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Published online: 21 Jan 2024.

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Collaborating with children: intergenerational research encounters

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses intergenerational research encounters when collaborating with children. It contemplates the possibilities of applying participatory research methods in situations where the research agenda and main research methods have been decided before contacting the research subjects, as these must be explained in the ethical statement request. The findings in the article suggest that participatory research with children has three important dimensions which involve both possibilities and challenges from the perspective of intergenerational relations: generational responsibility, adult authority and empowering experiences. Overall, children are dependent on adults; however, dependency in research settings is reciprocal and intergenerational. The three dimensions can be understood as a process when building research relationships. Relations between children and researchers that are based on responsibility, including the critical assessment of adult authority, can potentially lead to empowering experiences for both children and adults.

Introduction

This article focuses on intergenerational relations and research relationships between children (aged 8–17) and adult researchers in a qualitative research project titled 'Supporting the child – support person and support family practice in child and family social' (abbreviation SUSU). The article contemplates the possibilities and challenges when applying participatory research methods with children in situations where the research agenda and main research methods have been decided before contacting the research subjects. Consequently, in situations like these, intergenerational relations between researchers and children are especially important in the impact they have on how research processes are implemented. Intergenerational relations can be used as a lens when research encounters are analysed by asking what kind of participatory research processes are possible with children (Warming, 2022; see also, pp. 4–7; see also Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015).

Engaging with children in research has gained popularity, although critical views have also been raised. Researchers have asked, for example, if participatory methods with children are too easily seen as achieving ethical and epistemological validity, even though the methods are highly ambiguous and the reality where they are used is usually messy. Researchers suggest that the methods have potential but should not be used naively (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). It is common that in studies labelled as participatory action research children are rarely involved in the early stages of research projects, in framing the research agendas or in the data

analysis (Montreuil et al., 2021; Raanaas et al., 2020; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Smith et al., 2020).

In the article, we use the research project SUSU as an example when discussing intergenerational research encounters. We use the terms *children* and *child* to refer to 'every human being below the age of eighteen years' as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 1, United Nation [UN] 1989) and in the Finnish Child Welfare Act (Section 6, 2007). SUSU was a two-year research project (2021–2022) aimed at developing an assessment tool for use by social service professionals when evaluating relationship quality between a support family or support person and a child. The current Finnish Child Welfare Act (2007) specifies that the public sector body responsible for social services 'must, wherever necessary, arrange a support person or support family for a child deemed to be in need of support'. In both services, the basic idea is that volunteers provide lay support for children and their parents. Both professionals and researchers have acknowledged the lack of systematic methods for assessing the quality of supportive relationships from the perspective of children (Larsen, 2011; Lehto-Lundén, 2020; Moilanen, 2015; Svenlin, 2020). In SUSU, the perceived invisibility of children was the starting point, the basic assumption being that not only researchers but also service users should be researching and developing issues that affect them (e.g. Beresford, 2019; Larkins et al., 2015). However, institutional ethics requirements could narrow the participation of children (see also Collins et al., 2020).

For the SUSU research, an ethical statement was requested from and granted by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä. A common principle, and one applied in this ethical review process as well, is that the ethical review must be done before researchers make contact with research subjects. In the statement request research plan, research questions and methods must be explained in as much detail as possible. Fulfilling the ethical statement requirements inevitably places more emphasis on preplanning and researchers' perspectives (see also Moore et al., 2016, p. 246). This dilemma motivated us to contemplate the methodologies of participatory research. The starting point for our interest was the discussions we had as researchers concerning our positions as adults, the challenges we encountered, the possibilities we could offer children and the ethical regulations that we needed to fulfil. Thus, our understanding is that children's research participation is not only an ethical question but also connected to generational structures.

Intergenerational relations and research with children

Research with children is profoundly linked to the generational order, meaning the various ways in which child – adult relations are constructed, organised and present within society at any given time (Alanen, 2001, 2020; Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Kogler et al., 2021; Punch, 2020). Generational order includes an inventory of generational structures (such as age or family structures) within which children's everyday lives are rooted (Alanen, 2020). Childhood is part of a wider generational order through which some people are positioned as children while other people are positioned as adults. These positions are interdependent and relational, meaning, for example, the parental position cannot exist without the child position (Alanen, 2001, pp. 20–21).

