirected his own actions and has little trust in those about him, that he submits to no control and asks for no protection. He has consequently much to unlearn – he has to be turned again into a child.* (Hendrick, 1997, p. 42)

When parents were unable to do this, Reform Schools and other juvenile facilities were constructed to maintain social order. In this new age, politicians and philanthropists were of the view that only by reforming childhood could society itself be reformed – a philosophical approach which not only elevated the position of children and childhood but justified the control of it by well-meaning adults with the authority to use whatever means necessary to ensure that children received the appropriate direction to become good adults.

This philosophy also underpinned the development of the Industrial School, established in the mid-1800s, which cast aside previous assertions that a child’s ‘knowledge’ could be

suitably derived from parents, from community, from peers and from the child's own experience. It also was underpinned by the view that upon the pain of punishment (usually physical), children needed to develop a set of attitudes which in turn reinforced their vulnerability and dependence and, in terms of deference towards established authorities, their position and social class. Working children were problematised in the age of the Industrial School not as being exploited, but instead as being corrupted by adult knowledge and being deficient in character, due to their early exposure to financial independence and a level of adult-like control. The separation of childhood from society was institutionalised by the school and confirmed upon children a separate identity and social role. It countered previous conceptions by positioning children as investments in the future and in need of further development for the good of the nation (Humphries, 1981).

As school was compulsory for all (rich and poor, and for those in cities and in rural areas), childhood was universalised, and the universalised expectations of the childhood experience further problematised poor families who were not able to give children this 'priceless childhood' (as Zelizer, 1994, puts it).

It is not difficult to see how certain modern-day assumptions and common-sense understandings of childhood reflect those underpinning the Delinquent Child and the Child in Need of Educating conceptions. The prevalent view that adolescence is a time marked by storm and stress within which parents, schools and the State must take charge and limit children's capacity for delinquency, and the removal of delinquent children from the community to juvenile justice facilities, boot camps and boarding schools reflects many of the beliefs and approaches to this time (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 1990). Critics of the modern school argue that there has been little evolution since the time of the Industrial School and may not reflect what we now know about childhood, about learning and about the best ways that adults and children might interact.

## 7. *The Studied Child*

The move from the public to the more isolated school environment brought with it a renewed interest in childhood, and ways to best provide children with the childhood experience promoted by child protectionists and the community at large. Gathered in a single space, politicians and philanthropists were able to consider the broad issues for children: particularly as the breadth of children's disabilities and mental health concerns were revealed, and the experience of child poverty was observed. Natural scientists were also given unprecedented access to groups of children and were of the view that a study of childhood could give them answers related to the evolution of the human development more broadly. The Child Study movement (of the 1880s through to 1915) saw the beginning of "a prolonged and unprecedented public discussion of the physical and mental condition of school children" (Hendrick, 1997, p. 46), in which childhood was recast not as a natural phenomenon but one shaped by the environments within which they existed.

During this period, scientists, educators, psychologists and others developed 'expert roles', and through the dissemination of their findings, influenced educational, scientific and parenting practices on a large scale. Specialists and specialist organisations became popular and spurred on a whole new body of research and knowledge previously unseen.

This renewed interest in childhood led to a view that childhood was now 'for the Nation' – that investments in children resulted in a renewed sense of Nationhood and the potential for further growth and development. As Kelynack observed at the time:

*The child of today holds the key to the kingdom of the morrow; the child that now is will be the citizen of the coming years and must take up and bear the duties of statesmanship, defence from foes, the conduct of labour, the direction of progress,*

*and the maintenance of a high level of thought and conduct.* (as cited in James, 1997, p. 48)

Within a period marked by domestic concerns with poverty, class politics and social hygiene; and fierce imperial, political, military and national rivalries, children were reconceptualised as material investments in national progress (Hendrick, 1997).

This in turn resulted in increased State intervention through legislation: including legislative Acts such as those relating to the prevention of cruelty to children, juvenile justice and the age of consent. Parents were no longer seen as the sole protectors of children and, in many cases, were considered a potential threat to their wellbeing and development.

As will be seen throughout this thesis, the popular and academic fascination with children and childhood continues. Behind much of the rhetoric there continues to be a view that to be productive and responsible adult citizens in the future, children must be afforded certain experiences, opportunities and conditions during the period of becoming which is childhood. Researchers, policy makers and service providers continue to explore aspects of childhood experiences (i.e. the impacts of childhood trauma, the links between health and education and future prospects, and the outcomes of particular interventions during childhood) with significant emphasis on how these experiences influence the individual into adulthood rather than privileging the impacts in the present (Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn, 1998).

## *8. The Psychological Child: the child in development*

As compulsory schooling allowed psychologists with unprecedented access to children, a growing body of knowledge emerged that informed the way children were raised and

educated. Childhood began to be understood as a discrete, foundational and influential period of life. Psychologists of the time spent significant time exploring the nature and experience of children, particularly those who were poor and deemed more likely to produce disturbances of the social order now and into the future. The psychological study of childhood was driven by a goal of producing rational adults “out of a mob, a mass or herd” (Walkerdine, 2004, p. 114). Early pioneers worked with troubled children, such as the Wild Boy of Aveyron (Lane, 1996), and showed, through their successes, that education could turn the human animal into a civilised, rational being. They posited that children’s growth was evolutionary, that to grow into fully functioning adults they must pass through a number of stages, developing competencies and abilities throughout.

Developmental Psychology, the emerging discipline of scientific inquiry, emerged in the early 1900s and quickly became one of the most popularly accepted and most dominant discourses of childhood (Muir, 1999). Like Locke and Rousseau, developmental psychologists consider children in a teleological way – they are positioned into the future and childhood is primarily a period of growth towards adulthood. Developmental psychology ultimately considers the systematic psychological, emotional and perception changes that occur in humans over the course of their life span (Charlesworth, 2010).

Within this construct, childhood is seen as a developmental process in which adaptation within the environment is understood as a series of natural, stage-wise progressions. Within this conception, those living in unhealthy environments would have inhibited development and, mirroring Darwin’s theory of evolution, remain lower down the evolutionary scale.

One of the key theorists to make a significant contribution not only to the field of childhood development, but also to the way that children and childhood have been

popularly constructed is Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1999), a Swiss psychologist who began theorising childhood in the 1920s. Piaget's model describes four main stages in the development of thought and intelligence. It too is incremental and teleological; it proposes that the child must progress from one stage to another sequentially and develop their capacity from low status child-like 'figurative' to high status adult 'operative' intelligence:

*The four principal stages of the development of intelligence of the child progress from one stage to the other by the construction of new operational structures, and these structures constitute the fundamental instrument of the intelligence of the adult. (as cited in Bjorklund, 2011, p. 165)*

Unlike previous models which characterised children as passive recipients of adult knowledge and social acculturation, Piaget's assimilation-accommodation model of cognitive growth emphasises the active, constructive nature of the child, proposing that humans assimilate and accommodate new knowledge and information and that this enables psychological growth and development (Piaget, 1999). Like natural selection where new species arise from pre-existing ones, Piaget's model of development proposes that new forms of knowledge arise through development because they are better adapted to the environment and enable the individual to learn, grow and better respond to the outside world.

Piaget's work on intelligence and child development has had a significant impact on paediatric care and educational practice worldwide. In more recent times, the theory has proliferated to the extent that some have argued that its original intent has been lost:

*Nowadays the status of developmental psychology is not clear. Some say that it is a perspective or an approach to investigating general psychological problems, rather than a particular domain or subdiscipline. According to this view we can*

*address all major areas of psychology, such as memory, cognition, etc., from this perspective. The unit of development under investigation is also variable. We could be concerned with the development of a process, or a mechanism, rather than an individual.* (Burman as cited in Jenks, 2004, p. 96)

This is in marked contrast with the popular representations of developmental psychology which equate it with the practicalities of child development or, more recently, human development.

Other writers have posited that the field of developmental psychology has learned little about children's subjective experience even though it had achieved significant progress in understanding their cognitive growth. In 1992, psychologist John Flavell concluded that learning about children within the discipline had been limited to age-linked competencies and knowledge acquisition, and the effects of these cognitive accomplishments on some aspects of social and non-social behaviour. He observed:

*We have seldom tried to infer what it is like to be them and what the world seems like to them, given what they have and have not achieved cognitively. When knowledge and abilities are subtracted from the totality of what could legitimately be called 'cognitive', an important remainder is surely the person's subjective experience: how self and world seem and feel to that person, given that knowledge and those abilities.* (as cited in Hogan, 2005, p. 23)

Others have argued that it fails to recognise the lived experience of childhood and has little consideration of how the child perceives their own development:

*Within developmental psychology, some critical voices also emerged ... but these have been few, and the mainstream of research in developmental psychology has*

*taken little note of the criticisms posed from either outside or inside the discipline. Some of these criticisms centre around the perception that developmental psychology has failed to adequately describe and understand children's ordinary lives and their active participation in their social worlds, or in other words, to research their subjective experience. (Hogan, 2005, p. 22)*

## *9. The Socialising Child*

According to Jenks (1982), sociology has always been concerned with the development of the child, but often only inasmuch as their theories of social order, stability and integration depend on a level of uniformity and predictability from their participating members. Constructing a formally established concept of society as its first step, sociology tends to then work back to consider the necessary inculcation of its rules into the consciousness of its potential participants, namely, children. In sociological terms, this inculcation is referred to as 'socialisation'. Although often mirroring the chronology of developmental theories, socialisation avoids and resists the reduction to explanation in terms of natural processes or dispositions. One of the early theorists, Parsons noted that socialisation referred primarily to the process of child development:

*However, there is another reason for singling out the socialisation of the child. There is reason to believe that, among the learned elements of personality in certain respects the stablest and most enduring are the major value-orientation patterns and there is much evidence that these are 'laid down' in childhood and are not on a large scale subject to drastic alteration during life. (1964, p. 101)*

Classical socialisation theory is underpinned by the view that functioning adults are ultimately produced through childhood through a process of 'social conditioning'. Through socialising institutions or 'agencies of socialisation' such as the school, religion,



family and the mass media, children are socialised into understanding and accepting the conventional norms and values of their particular society and are socialised into the social status, class and roles that they assume. Sociology has asserted the prominence of socialisation in sustaining societies through time, arguing that without the successful transmission of culture from one generation to another, society cannot continue. As MacKay notes:

*In sociological writings characterised as normative, the term socialisation glosses the phenomenon of change from the birth of a child to maturity or old age. To observe that changes take place after birth is trivial, but the quasi-scientific use of the term socialisation masks this triviality. In fact, the study of these changes as socialisation is an expression of the sociologists' common sense position in the world – i.e. as adults. The notion of socialisation leads to the theoretical formulations mirroring the adult view that children are incomplete adults. (as cited in Jenks, 2004, p. 101)*

As Jenks notes then, the child's social and ontological purpose is to not stay a child. In fact, any dawdling during childhood or an inability to progress is ultimately cast as a failure to 'develop'.

Although its dominance remains within sociological discourse, socialisation theory has been increasingly challenged, particularly those taking an interactionist approach. Denzin's studies of adult-child interaction and children's peer interactions, for example, led to a level of dissatisfaction with the view that children did not hold a certain level of competence and act as agents in the culture within which they existed (Corsaro, 1988, pp. 19-24). Matthew Speier argues that traditional interests in development and socialisation have 'neglected the interactional foundation to human group life':

*The traditional perspectives have overemphasised the task of describing the child's developmental process of growing into an adult at the expense of a direct consideration of what the events of everyday life look like in childhood... the intellectual and analytic position of sociologists is essentially ideological in the sense that they have used an adult notion of what children are and what they ought to be that is like that of the laymen in the culture. (as cited in Thomas, 2004, p. 36)*

Jenks (2004) argues, therefore, that it is the job of sociologists to develop distinctive analytic tools to the study of childhood, to ensure that they come with an open and enquiring mind and to avoid simply recycling conventional ways of seeing and understanding the childhood experience.

### *10. The Agentic Child*

The agentic child is a relatively new image of childhood (Corsaro, 2005). It challenges the notion of the innocent, powerless child, as children are considered social actors who participate in community and shape their experience within it. This is not saying that they are miniature adults; rather, childhood is considered an important period of being – a time when children make sense of their world through active interaction with it (Corsaro, 1997).

Unlike other constructions of childhood, the agentic child is considered to be competent and capable and actively co-construct childhood with adults. Jenks (2004, p. 110) observes that within this conception; “Children are not [seen as being] pathological or incomplete; they form a group, a body of social actors, and as citizens they have needs and rights.”

As such, children share power with adults, power that is negotiated as a critically conscious component of their relationship. The child is empowered through their

relationship with adults who shares with them their power, strength and resources rather than imposing them upon or providing for the child paternalistically. As the child is changed through this sharing, so is the adult who becomes more knowledgeable, wise and acquires status through the relationship that they have with the child. The benefits of the relationship are bidirectional with all players developing as a result. In the agentic child construct:

*The idea of a child as a developing person in a perspective looking to the future is largely replaced by that of the child as an active person, a protagonist of social life in the present. This enhances consideration for the persona of the child, regarded as important in itself for its capacity to construct meanings of the world and act autonomously. (UNICEF as cited in Hartung, 2011, p. 162)*

Though living within and affected by the adult world alongside which their own experience exists, childhood is an independent place, or as Jenks puts it, “real places and provinces of meaning in their own right and not as fantasies, games, poor imitations or inadequate precursors of the adult state of being” (2004, p. 107). As such, this construction rejects the view that children are passive or innocent and challenges both deterministic models of childhood and those espousing purely constructivist views, which consider the actions of the child distinctly and separately from those of others. Co-constructivists recognise that the actions of both children and adults are constrained by a number of limited choices but that they have more agency than previously thought.

In this co-constructivist framework, the child is an active and eager learner who internalises their experiences while participating in the reproduction and transformation of society.

## *11. Children as Holders of Rights*

Alongside these constructions, children have at times been considered holders of universal human rights, and since the late 1970s as holders of special protections to development, to protection and to participation in processes that affect their lives. Archard (2004) argues that the development of children's rights were borne of a mid-twentieth century resistance to hegemonic, racial, ethnic and economic oppression. Since then, they have been the subject of theorising in the areas of law, political science, education, child protection and social welfare. In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child codified these rights, which through international, national and local legislative and policy enactments enshrined them in ratifying nation states.

Although there has been a symbolic agreement that children are rights-holders, there has been considerable resistance at both the theoretical and practical levels. As Franklin (1995, p. 90) notes, such resistance “straddles both the public realm of children's involvement in education and the care arrangements of the state and the private realm of the family”. It has been observed that these concerns reflect remnants of early conceptualisations of childhood which remain pervasive today: beliefs that children pose a threat to social order (Lansdown, 1994); views that parents, not the state, have the prime responsibility for children (Eekelaar, 1986); observations that children's rights are subordinate to those of adults, particularly parents (Guggenheim, 2005); and concerns about children's capacity to enact their rights in meaningful ways and ways that promote their best interests now and into the future (Archard & Skivenes, 2009).

## *12. The End of Childhood*

Since the early 1980s, a number of populist commentators have observed the adultification of children: where children are sexualised, commercialised and objectified

by the media and by the broader adult community at large (Medved & Medved, 1998; Postman, 1994). At the same time, there is a view that the distinction between adulthood and childhood has become blurred with adults engaging in traditionally 'child-like' activities, participating in youth-led cultures and sustaining relative dependence (seen, for example in the late departure of young adults from their parents' home) for extended periods of time. As Hengst notes:

*Childhood is being liquidated because today society is invading all those areas in which formerly children had been trained to meet the qualitatively different demands of adulthood. The gap between the generations is narrowing because important segments of reality have come largely to coincide (as in leisure-time activities), or different spheres of experience (such as school and job) are similarly structured and call forth comparable appropriation processes and 'survival strategies'. As society comes to influence individuals directly through a multitude of channels and agencies, the processes of upbringing, in particular, increasingly lose their effectiveness, are neutralised and no longer yield intended effects. (1987, p. 74)*

Critics of this view argue that although children's access to the adult world has increased as a result of increased engagement with media through television and the internet, most aspects of their childhood remain relatively *unchanged*: schools continue to socialise and educate children in similar ways to the past, children remain relatively unengaged in political processes, continue to be considered as legal objects rather than subjects, and as requiring adult protection as vulnerable and inactive members of the community. Generally, children continue to be understood in regards to their future selves, or as Qvortrup (1994) puts it, as human becomings, rather human beings.

Although the way that we see and respond to children has changed considerably since these times, vestiges of this view remain dominant in many of our modern day constructions: children's frailty and innocence continue to be asserted and moral panic remains in relation to child-raising and children's protection. Writers such as Stasiulis (2002) have argued that the dominance of these conceptions has profoundly shaped and limited children's ability to fully participate as active citizens in the life of the community, or to enjoy similar rights to those of other members of the community. Solely as a result of their age, children are excluded from the political sphere, are unable to work, own property or to assert many of the freedoms afforded to members of a liberal democracy.

## 2.3 Summary

*Table 1: Conceptualisations of childhood* summarises the key characteristics of each conceptualisation.

*Table 1: Conceptualisations of childhood*

Construct	Characteristics
1. Evil	Children are born evil and need to have evil educated and / or punished out of them
2. Empty vessel	Children are born without innate evil or innocence but passively acquire knowledge and temperament
3. Innocent	Children are born innately innocent
4. Romantic	Childhood is a preferred state and one that is lost as they grow into adulthood
5. Evangelical	Children need to be saved from the adult world around them and from exploitation
6. Delinquent	Childhood marked by potential evil (external rather than internal)
7. Child-study	Children shaped by their environments
8. Psychological	Children developing within and as a result of their interactions with

	the environment and others
9. Socialising	Children socialised to take on the conventional values and norms through social conditioning
10. Agentic	Childhood as a discrete period of life in which children make sense of their worlds and interact within it
11. Holder of rights	Children are humans and hold rights.
12. End of childhood	Delineation between children and adults is blurred. Children are exposed to adult knowledge and culture (often to their detriment) and adults fail to let go of their engagement with 'childish' activities and cultures.

## ***2.4 Chapter summary and conclusions***

As we have seen, children have been conceptualised in a number of different ways, at different times and in different contexts. Although it would appear that these have conceptualisations have been evolutionary, different aspects of each of these conceptualisations appear to remain present in contemporary theories and popular discourses about children, childhood, family, the State and welfare.

In chapters 5 – 7 I will explore how aspects of these conceptualisations have influenced the practice of research with children, and how researchers have attempted to manage the often-competing notions of children and childhood in their work and in their theory. I will also consider how reflexive practice might help researchers consider how they conceptualise children and how these conceptualisations influence their ontologies, epistemologies, ethical behaviours, methodologies and relationships with children in the research context.

## CHAPTER 3: REFLEXIVITY

*To be able to trust yet to be sceptical of your own experience, I have come to believe, is one mark of the mature workman... developing self-reflective habits you learn to keep your inner world awake. (Mills as cited in Macfarlane, 2008, p. 123)*

*Without some degree of reflexivity any research is blind and without purpose. (Flood, 1999, p. 35)*

### **3.1 Introducing the chapter**

Chapter 2 identified that throughout history children have been characterised as not-yet-human, as vulnerable, as incompetent and as in need of development. Such limiting notions of childhood have had a significant impact not only on how children are understood, but also on how we relate to them, respond to their needs and wishes, and either sustain them in vulnerable positions or empower them through our work with them.

As highlighted by Alison James (in Chapter 1), researchers have influenced these conceptualisations of children, creating narratives that perpetuate limiting notions or offer new ways of understanding, relating and responding. Realising this, she and others (Tisdall & Punch, 2012) have challenged researchers to consider this reality and to problematise what we do, how we do it and the impact that our work has on children and childhood. By doing so, she contends that we are opening up new opportunities to unsettle our common-sense understandings and to propose theories of childhood that better describe children's experiences, and responses that better meet their needs.



Within the Childhood Studies arena and the broader academic community, reflexive practice has been proffered as a way of ‘unsettling’ and challenging our theories, our approaches and responses, and opening up new opportunities. Although there is a view that reflexivity is still under-developed theoretically (Lynch, 2000), and that there are risks that its practice might be used to entrench rather than challenge limiting notions, there is a growing sense of optimism that it can be used by researchers to improve their practice and positively influence the practice of others working within their fields of research.

This chapter will provide an overview of the literature relating to reflexivity in practice: proposing some of the strengths and opportunities it affords and some of the risks and challenges that one might encounter. I highlight the fact that although there is still no fixed consensus about what reflexivity actually is, key characteristics have emerged that might underpin reflexive practice in research with children.

Later in the chapter I provide a broad overview of reflexive practice and how it has been characterised and practised within research projects with and about children; and observe that although there has been limited field-wide reflexive activities, there may be opportunities for doing so. Finally, I highlight some of the implications for this study, which will be further considered in Chapter 4.

This chapter on reflexivity is included because at the start of my research journey, I took on board the challenge to be reflexive, but was somewhat confused about what this might actually mean in practice and how it might shape what I do, why I do it, how I think about my practice and the implications this might have for my study. I also hoped to engage researcher participants in co-reflexive activities and wanted to learn more about the benefits, opportunities, hazards and challenges that might emerge as a result. What follows

is a summary of the literature: the narratives of those who had navigated the murky waters of reflexive practice and the cautions of those who found it unhelpful.

### **3.2 *Why be reflexive?***

Throughout the history of research, dominant positivist paradigms have placed great value on objectivity (Crotty, 1998). In such paradigms the researcher has been constructed as a detached, impartial observer whose responsibilities have related more to ensuring robustness and rigour of methodologies, rather than considering and accounting for the way that they as individuals shape processes, and influence how and to what end research is done. As a result, researchers have tended to write themselves out of the text and present the research process as the revelation of an untainted objective truth (Scott, 2007).

However, in more recent times, and particularly in the qualitative world, the idea that researchers can be fully objective and impartial has been criticised and replaced by a view that research is a social and a socially constructed activity, within which it is impossible to separate the researcher from the research. It is contended that researchers both influence and are influenced by the practice of research (Day, 2012; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Oakley, 1994): that the assumptions, values and theoretical positions that researchers bring to their research are shaped by a series of social and historical factors which influence not only what researchers choose to investigate but also how they conduct, interpret and present the data that they gather (Blaikie, 2000). MacNaught notes that theorists drawing from a series of discourses:

*... reject the idea that meaning, knowledge and, therefore, learning is a uniquely individual, value-free cognitive pursuit. Instead they believe that knowledge and thus learning is always social and always embodies ethics, values and politics. It is*

*always accomplished within a dynamic of power and the specific conditions that produce that dynamic will inevitably produce much of what is constructed and learned.* (as cited in David, Tonkin, Powell, & Anderson, 2005, p. 134)

Within the research context, it has been suggested that although the researcher often subconsciously understands why they go about their work, which approaches they choose, how they engage and interview participants and how they analyse data, they are unable to explain to themselves or others their reasons for doing so (Macfarlane, 2008). The textbook theories of research practice might give them access to explicit knowledge about research, but it is argued that much of how we research in practice relies on tacit knowledge instead (Macfarlane, 2008). As such, reflexivity is seen as a skill and a virtue: a process through which tacit knowledge might be rendered explicit.

In fact, it was this type of activity to which Talcott Parsons referred when he first coined the phrase ‘reflexivity’ as the capacity of social actors to be conscious of and give account of their actions (in Phillips, 1988). Giddens (1976) further developed this definition, observing that within late modernity, there is a requirement at both the individual and societal levels to constantly reflect upon and revise identities and understandings in light of the changing social categories at hand. He argued that this awareness needed to be more than simply self-conscious introversion and that as humans we need to be able to elaborate on the reasons underpinning our activities. Building on Giddens, Hillier and Jameson (2003, p. 26) see reflexivity as “the ability proactively to reflect, analyse and self-critically vocalise our own reflections while maintaining a critical awareness of the nature of culture and society around us”. Drawing on the work of Aristotle and Foucault, Flyvbjerg attempts to define reflexivity by suggesting that at its most basic it:

*Allows one to step back from... conduct and to 'question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals.' Thus [reflexivity] is the motion by which one detaches oneself from what one does and 'reflects on it as a problem.'* (as cited in Emslie, 2009, p. 419)

Researchers adopting critical (David et al., 2005; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002), emancipatory (Danieli & Woodhams, 2005), rights-based (Ahsan, 2009) and post-modern (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011) approaches commonly argue that the assumptions, values and theoretical positions that researchers bring to their research are shaped by a series of social and historical factors, which influence not only what researchers choose to investigate but also how they conduct, interpret and present the data they gather (Blaikie, 2000). They have, therefore, argued that there is a need for researchers to identify, articulate and account for this 'baggage' and how their biases and prejudices play out throughout the research process. Reflexivity has been offered up as a tool to achieve this end.

So popular is the notion of reflexivity, that Maton (2003b) has argued that it has become part of the 'bad faith' of the social scientific field where to not appear to be reflexive is seen as an ontological, epistemological and methodological weakness. And yet, he observes, there is little agreement as to what comprises reflexivity, and little scrutiny, when used, about how effective it might be in shaping research practice.

This lack of clarity has led to confusion and limited application of reflexivity in practice. This may be because there continues to be significant challenges and stumbling blocks in practising helpful reflexive practice. As Finlay (2002a, p. 209) observes: "The process of engaging in reflexivity is full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self-analysis and self-disclosure."

However, there seem to be a number of consistent themes and characteristics shared. For example, as Suzanne Day (2012) observed in her analysis of reflexive practices, most reflexive models offer opportunities to explore crucial questions related to the ‘thinking’, the ‘doing’ and the ‘evaluation’ of qualitative research. What follows is a brief summary of these different approaches to and some of the characteristics which are emerging as underpinning good reflexive practice.

### *Reflexivity and ‘thinking’*

The first set of characteristics related to good practice in reflexive practice reveal how one thinks, how they think about thinking and how this thinking influences the doing of research.

When considering thinking, reflexive researchers have argued that it is helpful to consider one’s ontological and epistemological assumptions and how these influence what the researcher knows, what they learn and what they present. Ontology, at its most basic, is the study of being: of what exists and of what is think-able (Crotty, 1998). In a broad sense it focuses on what is known and what types of entities constitute reality. Within the research context, ontology concerns itself with the form and nature of reality and what can be known about it. As Creswell (2012) suggests, within the research context, this relates to the reality as constructed by individuals involved in the research situation: the researcher, research participants and those who influence the process in a broader sense (research funders, reviewers, ethics committees and others).

Guba (1990, p. 27) argues that “realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them”. Within constructivist paradigms (which underpin qualitative approaches) there is an assumption that there are multiple and

constructed realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) which are subjective and are shaped by the context within which it emerges and is considered, the personal experience and perspective of its holder, and the environments within which the holder exists (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To consider ontology reflexively is to identify, understand and account for these dynamics.

Epistemological reflexivity aims to go further and consider our views about how we formulate theory. Epistemology is a theory of knowledge which relates to how we know what we know (Crotty, 1998). Rather than focusing on the object under investigation it takes a step back and concentrates on how knowledge might be acquired. It focuses on methodologies and methods, and the theories, concepts, rules, procedures and practices applied within a discipline and by practitioners within it to derive knowledge (Fenstermacher, 1994).

In the literature there is a growing interest in reflexivity in terms of understanding how one's background and social positioning influences the way they see the world and relate to others within it. This form of reflexivity, which Maton (2003b) describes as *autobiographical reflexivity*, has been of particular use to those who are relating to others in a professional context (i.e. in the areas of nursing, social work, community care). Reflexivity encourages professionals to explicitly place themselves in relation to their objects of their endeavours so that they can reveal and account for their often hidden beliefs, values and assumptions. White (2001, p. 102) summarises:

*Reflexivity is a process of looking 'outward, to the social and cultural artefacts and forms of thought which saturate our practices' and inward to challenge the processes by which we make sense of the world.*

D'Cruz, Gillingham and Melendez (2007, pp. 77-8) thus observe that the reflexive practitioner is “aware of the assumptions that underlie how they make sense of practice situations”, and “the cognitive processes by which knowledge is created”. In a research context the reflexive researcher also attempts to understand how knowledge is generated, and further, how the process of knowledge generation is influenced by relations of power. They, and others (Pillow, 2003), suggest that within the research context, reflexivity provides a way for the researcher to articulate, acknowledge and scrutinise their tacit knowledge and its origins.

Harding argues that this is imperative if research is to be credible and robust. She observes that:

*Maximising the objectivity of our accounts requires that the conceptual frameworks within which we work – the assumed and / or chosen ones of our discipline, culture, and historical moment – be subjected to the same critical examination that we bring to bear on whatever else we are studying. (as cited in Lynch, 2000, p. 32)*

As such, the researcher is encouraged to ask the questions: “how do we know what we know and how is this shaped by the time, place and discipline within which we know it?” And, “what aspects, if reconsidered, might open up new possibilities and lead to new understanding?”

#### *Understanding the context within which knowledge is generated*

It is widely argued within the qualitative research field that knowledge production is shaped by the experiences and worldviews of individual theorists, of the academic fields and organisations within which they operate and the broader cultures and societies whose norms, beliefs and values influence what is being theorised, how it is being understood

and how it is described (Breuer & Roth, 2003; England, 2005; Watt, 2007). To redress what they considered traditional ‘view from nowhere’ approaches of early theorists who made claims about how societies and individuals interacted, without considering how they came to these findings (McCarthy, 1994), reflexive practitioners have argued for an ‘unsettling’ of the research process and a challenging of the ‘privileged non-position of social-scientific knowledge’ through the analysis of its “modes of production, the roles it played in society, the interests it served, and the historical process through which it came to power” (McCarthy, 1994, p. 15).

As such, White (2001, p. 102) uses reflexivity to “denote a form of destabilization, or problematization of the taken-for-granted knowledge and day to day reasoning” of the researcher. This ‘destabilising’ has been beneficial for researchers, particularly those whose research has implications for practice and policy as they consider their goals, their practice and the implications of their findings for those under investigation. In the area of educational research, for example, Fenstermacher (1994, p. 4) writes:

*Suppose it turned out that the epistemology was faulty, or that it was more limited and constrained than previously thought, or that it was but one among a number of possible epistemologies, or that it was the wrong epistemology for the nature of the inquiry. What then? If educational policy is grounded in weak or erroneous assumptions about the nature of knowledge, there is a high likelihood that it will fail to address the problems and aspirations of education in positive and ameliorative ways.*

It has been argued that rather than just being honest or open, the reflexive researcher must analyse and articulate thoughts and practices which may be taken for granted or not yet critically considered (Day, 2012). In his critique of reflexivity, Lynch describes this



process as ‘reflexive objectification’: the act of stepping back and seeing, seeing through and critically revaluating what “fully situated members take for granted as ‘objective’” (2000, p. 30). He cites Bourdieu, arguing that reflexivity can thus be objectivation of the social field and lead to a reassessment of knowledge claims in light of this realisation. He recognises that this “conception of reflexivity depends upon the possibility of taking a detached position from which it is possible to objectify naïve practice” (Lynch, 2000, p. 31). Bourdieu contends that when practised, this form of reflexivity provides not only a “means of developing richer descriptions of the social world but also the basis for a more practically adequate and epistemologically secure social science” (as cited in Maton, 2003a, p. 53).

Taking a broader view than other models of reflexivity that focus solely on the individual, Bourdieu considers ‘the knower’ to be the intellectual field within which the individual exists and therefore attempts to not only account for the individual researcher but also their peers and the intellectual community and tradition from which they have emerged. As such, he argues that the research community itself needs to consider its own assumptions, beliefs and values and how this influences the way that it and its members construct knowledge.

In his work *Sociology in Question* (1993), Bourdieu identifies three principal sources of potential bias in knowledge claims, including: (1) the social origin and coordinates of the researcher; (2) the researcher’s position in the intellectual field; and, (3) the ‘intellectual bias’ that they maintain. Although the first two sources have been considered within other reflexive process, it is the second and third that are more nuanced in Bourdieu’s approach. Drawing out this theory, Bourdieu’s ally Wacquant (1992, p. 2) argues that the reflexive sociologist / researcher must consider:

*What forces drive a researcher to study the object she has chosen to study?*

*What makes a researcher observe what she really observes? What about her social origin and co-ordinates (class, ethnicity, gender, etc.)? What about the position the analyst holds in the micro-cosms of the academic field, and beyond that in the field of power?*

*What consequences does the intellectual bias bring about?*

In addition to encouraging sociologists to consider their own bias, Bourdieu argues that the bias is not only inherent in the individual researcher, but more importantly (and with greater influence) within the intellectual field within which they operate. As such, he argues that the aim of reflexivity is not only to uncover the individual researcher's biases but also the collective scientific unconsciousness embedded in intellectual practices by the field's 'objectifying relations' (Bourdieu, 1993).

Bourdieu argues that the 'analysis of collective objectifying relations' must be a collective enterprise that is conducted by the social scientific field as a whole rather than being a research practice of the individual. He therefore observes "the inclusion of a theory of intellectual practice as an integral component and necessary condition of a critical theory of society" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 36). As such, Bourdieu's reflexivity can be considered to be anti-narcissistic and delves deeper than other forms of reflexive practices.

### *Reflexivity and 'doing'*

In addition to using it as a way to critically consider one's knowing and thinking, theorists have argued that reflexivity can help the individual, teams, and 'the field' to critically reflect upon, problematise and account for their actions. As such, research has been reconsidered as practice and in need of critical examination (Moyer, 2009). Through

reflexive exercise, it has been argued that the way that it is developed, conducted, implemented, understood and presented is examined, scrutinised and critiqued with observations and learning used to improve practice and open up new opportunities for innovation and creativity (Russell & Kelly, 2002). By engaging in such practices, “[d]ecision making is [thus] made explicit, the methodological strengths and weaknesses are examined and the learning which takes place as a result of this process is utilized to improve research practice” (Northway, 2000, p. 342).

### *Bourdieu and his theory of practice*

In addition to considering how researchers think, Bourdieu’s theory of practice provides us with some clues as to why and how they act. Although his consideration of children and childhood was limited and his interests about children’s research non-existent, I am of the view that Bourdieu’s ‘theoretical ensemble’ of habitus, capital, field and practice can help to consider not only the placement of children and childhood within society but equally of researchers considering them in practice. Further, I will contend that his observations about research practice, particularly his rejection of epistemological innocence and his call for reflexivity are invaluable in providing a rationale and a foundation for my study and its conclusions.

Throughout his work, Bourdieu draws on what he calls his primary ‘thinking tools’: concepts of practice, habitus and social fields which help him to examine and deconstruct the everyday interactions and experiences of individuals and groups; whether they be meal customs, marriage strategies, visiting art museums or conducting research. Bourdieu uses *practice* to describe the carrying out of an activity, the normalisation of a process, or the formal naming of an activity; and providing it with social organisation, points of harmonisation and boundaries (Lawler, 2004).

Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1984) outlines how the interplay of 'habitus' – the “durably inculcated system of structured, structuring dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 52) or more simply, the 'social produced self' (Lawler, 2004) - and forms of capital (or individual and external resources) play out in certain fields or 'spaces of struggle' to inform behaviour. As a formula, Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) presents it thus:

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

Practice, summarises Swartz (1997, p. 141), is therefore “...the product of class dispositions intersecting with the dynamics and structure of particular fields. Practice occurs when habitus encounters those competitive arenas called fields, and actions reflect the structure of that encounter.”

In such a way, Bourdieu presents a non-dualistic, anti-essentialist stance which views individual and collective notions as being interrelated and not mutually exclusive. As such, he allows these symbolic relationships to be acknowledged and explored and recognises that the personal and collective are intertwined and, rather than being separate or in constant opposition, are in constant negotiation. This approach differs from the often dualistic nature of sociological thinking with its choice of focus on structure or agency, macro or micro, qualitative or quantitative (Everett, 2002).

Bourdieu's theory of practice hinges on the view that every society, culture and group of people that identifies as a collective has theories about the world and their place within it. These are models of how the world is, how it ought to be, of human nature and of cosmology. Although these are most often revealed in 'official accounts' which provide the basis for participants' observations (including sometimes to interested researchers), Bourdieu asserts that these are learned and constructed in, through and as a part of the

business of everyday life. Rather than just being ‘knowing’, these are just as much about ‘doing’.

In theory, practice is located in space and in time and is observable in three dimensions, and importantly, from moment to moment. Although observable, practice is not conscious or wholly conscious: is not of the view that it is organised or orchestrated but it is defining. He uses the metaphor of ‘a feel for the game’ to explain:

*The practical mastery of the logic or of the imminent necessity of the game – a mastery acquired by experience of the game, and one which works outside conscious control and discourse (in the way that, for instance, techniques of the body do). (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 20)*

This ‘feel for the game’ reflects Marx’s adage that although a man might be the maker of his own history (Fromm, Marx & Bottomore, 2005) he does so in circumstances not of his own choosing. Somewhat differently to Marx, however, Bourdieu’s theory suggests that actors do not just confront their current circumstances but are an integral part of them. Growing up in these social spaces, individuals learn and acquire a practical set of cultural competencies (including social identity, a ‘sense of position on occupies in social space’ [Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991]) which makes them almost completely unable to perceive their social reality, in all of its arbitrariness, as anything other than ‘just the way things are’: a necessity to their own existence and who and what they are. Bourdieu often refers to this as ‘doxa’ or the doxic experience:

*The coincidence of the objective structures and the internalised structures which provides the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of practical experience of the familiar universe, and which at the same time excludes from that*

*experience any inquiry as to its own conditions of possibility.* (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 20)

Bourdieu suggests that most people, most of the time, take themselves and the social world they inhabit for granted: they don't need to think about it so they don't. In fact there is an imperative that we don't spend too much time questioning the meaning of life because social imperatives do not allow us to. As such, practice is not wholly rational. Instead they are public, subject to scrutiny by other agents and relational.

### The field

In Bourdieu's theory, the field describes a series of structures, institutions, authorities and activities which relate to the people acting within the field. It is dynamic and changes in response to the power dynamics and practices that challenge the nature and the boundaries of the field, which are also influenced by the competition between individuals. Interactions between individual actors and the structures of the field can therefore potentially alter the nature and future direction of that field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The field is therefore dynamic and constantly changing in response to these interactions, with its boundaries, its authority and its structures altered by these internal and external forces.

As I will further discuss throughout this thesis, I suggest that Bourdieu's concept of the field is useful in the development of both practice and research, as it allows relationships between individuals and structures to be made explicit and be understood.

Bourdieu asserts that when considering the development of knowledge there is value in considering the academic field (arguing in some instances that it should be the primary area of study), as he contends that it is relationships within the field which are important: much more so than the actions of individual actors. As such, in this thesis I attempt to

consider not only individual researchers' ontological and epistemological positioning (and the educational and professional experiences that have shaped them) but also those of the broader academic field; considering how these positions have developed and are promoted. I will engage them in conversations where they are invited to reflect on the broader academic field while also placing their observations within the broader academic discourse, using the literature to guide these observations.

Drawing on Bourdieu's work, I hypothesise that the ways that children are popularly conceptualised within the broader academic field and the wider community will also have a profound impact, influencing how children are researched, how researchers and others interact with them and how they interact with each other. As such, I will also explore how the field of children's research is influenced by the players who sit alongside it and who also can sway its activity: players such as governing and funding bodies, ethics committees, and those gatekeeping children's participation in research more broadly.

### Capital

Bourdieu's second conceptual tool is capital. In his framework, capital can take a variety of forms depending on the field within which it is being used, and depending on how it is determined by players within that field. Capital relates to and represents that power held by an individual; a power that can be exchanged in order to improve one's position within the field. Unlike Marx, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capitalism is not restricted, in that its value can be understood in broader terms than economic capital or as a mechanism to position oneself in relation to wealth or the production of capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Coleman, 1991). This is not to say that Bourdieu disregards the importance of economic capital and the class structures within which it has influence. Instead, he places economic capital alongside symbolic and cultural capital, and recognises that each form of

capital is used by individuals to improve their position within the field. As this capital is exchanged, authority within the field is also reconfigured as groups strive to maximise their capital.

In this thesis I will consider issues related to power and influence, particularly as it relates to children and adult-child interactions. As will be seen, researchers engaged in discussions about the nature of knowledge creation and how this affected children; as individuals and as a socially defined group of individuals. They spoke about the cultural and symbolic authority (or capital) that is imbued in their positions as researchers and the lack of cultural and symbolic capital afforded to children (an observation also made by Thomas, 2007; and Morrow, 2001).

### Habitus

Habitus is Bourdieu's third conceptual tool: a tool which ambitiously attempts to incorporate culture and tradition into his theory of practice. It accounts for the features of social life that cannot be easily explained simply by accounting for the combined actions of individuals. Instead, he argues that these features are influenced by history, tradition, customs and principles that individuals cannot always make implicit but help shape the often unquestioned embodiment of reality that is seen as inherent in nature (Bourdieu, 1990b). 'Habitus' is thus an embodied reality of this nature and is developed by imitation as people unconsciously incorporate behaviours into their lives through a process of iterative learning: they imitate other actors within the field as they interact and respond to them. Within Bourdieu's theory, explicit examples of habitus might include religious and cultural traditions and history, while implicit examples such as manners, modesty and social mores are equally as important. For Bourdieu, the transmission of



habitus is vital and different to the behaviours that are learned through explicit teaching (Jenkins, 1992).

I would argue that Bourdieu's habitus is helpful in understanding the principles and customs that underpin not only the interactions that researchers have with children but also the way they relate to the broader academic field and the institutions that exist within it. As Bourdieu suggested, it would appear that much of these interactions are unconscious and not explicit, but are ultimately influential in determining both research practice and the research questions asked throughout the research process.

#### *Axiological assumption*

Within the reflexive literature there has been a growing interest in axiology and values. As ontology refers to what is known, epistemology to how it is known, axiology refers to what the researcher values throughout the research process: and how these underpin their approach and their claims (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism holds that these cannot be separated from the research process and should be described, admitted and bracketed through the process. This is driven by a view that research cannot be value-free and that the relationships within the research process (between the researcher and the participant, between the researcher and the data, and between the researcher and the broader discipline) will be shaped by and shape the various encounters and products.

Creswell (2012) argues that rather than attempting to eliminate these values they should be actively reported; both in relation to the value-laden nature of the study and the information gathered from the field. Ahern (1999) and others (Gearing, 2004; Mantzoukas, 2005) argue for reflexive bracketing, a practice where the researcher is upfront about their presuppositions, considers how these might influence their approach and findings, and articulates them in their narratives. Ahern (1999) suggests that

reflexivity therefore includes two steps: (1) self-reflection and the subsequent identification of the researcher's personal feelings and preconceptions; and, (2) the putting aside of these feelings and preconceptions in an attempt to maximise neutrality. She advocates the bracketing of such feelings and preconceptions, an activity that can occur at the beginning of the project, through the analysis and in presenting findings.

### *Considering power*

According to Pillow (2003), the benefits of reflexivity arose as a methodological tool when feminists revealed concerns about power within the research relationship. By asking destabilising questions about the relationship between the researcher and the research participant, such reflexive practice attempted to unsettle the subjectivities of the researcher and the participant, and notions of expert and informant (England, 2005).

In taking a broader view of power and the power dynamics inherent in the research process, others began to reflect on the ways that research participants used their own power to shape their involvement, and actively and passively resist attempts to be 'managed' through their engagement and to reshift the power differentials at play (Watts, 2006). By choosing to not answer questions, to present particular narratives or to actively confront the researcher, participants can use their power or respond to their relative powerlessness within the dynamic established throughout the process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This can influence not only how the research is being conducted but ultimately its outcomes.

Drawing on critical and other structuralist theories, there has been a growing view that a reflexive analysis of power might enable the researcher to contextualise, understand and respond to power imbalances of the research relationship within a broader set of power relations outside the immediate research setting (Pillow, 2003). By being aware of these

power dynamics the researcher might better understand and mitigate their effects or at least account for the potential impacts these dynamics have on their research (Finlay, 2002).

There is some ambivalence in the literature about whether reflexive practice can break down power differences or be inherently radical (Davison, 2004; Lynch, 2000), or transformatory, or whether there is actual value in being so. Mykhalovskiy et al. (2008), for example, argued that it was their authority as academics that enabled them to influence change; that their 'expert' status afforded them some authority to confront structures and systems using the views of their research participants in a formal and influential way. As such, there is a growing view that researchers need to consider their motivations, the interplay, benefits and potential risks associated with the playing out of power dynamics and to be clear about how they have used their reflections to achieve their research goals which too need to be made explicit.

#### *Problematizing methodologies and methods*

One key and enduring focus of the literature relates to how methodologies and methods are developed and implemented, with the bulk of commentators reflecting on how effective their strategies were in engaging participants, creating conducive research relationships and environments, and eliciting data through research activities. Researchers include reflections on how they experience the research encounter: how they feel (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn & Kemmer, 2001; Riley, Schouten & Cahill, 2003), experience power (Riley, et al., 2003) and listen to and notice what is occurring within the research space (Back, 2007; Finlay, 2002).

What follows relates to how reflexivity might be used at different stages throughout the research process.

### Formulating research questions

Advocates for reflexive practice argue that it is important for researchers to consider how they develop the nature and scope of projects, and the research questions being explored (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Keso, Lehtimäki, & Pietiläinen, 2010). This includes an exploration of the political and social environment within which the research is being conducted, the political and organisational agendas that are in force, the ontological and epistemological assumptions that are dominant and the outcomes that are intended through the research. Working within an academic context where much of the research is either generated or highly influenced by funding bodies (who often determine what is funded and how it might be carried out), or meet strategic rather than research-related priorities, writers have argued that self-reflection and a dialogue amongst teams and within organisations is imperative (Barry, Britten, Barber, Bradley, & Stevenson, 1999; Siltanen, Willis, & Scobie, 2008). In a number of articles, social researchers have considered how reflexive practice has led them to change the focus of their research question (Seibold, Richards, & Simon, 1994) and their broader research approach (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Keso et al., 2010).

Similarly, developing an appropriate methodology has been seen as a crucial outcome of reflexive practice (Jones & Watt, 2010). By considering one's ontological and epistemological assumptions in designing methodologies, Lamb and Huttlinger (1989), Allan (1997), and others (Mauthner, 2000; Warin, 2011) argue that the rationale behind methodological decisions can be made explicit and be open to more creativity and innovation.

