Using Child-Centered Methods to Explore Young Children’s Information Experience

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Abstract
This poster describes the use of child-centered methods in a recent research project exploring young children’s information experience in a daycare setting. The project involved participant observation, child-led tours of the daycare, and photo-elicitation interviews. The strengths and weaknesses of each of these methods within the context of this research project are discussed, as well as the ethical implications of using child-centered methods in research with young children.

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1 Introduction
Research on children’s and young people’s information seeking and use has tended to focus on children nine years of age and older (Shenton, 2004; Spink & Heinstrom, 2011). Researchers have cited potential barriers to the inclusion of children younger than this age, including their emerging reading, writing, and language abilities (Cooper, 2002; McKechnie, 2000). In order to include young children in research on information seeking and use, researchers must go beyond those methods typically employed in information behavior research, such as structured interviews and questionnaires (Case, 2012), and explore alternative methods that are better suited for use with such young populations. This poster discusses a recent project that utilized a combination of child-centered data collection methods in order to explore young children’s information experience. The research study took place in a class of fourteen 3-5 year old children (the ‘Chickadee’ class) at a university-affiliated childcare center.

2 Conceptual Framework
The ways in which researchers view children greatly impacts how they are included and represented in research. Historically, research on children has been shaped by the view of children as “adults-in-the-making” (Hogan, 2005, p. 27), with attention paid to their competencies and abilities as they develop and grow from infants to adolescents. However, a recent shift in thinking can be seen with the emergence of the field of childhood studies, which places emphasis on children as “beings” rather than simply “becomings” (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 207). Within this new paradigm, children and their experiences are perceived to have value in what they can tell us about children’s present, rather than their futures. Central to this view is the recognition of children as “competent social actors” (James, 2007, p. 261) who can participate in and contribute to research projects concerned with exploring their lives and experiences. Examples of the influence of this view of children and their place in the research process in library and information science can be seen in the works of Agosto and Hughes-Hassell (2005) and Meyers, Fisher, and Marcoux (2009).

3 Research Question
While researchers have explored the ways in which children seek information, these studies have typically been limited to school-aged children. The study described here seeks to address this gap by considering the following research question:

What do young children experience as informing? That is, what interactions, objects, or people, if any, do young children perceive as informing?

1 All names are pseudonyms
4 Methods

Child-centered methods offer one way through which researchers can engage children in research in ways more similar to their natural communication practices. These child-centered activities can take any number of forms, including drawings, mapping, photography, games, drama and role play (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010; Veale, 2005). The study described in this poster made use of participant observation, child-led tours, and photo-elicitation interviews.

4.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation was carried out in the Chickadee classroom over a period of four months. The researcher took on a ‘friendly adult’ role, in which she interacted positively with the Chickadees without assuming a role of authority (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). The researcher focused her observations on the ways in which the Chickadees engaged with information, with attention paid to both physical and interpersonal sources, and documented these observations via field notes. In addition, the researcher was able to become familiar with the individual Chickadees, as well as the classroom language and culture, a distinct advantage of participant observation.

While participant observation allows researchers to study interactions as they happen, rather than relying on retrospective descriptions (Warming, 2005), an adult researcher who engages in observation only “uses her or his brain and therefore her or his perceptions – not the child’s” (Moylett, 2014, p. 228). In order to gain a thorough understanding of the experiences of young children, additional methods of data collection are needed.

4.2 Child-Led Tours

Child-led tours of spaces allow children to be in control of what is shown to and discussed with the researcher (Green, 2012). Giving children a camera to document the tour affords them an additional sense of control and authority, and the pictures themselves can be used in subsequent research interactions (Johnson, Hart, & Colwell, 2014). In this study, the Chickadees were asked to take the researcher on a tour of the childcare center and to talk about people and objects in the classroom that help them find out new things. They were given an iPhone in order to take photographs, wore a lapel microphone connected to a small voice recorder that fit in their pockets, and were encouraged to talk about what they were photographing and why. During the tour, some of the Chickadees talked about what they were photographing and why (see Figure 1), while others either made no comment (see Figure 2) or simply named the objects and/or people they were photographing (see Figure 3).
Figure 1. “I didn’t know [classmate]’s birthday was on March” (Jacob, age 5)

Figure 2. Photo taken by Rachel (age 5)
Due to the nature of this research method, the people and objects that the children discussed were typically limited to those physically present in the childcare center. An additional limitation is illustrated in Figure 4; as the Chickadees were given control of what was photographed, not all of the pictures were taken in fulfillment of the research aims.
4.3 Photo-Elicitation Interviews
The Chickadees were given physical copies of the photographs that they had taken during the tour and were asked to identify and explain how the people and objects in the photographs contribute to their information experience. Researchers have noted that the incorporation of photographs in the interview setting helps to stimulate conversation as they provide children with tangible prompts and help to structure and focus the interview (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Using photographs that the children themselves have taken also allows children to control what is discussed, centering the interview on their perspectives (Einarsdottir, 2005). This has the potential to divert the conversation to topics unrelated to the research goals (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). However, although some of the Chickadees did take pictures unrelated to the research goals, they were able to articulate the difference between people and objects that contributed to their information experience and those that did not. The following exchange between Lily and the researcher highlights this (see Figure 5):

Lily: This is a picture of the library and the door.
Researcher: Does the library help you find out new things?
Lily: Yes reading books.
Researcher: Does the door help you find out new things?
Lily: Oh no.
Researcher: No, why?
Lily: It just lets me go in and out!

In addition, many of the Chickadees who had not previously articulated ways in which they engage with information were able to do so during the photo-elicitation interviews. For example, although Rachel had not offered any comment about the classroom’s books (as shown in Figure 2) during her tour, she indicated during the subsequent interview that these books help her to find out new things. Overall, incorporating this concrete activity to the interview setting created a much richer conversation between the Chickadees and the researcher (Danby, Ewing, & Thorpe, 2011).

5 Discussion
In addition to providing children and researchers enhanced means of communication, the use of child-centered methods also addresses important ethical issues that are rooted in the power imbalance
inherent in research with children (Hill, 2006; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). As Warin (2011) notes, the use of research methods that children find to be fun or engaging helps to minimize the “exploitative nature of the relationship” between researcher and researched (p. 809). The use of multiple methods allows children a greater degree of choice regarding if and how they will participate (Hill, 2006; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998), while visual methods such as photography extend participation to those who do not have sufficient language abilities to engage in traditional interviews or questionnaires, including children who are very young and/or English language learners (Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

The daycare at which this research project took place is often used as a research site. However, the teacher of the Chickadee class noted that:

This was the first time that they had a researcher come and then have them do something where they were kind of in control of it… I think this was the first time that they were given ownership of something they were able to control the outcome of how something would turn out. And that they were trusted with a piece of equipment, like your camera…

The teacher’s comments highlight the ways in which child-centered methods allow children, rather than the researcher, to be situated in a position of expertise and control.

6 Conclusion

While analysis of the data gathered in this study is still ongoing, preliminary findings from this study indicate that children as young as the age of three engage with information and can articulate that engagement when given the right tools. Researchers in library and information science should continue to look for ways to engage young children in research in order to better understand their information experience.

7 References


