

Listening to children about well-being

Ouvindo as crianças sobre o bem-estar

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Abstract

This paper discusses epistemological, ethical and methodological issues about the study of children's well-being listening to the children themselves in a specific collaborative project between some researchers at the University of Évora, Hospital of Santarém and Évora's Child Activity Centre (CAI), an early childhood education centre. The research aim was to explore and develop the concept of children's well-being. The centrality of children as research participants was fundamental to our methodological approach. Using a qualitative perspective and qualitative methods we explored children understandings about well-being, of how and when it is experienced by them. We discuss some of the challenges and implications driven from the reflection on the research process in terms of the epistemological, ethical and methodological questions that were raised and how they were addressed in a study that took place in the Child Activity Centre.

Keywords: Well-being; Children; Qualitative research; Methods

Resumo

Este artigo discute aspectos epistemológicos, éticos e metodológicos do estudo do bem-estar das crianças a partir da escuta das próprias crianças, no âmbito de um projeto colaborativo entre alguns investigadores da Universidade de Évora, do Hospital de Santarém e do Centro de Atividade Infantil (CAI), um jardim de infância da cidade de Évora. O objetivo da investigação foi o de explorar e desenvolver o conceito de Bem-Estar nas crianças. A centralidade das crianças como participantes da investigação foi fundamental para a nossa perspetiva metodológica. Partindo de uma perspetiva qualitativa e usando métodos qualitativos, explorámos a compreensão das crianças sobre o bem-estar e como e quando este é por elas experienciado. Discutimos aqui alguns dos desafios e implicações oriundos da reflexão sobre o processo de investigação em termos de questões epistemológicas, éticas e metodológicas que emergiram e do modo como estas foram abordadas num estudo que teve lugar no Centro de Atividade Infantil.

Palavras-Chave: Bem-Estar; Crianças; Investigação qualitativa; Métodos

Introduction

Recently, in the context of this Leipzig-Évora Scientific Meeting, we were advocating for the importance of listening to the voices of ordinary people about their own well-being (Vaz-Velho, 2018) including the voices of children.

The aim of the study is to explore and develop the concept of children's well-being from the children's perspective. Our challenge is how to listen to children about their perspectives on well-being in a valid and ethical way.

While designing and doing this research some epistemological, ethical and methodological questions had to be dwelt with: Are children's perspectives valuable in terms of understanding what is children well-being? Are children capable of expressing their views and, can we trust children's views to help us understand what their well-being is? What are the implications of children's participation in this research to their own lives in general and, to the every-day life of the Early Childhood Education Settings? What are the risks and the opportunities for children who participate in this study? What research design and methods can help us listen to children and understand their views?

We will structure this paper around 4 main questions: Why is it important to listen to children? What are the main constraints in considering children's voices to understand children's well-being? What are the main challenges we face when doing research with children about their own well-being? And finally, how did we address these challenges? We hope that this brief discussion can help other researchers, who want to research with children, to question and address their own epistemological, ethical and methodological questions in the research process.

I. Why listening to children's voices?

Several arguments can be used to explain why it is important to listen to children to understand what is children's well-being. The most direct answer is that asking and listening to children's subjective perception of well-being, is probably the best way of acquiring accurate information, since it provides information to the researcher that is based on their direct experience (Finch, 1986). Because children are a distinct population group, their perspective about well-being may not overlap with adult perspectives. For instance, parents and teachers may evaluate as the most important aspects of children well-being the school and friendships, while children may stress the importance of family, pets and sports (Sixsmith, et al, 2007).

Another reason to listen to children is an ethical one. A child is a subject of rights including the right of voice, and the right to influence decisions related to aspects of their lives. As the Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views 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 Human Rights, 1990, Art. 12, 1.)

This convention underlines agency and participation of children as citizens and social actors able to speak for themselves. Furthermore, research about well-being may be relevant for the children lives since well-being indicators are frequently used (OCDE, 2012), namely in the definition of Sustainable Development. (United Nations, 2015) In this sense, it seems fair to let children participate in the definition of well-being that will be used and that will affect their lives, in a more direct or indirect way.

II. Why aren't children's perspectives always considered?

We can group in two sets of reasons why children's perspectives weren't, until recently, listened to. Firstly, there was, or is, a believe that there are more scientific, predictive and measurable ways to know and to understand what children well-being is. Fattore and colleagues (2012) identified three themes that dominated the well-being research: (a) the vision of children as “becoming” following a linear growth path, towards the superior status of adulthood that emphasized the milestones of normal development; (b) the view of well-being as the lack of problematic behaviours and deficits; and (c) the measuring of well-being using an index of success or failure of children in formal institutions, for example retention rates in school or number of children under child protection care. All of those themes, although frequently used are adult centric and offer an indirect perspective of children well-being.