### Gathering information

The gathering of data is a political and relational exercise that many have argued becomes more fruitful, open and rigorous when conducted reflexively (Burman, Batchelor, & Brown, 2001; Keso et al., 2010). By considering how we are seeking data and how we are responding to it intellectually, theoretically, emotionally and relationally, the researcher is able to be more aware of what they are exploring and how they and their research participants are reacting to the various revelations. As Russell and Kelly (2002, n.p.) note:

*It is necessary to watch ourselves carefully to see what our responses are and why these responses might be happening. Reflexivity at this point in the process is critical for alerting us to what allows us to see and to what inhibits our seeing.*

Although still in its infancy, there appears to be a push for helping research participants to be more self-reflexive through their engagement in research as a means to generating more in-depth interpretive data (Takhar & Chitakunye, 2012). Researchers adopting such a position argue that trustworthy relationships between the researcher and their participants, having clear ethical boundaries and appropriate strategies for managing ethical and moral dilemmas and creating methodologies that enable co-research and co-reflexive practices are imperative if such practice is to be made possible (Smith, 1994).

Qualitative research is primarily a social exercise where the researcher is often interacting with and extricating knowledge and experience from participants. Advocates for reflexive practice have argued that the nature of these relationships should be considered both to ensure that the research approach is rigorous but also to ensure that the researcher acts ethically and professionally and considers and responds to ethical concerns related to power, minimising harm and enabling benefit for those involved (Alvesson & Sköldberg,

2009; Emmel, Hughes, Greenhalgh, & Sales, 2007). At this stage, Russell and Kelly (2002, n.p.) argue that:

*Researchers' reflexivity must be attuned to themselves and their responses to participants, of course. Their reflexivity also needs to be attuned to the emergent selfs that have been created for the purpose and by the processes of gathering information.*

Some have argued that engaging research participants in reflexive exercises such as pre and post interview discussions about how the research is being conducted, the nature and limits of the relationship, and the potential risks and impacts of their engagement, has been helpful (Riach, 2009). Others have sought feedback from individuals and from groups of participants, exploring how they understood and experienced the research process itself. Kathleen Riach (2009, p. 356), for example, suggests “that ascribing a more active role to interview participants as reflexive subjects can help to address some of the wider ethical debates over the role and positioning of participants in the research process”.

Within the literature there has been significant consideration of the power dynamic inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, a dynamic that has been problematised by many writers, particularly those adopting feminist stances. Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pissach (2009) argue that by exploring these dynamics, making them explicit and, where possible, redressing them within the research process, reflexive practice enables research to become more ethical, equitable and accessible.

### Analysis of information

As with other steps in the research process, the analysis stage can be a heavily biased one as the researcher attempts to make meaning from the data gathered (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). As Russell and Kelly (2002, n.p.) observe:

*If many voices compete for researchers' attention during the data gathering process, there are certainly no fewer voices striving to be heard during the process of information analysis.*

*Reflexive writers have argued that the challenge for researchers at this stage is to spend time considering what they have heard, what they have not heard, who they have heard from and whose views were quiet or remained unheard in trying to make meaning from the data in front of them. Recognising the power dynamics that were in play during the data gathering stage might open up greater scrutiny of what themes are emerging and what narratives appear most worthy of note.*

Researchers such as Siltanen and colleagues (2008), and Barry and colleagues (1999), have argued that working within teams has allowed them to scrutinise how they gather and analyse data by considering transcripts together, by asking questions about each other's motivations and intentions when probing, and considering the impact that this had on the research process. Together, they observed, they would then pull out major themes, identify possible meanings and implications, and explore different ways of understanding what emerged. Barry et al. (1999, p. 41) reflected:

*Using reflexivity to uncover the different agendas of each team member helps us to avoid biasing the data toward one voice. It also helps us, to some extent, to predict and deal with potential criticism before publication by refining the methodology*

*and carefully considering any methodological and theoretical decisions, which leads to higher quality research.*

*This can be a challenging experience for researchers who must be open to group criticism and a group process that might deprioritise their positions. However, when working within a collegial environment researchers have observed that this too can be a positive experience:*

*When a team is working well, each member is routinely reminded of what she does not hear, what he emphasizes without question, what she ignores without knowing it, and what impact this morning's chance meeting has on his understanding of the data. When a team is working well, all members attend to their own reflexivity and simultaneously serve as checks on one another's reflexivity and the reflexivity of the self-of-the-team (G. Russell & N. Kelly, 2002, np). (Barry et al., 1999, p. 41)*

### Presenting and disseminating results

Once data is gathered and analysed, and key themes are identified, researchers must present their findings and disseminate their work. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 479) contend, this is ultimately “an interpretive, personal, and political act” and requires the researcher/s to consider themselves, their participants, the group being explored and the audience for whom they are writing. Taking a Bourdieuan view of knowledge production in academia (Bourdieu & Collier, 1988), there is a need to consider how issues such as tenure, promotion, cultural and intellectual capital influence how researchers write; and ethical issues such as managing harm, maximising benefit, and promoting as accurate a picture of the research process, findings and conclusions as possible.



Writers such as Blackman (2007) require reflexive consideration not only of what is included in the research report but also what is missing. Blackman argues that there is often a ‘hidden ethnography’; a set of stories, accounts, findings and conclusions that are not shared – ones that should be considered, and for their exclusion to be justified through reflexive practice.

In considering how the research is presented and disseminated, a number of writers, particularly from the feminist, Indigenous and disability traditions have argued that researchers should reflect on ways that the research is ‘returned’ to the community so that those engaged in the study might benefit from it, and through a process of individual reflexivity, better understand the nature of their experience and use it for their own ends. Like Freire’s (2000) conscientisation (the process of developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action), advocates of reflexive practice have argued that dialogue with those involved open up a range of possibilities, including one’s own liberation and empowerment (Archeampong, Mkansi, Kondadi, & Qi, 2012).

### *Reflexivity and evaluating*

Over the past few decades there has been a growing call for qualitative researchers to evaluate their practice to justify and improve their research, and to enable others to understand and scrutinise how they came to their findings. Although early evaluative frameworks stressed the importance of assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research against criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), there has been a growing view that other characteristics which are more aligned with the goals and philosophies of qualitative research are more appropriate. Recognising that at its heart, qualitative research aims to give privilege to the perspectives of research participants and to “illuminate the subjective

meaning, actions and context of those being researched” (Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998, p. 345), there has been a call to assess how authentic the research process has been in revealing, interpreting and presenting these in practice. In addition, researchers have been encouraged to consider the power relations between the researcher and their participants, their transparency in collecting, analysing and presenting data and the ways that they adhere to and manage ethical standards throughout the process (Fossey et al., 2002). As we have seen above, reflexivity may provide researchers with a tool to consider these aspects, to account for them in their practice, and in the ways that they describe their research and justify their claims.

As also discussed, Bourdieu (2004) has problematised some of the common-sense views and assumptions dominant in the research field. To combat this problem, he encourages a ‘reformist reflexivity’, which he describes as “an effective means of increasing the chances of attaining the truth by increasing the cross controls and providing the principles of a technical critique” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 89). This, he argues, requires vigilance through constant reflection on the modes of thoughts embedded within the academic field within which qualitative research is conducted. To avoid a narcissistic reflexivity which is self-centred and experience-based, he insists that reformist analysis must not be limited to explicating individual experience but should reveal how one’s position within a disciplinary field and an academic universe “is liable to obstruct knowledge of the object” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 92). As such, in evaluating practice he invites the researcher to ‘unsettle’ some of the assumptions that are intrinsic within the fields in which they practice research and reflect on alternate possibilities.

### *Self-evaluation and development*

There has also been a growing recognition that researchers themselves are often changed as a result of their engagement in the research process: theories are challenged, preconceived notions about knowledge and knowledge development unsettled, self-identity reconfigured and motivations realigned (White, 2001). To be aware of oneself and the ways in which one changes and is changed through the research process, and within relationships that the researcher develops with their participants, their peers and within the broader academic field; writers have encouraged researchers to engage in reflexive activities in which they self-critique and self-appraise (Lipp, 2007; Mason, 2002). Through this process, the “critical gaze [is] turned toward the self” (Koch & Harrington, 1998, p. 1184), so that new insights and learning can be integrated into the research rather than being misinterpreted or ignored (Lambert & Glacken, 2011).

In their review of the literature, D’Cruz et al. (2007) suggest that reflexivity is sometimes understood in regards to the practitioner’s self-development, future opportunities and life choices. This version of reflexivity is not dissimilar to Giddens’ (1990), who argues that within a world experiencing rapid social change where there are both increasing risks and opportunities, the individual must consider the environment around them so as to capitalise on potential resources and overcome potential dangers. The process of reflexivity enables the individual to develop an understanding of themselves within their context and to make choices that maximise benefits. Elliott (2001, p. 37) summarises and posits that this type of reflexivity is “a self-defining process that depends on monitoring of and reflection upon, psychological and social information about possible trajectories of life”.

Beck (1992) takes this further, and recognises that to be able to manage within the modern risk society the individual must constantly reflect on their place within it and the state of play of the world around them. To compete and to maintain connections with others and the community, the individual must be abreast of current trends in thinking and behaviour.

Within the research domain, it has been argued that self-reflexive practice enables the researcher to consider the field at large and to position themselves in the most strategic and influential place as possible (Thomas, Tienari, Davies, & Meriläinen, 2009). This requires an understanding of one's own capacity and strengths, and also an understanding of the best ways in which to interact with peers, academic institutions and their broader discipline. As Russell and Kelly (2002, n.p.) observe:

*Just as we rely on reflexivity to carry out good research, conducting good research tends to improve our reflexivity. It enhances our ability to stay engaged with our own reactions and the reactions of others. It insists that we learn more about our personal and intellectual strengths and limitations. It invites us to confront feelings and conflicts that we might otherwise avoid—aspects of experience that traditional training has, in fact, encouraged us to disavow. It insists that we trust ephemeral processes and promises and gather at the tree of no-knowledge to eat until we are full—not of knowledge (of course) but of the wonder of the ever-changing stream of conversations that occur within and around us.*

In addition, Watt (2007) argues that when done well, reflexivity allows researchers (particularly those new to the game) the opportunity to become aware of what they see as well as what inhibits their seeing within the research context. More experienced researchers can also use reflexivity to re-analyse their practice and to consider how

effective they have been in marrying their ideals and principles (what they would like to do) with their management of day-to-day research tasks (what they actually do).

### *Reflexivity in practice*

As there are a number of ways of understanding reflexivity, so are there are a number of methods for engaging in it in practice. Some have argued for the use of reflexive journals, of interview notes which pose possible challenges to data collection and analysis, ongoing reflexive supervision and team discussions, and post-data collection evaluation. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 327) argue that tools such as reflexive journals might include things such as: “(1) [a] Daily schedule of the logistics of the study; 2. A personal diary for reflection, catharsis; and 3. A methodological log—for methodological decisions and accompanying rationales.”

Ahern (1999, pp. 408-409) suggests the use of different types of reflexive activities at different points in the research process, each considering a different aspect of the research process: that the researcher could (1) identify and note down interests that might impact on their research process and the power hierarchy that underpins their work and reflect on them; (2) articulate their value system and refer back to these when analysing data; (3) describe possible areas of potential role conflict and make a mental note when they experience anxiety, enjoyment or annoyance when collecting and analysing data; (4) identify and negotiate gatekeepers’ interests and the extent to which they are favourably disposed toward the project, engaging in discussions as necessary; (5) using a reflexive journal and making notes against the data, recognise feelings that could indicate a lack of neutrality; (6) consult with peers, step back from data collection and ask whether there is anything new or surprising in the data collection; (7) reframe ‘blocks’ that occur during the research process and consider any methodological issues that might overcome

problems as they arise; and, (8) scrutinise the process of data analysis by re-checking sources to ensure that they are representing diversity rather than simplifying the analytic task.

As such, a number of tools are available to researchers to use at different stages of the research process, each providing opportunities to reflect on the ways that they think, feel, understand, experience and report on their engagement in the research and that of research participants, colleagues, and those in the broader research space.

### *Critics of reflexivity*

Although the value of reflexivity is widely acknowledged, a number of commentators have pointed to some significant flaws in its development and application. Some have commented that the proliferation of reflexivity talk is, at its best, “self-indulgent, narcissistic, and tiresome and at worst, undermining the conditions necessary for emancipatory research” (Kemmis & Patai as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 176). These critics have suggested that it can disable the researcher and lead them to “endless relativism, introspection and paralysis” (D’Cruz et al., 2007, p. 81).

Some have also argued that it overstates the individual’s agency and capacity to capitalise on resources in the environment around them. Rather than recognising that there are a number of social and political causes of problems, reflexivity can place an “almost excessive emphasis ... on the tacit knowledge and self-understanding of social agents” (Elliott as cited in D’Cruz et al., 2007, p. 76). By stressing that individuals have the capacity to understand their positioning and opportunities to make choices, reflexivity can lead to victims being held responsible for bad choices and blame for the problems they experience (Lynch, 2000; Pillow, 2003).

Even though this challenge primarily relates to how the individual relates to the world generally, it has some application for those using reflexivity in the research context. As I suggested above, Bourdieu (as described by Wacquant, 1992) argues that when reflexivity focuses solely on the individual researcher and fails to recognise the influence of the academic field within which they operate, it is limited, and in many cases counter-productive, in that it fails to recognise the structural and cultural factors that have greater influence.

Maton (2002) observes that the reflexive researcher can easily engage in what he describes as *hermeneutic narcissism*, which may often lead the researcher to minimising the validity of their findings (as a result of academic guilt). He suggests that because they feel uncomfortable asserting anything else, “knowledge claims shrink into ever-decreasing circles, leading to authors telling us only about themselves” (Maton, 2003b, p. 55). He notes, therefore that reflexivity leads to *reflectivity*: where the product of research solely reflects the author themselves. Gill (1995) suggests that this can lead to self-indulgence and a situation whereby the self-critical researcher becomes the centre of text. Sparks furthers this, observing that reflexive practice, like many confessional approaches:

*Could be, and often are, seen as little more than an opportunity for emotional catharsis in the way that they unload their author’s personal burdens; an exercise in existential ‘navel-gazing’ at the expense of a broader and intellectual account of the research. (as cited in Ives & Dunn, 2010, p. 265).*

Similarly, Maton considers *authorship denial*, whereby the voice of the subject is given such prominence by the author who wants to ‘give voice’ to the observed that their own interpretation of the data is undermined or lost. In an attempt to give authority to the voice of the participant, the researcher thus loses their own authority and, ironically, the

participant. Conversely, there is a chance that the individual can use reflexivity as a way of justifying uncritical knowledge production and unsubstantiated claims. D'Cruz et al. (2007, p. 78) observe:

*The use of diaries as 'confessionals' to record practitioners' experiences may lead professionals to 'construct their current interpretations and practices as new, improved and hence more robust and less fallible' (White, 2001, p. 102). In short, reflexivity can be used as another device to legitimate the knowledge claims of professionals, rather than question them.*

Geller therefore argues that reflexivity, for reflexivity's sake can be unhelpful and often fails on both counts:

*It all seems to amount to a kind of collage... with a vacillation between the hope that this multiplicity of voices somehow excludes the bias of the external researcher, and a pleasurable return to a guilty recognition that the subject, the author, is still there. (as cited in Maton, 2003a, p 28)*

Finally, commentators have argued that reflexivity must be used sceptically to ensure that it does not perpetuate inadequate research unjustifiably. Ultimately, the act of reflexivity invites the research audience to see its conscientious efforts to 'tell the truth' about the doing and accounting for research and to therefore consider it authentic. Without vigilance, Gergen and Gergen (2000, p. 1028) suggest that we could easily be "poised at the threshold of an infinite regress of reflections on reflection".

As such, there has been a growing view that reflexivity must include an evaluative aspect in which the reflexive researcher problematises their reflexive practice in a similar way to their problematisation of their thinking and doing. By critically analysing the helpfulness



of reflexive practice and considering how its practice meets the needs of those participating, researchers might redress some of the potential limitations and hazards identified.

### ***3.3 Reflexivity in research with children***

As in other areas of sociology, there has been a growing interest in and commitment to practising reflexivity in research with children. According to James, Jenks and Prout (1998), there is a great risk that by failing to critically reflect on their theoretical approach to the social world, researchers and theorists risk the normalisation of adultist views of childhood and a routinising of methodologies and popular understandings of children. They follow:

*Although we are not suggesting here that the contemporary study of childhood is in need of such a severe indictment, we would none the less point to the need for a constant vigilance over the kinds of attention we pay to our growing body of knowledge. (James et al., 1998, p. 197)*

A number of writers have taken up this challenge and have begun to consider how best to be reflexive in the context of children's research. They identify a number of benefits of this practice.

#### ***Being aware of assumptions about childhood***

By being self-aware, it is argued that researchers can account for their assumptions about childhood and the ways that these assumptions influence the research process, the choice and implementation of research methods, and ultimately, the way that new knowledge is created (Powell, 2011). Within this reflexive practice, writers have argued that researchers

should consider how their education, the dominant academic paradigms within their fields, and non-academic life-based experiences (Cocks, 2006; Davis, 1998; Sime, 2008) influence their own personal biases. David et al. (2005, p. 127) suggest researchers need to “critically reflect upon their own assumptions, values and aims, the impact of each in shaping the research process, and the potential effect on those who are recruited as participants”. For some, being aware of one’s own childhood experiences and the influence that this has on their engagement with children as an adult. As David et al. (2005, p. 127) note:

*As researchers, we must consider how our own experiences in childhood and our practices in adulthood of engaging with young children (as researchers, parents, grandparents, teachers, play-workers, nurses and so forth) contribute to our views about the ‘needs’, desires, abilities, skills and experiences of young children. How do these ‘fit’ with the ways in which our society develops rules, laws and subsequent provision for children? How do we construct childhoods as a social phenomena (sic)? And how, as a result, do we design, conduct and critique our research activities involving young children so that they are sensitive to, and appreciative of, what children may give to and take from their collaboration with us in research?*

As was discussed in *Chapter 2: Deconstructing Childhood*, many childhood theorists have contended that old conceptualisations overstate the differences between childhood and adulthood, creating one as ‘becoming’ and the other as ‘being’ an adult. A number have argued that within the Sociology of Childhood discourse researchers have sustained these distinctions unintentionally and that to problematise this dichotomisation, researchers need to constantly reflect on how their theorising challenges or sustains limiting notions of childhood. As Thomson notes:

*If our research design predefines individual's identity we risk fixing those identities by unconsciously already outlining in our own minds what we expect from this social category. By using such categories uncritically child researchers are at risk of reproducing the very social relations they hoped to avoid. (Thomson, 2007, p. 214)*

### *Redressing power imbalance and considering representation*

One of the key themes emerging in the literature relates to redressing power imbalance between adult researchers and children (Fleming & Boeck, 2012; Powell, 2011), and ensuring that children have some control and choice over how they are engaged (Cocks, 2006; Farrell, 2005). Writers have advocated for processes that encourage researchers to consider how their role as adult, as researcher, and as 'expert' influence their interactions with children (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2009).

Spyrou (2011) argues that to do this the situated character and context of children's voices need to be acknowledged. He writes:

*... a critical, reflexive approach to child voice research needs to take into account the actual research contexts in which children's voices are produced and the power imbalances that shape them. However, instead of detracting from the value of voice research, acknowledging and reflecting on the situated character of children's voices and their limits can, potentially, contribute to new, more productive ways of producing and representing children's voices. (2011, p. 152)*

As will be seen in *Chapter 7: Children, Agency and Participation, and Research*, one key strategy advocated within the literature relates to using participatory methods and adopting different research methods, to enable children to take more control of the research process

and enable them to be represented in new ways (Kellett, 2005). Some of the ways that children's points of view can be understood and represented include the adoption of different researcher roles (Mandell, 1988), engaging children at all stages of the research process (Egilson & Traustadóttir, 2009), and engaging in individual reflexive activities where participants might be considered experts regarding the research focus (Sime, 2008). While Hunleth (2011) and others (Powell, 2011) support participatory activities, they argue that without a level of reflexivity, the extent to which 'children's voices' promote a heterogeneity of childhood and the power disparities inherent in the childhood experience remain unchecked.

James (2007) argues that the predicaments of representation are inescapable, and that researchers need to find a way of engaging with rather than redressing them. She and others (including Barker & Smith, 2001; Horton, 2001; Matthews, 2001) have advocated the use of critical reflexivity to manage the gap between adult researchers and child participants.

### *Ethics*

Considering ethical dilemmas and managing them in appropriate ways has also been advocated. Commentators argue that there is a constant flux of ideas about children, childhoods, research and ethical practice and that only by reflecting on one's own and others' mistakes can researchers account for and respond in what has been considered a 'messy' world of ethical research with children. Moss (2002) for example, argues that we cannot escape the politics within our work, nor the values that underpin our methodological and ethical approaches. Thomson (2007, p. 216) contends that:

*Guidelines for doing research with children are perhaps needed but not as a checklist of what to expect from this social group nor suitable methods to employ—*

*but as a checklist for researchers to explore how their prejudices are formulated and maintained by the societies in which we live, and how they are embedded in our cultural memory.*

She argues that these constructions prevent children from being invited into the wider academic world. To enable their exclusion from processes through which new knowledge is developed she argues that we must be aware of our prejudices and, where possible, ensure that myths about children are challenged. She and others support reflexive practice as a means through which some of these ethical dilemmas can be uncovered and managed.

### *Reflexivity in the field of children's research*

Although there has been a greater commitment to reflexivity in the field of research with children, it would appear that unlike in other fields, an interest in field-level reflexivity has been limited. Most discussion about reflexive practice places the responsibility on individual researchers (and in some instances groups of co-researchers) without inviting them to engage in critical conversations at a broader level. Although the growing literature about reflexivity in research with children reflects a growing momentum in field-based consideration of issues, there are relatively few examples of how this is occurring in practice.

Unlike other fields, particularly those where sex and gender, disability, health care and poverty are considered, the field of children's research is only beginning to consider how children - the subjects, objects, potential beneficiaries or those with most to lose as a result of the research – might also engage in reflexive practice. As will be discussed in chapters 5-7, this often occurs due to a lack of resources, lack of time and a lack of support from organisations, institutions and the broader academic field within which research is conducted. However, I will contend that there is a great need for individual researchers to

account for their practice (using reflexive models or other strategies) and for the broader research field to have dialogue about the broader implications for research in the field of children's studies.

### ***3.4 Summary and implications for this study***

For the purposes of this study, I take Gergen and Gergen's description of reflexivity as a starting point. They observe:

*Investigators seek ways of demonstrating to their audiences their historic and geographic situatedness, their personal investments in the research, various biases they bring to the work, their surprises and 'undoings' in the process of the endeavour, the ways in which their choices of literary troupes lend rhetorical force to the research report, and / or the ways they have avoided or suppressed certain points of view. (2000, p. 1028)*

Taking on board that the researcher is influenced by the field in which they exist and operate (Bourdieu, 1990b), I broaden their focus and suggest that reflexivity might also be used to uncover some of the biases, investments and assumptions inherent in the academic and cultural fields that interplay with those of the individual and some of the challenges, influences and implications for their practice.

As will be discussed further in Chapter 4, my research invites researcher participants to explore both aspects of their practice and how they reveal, understand and negotiate the tensions and challenges as they emerge. Believing that reflexivity is not only about reflection but also about evaluation and development, I also invite researcher participants to consider how their experiences and learning might help open up opportunities for those researching children now and into the future.

In this chapter I have provided a summary of some of the key aspects, challenges and opportunities afforded to those engaging in reflexive practice. I propose the benefits of reflexivity for individuals and those in the academic field and account for the progress of reflexivity in research with children. These will be further explored in chapters 5-7 and will provide the basis of a reflexive tool I propose in Chapter 8.

In Chapter 4 I will provide a description of the purpose, aims and nature of this research project and some of the ways that I attempted to be reflexive in practice.

## **CHAPTER 4: ENGAGING IN A REFLEXIVE ENDEAVOUR**

### **- THE RESEARCH STRUCTURE AND PROCESS**

*Through reflexive inquiry on our ways of constructing the world, and the practices which we sustain, we open doors to emancipation, enrichment and cultural transformation. (Gergen, 1999, p. 160)*

#### ***4.1 Introducing the chapter***

In *Chapter 3: Reflexivity*, I outlined the theoretical and historical context within which this research project is positioned. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of reflexivity and responding to the criticisms of contemporary sociology, particularly the Sociology of Childhood, I argued that there was a need for such a reflexive endeavour to help account for and to enable growth in this emerging discipline.

This chapter presents the rationale for the study, the development of the research question and the research approach, and my choice of methodology and methods. It presents a summary of how I undertook my data collection and how the data were analysed. It will also consider the literature regarding insider research and how it informed my research practice.

#### ***4.2 My research questions***

In response to Bourdieu's call for reflexive practice generally and the criticisms of childhood research more broadly, I believe that an examination of the underlying childhood research is both timely and necessary. In particular, I believe that there is value in developing a process to enable researchers engaged in the field to reflect on how their



practice is shaped by these assumptions and the implications for the design and delivery with children. I agree with a number of commentators (James & Christensen, 2008; Jenks, 2004; Lee, 1998) who argue that this is necessary if the movement is to maintain a stronghold within the academic community and to shape not only the way that children are conceptualised but, increasingly, in the way that they are related to in practice and policy.

As outlined in *Chapter 1: Introduction*, this research project attempts to understand the factors that influence the *how's*, *why's*, *when's* and *to-what-ends* of social research conducted with children. It draws heavily on the research experience of those conducting research with children as articulated by researchers in their interviews and within their written work, and provides an account of the context within which they work and the broad academic field within which research with children occurs.

As such, this project is fundamentally reflexive: it encourages researchers to consider the philosophical, theoretical, epistemological and ontological frameworks upon which their research is based, as well as the practical and procedural realities that shaped the experience. Participants were invited to engage in a frank and potentially challenging discussion about practice: a discussion that participants believed was fundamental but often left unexplored. As will be discussed later in this chapter, participants reported that this was both a valuable but sometimes unsettling experience.

As noted in Chapter 1, fundamentally, the research questions this project explores are:

*What are the underlying assumptions, beliefs and values held by researchers about children that underpin their research with children?*

*How do these assumptions, beliefs and values influence the broad research process?*

*How might reflexive practice be used to understand, account for and help guide the practice of research with children?*

### ***4.3 Adopting a qualitative approach***

This project is about understanding the way that researchers conduct research with children, how they understand children and the assumptions they have about children and childhood. It explores the ways in which these assumptions, and those of the field around them, influence the way that researchers construct meaning within the projects they conduct with children, and the influence this has on the process and outcomes of their study. It asked researchers to consider how factors around the researcher and the research project (i.e. funding bodies, ethics committees, and the broader academic field) influenced their research practice. This study was exploratory and iterative and required ongoing reflection and active engagement. Due to the nature and scope of this research project I have adopted a qualitative approach. In this study, I sought “an authentic access to the lived experience of the other” (Hewitt, 2007, p. 1149), and believed that qualitative methods would best achieve this outcome.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research attempts to understand how people attach meaning to their lives and to understand how these meanings affect how they encounter the world and each other (Minichello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 2000). It is constructivist and sees research participants as experts in their own lives, providing them opportunities to proffer their own meanings and knowledge. This aspect of qualitative research fits well with the focus of my study and its epistemology. The flexible and iterative characteristics of qualitative research were also helpful for this study.

Qualitative research also recognises that the researcher often cannot be impartial in their observations of the world nor sit outside the locus of the study. Instead, it is seen as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). This characteristic is necessary for me as a researcher with some experience in the field. It aligns with Bourdieu’s theory of practice and recognises the fact that I have my own developed opinions, biases and worldview that might be used to enhance rather than inhibit this study. This is not always possible in purest quantitative methodologies.

Finally, qualitative research “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible”, and have the capacity to “transform the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). These practices transform the world through the process of uncovering meaning in individuals’ lives and those of the collective. This active and transformatory nature is attractive to me as a youth worker, who is committed to not only using research to develop practice but also to enable positive outcomes through its practice. Although I am quite aware of the limitations of a PhD study, I am also attracted to the idea that my study might, even in a small way, be transformatory or at least develop a foundation upon which transformation is made possible.

### *Some tensions*

This PhD study is situated within and outside of the conflicts and tensions of representing reality qualitatively, and in a time in which the practice of qualitative research and the existing structures for validating and legitimating it continue to be problematised and challenged (Caeli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Lather, 1986). As Clifford Geertz observed in the 1980s, our “epistemological foundations have been shaken by a general loss of faith in received stories about the nature of representation” (in Pillow, 2003, p. 175). His contemporaries have argued that although much has been written about the practice of

qualitative research, faith has not been fully restored, particularly as the scope and nature of qualitative research has been proliferated as new methodologies and methods have been adopted (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Critics have raised, among other issues, concerns related to the “politics of the gaze” (Pillow, 2003), of the validity of representation and of the ‘maturity’ of various qualitative epistemologies (Lee, 1999).

To navigate my way through these challenges I have continually engaged with the qualitative research literature and have taken guidance from those researchers who have developed strategies to overcome the challenges observed. Many, for example, have promoted reflexivity as a way of considering and accounting for the existing nature of qualitative research and its dynamics, by doing so bolstering its credibility (Breuer & Roth, 2003; Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity, as will become explicit, can enable the individual researcher to understand and account for their own practice but may have greater influence when practised within teams and the broader academic field at large (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Grenfell & James, 2004). Throughout my study, I have attempted to consider how I have conducted my research, how I have analysed the data and presented it for consideration. Observations about this process are articulated in each chapter of this study under the headings of ‘reflexive notes’.

#### ***4.4 Considering ethical practice***

Ethical practice is a key component of good research practice and has become a central issue within the general research community (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As is conventional in postgraduate research, I adhered to the requirements of the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) ethical and safety requirements under the direction of the Australian Catholic University’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

To meet these requirements, I was required to develop a research proposal and ethics application that outlined my intentions, my proposed methodology and strategies to deal with ethical issues that might emerge through the research project. The NHMRC articulates five key values, being “respect for human beings, research merit and integrity, justice, and beneficence” that must underpin all research conducted by all participating (NHMRC, 2007, p. 11). These were all dealt with in these two documents and were considered by the Australian Catholic University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. There were some questions raised about the disclosure of researcher participants’ identities which will be considered below. I was granted ethics approval for my study and provided yearly updates to the committee which approved my ongoing conduct.

In addition to these key values, I was attracted to the related notion of ethics of care (Hewitt, 2007), which also encourage researchers to consider research bias (the way that one’s own history affects the research process), rigour (the legitimacy of the way in which participants are represented), rapport (the nature of the relationship between the researcher and researched), autonomy (the level of power and choice provided to participants), exploitation (the minimisation of maleficence), and confidentiality (within the research and the dissemination of its findings). These elements were considered at length by researcher participants in this study who also challenged me to consider how my practice was ethically sound. I will consider these further in chapters 5-7.

## ***4.5 Conducting fieldwork***

### ***Recruitment***

Participants were selected using a range of purposive and snowballing techniques. As noted in Chapter 1, in 2008 the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young

People (ARACY) and the NSW Commission for Children and Young People (NSWCCYP) facilitated a think tank for researchers working with children. A letter was sent to researchers who had participated in this roundtable inviting them to be involved in the project. As well as agreeing to participate, a number of these researchers suggested others who might be involved and these individuals were then contacted.

Members of ARACY's networks<sup>1</sup> were also provided information about the project through a network e-bulletin and interested parties self-nominated to the study.

Informants were provided with an Information Sheet outlining the purpose of the research and a Consent Form used to formalise participant agreements between the researcher and the informants. The Information Sheet and the Consent Form were authorised by the Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix E).

This study is primarily exploratory and does not attempt to be conclusive or confirmatory. It presents the views and observations of a small but authoritative group of experienced researchers. Throughout this thesis I will refer to this group as 'researcher participants' so as to distinguish them from other researchers who are conducting research with children and 'participants' who I will often use to describe children in the studies conducted by the sample.

Rather than preferring large sample sizes, qualitative approaches emphasise the value of samples that adequately represent the group being considered. As Blumer observes:

*A half dozen individuals with such knowledge constitute a far better "representative sample" than a thousand individuals who may be involved in the*

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<sup>1</sup> According to its website, ARACY's networks "bring together researchers from a broad range of disciplines, in partnership with policy makers, practitioners, data experts and young people, to generate new approaches and improve the transfer of knowledge from research into policy and practice".

*action that is being formed by who are not knowledgeable about that formation.*

(1979 as cited in Popay et al., 1998, p. 347)

According to Popay et al. (1998, p. 346), the key question that must be considered when considering the sample is: “Does the sample produce the type of knowledge necessary to understand the structures and processes within which the individuals or situations are located?” Central to good qualitative research, then, is whether the research participants’ subjective meanings, actions and social contexts, as understood by them, are illuminated. Nine experienced researchers participated in this study. After conducting and reflecting on the interviews conducted with these researchers I observed a level of ‘theoretical saturation’ where a series of codes and themes emerged and were explored at length. This approach mirrors Romney, Weller and Batchelder’s (1986) consensus theory, which proposes that smaller numbers of participants are necessary when they share a particular expertise and are thus more likely to agree with each other.

### *The sample*

Nine researchers participated in the study and self-identified as ‘children’s researchers’, although most had been engaged in research with other groups of participants. Amongst the group, the researcher participants had careers ranging in length from 3 to 22 years. All of the participants had child-related careers prior to beginning their research work with children, with 2 continuing to describe themselves as having some professional link to these fields. Researcher participants included:

- **Dr Sharon Bessell**, a political scientist who currently works as a Senior Lecturer in Public Policy at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University in Canberra. Sharon Bessell has conducted research with children for 18 years, beginning with her PhD study which focused on child labour and how it

impacted upon and was influenced by domestic policy, legislation and practice. Sharon Bessell recalls that her interest in children was driven both from an academic curiosity about how children saw the world and also from her own personal experiences as a child. She has engaged children as young as four in her research and generally conceptualises children as up to the age of eighteen. In a number of her studies she has stressed the importance of recognising children's transitions into adults and the value of understanding and responding to young people as they moved between these two age categories. Within the Australian context, Sharon Bessell has continued to draw on the children's rights framework, particularly in relation to children's rights to participation and to protection. She has conducted studies in the areas of child protection, child welfare and education both in the Australian and international context.

- **Professor Sue Dockett**, a Professor in Early Childhood Education, Charles Sturt University. Sue Dockett began her professional career as an early childhood educator, working in prior-to-school settings. Her work has primarily focused on influencing practice within the early childhood sector, and developing a theory of practice, which actively engages children and promotes their perspectives. She shares that she thoroughly enjoys working with children and learning from them about their worlds. She is also committed to improving their experiences at school, within the community and with their peers. Sue Dockett has written broadly about play (particularly in relation to early numeracy development), about early childhood curriculum, and in more recent times, has further explored epistemology, methodology and participation in children's research.
- **Dr Robyn Fitzgerald**, a postdoctoral fellow with the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University. She teaches in the Schools of



Education and Law. Robyn Fitzgerald reflected that through her work she attempts to elevate children's place in society by promoting their voices in the systems and services with which they interact. She is particularly passionate about children's participation: in the Children's Courts, in the child protection system, in education and in research. Robyn Fitzgerald has extensive research experience, with studies focusing on children's experiences in the Family Court, in supervised contact services, family relationship centres, and within the community more broadly. Alongside her research, she established and facilitates the Centre's *Young People, Big Voice* consultative group, which meets to inform the research agenda, provide support with data analysis and educate those working with children and young people on how to most appropriately engage them in participatory processes.

- **Professor Anne Graham**, the Foundation Director of the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, Lismore. In her work as a teacher, Anne Graham was interested in ways in which outcomes for children might be improved in the context of schools. Since these early beginnings, she shared that her motivation in conducting research was about informing and improving practice, particularly for those children and young people who might be considered 'vulnerable'. Anne Graham has a diverse research experience: exploring children and young people's engagement in the education, legal, welfare, juvenile justice and court systems; and has investigated issues related to mental health, schooling, social disadvantage and social marketing. She has also researched issues related to teacher training, pedagogy, professional development and the use of Information and Communication Technologies in education. Anne Graham has conducted evaluations of services, programs and participatory processes. Her work has not only included Australian children but also children and families in Vietnam.

Throughout her research career, Anne Graham has considered issues of epistemology and ontology, participation and ethics.

- **Professor Deborah Harcourt**, Professor of Early Childhood Education within the Faculty of Education at the Australian Catholic University. Deborah Harcourt has worked in the early childhood field for over 25 years, including 12 years spent teaching in Australia and Singapore. In 2000 she embarked on a career in research which she describes as her “life’s work”: an endeavour that married her interest in human rights and her interest in educating young children. In addition to her work focusing on education, Deborah Harcourt has investigated the development and implementation of health and welfare services for children, cross-cultural constructions of children, notions of quality, and children’s participation in research. She has written a number of books, participated in research ethics committees and collaborated with international partners on research in a number of domains. She argues that she still enjoys doing direct research with children, choosing to personally engage in research practice rather than hiving off tasks to research assistants or collaborators.
- **Dr Catherine Hartung**, an early career researcher. When I interviewed her, she was completing her doctoral thesis. Catherine Hartung has primarily focused on participatory practice with children: how children might best be engaged in decisions about the environment, public space, their use of parks and play equipment, and their involvement in healthy cities. Her PhD study engaged international experts and constructed “a post structural genealogy” of the present state of children’s participation, based on a discourse analysis of literature and semi-structured interviews with eleven key informants associated with the field of children’s participation. Prior to her PhD study, Catherine Hartung had conducted

a number of studies looking at children and space, children's rights and their involvement in child-friendly cities. She co-authored a book chapter on participatory practice with children.

- **Dr Deborah Keys**, a Principal Researcher at the Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne. Deborah Keys began researching issues related to children and young people nine years ago. Prior to this she had worked on crisis counselling lines and providing direct service support to women experiencing family violence. Deborah Keys has conducted studies with children and young people alongside other studies focusing on drug use, sexuality and homelessness. For three years, she worked at the Research and Social Policy Unit at Melbourne City Mission, a large non-government organisation, which among other work provides assistance to children and young people experiencing homelessness. While at the Unit, Deborah Keys conducted a number of studies focusing on accompanying children, young mothers and young people's pathways through homelessness services.
- **Professor Jan Mason**, formerly Professor of Community and Social Work and founding Director of the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. Prior to her university career, Jan Mason trained and practised as a child psychologist, and held a variety of government practice and management positions in the area of child welfare and protection. She has a long and distinguished career, and has primarily conducted research that attempts to link theory, policy and practice on children's issues. Jan Mason has conducted studies and published widely on issues related to child welfare and protection, child and family policy, child-adult relations, children's needs in care and children's well-being. In the later stages of her career, her work has focused on

children's participation: in research, in processes that affect their lives, and within the community more broadly.

- **Dr Neerosh Mudaly**, a Senior Research Fellow with Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia at Monash University. Prior to coming to Australia in 1990, Neerosh Mudaly was a child protection worker in South Africa, where she worked with children who had been abused. She recalls that as a counsellor she soon discovered that children could make sense of their experiences, including those which were particularly traumatic, and that the way they considered abuse was different to adults. Her interest in children's understanding of issues such as abuse continued in her clinical work in Australia and then into her research. Neerosh Mudaly's research has primarily focused on children who have experienced abuse and neglect, children's engagement with systems, child protection practice and the practice and impacts of abuse-related research.

I have further presented each researcher participant's current professional roles, their stated pathway into research, the motivations they identified for conducting research with children, their theoretical backgrounds and the nature of the research they have conducted in Appendix A. In the interests of disclosure, I have also described the nature of any pre-existing relationships that I had with this group and the way that they were involved in this study.

### *Disclosure of participants' identity*

My research project engaged 'expert' researchers with significant expertise and knowledge in the area of research with children. I believed that in respecting this expertise and intellectual capital it would be unethical not to give them the choice to be named in the research. This is not common practice as the potential risks for participants being

identified are often seen to outweigh the potential benefits of doing so. However, there is a growing agreement that disclosure for the benefit of participants is ethically justifiable when they are fully aware of the potential negative impacts and give their consent for this to occur.

In the interest of full disclosure, the following paragraphs were included in my Information Letter (which is included in Appendix D):

*The confidentiality of research participants in this study will be limited. This study aims to encourage participants to draw from their practice experience and to give examples from their research history. Through the project we hope to recognise and showcase the contribution of researchers and will encourage participants to share their identity where appropriate. Participants will be given the option of either being individually identified or for their input to be included in an aggregated and de-identified way. Participants will be offered this choice at the beginning and the end of the interviews and will be asked to identify any parts of the interview they would like de-identified.*

*However, as the community of researchers working directly with children is relatively small, it is highly likely that individuals may be identified by peers who are aware of their research experience. Every attempt to limit this actuality (for those who want to remain anonymous) will be undertaken (for example, identifying details will be omitted or altered).*

The practice of disclosing the identities of participants can be challenging and a number of writers have advised caution, particularly when interviewing powerful people. Walford, for example, observes:

*The fact that the named people involved are powerful can also lead to self-censorship. There can be real and perceived threats of libel which can lead to the researcher being ultra-careful about what is written where there is any doubt about interpretation. While it is ethical to take extreme care with interpretation, there may be a conflict with another ethical duty to report what has been said.*

(Walford, 2012, p. 114)

To navigate these challenges I discussed emerging concerns with my supervisors and spent time exploring and ‘checking in’ with participants to ensure that they felt comfortable with what was being discussed, and ultimately, reported. At the end of each interview, researcher participants and I considered the topics discussed and highlighted any situations where accrediting them might cause concern. On their advice I have not given examples where third parties are identified. For example, one research participant challenged the ethical practice of an institution with which she worked. She felt that the process that they had developed was tokenistic and ended up placing children in potentially unsafe situations, in an attempt to maximise their participation as co-researchers investigating sensitive topics. At her request, this example was not included in my discussion of ethical practice but was replaced by a less detailed but equally salient example from another researcher.

### *Nature of interviews*

Semi-structured interviews of between one and three hours were conducted. Participants were invited to describe their work history and the factors that led to their research with children; consider the assumptions and beliefs that they believed underpinned their research with children, how these emerged and how they influenced their practice; consider some of their internal motivations and driving forces for their ongoing work with

children; consider the external factors (systemic and structural) that influence their practice (including their auspicing agencies, funding bodies, ethics committees and the academic field at large); and consider how they understand reflexivity and use it in their practice (or not).

The interviews were recorded using a digital data recorder. As noted above, a brief discussion occurred after each interview where the interview process was considered. Interviews were fully transcribed.

### *Other data*

In addition to completing interviews with researcher participants I conducted a brief analysis of a selection (n=139) of their peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, books and research reports. These are summarised in Appendix B. These peer-reviewed documents were provided to me by the researcher participants directly, were identified in their published biographies (either on their institutes' websites or in curriculum vitae that they provided me at the beginning of the project) and sourced through searches of electronic databases (such as ProQuest, PsycInfo, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar). This was an incremental exercise, in that researcher participants continued publishing work in the three and a half years in which the study was being conducted.

### *The implications of being an insider*

With recognised experience in the area of research with children, I engaged with this project as an insider. Having engaged in research with children, written journal articles and been invited to participate in research symposia, conferences and a think tank with other children's researchers, I might be considered an insider in the children's research domain. This is important to disclose in that this insiderness has influenced my

motivations for this study, the scope and nature of the question, and my interactions with the researcher participants. Before embarking on this study, I wanted to consider the nature of insider research and draw on the learning of those who had encountered, considered and overcome any challenges inherent in insider research. What follows is a summary of the literature and a brief consideration of how I drew from these lessons in practice.

In contrast to traditional anthropological and sociological studies that have primarily focused on the examination of 'the other', contemporary social research has often considered social issues from within. Hayano (as cited in Hockey, 1993, p. 201) argues that to be an insider, one must have: "some prior knowledge of the people, their culture and language, as well as the ability to be accepted to some degree, or to 'pass' as a native member."

In more recent times, researchers have drilled down further to consider not only the benefits and potential risks of insider research, but insider research conducted by researchers with their peers. The advantages of conducting research within familiar settings have been well documented. Some of these include the relative lack of culture shock or disorientation, the increased capacity to build rapport and to communicate, an increased possibility of having respondents answer questions honestly and accurately and the increased likelihood that participants will share more intimate details (Hockey, 1993; Mercer, 2007; van Heugten, 2004). There are, however, a number of challenges that have been articulated. These included the increased likelihood of the researcher over-familiarising with the participant, a risk of there being taken-for-granted assumptions, and concerns related to the way that the researcher and the participant interact (Darra, 2008; Mercer, 2007). As such, the researcher's intimate familiarity with the informant's world can be of great assistance in helping them understand and explain the social processes and



meanings within that world. However, these processes may be taken for granted and therefore not dealt with as topics for analysis. As Merton observes:

*It is the stranger ... who finds what is familiar to the group significantly unfamiliar and so is prompted to raise questions for inquiry less apt to be raised at all by Insiders. (1972, pp. 32-33)*

In his discussions on the value of outsider research, Spradley (1979) argues that there are three reasons why insider research is problematic. Firstly, he suggests that the language used by informants is too familiar to the researcher and that key terms are often overlooked. Secondly, he argues that data analysis is problematic when the researcher takes for granted the culture under study's tacit patterns and regularities rendering their descriptions superficial, and finally, that respondents find it uncomfortable answering questions which they believe the researcher should already know, distorting the informant-researcher relationship.

As such, the environment is too familiar; the observer is often unable to be curious about it. As Aguilar (1981, p. 16) puts it:

*For one, the conduct of research at home often inhibits the perception of structures and patterns of social and cultural life. Paradoxically too much is too familiar to be noticed or to arouse the curiosity essential to research.*

#### *Implications for this study*

In conducting this research project I attempted to maximise the benefits of insider research and reduce the challenges and benefits in a number of different ways. These include reflexive practice with both researcher participants and activities I engaged in alone.

### Reflexivity: with researcher participants

As will be discussed throughout this thesis, reflexive practice can assist the researcher to better identify and account for the intrinsic philosophical, political and practical influences that underpin their research.

Although research with researchers is still in its infancy, a number of writers have begun to consider the benefits of using reflexivity to understand and overcome challenges that occur within projects where researchers are being researched.