Generational order as a social structural category is always present when doing research with children, if not always visibly so, or the most important standpoint (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Punch, 2020). Recent research has emphasised the importance of the empirical analysis of child – adult positions and adult facilitation concerning the responsibilities, dependencies, and processes of negotiation on issues such as research ethics, data protection and implications for publishing results (Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Kogler et al., 2021). In participatory research, the aim is to critically review the existing generational order and empower children, individually and collectively. Individual empowerment means awareness-building and developing abilities and assets, such as self-esteem and confidence, that can be used to improve one's situation. In collective empowerment, the empowered individuals recognise that by acting together, it is possible to pursue change and question the

intergenerational power imbalance (Kim, 2016, p. 236). Children's participation and empowerment, adult authority and responsibility are unavoidably connected, forming an ambitious aim for research with children.

Various methods for participatory research with children have been suggested, verifying the profound importance of identifying intergenerational relationships. The interactive research circle (Åkerström & Brunnberg, 2013, pp. 538–540) is an example of a method that emphasises dialogue between researchers and research subjects on issues such as conducting the analysis together. Collaborative (intergenerational and intersectional) fiction writing (Satchwell et al., 2020, pp. 885–887) is a method grounded in collaborative meaning-making through stories. These methods have been suggested as means to acknowledge the inherent power imbalance between adults and children and have been highlighted as ways of amplifying the voices of disadvantaged children and empowering them. The 'least-adult role', originally suggested by Mandell (1988), is also a method to be used for gaining access to children's peer group cultures. The aim of the least-adult role is to challenge and critically reflect on adult power and authority over children (Atkinson, 2019). Self-directed peer focus groups or young peer researchers have also been used as a method to reduce the influence of an adult researcher and give more control to young people (Taylor et al., 2014; Wood & Ristow, 2022). Researchers have concluded that peer groups are a promising method for collecting dynamic, emergent understandings of complex ideas and concepts. The groups, however, do not entirely remove aspects of (intragenerational) power as some participants were silenced while others dominated conversations (Wood & Ristow, 2022). The researchers' generational responsibility toward all children becomes especially important in situations like these. Thus, Alminde and Warming (2020, p. 445) emphasise that gatekeeping by adults, adult authority and responsibility are overlapping themes that constitute a critical issue in all research that strives to be democratic and inclusive.

Research encounters denote situated ethics, meaning that researchers must consider the everyday realities of children, not overburden them, and, if needed, be willing to change their ways of communicating and being with children (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Kousholt & Juhl, 2021). Children's expressions and cues must be read carefully to understand their decisions and allow them to temporarily or entirely withdraw from research activities if they wish. This means that consent is an ongoing process in which the importance of the generational order is highlighted concerning the responsibilities and negotiations between researchers and children (Barley, 2021; Kogler et al., 2021). These intergenerational responsibilities and negotiations, as well as the possibilities and challenges of applying participatory research methods with children, will be discussed in this article. To enact and ground this aim, we draw on the SUSU research project, be explained next.

SUSU research project: methodology and data

The primary question of the SUSU project was what issues should children be asked about, and how, when assessing the relationships between a child and the support person/support family. In Finland, support person and support family services are provided by the wellbeing services counties, and they can be organised by the public or private sector or a non-profit organisation. The explicit purpose of the services is to provide support to children and young people who are clients of public child welfare. The voluntary work of support persons and families is a form of civic activity; however, volunteers operate in close co-operation with public sector professionals. During the maintenance of the supporting relationship, the support persons and families are supervised, and their support activities controlled by social workers or other child welfare professionals (see also Moilanen, 2015; Moilanen et al., 2014). In SUSU research, the practical aim was to develop a tool for the use in follow-up meetings when children, parents, volunteers (support persons and support families) and social service professionals meet to discuss the past, present, and future of the supportive relationship.

The ethical statement for the SUSU research was requested from and granted by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä. After that, contacts with the professionals

in partner organisations were made. We relied on the social service professionals to pass on the information about participation in the study to prospective children and young people. Our aim was to recruit as representative a group of child participants as possible (in age, gender, family situation, etc.). Professionals sent research invitations via e-mail to children through their parents, which means that both professionals and parents were acting as gatekeepers (e.g. Hunleth, 2011; Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Spyrou, 2019). We have no knowledge of whether all the invited children received the information and had the chance to consider whether to participate. After receiving the first consents from children and parents, the researchers informed the children about the voluntary nature of the process, including their right to withdraw their participation at any point. At the beginning of the study, more details were given about the research process, and the children gave their written consent. The children were also aware that the discussions would be recorded and transcribed, for which purposes both their and their parents' consent was required.