Secondly, a group of reasons that prevented research to include children's voices are based on questioning the validity of their accounts. The question is, can we trust their knowledge? What can be the veracity of children's statements? Underlying such questions, we can see the idea of children viewed as a less cognitively competent group in terms of language or thinking (e. g. magic realism), as well as children as a vulnerable group. Together these suspicions might have been the reasons for disregarding children's views. For instance, stressing the fact that children may try to respond what adults want to hear as a characteristic of the child (and not something that might happen in certain contexts), without acknowledging that research with adults also deals with the “social desirability” effect, is a view of children as less competent.

Nevertheless, a child-focused approach has been emerging (Hood, 2005) and today we know from previous research that children, also small children (Estola, Farquhar & Puroila, 2014) are capable of understanding and to express themselves about abstract concepts and well-being in a complex way (e.g. Dex & Hollingworth, 2012; Folque, 2010; Gillett-Swan, 2017) and that they can use practical examples and important episodes to do it (Nilsson et al, 2013).

Having argued for epistemological and ethical relevance of listening to children to understand their well-being and having briefly referred empirical studies that have shown its possibility, now we will address the challenges of this research.

III. What are the main challenges in this kind of research?

Complexity

Children live and develop in complex social realities and well-being is a complex and social construct. The children's perspectives on well-being are elaborated and constituted during research interactions and are depend on the child and researcher history and culture and on the research context as well as on the relationship established (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, one of the major challenges is how to design and develop a research process that takes all this complexity in consideration, and finds strategies and methods to create a facilitating context to children's participation as well as the development of collaborative and dialogic relationships (Folque, 2010).

Another major challenge of this research is ensuring that we are really listening to children (Pascal & Bertram, 2009). How can a researcher learn to listen to children? How can one be opened and focused at the same time? How to engage in a dialogue with the children that elicits their best contributions? Although there is a recognized need to use different languages to listen to children (Honkanen, Poikolainen & Karlsson; 2017) this requires professional training, something that is still manifestly insufficient.

Ethics in research involving children

One of the key ethical questions often referred about children participation in research is the need to ensure that the participations is a voluntary participation, that children are not being in any way coerced or feel obligated to participate by the parents, teachers or the researchers (Prado, Vicentin, & Rosemberg (2018). The initial consent that is important to have from the children themselves is not a guarantee of permanent consent throughout the research process since children (as well as adults) may change their minds along the process and may not anticipate exactly what the research asks of them, even when all the steps are cared for to be the most appropriate (age and individualized) consents.

Another ethical issue concerning children's participation in research refers to the risks of the research process in terms of maleficence (harm and expectations). Although not all the consequences may be anticipated it is important to recognize that although in our study, we were looking for well-being experiences, evoking and making children pay attention to them may trigger unpleasant emotions even by contrast or by the increased awareness of the lack of such experiences in a child daily live. For instance, well children are interviewed in group and one child relates well-being with being in her father's arms and hugging, another child may miss this experience. Another important aspect is related to the expectations that this study may raise in the children that, by participating in the study, will promote a change in their lives, in the Early childhood care or in other contexts. An example may be: if a child says that he feels well-being when going to the beach, and it is summer, and he knows that his parents signed for the research, he might imagine that his parents are going to take him more often. All efforts have to be done not to create unrealistic expectations and disappointment, or the belief in children that that can't influence their one lives and well-being.

IV. How did we address these challenges?

Being aware of the many challenges, during the phases of defining our study design and of its implementation in order to attain our study aims regardful of the epistemological, ethical and also methodological questions helped us to learn about how to listen to the children's voices about their concept of wellbeing.

This study took place in an Early Childhood Education Context – CAI with the staff and two groups of children from 3 to 5 years old, to understand the meaning of well-being from the perspectives of children. This was a qualitative study, from on a socio-constructivist perspective where meaning is viewed as being constructed in the interaction between the researcher and the participants, and as a social construct.

As methodological steps or processes to address the complexity of the study, knowing that the context and relations influence children participation we tried to prepare ourselves as researchers, before and during the study, enhancing the competences to interview and listen to children, using different languages. Continued modelling, monitoring and discussion was used between the research team.

To improve knowledge, abilities and attitudes the research team integrated an Interdisciplinary Group Seminar called "Listening to children as professionals and as researchers", with participants form different areas of knowledge, experienced and junior researchers as well as professionals to debate and

deepen the knowledge and reflexivity about researching with children. This context, due to the diversity of the participants, some more connected to education, other to arts and other to clinical settings, also allowed to approach diverse methodological instruments and ethical sensibilities (Ostetto, 2019).