According to Bryman and Cassell (2006) there are at least two levels of reflexivity that occur when a researcher conducts research with other researchers. First, the researcher encourages the research participant to be reflexive about the nature of his or her practices, their limits and limitations and other possibilities that they might not yet have considered. Generally, they are both encouraged and stimulated to reflect upon the craft of research. Unlike other forms of reflexivity, this type is *cultivated* in that it does not arise spontaneously out of the participant's desire to make meaning of his or her entanglement in the research process or out of a felt need to explore the issue being considered. However, Bryman and Cassell (2006) assert that it is still reflexive because the participant is enticed to 'lay bare' aspects of their practice, which may have otherwise been left unconsidered. Lynch (2000) calls the reflexivity that is cultivated as *methodological reflexivity* and sees it as that in which the writer or researcher engages in methodological self-consciousness, and potentially, self-criticism.

The second level that Bryman and Cassell (2006) identify relates to the interaction the researcher has with the data and the influence that he or she has in interpreting and making meaning of it. They observe that there has been a growing recognition of the fact that researchers' own experiences and beliefs will shape the way that they elicit information

and present it. However, they suggest that “the significance of the researcher is greater because of the connectedness between the subject of the study and the assumptions about the nature of that subject” (Bryman & Cassell, 2006, p. 46).

They go on to argue that the process of reflexivity profoundly disrupts both the subject-object and observer-object distinctions characteristic of many research projects. They observe that the process turns the researcher into someone that not only reflects on his or her own practices but also on practices in general, and can sometimes entice them to engage in the very subject-object dualism that reflexivity attempts to disrupt. At the same time, the researcher participant, now engaging as a research subject, reflects not only on their practice, but also how their responses might be considered by the researcher, whom they often consider to be knowledgeable about the research process and the research topic, and they are therefore more likely to frame their own responses as a result.

As such, it would seem as though the reflexive researcher who researches his or her peers needs to not only be reflexive about their own behaviours and practices, but also those of the research participants’, to ensure that the process is most fertile and provides both with an opportunity to provide unedited accounts.

### Co-reflexive activities

So as to respond to these challenges, I used a number of strategies to help researcher participants and I to consider how our relationships might influence interviews and to consider how any challenges might be dealt with.

Firstly, I was up front with the researcher participants about the role I was assuming, and allowed some time at the start and end of each interview to discuss and negotiate the way the interview might be conducted. Generally we agreed that I might ask ‘dumb’ or ‘naïve’

questions at times, might ask for explanation when it might not otherwise seem necessary, and be able to come back after interviews to seek further explanation of issues raised. During the interview, I often asked, “How might you explain that to someone who was just embarking on research?” and “Can you explain that to me, assuming that I don’t know anything about the topic?”

Conversely, I did draw on my own experience and knowledge at times to clarify points being raised by participants. This enabled us to explore issues more deeply and engage more with researcher participants’ theoretical understandings. As will be discussed below, the dynamic that emerged between researcher participant and subject was more dialogic (Russell & Kelly, 2002) than I had previously experienced. ‘Dialogic listening’ is different to active listening (which is often recommended in the research literature [Wengraf, 2001]) in that it:

*...emphasises conversation as a shared activity; encourages people to attend to their own and the other person’s views at the same time (which is different to active listening which primarily focuses on the other); it is less structured and enables greater choice for both conversationalists; it requires parties to consider what is happening between them rather than what is going on in the mind of the other person and focuses on the present, rather than on the future or on the past. (Albertín Carbó, 2009, p. 190)*

This type of interchange is most congruent with reflexive research practice and has therefore been advocated by those promoting that approach (Albertín Carbó, 2009). In saying this, there was some risk that this approach might lead researcher participants’ responses, as there is a view that when researchers use active listening techniques and encourage answers, participants are more likely to continue to answer questions in ways

that they believe will elicit such positive reactions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). To minimise this risk I adopted a number of strategies that follow.

Although I attempted to keep the focus of the interview on the participant, I allowed participants to shape the interview and to consider issues that they raised themselves. Lines such as “now I need to tell you about...” and, “I’m sure you’d be interested to know that” were often heard from researcher participants who were keen to discuss particular aspects of their research history or the theories or observations that they had developed. I respected the value that they placed on these topics and allowed some flexibility to enable that this occurred.

In addition, after each interview I spent some time talking with the researcher participant and diarising about the research interview and the dynamic that emerged. This was helpful in that I was able to use this feedback to help shape subsequent interviews and to help me consider more deeply emerging themes during the analysis stage.

### Self-reflexivity

In an attempt to mirror the reflexive practice approach being proposed throughout this study, I engaged in a number of tasks and activities to help me consider my own values and beliefs, my own assumptions about children and childhood, and the practice of research with them, and the way that I, as a researcher researching researchers might be open and transparent about my own practice.

Such activities included:

- **Regular supervision:** I greatly benefited from ongoing contact with my research supervisors, who each had considerable experience in research. The value of having one researcher who was currently engaged in the field of children’s

research, and another with expertise in research with women and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities became apparent throughout the research process, as I developed an appreciation of the way that researchers and theorists from a wide range of disciplines and fields approached reflexive research and encountered and accounted for their way of being and working within this field. I kept notes from these meetings and, at the later stages of my PhD, audio taped and transcribed portions of these discussions as tertiary data against which I considered my collection, analysis and presentation of findings.

- **Ongoing dialogue with ‘study buddies’:** I also benefited from ongoing dialogue with a group of individual researchers embarking on their own PhD studies, with whom I considered a broad range of theoretical, ethical and practical issues. In particular, I worked closely with a colleague who was doing a Master’s degree, with her own thesis considering reflexivity within social work practice, and had bimonthly meetings with her to consider the practicalities of reflexive practice in our own work. I also met on numerous occasions with another colleague who had completed his PhD thesis, drawing heavily on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who was influential in guiding my thinking about reflexive practice and its practical application in the academic field. Notes from both of these interactions were kept and audio-taped discussions analysed to inform my own practice.
- **Reflexive journaling:** After reading articles, conducting interviews, during transcription and before and after coding of data, I kept notes which considered not only the key themes emerging from these activities but also issues related to my own practice as a researcher, observations about how the data emerging reflected my own experience and theoretical perspective, and how this might be best considered within the final thesis product.

- **Coding of practice-related themes:** In addition to coding themes emerging from interviews, I coded words, sentences and themes which might provide some insight into my own thinking and practice as a researcher, and the way that I related to my participants as peers, mentors and as researcher participants who straddled a number of fields within which I operated (i.e. academic, practitioner, children's researcher, PhD student).

In brief, these activities provided me with some insight into the nature of the research relationship within which I was working; how my formal and informal relationships with participants influenced how I conducted interviews, how participants engaged in these interviews and how I represented them in my analysis; and at how my own experience as a children's researcher and my own political, theoretical and practice framework influenced the focus of my study, the types of things discussed with participants, and the ways that I represented views that were congruent and incongruent with my own.

At times this reflexivity was confused and messy as I attempted to be reflexive about reflexive practice in my own theory and practice and that of my research process. As a researcher whose previous work had not always been marked by a significant level of reflexivity, this constant exploration was sometimes energising but could also be tiring and uncomfortably introspective. As action is the key characteristic that distinguishes reflective practice from reflexive practice, I was also challenged to ensure that my introspection led to change, rather than narcissism or paralysis. At times this was more easily said than done.

## 4.6 *The analysis*

Due to the fact that I adopted a qualitative approach to its collection, the data in this study appeared to be what Corbetta describes as “soft, rich and deep” (2003, p. 37). Throughout this project, I adopted a comparative method of data analysis which included a number of steps. As Bringer, Johnston and Brackenridge (2004, p. 247) note in their article, there are a number of “difficulties [in] writing about an iterative process within a linear document”, but I will attempt to do so here.

Early interviews were transcribed and reviewed with emerging themes identified and considered. Memos were created which noted early themes and issues in need of further exploration. These themes and issues were then tested with subsequent participants in an iterative way. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed some flexibility and afforded me the flexibility to build on the observations of preceding interviewees. Subsequent interviews were transcribed and memos written. As further themes and areas for exploration emerged, previous interviews and memos were re-considered and theories tested.

After the first three interviews had been conducted, I began using the NVIVO tool for data management. Data were coded in relation to the key themes considered in interviews. For example, when researcher participants discussed how they first became involved in research with children these discussions were coded as ‘pathways into research’. Subsequent interviews were similarly coded and clarified with more specific codes generated such as ‘professional interest’, ‘study requirements’ or ‘influencing change’.

In addition, I selected a number of researcher participants’ peer-reviewed articles and book chapters (discussed above in ‘other data’) based on their relevance to my research question. These articles were chosen because they focused on topics such as ‘research with



children', 'participation', 'ethics', and 'research methods'. I entered these texts (noted in Appendix B under 'Documents Analysed') into the NVIVO software and coded relevant quotes against codes and themes emerging through the interviews. My analysis of these texts occurred alongside the analysis of the transcripts; as I interviewed researcher participants I sought and coded their relevant texts. Twenty-two peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and other texts were analysed in this way.

This process mirrored that proposed by grounded theorists. Glaser and Strauss (1967) encourage theorists to generate codes emerging from the data, and by comparing and contrasting them, generate theoretical properties of a category based on the emergent properties within the data. In a cyclical way, new and emerging categories are then compared and contrasted against existing codes and categories allowing for refinement and clarification. As such, categories become conceptually dense and the interrelationships between categories further understood.

Using the program, I analysed the data and generated a series of codes (which are included in Appendix C), from which a series of broad themes emerged. These themes related to:

- The participants' educational and professional pathways into research;
- The motivating factors that drew them to research with children and the factors that helped sustain them in their work;
- The theoretical and professional frameworks that helped shape their understanding of children and childhood;
- The key conceptualisations of childhood that emerged (which were sorted into sub-themes: 'vulnerability', 'competence and capacity', 'participation and agency' and 'other');

- The skills and attributes that they believed enabled them (and others) to conduct research with children;
- The external, structural and systemic factors that influenced research practice (i.e. funding bodies, research institutes, ethics committees, the academic field); and,
- Reflexive practice and their engagement with it.

As such, I adopted a phenomenological approach which was not only a description but is also seen as an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences (Corbetta, 2003).

### *The emerging themes of vulnerability, incompetence and agency and participation*

As seen in Chapter 2, children have been conceptualised in a number of ways at different times throughout history. After conducting three interviews with the researcher participants and reviewing related articles, books and reports, the themes of ‘vulnerability’, ‘incompetence’ (or capacity), and ‘participation’ (which later included ‘agency’) emerged. These aspects of the conceptualisations seemed to strongly influence the practice of those working with children. As such, I coded data against these aspects and the ontological, epistemological, methodological and practical implications of holding them in practice, and used them to analyse the data. Observations about these aspects of the conceptualisations are presented in chapters 5- 7.

## **4.7 Limitations**

This study was small scale and exploratory, and drew primarily from the experiences of researchers with significant experience and growing commitments to reflexive practice. As

such, it did not engage with those beginning their journeys, and those who might look at the issues with fresher and less habituated eyes.

Bourdieu's challenge to reflexively consider one's own biography requires the individual to step back and to look critically and without bias on their experiences and on their research. Whether this was fully possible within the academic context where habitus is entrenched may be critiqued, but may also open opportunities for new and more innovative ways of accounting for and reflecting on practice as it unfolds.

## **4.8 *Summarising the chapter***

Throughout this thesis I will contend that the way that researchers interact within their fields, and the ways that other players in their fields (particularly ethics committees, gatekeepers and others) manage children's participation have a considerable influence on the how's, why's and to-what-ends research is conducted. As such, in presenting my research question I argued for an exploration not only of the researcher participants' own biographies, and their own ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions (as revealed through interviews and their published work); but also those of other players with whom they interact.

Recognising that this project relates to how researcher participants understand children and how these assumptions influence their practice, I adopted a qualitative approach that encourages co-reflexive practice: where we can explore together research practice through ongoing dialogue. I noted the tensions and challenges posed of qualitative researchers, particularly those engaging in insider research, and suggested that reflexive practice might assist me in navigating these when encountered. I briefly described some of the reflexive

activities that I used, including the use of supervision, dialogue with colleagues, journaling and the coding of practice-related themes.

Within this context I posed my research question and my research approach, and described my methodological approach: including how I conducted interviews, analysed interviews, developed themes and presented them in this thesis.

Chapters 5-7 are data chapters, which explore issues of vulnerability, competency and agency, and participation. They draw heavily from the experiences of researcher participants as presented within interviews, from their writing and from within the broader literature relating to children's engagement in research.

## CHAPTER 5: CHILDREN, VULNERABILITY AND RESEARCH

*If my life was made into a movie I wouldn't be allowed to watch it. There'd be drugs, alcohol, adult themes, violence, language... Most people think we can't cope talking about this stuff but they need to hear it and we need to say it.* (From a transcript of a workshop exploring emerging themes in a project focusing on parental drug use [Noble-Carr, Moore, & McArthur, 2009])

### 5.1 *Introducing the chapter*

As discussed in *Chapter 2: Deconstructing Childhood*, childhood has popularly been characterised as a period marked by vulnerability. From this perspective, children as a group are conceptualised as needing protection either from their own inherent evil or innocence, from adults who exploit or maltreat them, or systems and structures that disempower them. I have summarised how vulnerability is seen in each of these conceptions in *Table 2: Conceptions of Childhood and Vulnerability*, below.

*Table 2: Conceptions of Childhood and Vulnerability*

Construct	Characteristics	Vulnerability
Evil	Children are born evil and need to have evil educated and / or punished out of them	Children vulnerable to immorality and poor adulthoods if innate evil is not redressed
Empty vessel	Children are born without innate evil or innocence but passively acquire knowledge and temperament	Children vulnerable as a result of poor parenting and negative adult involvement
Innocent	Children are born innately innocent	Children are vulnerable when exposed to adult knowledge,

		exploitation and harm
Romantic	Childhood is a preferred state and one that is lost as they grow into adulthood	Children are vulnerable to corruption and for their childhoods to be stolen by adults
Evangelical	Children need to be saved from the adult world around them and from exploitation	Children corrupted by employment, sexual abuse and maltreatment by adults. Great concern for poor children
Delinquent	Childhood marked by potential evil (external rather than internal)	Children are vulnerable to delinquency
Child-study	Children shaped by their environments	Children are vulnerable to poor health, psychological and educational outcomes
Psychological	Children developing within and as a result of their interactions with the environment and others	Children are at risk of poor outcomes, caustic environments that lead to poor outcomes
Socialising	Children socialised to take on the conventional values and norms through social conditioning	Children are at risk of poor outcomes throughout life if not socialised properly
Agentic	Childhood as a discrete period of life in which children make sense of their worlds and interact within it	Children are vulnerable as a result of structures and entrenched power differentials
Holder of rights	Children are humans and hold rights	Children are vulnerable due to their relative immaturity and incompetence – they have a right to be protected, to have their developmental needs met and to participate in processes that affect their lives
End of childhood	Delineation between children and adults is blurred. Children are exposed to adult knowledge and culture (often to their detriment) and adults fail to let go of their engagement with ‘childish’ activities and cultures	Children are vulnerable to being displaced, to being neglected by adults, to commodification and sexualisation

A number of writers argue that these conceptions continue to be played out in both popular and academic spheres. This is reflected in the unprecedented number of biographies and fictional accounts of childhood that focus on child adversity and early experiences of abuse and neglect (Burman, 1994), and the growing body of research that focuses primarily on ‘childhood issues’ and problems (Qvortrup, 1994). Such discourses promote the need for adults as individuals (including parents, teachers, and children’s workers) and collectives (including societies, child protection systems, and welfare sectors) to intervene in children’s lives (Christensen & Prout, 2002).

I begin this chapter by exploring how researcher participants consider vulnerability and how their previous non-research related work with children has influenced the way they think about, respond to and challenge notions of vulnerability in their research. I will also explore how they have balanced children’s need for protection with their right to participate (which will be further explored in *Chapter 7: Children, Agency and Participation, and Research*). I will then discuss how researcher participants believe notions of childhood vulnerability have played out within the academic field, particularly in relation to ethics committees. Finally, I will consider the ways that reflexivity might be used to navigate the ethical and methodological challenges that arise.

## ***5.2 Considering vulnerability and its ontological implications***

In the literature there is a view that research that is underpinned by the assumption of children’s vulnerability and human becoming has largely been positivist and founded on developmental perspectives (explored in *Chapter 2: Deconstructing Childhood*). Commentators argue that this dominant discourse has attempted to discover how children progress through certain stages of adulthood, and are compared against the standards of adult knowledge and values (Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996). As such, the research

enterprise has focused mainly on adult interests and children have been the object rather than subject of exploration. Such approaches have been 'on' children, rather than being 'with' them or 'for' them.

Concurrently, vulnerability has been afforded prominence in welfarist approaches which emphasise the links between knowledge, behaviour and individual responsibility (Kelley, Mayall, & Hood, 1997). Such research focuses on conflicts of not taking risks and risks as a route towards individual development and socioeconomic advancement. Hood et al. (1996, p. 118) note that within welfarist approaches, children are cast either as victims or threats, "vulnerable incompetents or deviants, either at the mercy of or posing risk to adult social worlds". Within such conceptions, it is the role of the adults vis-à-vis children to protect and control.

Although Pierre Bourdieu doesn't pay specific attention to children's vulnerability, he does make observations about how those who are afforded little social and cultural capital are often dismissed and their contributions diminished within the fields in which they live and operate. He argues that these limiting notions are reflected both in the way that those with capital see, feel and respond to those without, and likewise, how those with little capital see themselves, their position and their interactions with each other and those who do. Through the habitus, the power differential is often normalised and embodied without conflict.

In his and Passeron's observations about students in the academic space that is the university, Bourdieu argues that vulnerability is inherent in their experience and in the way that they relate to teachers (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Rather than couching it solely as a negative marker, Bourdieu recognises that with a level of vulnerability comes the opportunities to be open and receptive to knowledge, choices about anonymity and



non-participation, and non-risky interactions. They argue that being vulnerable enables students an “openness, receptiveness and courage, [which they argue] are conditions for recovering certain modes of ontological and epistemological voice that are vulnerable in contemporary higher education, and in danger of being lost” (Batchelor, 2006, pp. 798-799). At the same time, however, vulnerability can also lead to weakness, dependence and suppression which might inhibit the exploration of these insights and perpetuate the subservience of students’ views to those of academics, who hold status and influence.

Although reflecting on students’ rather than children’s experiences, Bourdieu’s observations about the provisional and transitional nature of the student’s vulnerability are of note. Like other theorists, Bourdieu recognises that through development (this time in relation to capital), children become less vulnerable, but unlike others, Bourdieu problematises the idea that vulnerability is natural and is, instead, an embodiment of the dominant habitus influenced by the power relations within which children and adults exist (McLaughlin & Dietz, 2008).

Although children’s vulnerability has been popularly asserted throughout the ages, it has become more apparent in the post-modern era. According to a number of key sociological writers, most notably Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990), we live in a period when risk, risk assessment and risk management hold a dominant place in social and organisational life. Beck (1992) argues that this increasing prevalence is a defining feature of daily life in ‘advanced’ societies. This is driven by a proliferation and diffusion of knowledge, and the development of global environmental risks which culminate to encourage people to believe that they must think in terms of risk to survive individually and within a collective. Although Giddens (1991, p. 124) asserts that modern society is not necessarily more risky than previous ones, he argues that risk and risk assessment is “a more or less ever-present exercise, of a partly imponderable character...” and that, “the risk climate of modernity is

thus unsettling for everyone; no one escapes”. Researcher participants observed in the interviews that nowhere is this more the case than in the field of children’s research; and within the institutions and academic disciplines within which it is conducted.

Researcher participants also noted that within the research field, the vulnerable child continues to have some dominance with many writers advocating the need to protect children from harm, from exploitation and from exposure to experiences, knowledge and processes that might have adverse consequences. At the same time, other commentators have argued that by overstating children’s vulnerability and the risks related to their participation in research, children have been excluded from, and have remained, voiceless and unengaged in academic debate, and as a result have become further marginalised and disempowered (Farrell, 2005, 2010; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

The following section considers how researcher participants discuss vulnerability – as it is inherent in children and as it results from children’s positioning to adults.

### *Children as inherently vulnerable*

Researcher participants universally recognised that children experienced some level of vulnerability and were reticent to adopt conceptions of childhood that understated this reality. They echoed the sentiments of Balen et al. (2006, p. 32), who observe that:

*...failing to acknowledge childhood as a distinct phase in the life cycle, albeit arguably socially constructed, where differential competencies, responsibilities and vulnerabilities prevail, would be irresponsible.*

A number reflected on how their own childhood experiences, experiences as parents, as teachers, and as youth workers influenced their thinking. Three observed, for example, that their experiences as parents helped shape, soften or realign their views on childhood

vulnerability. On one hand, having raised children through infancy they reflected that they were aware of how dependent children could be and how they needed adults to keep them safe from harm. They said that having children helped them to appreciate the level of this dependence, and to become increasingly aware of the protectiveness they had for their own children, and as a result of this, for children more broadly.

On the other hand, however, they reflected that although they had come to parenting with a concept of children as resilient, this resilience was further revealed through the observed experiences of their children and their children's peers:

**I always thought that kids were resilient but in having children it became clearer to me as to how resilient they can be when given the right opportunities and chances. I don't know that I could have come to this view without having been surprised [by my children's capacity to cope]. (RF)**

To varying degrees, researcher participants felt that they brought this experience to their research work. Deborah Keys, for example, related that coupled with her role as a mother, her work with young women both kept her up-to-date with what it is currently like to be an adolescent, and the challenges and risks that young people face. At the same time, she talked about relating the stories of her young participants to her own stories, to those of her daughters and her daughter's friends, in an attempt to understand them.

**And [I'm] in touch with my own youth even though it's a long time ago. Like I can identify still a lot from the adolescent perspective because I've been exposed to it a lot and tapped into my memories and kept them there and what it's like to be in that space, even though I wasn't in those sort of dire circumstances. (DK)**

**You draw on your own experiences and of the young people in your life to make meaning of what's been said. Some of my daughter's friends are saying "Oh my God, I could never tell my parents that". They tell me things, and I find out what is going on. What's worrying them. What's happening for young people. From them I hear about the things that are hard but also watch them cope with them too... I've always seen young people cope with a lot more than adults expect. That shapes the way I look at [young people], the way I think about [them] and the way I work with them. (DK)**

Researcher participants had varying views about the extent to which this vulnerability was inherent in the child, in their relationship with adults, or within the systems and structures in which they lived and negotiated the world.

Children's vulnerability is often posited in terms of their physical weakness; their lack of knowledge due to their limited education, experience and cognitive capacity; and the 'normal' risks associated with being a child (Kelley et al., 1997). Researcher participants were generally appreciative of these limitations, particularly when considering younger children. Neerosh Mudaly, for example, talked about a newborn relative of hers and its total reliance on its parents for food, stimulation and protection. Although she acknowledged that this small child was interacting with its parents, and ultimately affecting them, she recognised that its dependence on adults in general and its parents in particular was significant. She observed that children's dependence afforded them adult intervention and concern:

**It is those very qualities that make children lovable and appealing are the same qualities that make them vulnerable... you look at a baby and the fact that they lay there and they look at you and they can do nothing and they're**

**so appealing but they're also so vulnerable because they can do nothing else.**

**(NM)**

As such, Neerosh Mudaly considered children's vulnerability to be inherent and a characteristic that would remain whilst developing into adulthood. She makes the observation in her writing that:

*Children's vulnerability is an inherent part of development based on developmental needs and dependence on adults ... This vulnerability may be increased by extrinsic social, cultural and environmental factors (which may include abuse) and intrinsic factors which are inherent in the child (such as cognitive, emotional, sensory deficiencies, physical defects and health issues).*

(Mudaly & Goddard, 2009, p. 263)

Amongst the researcher participants, however, there was a strong view that by universalising childhood, theorists have been unable to recognise that children of different ages and stages have different vulnerabilities, and that by holding totalising assumptions about children and their ability to protect themselves and manage the risks around them, children were often further marginalised and oppressed. Researcher participants argued that researchers and theorists need to be upfront about what children they were theorising about, how children of different ages, stages and experiences might have different needs and be conceptualised in different ways.

*Children's vulnerability arising from their positioning with adults*

Although there was agreement that children were often vulnerable as a result of their relatively limited physical, neurological and experiential development, there was also a view that much of their vulnerability emerged as a result of the way that children are

positioned within society. As such, it was argued that vulnerability was inherent in both children and childhood.

In this regard, Jan Mason, Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald highlighted the work of Lansdown (1994, p. 35), who observes that this structural vulnerability exists “because of [children’s] total lack of political power and their lack of civil rights”. Lansdown (1994, p. 38) follows by arguing that:

*There is a tendency to rely too heavily on a presumption of children’s biological and psychological vulnerability in developing our law, policy and practice, and insufficient focus on the extent to which their lack of civil status creates that vulnerability.*

This sentiment was echoed by a number of the researcher participants who believed that the way in which children were considered, related to and treated by adults often led to a greater vulnerability:

**I look at babies and it strikes me, I mean, my concern of *course* is that they are so vulnerable. Anything could be done to them and that’s only because of the kind of society we live in. (NM)**

**And it’s the adult who’s placed the child in the vulnerable position; it’s not the children themselves that are vulnerable. (DH)**

**They lack power. Because they lack power in relation to adults or to older children... that’s a very real vulnerability. (JM)**

However, some researcher participants argued that the relational aspect of adult-child should not be overstated and that children’s agency should be further appreciated when

considering this positionality. Catherine Hartung (2011, p. 256), for example, observes in her PhD thesis:

*Positioning adults and children in a fixed opposition to each another, whereby the former are seemingly more powerful than the latter, fails to account for the complex ways in which power is exercised between people and within the spaces in which participatory practices are carried out.*

A number of researcher participants gave examples of how children managed, negotiated and rebelled against this positionality: noting that through their play and in their interactions with adults more broadly, children had some control over how adults might be let into their worlds, be provided with status and recognition and ultimately whether they might be excluded.

Sue Dockett gave examples from her pre-research related work in preschools where children used unfamiliar language, actively ignored and isolated adults, and kept them from being part of ‘the group’. On entering the research field, she recalled one project where she asked children to take photos of places that new children in preschools might need and want to know about and was surprised that most of these places were in out-of-bounds areas and ‘secret places’ where adults did not frequent. She argues that these practices helped children claim spaces of their own and that this might be as a way of opposing adult control and claiming things for themselves. As will be discussed later, Sue Dockett believes that researchers need to reflect on whether sharing these spaces with adults was ethical and appropriate: whether revealing them might disadvantage children and take from them the power that they had claimed. This view will be further considered below.

Although children's vulnerability might primarily be structural, researcher participants also highlighted the fact that some adults actively harmed children: abusing, manipulating and exploiting them directly. They believed that it would be naïve for the research community to understate children's vulnerability at the hands of adults:

**But the issue about power, I think we do have to realise that there are unfortunately adults in this world who do abuse kids. I think there are issues of vulnerability in terms of abuse, neglect, a whole range of things that we can't ignore. (SD)**

They contended that it was important that there needed to be checks and balances in place to ensure that suitable people were conducting research with children, and that procedures to minimise the risks of children being actively harmed needed be put in place:

**We'd hope they'd never happen in a research context, but you can't pretend they don't. I suppose there's levels of social vulnerability. (SD)**

**You would hope that researchers wouldn't harm children in this way, but it's hard to know. The same protections for children that we see in say schools or in social work need to be in place in research so that kids are protected. (NM)**

The sensitivities to this harm seemed pronounced amongst researcher participants who had professional backgrounds in child protection and those who had worked directly with children who had experienced abuse or harm. Interestingly however, those researcher participants who seemed most aware of the issues were also those who most strongly believed that children should be given opportunities to talk about, provide guidance on how to deal with, and participate in processes that related to these experiences. They advocated for allowing children to engage on issues that might be difficult or challenging,



but also recognised that this process itself might reduce vulnerability either for the individual child or for children more generally. I will consider this further below.

### ***5.3 Vulnerability and ethics***

Since the emergence of the Childhood Studies (and Sociology of Childhood) movements, an increasing number of projects have directly engaged children in research about their lives (Kehily, 2004). These studies have often considered childhood broadly and explored experiences that are shared widely across the childhood population: their involvement at schools, their interactions with peers, their interactions with adults, their engagement with the built and natural environment, and their participation in the life of their communities.

In more recent times, however, children from vulnerable groups and children who have experienced challenging life events have also come under the gaze of researchers. This has occurred because governments, auspicing bodies and practitioners have wanted to identify and develop responses to children's needs and to evaluate the effectiveness of emerging policies and programs implemented to meet these needs (Farrell, 2010). In such projects, researchers are confronted by a series of ethical issues which need to be identified, explored and negotiated (Noble-Carr, 2007). As will be discussed, often these ethical issues are those considered in research more broadly, but with different nuances and practical implications emerging. This highlights a range of ethical issues raised by researcher participants.

All of the researcher participants talked about ways in which ethics committees maintained a risk-averse approach to research with children, characterised by views of children which reflected broad community concerns about vulnerability. These assumptions often reflected philosophies held by the organisations within which

researchers worked, but were also driven by a series of legislated and practice-oriented protocols which aim to protect children – often at a cost to their participation.

Before embarking on a discussion about how these conceptions of childhood influence ‘procedural ethics’ and ‘ethics in practice’, it is important to place them within an historical context. As noted in Chapter 1, the historical tradition of research with children is marred by unethical practice, notably within the area of human experimentation, which often involved the abuse and exploitation of children (Lederer, 2003).

To redress this exploitation, the Nuremberg Code (the Code), formulated after the Nuremberg Trial after World War II, was designed to ensure that atrocities like those conducted by Nazi doctors could never happen again. Amongst a number of expectations, the Code asserted the absolute requirement for informed consent and required for participants to benefit from their participation. Many of the principles inherent in the Code were mirrored in the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (1964) which more specifically addressed medical research involving human subjects and became a ‘rallying point’ for the formulation of other codes (Spriggs & Caldwell, 2011).

Within the Australian context, research with children is highly regulated and has drawn heavily from codes and guidelines that address ethics in medical research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In Australia, the National Health and Medical Research Council issues the most influential set of research ethics guidelines. Although the NHMRC guidelines were originally developed to steer biomedical research, the NHMRC later issued a directive stating that it would only fund research that complied with the guidelines and included ethical review. Australian universities complied with this directive and social research of all kinds became subject to ethics review.

In 1999, the NHMRC published a reformulated set of guidelines in its *National Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans* (NHMRC, 1992). The Statement includes a comprehensive section which sets out a number of stringent protocols which must be adhered to if research with children is to occur. Compliance with this national statement is legislated and is a prerequisite if researchers are to gain national research grants (NHMRC, 1992).

Although these protocols are in place to protect children, there is a view that they often exclude children's participation in research and can, ultimately, sustain children in vulnerable circumstances as a lack of research and a lack of data about children may also cause harm (Spriggs & Caldwell, 2011). In their paper on research ethics, Robyn Fitzgerald and Anne Graham, also participants in this study, note:

*At a time when there is increasing recognition of the value of giving children a say about the issues that shape their lives, the ethical frameworks that facilitate their involvement in research are providing fewer opportunities for them to do so.*  
(Fitzgerald & Graham, 2009, p. 12)

They note that due to their assumed vulnerability, children and young people attract a particularly intense gaze from ethics committees as they attempt to negotiate the complex space between protecting children and providing them an opportunity to participate. This was raised in a number of interviews:

**There is definitely a heightened sense of concern within many of the ethics committees about research with children. I think that they want to do the best by children and to protect them from harm but are excluding them as a result. (SB)**

**I think that there is a real anxiety about research conducted with children. We are more worried about them, and feel more responsible for them than we do with other groups. It's about how children are positioned: that adults must intervene, must protect. And we see that in our ethics committees: trying to protect children by limiting the research that's focusing on them. (JM)**

This practice sits within an environment characterised by what Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald describe as a new 'ethics of risk' (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a, p. 13), whereby concerns for children is driven by a precautionary sensibility, or 'culture of fear'. Furedi (as cited in Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a, p. 14) argues that this "encourages society to approach human experience as a potential risk to our society". Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald argue that under the guise of the 'best interests of the child', an 'imperative of avoidance' prevails, which privileges children's rights to protection above their rights to participation and ultimately silences them. Thomas (2012, p. 6) challenges this and argues:

*It is important to focus on children's competence rather than their incompetence, and to acknowledge the resilience many of them have already demonstrated in dealing with difficult events. We cannot delete negative experiences simply by excluding children from discussions. Children want to be included, given information, the chance to have a say.*

At the same time, there was a view amongst researcher participants that in a risk-averse society, ethics processes are often just as much about protecting institutions as they are about protecting participants. This sits within a litigious environment where universities are afraid about the consequences for their reputations and their financial stability, and where a primary role of ethics committees is to mitigate this risk. Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald (2009, p. 14) summarise: "Such assessments... at times appear to be

more about managing risks to universities and institutions than about managing risks to children.”

### *Procedural ethics*

For the purposes of this discussion, I will distinguish ‘procedural ethics’, which describe the process through which researchers adhere to ethical procedures such as completing ethics applications, responding to ethics committees, and reporting changes as a result of emerging ethical dilemmas (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004); and ‘ethics in practice’, which refers to the ethical dilemmas that arise from the specific roles and responsibilities that researchers and research participants adopt in specific research contexts and the ways that they deal with them in-the-moment (see: Kubanyiova, 2008 for more discussion).

Researcher participants observed that procedural ethical processes were often a stop-start endeavour: projects were assessed prior to the commencement of the research process and dialogue about ethical issues was limited while the research project was being carried out.

As Guillemim and Gillam (2004, p. 269) note:

*There is no direct or necessary relationship between ethics committee approval of a research project and what actually happens when the research is undertaken. The committee does not have direct control over what the researcher actually does. Ultimately, responsibility falls back to the researchers’ themselves – they are the ones on whom the conduct of ethical research depends.*

In such instances, researcher participants believed that there was a risk that those researching children would become more focused on how they might comply with the requirements of their ethics committees and its procedural expectations, rather than

considering how to work most ethically with children throughout the research process.

Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald note:

*When the approval of research is inextricably linked with a comprehensive 'risk assessment', what is deemed to be ethical research will be reduced to a "performance by researchers: the ability to fill out forms in an approved way, to deploy 'ethics speak' as required and to couch a research project in the language of scientific objectivity" (Halse & Honey 2007, p. 344). (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 16)*

In managing 'procedural ethics', researcher participants observed that researchers must answer a series of narrow questions, often without having bedded down their research design, methodologies or methods and, in many cases, without having employed research staff or developed relationships with advisory groups and gatekeepers. To enable this negotiation to occur at a later date, those responding to the procedural requirements of ethics committees must write their proposals in such a way that both demonstrates their conformity to requirements but allows them some flexibility to modify their projects as required.

**Ethics processes usually occur before the project has even begun: researchers seek ethics approval before children are involved in the study and are therefore based on what the adult researcher foresees. Sometimes it's a tick-and-flick exercise, a hurdle researchers have to pass before they start their work rather than something that's going to help them work ethically throughout the research process. Yes, there are progress reports that you need to fill out but there is a disconnect: ethical processes don't always lead to ethical practice, particularly if the researcher doesn't have a commitment to**

**ethical practice or the skills to pick up ethical problems as they emerge. The ethics committee is a bit removed and dialogue about ethics quite limited.**  
**(AG)**

When adopting methodologies or practices that might cause alarm amongst ethics committee members unfamiliar with the chosen approach, researchers may feel some pressure to ‘gloss over’ particular details so that approval might be sought (Clark, 2009). Researcher participants were ambivalent about such practices, often choosing to be up front about their epistemological, ethical and methodological approaches. In some situations, this proved to be unproductive. As Deborah Harcourt notes:

**I’ve had an ethics application in for probably 12 months, which I’m refusing to take out because I got a letter back from the chair, which said, “You will not use the term informed consent. You will use the term child assent” and I just said “No. No.” And I gave them a whole list of my publications around informed consent. I’m one of the few people in the world who’s writing on it from the perspective of very young children. I am not changing it. (DH)**

As we will see below, a number of researcher participants (including Deborah Harcourt) used more proactive strategies to engage ethics committees in dialogue about ethical issues, to both enable research to occur and ethical practice to be assured.

### *Ethics in practice*

Rather than seeing ‘ethics’ as a hurdle that needs to be jumped prior to conducting research, researcher participants believed that ethical issues needed to be considered throughout the research process and constantly be negotiated and re-negotiated with children as participants. This consideration and negotiation needed to begin in the research

design stage and continue through data collection, data analysis, interpretation and dissemination stages.

This 'Ethics in Practice' (as it has been described by Bingley, 2002; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) requires consideration of the ethical issues that emerge while conducting individual research activities and within the research process itself. As Deborah Harcourt notes:

**Many people are using the ethics application as like a tick and flick. Then ethics is forgotten and really that's just the start, and it's really about conducting ethical research right up through dissemination and how do we engage children in analysis; how do you engage children in dissemination.**  
**(DH)**

As we will see, these issues are not usually addressed in research ethics committee applications and are often ones that may not be anticipated when seeking approval. Within the literature there is limited attention on these practice-based dilemmas. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 265) note:

*Although this ethical dimension of research practice is often apparent to researchers, there is little conceptual work available to draw on to make sense of it. We need both a language to articulate and understand these ethical issues and an approach that assists us to deal with these issues when they arise.*

Cannella and Lincoln (2007) argue that when ethics is seen as an ongoing concern, and where reflexive consideration occurs, ethical behaviour is more likely. They observe:

*By mandating ongoing attention to ethical concerns, ethical reflexivity reminds researchers that few research projects proceed as expected; many ethical issues are unforeseen in advance; participants have their own concerns regarding ethical*



*behaviour which cannot be predicted by institutional review boards; ethics, as a general concern, reside in specific situations with the complex histories of individuals.* (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007, p. 327)

Researcher participants strongly agreed with this and noted that they were often confronted by challenges that were not foreseeable. When children felt safe and took charge of the interviews, focus groups, and other research activities, there was always a chance that they would disclose stories that suggested abuse or harm. Due to the nature of the relationship developed through the research activities, children sometimes developed a close bond with researchers who felt some level of responsibility to respond to some of the real challenges that children faced in the moment. Researchers reported anxiety when discriminating which themes to present and how they might be presented, so that the best outcomes might be achieved for children and they not be rendered more powerless as a result of the study and its impact. Researchers reported that they often found the procedural ethics process did not provide answers on how to manage these dilemmas and felt that there needed to be opportunities to consider and resolve these issues more broadly.

### *The ethics of adhering to 'ethical guidelines'*

When considering some 'ethics in practice' issues, researcher participants highlighted a tension between procedural ethics and the reality of doing research with children. Researcher participants argued that by meeting some of the arduous provisions of the NHMRC Statement, and the guidelines that ethics committees had established to institutionalise them, they were being forced into practising what they considered to be unethical behaviour.

Sharon Bessell, for example, talked about her research into corporal punishment, child labour and exploitation. She recalled a research project in which the ethics committee overseeing the study required her to make a list of sensitive topics that children might discuss in an interview, and present them to the children and the parents of the children she was inviting to participate. The ethics committee's rationale for this was that they believed that children and parents should be made aware of the topics which might cause distress, and determine, on this basis, whether they would like to be involved. Although Sharon Bessell agreed that children needed to have control over their participation, and be aware that sometimes in interviews children chose to talk about sensitive issues, she believed that the process suggested was unethical and unnecessary. Firstly, her methodology afforded children the opportunity to negotiate the nature of the interviews she was conducting: they were given multiple invitations to engage in, continue with, and exit the project. Secondly, she argued that her semi-structured interview allowed her participants to determine the topics discussed, and in her approach she would only raise particular issues if children alluded to them in the course of the interview. If a child raised concerns about their safety at home, for example, Sharon Bessell would invite them to talk more about this in a way that was comfortable. If they did not talk about safety concerns at home she would invite them to discuss other issues that were more relevant to them – such as the way that children were treated in the community, who protected them and how best to keep children safe. As such, presenting children with a list of topics at the beginning of the interview seemed counter-productive, and suggested that issues were all pre-determined and not negotiated with children themselves. Lastly, she believed that presenting a long list of potentially sensitive topics to children and parents prior to establishing the research relationship would cause them more anxiety and distress than was justified – particularly as most of them would not be discussed anyway. She believed

that the practice was unethical because it could cause distress, because it distorted the nature of the interviews, and because it may have excluded a whole series of children who could otherwise be engaged – particularly those who felt that the majority of the issues on the ‘checklist’ were not relevant to them, and those who were concerned (or whose parents were concerned) about having to talk about issues they didn’t feel comfortable talking about.

It is important to note that Sharon Bessell strongly believed that children should be made aware of the nature of the interviews: the broad issue under discussion (i.e. keeping children safe), the choices that they had over the way the interview was conducted and how the topics were discussed, and how the researcher might respond if they were concerned about the child’s safety. It was the practice of creating a list of topics which may or may not arise, and which may or may not cause distress, which she challenged.

As noted, Sharon Bessell’s example briefly touched on the issue of responding to safety concerns raised in interviews. This is a contentious issue and has been hotly debated in the literature (Bushin, 2007; Coyne, 2010; Kirk, 2007; Thomas, 2012). I will briefly discuss issues of consent in Chapter 7 but in relation to the ethics of ethical practice, how to best discuss issues of concern to children emerged throughout the interviews. Sue Dockett, for example, noted:

**That’s always a challenging issue for us, because if we’re looking at quite young children, trying to get the message over that confidentiality is limited is difficult, because how do you ... we don’t want to give examples, because you don’t want to scare kids off and you don’t want to think that these are possibilities, but neither do you want to suggest that this is like a game and that’s why you need to adopt a different name. (SD)**

Others talked about the need to challenge ethical guidelines that require wordy, legalistic and therefore inaccessible information letters and consent forms, which either scare children out of participating, or deter them from reading, questioning and then understanding the content:

**You have to get the balance right. Children need to know what things they might be asked about, what things might be hard to talk about and what might happen with the information they give. But you don't want to lead them by giving them too many examples of potential responses and you don't want to open up discussions about things they might not be prepared to talk about.**  
**(SB)**

There was also a view that researchers needed to seriously reflect on whether they should dissuade children from talking about issues that were important to them. In their 2009 paper, Dr Neerosh Mudaly and her colleague Chris Goddard make the observation that researchers “need to be careful not to give the impression that they do not want to or are unable to hear these aspects of a child's experiences” (p. 266). Like Sharon Bessell, Neerosh Mudaly argues that children should therefore be co-directors of the interview process and reflects on how this might occur in practice:

*The introductory conversation allowed the child to decide which topic and issue he or she wished to talk about and how much information he or she wished to reveal... This approach provides gentle guidance and directs the flow of the interview at certain times.* (Mudaly & Goddard, 2009, p. 268)

When researchers encounter particularly delicate issues, researcher participants advocated for a level of sensitivity and felt that researchers needed to actively reflect on the benefits

and harms that might be encountered if they were to delve more deeply. Sue Dockett commented:

**For many researchers who think they may have encountered or are encountering a child who is being abused in some way, it's a difficult, really difficult, line to call and there's no real easy answer to that. I mean, we would adopt the position that if you are at all worried, then you need to take it further, but you know full well that sometimes taking it further might in itself create a whole range of issues. So there's a real fine line, particularly when you're talking about young children who may not necessarily have the vocabulary or the articulation to tell you in words, so how do you interpret that? So there are all sorts of challenges. (SD)**

Researcher participants argued that ethical issues and dilemmas emerged at every stage of the research project and that researchers need to be prepared to respond to them in the moment. This required a level of planning: researchers needed to be aware of their ethical responsibilities and needed to have developed strategies for talking to children about these responsibilities at the beginning of activities, but also when concerns began to emerge. It also required researchers to have certain skills; in being able to assess children's level of comfort, in being able to pick up when children were about to talk about sensitive topics and reminding them of the implications of doing so and the choices that they had, and in responding in sensitive and appropriate ways. This process, they believed, might also be strengthened if supported by reflexive practice; when individuals and teams could look back over research activities and evaluate and learn from their experience, developing new strategies and pre-empting further challenges. Sharon Bessell observes:

**How you gauge these things with kids can be tough and needs considerable thought. It should be something that you constantly consider and something that you need children [to] be constantly aware of – in a way that’s going to open up rather than close down conversation. (SB)**

They observed too, that ethics committees were interested not only in issues related to research design but also in who, what, when and about which topics researchers researched. In the following sections I will draw out these issues at greater length.

### *Who you can talk to*

Researcher participants felt that in most instances all children had the right to participate in research. More specifically those most affected by the issues explored and who had the greatest stake in the outcomes achieved should be included rather than excluded from research processes. Mirroring the observation that “at the ethical core of researching with children... are issues of equity, inclusion and exclusion and who gets to speak after all and whose voices are heard, recognised, or silenced” (Maguire, 2005, para 20), researcher participants argued that researchers must consider those with whom they speak and those who they do not.

In most instances, they argued that children who were most vulnerable had the most to offer and the most to gain from their participation. Sharon Bessell, for example, whose research has considered issues such as child labour, trafficking, and engagement with child protection systems observed that:

**...children live in a world and they’ve experienced a whole range of sometimes very nasty things and they have a position on them ... a position that they should be given the opportunity to discuss. (SB)**

In practice, however, researcher participants recalled that these children were most likely to be excluded ‘for their own best interests’, and that those who were deemed vulnerable often remained in a vulnerable position because their views and opinions were not uncovered. Deborah Harcourt summarises, “we don’t hear from those children, and that’s what I call vulnerable”.

