Becoming Less ‘Adult’ Or Less ‘Child’ As Researchers

Aaron Toogood
De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

Children and adults are social groups which have very pronounced similarities and equally pronounced differences. Jenks (1982) writes (from the adult perspective) that a ‘child is similar to us and yet strange, she/he inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another, she/he is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a different order of being’ (p. 9). This is known as the paradox of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ (Greene & Hogan, 2005) and it implies that interactions between the two groups can be both informative and/or confusing, illustrative and/or misleading.

This difference has resulted in a number of ongoing methodological debates, whether it is a discussion about the ‘membership role’ of the researcher (Adler and Adler, 1987) or Hart’s (1992) widely cited model on young person participation in research.

This paper is a secondary output of a study which was focussed on determining the impact of a number of innovative University - Primary school ‘closing the gap’ interventions on the aspiration levels of Year 6 pupils from mainly deprived backgrounds which involved adult-child and child-child semi-structured interviews as a key data gathering instrument. This mixed methods study also included the use of questionnaires as a useful triangulation reference point.

Content analysis of the adult-child and child-child interview transcripts has identified that while an adult researcher attempts to be ‘least-adult’ (Mandell, 1988) the child researchers attempt to be ‘least-child’, with the adult researcher attempting to close the power gap while the child researcher attempts to create one.

This study adds to the debate regarding the effectiveness of adult approaches to child research and questions whether such efforts to change the nature of the power relationship between researcher and subject are necessary.