To understand and participate in a complex context it is necessary time to undergo a process of immersion in the context, but also reflexivity. We designed a study of phenomenological/ethnographic nature that required that the main researcher stayed for some weeks in the field (Spinelli & Quinteiro, 2015). The reflexivity of the researchers along the research process was implemented through the use of a "field diary"; the detailed contextualization of the interactions during the four moments we will discuss below; the discussion of the dialogues and of the kind of relationship that was being developed with the children, and finally; of all contributions to address the research questions.

Setting up the activities or the contexts where the listening (dialogical) would take place was also carefully considered. We kept in mind the importance of proposing diverse activities and languages to collect what constitutes well-being and how those definitions relate to the daily experiences of the children. Such diverse activities had to make sense to children so that they would be engaged and participating at the best of their abilities (Folque, 2010).

Since the first visit to CAI the principal adult researcher was introduced to children as such. "Then he introduced himself and explained that was researching about children's well-being, and was going to spend a few weeks with them", "for me to know you and what you do and for you to know me and what I do and then I will invite you to investigate with me how children feel-well and what it is well-being, for you.". After a few days we explained what we meant by investigating and we made investigators hats with the children. Then we presented the study phases and made a drawing about those phases.

We collected children perspectives about well-being during 4 distinct moments and activities that were previously discussed and planned with the children and the CAI staff.¹ For example, we asked educators to suggest or choose activities that would be interesting and motivating for children and ways to implement them, recognizing their knowledge:

1 – Small group drawing and interviewing moments – children invited to go to the next room and "research about well-being"; voluntary groups of 3 children would go and draw and dialogue with the main researcher about what well-being is. Opened questions "what it is to feel well", and "when do you feel well" and, "how do you feel, or know, that you are feeling well", elicited the children self-expression (Passeggi, Nascimento & Oliveira, 2016).

¹ It should be noted that this diversity also allows for methods triangulation.

2 – Small group visits to the CAI premises (kitchen, rooms, yard, vegetable garden, little house, etc.) and asking children to search and show “where do they feel well and how”. The main researcher invites and walks through the early childhood education centre with groups of 3 children at a time, whom have offered to do the “walking tour”.

3 – Big group discussions about the perspectives on well-being that children presented to the principal researcher. In these meetings the children educator was present and was a participant in the group. In this 4th moment the principal researcher and the participants explored the dominant themes identified in the first 3 moments in order to clarify and check the validity of the researchers' interpretations which were beginning to develop (also allowing for a credibility check). Children clarified, corrected and confirmed.

4 – Informal conversations with the researcher about the research queries. Children initiate the contact with the main researcher to talk, or to show something related to the well-being research. These moments emerged and were added as “activities” after listening to children direct instructions to the adult researcher that “he should use his notebook and write what they were saying as it was related to the well-being investigation”.

In terms of ethical and power issues we tried to respect all participants (children, parents and staff) competences clearly stating the research aims (Pain, 2008) and including them in all phases of the research process, from the definition of research strategies (as stated before) and activities, to the interpretation of the findings, as well as in the research chronograms and timings. We interpreted that some children took the research as theirs when they were actively thinking and contributing to it, also in unplanned moments.

We tried to create a context that balanced the relation between the researcher and the children, or each child, using two strategies:

- The researcher was always with more than one child; only small group interviews were made, never individual ones;
- Children's participation was always voluntary. Not only informed consent from parents and children was asked, but children decided when and if they wanted to participate and be involved throughout the activity proposed. During this study, children were able to say and said no and questioned the researcher directly.

In our study's experience, the training of research competences before going to the field was of great value. Some of the abilities for interviewing and listening to children could only be developed during the actual research process and we believe that it is useful for researchers to consider them as

"developing competences" that are "in progress" since, during our life as researchers, we have to be opened to the child and the context if we are to establish a true relation in research with the children. As child psychiatrist, João dos Santos stated "To observe a child one must first let yourself be observed by him/ her" (Santos, 2004).

Many ethical challenges occurred throughout the process (for instance how to deal with children, from other rooms, that also wanted to participate in the study?) and, only through continuous reflexivity and open discussion could they be addressed. In this sense, there was a dialogic relation established between the researchers and the research supervisors, isomorphic of the relation between the field researcher and the participants (children and staff).

Finally, in our study we were guided by two clear orientations provided by Andrade e Rosemberg (2004): the first was to have clear that "the preservation of the dignity, privacy and physical, moral, religious and cultural integrity of the child, overcomes any other research interest" and the second one "to try to be especially aware of the interpretations that reinforces the bad prognostic or destiny, based on the present vulnerabilities and contexts children live" (free translation).

Ensuring that the research process is well prepared and carried off, listening to the children about their views on well-being is an opportunity to "explore and find new and surprising things" which, according to children, is related to well-being.

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