In her PhD thesis, Catherine Hartung (2011) goes further by citing Schaffer (1998), arguing that the concept of children’s best interests has become one of “the most unhelpful and abused phrases resorted to in order to justify all kinds of decision-making” (Hartung, 2011, p. 88), an observation she explored in her interview when she noted:

**Concepts like ‘best interests’ are often confused and are used to exclude children from participating rather than affording them opportunities to have their say, to make decisions and to be taken seriously. (CH)**

Researcher participants spoke of many projects they had conducted in which vulnerable children’s participation had been restricted. In her interview, Deborah Harcourt provided an example, a project in which she was talking to children about their rights at school. She recalls that one teacher kept her Aboriginal students back while their peers were interviewed because she felt that it would be better for these Aboriginal kids to catch up on missed work rather than participate in the study. This was not only a frustrating experience for Deborah Harcourt but also highlighted the exclusion of these children from important studies:

**You know it’s really about children articulating their experience, so these children are vulnerable because adults are putting them in a vulnerable situation, and here was a white teacher saying to me that these black kids**

**can't talk to you because it's going to interrupt their literacy program, which was full of worksheets anyway. I know because I was the year 1 teacher. (DH)**

Researcher participants also argued that other groups remained disengaged because adults had deemed them unable to participate. I will explore the issues of competence further in Chapter 7, but it is important to note that particular groups of 'vulnerable' children have been excluded because adults do not believe that they have much to offer conversations due to their perceived lack of insight, capacity and clarity. As Catherine Hartung notes:

**...certain children get excluded in the process if they don't make the cut or for some researchers they look for specifically articulate children or they don't or they're only focusing on children that are at risk and then there's this whole group of children that keep on leaving that don't because they think well you don't really have any major issues so... "see you later". So there are issues around exclusion and also in terms of people but also in terms of practices and ways of thinking. (CH)**

### *What you can talk to children about*

In each interview, time was spent considering the types of research questions that were appropriate or not appropriate for children's consideration. This reflected a growing body of often contradictory views in the literature about what topics might be considered. There is much discussion about the implications of placing limits on the types of things that children might consider. Jones and Myers (1997, pp. 121-122), for example, observe that:

*One of the dilemmas is that if children in institutions are seen as vulnerable (and there is no doubt that both due to the nature of their experiences and the fact that they are in care makes them vulnerable), should they be protected from further*



*harm by preventing them from possible exploitation by researchers? This is a catch twenty-two, they have been harmed so do not harm them more, but if research fails to understand their experiences and hear from them in person then one could argue that future children will continue to be harmed.*

Generally, researcher participants felt that rather than coming from the starting point that all topics should be off-limits, researchers should explore issues with children unless they were unable to do so in an appropriate and professional way. They hastened to add that particular topics could stir powerful emotions in children, and when not approached sensitively, could have significant impacts into the future. They observed, however, that it was important to weigh up the potential benefits for children and the potential harms when risks were unidentified and dealt with through the research process.

Researcher participants felt that most researchers and research teams failed to consider the potential benefits and predominantly erred on the side of caution, ultimately restricting children's access. They saw it as one of their responsibilities to challenge this reticence:

**I had two researchers ... who were doing one of the big evaluations and they really struggled with the notion they could go to these kids and have a conversation with them about the value of the programme and I said, "Why can't you?" and they said, "Because the conversation might harm them" and I said, "Well why would it do that?" (AG)**

The implications of not discussing particular topics with children were considered significant. Citing Lansdown, Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald (2009, p. 149) argue that: "by failing to listen to children, the adult world can be blind to the reality of children's vulnerability to harm. Adults cannot protect children without understanding their experiences." There were circumstances, however, where they believed that

researchers needed to be cautious and proceed carefully. These circumstances are briefly discussed below.

*Where children feel as if they're betraying others*

Researcher participants felt that children should not be placed in situations where they felt pressured to problematise or critique things 'too close to home': where they would feel shame or embarrassment or where they felt as though those important to them were under attack.

As an example, researcher participants felt strongly that children shouldn't be asked to directly critique their parents and families, particularly around topics such as family functioning, domestic violence, parenting capacity and other family issues such as drug-taking, when the child might feel pressured to make value judgments. This was to avoid children feeling as though they were betraying their families or feeling shame about the way that families were or were not dealing with problems or difficulties. This is not to say that researcher participants felt that children should not consider these topics broadly. As Neerosh Mudaly observes:

**I think even those areas of family violence and about families as well: I don't think we should say it's a no-go zone... I would start very much by saying "this is an area I think is really important – it's going to make a huge contribution", because families and parents need to also hear what you know... But I'd also really consider how we'd ask questions. I'd avoid asking them questions that would make them feel like they're judging their parents because that's not good for them and probably not good for the study [because they won't answer]. (NM)**

Researcher participants argued that children should be invited to talk about family issues hypothetically or less specifically so that potential shame and distress might be avoided.

*Where children might be asked to consider topics that are distressing and which they might not usually consider*

Researchers were strongly of the view that methodologies needed to be flexible enough to allow children to determine what things they were happy to discuss and what things they were not. In one of Sharon Bessell's studies, for example, a group of children told her that they were afraid of being kidnapped by strangers and they did not trust that their communities would protect them. This was a significant finding and one that she felt needed to be explored with other groups of children. In fact she was of the view that it would be unethical not to further consider these issues with children, helping to develop an understanding of the nature of the issue and children's perceptions of the threat. However, she was equally concerned that by asking specific questions (i.e. "are you afraid of being kidnapped?" or, "do you think your community would protect you?") she might raise children's levels of distress by presenting possibilities that they might have not yet encountered or considered. The likelihood of this occurring was greater, she believed, because it was an adult who children trusted and appeared to have some authority and knowledge on such issues who was presenting the possibility of making the threat more real:

**I may have just introduced into that child's life something that wouldn't have otherwise been in there and I don't think I had the right to introduce [it]. (SB)**

As such, Sharon Bessell decided to talk to children about strangers and allow them to raise concerns about kidnapping if they had them and were happy to discuss. This ultimately meant that there was a risk that children would not raise these issues and that she could not

make claims about the extent of children's concerns about kidnapping and community capacity.

She used this example to illustrate a broader concern that she and others had about introducing children to knowledge and experience that they might not yet have encountered or concerns that they might not have formed:

**I have a concern about making the assumption that all children have been exposed from a young age to all kinds of negative experiences and thoughts. I do think the position that – and I'm talking here with younger children the sort of 7 to 12 age group that I've done a bit of work here – I think as researchers we do have to think very seriously about what we might introduce into children's lives. (SB)**

### *Negotiating risks with ethics committees: a reflexive exercise*

Recognising this reality, researcher participants talked about the need to engage in an ethical dialogue *with* ethics committees rather than ethics being something one does *for* ethics committees at the beginning of a project. Neerosh Mudaly made the point that whilst the focus is primarily on procedural ethics, researchers can abrogate their responsibilities to ethical conduct by thinking that after ethics approval has been granted no more thought or discussion is required. She places this assumption within a broader culture of 'ethical ignorance', where researchers believe that it is the responsibility of ethics committees to raise and oversee ethical concerns and not that of the individual researcher.

Inherent in this dialogue, is finding the right balance between support and surveillance. A number of researcher participants arguing that committees who were overly intrusive made practice difficult:

**Yeah, they monitor. You have to constantly give feedback, and if you are going to vary your research in any way you have to go back in front of the committee. It's very sort of strictly monitored. I think that's okay for new researchers but sometimes the process is so arduous that you wonder whether it's worth it. There is a need for balance. (NM)**

To deal with these many issues, researcher participants were of the view that there needed to be more open dialogue between researchers and ethics committees to ensure that ethical dilemmas were being identified, responded to, or negotiated in ways that enabled children to participate in a way that respected their needs, interests and rights. This required conversations not only about the key ethical concerns inherent in guidelines such as that presented by the NHMRC, but also in relation to the way that children are understood, accommodated and protected throughout the research process. This requires researchers to advocate alternate conceptualisations of children and childhood, and to justify their positions with evidence from their practice experience as these following quotes suggest:

**So I think ethics committees are right to focus on vulnerability, but we need to be able to respond and say, "Well, how are we addressing that?" Whether it's vulnerability in terms of adult power, whether it's vulnerability in terms of where you conduct the interviews, with whom, and the people that conduct the interview is fine. (SD)**

**I think it depends on the nature of the research; the merit of it; the urgency of it; and what are the trade-offs; what's the benefit and what's the benefit to**

**those children as well as to the broader society. I think there are instances where the case can be made that yes, this is about them and should be done, but not every research project of that type is. (SB)**

**What is required is an open dialogue between ethics committees and researchers. We need to recognise that if committee members don't share our views it may be because they haven't been exposed to the possibilities of research with children or haven't had exposure to different ways of thinking about ethical practice with them. If we want to progress children's research we need to challenge these constructions and help people find alternatives... I think many researchers just give up because there are too many hoops to go through. But this isn't good enough. As a group we need to deal with these challenges together, to promote new ways of looking at things. (RF)**

It would seem that such approaches have paid off for a number of researchers and research centres that have engaged in ongoing discussions and debates with their ethics committees. Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald, for example, spend time each year with their committee talking through their projects, their ethical approaches and the ways that they have managed ethical tensions in the past. This required them to invest considerable time in opening up this dialogue as well as a willingness for their practice to be scrutinised and challenged by their peers. They observe:

*When research is guided by an orientation towards children's self-understanding, the individual agency of each child – their competence, determination, dependency and vulnerability – does not determine their inclusion or exclusion from the research, but rather informs the conditions in which their inclusion takes place.*

(Graham & Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 16)

### *When you can talk to children*

There were mixed views amongst the researcher participants about when it was most appropriate to talk to children about sensitive issues. One school of thought was that children who were currently experiencing difficulties should not participate because their emotions might be raw and the consequences far-reaching.

Morrow and Richards (1996) argue that children are seen as in need of protection from further harm by exploitative researchers or thoughtless researchers who may cause distress by asking children to recount traumatic or distressing experiences without the appropriate safeguards. Roberts (2008, p. 238) continues, observing that:

*While it is likely that research on children which includes children and young people will considerably strengthen some aspects of the research, we cannot take it for granted that participation in research, and the development of increasingly sophisticated research methods to facilitate children's participation, is necessarily always in their interests.*

The other school of thought suggested that children who were experiencing difficult emotions needed to be given the opportunity to discuss them – for their fears, concerns and challenges to be recorded and presented to influence policy and practice. Balancing the need to document these experiences while protecting children from harm was often seen as a difficult task and one that should only be approached by researchers with the skills and experience to respond appropriately and professionally, and with the ability to judge what might be in the child's best interests. This, they believed, required a level of sensitivity and a good appreciation of ethical practice.

*When it has immediate and real benefits for participating children*

There is a general reticence in the broader research literature to engage children in research that might have a negative impact on them or their emotional wellbeing. Although this seems to be a dominant position, there is limited evidence to suggest that participation in social research has an adverse impact. A 2004 meta-analysis of medical research participation found, for example, that only small percentages of children self-report sadness or upset during their participation in research on issues related to trauma, to child abuse and to a series of adverse life events (Newman & Kaloupek, 2004). They note, instead, that large numbers of children (and their parents) reported benefit including positive self-esteem and a sense of altruism as a result of participating. In that meta-analysis, the authors reflected that in a number of studies, children commented that it was useful to talk to someone outside of their family about their issues and that it helped them clarify personal issues related to their circumstance.

This theme emerged strongly in researcher participant interviews: researcher participants observed that engagement in studies appeared to help children understand their experiences and provided them with opportunities to help other children in similar circumstances. They believed that this aspect should be considered when evaluating the value of conducting research. Researcher participants pointed to the fact that children often wanted to participate in research, particularly when they believed that it would be of benefit to others. This is encapsulated in a quote from a child in one of Neerosh Mudaly's studies on abused children's engagement in research who remarked:

*I've been planning about this actually ... I'd love to help in research cos' research will be good to, research ... usually ends up as a worthwhile cause. And that's why I'm telling because it is for research (11 year old male). (Mudaly, 2009, p. 268)*



Although researcher participants felt that vulnerable children needed to be particularly protected through the process, they believed that when done sensitively, research could have an almost healing effect. Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald, for example, believed that when children were given opportunities to talk through particular challenges and difficulties with a safe and trusted adult, in an appropriate and supportive way, this sharing might be of benefit to children; in the immediate and into the future. As noted in Appendix A, Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald's work has included a significant focus on children's participation in the family court (Fitzgerald, 2009; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006), an environment that can be full of 'tough stuff', and one characterised by an ambivalence about children's participation and strong views about their need for protection. Within this environment, they observe that children's participation has been problematised by those who focus on children's emotional responses without recognising their own ways of managing and negotiating them.

According to one of their 2004 articles, Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald's work 'refashions' children as rights holders and asserts that their grief responses are not a pathological condition that position them as victims or dependent (Graham, 2004). They argue that within this frame, participation provides a space, in which their hurt and distress are acknowledged and where their powerlessness and passivity might be resisted in the face of stressful family circumstances (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006). Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald observe:

*In constructing their experience in this way, we open up the possibility that children themselves are implicated in the project of their own wellbeing, that is, they can engage their own knowing to act on themselves in relation to divorce and the changes it brings in their lives. (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 33)*

Anne Graham brought these observations through to her discussions about children and research:

**What I've learned is for a child to express their vulnerability in some way or even to be vulnerable from time to time, with skilled researchers or skilled practitioners it's not necessarily a bad thing, that children and young people can find their way to solutions sometimes by naming a problem and they're just like adults; in the process of naming the problem there might be all kinds of feelings that come up and I think it's those feelings that we sometimes respond to in terms of the vulnerability question, that it takes some experience and skill to be able to know how to sort of deal with that. (AG)**

As will be discussed further in Chapter 7, researcher participants believed that researchers need certain skills to best engage and support children through the research process. In relation to the topic at hand, researcher participants believed that if children were to be encouraged to talk through difficult issues and potentially uncomfortable feelings, researchers need the skills to acknowledge, affirm and help children manage these emotions. The researcher participants who had non-research related practice experience with children (as teachers, counsellors and social workers) felt that they could draw from their professional education, particularly in counselling, to set up a safe environment for the children and also to ensure that children were leaving the interview without distress and with strategies to manage uncomfortable feelings if they were to re-emerge later. They believed that through their practice experience they had developed skills to be able to predict and respond to these emotional concerns and assess the self-soothing abilities of children who were demonstrating distress, and felt that this enhanced their research practice.

*When it has immediate and real benefits for children more broadly*

A number of the researcher participants suggested that the benefits for children should not be restricted to those gained by engaging in projects but, ultimately, in relation to the benefits for children more broadly. Neerosh Mudaly summarised:

**I think when you engage children in research like that you're giving them the hope that things can change, and I can't do that, and so to some extent I am letting them down. So I think, "what benefit would it have for children?" If there's no benefit, I'm not sure it's ethical to continue. (NM)**

The commitment to beneficence underpinned much of the researcher participants' consideration of research projects. In saying this, however, researcher participants reflected that in the past projects were assessed in a way where the benefits for children as a group were seen as more important than the benefits for children who directly participated. They unsettled this view, arguing that like adults, children should be given the opportunity to choose whether to participate or not based on what they might get out of it personally. Sue Dockett observes:

**I think we really have to seriously look at that issue of beneficence and one of the challenges I find in working in kids, in research with children, is that we still have this expectation that we might actually use this group of kids to find out things that can help things for the next group of kids. I think a reasonable question to ask is why should we expect children to be so altruistic? Adults will participate in something if they think it's going to benefit them, but not the next. So we've got to seriously look at what we ask kids to do and how it's of benefit to them, as well as the next group or the next group. But I think it's**

**reasonable for them to ask, or for us to ask, what are they getting out of it?**

**(SD)**

Researcher participants were concerned that children were often engaged in projects because it would be considered politically incorrect for them to be excluded, or because the inclusion of token quotes or stories might make the research appear more attractive. Obviously, they advocated for children's meaningful involvement in research but were reticent to support processes where the intent was dubious. As Anne Graham commented:

**There are some kids though that I think some conversations should be off limits with and I think nothing raises my ire further than when I see research being undertaken which has got very little to do with a benefit for a child but a lot to do with telling a good story. (AG)**

Having clear intentions about why researchers wanted to engage children about sensitive topics and the processes that researchers had in place to ensure that their involvement was meaningful and appropriate was advocated by the researcher participants.

#### **5.4 (Re) considering vulnerability reflexively**

In their 2011 article, Jan Mason and her colleague, Suzanne Hood reflect that research is never apolitical and research with children is conducted within a context in which the “political can no more be separated from the personal for children than for adults” (Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 494). By promoting children's agency, researcher participants can challenge the social order through the process of renegotiation of adult-child relations – whether they are engaged as participants or by treating them as co-researchers. However, as others have observed, there is also a risk that the research process can sustain children

in disempowered positions and privilege adultist assumptions about their competency, their vulnerability and their broad life experience.

### *Negotiating risks – at the planning stages*

There was a view amongst researcher participants that reflexive practice needed to begin from the early days of designing and planning research projects. Firstly, researcher participants stressed the value of researchers (particularly those new to the field) to spend time reflecting on how they consider children and their vulnerability. As seen, they advocated for conceptions of childhood that marked children as competent and encouraged researchers to consider how they might ‘get over’ limiting mindsets.

When asked to give advice to new researchers, Deborah Keys suggested that researchers spend time thinking about how they conceptualise children and young people and how this might affect their research practice:

**I was going to say something like corny, like open your mind and open your heart I suppose. Yes, put aside those assumptions about vulnerability and assumptions about bad behaviour and engage with them as you would engage with any other person, and have the same level of expectations of their insights and yes, their capabilities I suppose. (DK)**

Consideration of how children might experience harm, how they might encounter risks and how the research process itself might either exacerbate or alleviate (to a certain degree) individual children’s vulnerability, and the vulnerability of children in general, were also considered essential. Some of the strategies included participation in team meetings, conversations about the nature, methodology and safeguards built into the project, and consideration of the ‘learning’ of others working in the field:

*These include that the researcher examines closely the importance of the research, reviews the literature for safe and risky procedures and implements procedures to counteract risks. (Mudaly & Goddard, 2009, p. 269)*

This seemed easier for those engaged in teams of experienced researchers where conversations about children's vulnerability and participation in research were an entrenched, ongoing and incremental exercise:

**It's been the focus of conversation for some time. We've had the opportunity to talk about, think about, write about and build our knowledge and our theory on these issues. Coming from a wide range of disciplines, we've been able to look at things different and call each other to account. It's not always been an easy conversation but we have benefited greatly from it. (AG)**

For those more isolated, the reflexive task was often more difficult but considered essential.

Dr Deborah Keys argues that there may be benefit in the 'academic field' creating opportunities for reflexive practice, ensuring that researchers can consider, together, the issues that arise:

**Yes. I suppose I've never really worried about it not being there but I suppose it's because when we have other people who we know who are researchers, you probably have the occasional conversation about it. But I guess if the academic world wasn't so frantic, which people laugh at but you know it is, and pressured, I don't know, I guess you could have researchers meeting at certain intervals and talking through these kinds of issues, yes, and form some sort of research group. I mean maybe there are in different - I'm sure there**

**would be different parts of the university - I haven't been part of everything - but. But it's missing and it would be beneficial – particularly when you're working on your own. (DK)**

### *Negotiating risks – with ethics committees*

In line with Bourdieu's notions of reflexivity, researcher participants believed that there was value in engaging in reflexive discussions within the broader academic field: unpacking notions of vulnerability and collaboratively navigating the ethical and methodological challenges that might arise. In particular, they stressed the value of developing an ongoing dialogue with ethics committees.

Researcher participants were of the view that ethics committees generally held conceptions of childhood that posed them as vulnerable and at risk of increased vulnerability through the research process. As such, in considering practical ways forward, they believed that further dialogue needed to be entered into with ethics committees, particularly around understandings of vulnerability.

Rather than seeing ethics as being primarily procedural, and ethics committees as gatekeepers whose sole role is to approve or disallow research, researcher participants argued for a reconsideration of the ethics process, advocating strongly for processes and procedures that responded to risk but allowed for children's participation.

They believed that it was the role of researchers who held contradictory conceptions of children and childhood vulnerability to work with ethics committees to consider questions such as: 'how might children's exclusion from research further disempower and exclude them?' 'How might vulnerabilities be understood within the research context and appropriate steps be put into place to ensure that those which become apparent are

resolved at each point in the research process?’ And, ‘how might other conceptualisations of children and childhood be understood and be used to reframe ethical dilemmas and issues?’ For this to occur, they were of the view that ethics committees needed to engage in reflexive activities with those working with children and those with a good understanding of their lived experiences.

**We’re not looking for one chorus here, we’re not looking for everyone to sing from the same song sheet because the debates are critically important, they keep us thinking and they keep me refining constantly all the time; why we do what we do, how we think or whatever it might be but I think if the system works against us in almost setting up barriers where it’s not easy to collaborate. (AG)**

As noted in the literature, this approach engaged researchers and ethics committees in a process that reflexively considers “*epistemic responsibility*, that is, what it means to ‘know well’ and ‘know responsibly’” (Renold, Holland, Ross, & Hillman, 2008, p. 430), and the ethical dilemmas that are entrenched within the space between the two.

In saying this, although researcher participants observed that they had heard of many instances where ethics committees knocked back proposals because they involved children and that this was seen as intrinsically risk-filled, most reported that they had been able to negotiate with their own ethics committees and were successful in finding resolution to any apparent conflicts. For Professor Deborah Harcourt, this meant volunteering to sit on her university’s ethics committee and advocating from within:

**I got myself on the ethics committee and I am trying really hard to change some of the very traditional notions they have around children. (DH)**



Inviting researchers conducting studies with children to talk about the practice of research with children was identified as one way in which she helped educate and engage committees with the realities of research. Another was to pose alternative questions when assessing the merit, ethical issues and responses to particular projects when submitted for consideration. Such questions included: ‘have researchers been clear about how they understand children: the ontological and epistemological assumptions they bring to their research and the implications for practice?’ According to Professor Anne Graham, this requires additional resources and opportunities to embark in these reflexive activities:

**There are constraints in relation to time and resources that influence how much discussion ethics committees have about these matters, but if we spend time advocating for young people and our approach to research with them committees seem to be more willing to participate. After all, many of the questions that ethics committees might answer in relation to research with young people are the same that they might consider when working with other vulnerable groups. (AG)**

For Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald, this negotiation has been significant and ongoing. They reported that their university is somewhat progressive in relation to conducting research with children, but that this has occurred through ongoing dialogue and discussion. They talked about attending their ethics committee’s meetings in person, talking through their projects, answering questions and responding to their concerns, giving the ethics committees opportunities to learn from the young people who advise their research centre, and constantly reporting on the way that they have managed research dilemmas in practice. Anne Graham reported that having chairs of ethics committees who have a commitment to this ongoing dialogue has helped facilitate this practice, and has helped when members of the committee have been more conservative in determining

when children and young people are involved. She and Robyn Fitzgerald reported that there were times when they needed to strongly advocate their position, but that through ongoing discussions members of the ethics committees were able to articulate their views and to negotiate ways of ensuring that both sets of views and needs were dealt with appropriately.

### *Negotiating risks – with children*

As we have seen, researcher participants clearly highlighted a number of risks for children when discussing sensitive topics. Rather than suggesting that these risks should be avoided, many argued that it was important that they be negotiated with children: by discussing them at the beginning of their engagement and further considering them when they emerged. Sharon Bessell was of the view that negotiating risks should be intrinsic in the process of conducting research, and an activity where the researcher is led by children themselves. She observes:

**All research of children needs to be designed in a way so that it begins fairly softly and gently and allows children to take control over how far they go and what issues they feel comfortable in raising, so the researcher may point things in a particular direction, but they need to be genuine and ... [ensure that children have a choice to participate, to stop participating and to change focus if need be]. (SB)**

She argued that through this constant negotiation and reflection the way that children engage can be refined, and any risks managed in a way that protects children from harm and meets their felt needs. She continued later in her interview:

**So the way I approach it is to have a conversation with children about this is what we're going to talk about; "I don't think you'll get upset but sometimes people get upset and that's okay, this is what we'll do; and if I'm really worried about you, that you might be hurt, and then this is what we'll do". I think we need to go through that process but we need to do it in a sensitive [way] and you need to do it I think in quite an informal way, otherwise we just scare the Jesus out of children. (SB)**

The implications of doing so was not lost on many of the other researcher participants who recognised that there was value in allowing children to speak about difficult subjects for the purposes of the research. Deborah Keys, for example, notes:

**And I guess that's a point of vulnerability for the participant, so there's always that we're innocent, not wanting them to go any further than they feel comfortable with, but on the other hand knowing that the closer they engage with you, the better the interview data will be. (DK)**

As such, she argued that there needed to be a negotiation, rather than a hard-lined position to exclude particular topics, particularly when this was done without the input of children themselves. In her interview, Anne Graham echoed this need, suggesting that at times she would use her skills as a teacher and as a researcher to determine whether children were moving into spaces that might be dangerous or otherwise detrimental. In such instances she would remind children not only of her responsibilities to share her concerns with others, but ultimately, to reframe the interview to ensure that any hazards were avoided:

**When I'm far enough into an interview conversation with a child to know that to ask that question would be to take them somewhere they're not ready to go and sometimes it's a really hard judgment call to make. So I'm looking for**

**clues, scanning all the time. So looking for clues for any sign from a child of resistance or distress ... and choosing to not go there if it is going to be a problem. (AG)**

As demonstrated, these ethical dilemmas and practices often occurred during interviews and in ways not always considered through traditional ethical conversations. As such, researcher participants argued that those conducting research with children needed to have a firm ethical stance and the skills to respond within the chaotic and often unpredictable research process. As Sharon Bessell notes:

**The reality is – and I’m not saying that we shouldn’t have an ethics process, I think we should, but I think there are other things that we need to do because there is no way through an ethics approval process you can actually second guess everything that might happen in the field and how you respond to it. (SB)**

It is important to note that current ethical processes include steps to help children to understand how they might be involved and how ethical issues might be dealt with. However, many of the researcher participants argued that these steps were often not child-friendly and might not be easily understood by children. Some had tried to minimise this inaccessibility by reproducing letters and forms into child-friendly charts and brochures:

**We’re still working on information sheets and consent forms, much as you are<sup>2</sup>, but with quite younger children, and have had some really nice feedback about those. So again, that doesn’t reduce the power, but it’s about trying to - there are ways that they can change the situation if they want. (SD)**

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<sup>2</sup> When she says “much as you are”, Sue Dockett refers to the ‘Rights in Research’ chart I developed in my project on accompanying children’s experiences of homelessness (see: T. Moore, McArthur, & Noble-Carr, 2007).

These attempts have proven difficult, as adults have tried to present concepts to children in an appropriate way:

**Even with the information form we developed, we ended up using a picture, a smiley face that was bandaged up. The older kids said, “That’s a silly photo, because that looks like he’s been bashed. That’s not what you’re talking about. You should put a photo there or a picture there about somebody. (SD)**

A number of the researcher participants had actively involved children in discussions about these issues – where they not only asked for feedback about their involvement, but more broadly, how children believed that research might be improved to ensure that children’s vulnerabilities were understood, and ways in which children might best respond. Southern Cross University’s *Young People Big Voice* group, for example, is a collection of young people, aged 13–21 from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences who meet regularly to advise the Centre for Children and Young People on important issues for its research, education and advocacy activities. As Robyn Fitzgerald explains:

**They’re involved in whatever way they’d like and then the other thing that’s really interesting, which I love about this group ... Because that’s their expertise, youth participation, they can talk about the do’s, the don’ts, where we’ve got it a bit wrong and what we’ve done well, dah, dah, dah... We talk with them, raise concerns with them, learn from them and find solutions with them... They are part of our reflexive process; they are part of the discussion if they choose to be. And often they do. (RF)**

They conceded, however, that such processes also required significant investment – a luxury that was not always achievable within time and resource-limited research arenas.

They believed that it was something that they ultimately would like to include in their research work, but that it often did not happen.

### *Managing researchers' vulnerabilities*

In addition to recognising and reflecting on the vulnerabilities that children may encounter within the research process, Neerosh Mudaly and other participants were of the view that it is important for researchers to consider how the research experience affects them also. She, and other writers, recognise that when entering the research process, researchers can often delve into “unexpected and uncomfortable territory” (Davison, 2004, p. 381) where their own emotional security might be affected. Coles and Neerosh Mudaly observe:

*Qualitative research with vulnerable populations exposes researchers to a range of challenges during the research process that may have an impact on the researcher. These include the relationship that develops between researcher and participant, the counsellor versus researcher role, being empathic and sensitive to participant distress, and frequent exposure to participant trauma during the research process. (Cole & Mudaly, 2010, p. 60)*

Neerosh Mudaly was of the view that how researchers understand, experience and manage these dilemmas will indelibly shape the rigour of the process and the eventual project findings, and therefore need to be considered and accounted for in practice. To ensure researcher safety she also advocated for project teams to provide spaces where researchers could reflect on and seek support and supervision when issues arose. Some of the strategies Neerosh Mudaly believes are helpful are captured in her article:

*In addition to participant safety, we advise child abuse researchers to carefully consider and plan for their own safety when undertaking research. Strategies*

*include: careful preparation for research, setting up support networks, being empathetic and prepared to manage the emotional impact, limiting exposure, keeping field notes, reflective journals, supervision, accessing trauma counselling if necessary, and finally ensuring that the research undertaken has a positive outcome. It is critical to our communities that quality child abuse research is successfully undertaken and completed safely. (Coles & Mudaly, 2010, p. 66)*

Deborah Keys talked about doing this in practice, seemingly opting for less formal and structured ways of considering and coping with challenging experiences:

**It hasn't been very structured, no, and it's tended to be in response to something that's happened or in response to someone doing an interview that's really affected the emotionally and they've needed to debrief from it, and then that sparks the conversation. (DK)**

As such, researcher participants felt that what they were doing was more than debriefing incidents or emotionally arousing events. They argued that it was using these incidents and events to reflect on their practice, on their responses to these experiences and the way that it influenced what they had done and what they might do into the future. They believed that without this reflection there was a risk that they might avoid similar situations in future research activities either to protect themselves or their research participants or overstate them in their reports as a process of dealing with the emotions that they encountered.

### *Considering vulnerability when reporting and disseminating findings*

There was a view amongst a number of the researcher participants that there is a need to critically reflect not only on how research is conducted but also on how it is reported and

disseminated. They believed that notions of beneficence and non-maleficence should underpin these considerations: ‘how might children become more vulnerable or liberated through the new knowledge that is created?’ And, ‘how might the benefits of the research process flow on to children?’

The need to ensure that children benefit from research reflects Bourdieu’s (1990a) recognition that researchers often receive praise, social status and financial and academic reward from the promotion of new knowledge, with those sharing their stories, viewpoints and understanding remaining in a powerless and disadvantaged position.

Although researcher participants believed that children’s voices should be given primacy in research reports, particularly in relation to improving practice, they believed that they did have some responsibility to draw from their own professional expertise to help shape and progress conversations about the implications of children’s views. Reinforcing Jan Mason’s view that children often participated in research with people who they believed were influential and could use their input to progress and respond to the needs of children, researcher participants argued that it was important for them to inject their voices in a way that didn’t contradict but reinforced children’s views, needs and wishes. Sue Dockett reflects:

**The down side of that is sometimes people expect only to make change if children raise issues. I suppose that goes back to my point about thinking about responsibility. I don’t think it’s fair to expect four, five, six year olds to come up with either identifying every possible problem, or identifying every possible solution. I think we’ve got some responsibilities there. (SD)**

For those who had direct non-research related experience working with children, the notion of beneficence was considered limited when the needs of individual children were



lost within the broader research process. As professionals who had worked to help individual children, the challenge of ‘leaving kids in tough places’ behind was difficult: with many wanting to advocate for, and link to services and supports.

**Although that was one of my aims, the things that I was looking for, that we’d be able to start that process. But you know, it’s the same thing – I won’t give up just because of that, because again, this is what we’re trying to change. It doesn’t mean that it’s unquantitative data – it’s more powerful. Because if you’re looking at vulnerability - and I think this is for a whole range of vulnerable populations in society – it’s not about the numbers, it’s about all those individual experiences, and even if it’s just one person who has a certain experience then I think it’s important enough for us to be able to sit up and take note. (NM)**

In this quote, Neerosh Mudaly points to the issue of representation in research reports. She acknowledges that in qualitative and quantitative research there is often an expectation that ideas and experiences are reported when they are raised consistently and are the dominant view. However, she argues that in doing so there is a risk that views of individual children can be lost – and that particular experiences and needs are not reported even when the benefits of doing so are substantial. She argues that researchers need to reflect on the practices of coding and identifying themes and the ways that dissenting or isolated views might also be articulated.

### *Encouraging conversations about vulnerability and children within the broader research field*

Researcher participants highlighted the fact that often their views, values and beliefs about children and vulnerability were different to, and sometimes opposed, those dominant in

the academic field and within the broader community. They had used a number of strategies to help navigate their way through the conflicts, tensions and ‘roadblocks’ (as Deborah Keys put it) that emerged as a result of these differing perspectives, but argued that further conversation with key stakeholders across fields would be of benefit. So too, they argued, was there benefit in sharing their experiences with others who were new to the game who were encountering similar ontological and epistemological inconsistencies and ethical and methodological dilemmas. Sue Dockett argues that those who were working through these difficulties had an ethical and professional responsibility to engage others in discussions, so that children were both protected from possible and often unforeseen risks through their involvement or non-involvement in research processes:

**Yeah and that’s what we get, but I suppose that means that we frame research then as an ethical responsibility to each other and that’s an ongoing - it’s beyond the ethics committee. That’s an ethical interaction with people and you can’t ethically stand by and not do something. (SD)**

#### **REFLEXIVE NOTE: RECONSIDERING VULNERABILITY**

In 2008 I completed a study looking at young people’s experience of the youth justice system and their re-entry back into the community after periods of detention. The ethical issues that emerged through that project were significant and unforeseen. On one occasion I arrived at the local detention centre and found my participant (who had recently attempted to escape) handcuffed to the desk in a locked cell, compromising the nature of the research relationship and the young person’s level of choice and control over their participation. I felt an ethical and professional responsibility to challenge this practice which appeared to be unnecessary and more about the facility asserting its control than ensuring my safety or the safety of others – a challenge I knew may limit my access to the young people and the viability of the research. I did not find advice in the ethical

guidelines as to what I should do in such a situation or how to weigh up the potential implications of advocating for young people involved in my study versus the benefits that might arise if I conducted the study in a way that gathered and promoted the young people's experiences.

In the same study I arrived at another young person's house to find him 'coming down' after a night of drug-taking. He reported that his mother had a new boyfriend and no longer wanted to have any contact with him. He had called her after being physically assaulted by a friend and needed someone to talk to. When I arrived the young man had already self-harmed and was visibly distressed. He reported that he had called his case worker who told him that they couldn't talk to him while he was under the influence of drugs and a support worker who said that he had been exited from the service because he had missed too many appointments. He told me that he was going to steal a car and drive it into a house so that he would be arrested and sent back to the juvenile detention centre. This experience raised a number of things for me. Firstly, I felt compelled to provide the young man with emotional support – support that sat outside of the research context. Secondly, I felt compelled to ring his workers and to advocate on his behalf – altering the relationship I had with them. Thirdly, I made the commitment to ring him every few hours to make sure that he was okay. As such, I realised that there were implications for my study as I had accidentally become part of the 'support team' which surrounded this young person: the support team that I was studying. Lastly, I realised that I had been emotionally affected by the encounter and that it influenced the way that I engaged with the young people in the study, the type of emotional relationship I had with the data, the research process, the dissemination of the research findings and the way that I used the research to advocate for change in the system. In retrospect, the implications of this unanticipated

encounter were significant and were left relatively unexplored within the research domain – I did debrief with a social work colleague.

I came to this research with such issues buzzing around my head. I wanted and needed to know how these tensions might best be addressed and spent some time exploring strategies that researchers had used in similar encounters, and to an extent, whether my position was justified. In two of the interviews I used the above example and asked researchers about how they might have responded. After these interviews I did spend some time considering my motivations for sharing this story with them and whether I was more interested in justifying my own practice or shining a light on the challenges that such a scenario raises. The experience highlighted a number of things for me: firstly that encountering ethical tensions can be an emotional experience when the researcher's values, assumptions and motivations are challenged and that past experiences can creep into new research projects. Secondly, it highlighted the potential in research interviews (particularly when conducted by an insider) for the researcher to use the process to justify their ethical position and that the researcher needs to be reflexive, engage in supervision and account for and justify their actions when these things emerge. Thirdly, and most relevant here, the experience highlighted the lack of guidance the literature and existing ethical guidelines provide to researchers on how to manage ethical issues as they arise through practice and the need for further consideration within the field. I found the discussions with researcher participants to be helpful in teasing out these issues and looking for new ways of dealing with them.

## **5.5 *Summarising the chapter***

It became clear in interviews that researcher participants held a number of theoretical positions in relation to children and young people: that childhood was marked by various

vulnerabilities that sat within the child, their environments and in the relationships that they had with adults. Unlike theoretical perspectives that consider vulnerability as being in only one of these domains, researcher participants recognised that they often existed in a myriad of ways at different times and in different contexts. They argued that processes that had been established to minimise risks as a result of these vulnerabilities often sustained children in vulnerable positions ‘for their own good’, and failed to provide them opportunities to challenge, mitigate the effects of, and cast light on the risks and challenges that they faced. They generally believed that children understood risks and vulnerabilities differently to adults and negotiated these, sometimes claiming space for themselves, and that children’s perceptions of risks and vulnerabilities needed to be understood and used to better their circumstances.

Researcher participants were of the view that children’s vulnerability needed to be acknowledged and understood within the research context. However, they believed that rather than excluding vulnerable children from research or avoiding talking to children about risks and risky topics, researchers might better negotiate conversations to enable both the protection and participation of children. This, they believed, required a level of reflexivity and a set of skills in being able to pre-empt, discuss, respond to and mitigate the potential impacts of these risks throughout the research process. They argued that as part of this, researchers needed to also develop strategies for dealing with any emotional impacts that discussions about sensitive issues might have on them and their research practice.

To enable this to happen, researcher participants advocated for a more dialogical relationship between researchers and ethics committees, and a better integration of procedural ethics and ethics in practice. This requires investment by researchers and committees and a general willingness to manage risks and challenges as they present

themselves. They believed that opening such conversations up to children may be of benefit.

As will be an ongoing theme in this thesis, the value of being reflexive - about vulnerability, about children's positioning and about ethical practice – was highlighted and may provide those researching children, and those overseeing the researcher's conduct, with a framework upon which these risks and challenges might be managed.

In *Chapter 6: Children, Competence and Research*, notions of competence will be considered. As will be further discovered, conceptualisations of vulnerability and incompetence are often intertwined and are seen at the same end of a continuum toward adult competence and invulnerability. In Chapter 6 we will see how this perceived vulnerability and incompetence have legitimised the exclusion of children from research. In Chapter 6, the role of gatekeepers, ethics committees and the broader academic field will be explored as researcher participants discuss the challenges they have encountered and the strategies they have adopted to manage competing conceptualisations and practical trials as they emerge.

## CHAPTER 6: CHILDREN, COMPETENCE AND RESEARCH

*Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them. (The Little Prince, Saint-Exupéry, 2001)*

*A child's voice, however honest and true, is meaningless to those who've forgotten how to listen. (Professor Dumbledore in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Cuarón, 2004)*

*Kids should be asked about stuff that's got to do with them... They can tell you stuff you'd never think of – cos you're not a kid. (9 year old girl, Moore, McArthur, & Noble-Carr, 2008, p. 90)*

### 6.1 *Introducing the chapter*

In *Chapter 5: Children, Vulnerability and Research*, researcher participants considered how children are popularly constructed as being vulnerable. In *Chapter 2: Deconstructing Childhood*, I observed that as well as being considered 'at-risk' and susceptible to harm, children have been conceptualised as incompetent, and childhood as a period of dependence during which adults hold children's rights, best interests and needs, and act on their behalf. I have summarised how competence is considered in each of these conceptions in *Table 3: Conceptions of Childhood and Competence*, below.

*Table 3: Conceptions of childhood and competence*

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Competence</b>
Evil	Children are born evil and need to have evil educated and / or punished out of them	Children are not competent to act in their own best interests or in ways that are not antisocial
Empty vessel	Children are born without innate evil or innocence but passively acquire knowledge and temperament	Children are immature and incompetent
Innocent	Children are born innately innocent	Children are immature and incompetent. Innocence and naivety promoted
Romantic	Childhood is a preferred state and one that is lost as they grow into adulthood	Children are competent in understanding their worlds but not necessarily the adult world within which they live
Evangelical	Children need to be saved from the adult world around them and from exploitation	Children have their own natures but these are non-adult and of lesser value
Delinquent	Childhood marked by potential evil (external rather than internal)	Children are unable to curb influence of adults
Child-study	Children shaped by their environments	Children have developing competence but lesser than adults
Psychological	Children developing within and as a result of their interactions with the environment and others	Competency is developed from childhood incompetence to adult competence
Socialising	Children socialised to take on the conventional values and norms through social conditioning	Increasing recognition of children's competence however children less competent than adults
Agentic	Childhood as a discrete period of life in which children make sense of their worlds and interact within it	Children are competent, have their own knowledge and can reflect on their place within the society
Holder of rights	Children are humans and hold rights	Children are competent but less so than adults. They have a developing capacity to act in their own best interests but adults care-take their rights until they become



		adults
End of childhood	Delineation between children and adults is blurred. Children are exposed to adult knowledge and culture (often to their detriment) and adults fail to let go of their engagement with 'childish' activities and cultures	Children are assumed to be competent but may be required to do things that they are not prepared for / be responsible for things out of their control

As we will see, in practice this has meant that children are often excluded from a range of civic and participatory processes and, in the research domain, had their views, their wishes and other forms of input discredited if not omitted from popular discourse and academic debate. New conceptions of childhood have challenged what have been considered adultist perspectives, and have advocated for new ways of seeing, engaging and responding to children in the many domains that they occupy.

Holding both vestiges of these traditional and new conceptions of childhood together, researcher participants have attempted to develop new ways of considering and researching children and childhood: often within ambivalent and sceptical academic fields. This chapter attempts to account for researcher participants' evolving ontologies and epistemologies and considers the impact for the practice of ethical and responsive research with children. It promotes a dialogue between researchers and children and a process of co-reflexivity to ensure children's competencies and capacities are revealed while recognising the different ways that children experience the world and the knowledge that they, and the academic field, create about this experience.

## ***6.2 How researcher participants consider competence***

As discussed in Chapter 2, childhood has popularly been understood as a period of pre-humanness during which children are either socialised, educated and / or cajoled into

discarding their childish, naïve, and sometimes evil natures, so as to become contributing members of the society.

These constructions that posit children as developing are explicitly future orientated and place the onus of importance on what the child *will be* rather than what the child currently *is*. Rather than being recognised as a human being in their own right, children are seen as future adults. This temporal focus diverts our attention away from the present everyday realities of being a child, to their anticipated but undeterminable future possibilities (Uprichard, 2008). Inherent in these future-focused constructs are views about competency and capacity: they are founded on a view that children are incompetent and that adults are not.

Socialisation theories posit that competence is a developmental process through which children learn how to enter and participate in their social organisations (James, 1997). Not understanding the normative rules of ‘how to act in everyday situations’, children are cast as ‘underdeveloped’ and lacking in power and knowledge. This approach views children “as in their very nature not grown up and thus not something rather than something” (Waksler as cited in Danby & Farrell, 2004, p. 36). Similarly, childhood “is seen as progressing from a state of vulnerability to sophistication, from an earlier lack of skills to a later possession of abilities” (Young as cited in Uprichard, 2008, p. 305).

Such constructs assert that the closer one is to becoming an adult, the more competence the child acquires, and the more adult-like they become. Competence is seen as a necessary and defining feature of adulthood: a feature that cannot be possessed by children. As such, children cannot be competent and adults cannot be incompetent. As Mayall observes:

*The crucial distinction that makes children children is that they are not adults; as individuals and as a social group, they lack adulthood. This lack can be defined variously as deficiency, disadvantage, and/or oppression. The components may vary according to individual and societal standpoint. What is common to the intergenerational relationships of children to adults, is that children are inferior to adults. (1995, p. 118)*

In recent decades, these notions of children's incompetence have been challenged, and an alternate set of conceptual understandings, which assert that children are capable of active and meaningful participation in their everyday worlds, including the world of adult-generated and oriented research have been developed. As Farrell (2010, p. 398) observes:

*Within this paradigm, childhood is not seen as a universal phenomenon, where developmental stages or levels are universally-evident or universally-applied. Rather, within this framework, childhood is seen to be constructed socially within particular contexts, times and places.*

More discussion about this conceptualisation of childhood will occur in Chapter 7.

### ***6.3 Considering competence and ontology: How researcher participants constructed their views on children's competence***

Before considering how researcher participants considered competence, it is worth noting that writers in the areas of feminism (Spender & Adler, 1985), disability (Danforth, 2006), queer (Binnie, 1997), Indigenous and First World (Fatnowna & Pickett, 2002), have problematised notions of competency and the privileging of particular knowledge in the

academic field. In fact, they contend that the history of academia and the development of theory has primarily been uncritically shaped by assertions made by white, straight, educated, non-disabled, men from western cultures (Carroll, 2012) who have been afforded cultural and symbolic capital. As Code notes:

*Women and other marginalized groups have struggled against ... [such] ... approaches to social science that left them with “no way of making their experiences count as informed or knowledgeable”. (as cited in Day, 2012, p. 77)*

In *The Weight of the World*, Bourdieu (1999) argued that there is particular merit in directly involving those closest to the experience, in being considered in the process of inquiring about and developing new knowledge. In that work, he demonstrated his commitment to privileging the non-academic insider's voice and argued that his claims were stronger as a result.

Researcher participants in this study considered issues of ontology and epistemology in similar ways, likening the de-privileging of children's knowledge to the ways that women, people with disability, people from non-Western countries and with alternate sexualities have had their knowledge de-privileged in the past. They highlighted that these groups have achieved some success in shifting the sociological debates about knowledge creation and that much can be learned from their experiences, particularly in the research context.

Researcher participants argued that within society broadly, and within the academic field, children are still primarily and uncritically understood as being incompetent and unable to reflect upon or articulate their experiences, needs or wishes. There was consensus among the group, however, that such notions did not reflect their experience or their ways of seeing children more broadly. Deborah Keys reflected:

**I completely disagree. I vehemently disagree [with the idea that children and young people are incompetent]. I just think that young people, both in their interviews and in their lives they describe, seem to be incredibly able. And as I said before, I think I was just very surprised at their ability to reflect on their lives and try and make narratives out of those that were clear to them and to be able to look back and review things and look at them differently as they grew in maturity. (DK)**

Researcher participants' views about children's competence were often shaped by their own experiences of childhood, through their tertiary education and from their practice experiences; either prior to or as part of their research careers. Sharon Bessell, Neerosh Mudaly and Catherine Hartung all spoke about their childhoods and how they remember having in-depth conversations with adults around them, and in feeling involved in decision-making processes about matters that were important to them. These experiences shaped these researcher participants' views on children's capacity and the value that children place on these encounters. As Sharon Bessell, then Neerosh Mudaly suggest:

**I think it was also my personal experiences as a child and a young person that made me absolutely convinced that children are capable of knowing about their own lives; of having a say on their own lives; even if they may not be in a position to make a decision, just as adults are often not in a position to make a decision, but the children have to be part of that. (SB)**

**I know that I was made to feel special, capable. I knew how important these moments [when adults listened] were for me, and looking back on them the value I placed on the opportunity to have my thoughts heard. (NM)**

These researchers reflected that they drew from their own experiences of thinking about, talking about and learning about complex issues while they were young. As such their developing concept about childhood knowledge informed not only the way they encountered children in the present but also opened up opportunities to reflect on their own childhoods and how this influenced current practice.

**Maybe I think in the course of working with the children [in research] one of the things that started - struck me as I heard them say things or make sense of things I would start to ask myself about: “Was I like that?” And, “Did I have that ability to verbalise things in this way because I couldn’t connect with my own childhood?” I started to question that about myself and that’s when I started to notice a lot more, because I think they’re sitting there and what is it that - seemingly not very smart children were able to say things that were so poignant and so clear. It revealed things about me, about my childhood, and that was informative as well. (NM)**

For the researcher participants who had worked with children in different contexts and professions, their views were very much shaped by their practice experience with children and the many conversations and interactions that they had shared. As Anne Graham (who had worked as a teacher and who had developed a program for children experiencing grief and loss) and Deborah Harcourt (who worked as an early childhood educator) demonstrate in these quotes:

**When I was involved in activities, not just research but some of these programme activities where I thought, “God, there’s no limit really in a sense to what kids might be capable of here, in particular contexts and particular circumstances”, so I became much more humble about the way they**

**universalised and generalised the experience of kids and that's really pulled right through with me. (AG)**

**Yes. I think that has a lot to do with it, Tim. I am really lucky that I spent 12 years working with two, three, four and five year old children, and I think I have a really strong understanding of their capacity and their concepts, and I have a real belief in them. Whereas I think it's very difficult for people who come from other fields and they might have an interest or they might work for children, for example, social workers or people who work in paediatric health or people who work with juveniles in law and that kind of stuff, but (a) they don't have a strong background in child development or Sociology of Childhood; (b) they don't have experience of working with diverse groups of children day in, day out, they work with individual children; so I think the teaching profession gives you an incredible background. (DH)**

Deborah Harcourt's quote also reveals a theme which we will discuss further – that of *who* is in a best position to research children, and what skills, experiences and worldviews might best equip them to conduct ethical, professional and robust research with children.

The desire to recognise children's competence seemed important to a number of the researcher participants who believed that children had a right to speak and to be heard. It would appear that this ideological view spurred researchers on and provided the impetus to continue.

**I'm just as fallible as anybody else and influenced by my own prejudices... um, I do see children, I do want to see, I do want to see people, children as people who have valid knowledge and have a right to be heard and to not just**

**be heard but to have an influence on decision making about their concerns.  
(JM)**

**So again it's a delicate one but there's this whole thing that if we say we're trying to move from this idea of the child as an object of concern and therefore someone that we're trying to do research on, to something different, we have to believe in their competence and provide them the opportunities for them to be competent, to have their say. When we look for these opportunities and provide children opportunities to participate they live up to these expectations. (AG)**

Proving that children are competent seemed to be a motivating factor for a number of the researcher participants who voiced their satisfaction in doing so:

**I think maybe it the most important reason is that I enjoy doing research ... is because I feel we have to start to change adult attitudes towards children, about who they are and what they can do ... and I just don't think that the value and knowledge and experience of children is heard strongly enough.  
(NM)**

As will be explored in the next section, researcher participants were of the view that children's knowledge was often different to that of adults. For a number of researcher participants, this view emerged after observing children in child-friendly environments: as they played, as they negotiated space, as they interacted with others. For each of the researcher participants, notions of children's competence also emerged through their engagement with children; as they encountered children who were able to articulate their experiences and provide nuanced answers to their questions:



**I suppose, feeling comfortable and knowing that the times that I've spent with kids, they knew exactly what was going on. They were incredibly insightful and quite understanding of a whole range of things. (SB)**

### *Reconsidering children's competence*

As seen, many of the researcher participants were of the view that the way that children experienced and understood the world was significantly different to adults. Researcher participants challenged traditional understandings of knowledge and knowledge development, arguing that they were adultist, and that these traditional understandings viewed adult knowledge as being more valid and of greater value than that of children's. Rather than dismissing children's knowledge as being non-adult knowledge, researcher participants argued that it held value for a number of significant reasons. As Jan Mason summarised:

**What do I say about that? I say, as [children's researcher] Mary Kellett says, that children are the most competent commentators on their own lives. They know more about themselves. Adults are people too. I mean, see what we ignore is that there are varying degrees of competence in adults. I will speak out on things that I'm not competent on. It's the responsibility of other people to [scrutinise my input and determine its value]. (JM)**

The implications of recognising children's knowledge as being of value were discussed by each of the researcher participants. Firstly, they argued that the ways that children understood and made meaning of their experiences was different but in no way less complex or sophisticated to adults. They argued that children understood what it was like to be a child and to experience the world as someone in that particular age and stage of life. Sue Dockett recalls her early work in early childhood education:

**So that's where it started from, is that notion of what were children's experiences and how they were different. One of the really important things that came out of the first work we did in 1997/98 was that children's perspectives, particularly about starting school, were incredibly different from everybody else's. In many ways, that was really nice, because it enabled us to justify in all sorts of ways the importance of getting kids' perspectives, because you weren't getting those from parents and you weren't getting those from teachers. (SD)**

In her interview, Sue Dockett gave a number of examples of how children's perceptions about school, community and the environment were significantly different to those posited by adults. They were also different to those of adults who presumed to speak on behalf of children on these issues (i.e. academics, teachers and parents) This 'disjuncture' between "how they [children] experience their lives and how they are supposed to experience them" (as Jan Mason puts it in Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 493) is summarised by Deborah Harcourt who observed:

**I think we forget that the lived experience of childhood is very different to the observed experience of childhood. And I'm really disappointed that particularly in my field in early childhood education that not enough credit is given to children's capacity to engage with us on those really big issues. (DH)**

Researcher participants working with infants (namely Sue Dockett and Deborah Harcourt) contended that their position was not universally accepted or, in many domains, the dominant position. They recalled many situations where their assertions were disputed by other academics and the field at large:

**Now people would just go, “You are kidding. You know, you’re just making this up”. And in fact I just submitted a paper last year to [an education journal] and one of the reviewers said she questioned the trustworthiness of this project because there’s no way that children [aged under 5] knew how to say or do these things. (DH)**

**So I guess it comes back to what constitutes reliable evidence for change and that’s what I think we’re still struggling with a bit here in Australia amongst researchers working with kids... there are many that don’t agree. (AG)**

As a result of holding this view about children’s knowledge, researcher participants described how they were reticent to perpetuate what they believed were adultist observations about children and childhood, and spent some time considering the implications for theory and practice. They argued that it was necessary for those researching children to be clear as to whether they were reporting on their observations about children’s experiences, or when they were reporting children’s views about their experiences. In the latter case, Sue Dockett and Sharon Bessell in particular, argued that the researcher must spend time exploring the child’s inner world and present children’s thoughts within the context of their own childhoods and their current experience. As will be discussed in *Chapter 7: Children, Agency and Participation, and Research*, such an approach challenges the school of thought that suggests that adult researchers can reflect on their own past childhoods to make meaning of the observations made by children in the present (Galbraith, 2001).

These views challenge the traditional notions of children as ‘human becomings’, and recasts them as humans who may have different ways of making meaning about and

understanding the world but whose knowledge is no less valid. As Deborah Harcourt and her peers observe:

*Prominent Italian researcher Rinaldi (2005) suggested that a standpoint which seeks an acknowledgement of the presence of children, and their accounts of life, is an essential element to understanding their worlds. This challenges the traditional notions of developmental psychology that children become someone; children are already someone. (Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011, p. 39)*

In fact, standpoint theorists assert that by sitting outside of adulthood, children can articulate how their knowledge and knowing might be different to that of adults, and that they can also provide observations about how they believed adults experienced and understood the worlds around them. This view is summarised in Deborah Harcourt's 2011 article, *An encounter with children: seeking meaning and understanding about childhood*, in which she talks about herself (as 'the adult researcher') and her experiences in research with young children:

*From these early responses, the adult researcher recognized the children's competence as conversation partners and acknowledged that these children were articulate authorities on life as a child and on the constructs of both adulthood and childhood. The children had made it clear that there was a difference between adults and children and the ways in which they experienced life. But then, if there is an overt observed adult construct of childhood as we see in the literature, maybe there is also an observed child construct of adulthood. Therefore, we can consider the existence of the possibility of a two way exchange of viewpoints, as each observes the other. Indeed, the children have begun to demonstrate that adulthood is being closely observed by children and being reconstructed from that viewpoint.*

*This is a potential positioning that has yet to be considered in research paradigms.*  
(Harcourt, 2011, p. 338)

To enable the child's standpoint to be revealed, and for it to be of influence, three of the researcher participants argued for a degree of reflexivity, of openness and a willingness to allow children's views to be afforded more prominence, and for the dominance of adult knowledge to be unsettled. As Deborah Harcourt continues in another article:

*In terms of the adult standpoint it is important, at times, to stand back from what has been socially constructed (by adults) as understandings of children and childhood. We may need to re-evaluate this positioning and reflect upon the existence of a complementary construct, that of the lived experience of children and childhood. Further examination of this construct may provide an opportunity for children and adults to work together and to give value to different perspectives on the same notion.* (Harcourt, 2011, p. 341)

As Eekelaar (1994, p. 58) observes, this conceptualisation emphasises the pursuit of autonomy, "optimally positioning children to develop their own perception of their wellbeing as they enter adulthood: not of foreclosing on the potential for such".

Jan Mason and Deborah Harcourt stressed the value of children's observations about the world not only because they illuminate children's own experiences and considerations but also because they could provide fresh insights about the nature of society and the place of both children and adults within it. In her interview, for example, Jan Mason drew from feminist standpoint theory and argued that, like women, children were an oppressed and marginalised group who could reflect not only on their positioning but also on the ways that adults interacted with each other and with children:

**Standpoint theory gives us a lens through which we can understand children and to also understand ourselves as understood by children. Like women have provided powerful observations about being a woman and not being a man, children can tell us what it's like to not be an adult, what they think it's like to be an adult and what it's like to be someone who's not yet an adult in an adultist world. (JM)**

**Without the childhood researchers we wouldn't have a theoretical basis for looking at children, we wouldn't ... their goal of looking at children's lives from children's standpoint is so important and I would actually think that some of the people who criticise don't understand standpoint theory or the importance of what they're doing and in particular their work on generations. (JM)**

According to Swigonski (1994), a standpoint considers an individual's (or group of individuals) position in society and allows a certain level of awareness about the individual's social location, a location from which certain features of reality are revealed while others are obscured. She argues that standpoint theory is founded on a view that as a consequence of their oppression, less powerful members of a society experience reality differently to those with more power. To survive, the oppressed must be attentive to not only their own perspectives but also that of the dominant class, creating a 'double vision' or double consciousness. This consciousness has the potential for providing subordinate groups with a more complete view of social reality as they attempt to negotiate existing power differentials. Swigonski (1994, n.p.) continues:

*This more complete perception should not be taken as in any way negating the serious and debilitating consequences of oppressions. On the contrary, members of*

*oppressed groups must develop this more complete view as a survival skill to cope with this oppression.*

From this perspective, Jan Mason and Deborah Harcourt argued that children's knowledge is valuable not only in its diversity but also as it is created alongside, but outside, of the usual adult-driven processes of knowledge construction, providing important insights on the experiences of children, of adults and of the communities the two groups share.

Although they asserted its value, researcher participants acknowledged that listening to children often unsettled adults and adultist institutions – an unsettling that was both valuable and necessary when considering the implications for children, for adult-child relations and for the community more broadly. As Jan Mason writes:

*I consider it almost inevitable that youth standpoints will challenge adult perspectives. That is, after all, why children's standpoints need to be heard, because they are likely to have something to say which differs from what adults will say on the same issues. It is understandable that adults are likely to find children's perspectives a challenge, when they threaten adult power and status quo. Those of us who support research with, or by, children, would do well to think through and make explicit our roles as advocates for them, once they have contributed their standpoints. (Mason in ARACY & NSWCCYP, 2008, p. 50)*

### *Children's competence greater than suggested*

Researcher participants challenged the view that universally children could not grasp adult concepts or participate in discussions about topics often considered incomprehensible to children (particularly as they moved into adolescence):

**I think we often misjudge children's capacity and competence either because we don't provide them opportunities to demonstrate their skills or knowledge or we involve them in activities that that don't fit their needs or wishes. Because we've failed to explain a process or have been unclear about our expectations children haven't responded – and we see that as their lack of competence in understanding rather than our incompetence in asking. (SB)**

They argued that they could justify this position as a result of their experience and success as researchers. They contended that those who were more ambivalent about children's competency were often so because they had not worked with children, nor seen firsthand, what children were capable of knowing and articulating:

**People just don't get young children's capacity. They just don't get it, but they've got no experience so they've got nothing to draw on - and it's like the fear factor with people with disabilities ... or whatever "Oh, they're all scary and horrible". Because they've had no experience with them, they know nothing about them; so therefore, whatever the person thinks must be true. (JM)**

Although they recognised that children were often more competent than adults gave them credit for, most researcher participants were reluctant to suggest that because certain children were competent in many domains of their lives that they were competent in them all. What researcher participants did acknowledge was that children's reflective capacity did evolve and change but that this was no different to adults. As Sharon Bessell notes, "all human beings — regardless of age (child, adolescent, adult, elder) will have differing levels of insight — all of which should be respected" (in ARACY & NSWCCYP, 2008, p. 88).



By doing so, researcher participants recognised that there were limits to what children could understand and argued against placing children in positions where they were asked to comment on things outside of their experience or to explain things that they had not processed in the past. Although two of the researcher participants strongly advocated the reflexive capacities of infants and young children and their capacity to understand concepts such as research, consent and future harm; the group of researcher participants as a whole were of the view that some children may not have the cognitive capacity to understand what was being asked of them, or why and how their involvement might affect them into the future. Such views are less radical than other writers in the children's rights area but allows for a level of discretion and responsivity.

One of the reasons why researcher participants, who had non-research related practice experience (particularly in child welfare settings), were hesitant to assert that children were as competent as adults in adult-centred domains, was because they realised that the practical implications for children were often significant. In child protection situations, for example, Jan Mason argued that children were able to articulate their wishes and their needs but were not always in the best position to ascertain their best interests into the future. The notion of the best interests was contentious, as researcher participants acknowledged that this principle was often used to discredit children's participation in the here and now, suggesting that their present needs and wishes were deemed contrary to and less pressing than the potential risks adults foresaw in their futures. Robyn Fitzgerald, for example, talked about the legal system's reluctance to act on children's wishes in family matters, if acting on these wishes might hold a risk that things could get worse for the child in the future (both the imminent and far reaching). She noted that even when the possible consequences were minimal, children's views were dismissed and their wishes disregarded in courts where adults promoted the best interest principle in a narrow way.

Researcher participants argued that such practice contradicted the intent of the principle and ended up disempowering rather than promoting children and their rights. Instead, rather than dismissing children's views, Jan Mason argued that it was the responsibility of adults to hear 'the essence' of what children were articulating, and to use that as a foundation on which decisions might be made:

**We need to hear, for example, that a child wants to go back to their mother. We need to take that seriously. But that does not mean, you know, putting them with their Mum. What it means, because when you hear what that person says rather than thinking 'oh no'... if you say "oh no, you can't go back to your mother, your mother's abused you, don't you understand" they won't understand. But if you say "tell [me] more about why you'd like to go back to mother" you might find some... it might appear "that I can't see my mother when I want to" or "I can't see my mother" – that was often the response. "I can't have contact with her." (JM)**

Philosopher David Archard (2004) argues that as children's ability to consider particular concepts and outcomes and to make decisions in their own best interest is variable, so are adults'. And yet, he argues, we dismiss children's accounts and discredit their views because they often fail to meet a threshold that does not exist where adults are concerned. In his paper *Balancing a Child's Best Interests and a Child's Views*, he asserts:

*A child should not be judged against a standard of competence by which even most adults would fail. It is unfair to ask children to be more competent in their decision-making than those adults to whom we grant a general freedom to decide.*  
(Archard & Skivenes, 2009, p. 10)

Recognising children's developing competence also enabled researcher participants to differentiate children's different ways of seeing the world, and making sense of it at different periods of childhood (infancy, early childhood, childhood etc.), but more importantly in different domains of childhood (in relation to their education, family life, their own social positioning and interactions with peers, adults, parents and the broader community). They recognised that some children may be competent in some domains while developing competence in others, and that experience within these domains affected children's ability to reflect on these experiences, and to make sense of them. This approach does reflect the theories of developmental psychologists like Piaget (1999) but challenges the often held view that children progress from one milestone to another in universal and linear ways. At the same time, they asserted that children's knowledge and knowledge making should not be assessed just in relation to adult's knowledge and knowledge making, but also in its own right. As such, children should be considered to be competent children rather than just as incompetent adults.

Jan Mason follows this argument further, arguing that in reconsidering children's incompetence we should reconsider adult's competence, and recognise that adults' competency is also as dynamic and developing as is children's:

*As other research has indicated (Manion and I'Anson, 2004; Mason and Michaux, 2005), crucial to achieving such changes will be a lessening of the dichotomy between adults as competent beings and children as incompetent 'becomings', so that we construct children as beings, as well as 'becomings', and we construct adults as 'becomings', as well as beings. Vital here is adults being able to learn from, as well as teach, children. As children taught us in this and other research, developing more equal relations between children and adults means a constant*

*process of negotiation over control and a willingness by adults. (Mason, 2008, p. 367)*

As part of this conversation, Catherine Hartung problematised socialisation and developmental theories, arguing that competence is not always something developed *in* children socialised *by* adults, but rather something that emerges in the interplay between the two, and at times, independent of adult-child relations:

*Underlying these arguments from Holzman (1995) and Smith (et al, 2003) there is an assumption that competence can be 'made'; that it is something innate that needs the action and expectation of adults to bring it to emergence... (Hartung, 2011, p. 175)*

Early childhood researchers Sue Dockett and Deborah Harcourt also felt that by promoting competence as being an adult trait, children were encouraged to move too quickly from childhood to adulthood. They observed that children who appeared precocious, and those whose developing competence was recognised, were shuffled into adultist domains unwittingly and were asked to speak about things that were out of their experience and previously unconsidered.

The unanticipated consequence for individual and groups of children could be significant. Sue Dockett, for example, observed the real tension between asserting young children's ability to understand concepts and to articulate their needs, and promoting their continued engagement in child-led and age appropriate activities such as play:

**Lots of the things that I'm involved with are looking at curriculum and what's happening with the kids as they start school. There's a challenge there between saying kids are incredibly competent and the counter-side saying,**

**well, therefore we can have much more formal curriculum for them earlier if you're telling me they're competent. That's a double-edged sword, because you do want to recognise kids' competence, but not to the stage that you then force them into really structured environments with curriculum. So it's a difficult line to play and it's actually challenging at times. (SD)**

She and other researcher participants argued that those promoting particular discourses of childhood needed to reflect upon the implications of this ontology for children, for adult-child relations and for the way that we promote particular childhoods and confine children to others. This will be discussed further below.

Lastly, researcher participants highlighted the flaws in the conceptual opposition of childhood and adulthood inherent in many of the dominant paradigms relating to childhood (Mason & Hood, 2011). As Jenks (1982, p. 10) notes: "the child cannot be imagined except in relation to an adult ... it becomes impossible to produce a well defined sense of the adult... without first positing the child."

Alongside this challenge to children's incompetency was Anne Graham, challenge to the notion that adults were always competent and children were not:

**There are many things that I do not know, things that children know, a knowing that they are not given credit for or opportunities to articulate. (AG)**

This view reflects the writing of a number of theorists (including Alanen & Mayall, 2001; James, 1998; Lee, 2001), who by emphasising the social context in which a person is situated, have problematised the notion of competency. From this perspective, children and adults can be both competent and incompetent, depending on what they are faced with. David Archard summarises:

*Adulthood is a process of continual becoming, a never-completed maturing. It is not a plateau of age but the asymptote of life's developmental curve. The individual can become more and more of an adult but there is no guarantee that ageing automatically brings with it a maturity as understood normatively. Childhood is not necessarily left behind forever when one grows older: its characteristics may be retained to lesser or greater degrees in later years. To that extent childhood is constructed not so much as an actual period of one's life but more as a metaphorical immaturity which can be present to some extent throughout a lifetime. (1993, p. 36)*

#### **6.4 Considering competence and epistemology: children's knowledge**

In addition to considering the ontological implications of seeing children as inherently incompetent, it would appear important for researchers to consider how their theories of childhood influence their epistemological position.

Although children have always been engaged in research, Oakley (1994) observes that in the past most projects were 'on' rather 'with' or 'for' children because "the idea that children can constitute meaningful research data conflicts with adultist views of children as less than competent to make sense of the adult world" (Oakley, 1994, p. 25). As Farrell (2010, pp. 396-397) observes:

*The notion of children's unfolding or progressive development carries with it the notion of children as 'human becomings' that is, as being pre-competent; but who, in the fullness of time and under particular conditions, may become competent adults.*

This approach reflects a pervasive view that children lack competence to make decisions about whether they might participate in research (Morrow & Richards, 1996), and an ambivalence about the capacity of children to make valid claims about or to reflect upon and adequately articulate their lived experience (Qvortrup, 1997). As such, across a range of disciplines, data obtained directly from children has been viewed as unreliable and invalid because it was believed that children were too immature to understand their worlds, and lacked the necessary verbal and conceptual abilities to convey their experiences (Faux, Walsh & Deatrick, 1988). Instead, it was argued that children were suggestible and incapable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality (Punch, 2002).

The effects of such assumptions are far-reaching. Firstly, and as seen in *Chapter 5: Children, Vulnerability and Research*, researcher participants argued that children are often excluded from participating in research even when they are its focus. In these instances, research about childhood is constructed by adults, for adults and with adults, and according to Christensen and Prout (2002), relies on the exclusion of children from a voice in the research.

Researcher participants pointed to various projects where children's participation was limited – either because the research team had not considered children's engagement, or where auspicing bodies were ambivalent about their participation and where a series of gatekeepers acted to limit researchers' access to children generally and those perceived as incompetent more specifically. The role of gatekeepers will be considered further in Chapter 7.

In the political science arena, for example, Sharon Bessell talked about her early work that focused on how international norms and standards policies around child labour impacted on domestic policy legislation and debates in Indonesia. She recalls interviewing

international agencies, government officials and politicians about children and developing a broad understanding of how adults considered child labour. Like most of those writing in the area at that time, Sharon Bessell had not spoken to children nor considered their perspectives central:

**I had no idea what children were saying. It had not completely occurred to me to see them as stakeholders at the beginning ... At that time most of the literature on child labour had that huge gap. [It] had almost nothing around what children were actually saying. [It included discussion] about how adults interpreted children's lives but nothing from children themselves. (SB)**

Sharon Bessell remembers believing intuitively that it was important for children to be engaged, but recalled that her field did not have an epistemological point of view about children or a commitment to engaging them in research:

**I didn't find it a big step, I guess what amazed [me] was that I didn't build it in in the first place. I think that was more around the discipline that I was in rather than my own views, because as soon as I was freed up enough to really think about the topic myself, then it just seemed natural I guess, that children should be part of it. (SB)**

I will consider this 'freeing up' further when considering reflexivity below.

Secondly, within epistemological approaches that focus primarily on competence, particular groups of children's involvement in research is conditioned by adults' judgments about their cognitive abilities and social competency: children of varying ages, backgrounds and abilities are often excluded at the whim of adults (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Catherine Hartung observes in her PhD thesis:



*While intending to foster children's competence, this conceptualisation may inadvertently exclude those children who, for whatever reason, may not want to or be able to demonstrate competence in accordance with what is deemed appropriate by adults. (Hartung, 2011, p. 175)*

Catherine Hartung and other researcher participants argued that by conceptualising them as incompetent and their input value-less children are excluded from research. This fails to afford them opportunities to express themselves or provide adults with better understandings of their life worlds and their capacities. This, in turn perpetuates these limiting notions and further disempowers children. As Morrow and Richards (1996, p. 98) observe:

*Conceptualising children as less competent in this way is unhelpful, and it is important to see it critically, because it has provided teachers and parents (and sociologists) with powerful normative models for what children are (or should be) like. It reflects a cultural reluctance to take children's ideas seriously, which in itself is not surprising, given that – at the macro social level at any rate – adults tend to trivialise and devalue children's acts as a matter of course.*

Researcher participants were clear about how children, particularly from 'vulnerable' communities, had been excluded from discussions about social issues and problems and, as a result, their needs and wishes had been overlooked. Deborah Harcourt, for example, talked about the fact that children (including infants and younger children) could contribute to discussions about social issues. She agreed that sometimes children's language, their concepts, and their understandings were different to those of adults. She observed that these had often been assessed as lesser than that of adults' by the research

field and broader community, but strongly believed that regardless, children's observations had value and should be considered different rather than lesser.

In reality, however, she argued that children's views were often seen as limited and their participation devalued. She, and others (including Robyn Fitzgerald), reported on occasions when their work had been challenged by the field asserting that research with children was less credible than that conducted with participants of other ages.

**While children's knowledge is considered lesser, their participation in research is always going to be seen as lesser. As a result, if there's a part of a research project that needs to be cut for financial reasons or what have you it will often be the children who are cut. They are considered less competent and their views superfluous. (RF)**

Jan Mason agreed that while children's knowledge was viewed this way, research that attempted to understand their views was similarly undervalued:

**There are still some who rubbish research with kids because they think that children can't really understand or reflect on their experiences. So they ask for validation: from parents, from adult experts and are sceptical when children hold alternative views. (JM)**

Conversely, however, a number argued that the academic community was often excited by work done with children, possibly because it was considered different or novel:

**When I get papers on children's perspectives of things, people are really interested and find it really exciting and I don't find that people dismiss it, say why would you talk to children? They're interested in the fact that I do. I**

**actually feel in some ways it's not so much a resistance it's just that it hasn't occurred, why would you. (SB)**

As we have seen, amongst the researcher participants there was a strong view that children had the capacity to understand the worlds within which they lived and the experiences they encountered. However, even when children's competence was called into question, researcher participants held the view that children's abilities should not be the sole or most prominent factor in determining whether children should participate in research:

**You can also say that there's a difference of ability, but that's buying into the disability sphere. I mean people with disabilities have less abilities than some of us who are teaching in universities um, but does that mean ... it doesn't mean that their voices shouldn't be heard it's more that they must be given an opportunity to have a voice. (JM)**

It was the view of the majority of researcher participants that methodologies could be developed around children and that the needs of particular children could often be met if the research approach included some level of flexibility to ensure that they responded appropriately. As will be discussed later, this requires a good understanding of the capacities of children, an ability to work with individual children to determine their level of ability and their willingness to participate, and a degree of reflexivity to evaluate the effectiveness of methods to meet the children's needs, and that of the research.

## ***6.5 Competency and Ethics***

As Sharon Bessell discusses in a 2006 paper, assumptions about competence are intrinsic in the various ethical instruments that help guide the facilitation of research with children (Bessell, 2006). Although attempting to protect children, it can be suggested that even at

the highest levels, such instruments can act to restrict the involvement of children deemed ‘incompetent’ from participatory processes. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), for example, asserts that:

*...the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

(United Nations, 1989)

Such provisions require an assessment of a child’s competence, both to articulate their views and to consent to participate in the process through which these views might be presented. The weight given to their views is also determined by adults, often based on arbitrary notions of age and maturity, rather than on their capacity to understand what is being asked of them and the potential risks and benefits now and into the future.

In their analysis of children’s involvement in decision-making, Archard and Skivenes (2009) note (and refute) a number of assumptions that underpin an ambivalence about children’s competence. They note that children are often considered emotionally unstable or have adverse emotional reactions to circumstances; that they are ignorant or have poor understandings of relevant issues; they lack independence in decision-making and rely too heavily on the judgments of others; and they have an inconstancy of judgment.

As we have already considered researcher participants’ beliefs about children’s capacity to reflect on their lives and form their own view, this section will consider children’s ability to consent to participate in research and how this has been managed in practice.

## 6.6 *Ethics in practice*

As noted in *Chapter 5: Children, Vulnerability and Research*, one strategy that researcher participants adopted to adequately deal with ethical issues related to children's vulnerability as they arose was to engage in ethics-in-practice. A similar strategy was promoted in relation to children's competence.

Firstly, consent was considered as an ongoing process. To be ethical, researcher participants argued that researchers needed to constantly 'check in' with children to ensure that they understood what was being asked of them, to remind them of their rights and choices, and to ensure that they felt able to withdraw their consent if they no longer wished to proceed.

In many situations, researcher participants saw this as a process of negotiation and renegotiation: a process that required flexibility of approach to enable children to take control of the research process and participate in a way that met their needs and wishes.

**So it's to me, I suppose, about framing them as people who respond in particular ways to particular opportunities; whether they happen to be adults or children just means that their responses are different. So as researchers sometimes you do set yourself up. Sometimes you do set yourself up to give them far too much opportunity to do whatever and the real challenge, I suppose, is bringing that back down to a reasonable level where they know what you're asking about and what you want them to do, and you know as well, because sometimes that totally open slather is just not useful for anyone.**  
**(SD)**

Secondly, participants argued for ongoing consideration of power and the privileging of children's knowledge through the research process. Like feminist researchers who have advocated for more dialogical and participatory styles of research which reduce power differentials and recognise the capacities of research participants to help uncover knowledge in meaningful ways (Ansell, 2001; Oakley, 1981, 1994), Anne Graham argued for more choice and control, and for researchers to be led by children throughout the research process:

**I do believe we need to look at the methods, what we're asking kids to do, the sorts of time within the expectations, and giving them also a chance to guide and control wherever possible the work that's going on. We all know that you might have a particular aim in mind, but sometimes a child asks a question or takes you somewhere else, or ends up - and you think, hey, that was much better. Perhaps I suppose that also means that as a researcher you need to be fairly flexible and not thrown by the idea that a five year old might have a better idea than you have. (AG)**

Thirdly, they argued for consideration of representation: that children's insights are adequately sought and gathered, included in research reports and disseminated as valued contributors. This view is not dissimilar to that of Spyrou (2011), who contends that in order for childhood research to deal with the problem of representation, it must critically examine the research process itself, that is, the process through which 'children's voices' are produced.

## **6.7 (Re)considering competence reflexively**

Considering and accounting for these ontological, epistemological and ethical challenges was viewed as being imperative in research with children and deserving of reflexive practice. In this section I will explore how researcher participants attempted to be reflexive, and the advantages that they encountered when doing so.

### *Being aware of one's own theoretical, ontological and epistemological position*

As we saw in *Chapter 5: Children, Vulnerability and Research*, researcher participants were of the view that one's theoretical, ontological and epistemological positions had a profound influence on how, why and who did research with children, and what issues and experiences were explored and reported. They were of the view that children's competence should be recognised, but realised that this view was not always supported by others. They argued that when academics were hesitant about children's capacity they should be upfront about this in their work. As Anne Graham said:

**I suppose I try to be patient with that view [about children's incompetence] that's there because I do understand it ... [but] if in fact we don't trust children's accounts then we should be upfront about that and not attempt to do it. I think if we do trust children's account, this is not about giving away our authority as researchers or as adults or as anything else, this is much more about, you know, there's that whole idea that you can share power and still retain your authority [and credibility in an academic sense]. (AG)**

Anne Graham, Robyn Fitzgerald and Jan Mason believed that it was important, therefore, for researchers working with children to account for their positions, particularly in relation

to children's competence: their views about children's ability to reflect upon and articulate in a research context. They asserted that this was particularly important when conducting qualitative research with children on topics not often considered consider-able by children.

Jan Mason makes the point this way:

**All I'm asking for is that [researchers become] ... aware of what [their] theoretical constructs are: because we all have theory. And the positivists aren't always aware of the constructs and criticise our work because they are working in a different theoretical space. (JM)**

**[My advice is to just] read carefully, to be aware of epistemology as well as methodology, where they're coming from ideologically, um to talk to other people and, you know, use that tool of reflexivity to the utmost. Um, and to continue to question for the good of others. (JM)**

### *Considering methodologies and methods*

As Oakley (1994), Ansell (2001) and others have suggested previously, researcher participants were mindful of the fact that what they perceived to be 'child friendly' practice and tools may not always be the best for children or best for the research. As Barker and Weller observe:

*Researchers must reflect upon their own position and roles and evaluate their research in its attempts to achieve meaningful participation, rather than to simply adopt a tokenistic view of what the researcher perceives to be an appropriate method. Whilst striving for the 'idealism' of children centred research, researchers must be 'realists' in their reflexive evaluation of children centred research methods in practice. (Barker & Weller, 2003a, p. 37)*



Researcher participants in this study argued that in an attempt to be ‘child-friendly’, researchers sometimes developed research methods that were overly simple and lacked rigour. This was based on their assumptions about children’s capacity to use existing research instruments, and the need for them to be activity based and fun. This observation has been made elsewhere, as Hunleth (2011, p. 82), for example, suggests: “There is an emerging discontent in the social studies of children with the unreflexive use of participatory methods and also their dominance as methods in research with children.”

Researcher participants talked about the need to critically assess the methods that they use with children – an assessment that could and maybe should be conducted with children themselves. In addition to considering whether they are engaging (which they believed was important), researcher participants suggested that they also should be assessed on their ability to elicit children’s views sensitively, meaningfully and rigorously; and to meet the research question itself. For those who had worked in the area for some time, this assessment was an iterative process; where old methods were assessed and new methods developed to strengthen and improve practice. As Anne Graham noted:

**It’s about how can we get this better and every time we do something now we’re finding we’re building on what’s happened before, rather than starting again and that takes a little while I think. But it definitely has advantages. We can be creative but we can ensure credibility at the same time. (AG)**

Researcher participants believed that as a field, we need to be open to criticism and feel open to criticise or challenge. Jan Mason and Sharon Bessell observed that the latter was often a difficult activity when child-centred methodologies were a given, and when their use was without question. As Jan Mason noted:

**It's interesting. It seems as those who are writing about the limits are often qualitative sociologists, that they are suggesting that the childhood sociologists are uncritical. Lee, for example, is critical and notes that those who are critical of the Sociology of Childhood might be characterised as anti-child or oppressive, so may not always come forward. (JM)**

In saying this, however, Jan Mason was of the view that much of the discussions about children's engagement in research in Australia were more focused on practical issues rather than on the ontologies and epistemologies that underpin them. She observed:

**I don't necessarily get a lot of access to [those critical conversations]. I don't get to travel overseas. And that's where it's happening. We're so atheoretical here. You know, here and the [United] States it's very pragmatic, but that's a really, really good question and I'm hoping in your research you'll be able to follow that up and see if things have moved on. (JM)**

Although it was difficult to ascertain whether 'things have moved on', researcher participants were of the view that there was a need for these discussions to occur.

**Research with children is too important to not get the best we can possibly do and it probably takes more than one brain to do that so this is the way we work around here. (AG)**

### *Reflexive practice with children*

As seen in *Chapter 5: Children, Vulnerability and Research*, there was a growing sense amongst researcher participants that reflexivity *with children* could provide valuable outcomes for the research process generally and deal with issues related with competence and consent more specifically. As will be discussed further in Chapter 7, projects that

engaged children as active participants throughout the research process enabled researchers to constantly receive feedback on their practice, and other mechanisms were promoted even when this was not possible.

Inviting children to reflect upon methodologies and methods were considered vital by a number as was a willingness to respond to what children were suggesting:

**So it was really about engaging with these children around what it is to be a researcher. And I commissioned children as my co-researchers, not participants but co-researchers, and in that way they begin to generate - you know I never tell children "Oh, we're going to draw about this or you're going to talk to me about this". I thought, how can I find out about this? And I make it blunt that this is what I'm interested in, if you would be interested in talking to me about this, I'd like to know how I should go about it. What questions should I ask? How could children show me? You know, all of those sorts of things, but researchers go in with five year olds with surveys and questionnaires and they say they're interviewing them. I mean for goodness sakes! I think it just demonstrates how much they don't know about children.**  
**(SB)**

The value of acknowledging this expertise was also not lost on researcher participants:

**There's actually nothing wrong with admitting that, "that's a better idea than I had" Or, "I like your way better". What it does do is acknowledge to kids that not only are you listening, but that you're prepared to act. (SD)**

**I rely... on children helping me frame those questions. So I suppose I've sort of, in a sense, de-privileged my authority and expertise and I do defer more, I**

**really do try to take into account much more what kids might have to teach me about the tool I might be using. (AG)**

Jan Mason summarises:

*Reflexivity in this context has been defined as opening "the way to a more radical consciousness of self and 'a mode of self-analysis and political awareness' (Davis, Watson & Cunningham-Burley, 2000:201 citing Dalaway). In practice this means that when facilitating and interpreting the contributions made by children to policy or research, adults must question the language and processes they use as bureaucrats or academics and also as members of the culture of adulthood. In other words, the assumptions about adulthood and childhood must be continually questioned when we work with children in this mode. When used effectively for this purpose, reflexivity should enable adults to limit the use of their power and to facilitate children's reflexivity as they participate in ways which enable them to be heard. (Mason, Urquhart, & UnitingCare, 2001, p. 19)*

Jan Mason continued in her interview, arguing that the process of negotiation is often a difficult one as you encounter and respond to the child, and work with them in determining what they understand and what might be needed:

**When you say something to a child you make sure that they understand what you are saying and that you make sure that you understand too. And this is the way that the people I research with... so you are feeling your way: you are negotiating, every bit of the way you are negotiating. And that is what gives you the symmetry [of power] that I talk about. So you work for that symmetry in relations. And it is by making sure that you're understood and that you are understanding. (JM)**

### *Considering competence when analysing data*

Researcher participants felt that it was important to consider their ontologies and epistemologies when analysing data. They believed that it was important to recognise that children's knowledge was different to adults' knowledge, and that there was a need to be vigilant to ensure that rather than translating children's views into adult speak, they needed to consider what children were actually saying and promote them in a raw form. Jan Mason talked about her team's approach to data analysis: a process whereby team members would go through the data and ask questions such as "what are children really saying here?" "How is this different to what adults might say?" And, "how might what they mean in this quote be different to what adults think they are saying?" One strategy used by Jan Mason's team was to use their own experiences, and those of children with whom they worked or interacted, as a first step in trying to understand what children were actually saying. Jan Mason reflected:

**One thing that you inevitably do in qualitative research is relate it to yourself and so I might say "look, I can actually understand that in terms of what my granddaughter said last weekend". So we'd explore them, coming back to the data. (JM)**

She went on to say that there had been times when staff outside of the research team had engaged with the data analysis and had suggested different interpretations.

**I remember when we got on to data analysis...we had an external person who would help us with the data analysis. I remember a number of examples when we were sitting around the table and where [one team member] would say, "that's not what I heard", and so we would go back to the data... Then I remember [another team member] at the end, who was working in an admin**

**position went through all the data and said “Jan, you’ve covered this and that but you’ve left out that”... And, “I think you’ve misunderstood this bit”. So we’d go back again. (JM)**

Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald would often go through a similar process but, where possible, have this conversation with children and young people themselves. Recognising that as researchers have different perspectives and theoretical positions, children and young people do too; Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald attempted to not overstate young people’s analysis of others’ views, but saw the value in having another perspective during the analysis stage:

**Young people can look at the data with fresh, different eyes. They can draw on their own experiences, their understanding of youth cultures and the things they’ve observed among their peer groups. They can’t speak on behalf of all young people, but their views can help us develop a more rounded picture of what’s being said and what is being conveyed. (RF)**

All of those who engaged in reflexive activities with children related to data analysis reported positive outcomes, mirroring the observations of Thomas and O’Kane, British researchers who have spent some time considering participation:

*In the end it is hard to disentangle what was our contribution and what was theirs; but there is no doubt that the course followed by the research, and the final conclusions, were very different as a result of the children's own interpretations of the data. (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998, p. 345)*

## *Reflecting on power*

In addition to considering what the most appropriate methods were for engaging children, Catherine Hartung proposed that it was important to use a political lens to consider the broader forces at play in determining how research with children is conducted. She writes in her PhD, for example:

*Underlying this argument is an assumption regarding the fixed competencies children are seen to possess which ignores the structural constraints and discursive resources both children and adults bring to participatory practices.*

(Hartung, 2011, p. 176)

Although a number of writers have promoted child-directed research and research co-conducted by children themselves (Kellett, 2005, 2010), there has been a growing realisation that although these approaches manage some of the dilemmas about children's representation, ultimately they do not resolve them. Instead, adults continue to mediate the research, and ultimately, sustain processes of power and control (Claverling & McLaughlin, 2010; Franks, 2011). As Franks notes:

*One of the critiques of participation research which has grown out of development research, feminist discourse and other discourses of liberation has been on the grounds of concern regarding ethical and epistemological ambiguities and exponents of participation have debated whether exploitation can really be avoided ... or whether participants have genuine ownership of the research. (2011, p. 16)*

It was interesting to note that this practice was not always supported – that the engagement of children in data analysis was sometimes viewed as a process through which findings

were 'dumbed down', or became less rigorous. This appeared to reflect ambivalence by some researcher participants about children's ability to be reflexive and their competence as translators of knowledge.

**Who makes the call? Well at the end of the day I make the call and I'm not necessarily always able to utilise everything that kids tell me or advise, but I talk to the kids about that and I'll certainly check things out with them fairly thoroughly if there's something I don't understand - about what it is that they're trying to tell me. But does it make it less rigorous? No I don't think that it makes it less rigorous at all. But I think that there will always be almost paradigm driven differences here that will really not get some people up to the gate, but they'll fundamentally say that somehow or other it's diminished research or its status or its value is less because it has had input from children in the shaping of the design and/or they've participated directly or they've helped analyse or present findings. (AG)**

### *Considering competence within the field*

Recognising the relative immaturity of children's research and the limited dialogue related to the ethical use of methods that occurs at the institutional level, a number of researcher participants called for more opportunities for children's researchers to come together to develop more responsive and appropriate protocols to help facilitate ethical practice, rather than hinder it.

**I think that to me the key is then in actually building networks of researchers who can share ideas and experience and provide good training and good support for researchers who are going to be going out and working with**



**children so that in practice they know how to deal with those really tricky things that arise when you're in the field. (SB)**

**Do we need to keep pushing through the barriers, we do. We need to keep identifying what they are and then getting success stories up basically and I think we need to look for opportunities too: where we can come together like the think tank where I met you in Sydney, because it does build our confidence about what we're doing but it plugs us into other resources and open the picture up constantly all the time; have you thought about this, have you thought about that, is this person able to... (AG)**

In some institutions, groups of researchers working with children have started discussing some of these ethical challenges and have reflected more broadly in practice. In the following chapters I will consider some of the experiences, challenges and benefits of practice reflexivity throughout each stage of the research process, in collaboration with children and peers alike.

#### **REFLEXIVE NOTE: RECONSIDERING COMPETENCE**

For the past 16 years I have worked with children and young people who provide care in families affected by an illness, disability, alcohol or other drug issue or a relative needing help because they are frail aged. In addition to volunteering on youth camps, managing local and national services, and advocating on their behalf, I have conducted 5 research projects with young carers, hoping to shed light on their experience and develop service responses that best meet their needs. In the practice and research space my colleagues and I have encountered two opposing conceptual frameworks for understanding the caring experience. On one side there is a view that the caring experience is primarily a negative one where children are described as 'victims' and where children's vulnerabilities and the

negative consequences of caring are centrally stated. Phrases such as ‘lost childhoods’, ‘shouldering the burden of care’ and ‘parentified children’ are prominent. Conversely, there is a growing literature that focuses primarily on the benefits of the caring experience, where children are described as ‘champions’ and ‘heroes’, resilient kids who are active citizens with great skills who need to be recognised for their significant contribution. Many young carers actively resist such characterisations, observing that they do not identify with the young carer label because it does not reflect their experience; it is underpinned by moral assumptions about child and family roles and expectations; and they do not believe that they are either a ‘hero’ or ‘victim’. Both are often founded on what children in our studies have seen as a false dichotomy: that children are either competent and active, or vulnerable and passive (see: Moore, Noble-Carr & McArthur, 2011, for more discussion).

In talking to researcher participants and analysing transcripts in relation to issues of competence, I reflected on my research with young carers and the need to think about these issues carefully. Firstly, in the research I have conducted with young carers I have tried to respect children’s wishes to not be characterised in either of the two ways they opposed. This has meant challenging both limiting notions of the caring experience and those which might first appear to be ‘liberating’ or ‘empowering’. Secondly, I have had to consider how I engage with them in research: what expectations do I have of them in relation to their participation and the way I engage with them? Do I have assumptions about their competence and vulnerability in the research space based on my preconceptions about other parts of their lives and their demonstrated abilities to assume (perceived) adult roles? Should I assume that because they appear to be altruistic in other parts of their lives that they should also be engaging in the research process?

This study has made me muse again about the conceptualisation of children in both the research and broader society settings. I have had to problematise two apparent truisms: ‘that because children are competent they should participate’ and ‘when they appear incompetent in managing adult-driven and adult-centred tasks they should be protected (read excluded) from research’. I can’t say that all of my questions have been answered but I do think that moving competence and vulnerability off a continuum will be of use.

## **6.8 *Summarising the chapter***

In this chapter I have explored issues related to competence and the ways that researchers, gatekeepers and others think about, negotiate and overcome issues related to children’s real and perceived lack of abilities within the research context. The chapter began with an exploration of what competence means to researchers and their shared view that children often experience, understand, and relate to the world in different ways to adults; and that there is benefit in giving them opportunities to discuss these differences through the research process. Drawing on standpoint theory, a number of researcher participants argued that in addition to providing an account of their lived experiences and understandings of the topics under investigation, children were able to reflect on the ways in which their understanding and experience was different to adults. This, researcher participants argued, provided alternate views and could help inform the development of richer and more responsive theory, policy and practice.

In this chapter, the challenges experienced by researchers when gatekeepers, ethics committees and others had different and conflicting notions of childhood competence were also considered. Ethical challenges were also identified and an ethics-in-practice approach was advocated by researcher participants who believed that ongoing reflexivity and negotiation with children could both inform practice and overcome ethical and

methodological issues as they arose. Engaging those in the field who were sceptical about children's competence was also encouraged.

In chapters 5 and 6 the dominant view that children are inherently vulnerable and inherently incompetent was challenged. Researcher participants also problematised a series of dichotomies that placed participation on one end of a continuum and incompetence and / or vulnerability at the other. Instead, they argued that children's vulnerability was often structural, and that through their engagement in participatory processes such vulnerabilities might be challenged and minimised. Similarly, they challenged the view that children were inherently incompetent and that adults were competent, and that children's exclusion from research was therefore justified. They argued, instead, that children's competence (and knowledge) was often different to adults' and that this difference was worthy of exploration through research processes.

In Chapter 7 I will further consider these ideas in relation to concepts of agency and participation. The chapter will present a series of characteristics that researcher participants believed represented good participatory processes and provide an overview of their ontological and epistemological underpinnings.

## CHAPTER 7: CHILDREN, AGENCY AND PARTICIPATION, AND RESEARCH

*So let that be a lesson to one and to all; a person is a person, no matter how small.* (Seuss, 1954)

*Science still and always will need the voices of people – small and large – who have been previously unheard. Not to represent something ‘authentic’, but to challenge the scientific imagination.* (Eldén, 2012, p. 13)

### ***7.1 Introducing the chapter***

In chapters 5 and 6 I considered children’s vulnerability and competence – assumed characteristics that have significant influence on the way that children are considered, engaged and researched. In this chapter, I will consider children’s agency and participation, and the ways that researcher participants recognise the way that children contribute to and interact in the places and spaces they occupy, and the societies within which they operate. When considering children’s agency and participation, it is important to recognise that different conceptions have often failed to recognise that as well as being influenced by the world around them, so are they influencing them. In Chapter 2 we considered these conceptions. In Table 4, I summarise the way that they have considered children’s agency and participation.

*Table 4: Conceptions of childhood, agency and participation*

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Agency / Participation</b>
Evil	Children are born evil and need to have evil educated and / or punished out of them	Children's value is in the future, influenced by adults and negatively influencing society. Children are passive recipients
Empty vessel	Children are born without innate evil or innocence but passively acquire knowledge and temperament	Children are passively influenced by adults and society – no real attention is paid to how they influence or are agents within it
Innocent	Children are born innately innocent	Children are passively influenced negatively by adults and society. They have no agency
Romantic	Childhood is a preferred state and one that is lost as they grow into adulthood	Child's play and children's cultures are recognised. The influence they have on each other is recognised
Evangelical	Children need to be saved from the adult world around them and from exploitation	Childhood is contextualised within families. Children's rights are managed by adults who determine their participation
Delinquent	Childhood marked by potential evil (external rather than internal)	Childhood scrutinised and controlled by adults for the good of children. They have no positive influence
Child-study	Children shaped by their environments	The State is responsible for children and for educating them. They have little agency
Psychological	Children developing within and as a result of their interactions with the environment and others	Children assimilate and accommodate knowledge and competence through interacting with environment. They have some agency
Socialising	Children socialised to take on the conventional values and norms through social conditioning	Increasing recognition of agency although not all socialisation theories recognise children's influence
Agentic	Childhood as a discrete period of life in which children make sense of their worlds and interact within it	Children are active agents influencing and being influenced by others and the worlds around

		them. Children are co-constructors
Holder of rights	Children are humans and hold rights	Children influence and are influenced by the worlds around them. They have a right to participation – but often need adults to enable this to occur. Children’s rights sit alongside parental rights (with some clashes)
End of childhood	Delineation between children and adults is blurred. Children are exposed to adult knowledge and culture (often to their detriment) and adults fail to let go of their engagement with ‘childish’ activities and cultures	Child-adult interactions are confused. Children heavily influenced by the media, by markets and by others who act to manipulate them. Children have limited capacity to protect themselves from manipulation

Researcher participants strongly believed that children were active agents who influenced those around them. In recognising this agency and children’s ability to know, researcher participants felt strongly that they should be afforded opportunities to meaningfully participate in research: not only because they had a right to do so but, as importantly, because their unique knowledge, experiences and insights were considered worthy of exploration and their contributions invaluable in the development of new theories and understanding.

I will begin by placing researcher participants’ views within the broader participation context before exploring the way that they developed their epistemological and ontological positions, which too will be discussed. Researcher participants observed that although gathering momentum, children’s participation is still considered challenging and can easily be undermined by the organisational, theoretical and political contexts within which children’s research is conducted. Researcher participants encouraged ongoing dialogue with children, with the gatekeepers that facilitated their participation, and within the

broader academic field, which enabled or challenged their active involvement. As in previous chapters, researcher participants advocated for co-reflexive activities to broadly consider how, why and to what effect children might participate.

## **7.2 *Considering agency ontologically***

Although children's agency has been asserted in much of the literature on children and participation, what it describes and what it means for practice has been left relatively unexplored. As Catherine Hartung observes in her PhD:

*[T]he more I read of the literature, particularly in the areas of children's rights and citizenship, and the more I spoke with proponents of children's participation, the more notions of children's agency and power kept appearing. Interestingly, as fundamental as this term seemed to be, there appeared relatively little in-depth discussion about how it was being understood and used within the field. (Hartung, 2011, p. 160)*

In her analysis of the literature, Catherine Hartung (2011, p. 163) suggests that agency has been increasingly underpinned by "a notion that a child can and does make decisions independently of the structures within which they live", and does influence the cultures, communities and systems within which they interact.

She observes that such a conceptualisation of agency, and the power afforded within it, is used to justify children's participation in two distinct ways. Firstly, she argues that power is conceptualised as something that children can be given through nourishment or empowerment. Through participatory processes, children are seen to be given opportunities to "influence the actions and decisions that affect their lives", thus empowering them as members of civil society (Veitch as cited in Hartung, 2011, p. 161).



The second way that it is reiterated is where power is seen as something that children already possess in the form of ‘competence’ and participation as something that children already have the capacity to be engaged in. By asserting that children are “autonomous, knowing, responsible and aware of their culture”, (Gordon et al. as cited in Hartung, 2001, p. 162) such a conceptualisation challenges those who argue against children’s participation, believing them “incapable of reasonable and rational decision-making” (Gordon et al. as cited in Hartung, 2011, p. 162). It recognises that children play an active role in society and are therefore contributors to its “(re) production” and “(re) interpretation” (Christensen & Prout, 2005, p. 50). As Robyn Fitzgerald writes:

*Implicit in this understanding... is the idea that children are social actors, actively involved in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the families and societies in which they live. Far from being seen as passive subjects in social structures and processes and as ‘products’ of culture, children are understood as having the capacity to actively contribute to the constitution of their own reality. (Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 84)*

As such, children are not simply being ‘enculturated’ by adults, but engage in a process of ‘interpretive reproduction’. One of the pioneers in this approach is Corsaro (2005) – a writer who Catherine Hartung draws heavily on in her writing. In his ethnographic research on children's friendships, Corsaro challenged socialisation constructs, which failed to recognise the unique cultural and relational dynamics inherent in children's interactions with each other. He argued that children's culture was an emergent property of children's active engagement with the spatial and temporal structures which constrain them. Corsaro’s ‘interpretive reproduction’ contends that children produce and participate in their own unique peer cultures, appropriating but reinterpreting information from the adult world for their own purposes. As such, they are not simply internalising society and

culture but, instead, are also actively contributing to its cultural production and change. Inherent in his theory, however, is a recognition that children's participation in society is constrained by the existing social structures and by its broader social reproduction processes (see: Corsaro, 2000).

Researcher participants talked about both of these issues, sometimes contradictorily. As discussed in *Chapter 6: Children, Competence and Research*, researcher participants were strongly of the view that children were capable of knowing and that they were already agents of change in their own local environments.

In some instances, this was a result of their own upbringing and the benefits that they experienced through their participation. Sharon Bessell reflects:

**I think for me a lot of it was to do with my personal experience as a child, a young person; that I at a personal level held very deeply the view that children are entitled to – I'll have to quote Article 12 – are entitled to “have a say on their lives and on decisions that are made around their lives”. I guess in some ways once I started and I think it was probably my personal experience that actually drew me to children's issues as the case study that I was using, rather than something else within the broad area of political science. (SB)**

Researcher participants also drew from their professional experience. Sharon Bessell (2011), for example, also drew from work she had completed on children's labour in Indonesia, arguing that her participants regularly made decisions about their lives and that the gravity of these decisions highlighted their capabilities. Within a context of strong structural constraints, she observed that children exercised considerable agency – agency not often considered possible of children – often without the involvement of parents or other adults.

**In the research that I've done I've seen children also make very big decisions about their lives. Children themselves take the decision to leave school and work for a whole range of reasons, from leading and wanting to support their families, to wanting to be able to afford to go to movies. So it's the whole spectrum and I think where children do take decisions sometimes in the literature and also in the kind of some of the literature, it's really run out to size as children making these profound decisions and some do. Some just want to be able to have a say and so – but I guess in terms of agency I think children do daily exercise agency in different ways and to different extents but they do so – and this is where I go back to sort of [the theories of] Qvotrup – but they do so within the constraints of the structures that they live in and they do so within the constraints of their immediate environment, the society and the social norms that they live and operate – within which they live and operate within the macro of political context. (SB)**

At the same time, researcher participants argued that participatory practices gave children opportunities to develop this capacity, and for this knowing to influence academic theorising and policy and practice. As Jan Mason observed:

**Children aren't always afforded opportunities to have input or to make decisions about things that affect their lives. Through participation, children learn new skills and are empowered to more actively influence the world around them. (JM)**

Instead of holding on to one conceptualisation of agency and power, it would appear that most saw children as both holding but also developing agency – two states which interacted within and as a result of their engagement in participatory activities. So too did

they recognise that children's agency existed within environments, systems and communities that influenced their ability to contribute and for this contribution to have effect. Echoing the views of Pole, Mizen and Bolton (below), researcher participants advocated a more nuanced understanding of children's agency and were ambivalent about considering it a static and unaffected reality:

*What we are saying, however, is that it is important for sociologists of childhood to contextualize agency, to recognize its limits and to acknowledge the constraints under which it is realized. In this way we feel that social constructionist and structural explanations and interpretations of aspects of childhood can co-exist, avoiding a rush towards relativism, and at the same time recognizing the important role that researchers have in facilitating the means by which the voice of the child can be heard. (Pole, Mizen, & Bolton, 1999, p. 52)*

According to Jan Mason, this recognition of children's agency problematises the positioning of adulthood and childhood as two ontological statuses: where childhood is seen as a passive state and adulthood as an active state. Like others (including, for example Lee, 2001; Prout & James, 1990) Jan Mason and Hood (2011) argue that although children are not always active in the same ways as adults, their roles should be recognised and not differentiated in a manner that characterises children as inherently incompetent, or adults as being fully competent actors. Like Lee (2001), she, Sharon Bessell and her peers (Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, & Waterson, 2011) argue for a more nuanced understanding of agency, and challenge the dichotomisation of concepts such as 'active', 'passive', 'being' and 'becoming'. They assert that by seeing all humans as humans who are in a constant state of change and growth, these dichotomies are bridged and the complexity and diversity of experience of humans at all points in the lifecycle are more appropriately understood.

Unlike some commentators, researcher participants were not of the view that as agency and structure should not be seen on a continuum, nor should agency and vulnerability or competence. Instead, they argued that children's positioning should take into account some of the inherent and structurally imposed vulnerabilities, and the fact that, by the fact of their age, children's experience and competence might be different or lesser than adults:

**I think the way which children exercise their agency or make decisions on their choices has to be understood within the environmental constraint, just as the way adults make and so are [placed] within the environment constraint and context... Children can be active agents while remaining vulnerable because of the contexts within which they exist: it would be unwise to suggest that because they play a role in their communities that children's vulnerability is cast away. (SB)**

As discussed in *Chapter 1*, childhood has been considered significant in its own right, not merely as a precursor to adulthood. Researcher participants generally advocated for a conception of child that took into account children's differing experience and capacity (from each other and from adults), while asserting their agency within socially constructed contexts and with differing social relations (Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004). Unlike individualised models of development, such a conception examines the way that children experience their lives within cultural, historical, social and relational arrangements and sees them as individuals who influence and are influenced by the world around them. As M. Graham and Bruce write:

*In these institutional formulations, the focus is directed toward the needs of individual children largely divorced from their social contexts which not only disallows their collective identities, but also promotes their shared processes of*

*exclusion, historical neglect, and differential treatment as irrelevant or non-consequential (Kraken, 1999). Thus, childhood as an integral part of society is shaped and prescribed by social forces which frame the "complex relations between children and institutions and the formal and informal hierarchies that influence children's lives" (Christensen & Proud, 2005, p.54). (2006, p. 57)*

For those who saw children as an oppressed group, conceptualising children in this way and allowing them to participate in processes that uncover their thoughts, feelings and experiences also allowed the uncovering of the ways in which oppression and discrimination play out:

**With a different standpoint, children can observe the ways that they are oppressed by adults and come to realise how this affects them. (JM)**

Such views reflect those of other children's researchers who have asserted that traditional conceptualisations of childhood allow children's continued oppression.

Researcher participants believed that these oppressive forces, rather than children's inherent limitations (as a result of having lesser experience and relatively less developed cognitive capacities), had greater influence on children's positioning and the way that they were understood. As Catherine Hartung writes in her 2010 book chapter:

*Children are marginalised in adult-centred society. They experience unequal power relations with adults and much of their lives is controlled and limited by adults. The main complications do not arise from children's inabilities or misperceptions, but from the positions ascribed to children. (Malone & Hartung, 2010, p. 26)*

### ***7.3 Considering participation ontologically***

Researcher participants contend that as active agents, children should be afforded the opportunity to participate in the life of the community and the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

The growing literature on children and participation often begins by placing participation within the broader rights discourse, codified in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which, alongside protection and developmental rights, affords children the right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Researcher participants observed in their interviews, and more extensively in their writing, that although many have written about participation, that like agency there still is a lack of consensus as to what it entails and how it might be meaningfully applied. In her thesis focusing on children's participation in family law decision making, for example, Robyn Fitzgerald notes:

*Children's participation is still a relatively new phenomenon, and it is only in the last two decades that there has been a discernible shift, in principle at least, toward children being viewed as participants in social and political life ... This dramatic growth in interest in children's participation, including the flourishing of empirical and conceptual literature on the subject does not, however, make the task of defining children's participation any more straightforward. (Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 77)*

Robyn Fitzgerald argues that participation remains an essentially contested concept which has been highly deliberated at every level, from "its meaning, importance and benefits, its

political and social applications for children” (2009, p. 78), and practised in varying ways depending on the political, social and environmental context within which it emerges. Beers and colleagues (2006), further this observation and argue that terms such as ‘meaningful participation’, ‘enabling environments’ and ‘participation’ are used without consistency amongst the different social groups and agencies exploring the concepts. Rather than considering how children’s participation benefits children and their societies in the present, she argues that most definitions are teleological and focus instead on what is done in the name of participation itself.

In her PhD thesis, Catherine Hartung observes that although there is no universal definition of children’s participation, several explanations have some currency. She notes that Chula, for example, defines participation as “a process in which children and youth engage with other people around issues that concern their individual and collective life conditions” (cited in Hartung, 2011, p. 18); while Hart sees it as:

*[A] Process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. (1992, p. 5)*

In summary, Catherine Hartung observes that while definitions seem concise and uncomplicated, a great variety of different activities, at different levels of society are now encompassed by ideas of participation without uniformity or an agreed set of underlying principles and characteristics.

Jan Mason argues that this is problematic, particularly as the participation agenda is easily manipulated by adults, for adults, and can act to perpetuate adultist notions of childhood and unbalanced adult-child relations. In her 2011 paper, Jan Mason and her peers (Mason et al., 2001) observe that different approaches to children’s participation have different



ideological frameworks, agendas and outcomes. At one end, adults control children's participation and prescribe the nature, extent and impact of children's involvement. As a result, children are afforded to speak but the extent to which their contributions are heard and acted upon are limited by what adults believe children are competent to comment on, and whether it is appropriate for them to do so. Very much driven by developmental perspectives, which assert notions of incompetence and vulnerability, such adultist models restrict children's involvement, and to a greater degree, filter their voices to meet adult agendas.

At the other end of the continuum Jan Mason and her peers observe that children initiate participatory processes, and do so in a way that challenges and removes the basis for oppression of themselves and others who are denied power and respect. This requires children to have the resources, and to an extent, the political nous to understand and respond within the structures and systems which surround them.

Between these two extremes is a collaborative model, which recognises that children have their own standpoint: one that should be respected and privileged. Rather than understanding competence in relation to age, it is understood in relation to experience. In such a way, it accounts for the heterogeneity of childhood experiences and the varied ability of children to reflect on experiences (Thomas, 2012). According to Jan Mason and her peers (2001, p. 19); "[c]rucial to applying this model is a questioning of the existing generational order, by recognising the vulnerability of children both economically and politically compared to groups at other ages. Such as working-age adults."

To engage such an approach, Jan Mason argued that adults needed to be aware of their power, and rather than divesting it, ensure that children were provided with opportunities,

skills and openings to enable them to be empowered within and through the research process. Jan Mason and her colleagues discuss:

*Those researching with children in the collaborative approach question, as feminists have, the hierarchical, cognitive authority implicit in much mainstream or top-down research and knowledge development. Generally, research working within such a framework has developed from a critical, structural approach to empowering oppressed groups. Researchers who use this approach note the importance of ‘repositioning oneself’ so that the researcher moves ‘from the role of plunderer to facilitator’ of children voicing their perspectives (John, 1996, p. 21). (Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 492)*

Jan Mason and Robert Urquhart’s model follows in Table 5.

*Table 5: Mason & Urquhart's models of children's participation (2001)*

	<b>Adultist</b>	<b>Children’s rights</b>	<b>Children’s movements</b>
Initiation of participation strategy	Agency / external statutory agency	Agency / external statutory agency	Children (e.g. Children’s labour movements)
Ideological framework	Positivist / market forces, consumer involvement	Phenomenological / constructivist	Minority rights, groups, struggle
Children viewed as	Passive, incompetent, developmentally incomplete ‘becomings’	Actors, competent, ‘beings’, oppressed	Actors, competent, human beings
Locus of power	Adults through governance and ‘best interests’ asymmetrical	Questions the generational order, symmetrical	Children, empowered
Needs identification	Normative from psychological	Individualised, from listening to children	Asserted both as a group and

	literature		individually
Method of decision making	Adults structure procedures	Negotiation between stakeholders	Children dominated
Knowledge	Adult authority	Opportunity for children to shape and contribute	Children experts on their own lives; recognises and challenges adults' power over children
Professionals	Superiority of expertise used for empowering	Facilitate through alliances	Provide resources
Children's voices	Filtered	Reflexivity by adults and children facilitates children's voices being heard	Challenges and unsettles adults

This representation challenges the spectrums posited within many sociological traditions: spectrums that consider 'agency' at one end and 'structure' at the other. Within these traditions, a range of experiences, issues and relationships, either in relation to the individual and the way that they relate to the world (agency), or the social, political, institutional and organisational worlds within which they live and understand the world (structure) are considered without consideration of the other.

Robyn Fitzgerald and others argue against this caricature and divide. They suggest, instead, that attention must be paid to the structural connections between the different arenas of action and the ways that structure and agency mutually influence each other, and the ways that children move within, and between, and influence these positions. As James and Prout suggest:

*Children might employ a variety of modes of agency within and between different social environments... the possibility [exists] that children locate themselves*

*flexibly and strategically within particular social contexts and that, through focusing on children as competent, individual social actors, we might learn more about the ways in which 'society' and 'social structure' shape social experiences and are themselves refashioned through the social action of members. (1995, p. 78)*

As such, they argued that participation needs to match the context, the resources and the nature of the research being conducted. Researcher participants generally problematised continuums of participation (such as Hart's ladder) because they believed that it implied that particular models of participation were universally better than others:

**Context will largely determine ... how I define participation. I don't believe in some typologies, particularly if they're linear [and] suggest one kind of participation is better than another. It really depends on purpose and it really depends on what you're inviting kids into and whether that's been made clear.**  
(AG)

## **7.4 Agency and epistemology**

As discussed in Chapter 6, researcher participants were of the view that children had the capacity to reflect upon and 'know' about issues that affected their lives.

In considering agency, they went on to argue that this knowing provided children with opportunities to relate to and navigate the worlds, systems and structures within which they operated, and to articulate these experiences. As Robyn Fitzgerald notes in her thesis, the Childhood Studies movement has enabled these concepts to be considered jointly:

*By emphasising the plurality of children's lives and the potential of children to actively construct their social lives, the new childhood studies have contributed to*

*children increasingly being valued in recent times as 'knowers', in relation to how they negotiate rules, roles and personal relationships, how they balance autonomy with (inter)-dependence, and how they take responsibility for their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. (Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 84)*

She goes on to argue that when children are conceptualised as knowers they are transformed into valuable participants in the social, cultural and political life, and in possession of agency, capacity, voice and status to participate. Unlike within the welfare paradigm, which emerges from a protectionist framework, such a conception attempts to protect children by affording them and enabling them to fully exercise their human rights, rather than making them solely dependent on adults to represent and protect them.

Within the research domain, an ontology that promotes children's agency and capacity easily affords an epistemological position that directly engages children in research and offers them meaningful opportunities in shaping, implementing and disseminating research project findings.

## ***7.5 Children's participation as co-researchers***

There has been a growing body of research conducted with and by children on issues that they identify as being of interest, of needing to be researched, and of having value for children themselves. Writers such as Kellett (2005), who established the Children's Research Centre at the University, have argued that research conducted by children best reveals their knowledge and opens up opportunities for their status in society to be lifted through the research venture itself and from the symbolic capital that it affords.

Jan Mason, Anne Graham and Sharon Bessell spoke about experiences that they had in engaging children (mostly young people) in the research process, either as co-facilitators

or co-researchers. Although they believed that this type of approach had great strengths and was of benefit to the children, and to the research process, they and the other researcher participants were ambivalent to suggest that all research with children should be conducted in such a way.

As seen in Chapter 5, Neerosh Mudaly, for example, reported on the vicarious trauma that she and her colleagues had experienced in research about child sexual abuse, and was adamant that children should not be engaged in research about such topics. Sharon Bessell, a strong advocate for children's participation, felt that assessing the validity of children's research on the degree to which children conducted the research itself was limited and potentially unethical. She spoke of a research project on corporal punishment in which colleagues argued that children should find children who had been physically abused, and interview them about their experiences. Although she agreed that children might have greater access to their peers, had the capacity to conduct the interviews, and may elicit richer data as a result; she did not believe that they should be placed in a situation where they might be confronted by traumatic stories that would affect them in a profound way. She believed that adults often developed self-soothing skills, and as trained professionals, had a network of supports around them, which may not be available to children. As discussed in Chapter 5, she also argued that although children were more often exposed to and reflected on violent, unsafe and unpleasant experiences than adults were willing to admit, the opposite was also true. She argued that adults shouldn't suppose that because particular children lived in unsafe, unhealthy or caustic environments that they should be further exposed to unsettling experiences, knowledge or relationships uncritically. She contended that her view that children should not be engaged as co-researchers in projects that discussed such issues may be patronising, but felt that this was warranted. At the same time, however, she noted that she would not send inexperienced researchers in to conduct

research if she believed that they were not ready to deal with the content emotionally, or if good processes were not in place to ensure that they were properly supervised and supported.

As seen, researcher participants were generally supportive of the idea of children's engagement throughout the research process but did put some caveats on their involvement. These will be put in the context of good research practice as discussed below.

## **7.6 *Participation and the ethics of research***

As has been discussed in chapters 5 and 6, the way that ethics committees consider children theoretically and ontologically, and their knowledge epistemologically, will influence how they judge children's involvement in research. As Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald observe in a paper on participatory research with children:

*The notion of 'ethics' is a complex construct since it, too, is imbued with particular values and beliefs that influence how we approach our research. 'Doing ethics' surely involves adherence to procedural requirements but it also strongly reflects a values orientation in terms of the issues that are privileged as part of this process (Somerville 2006). How ethics is conceptualized, then, is instrumental in shaping the conditions and possibilities for children's involvement in research. (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a, p. 134)*

Many of the researcher participants were of the view that, as highlighted in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children were active citizens and had the right to "participate in decision-making processes that may be relevant in their lives and to influence decisions taken in their regard—within the family, the school or the community"

(United Nations, 1989). At the same time, however, they recognised that children also needed to be protected from harm: from being exploited, and from participating in processes that have a negative impact on them now and into the future. They recognised that this tension has underpinned much of the ethical debate about children's involvement in research, with well-meaning adults, institutions and systems prioritising the removal or reduction of risk over children's right to participate. This has had significant implications for children and children's research. Skelton's work, for example, "highlights concern about the ways in which ethical research practice can actually close down participation for children and young people and also fails to accord them the same rights as adults" (2008, p. 23).

### *Consent*

Since the completion of the Nuremberg Trials, research ethicists have argued that participation in human research should be voluntary: that individuals should consent to their participation after being provided with enough information about the nature of their engagement, and the potential benefits and risks that they might encounter as a result (NHMRC, 2007). Consent assumes that the participant is fully cognisant of all aspects of the research that they are being invited to participate in (Burke, Abramovitch, & Zlotkin, 2005).

The issue of whether children have the capacity to consent to participate in research is a vexed one and one that occupies a significant proportion of the narrative around children's engagement in research (see, for example: Balen et al., 2006; Belanger & Connelly, 2007; Brody, Annett, Scherer, Perryman, & Cofrin, 2005; Cocks, 2006; Coyne, 2009; Edwards & Alldred, 1999; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Glantz, 1996; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; Heath, Charles, Crow, & Wiles, 2007). As Sharon Bessell (2008) notes in one of her journal



articles, there are some studies that suggest that children, particularly those under ten, are incapable of making informed decisions about their involvement in research. However, as Burke et al. (2005, p. 719) observe:

*Some of the vulnerability in levels of understanding reported in [these]... studies may have been a function of how the assent forms were written as opposed to a developmental barrier that children under nine years of age had difficulty crossing.*

They argue, too, that if provided with information in an age appropriate way, even young children can understand and respond successfully.

As with other rights, children's right to consent to participate in research has often been placed in the hands of adults (often their parents) to act in their perceived *best interests*. As will be further discussed later in this chapter, the way in which participation is determined by adults, and children's best interests are considered, is contentious. Researcher participants were strongly of the view that even when parents or other adults agreed for children to participate, children themselves should have the ultimate say. They believed that when this did not occur, children's vulnerability was pronounced. Deborah Harcourt, for example, spoke about research on children who had autism. She suggested that the research was quite intrusive and included physical and cognitive testing: testing conducted with the consent of adults but not of the children themselves. This was because the researchers and the ethics committee did not believe that these children had the capacity to understand notions of consent and of the consequences and benefits the research might open up. She observed:

**These children were being tested without the knowledge, without an explanation because they were autistic and they were so far on the Autism**

**[spectrum] that really they wouldn't know anyway. Adults were making decisions for them without them having any say. That's what I call vulnerable.**  
**(DH)**

Although she contended that these children may have different capacities, she believed that they did make choices about what things they did during the day, they could articulate their wishes, and what they liked and didn't like doing; and that these should be used to determine whether children participated, rather than solely relying on their parents to decide if and how they might be involved.

Researcher participants were generally of the view that it was often easier to provide ethics committees with tools and processes that responded to children's perceived (and sometimes demonstrated) incompetencies, rather than to continually debate whether or not children could, in fact, understand the adult-centred paperwork and consent forms that were used in other research projects. A number of researcher participants reflected that this proved to be a beneficial move: that by developing information packages and child-appropriate tools, children appeared more able to participate and to do so in a way that felt comfortable and suitable.

In such circumstances, researcher participants included the basic requirements of their ethics committees but then used additional tools to ensure that children more fully understood the concepts and approaches being taken. In addition to using the mandatory paperwork, for example, Sue Dockett engaged in an ongoing discussion of assent with her child participants, asking them at key points whether they had understood that they could answer or not answer questions and whether they would like to continue. In such a way she did not solely rely on children having understood the research documentation but afforded them opportunities to more fully understand and experience consent in practice.

This pragmatic approach to the issue of competency and consent proved to be effective but did cause some unease for researcher participants who were of the view that children could consent and felt that they were compromising their positions by suggesting otherwise.

They recognised that some writers, including Oakley (1994), were more assertive and suggested that children's competence should be assumed, and methods developed around that as a starting point; that the same methods be used in research with children as those used with adults, unless children prove to be unable to respond. Sharon Bessell and Catherine Hartung observed that the potential flaw aspect in Oakley's argument, however, was the view that adults fully appreciate the risks and benefits associated with research, and make informed decisions about their participation. In considering children's abilities, Burke et al. (2005) make the observation that adults also often misunderstood the nature and purpose of research, and don't engage with the often wordy explanations provided in written or oral form at the start of a research project.

This tension is apparent in the Australian context. As Farrell (2010, p. 400) writes:

*The competence paradigm and the need to ensure high quality early childhood experience can generate a sense of optimism about children's capacities to participate and the merit of their participation for themselves and those around them. Such optimism, however, can eclipse the very real challenges, both conceptual and methodological, that are involved in child research. There can be challenges in determining appropriate research methods and mechanisms for gaining consent and allowing for dissent.*

Researcher participants observed that providing children with rights to choose to participate in research (or not) was sometimes challenging for adults, who were of the

view that if parents or other caretaking adults had given permission to researchers to engage with their children, that they should do so. Sue Dockett shared, for example, that the rights discourse and the process of explaining it to children didn't sit comfortably with some of her teacher colleagues:

**So yes, some teachers basically chose not to be involved in the project, or chose to have quite limited involvement in the project, because they really weren't comfortable with the idea that we were pushing kids, even young kids, as active participants in the research with the right to say no, and with a right to know a fair bit about the research. (SD)**

### *Consent in practice*

Although researcher participants spend some time considering consent in the traditional sense of the word, they argued that, in alignment with the 'ethics in practice' process identified in Chapter 5, consent should be considered in a broader and more responsive way.

Firstly, they recognised that children sometimes needed to be empowered to be able to make decisions about whether they wanted to participate in research, and how they would like to participate. This was often problematic, particularly when other adults (teachers, parents, workers) had made decisions about their participation: decisions that children often felt unable to challenge or refute. As such, researcher participants felt that it was important to begin research activities by helping children to understand the ways that they might participate, or choose not to, and by providing them with strategies to actualise these choices.

**In terms of decision-making, our standard introduction is that we have permission, that their Mum or their Dad or someone has actually said it's okay to talk to them, but it's up to them. It's their decision. (SD)**

Such considerations have been discussed, at length, in the literature on children's assent and consent (see, for example: Alderson & Morrow, 2005; Jones & Stanley, 2008; Rossi, Reynolds, & Nelson, 2003; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Without going into significant detail here, researcher participants were of the view that regardless of whether parents had agreed for their children to participate in research, ethical researchers should elicit children's consent to participate in research independently and provide multiple opportunities for children to choose what, how and when they might participate.

Unlike some commentary that suggests that children are unable to fully appreciate the gravity of their engagement with research, or their capacity to determine whether it is in their best interests to do so, researcher participants were of the view that children understood the research process and could be supported to understand any potential risks or issues that might emerge. In her commentary for the NSW Compendium on Research with Children, Sharon Bessell summarises:

*Based on my experience of conducting research with children and young people (and indeed adults) from a wide range of ages, backgrounds, experiences, and cultures I would agree that some children and young people — like some adults — find it difficult to understand the nature of some research. Most children and young people, however, do (in my experience) have the capacity to understand what is being asked of them, so long as the information is presented in an accessible manner and there is time to fully explain and answer questions if necessary. (Bessell in ARACY & NSWCCYP, 2008, p. 118)*

Rather than seeing the obtainment of children's consent as a hurdle that must be overcome at the beginning of a research activity, researcher participants argued that children's participation needed to be negotiated throughout their involvement in a project, giving children multiple 'outs' and openings for renegotiations. Sue Dockett termed this 'process assent', and argued that researchers needed to be aware of and respond to both active and passive acts of consent or dissent, realising that children might not necessarily articulate their wishes verbally:

*Children can provide assent in a number of ways, such as responding to a smiley chart noting how they feel about participating in research. Equally important is an adult reading of children's non-verbal actions and signals. For example, children seeking to avoid researchers, turning away from interactions or generally seeking to be engaged elsewhere are all signs that a particular child may not feel comfortable participating. (Dockett in ARACY & NSWCCYP, 2008, p. 57)*

Helping children to consider the research, and weighing up the benefits of their participation (as individuals and as groups) was considered an important first step. Deborah Harcourt recounted times when she talked with children about the possible outcomes of the research (both positive and negative), and negotiated with them ways that they might minimise any which children felt were compromising or unjustified. Throughout the interview she would remind children of this conversation, constantly renegotiating the nature and focus of research activities to ensure that they felt comfortable with the process.

In providing these opportunities, researcher participants argued that researchers must be aware of the way that the relationship they have with children might reflect adult-child relations more broadly. They encouraged researchers to consider the ways that language,

communication styles, and methodological tools might influence the nature of their interactions with children. As Deborah Harcourt observes:

*Thoughtful consideration had to be given to the language, or other forms of communication, which were to be used to support the child's decision-making. Researchers may unconsciously use a language of power, which implies that the child will participate. Phrasing requests to participate such as "I have come to get your permission" or "I have come to get you to sign" saying you agree to be involved in my research may have the intention to seek permission, but the request is posed as an already negotiated agreement. Children may then find it difficult or challenging to decline the researcher's request. (Harcourt in ARACY & NSWCCYP, 2008, p. 77)*

Allowing children alternatives to research was another strategy: Sue Dockett, for example, shared that she would often conduct research in child-friendly spaces (such as in sandpits or in playrooms), where children already felt comfortable, had some power and where they could play independently if they were disinterested in the research or thought they would like to do this instead.

For many of the researcher participants, this negotiation was an ongoing process. Robyn Fitzgerald spoke of occasions when she allowed children to ask her questions, to move the conversation to other relevant but unplanned areas, and to shape the way that the research developed. Sue Dockett worked with small groups and spent time, using her skills as an early childhood educator, to negotiate and discuss issues related to power and participation, recognising that it was almost impossible to negate many of the structural power imbalances encountered:

**So there are little things like that. Now, I'm not sure that that really makes a difference for a child. I'm not sure that they necessarily feel like that's reducing the power, or whether we're kidding ourselves, but they're efforts to not - I don't think we can take away the power differential. Particularly in schools, an adult is addressed in a particular way, they have specific expectations and ways of acting, and as a teacher I probably have those without knowing them. But if we can at least create a situation where there's perhaps two or three kids involved in a conversation, it's a comfortable conversation, they know that they can move backwards and forwards as they need to, they know we're not going to take away the stuff they work on, it tries to take it down a little bit. But, like I said, I'm not sure that we ever get away from it. (SD)**

All of these practices attempt to confront what Ridge refers to as the “ethical considerations and issues of power and control” (Ridge, 2003, p. 5); a confrontation that requires ongoing negotiation between adult researchers and children during all phases of the research process, so that, as Jan Mason and Hood (2011, p. 493) put it, “the roles of ‘teller and told’ are shared and jointly created in both interviews and analysis of data”.

Although these strategies afforded children some power and control, researcher participants did make it clear that they contextualised these choices within the broad research process. Anne Graham, for example, recounted situations when she had reminded children of the nature and purpose of the study when their wishes could compromise the results:

**Sometimes children want to guide the conversation to something not relevant to the study. This is okay, and ultimately if we are affording them these**



**choices then we need to respect this. However, children often respond when they are reminded of the purpose of the particular study and what things still need to be considered. "Yes I'm interested in hearing about that too but would it be alright to talk about these things first and come back to that later - I just don't want to miss out on the stuff that helps answer our research question". Children are generally okay with this and understand why it's happening. (AG)**

Anne Graham reported that children understood the research process, more than adults expected, and were often quite committed to achieving the negotiated outcome. She observed that philosophically, she encouraged children to decide what things they would like to talk about but was always aware of the practical implications of these choices.

Even when researcher participants had attempted to redress unequal power relations, they reported that children were often confused about these dynamics and uneasy in the way they interacted with adult researchers. As such, they suggested that researchers needed to be patient and constantly reaffirm their commitment to choice and to responding to children's wishes.

It is important to note that researcher participants refuted the idea that children were primarily passive participants, suggesting that children often had a considerable deal of power within the research process, which they exercised throughout. Researcher participants, for example, observed that children who were not willing to participate in activities absented themselves, created distractions, or 'played dumb' so as to be excused. Sue Dockett and Deborah Harcourt, two early childhood experts, were of the view that adult researchers needed to be aware of these dynamics, particularly when children made up stories to either hide their true feelings or experiences when feeling discomfort, when

they created answers based on what they believed adults wanted to hear, or when they just wanted to play:

**I suspect that's what comes from my years of working with kids, is knowing that kids are smart enough to look at somebody and say, "Look, you're a sucker", well actually not necessarily in a nasty way, but it's part of the play. (SD)**

**I've noticed, particularly with some of our students, for example ... they think [that]... the children's every word is like gospel, and if you know kids well enough, there's a real sense of saying, "Come on, I know that's not the case". So there's that sense of knowing them well enough and them knowing you well enough that you can play a game, but you've got a much greater knowledge of them. If you don't, then I think you do find yourself sometimes being told really nice stories by kids. (SD)**

In acknowledging this resistance, Anne Graham observed that children were often more willing to talk about things that might seem difficult than what adults might expect, and that adults should come to discussions with as little apprehension as possible:

**Kids don't always resist the conversations you think they'll resist. I think adults sometimes think that kids will be reluctant to talk about things that might be difficult but my experience has been that it's often the opposite: that children want to talk about the big issues, the tough stuff and its often adults who find it uncomfortable. Working this through with children is essential: allowing children to make decisions and allowing them opportunities to talk is important. It takes some skill for a researcher to monitor how children are going with the conversation and to navigate away from things when children**

**need you to. But it also takes skill to stay where children want you to stay.**

**That's why it's important to be self-aware and reflexive. (AG)**

The importance of doing so was stressed by researcher participants who argued that without this ongoing dialogue and consent, children might feel compelled to disengage or to only provide answers which they believed the adult researchers wanted of them. Although this concern has been raised in other areas of qualitative research, researcher participants who had worked with other age groups observed that children might be more likely to use these resisting techniques because they are less likely to feel as though they have control in the research process. Constantly reflecting on this possibility and 'checking in' with children was considered pivotal to ensure that such concerns are dealt with early.

## ***7.7 What makes good participatory research?***

To be child-focused and participatory, researcher participants argued that children's participation in research should be meaningful on children's own terms, rather than on those dictated by researchers or by the strictures of funding arrangements. They felt that successful research with children needed to be characterised by: voluntary participation; a symmetry in adult-child relations and a recognition of power differentials; accessibility; active engagement of children at a number of stages and in a number of ways; being relationship based and facilitating dialogue; being conducted in a way that enabled the co-construction of knowledge; and having a positive impact for children. To be able to do this, researcher participants stressed the important of ongoing reflexive practice (which will be discussed further below).

To be credible, researcher participants also argued that it needed to be conducted with academic rigour and be available to scrutiny by peers, the field and by children themselves. In such a way, Sharon Bessell argues that it can be confidently used for policy planning and monitoring, and ultimately increase the likelihood that it will have positive effects for children (Bessell, 2006).

### *Change*

Robyn Fitzgerald strongly believed that children's participation should be judged just as much by the extent to which it enabled change – for the child, the researcher, the process and the outcome – as the level or extent that children owned or participated in its design, conduct and implementation.

**If you take the word participation to its etymological roots then you go back to ... it goes back again to the act of the Eucharist - where you exchange something and you both leave the event changed. So if you think about the etymology of the word 'participation' you have quite a profound emphasis on sharing and change, and so participation then becomes a little bit starker in the way you think about things. (RF)**

This added dimension was important in that it moved debates beyond a consideration of the level of participation to an impact of the participation; a move advocated by Thomas (2007), Alderson and Morrow (2005), and others.

In considering whether they would embark on research with children, Robyn Fitzgerald and Anne Graham felt strongly that they needed to reflect on whether the organisation that was commissioning the work, they as researchers and the children involved, were all ready

and willing to act upon and change, as a result of the research process and its outcomes.

Robyn Fitzgerald observed:

**Well I think in the eye of the beholder so for me, the institutions I'm doing the research for, we often say, "how ready are you for change?" If we're going to invite children to this research, "how ready are you and what's your capacity to change?" Because if this is just an exercise about getting a whole lot of kids' voices so you can tick this box then we won't be doing it. And [for] me, "how willing and open am I to keep going with questions with kids?" It may be uncomfortable as long as it's respectful that challenge me, the change element is there but it's also with the children, how much change do they want to be effected as a result of their participation, so learning what that is and then advocating for it. So the change has a different emphasis depending on whether it's me inviting the conversation or whether it's the children being open to that conversation, but it's certainly an important thing for me to be able to say to them, "this is all I can change, it's not probably going to feel like a lot" but we'll be doing our hardest. (RF)**

As Robyn Fitzgerald highlights at the end of the quote, adults cannot always assure change or the type of change that children are advocating for. As such, she believed that participatory processes run the risk of 'setting children up'. As such, she encouraged researchers to consider how they might best respond to children, and keep them informed about how what they were saying affected their practice, and the overall research outcome. A powerful tool for achieving this was the constant feeding back of information, and the ongoing negotiation of stated hopes the project. Jan Mason added:

**And I think that's so important but it's important not just that we act on it but that children need to see how we attempt to act on it ... I often haven't done this myself in my research. [I] mostly haven't done it because it's too difficult. (JM)**

In addition to considering how children were engaged in the research, researcher participants made observations about the politics of research impact because, as Jan Mason notes, there is not always a natural match between the facilitation of children's agency through research, and positive changes in policy and practice. Jan Mason and her colleague Hood (2011, p. 494) argued that this is the case in other areas of social research, particularly when it is based on the subjectivities of those "at the lower levels of the knowledge hierarchy (such as children)". In these instances, Finch (1986) observes that research often has impact in an indirect and diffuse way, and at the conceptual rather than at the practical level.

When considering the success of a research project and its process, researcher participants were quick to argue that it should have a level of positive impact for children, as participants, but more broadly for children as a group. Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald observe some of the broader benefits of participation:

*The benefits of participation are well established and have been found to include enhancement of skills, capacity, competence and self-esteem (Alderson 2000) improved self-efficacy (Greenwood and Levin 1998; Morrow 1999); strengthening of social, negotiation and judgment skills through trial, error and compromise (Raynor 2003); as well as increased protection, as a result of having the opportunity to identify issues and be heard (Alderson 2000). Raynor (2003) further suggests that an important argument for children's participation has to do with the*

*benefits that result from adults and children talking together while making decisions, not least because this enables adults and children to mutually propose and agree to decisions, thus improving the chances of the decisions working.*

(Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010b, n.p. )

Within the constraints of the academic field, researcher participants observed, however, that this aspect was not always achievable, measurable, or of notable importance to funders, universities or the broader academic community. This was frustrating for each of the researcher participants who felt that influencing change and having a positive impact were two of the most motivating factors for them. All reflected that they were often unsure about whether their lifework had made considerable change for children, particularly those most vulnerable within the community.

**I was hoping that it'll have some political clout, and it hasn't, and that's why I think to some extent, you know, fortunately the academic world depends very much on... you know, if I'd interviewed 200 children or 500 children maybe it would have had more political clout. But the individual stories and experiences of children, it doesn't stand out to change governments or policies, and things like that, and so to some extent I feel sad in that sense that even with the 10-12 children that participated, I can't go back and say we've made those changes. (JM)**

They believed that, as an academic field, more work needed to be done to consider how research might be best utilised to have a positive impact for children, and that the research's capacity to influence should be a determining factor in whether it be conducted. This, they believed, required a reorientation of current research frameworks and a reprioritisation of the broad research agenda.

**...as a researcher you don't know whether your work makes a difference and you sometimes don't know for a good while whether it's had any influence or impact, and the ways we measure those things in academia are not necessarily how I would measure them or what matters to me personally. (AG)**

### *Symmetry*

Jan Mason observed that research with children is still primarily constructed in contexts characterised by institutionalised, asymmetrical, adult-child relations; in which age was considered a structural factor. In her many years in academia, she reported witnessing limitations across the research process: in the ways that research agendas were set (particularly through the grant-getting process), in the ways that children were accessed and their consent elicited, in the analysis and presentation of findings, and the way that research was used to influence change. Jan Mason muses:

*Here, age acts to prohibit children's entry to adult-centrally organised institutions of research. In particular, age obstructs the extent to which children can take initiative in research leadership activities in a fundamental way. (Mason & Hood, 2011, p. 493)*

Jan Mason argues, however, that some adults are seeing the way forward in facilitating children's agency and being more inclusive of children's research agendas – either in supporting them to conduct their own research, or in engaging them in processes to identify research priorities and to co-develop research projects alongside supportive research teams. However, she observes that this requires significant resources, and for adults to assist with skill transfer to enable that their research is considered credible. For, as Kellett, Robinson and Burr (2004) note, it is not a lack of competence linked with their child status, but a lack of skills and tools that adults provide to other adults to enable them



to do research. Jan Mason and her colleague Hood (2011, p. 493) go on to argue that these skills “are what empower adults to participate in the formal creation of knowledge”, and that these skills could be provided to children through training and with support.

### *Redresses power*

Jan Mason (2011) argues that to access children’s knowledge, researchers must attend to the structural issues around age, and reduce the asymmetry between adults and children by balancing power relations, so that researchers can explore the meanings that children give to their worlds. Researcher participants spent some time considering power and the power relations inherent in adult-child interactions. They recognised that both children and adults had been socialised to have a series of expectations about how the two groups interact: expectations that were not always conducive to positive outcomes. As Sue Dockett observes:

**There’s the issue of power, in that, particularly in educational settings, adults make decisions about a whole range of things in just about everything, not just academic work. So there are issues about how children are perceived by adults and how they’re subject to decisions. (SD)**

They recognised that their power could be of benefit to children, a situation that children themselves often understood and drew upon.

**Obviously they’re going to talk to me. Some children liked to talk to me as a professor because they know, well they think that I might have some influence but it’s also, which is one thing which is real. (JM)**

They observed that a number of things could be done to redress power imbalances. Firstly, they advocated for providing children with opportunities to participate at the early stages:

by helping to set the research agenda, by affording them opportunities to be co-facilitators in the research design and implementation, and in analysing data. As Ennew and Plateau note:

*Participation is a process in which 'ownership of the problem' is increasingly shared between researchers and researched. In the first instance, researchers are likely to own the research problem and design the research, using methods that enable stakeholders to express themselves ... Working directly with stakeholders (including children), and gradually handing over responsibility to them for setting the research agenda, will change the role of researchers to 'facilitators', and turn the research process into a joint project. (as cited in Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, & Waterson, 2009, p. 372)*

Secondly, they advocated for co-reflexive practice where children were given opportunities and the language, to consider and provide guidance to researchers on how adult-child relations impacted on their participation and how this might be redressed. Unlike previous writers, most researcher participants felt that they should not divest their authority (the power they held and which could be used to protect, teach and support children), but provide children with opportunities to empower themselves through the process. Giving them regular opportunities to consent and dissent was seen as one such strategy.

### *Accessible*

To be both child-centred and robust, researcher participants argued that research with children needed to be accessible to a wide group of children, particularly those most marginalised and whose voices were less often heard. Researcher participants shared, with some frustration, that children's decisions to participate was reliant on, influenced by, and

often considered secondary, to gatekeepers; including community organisations, schools, teachers and parents, each of whom had different priorities and expectations. As Jan Mason notes:

**They all have their own interests and agendas, and these interests and agendas often reflect the adultist views we have about children, understating their capacity and often silencing their voice. (JM)**

Researcher participants were concerned about the level of gatekeeping that occurred, observing that it reflected what Skelton (2008, p. 28) describes as “an adultist construction of research ethics that privileges the researcher, adults connected with children and university anxieties related to prosecution”. They noted that this ‘hierarchy of gatekeepers’ determined children’s participation by an adult-focused assessment of imminent risk and potential harm, and also an (often unchecked) assessment of children’s competence and capacity to participate, both as individuals and as a group.

Across the projects discussed by researcher participants, it would seem as though gatekeepers considered the following when determining children’s involvement in research:

- The potential risks for parents and families, as the private and secret domain of family life was revealed;
- Whether there was actually relative value in drawing from children’s experiences rather from adults themselves;
- The capacity of the child to represent their lived experience unaided;
- The perceived usefulness of the research (for individual children, for children generally, for their organisation, for their profession);
- The potential costs and resources required to assist participation;

- The potential harm that children might experience as a result of their involvement; and,
- The implications for their service delivery, its reputation and approach.

They noted that in some projects there could be up to five or six gatekeepers operating, each with different expectations and views about children and children's research:

**Yeah, I mean, gatekeepers are interesting and I in many ways don't think we should get rid of gatekeepers, but gatekeepers, I think, don't realise how many layers upon layers there are. If you look at just getting into schools, by the time you go through - I mean, I have no problem with going through ethics committees, but generally one should be enough. But there's not one. If you look at New South Wales, by the time you go through the university ethics committee, then there's the Department of Education ethics group, and then you've got to go to the local level, and then you've got to go through the principal, and then you've got to go through the teacher, and then you might get to the parents, and then you might get to the kids. Now, yeah, I don't think there should be open slather at all, but I think there are a number of gatekeepers for a whole range of reasons. (SD)**

These issues, coupled with some of the practical restraints of engaging children in research often led to the non-participation of children in research activities.

It is important to note that although researcher participants were often frustrated by the way that gatekeepers could restrict children's access and slow down the research process, some were aware that these gatekeepers played an important part in supporting children to participate, and in ensuring that the research was ethical and responsive to their needs. As Neerosh Mudaly observes:

**Like I said, whilst there are times when it would be nice not to have them, at least you do have some surety that when you finally get to meet the kids and talk with them that there has been a level of scrutiny. You would hope by that point you're not putting kids in any position that might increase their vulnerability, or your own, for that matter. Because I think, as researchers with children, there are issues about your own research vulnerability. (NM)**

Researcher participants argued that one of the reasons why the research community was sometimes ambivalent about children's participation, was because they had not had direct opportunities for their assumptions to be challenged about children's vulnerability, and their capacity, and for children's abilities to be revealed.

Recognising that it was often impossible to provide those not involved in the children's research domain with these experiences, researcher participants were of the view that it was their responsibility to share their own observations, learning, and beliefs; and to engage in a dialogue within which these constructs might be posited, considered, debated and refined. Bringing detractors and those who were ambivalent about children's competence into 'the tent' was seen as a valuable exercise. As Catherine Hartung and her colleague Karen Malone note:

*[W]hen considering children's participation, and particularly children as change agents and active citizens, we believe it is important to acknowledge children as capable and competent agents who, with adults, can imagine and create projects around their lives, instead of the projects that adults imagine and design for them.*  
(Malone & Hartung, 2010, pp. 31-32)

Anne Graham reflected:

**We're still so reliant on the so-called scientific methods, or validating so many policy and funding decisions and various other things like that, but I just wish that we could bring into it a bit more dialogue. (AG)**

**I suppose I try to be patient with that view that's there because I do understand it but it goes back to what I was saying before; if in fact we don't trust children's accounts then we should be upfront about that and not attempt to do it and I think if we do trust children's account, this is not about giving away our authority as researchers or as adults or as anything else, this is much more about, you know there's that whole idea that you can share power and still retain your authority. (AG)**

### *Research meaningful on children's terms*

In addition to recognising that research approaches need to reflect participatory goals, there was a view that when agentic conceptualisations of childhood were adopted, researchers needed to consider not only *how* they conducted research, but also the focus of the issues and experiences being examined.

A number of the researcher participants were interested, for example, in the power relations between children and the institutions, the formal and informal hierarchies, and the systems that they encountered in their childhoods. For those who had worked in the child welfare system, much discussion centred on children's interactions with the courts (Fitzgerald, 2009; Newell, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2009; Taylor, Fitzgerald, & Graham, 2005), with welfare organisations (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010b), and within the systems that shaped them (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011). Early childhood educators were interested

in the nature of the relationships between children and teachers, children and their communities, and with each other. Sharon Bessell, the lone political scientist's focus was on civic participation, child labour and their relationships with adults in the family and community.

Researcher participants were of the view that when methodologies were developed in relationship with children, the tools were not only more robust (because children understood them), but were also more engaging and responsive to children's needs and wishes:

**It turns kids off research for a start if they're just answering a lot of inane questions that don't matter to them and they don't understand them anyway or they don't matter. So I know it sounds idealistic and none of this gets played out perfectly, but it's been a process of trial and error to try and look at how we can actually do that better. (RF)**

Researcher participants made the point that when designing methods for engaging children the robustness of methodologies must not be compromised. In fact, they denied the view that methodologies for engaging children are overly simplistic and not credible. As Sue Dockett noted:

**Sometimes you do set yourself up to give them [children] far too much opportunity to do whatever and the real challenge... is [to] bring that back down to a reasonable level where they know what you're asking about and what you want them to do... Allowing children to control the interview is important, but to practical reasons you also need to ensure that they are on track and meeting the needs of the research at the same time. (SD)**

### *Relationship based*

One key feature of effective participation that emerged was that it was relationship-based. Researcher participants believed that children needed to be engaged in a dialogue about their participation and that this was best facilitated within the context of a trust-worthy and power-responsive relationship.

**I suppose the things that I've come to very strongly is that participation is not possible outside of a relationship and I think that comes back to the old thing about kids' agency versus their vulnerability. I think it's probably the nature of the relationships that we now need to have the conversation around... (AG)**

**I'm 60 now, 61 years old, and I still have the ability to enjoy being with children and I think kids quite often pick that up and that's why I'm generally good in my counselling work because I can bond and connect with children and young people of any age, and I use that skill but it must have come from somewhere where I've picked up the skills about relationships. (NM)**

Researcher participants believed children were not only more willing to participate when they trusted the researcher and had a relationship with them, but the data gathered from them was richer and more reliable. They stressed the value of building rapport, developing trustworthy relationships where a valuable dialogue was possible, and continually reaffirming this relationship. As such, researcher participants suggested conducting projects in a way that required time, resources and ongoing opportunities to help children understand the nature of the research and their and the researchers role within it. This, they observed, was not always possible within the constraints of usual research processes where timeframes were short, and opportunities to foster and affirm relationships limited. They



argued that to maximise on the research encounter, teams needed to afford enough time, and where possible, allow researchers to work with children in their spaces and places where they felt most comfortable:

**First of all I do the research myself. I don't send a research assistant out and I think that that is quite unique, particularly for a professor at a university to actually be doing her own research herself. The second thing is that I spend a long time with the children building a relationship before we start the research project. I don't just go in and expect to collect data and I leave again. I respect that to be able to generate really rich data, data that is really at the heart of what children have to say, particularly with the age group of children I deal with - you have to have a relationship with them. So I have enormous respect for that, and I do not have an expectation of going in and expecting children to tell me stuff and then I can go onto the next pre-school. (DH)**

### *Robust and credible and impacting*

Researcher participants observed that the greatest criticism cast towards research with children related to the robustness and credibility of methodologies, particularly in relation to data gathering and analysis. They argued that it was important that researchers be flexible enough to respond to children's needs and wishes (both at the individual and group level) but also to ensure that their ultimate goal was to conduct quality research. Their observation was that researchers often became too invested in creating child-friendly methodologies that provided children with fun, and sometimes almost therapeutic encounters, at a cost to the research itself. They cautioned against this, recognising that robust research processes were the ultimate goal and that to remain credible, the

community of researchers working with children needed to constantly reflect on its intentions, successes and failings.

### *Conducted by skilled researchers*

As discussed throughout chapters 5 and 6, there was a view that researchers needed to be able to achieve good participatory research, and needed to have developed certain skills that could be used throughout the process. These included an ability to build trust and rapport; to listen, to hear and to respond to children's needs and wishes; to identify risks and issues and to respond to them in meaningful ways; to negotiate with children, within teams and with gatekeepers related to children's participation; to ensure methodological robustness; and lastly, to be reflexive about the research process.

#### **REFLEXIVE NOTE**

Over the years my colleagues at the Institute of Child Protection Studies and I have been concerned about judging projects based solely on the level rather than the impact of children's participation. In a 2011 paper we observed:

*Although we support children and young people's full participation in our research projects, our learning would be that the nature and meaningfulness of young people's involvement as participants is often more critical than the level of their engagement in the research processes' design and delivery and is often more highly valued by young people. As such, we would challenge the view that the extent to which young people manage and conduct research should ascertain its credibility as a participatory project. We would also argue that researchers should not abandon their attempts to meaningfully engage children and young people just because they are not able to achieve full participation. Instead, researchers should attempt to ensure that young people's participation is meaningful*

(Bessell 2008; Hart 1992) and responsive to their needs, wishes and safety. (Fraser 2004) (Moore, Saunders, & McArthur, 2011, p. 260).

The discussions that I had with researcher participants about the meaningfulness of participation were often most engaging as we discussed some of the practical implications, challenges and opportunities that different approaches to participation could open up. Considering questions such as “what does meaningfulness actually look like in practice?” And, “how might notions of participation actually be limiting?” were particularly helpful and will have a significant impact on my future practice.

It also became apparent that although children are now participating in a whole range of activities and processes in the broader community, participation characterised by choice and control, negotiation and collaboration and a commitment to acting on children’s views and wishes is still limited. As such, it became apparent that we need to help children understand and cope with participatory activities which seem at odds with what they know and understand about adult-child relations and primarily adult-driven processes.

In 2008 I was involved in a research project with Aboriginal children who had been removed from their families and were engaged in the out-of-home care system. Although a number of Aboriginal elders told the participating children that it was okay for them to talk about their experiences, and although the research team spent a lot of time building rapport with participants and explaining that they had some control over their involvement, many found the process difficult and confronting.

When reflecting on children’s reluctance to talk about some of the challenges their families faced, our Aboriginal adviser said that children had been raised not to talk about problems, leaving adults and elders to speak on their behalf. She observed: “it’s like when children are raised not to have their elbows on the table when they’re eating. Even when

you say to them “it’s okay to put your elbows on the table now” they’ll find it difficult to do it. It will feel uncomfortable and unnatural – and it’ll take a while before they do it without feeling like they’re doing the wrong thing. It’s like that with talking – most have been told they can’t talk, and even though [the elders] have said they can, there’s still a feeling of shame attached to it: that they’re talking out of school, that it’s not appropriate for them to do so. It will take a bit for them to get over this. It’ll take time and space.”

In reflection, researcher participants talked about the need for this time and space to be afforded to children, but further consideration about what else might help children understand and cope with this potentially new and unusual situation would be useful.

## **7.8 *Summarising the chapter***

In this chapter I have looked at how agency and participation have been understood by researcher participants, and what they believed good participation in research looked like. As observed, notions of agency and participation are still used differently across the field, and standards about children’s participation in research remain muddled and unsophisticated. This has had an influence on how gatekeepers enable or restrict children’s participation – particularly in relation to issues of consent.

Researcher participants believed that good participation was characterised by a symmetry in the relationship between adult and child (and research and the researched); appreciation of, and responsiveness to, power differentials; accessibility; meaningful engagement; trustworthy relationship; robustness, credibility and influence. They believed that researchers needed to develop skills to best enable this to occur.

In the next, and final, *Chapter 8: Conclusions and Contributions*, I will explore the ways that researchers have reflected on these characteristics and navigated the many ethical,

procedural and methodological challenges inherent in what Sharon Bessell describes as the ‘messy’ domain of children’s research, where theory and philosophy has not always reflected or enabled good practice.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

*I know that this manner of experiencing scientific work is somewhat disenchanted and disenchanting, and that I run the risk of damaging the image of themselves that many researchers like to keep. But it is perhaps the best and the only way of sheltering oneself from the much more serious disappointments that await the scholar who falls from on high after many a years of self-mystification during which he spent more energy trying to conform to the glorified image that he has of research, that is of himself as a researcher, than in simply doing his job. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 218)*

In this final introductory quote, Pierre Bourdieu recognises that the practice of reflexivity can be a difficult one – where demons emerge, where researchers place themselves at risk of scrutiny and challenge, and where entrenched ways of thinking about the worlds, about oneself and about the topics under examination are taken apart, examined and reformed. What he does note, however, is that the process can help the individual researcher, teams, and the field at large to find better outcomes, and through the process of reflexivity, create new theories that will be of value and respond more to the world in which they are created.

### **8.1 *Introducing the chapter***

As a child, my family and I would, like many Canberrans, head to the coast for the holidays. One of my favourite activities was to build dams across the shallow waterways of the inlets during low tide, and watch as the water rose, the dam holding off the growing stream. Often the stones and pebbles would wash away, but more often, they would become unsettled as the pressure of the water increased. Pushed by the stream, they would

rearrange themselves, either making the makeshift dam stronger and more resistant, or weakening it until it eventually collapsed under the weight. The next day I would return and find only parts of my dam remaining. A tenacious kid, I would then build a new dam on the old foundations – using the remaining rocks as a platform on which to build a new wall, drawing on the things I’d learned from my previous attempt. I can’t say that I ever made a structure that lasted the night but the process of creating, then unsettling, and then recreating was an intriguing and satisfying one, and one that I returned to over many summers.

In preparing to write this final chapter I couldn’t shake off the experience of building those (damn) dams. The more I thought about it, the more parallels I drew between that childhood experience and the experiences of researcher participants in this study. Working in the muddy waters of childhood theory, researcher participants would attempt to create ontological structures that would enable them to practice quality research with children – structures that would ultimately be unsettled and in need of ‘fixing’ and ‘reconfiguring’, but ones that could ultimately be used as a basis for future attempts. Often the pressure from the external academic community, from broader society, and one’s own mistakes (there were many times one of my clumsy feet would knock the wall over), would also unsettle what researcher participants ‘knew’, but with a similar tenacity, many would rebuild their conceptualisations and use it to stave off the impending tide. Drawing on their observations about previous attempts and the attempts of others (I was never afraid to steal my brothers’ ideas on dam-building), researchers displayed a similar tenacity and were able to hold different ideas about children and childhood at once. This appeared most reliable when they were able to reflect on their experiences, challenge old notions, and create a theoretical bridge over which they could travel. Like my brothers and I, there were distinct advantages when they built the dam collectively, but this was not always possible

(my brothers were often distracted by the sea, by beach cricket or other pre-teen adventures).

In this chapter I will make observations about the ‘unsettling’ practice of reflexivity and present a framework that might be used for future researchers to consider and re-consider their ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies and research practice. Drawing on Bourdieu’s view that reflexivity is best done within the field, I will promote a process that examines and engages not only those doing the research, but also those who participate in it, those who commission it, regulate it and ultimately scrutinise it. As such, I will advocate for reflexivity as a collective practice: one that not only informs research practice but ultimately unsettles the way that we think about, engage with, create knowledge about, and respond to children. Drawing heavily on the ideas and experiences of my researcher participants, I hope to present a tool that might be used by those standing with a bucket and a spade in the murky inlet of children’s research.

In the final sections of this chapter, I will make observations about the contribution that my study and framework makes, and my own reflections on the research process itself.

## ***8.2 Reflexivity: about the ontologies and epistemologies of children and childhood***

This thesis was primarily a reflexive one: one that considered how researchers understood, reflected upon, practised and built research projects and theories with and about children. It aimed to answer the questions: “What are the underlying assumptions, beliefs and values about children that underpin research with them?” “How do they influence the broad research process?” And, “how might reflexive practice be used to understand, account for and help guide the practice of research with children?”



In addition to asking researcher participants to reflect on their practice, I invited them to reflect on their reflecting: to consider what processes, tools and conversations they engaged with and the benefits, challenges and drivers of doing so. In this first section I will draw together the key themes emerging from my previous chapters, and relate them to the practice of reflexivity.

### *Dominant conceptions at play*

Over time, dominant conceptions of childhood have been prevalent and have influenced the way that children are seen, understood, theorised, raised, supported and dealt with, within policy and practice. As seen in *Chapter 2: Deconstructing Childhood*, often these conceptions have been limiting, placing children's value in the future, restricting their activity, and curbing their behaviours, in their interests and the interests of the broader communities within which they live. Vulnerability was often constructed as an internal thing: a natural predisposition that was inevitable and one that children needed to be shielded from as they grew to adulthood. As seen, most accounts failed to recognise the structural, ideological, moral and relational aspects of their vulnerability, and the way that children had been made vulnerable by the forces that surrounded them. Although modern theorists have often attempted to challenge this limitation, we saw in Chapter 5 that different conceptions have continued to influence the practice of research with children, and ultimately, the way they are theorised.

At the same time, children were often constructed as 'troubled' or 'troubling', born with an innate evil that needed to be thrashed or educated out of them for the good of the societies within which they lived. Within such ideologies, it was the responsibilities of adults (primarily parents but also the State) to prepare children for adulthood, and to

ensure that they were not further corrupted or exposed to knowledge, experiences or behaviours that might interrupt this important development.

At different points in time (including in the modern day), childhood has been valued as ‘priceless’, and the experience has been romanticised, idealised and corporatised; as a separate category in the lifespan characterised by naiveté and innocence, and a time sought after by adults.

Challenging some of the ‘common-sense’ notions of childhood, the Children’s Studies movement and other modern theorists have argued that the conception of childhood needs to be further unpacked and understood, particularly in relation to the way that children enact agency; the way that they influence and are influenced by the world around them. Drawing from this perspective, there has been a growing view that children have the capacity to engage in participatory processes, and that in their interests and the interests of other players, opportunities should be opened up to enable that they have a voice, and that the broader community benefits from listening to, hearing and responding to these voices.

### *Reflexivity and its attempt to unsettle one’s own assumptions about children and knowing*

The practice of research with children is primarily related to the development of knowledge, but is also a political and social endeavour. Through the development of new theories about who children are, what needs they have, what contributions they make, and how they understand and respond to the world, children’s positioning is reconstructed, and the ways that such theories influence practice are problematised and reoriented. But reflexive theorists also argue that the practice of research and the theorising that follows is also political and social, and is highly influenced by those managing that process and those relationships, either to the benefit or detriment of children.

As introduced in *Chapter 3: Reflexivity*, Bourdieu therefore challenges researchers to consider the objectifying relationship between the knower and the known (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992): to be up front, not only about *what* is known, but *how* it is known. Unlike other forms of reflexivity, Bourdieu promotes a consideration about the practical adequacy of the researcher's knowledge claims: about how their own biographies, education and social position influence what they know and how they create knowledge (Maton, 2003).

As discussed in Chapter 4, researcher participants in this study agreed with this challenge and argued that it was important to reflect on one's own childhood experiences. This was not because they believed that their reflections on what they knew credibly accounted for what children currently know, but because their memories, previous learning and past experience would ultimately shape how they considered children in the present. As summarised in *Appendix A: Researcher Participant Biographies*, and discussed in chapters 4-6, researcher participants often drew from their own experiences in understanding children and childhood, and were often motivated to challenge limiting notions as a result.

They also recognised that their education, their non-research related practice experience and the views of those around them influenced their ontologies and epistemologies, and coloured the lens through which they were exploring childhood and children's experiences.

By recognising how one's ontologies and epistemologies play out in the research context, researcher participants were of the view that new approaches could be developed, and clearer accounts of our positioning could be expressed. As Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald suggest:

*Having acknowledged our own prejudgments and prejudices, and the fact that these may largely be hidden from us, the second movement draws attention to our own stance in the conversation, in particular what personal, political, social, moral and ethical commitments we are willing to risk by opening them up for interpretation and reinterpretation as part of the dialogic encounter of participation (Kugler, 1999; Whelan, 2007). (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010b, p. 354)*

As highlighted in Chapter 3: Reflexivity, the first and second of Bourdieu's initial questions might be used to help researchers reflect upon and account for the objectifying relationships. These include:

1. *What forces drive a researcher to study the object she has chosen to study?*
2. *What makes a researcher observe what she really observes? What about her social origin and co-ordinates (class, ethnicity, gender, etc.)? What about the position the analyst holds in the micro-cosms of the academic field, and beyond that in the field of power? (Wacquant, 1992)*

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to provide an account of these forces and how they interact around researchers conducting studies with children.

Although Bourdieu recognises the benefits of individual reflexive practice, ultimately he argues that it is limited and has the potential of becoming narcissistic or self-sustaining. Instead, Bourdieu asserts that when considering the development of knowledge there is value in considering the academic field (arguing in some instances that it should be the primary area of study), as he contends that it is relationships within the field which are important: much more so than the actions of individual actors. He argues that much of the individual's behaviour relates to the habitus intrinsic in that field. As such, he contends that researchers need to take two steps back from the research process; the first being the

one that enables researchers to gain an overall impression of what is going on, and the second enabling them to step back from themselves and consider how they are as intrinsically part of the unfolding social milieu as others (Bourdieu, 1990b).

For the purposes of this thesis, I have attempted to explore the academic field within which the researcher participants work and interact, and the habitus that influences the way in which they interact with each other and the theory they are creating. Throughout this thesis I have attempted to consider not only individual researchers' ontological and epistemological positioning (and the educational and professional experiences that have shaped them), but also those of the broader academic field: considering how these positions have developed and are promoted.

As such I have attempted to consider, and help researcher participants to consider Bourdieu's second and third questions, namely: "What about the position the analyst holds in the micro-cosms of the academic field, and beyond that in the field of power?" And, "What consequences does the intellectual bias bring about?" (Wacquant, 1992).

Drawing on Bourdieu's work, I have argued that the ways in which children are popularly conceptualised within the broader academic field and the wider community has a profound impact. Researcher participants believed that these conceptualisations influenced how children are researched, how researchers and others interact with them, and how they interact with each other. As such, researcher participants and I explored how the field of children's research is influenced by the players who sit alongside it and who also sway its activity: players such as governing and funding bodies, ethics committees, and those gatekeeping children's participation in research more broadly.

In practice, researcher participants shared examples of the ways that gatekeepers restricted children's access due to their ambivalence about children's capacity to understand, reflect

upon and articulate their experiences; ethics committees' concern about children's individual vulnerability and their hesitation to allow researchers to consider topics that were challenging but could ultimately help children as a group; and the academic community sometimes viewing research conducted with children as being less credible and less valuable than that conducted with adults, and researchers working within such projects as being 'childish' and naïve.

### *Reflexivity: a process to inform ethical practice*

It was often suggested that ethical practice with children was 'messy', as researcher participants tried to meet the requirements of ethics processes, and ultimately ensure that their interactions with children were appropriate, respectful, protective and empowering. This is not to say that these two things are mutually exclusive, but as researcher participants observed, when underpinned by competing or clashing ontologies and epistemologies, tensions did exist.

Researcher participants were of the view that by engaging in critical dialogue about the ways in which knowledge about children was created (and sometimes silenced), ethical issues might be foreseen and responded to in-the-moment. As discussed in Chapter 5, by promoting an ethics-in-practice approach to their work, researchers opened up possibilities for recognising children's vulnerabilities, but also allowed children to participate in ways that enabled and built upon their competencies, and provided them an opportunity to share in the construction of new knowledge.

Such approaches allowed researchers to reflect upon the social relationships that they encountered through the research process, and to present their findings in more neutral and explicit ways. By being upfront about ethical dilemmas, researcher participants could

account for their practice, redress issues and provide a trail that articulated how they managed ethical tensions and strategies for reducing them into the future.

As discussed in Chapter 5, one area in need of constant vigilance related to power and the way that power influenced the research relationship. Although there was a view that children often wanted to engage with powerful people – or more importantly, people of influence – researcher participants believed that there was a need to ensure that children's participation wasn't limited as a result of a power dynamic reflective of dominant notions inherent in the broader community.

Related to this, and also explored in Chapter 5, researchers were concerned about children's vulnerabilities. Although they contended that most of these were structurally imposed, they were also of the view that due to their circumstances children had often experienced difficulties, which may cause some discomfort or distress in their re-telling or reflection upon. Being aware of these concerns needed to be paramount, particularly when projects were based on the view that through the research process individual children could benefit from the exploration and from the knowledge that they would be helping others, and that children as a group could benefit from adults' better understanding of their needs, wishes and aspirations. Researcher participants believed that managing these dilemmas required significant insight and reflexive capacity – a capacity strengthened through conversations and negotiation with children themselves. They, like Cannella and Lincoln (2007, p. 327) *believed* that reflexive practice might help researchers better respond to these issues in the moment:

*By mandating ongoing attention to ethical concerns, ethical reflexivity reminds researchers that few research projects proceed as expected; many ethical issues are unforeseen in advance; participants have their own concerns regarding ethical*

*behaviour which cannot be predicted by institutional review boards; ethics, as a general concern, reside in specific situations with the complex histories of individuals.*

It was the view of researcher participants that this process could be, and often was, threatening to researchers. As Foucault (1988, p. 155) observes, such critical conversations reveal “what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest”. This, he follows, can often be an unsettling process, for “[a]s soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes very urgent, very difficult and quite possible” (Foucault, 1988, p. 155).

Researcher participants argued that ethical dialogue and an ethics-in-practice approach required greater transparency and openness throughout the research process. Unlike a procedural ethics approach, which primarily operated at the beginning of a project and was a hurdle which researchers needed to overcome, reflexive dialogue about ethics was characterised by a to-and-fro interaction marked by negotiation.

There was a growing practice of engaging ethics committees in conversations about children, childhood and ethical practice. In many cases, researcher participants challenged dominant notions related to children’s vulnerability and incompetence by providing examples from their own practice, in an attempt to reveal how ethics could open up, rather than limit or problematise children’s engagement. This required open dialogue, negotiation and a level of trust.

As with other aspects of their research, researcher participants strongly advocated for ongoing reflexive dialogue with children about ethical practice. This reflects a broader view that by engaging in dialogue with children, new and better understandings about



ethics and insights about how they might best be managed can be generated and dealt with. Strategies included the development of children's advisory groups; asking children throughout their interactions about how they felt, how they believed the process was affecting them, and how the process and the relationship might be improved. Rather than just listening to children about ethical practice, there was a view that researchers needed to act on their views and wishes through a process of negotiation and reflection.

Such dialogue, researcher participants believed, might also include ethics committees and others who influence how, why and when research with children is conducted. Although researcher participants did not provide examples of how children themselves had engaged in critical dialogue with these influential forces in the field, they did promote a commitment to doing so. Linking children to these processes might enable such players to further consider their own ontologies and epistemologies, and the ethical assumptions that they proffered. Again, this was not without risks and implications. As Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald muse:

*To do this creates disequilibrium in existing power relations and in social and institutional norms that are firmly fixed on the capacity of the child to participate, rather than on our own capacity to respond to what children have to say. (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010c, p. 354)*

Researcher participants believed that working with children to identify such challenges and to identify solutions was of value.

### *Reflexivity: a process to inform methodologies*

One of the key criticisms cast on children's researchers relates to the credibility and robustness of research processes and methodologies. As seen in Chapter 2 and then in

Chapter 6, there was a dominant belief within the academic world and the community more broadly that children did not have the skills, reflexive capacity or ability to articulate their views.

Researcher participants were hesitant to reject these claims outright: observing that some children were less competent to reflect and articulate, that children's knowledge was often different to that of adults, and that for both structural and inherent reasons children were sometimes vulnerable, particularly within adult systems and processes. Rather than using this as a rationale for excluding children from research, researcher participants argued that they needed to be constantly vigilant, to test their theories and their assumptions (with others and with children), and to negotiate their way through contested territory. Holding absolute views about competence, about vulnerability, and about children were seen as unhelpful, as was failing to recognise the heterogeneity of their experience and status.

To manage these theoretical and methodological issues, researcher participants were of the view that researchers needed to engage in reflexive activity, constantly asking themselves not only about their ontologies and epistemologies, but also about how their research activities with children were going: whether children felt comfortable, trusted the researcher, were able to respond in meaningful ways, felt empowered to take control of their involvement, were not being unduly influenced, were not experiencing adverse or unmanageable emotions, and were not being harmed through the process itself.

They also encouraged researchers to consider the validity and quality of their methodologies, engaging in what has been described as “ever present and recursive” (Day, 2012, p. 64) reflexivity. Bourdieu (2004) describes this as ‘reformist’ reflexivity which he suggests is an “effective means of increasing the chances of attaining the truth by increasing the cross controls and providing the principles of technique” (2004, p. 84). He

encourages a constant reflection of the modes of thought, which might be embedded in the academic system within which research is conducted, and to which the researcher is answerable. Scrutinising methodologies and methods against developed best qualitative practice principles was one way that researcher participants felt they could ensure quality and promote a sense of confidence – a necessary aspect of good qualitative practice.

Researcher participants also believed that it was important for researchers to constantly remind themselves that research is a political process, and that there was great potential to either subjugate children or reduce their disempowerment through the research process; in the relationships they built, the methods adopted, but more importantly, the findings they presented and the new knowledge that they constructed. Similarly, however, they argued that it was important to ensure that their methodologies were robust, so that they could stand the test of doubters from the broader academic community. Recognising that accusations of bias are often made “when the research gives credence, in any serious way, to the perspectives of some subordinate group in some hierarchical relationship” (Becker, 1967, p. 240), they argued that children’s researchers needed to account for and justify their approaches. Constantly evaluating and reflecting on such issues was seen as a valuable activity and one that should underpin reflexive practice.

Although emotion has not always been considered credible or worthy of note, researcher participants believed that it was important for them to engage in discussions with children about how they were feeling and to reflect upon their own emotional responses to the research activity and the broader research process. This enabled them not only to ensure that children were ‘safe’ throughout their involvement, but to also consider the impact their involvement might have in the longer term. Similarly, researcher participants (particularly Neerosh Mudaly) believed that due to the often emotionally taxing nature of research with children about sensitive topics (including child abuse, cruelty, manipulation

and exploitation), reflexive practice enabled researchers to minimise the vicarious trauma that they might encounter otherwise.

Finally, researcher participants were of the view that due to the often contested nature of childhood theories, particularly those that promoted children's agency and challenged notions of vulnerability and incompetence, reflexivity could help them hold multiple ontologies and epistemologies at once and create new ways of drawing from established and emerging theories pragmatically. In one of my supervision sessions with Professor McArthur and Dr Zubrzycki, we characterised this outcome as a theoretical bridge over which the existing contradictions and complexities could be crossed.

### *Being reflexive about reflexivity*

As noted, the practice of reflexivity has not had universal support within the academic world. As such, it would appear that one of the tasks that should be included in a reflexive framework is consideration of reflexive practice itself: how effective have reflexive activities been in drawing issues out and identifying solutions? Has the practice achieved the outcomes that were intended, and what unintended consequences (both positive and negative) have emerged? How has reflexive practice been used to manage the tensions and challenges that have been encountered? What limitations and difficulties have been observed?

## **8.3 *Developing a reflexive model***

One of the key findings of this study was that research with children was a messy endeavour and that there remained a lack of fit with existing theoretical approaches. Similarly it would appear that although certain characteristics of reflexive practice and strategies to help researchers work reflexively were helpful, no one model would be

applicable to all research situations, or consider or deal with all the challenges and tensions that might emerge.

As such, I was initially hesitant about presenting a framework that might fully consider or respond to all issues or be useable in all contexts. However, in reflecting on the key themes that have emerged, in responding to the advice of this group of researcher participants who have considerable expertise and experience in the field, and drawing on models proposed by others engaging in reflexive activities (particularly Ahern, 1999; Barry, Britten, Barber, Bradley, & Stevenson, 1999; Cunliffe, 2003, 2004; Hurley & Underwood, 2002; Lipp, 2007), I have created a framework that might be used to open up conversations and to help researchers, particularly those engaging in research with children for the first time: a framework to think about and respond to the challenges that have been highlighted.

I have decided not to be prescriptive about how the model might be used. As highlighted in Chapter 3, other writers have provided some guidance about what tools might be used to answer such questions (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ahern, 1999). They advocate, for example, journaling, writing reflexive notes at the end of each research activity, peer supervision, and group discussions. At a team, organisational and field level, the benefits of writing journal articles on ontology, epistemology and methodology have been advocated, as have processes such as the Think Tank I referred to in Chapter 1, at which researchers from across the field came together to share their experiences, scrutinise approaches and share learning.

I would hope that it might be used, re-configured and developed through further reflexive activity: by individuals, within teams and within the broader field at large.

### *Reflexivity across domains*

It would appear that reflexive practice is most helpful when it engages multiple players at multiple stages. I therefore suggest that a good model includes individual researchers and their teams in autobiographical reflexive activities, and ones that consider how their own experiences, theories and assumptions influence the *how's*, *why's* and *what's* of research. I also believe that it should include practice with children that considers what things might and should be known about children, how to best engage them and enable them to meaningfully participate in the research. Finally, I advocate activities that consider the nature, design and implementation of research projects; and reflexive activities that engage the broader field of research with children and qualitative inquiry more broadly.

### *Reflexivity as an individual exercise*

Although the benefits of collective reflexive practice can be significant, there also appears to be great merit in conducting reflexive activity at an individual and personal level. By considering one's own assumptions, biases, values and theoretical approaches, the researcher can illuminate and develop strategies to resolve any methodological, ethical and practice-related issues as they emerge. It has been argued that by being ever vigilant about the personal and professional, the relationships through which research is conducted, and the impact that the research process has on oneself and those around us, reflexive practice can afford the researcher greater confidence and achieve better outcomes. In Table 6, I encourage researchers to consider a number of broad reflexive questions (those in bold), providing prompts that might further explore the practical implications within their practice.

Table 6: Reflexive questions and prompts for individual researchers

Stage	Key questions and prompts
Pre-reflexive activity	<p><b>Am I ready, willing and able to be reflexive?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some of the benefits that I hope to achieve?</li> <li>• What do I understand to be reflexive practice?</li> <li>• What level of commitment do I have to practising it?</li> <li>• What time, resources and personal investment will be needed to do it to the extent that I feel comfortable?</li> </ul>
Pre-planning	<p><b>How does my biography influence how I understand children and their participation in research?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I know and what do I believe about children?</li> <li>• How did I develop this knowledge and belief?</li> <li>• What about my childhood, my personal and professional experience, and my educational background influence my approach to children and to conducting research with them?</li> <li>• What views do I feel strongly about and how do these shape my judgment?</li> </ul> <p><b>How do I interact with the field (and it with me)?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might my knowing and my believing be different to others (in my team, in my academic field, in my community)?</li> <li>• How might these differences play out?</li> <li>• How does the field influence my understanding, my biases and assumptions?</li> <li>• What might I need to be aware of?</li> </ul>
Planning	<p><b>How do my experiences with and my views about children affect how I research them?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what way might my personal and professional experience colour my participation in the project?</li> <li>• What experience have I had researching children?</li> <li>• What do I know about children: what they are capable of understanding?</li> <li>• What about researching children concerns me (my skills, their vulnerability, the process)?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What theoretical lens do I favour to apply to the results?</li> </ul> <p><b>What are my motivations?<sup>3</sup></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do I have any political or social motivations for conducting this research (i.e. for empowering children, for redressing inequity, for challenging structures or systems)?</li> <li>• What results do I expect to come out of this project?</li> <li>• What is my stake in the research? What do I hope to get out of it?</li> <li>• What are my fears?</li> </ul>
Reporting	<p><b>What is my impact on the research process?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What impact am I having on the process?</li> <li>• What impact is the process having on me?</li> <li>• How is the way I think about children and relate to them influencing my practice?</li> <li>• What are my personal responses?</li> <li>• What are the interpersonal dynamics?</li> <li>• What are my motivations?</li> <li>• What are my biases?</li> <li>• What impact has the process, methods and outcomes had on the issue / experience being considered?</li> </ul> <p><b>How have the voices of others been included in the reporting of the research findings?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whose reflexive voice is heard – the researcher’s and/or the “subject’s”, and is one privileged over the other?</li> </ul> <p><b>What impact has the research had on me?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do I know?</li> <li>• How do I account for this in practice?</li> </ul> <p><b>Do I need to account for any of these in the research report or in other dissemination activities?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If so, how?</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> (based on Barry, et al., 1999, p. 35)



Post-research	<p><b>What has arisen from my reflexive narrative of the process?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did I learn about myself, about my knowing, about children and about research?</li> <li>• What would I have done differently?</li> <li>• Did it meet my objectives?</li> </ul>
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### *Reflexivity with teams and within projects*

As seen in the observations of researcher participants who had engaged in co-reflexive activities, the benefits of considering how different team members conceptualise, conduct and reflect on their experiences has some worth: both in identifying and responding to issues, and allowing for a variety of perspectives to be considered and included in the research design, delivery and reporting. Questions related to politics, to relationships and to team dynamics might also open up conversations that help researchers work more collaboratively and with less tension. In Table 7, I invite research teams to consider their readiness to engage in reflexive activities and to consider their variety of views on children, childhood, ontology, epistemology and the practice of research with children more generally.

Table 7: Reflexive questions and prompts for teams and projects

Stage	As a team	Within the project
Pre-reflexive activity	<p><b>How ready are we to engage in reflexive activities?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do we have the required level of trust, rapport and openness?</li> <li>Have we allocated enough time and resources to facilitate reflexivity?</li> <li>Do we have an agreed set of expectations and shared goals for reflexive practice?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Can reflexive practice be implemented?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What flexibility is there in the design, scope and implementation of the research process to enable that things discovered through reflexive practice might lead to change?</li> <li>What are some of the constraints: within the project brief, within our organisation, within our team?</li> <li>How might any disablers be managed?</li> </ul>
Pre-planning	<p><b>Are there any ontological, epistemological or methodological tensions? If so, how might we deal with them?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do our notions of children's knowledge influence the type of research we do?</li> <li>How are our responses to the individual reflexive questions different?</li> <li>What might the implications of these similarities and differences be to this project?</li> <li>How might any tensions or conflicts be resolved?</li> </ul>	<p><b>What are our motivations?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why are we conducting this project?</li> <li>What outcome do we hope to achieve? For individuals, for the project, for our organisation, for children and for the academic field?</li> </ul> <p><b>What assumptions underpin our research project?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do our notions of children and children's knowing affect our choice of methodology, methods and broad research approach? (How do we account for the heterogeneity of experience, competence and choice?)</li> <li>How might children be engaged in this project (as objects, subjects, participants, co-researchers) and what is our justification for this?</li> <li>How are we going to ensure that what we are doing reflects children's needs and wishes?</li> <li>Will <i>not</i> conducting the research have an impact on</li> </ul>

		children (and childhood)?
Planning	<p><b>How will our research plan meet individual, team and project needs and motivations?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How will tensions and mismatches of expectations be articulated and resolved?</li> </ul> <p><b>What reflexive activities will be built into our project and when?</b></p> <p>What resources will be required to enable this to occur?</p>	<p><b>What methodologies and methods have we chosen?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What methodologies and methods have we chosen – and what is our ontological and epistemological rationale for these choices?</li> <li>Do our choices enable us to meet our stated goals and reflect our motivations?</li> </ul> <p><b>Is our practice ethical?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What does ethical practice with children look like?</li> <li>How might risks be negotiated?</li> <li>How do we know that children will be capable to participate and how will we confirm this through our methodology?</li> <li>How do we know that children will not be harmed through this process and how will we be vigilant about this through the process?</li> <li>Which children might be excluded from this research and what are the implications for them, for our study and for children, broadly?</li> </ul>
Conducting	<p><b>Do we have agreement on how the research is being conducted?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How might any ethical or methodological disagreements be identified and resolved?</li> </ul>	<p><b>How is the project influencing and being influenced?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is the project influenced by individuals and teams?</li> <li>What impact is the project having on individuals?</li> <li>What impact is the project having on individual team relationships and the team as a whole?</li> <li>What methodological, ethical and practical challenges need to be considered and resolved?</li> </ul>

Analysing and Reporting	<p><b>Do we have agreement on how the research is being analysed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might any theoretical disagreements be identified and resolved?</li> <li>• How might differences of opinion be articulated in the reports, articles and broader literature presented?</li> </ul>	<p><b>How is the analysis and reporting process influencing and being influenced?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do our experiences of childhood affect the way that we make meaning of the data?</li> <li>• How do our conceptions of childhood influence the way we understand the data?</li> <li>• Are we reporting what children have expressed or have we translated or distorted their voices?</li> <li>• What are the ethical issues related to how children are represented (i.e. images and quotes)</li> <li>• What are the ethical issues related to children's engagement in presenting and how have they been managed?</li> </ul> <p><b>Do I need to account for any of these in the research report or in other dissemination activities?</b></p> <p>If so, how?</p>
Post-research	<p><b>What has arisen from our reflexive practice?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How has my practice been affected by the things I have learned through reflexive activities? How might this affect my practice?</li> <li>• How do I need to account for these learnings in how I write about my practice and the process of research with children?</li> </ul>	<p><b>How was our project influenced by reflexive practice?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would we have done differently?</li> <li>• Did it meet our objectives?</li> </ul>

### *Reflexivity with and about children*

There is an emerging view that as well as engaging researchers in reflexive practice, conversations with those participating and potentially benefiting from the research might also be constructive. In Table 8 I invite children and researchers to consider children's participation, their ability and willingness to engage in research, and on the value, politics and practical implications of doing so.

Table 8: Reflexive questions and prompts with and about children

Stage	About children	With children
Pre-reflexive activity	<p><b>How ready, willing and able are we to engage children in reflexive activities?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways, if any, are we going to engage children in reflexive activity?</li> <li>• What might be the benefits of doing so?</li> <li>• Can we ensure that their participation in reflexive activities meets their needs and ours? How might we know?</li> <li>• What level of commitment do we have to acting on things we learn, with children, through the reflexive process?</li> <li>• What limitations and challenges do we need to understand and redress?</li> </ul>	<p><b>How ready, willing and able are you to engage in reflexive activities?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you need to know?</li> <li>• What do you need us to do?</li> <li>• What do you think you could contribute?</li> <li>• What would you like to get out of the process?</li> <li>• What can you tell us about how this might best be done?</li> </ul>
Pre-planning	<p><b>How are assumptions about children and childhood different to those of children, and how might differences and tensions be managed?</b></p> <p><b>How are assumptions about what children know, what they are able to articulate, and what they should be protected from experiencing as part of the research process, the same or different to those of the children engaged in reflexive activities? How might these differences be managed?</b></p>	<p><b>What might be explored?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What topics do you think are important for us to consider in research?</li> <li>• What do you think children, adults and others might need to know more about?</li> <li>• How might we best explore issues related to the research, together?</li> <li>• How might different children, with different experiences and needs engage? What things might we need to be flexible about?</li> </ul>

	<p><b>What are our beliefs and assumptions about children's participation as co-researchers? How might we engage children throughout the research process in such a way (or not)?</b></p>	
Planning	<p><b>How do our assumptions guide our work?</b></p> <p><b>What type of methodologies and methods might we consider?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are our assumptions related to children's capacity to be involved in research?</li> <li>• What are the methodological implications for this project?</li> <li>• What role/s might children assume (subjects, participants, co-researchers, advisers)?</li> </ul> <p><b>What are some of the ethical issues that arise from our engagement with children?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are our assumptions about the ethics of research with children?</li> <li>• How might ethical issues be considered and dealt with in planning for the project?</li> </ul>	<p><b>What should the project aim to discover?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you think the researchers should find out the answers to these questions?</li> </ul> <p><b>How might children participate (if they participate at all)?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should children be involved in this project? If yes, how?</li> <li>• What might be the best ways to get children involved?</li> <li>• What types of questions do you think they might be able to answer (if interviews / focus groups are suggested)?</li> <li>• What types of things do you think should be avoided?</li> <li>• What sorts of things should adults do to make sure that children are comfortable, safe and feel like they can really participate and have their say?</li> <li>• How do you think they (and you) might best be involved in the study (if they'd like to be involved)?</li> </ul>
Conducting	<p><b>How are we experiencing the research process?</b></p> <p><b>How are children experiencing the research process?</b></p> <p><b>What have we learned and how can these influence further research activities?</b></p>	<p><b>How is the research activity going?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are you feeling?</li> <li>• Are you okay talking about these things?</li> <li>• Do you understand what is being asked?</li> <li>• Do you think you know enough or have experienced these things to be able to talk about them?</li> <li>• How would you like to talk about these things?</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you believe that you are being listened to? Can you help me understand what has helped / made it hard?</li> </ul>
Post activity	<p><b>How did children participate, and how was this for them and for you?</b></p> <p><b>How might their observations about the process influence the way that you conduct the next series of activities?</b></p>	<p><b>How was your involvement?<sup>4</sup></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you remember the researcher explaining what your rights were in the [research activity]?</li> <li>Did you understand what your rights were during and after the [research activity]?</li> <li>Can you give me a quick example or remember what some of your rights were?</li> <li>Do you feel that the interviewer was listening to you and understood what you were saying?</li> <li>How do you know that they understood you?</li> <li>Do you remember what you talked about in the interview?</li> <li>What things were the easiest to talk about?</li> <li>What other questions should we have asked?</li> <li>Did anything happen in the project you had not expected?</li> <li>Do you think that you got to fully explain what life is really like for you?</li> <li>What would have made the interview better for you?</li> <li>How did you feel after the interview had finished?</li> </ul>
Analysing and Reporting	<p><b>How are we analysing and reporting the data?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whose voice are we privileging through the analysis and reporting?</li> <li>Whose voice is missing or under-reported?</li> </ul>	<p><b>What sorts of ideas did children seem to have in common?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How are they similar or different to your ideas?</li> <li>How might we ensure that some of the less popular</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> (based on Hurley & Underwood, 2003 and feedback questions developed with Debbie Noble-Carr and asked of children and young people at ICPS)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the implications of this?</li> <li>• What needs to be acknowledged?</li> <li>• How are our priorities similar or different to those of children?</li> </ul> <p><b>What are the ethical concerns?</b></p> <p>Would the reporting on any experience or issue have a negative impact on individual children, children in groups or childhood?</p>	<p>ideas and views are given voice?</p> <p><b>What are the important things that you think need to be shared?</b></p> <p><b>What are the things that might need to be considered before reporting?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What might children not want adults to know? What risks might they experience when their ideas, stories, experiences and needs are reported?</li> </ul>
Post-research	<p><b>What did we learn through reflexive practice?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How were children's, researchers' and the team's goals met through reflexive practice?</li> <li>• What enabled and drove success?</li> <li>• What were the challenges and tensions that emerged?</li> <li>• How were they managed?</li> <li>• What the benefits and disadvantages of engaging in reflexive activities?</li> <li>• What should be reported?</li> </ul>	<p><b>What was reflexive practice like for you?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was the reflexive experience for you?</li> <li>• Did it meet your expectations?</li> <li>• Did you feel as engaged as you would have liked?</li> <li>• What advice would you give to researchers who might do this type of thing in the future?</li> <li>• What advice would you give to children who might do this type of thing in the future?</li> </ul>

### *Reflexivity with the field*

Researcher participants called for more opportunities to work with the field to allow it to (re)consider new approaches to understanding, responding, researching and theorising about children and childhood. They believed that through critical reflexive dialogue they might open up new ways of working with children and ensuring that methodologies, research practice and the development of new theories were ethical, robust and responsive to the lived experience of children and those who work with them.

In particular, they observed a need to work with gatekeepers, ethics committees, funding bodies and other groups who influenced how, when, why and the nature of research that was conducted with children to build shared expectations, and to enable good, quality and sound research to be conducted. Some reflexive questions are posed in Table 9.

*Table 9: Reflexive questions and prompts about and with other players in the field*

	About other players in the field	With other players in the field
With other children's researchers	<p><b>What can we learn from the experiences of others?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are their approaches and theories challenging or perpetuating particular conceptions of childhood and what are the implications and benefits of doing so?</li> <li>• How might differences be highlighted and strategies to integrate or challenge them be developed?</li> </ul>	<p><b>How can we engage in reflexive practice as a field?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What knowledge and experience can we share?</li> <li>• How can we create cultures of reflexivity?</li> <li>• How can we account for difference?</li> <li>• How can we evaluate how effective approaches have been?</li> </ul>
With ethics committees	<p><b>How are our assumptions, biases and approaches similar to or different to those of ethics committees and those scrutinising our research?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might ethical dialogue be opened up in a way that enables constructive discussion about the ethical dilemmas throughout the research process?</li> <li>• What might enable ethics committees to further understand and appreciate our position?</li> <li>• What knowledge, evidence and experience might assist ethics committees to consider our epistemologies and methodologies to enable that their and our needs are met?</li> </ul>	<p><b>What are some of the dominant, conflicting and shared assumptions, biases and approaches that underpin our practice?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What influence do these have on our practice: how we evaluate, scrutinise and monitor research projects?</li> <li>• How might these be discussed?</li> <li>• How might conflicts or differences of opinion be managed?</li> <li>• Is reflexivity practice important? If so, how might we assess the usefulness of these practices when consider projects?</li> </ul>
With other gatekeepers	<p><b>How are our assumptions, biases and approaches similar, or different, to those of the gatekeepers we encounter?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might we best discuss these and negotiate any tensions, differences and emerging concerns?</li> </ul>	<p><b>What are some of the dominant, conflicting and shared assumptions, biases and approaches that underpin our practice?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might we discuss these differences?</li> <li>• What do we need to feel comfortable about referring</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What might they need to better understand our position and to open up dialogue, debate and negotiation?</li> </ul>	children to projects and supporting their engagement – before and throughout the process?
With the broader academic community	<p><b>How are our assumptions, biases and approaches similar to those in the broader academic community?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What impact do these have?</li> <li>• How might we best articulate, discuss and negotiate these?</li> </ul>	<p><b>What are some of the dominant, conflicting and shared assumptions, biases and approaches that underpin our practice?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might we discuss these differences?</li> <li>• How might we (re)consider our assumptions, biases and approaches to research practice?</li> <li>• How might emerging tensions be best articulated, managed and negotiated?</li> </ul>

## **8.4 *Contribution***

As we have seen throughout this thesis, reflexivity challenges us to fundamentally question the way that we conceptualise children and childhood, and the way that our own ontologies and epistemologies shape how, why and to what end we research children. It challenges us to open ourselves up for scrutiny: as individuals, teams and as a field; and for our work to be unsettled and deconstructed in the hope that it might be rebuilt stronger and more robust than before. Rather than standing on the bank of the inlet, we are challenged to stand in the murky waters of the stream and create dams that might weather the inevitable pressures that will come from within and outside of our field.

Ultimately, reflexive practice requires an investment: of time, resources and one's self. Although the value of reflexivity has been challenged by many, I argue that it can offer valuable insights about our practice, our knowing and our construction of new knowledge, by stimulating a critical exploration of how we develop knowledge and how we practise as researchers. Like others, I would argue that reflexivity raises possibilities for different forms of inquiry and new ways of understanding our experiences.

By revealing the sources, limitations and possibilities of our assumptions we are less at risk of being complacent or complicit to dominant and limiting notions about who we research and their positioning in society. By testing our ontologies and epistemologies, new ways of engaging in the process of understanding and creating are opened up and richer understandings can become more likely.

When done collectively, contradictions and inconsistencies in our views and our approaches can be further explored, leading to more illuminating research. By engaging the subjects of research as colleagues in this reflexive endeavour there appears to be more

possibilities for circumspect, critical and symmetrical relationships that challenge, rather than reflect, dominant and limiting notions; and which allow diverse perspectives to be promoted.

As Day (2012) observes, reflexivity is not necessarily a magic cure to the many methodological, ethical, political and practical dilemmas that emerge in the messy world of qualitative research with children, but I would suggest that it provides a process through which they might be better identified, understood, and hopefully, resolved.

In this thesis I provide an example of how researchers might engage in reflexive practice and draw from the observations of those who have attempted to do so in the hundreds of projects that they have collectively completed. I present a framework which might assist those who are embarking on the journey, or who are stalled (as Ahern & Manathunga, 2004, describe it) by the complexity of the research process.

I also am of the view that reflexive practice might be of benefit to those working with children in different domains. As a youth worker and advocate I am aware that practitioners, policy makers, parents, and those who work with children formally and informally, all hold views about children and childhood, that might be unsettled in similar ways; and that more responsive ways of understanding, relating to and engaging children more broadly might be enabled.

In reviewing the literature relating to other groups of people: the unwell, the poor, those experiencing disability, those whose vulnerabilities are similarly structural and entrenched in the systems with which they operate – I am also of the view that reflexive practice such as that advocated here might open up new possibilities for research, policy and practice.

## ***8.5 Learning and being challenged through reflexive practice: a personal journey***

As noted at the beginning of this thesis, I commenced this study with a sense of enthusiasm but trepidation about what I would uncover, and how my own practice as a children's researcher might be underdeveloped and in need of (re)consideration. True to this expectation, I found the process liberating and reassuring as I realised that many of the tensions and challenges that I had encountered were shared by others. I recognised that much of my practice aligned to principles of good practice, and that the anxiety I felt when working with children actually helped me to engage ethically and responsively – being forever vigilant about whether it was valuable, reliable and appropriate, and engaging in a way where new possibilities might be opened up to develop my practice and approach.

However, it was also an unsettling experience as I scrutinised my own practice alongside the practice of the researcher participants with whom I engaged. In further considering ontology and epistemology I realised that I had acculturated many of the 'common sense notions' about childhood and many of the limiting assumptions dominant in the research and broader communities. I realised that at times my practice had been paternalistic, naïve and limited. In considering notions such as 'best interests', I realised that there had been times when my observations about childhood had been marred by thoughts about what childhood should be, and what things I believed children should experience during this period of life. Rather than being a crippling experience, the process was motivating: driving me to want to do more and different research with children, using new methodologies, and methods and approaches that would enable me to put this learning into practice.



Similarly, I realised that my reflexive capacity was still in its infancy, but that the questions I had asked of myself and of the teams I had worked with were useful ones that could help me at this stage of my research career. I accepted the fact that I needed to be more aware of my own assumptions and biases, particularly in relation to ontology and epistemology, and to be more upfront about these when designing, delivering and writing up my research. At the beginning of this journey such terms and concepts seemed foreign and intimidating, but through the process of considering them with my researcher participants, their meaning and relevance were further revealed.

The process of conducting this study was also marked by periods of anxiety and enthusiasm. Researching peers can be a difficult endeavour: I was constantly anxious about how they might perceive both me, and my practice. After all, many of these researchers were experts in the field who were able to reflect on the robustness of my approach, the skill that I demonstrated in conducting interviews, identifying themes, and ultimately in sharing their experience with the community. I am forever grateful to my researcher participants for their generosity, patience and willingness to share their wisdom: not only about childhood and childhood research, but also in my conduct in this piece of research itself. I am also thankful to my supervisors who challenged my bouts of self-doubt and provided me with reassurance, but also tools to work through my anxiety. There are many things that I would do differently if placed in the same situation again but I have some confidence that this research process has been a credible one, and that the product will be of benefit to others embarking on a similar journey. I look forward to sharing more of these in the papers, articles and presentations that may emerge from my engagement with this study.

## **APPENDIX A: RESEARCHER PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES**

### ***Sharon Bessell***

Dr Sharon Bessell is a political scientist who currently works as a Senior Lecturer in Public Policy at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University in Canberra.

#### ***Pathway into research with children***

Sharon Bessell has conducted research with children for 18 years, beginning with her PhD study, which focused on child labour and how it impacted upon and was influenced by domestic policy, legislation and practice. In conducting her research, Sharon Bessell became aware that although there was a growing interest about child labour there had been little exploration of how children understood their experience, how they believed that it affected their lives and what they wanted from the States and the systems within which they existed. She observed that children had been considered within political science theories, but only as passive objects affected by systems and structures, and not as subjective thinkers and agents in their own right.

#### ***Motivations***

Sharon recalls that her interest in children was driven both from an academic curiosity about how children saw the world, but also from her own personal experiences as a child. Sharon shared that her childhood experiences convinced her that children were capable of knowing about their own lives, that they could reflect upon and articulate views about their worlds and their interactions within them. This view has been supported by her

research practice with children, through which, she believes, children's capacity has been confirmed and further revealed.

### *Theoretical assumptions*

At the time of writing her PhD thesis in 1995, Sharon found that there was not ample theory related to children and childhood broadly, and within political science in particular. Borrowing from the early childhood studies domain, Sharon drew on the work of Qvortrup, particularly in relation to power and the relationships between adults and children, but also recognised some of the limitations of the Sociology of Childhood theories which problematised these relationships and failed to recognise that many children have positive relationships with adults who "they love and care about and who love and care about them". She also observed that children often appear keen to divest their power and to rely on adults to take responsibility for them and to act in their best interests. Sharon recognised that the importance of relationship was often lost in political theories, which solely considered structures and those that solely considered individual agency. The relationship between players, she believed, was often understated and continues to be underdeveloped in many theories about childhood and children.

Sharon Bessell's work has also attempted to account for age and for the heterogeneity of children's experiences: in relation to where they live, the cultures that surround them, and the problems and challenges they face. She observes that much theory about children has not fully accounted for the differences within childhood experience and has therefore failed to understand or respond to individual experience.

### *Types of work conducted*

Much of Sharon Bessell's early work relates to child labour and children's experiences within non-Western countries. She has considered issues such as corporal punishment, exploitation and trafficking. At the same time, Sharon Bessell has written widely about gender and the gendered experience of women and girls, particularly in South East Asia.

Sharon Bessell has engaged children as young as four in her research and generally conceptualises children as being up to the age of eighteen. In a number of her studies she has stressed the importance of recognising children's transitions into adults, and the value of understanding and responding to young people as they moved between these two age categories.

Within the Australian context, Sharon Bessell has continued to draw on the children's rights framework, particularly in relation to children's right to participation and to protection. She has conducted studies in the areas of child protection, child welfare and education, both in Australia and internationally.

Recognising the short history of research with children in the political science domain and within the broader academic tradition, Sharon Bessell has explored epistemological, methodological and ethical issues and has written broadly about children's participation. Challenging limiting notions of children and a dominant view that children need to be restricted from participation in research around sensitive issues, Sharon Bessell has attempted to create and foster research approaches that enable children to engage with research, and through their participation, inform the development of responsive policy and practice.

### *My relationship with Sharon Bessell*

I have known Sharon Bessell for over ten years and worked with her on projects related to children's participation and children's involvement with the child protection system. I consider her to be a mentor and believe that she helped shape my understanding of children and children's research. I have attended a number of her lectures and workshops at the Australian National University. In 2005 we wrote a paper and presented together, and have kept each other abreast of our research and the ethical and methodological issues that have arisen. Sharon was one of the first to introduce me to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and provided me with advice early in my PhD journey on how reflexivity might help in navigating an underexplored subject such as the one considered in this study. She and I participated in the 2008 Think Tank on children's research co-hosted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People (NSWCCYP).

### *Sharon Bessell's engagement with this study*

As part of this study I conducted a two-hour, face-to-face semi-structured interview with Sharon Bessell at her office at the Australian National University, and analysed over twenty of her journal articles, book chapters and research reports related to children, children's rights and participation in research.

## ***Sue Dockett***

Professor Sue Dockett is a Professor in Early Childhood Education at Charles Sturt University.

### ***Pathway into research with children***

Sue Dockett began her professional career as an early childhood educator, working in prior-to-school settings. She has a bachelor and a master's degree in education.

Sue Dockett's interest in research with children began in the late 1990s whilst living in the United States of America. She and colleague Bob Perry were intrigued by newspaper advertisements that encouraged parents to enrol their children in programs to help them prepare for school. They were interested in this period of transition and quickly noticed that most of the research had engaged parents and teachers, but that children's perspectives were starkly missing. Although they encountered some ambivalence about children's ability to reflect on their needs and experiences and the ethical issues related to engaging them in research, Sue Dockett and Bob Perry's work gained recognition because they discovered that children saw transitions and their needs quite differently to adults.

### ***Motivations***

Sue Dockett's work has primarily focused on influencing practice within the early childhood sector, and developing a theory of practice, which actively engages children and promotes their perspectives. She shared that she thoroughly enjoys working with children and learning from them about their worlds. She is also committed to improving their experiences at school, within the community and with their peers.

### *Theoretical assumptions*

Trained in early childhood education and working within child care and pre-school settings, Sue Dockett observes that she has been influenced by developmental and educational theories but has spent some time problematising and reconfiguring what are often limiting notions of childhood. Sue draws on the work of Barbara Rogoff who contends that children develop expertise through participation with others, and stresses that children are capable of reflecting, developing theories of the world and influencing those around them.

One of the tensions that Sue Dockett identified related to children's competence. She argued that children were able to understand their worlds and reflect on them. However, she argued that sometimes promoting this capacity was detrimental to children when adults pushed them too hard, and when, thinking they were ready for further education, disallowed them time for play and for childhood exploration. Building a theoretical framework for enabling children to develop in their own time, at their preferred pace, and in ways where they learned through their interactions with others and the world around them, seems important to Sue and is something that she has considered broadly.

### *Types of work conducted*

Sue Dockett's work has primarily focused on children's transitions into schooling: how they experience it, what their needs are during this period, and how best to respond to children, parents, teachers and others during this critical time. She also has written broadly about play (particularly in relation to early numeracy development), about early childhood curriculum, and in more recent times, has further explored epistemology, methodology and participation in children's research. According to her on-line biography, "Much of Sue's current collaborative work is focused on refining and critiquing these approaches as

well as conceptual and theoretical analysis of what is meant by engaging children and young people's voices within research agendas”.

### *My relationship with Sue Dockett*

I first met Sue Dockett at the ARACY / NSWCCYP Roundtable in 2008. Since then, we have had numerous conversations about methodologies and have swapped research tools, particularly those related to consent and choice.

### *Sue Dockett's engagement with this study*

As part of this study I conducted a ninety-minute, face-to-face semi-structured interview with Sue Dockett at Charles Sturt University, and analysed ten of her journal articles, her book and research reports related to children, children's play, early childhood education and participation in research.



## ***Robyn Fitzgerald***

Dr Robyn Fitzgerald is a postdoctoral fellow with the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University. She teaches in the Schools of Education and Law.

### ***Pathway into research with children***

Robyn Fitzgerald first trained as a teacher and taught for some time. However, in the late 1990s she decided that she wanted to study law and did so while her three children were still young. After she completed her law degree she started talking to her friend and netball team-mate, Anne Graham, about grief and loss, and together they became interested in the impacts that parents' divorce and separation had on children. With another colleague, Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald established the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP), a centre made up of "a team of interdisciplinary researchers working collaboratively with practitioners and policy makers to enhance the wellbeing of children and young people in their families, schools and communities".

### ***Motivations***

Robyn Fitzgerald reflected that through her work she attempts to elevate children's place in society by promoting their voices in the systems and services with which they interact. She is particularly passionate about children's participation: in the children's courts, in the child protection system, in education and in research.

### ***Theoretical assumptions***

In her interview, Robyn Fitzgerald observed that education and law are both professions that can be bound "to any number of discourses in their application". She argued that this makes them almost atheoretical – without a commonly shared view of children and

childhood. Although there are a number of dominant conceptualisations of children in both of these fields (i.e. children as developing, children as holders of rights, children in need of protection, childhood vulnerabilities), she argues that they did not sufficiently explain children's experiences, nor provide practitioners (within education, law or the welfare system) with appropriate theoretical tools to understand or respond to their needs. Robyn Fitzgerald reflected that her own views of childhood, shaped by her practice experience and the theories she encountered in her education and legal studies, and in her reading in the areas of philosophy, were constantly developing and changing, and she tried to draw these often competing discourses together.

### *Types of work conducted*

Robyn Fitzgerald has extensive research experience, with studies focusing on children's experiences in the Family Court, in supervised contact services, family relationship centres, and within the community more broadly. Robyn reflected that she is most engaged in projects that attempt to better understand the views and perspectives of children, and to inform change in the ways we understand and respond to them.

Alongside her research, Robyn Fitzgerald established and facilitates the CCYP's *Young People, Big Voice* consultative group, which meets to inform the research agenda, provide support with data analysis and educate those working with children and young people on how to most appropriately engage them in participatory processes.

### *My relationship with Robyn Fitzgerald*

I first met Robyn Fitzgerald at a conference where issues related to children and young people's participation were explored. We then both attended the ARACY / NSWCCYP

Roundtable in 2008 and have had further discussions about young people's participation in the broad child welfare system.

*Robyn Fitzgerald's engagement with this study*

As part of this study I conducted a two-hour, face-to-face semi-structured interview with Robyn Fitzgerald at the CCYP in Lismore, and analysed her PhD thesis and over fifteen of her journal articles, book chapters and research reports related to children, their involvement with the family law system, their engagement in participatory activities and issues related to their engagement with research practice and methodologies.

## ***Anne Graham***

Professor Anne Graham is the Foundation Director of the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University.

### ***Pathway into research with children***

Prior to work in research, Anne Graham worked in schools, and in response to a group of children who had experienced grief and loss, wrote a program called “Seasons for Growth”, which attempted to increase children’s resilience and emotional literacy to promote social and emotional wellbeing. The highly successful program is based on Anne’s view that children who have experienced grief and loss need a space in which to talk about their feelings and their experiences in a safe and nurturing way. Through the experience of talking with these children, Anne Graham developed a growing interest in how best to have conversations with children, and after being encouraged to evaluate the program, also how to best elicit children’s observations about what works and what doesn’t. This carried through into her research at the Southern Cross University where she taught in the School of Education and then set up the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP).

### ***Motivations***

In her work as a teacher, Anne Graham was interested in ways in which outcomes for children might be improved in the context of schools. Since these early beginnings, Anne Graham shared that her motivation in conducting research was about informing and improving practice, particularly for those children and young people who might be considered ‘vulnerable’. She reported in her interview that providing children with opportunities to express themselves was incredibly important, and that much of her work

was driven to this outcome. In addition to listening to children, Anne expressed a commitment to trying to respond to what they have said and what they want. Participation, she believes, requires negotiation and should be beneficial to all parties. In summary, Anne Graham reported that she had “an unashamed love of kids” and ultimately wanted to make life better for those experiencing difficulty.

### *Theoretical assumptions*

Through her experiences with the “Seasons for Growth” program, Anne Graham developed a view that children not only had the capacity to reflect on their lives, but should also be afforded opportunities to do so. This view was not always congruent with some of the educational theories about children that were dominant in schools, and the practice of listening and responding to children was limited. She observed that there was ambivalence about children’s capacity and a lack of recognition that they already influenced and were influenced by the worlds around them. She argued, that in particular, children who had experienced adversity may have different perspectives on the world and could and did reflect on these experiences in a way that adults might not expect.

### *Types of work conducted*

Anne Graham has a diverse research experience: exploring children and young people’s engagement in education, in the legal, welfare, juvenile justice and court systems; and has investigated issues related to mental health, schooling, social disadvantage and social marketing. She has also researched issues related to teacher training, pedagogy, professional development and the use of Information and Communication Technologies in education. She has conducted evaluations of services, programs and participatory processes. Her work has not only included Australian children but also children and

families in Vietnam. Throughout her research career, Anne Graham has considered issues of epistemology and ontology, participation and ethics.

### *My relationship with Anne Graham*

Before beginning my own research career I worked primarily with young carers and other children in families where someone had an illness, disability, mental health, or alcohol or other drug issue. As part of this work I came across Anne's "Seasons for Growth" program and participated in an introductory training session, possibly co-facilitated by Anne herself. I remember learning a lot from the program and working alongside practitioners who were using it.

I first met Anne Graham at a conference on children's participation, and then again at the ARACY / NSWCCYP Roundtable in 2008. We have sat on a panel on children's participation and attended the same conferences since.

### *Anne Graham's engagement with this study*

I conducted a seventy-minute, semi-structured telephone interview with Anne Graham while visiting the CCYP in Lismore. In addition, I analysed twelve of her journal articles, book chapters and research reports and policy submissions.

## ***Deborah Harcourt***

Professor Deborah Harcourt is Professor of Early Childhood Education within the Faculty of Education at the Australian Catholic University.

### ***Pathway into research with children***

Deborah Harcourt began her career teaching children in Adelaide and the Sunshine Coast, where she established her own training school. She then moved to Asia, establishing graduate programs in teacher education in Singapore, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and Cambodia. In 2000 Deborah embarked on a career in research.

### ***Motivations***

In her interview, Deborah described research as her ‘life’s work’: an endeavour that married her interest in human rights and her interest in educating young children. Deborah’s commitment to research-for-change was driven by her experiences as a child growing up in small country town in South Australia and going to a school with a large Indigenous population. She recalls that early on she became aware of social justice issues and was interested in looking at how she might best redress them. This vocation was further laid down when, at 18 years of age, Deborah travelled the world as a dancer and encountered poverty, disadvantage and injustice. In her work as a teacher and then as a researcher, Deborah has been committed to enabling children to have a voice believing that when children are listened to change is inevitable.

### ***Theoretical assumptions***

Deborah Harcourt was trained as a teacher but believed that early educational theory did not place children at the heart of schooling. She was heartened, therefore, to encounter the

Regio Emilia approach to education and the pedagogy of listening: an approach that is characterised by children's self-learning, a respect for children's expression and the centrality of adult-child and child-child relationship. Deborah Harcourt has adopted the approach in her teaching and research practice.

### *Types of work conducted*

Deborah Harcourt has worked in the early childhood field for over 25 years, including 12 years spent teaching in Australia and Singapore. In addition to her work focusing on education, Deborah Harcourt has investigated the development and implementation of health and welfare services for children, cross-cultural constructions of children, notions of quality, and children's participation in research.

### *My relationship with Deborah Harcourt*

I had met Deborah Harcourt on a number of occasions before embarking on my PhD, had read a number of her journal articles and had spent time talking to her about how to best engage and support young children in both the research and welfare contexts. Deborah and I participated in the Think Tank and have presented separately at a number of conferences.

### *Deborah Harcourt's engagement with this study*

I conducted a seventy-minute, semi-structured telephone interview with Deborah Harcourt. In addition, I reviewed eighteen of her journal articles, book chapters and research reports.



## *Catherine Hartung*

Dr Catherine Hartung is an early career researcher. When I interviewed her, she was completing her doctoral thesis, “Governing the 'agentic' child citizen: A poststructural analysis of children's participation” at the University of Wollongong.

### *Pathway into research with children*

Catherine Hartung reflected that her interest in children and childhood was spurred on by her own experiences as a child, who regularly moved from one school to another. In studying to be a teacher she became interested in how children experience different aspects of their lives, including education, how they interact with the environments around them, and what benefits there might be in more meaningfully engaging them in participatory processes.

### *Motivations*

Catherine Hartung reflected that her motivations were both academic and practical. She was fascinated by the way that theorists had conceptualised children (or had not) and the implications that this might have for participatory processes. Recognising the growing interest in engaging children in consultations, but also a growing trend of doing so in ways that were token and limited, Catherine felt there was a need to develop a theory that could be applied for the benefit of children and for those working with them.

### *Theoretical assumptions*

In her PhD, Catherine Hartung identified and problematised many of the key theories and approaches to children's participation. Drawing on the work of Corsaro and others, she drew from sociological accounts of childhood and looked at how they were being applied

theoretically and practically in environments across the globe. Adopting Foucauldian theories related to power and knowledge, her study mapped the “discourses of children’s participation through a two-phased poststructural genealogy”, attempting to move beyond the traditional dichotomies of vulnerability and empowerment, and structure and agency.

### *Types of work conducted*

Catherine Hartung has primarily focused on participatory practice with children: how children might best be engaged in decisions about the environment, public space, their use of parks and play equipment and their involvement in healthy cities. Her PhD study engaged international experts and constructed “a poststructural genealogy of the present state of children’s participation”, based on a discourse analysis of literature and semi-structured interviews with eleven key informants associated with the field of children’s participation.

Prior to her PhD study, Catherine had conducted a number of studies looking at children and space, children’s rights and their involvement in child-friendly cities. She co-authored a book chapter on participatory practice with children.

### *My relationship with Catherine Hartung*

I first met Catherine Hartung in 2011 when she met with the team at the Institute of Child Protection Studies after being interested in our work and our approach.

### *Catherine Hartung’s engagement with this study*

I conducted a one hour, face-to-face semi-structured interview with Catherine Hartung, and analysed her PhD thesis and her book chapter.

## ***Deborah Keys***

Dr Deborah Keys is a Principal Researcher at the Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne.

### ***Pathway into research with children***

Deborah Keys began researching issues related to children and young people nine years ago. Prior to this she had worked on crisis counselling phone-lines and provided direct service support to women experiencing family violence. After having a child of her own, Deborah completed her PhD studies, looking at health, sexuality and identity. In 2002 she began work at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, where among other studies, she reviewed the social and contextual factors related to adolescent sexual risk-taking, vulnerability to unwanted pregnancy and STI/HIV infections and their impact on sexuality. This sparked an ongoing interest in the experiences and needs of ‘vulnerable’ young people. Although her work has not always centred on issues related to children and young people, she observed that she has always had a keen interest in their needs and ways to best respond to them.

### ***Motivations***

In her interview, Deborah Keys noted that one of her key motivations for conducting research with vulnerable populations (including young people) related to improving their outcomes and developing responsive services and supports. She observed, “I can’t imagine a job where you didn’t feel like you were trying to make something better in some way: on a large structural sense or the policy level or the practice level”.

### *Theoretical assumptions*

Deborah Keys' early work primarily focused on theories related to the development of identity, and in understanding issues such as risk-taking behaviour and sexuality. Rather than holding specific theories related to children and young people, Deborah Keys has attempted to draw on a range of theoretical positions to understand their experiences. She reflects that for pragmatic reasons, some of her recent practice-based research has been atheoretical, focusing primarily on practice implications rather than on building conceptual and theoretical frameworks related to child and youth-hood.

### *Types of work conducted*

For the past nine years, Deborah Keys has conducted studies with children and young people alongside other studies focusing on drug use, sexuality and homelessness. For three years, Deborah Keys worked at the Research and Social Policy Unit at Melbourne City Mission, a large non-government organisation; that among other work provides assistance to children and young people experiencing homelessness. While at the Research and Social Policy Unit, Deborah conducted a number of studies focusing on accompanying children, young mothers and young people's pathways through homelessness services.

### *My relationship with Deborah Keys*

I first met Deborah Keys in 2007 after completing a study focusing on accompanying children's experiences of homelessness. At that time, Melbourne City Mission was also exploring the needs of this group and Deborah Keys was interested in how we conducted the study with children and the findings that we concluded. Believing that our project was quite successful and responsive to children's needs, Deborah Keys drew from our methodology, replicating parts of the study in the Victorian context. We had numerous

conversations about our studies and sat on a number of panels discussing the outcomes of our research. Deborah Keys and I sit on an advisory group overseeing a project exploring family sensitive assessment in homelessness services.

*Deborah Keys' engagement with this study*

While planning my research project I met with Deborah Keys and her colleague, Dr Shelley Mallett, to discuss the nature and scope of the study. I then interviewed Deborah Keys for an hour in Melbourne after she moved from Melbourne City Mission to the University of Melbourne.

## ***Jan Mason***

At the time of interviewing, Professor Jan Mason was a professor of Community and Social Work and Founding Director of the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney.

### ***Pathway into research with children***

Prior to her university career, Jan Mason trained and practised as a child psychologist, and held a variety of government practice and management positions in the area of child welfare and protection. In 1986 she completed her PhD in the United States, where she analysed their Child Welfare Policy and considered the part that children played in the system. On returning to Australia, her interest in children, particularly those who were involved in statutory systems continued, and she began exploring children's voices and how they might best be heard. She wrote book chapters and articles sharing children's accounts of their experiences – a discussion that continued into her research work.

### ***Motivations***

Jan Mason observed that social justice was a key driving force for her. In both her practice and in her research, Jan Mason recognised the de-privileged position of children and reflected that children “are not highly valued... they're at the bottom of the barrel”. She observed that through her career she promoted children's rights, needs and wishes; and attempted to reposition children so that their value, their competencies and their agency might be better understood and nurtured. Although she observes that she was never quite sure as to whether her research had led to meaningful change for children, this remained a significant motivator throughout her long and significant career.

### *Theoretical assumptions*

In her early years as a psychologist and researcher, Jan Mason drew heavily on developmental theories, but felt that they did not fully recognise the value of children in the present. Challenged by feminist and standpoint theories, Jan Mason then took a more structural and political view of children and childhood, arguing that children's vulnerability related more to adultist conceptualisations of children, and children's lack of access to social, political, cultural and economic capital. She has worked closely with a number of the key writers in the Childhood Studies domain and reports that she has found their discourse helpful in understanding and writing about children.

### *Types of work conducted*

Jan Mason has a long and distinguished career, and has primarily conducted research that attempts to link theory, policy and practice on children's issues. She has conducted studies and published widely on issues related to child welfare and protection, child and family policy, child-adult relations, children's needs in care and children's well-being. In the later stages of her career, Jan Mason's work focused on children's participation: in research, in processes that affect their lives and within the community more broadly.

### *My relationship with Jan Mason*

Jan Mason is one of Australia's leading experts on children's research. I first came across her work in my undergraduate degree when I drew heavily from her research focusing on children in care and her analysis of the children's rights framework. I attended a number of symposiums where she key-note lectured, and then we both participated in the ARACY / NSWCCYP Roundtable in 2008.

### *Jan Mason's engagement with this study*

I conducted a ninety-minute, face-to-face interview with Jan Mason, and analysed her books, book chapters and fifteen of her journal articles.



## ***Neerosh Mudaly***

Dr Neerosh Mudaly is a Senior Research Fellow with Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia at Monash University.

### ***Pathway into research with children***

Prior to coming to Australia in 1990, Neerosh Mudaly was a child protection worker in South Africa, where she worked with children who had been abused. She recalls that as a counsellor, she soon discovered that children could make sense of their experiences, including those experiences that were particularly traumatic, and that the way they considered abuse was different to adults. Her interest in children's understanding of issues such as abuse continued in her clinical work in Australia and then into her research.

### ***Motivations***

Neerosh Mudaly continues her work as a child and family therapist and is motivated to help children understand, deal with, and overcome the many challenges that they encounter. This continues into the research domain, where Neerosh attempts to not only promote children's voices but to help those working with them to understand their needs, their wishes and the value of engaging them in meaningful ways. Alongside her work as a therapist and researcher, Neerosh Mudaly dedicates much of her time to educating students, and assisting in the professional development, clinical supervision and training of those working with children. She is motivated to ensure that these staff are best equipped to work with and for children.

### *Theoretical assumptions*

Neerosh Mudaly draws heavily on developmental theories and recognises that alongside their vulnerabilities, children do have developing capacities. Neerosh works in the area of mental health and aligns her thinking with trauma, ecological and family system theories: theories that also inform her work with particularly vulnerable children.

### *Types of work conducted*

Neerosh Mudaly's research has primarily focused on children who have experienced abuse and neglect, children's engagement with systems, child protection practice and the practice and impacts of abuse-related research.

### *My relationship with Neerosh Mudaly*

Neerosh Mudaly and I have sat on a number of panels and have presented in the same streams at a number of national and international conferences, particularly on issues related to research practice with children.

### *Neerosh Mudaly's engagement with this study*

Neerosh Mudaly participated in a ninety-minute, face-to-face interview at her office in Melbourne. As part of this study, I analysed her book and five of her journal articles.

## APPENDIX B: RESEARCHER PARTICIPANTS'

### LITERATURE

The documents listed under 'Documents Analysed' are those from which themes and codes were identified, as discussed in the Section 4.6. Those listed under 'Literature Review' are those which were reviewed and used as additional data in chapters 5 – 8.

<b>Researcher participant</b>	<b>Documents analysed</b>	<b>Literature reviewed</b>
Sharon Bessell	1 research report, 2 journal articles	22 documents (including peer reviewed journal articles, book chapters and research reports)
Sue Dockett	2 book chapters, 1 journal article	24 documents (including peer reviewed book and journal articles, book chapters and research reports)
Robyn Fitzgerald	2 research reports, 1 journal article	22 documents (including her PhD thesis, peer reviewed book and journal articles, book chapters and research reports)
Anne Graham	1 research report, 2 journal articles	22 documents
Catherine Hartung	1 journal article	3 documents (including her PhD thesis, a peer reviewed journal article and a book chapter)
Deborah Harcourt	2 book chapters, 1 journal article	18 documents (including peer review journal articles and edited book chapters)
Deborah Keys	1 research report	3 documents (including research reports and a journal article)
Jan Mason	3 book chapters	14 documents (including a book and book chapters and journal articles)
Neerosh Mudaly	2 journal articles, 1 book chapter	11 documents (including a book and journal articles)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23 documents</b>	<b>139 documents</b>

## APPENDIX C: THEMES AND CODES

The following themes (bolded) and codes (bulleted) were identified through the data analysis stage and were used as a framework for discussion in chapters 5 – 8.

<b>Pathways to research</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background</li> <li>• Childhood experiences</li> <li>• Difference of opinion</li> <li>• Educational background</li> <li>• Pathway into research</li> <li>• Practice experience – children</li> </ul>	<b>Pre research work / Professional identity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child welfare</li> <li>• Early childhood</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Political science</li> <li>• Social work</li> </ul>	<b>Motivating / sustaining factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belief in children</li> <li>• Developing understanding</li> <li>• Emotional impact</li> <li>• Forging new pathways</li> <li>• Improving practice</li> <li>• Influencing change</li> <li>• Interest</li> <li>• Learning from or with children</li> <li>• Love of kids</li> <li>• Rationale for research with children</li> <li>• Responding to future problems</li> <li>• Responsibility FOR children</li> <li>• Social justice</li> </ul>
<b>Constructions of childhood – theoretical perspectives</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical theory</li> <li>• Developmental</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Feminist theory</li> <li>• Law</li> <li>• Literature</li> <li>• Philosophical</li> <li>• Political</li> <li>• Psychological theory</li> <li>• Self-concept</li> <li>• Sociology</li> <li>• Standpoint theory</li> <li>• Theory – general</li> </ul>	<b>Aspects of constructions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acting on children's views</li> <li>• Agency</li> <li>• Best interests</li> <li>• Capacity / Competency</li> <li>• Childhood distinct to adulthood</li> <li>• Children as future beings</li> <li>• Children understanding</li> <li>• Children's agency</li> <li>• Children's feelings</li> <li>• Children's knowledge</li> <li>• Children's participation</li> <li>• Children's play</li> <li>• Children's power</li> <li>• Children's rights</li> <li>• Children's space</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's strengths</li> <li>• Children's voice</li> <li>• Constructions of childhood</li> <li>• Innocence</li> <li>• Limitations of constructions</li> <li>• Position of children in relation to family</li> <li>• Status of children</li> <li>• Vulnerability</li> </ul>	
<b>Research process</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis</li> <li>• Boundaries for children</li> <li>• Children telling truth</li> <li>• Children's views different to adults</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Consulting children</li> <li>• Conversations with children</li> <li>• Difference adult-child research</li> <li>• Epistemology and theory</li> <li>• Evaluations</li> <li>• Feedback from children</li> <li>• Fun</li> <li>• Interdisciplinary</li> <li>• No Go Zones</li> <li>• Participation</li> <li>• Participatory research - children</li> <li>• Protecting children</li> <li>• Research design</li> <li>• Research experience - children</li> <li>• Research methods</li> <li>• Research on children</li> </ul>	<b>Desirable researcher skills and attributes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to connect</li> <li>• Ability to listen</li> <li>• Different to research with adults</li> <li>• Professional attitude</li> <li>• Professional work skills</li> <li>• Relationship with children</li> <li>• Researcher as parent</li> <li>• Researcher skills - children</li> <li>• Trust</li> </ul>	<b>Ethical issues</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefits for children (immediate)</li> <li>• Benefits for children (longer term)</li> <li>• Benefits for children as group</li> <li>• Children silenced</li> <li>• Choice</li> <li>• Confidentiality</li> <li>• Consent Assent</li> <li>• Danger zones</li> <li>• Ethics</li> <li>• Ethics Committees</li> <li>• Harm to children</li> <li>• Power - researcher or adult</li> <li>• Promoting research with children (and researchers)</li> <li>• Protecting children</li> <li>• Vulnerability</li> </ul>
<b>External forces / influences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic field</li> <li>• Family engagement</li> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Gatekeepers</li> <li>• Organisational philosophy</li> <li>• Resources - human</li> <li>• Resources - time</li> <li>• Resources - training</li> </ul>	<b>Research outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy</li> <li>• Children's voice heard</li> <li>• Constraints</li> <li>• Difficult for adults</li> <li>• Educating adults</li> <li>• For children</li> <li>• For practice</li> <li>• Implications for practice</li> <li>• Process educational for</li> </ul>	<b>Criticisms of children's research</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Atheoretical</li> <li>• Challenging ambivalence about children</li> <li>• Credibility of research</li> <li>• Criticisms of children's research</li> <li>• Limitations</li> <li>• Robustness of children's</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools</li> <li>• Site of research</li> <li>• Status - research with children</li> <li>• Status of children's researchers</li> </ul>	<p>children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research dissemination</li> </ul>	<p>research</p>
<p><b>Reflexivity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving practice</li> <li>• Reflexivity - in field</li> <li>• Reflexivity - research practice</li> <li>• Reflexivity - with children</li> <li>• Reflexivity - within team</li> </ul>	<p><b>Reflexivity – this project</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insider knowledge</li> <li>• Experience</li> <li>• Reflex notes</li> <li>• Relationship with researchers</li> <li>• Challenging preconceptions</li> </ul>	

## APPENDIX D: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS



Australian Catholic University Limited

P.O. Box 256 Dickson ACT 2602

Phone: 02 6209 1228

Fax: 02 6209 1216

Email : [icps@signadou.acu.edu.au](mailto:icps@signadou.acu.edu.au)

August 2010

### INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Title of project: Keeping them in mind: Understanding research with children

Principal Investigator: Dr. Morag McArthur

Student: Tim Moore

#### Invitation to participate in important research

I am writing to invite you to participate in a doctoral research project to explore the way that researchers approach and conduct their work with children.

This project will explore some of the key assumptions that underpin research with children and the way that these influence the types of research that is conducted, the methodologies adopted, the findings determined and the new knowledge created and disseminated.

This letter provides you with information to encourage your participation in this important research project.

#### Background

Over the past 25 years there has been an increased interest in the lived experiences of children and a growing commitment to directly engaging them in research projects on topics that affect their lives. Although much has been written about the ethics and process of working with children, there has only been limited reflection amongst the research community about why individual researchers and their teams directly work with children, what experience, knowledge, values and assumptions they bring with them to the research context and what influence this might have on what, how, why and to what end they do what they do. In essence, this project will encourage researchers and the broader research community to be reflexive in light of the emerging interest in children's research.

#### The research aims to answer the questions:

What are some of the key assumptions and beliefs that underpin researcher's practice?

- How have these key assumptions and beliefs emerged?
- How do these sit within the broader research context?
- How have these assumptions and beliefs shaped the research process?

### **Benefits for practitioners and practice**

The research will provide an opportunity for researchers to reflect on their own practice: their knowledge, skills and values and how these impact on their work.

### **Benefits of your contribution**

The project aims to develop a better understanding of the broad research field and an appreciation of the way that researchers understand and work with children. As an established researcher, your contribution will be significant in helping us further understand the research experience.

### **Participation**

The research will involve participants participating in a semi-structured interview which will take about one hour at a time and place of your choosing. You may prefer to participate via a phone interview. With your permission interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed.

Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason.

### **Confidentiality and risks**

The confidentiality of research participants in this study will be limited. This study aims to encourage participants to draw from their practice experience and to give examples from their research history. Through the project we hope to recognise and showcase the contribution of researchers and will encourage participants to share their identity where appropriate. Participants will be given the option of either being individually identified or for their input to be included in an aggregated and de-identified way. Participants will be offered this choice at the beginning and the end of the interviews and will be asked to identify any parts of the interview they would like de-identified.

However, as the community of researchers working directly with children is relatively small, it is highly likely that individuals may be identified by peers who are aware of their research experience. Every attempt to limit this actuality (for those who want to remain anonymous) will be undertaken (for example, identifying details will be omitted or altered).

### **What happens to your responses?**

The data will be aggregated and analysed and drawn together in a doctoral thesis report. We also intend to use the findings of the study as a basis for a number of journal articles and conference papers. Participants who consent to having their identities shared may have particular quotes or stories attributed to them in these documents and communications while those who choose not to have them shared will remain anonymous.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact the principal researcher:



Dr. Morag McArthur  
Australian Catholic University  
Institute of Child Protection Studies  
223 Antill Street  
Watson ACT 2602  
Phone: 02 6209 1225  
Email: [morag.mcarthur@acu.edu.au](mailto:morag.mcarthur@acu.edu.au)

This project is conducted with the approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University. If, during the course of the research, you have any complaint about the way that you have been treated or if you have a query that you think has not been dealt with by the project researchers, you may contact:

Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee  
C/o Research Services  
Australian Catholic University  
Strathfield Campus  
Locked Bag 2002  
STRATHFIELD NSW 2135  
Ph: 02 9701 4093  
Fax: 02 9701 4350

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the result of your complaint.

Thanking you in advance for your participation.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Morag McArthur', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Associate Professor, Dr Morag McArthur  
Director, Institute of Child Protection Studies  
Australian Catholic University

## APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

TITLE OF PROJECT: Keeping them in mind: Understanding research with children

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: DR. MORAG McARTHUR

NAME OF STUDENT INVESTIGATOR: TIM MOORE

I.....have read (or had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Information Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in:

☐ an interview which will be audiotaped

☐ I consent to my identity to be revealed in the doctoral thesis and in journal articles and conference papers

☐ I do not consent to having my identity revealed and request that my input be de-identified and aggregated.

I realize that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I agree that research data collected for the purpose of the study may be published in accordance with the Information Letter to Participants.

SIGNATURE..... DATE.....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR



DATE.....

# APPENDIX F: ETHICS APPROVAL, AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY



## Human Research Ethics Committee

### Committee Approval Form

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Associate Professor Morag McArthur Canberra Campus

Co-Investigators:

Student Researcher: Mr Tim Moore Brisbane Campus

Ethics approval has been granted for the following project:

Keeping them in mind: Understanding research with children. (Keeping them in mind)

for the period: 26 August 2010 to 30 June 2011

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Register Number: N2010 43

The following standard conditions as stipulated in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (2007) apply:

- (i) that Principal Investigators / Supervisors provide, on the form supplied by the Human Research Ethics Committee, annual reports on matters such as:
  - security of records
  - compliance with approved consent procedures and documentation
  - compliance with special conditions, and
- (ii) that researchers report to the HREC immediately any matter that might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol, such as:
  - proposed changes to the protocol
  - unforeseen circumstances or events
  - adverse effects on participants

The HREC will conduct an audit each year of all projects deemed to be of more than low risk. There will also be random audits of a sample of projects considered to be of negligible risk and low risk on all campuses each year.

Within one month of the conclusion of the project, researchers are required to complete a *Final Report Form* and submit it to the local Research Services Officer.

If the project continues for more than one year, researchers are required to complete an *Annual Progress Report Form* and submit it to the local Research Services Officer within one month of the anniversary date of the ethics approval.

Signed: ..... Date: 26.08.2010  
(Research Services Officer, McAuley Campus)

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