We worked with 19 children aged 8–17 (12 girls and 7 boys). The SUSU project included a three-step research process, organised by researchers outside school hours (evenings and weekends). The complete research process is described in more detail below, providing information on the context of the article and grounding the methodological considerations.

The first step of the research process was reflective workshops. Five reflective workshops, each facilitated by two researchers, were organised in May – June 2021. Four were in-person and one was organised online via Teams. At each workshop, there were three to five children present. The primary question for children was as follows: What issues should professionals ask children about when evaluating supportive relationships? Children reflected on their supportive relationships and defined what is important to ask when assessing the quality of these relations. Children also appraised questions that have previously been used in support family and youth mentoring research when evaluating mentoring relationships (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Lehto-Lundén, 2020; Svenlin, 2020; Zand et al., 2009). The researchers selected a wide range of questions and children voted for those they considered to be the most important. The children could also suggest alternative questions.

The second step was the application of an e-diary method using eCoach which is a web-based diary adapted for mobile devices (Rönkä et al., 2015). After the first workshops, the researchers summarised the data and formed questions for evaluating supportive relationships from the child's perspective. The children then tested the questions using eCoach. The children received a link as a text message to their own or their parents' mobile phones and the link opened the questions. Questions were sent four times to 19 children every second week during an eight-week period. A total of 16 children responded online. On each occasion, four to six questions on a particular theme were sent. The total of 18 questions covered the following themes: doing, being, relationships, and evaluation.

The third step with children was testing workshops. Based on the first workshops and e-diary data, the questions were decided, and sketches for evaluative forms were created by the researchers. Nineteen children in five workshops tested the forms and reflected on the questions, layout, and illustrations of the forms, and gave their suggestions and comments. Based on these, the forms were finalised by the researchers. During the year 2022, the forms were piloted in different municipalities and further feedback was gathered from children (data from the pilot are not included in this article).

In the workshops, we used mixed visual and discursive group methods to collect the data, including a multitude of child-oriented possibilities to participate. One challenge we encountered was to develop suitable methods to meaningfully engage a broad range of children (children with learning difficulties, shyness in group discussions, young children and teenagers). After working with children, the five of us who participated as researchers in workshops wrote retrospective reflections in which we examined our work with children in the SUSU project. The texts were written in January 2022. Pinter and Zandian (2015) argue that retrospective reflection can be a beneficial tool when developing researcher reflexivity. With the help of the reflective texts, we examined research-with-children situations,

including obstacles, opportunities, limits, norms and assumptions when working with children. Reflections focused on intergenerational relations, as they define the social status, rights and responsibilities of researchers and children. Overall, the research data for this article consist of recorded and transcribed workshops (total 215 pages) and retrospective reflections by the researchers (38 pages).

Analysis

The analysis is based on the following research questions: (a) What generational positions are present in research encounters when the research project has been designed by the researchers? and (b) What kinds of consequences does this have for the aim of doing participatory research with children? We used theory-informed qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) for condensing and organising the data. Combining content analysis and the reading of methodological research articles at the same time focused our analysis on questions regarding responsibility, adult authority, and empowerment as these dimensions were present in our data and have been considered important intergenerational dimensions in research with children (e.g. Atkinson, 2019; Devine & Cockburn, 2018; Thomas, 2021; Tisdall, 2017).

The first step in analysing the data was to extract from the datasets episodes containing speech or notes about responsibility, adult authority and empowerment. Second, in each theme, different voices of researchers and children were identified, and intergenerational aspects and power relations of the interaction were examined. At this stage, it also became evident that in all dimensions both opportunities and challenges were present.

In our discussion of the findings, we first address research as a responsibility, foregrounding the issue of responsibility and the generational interdependency of both children and adults in research contexts. This underlines the view that both the participating children and adult researchers are at the same time dependent on each other and have power over the process. Second, we state that research entails multilevel reflections on adult authority when seeking the status of a 'different type of adult' (see also Atkinson, 2019; Mandell, 1988). The last dimension is research as empowerment, where we argue that intergenerationally aware and respectful research also carries elements of participation and empowerment.

Findings

Responsibility and generational interdependency

Childhood is a fundamentally relational phenomenon and, therefore, the study of children and childhood, and the circumstances of children's lives, necessitates a methodology that is relational (Alanen, 2014). The ways researchers view children has a profound impact on the way they conduct research (Coyne et al., 2021, p. 814). In our reflective notes, we have regarded children as the ones whose knowledge we value and need, and for that their participation was pivotal. However, responsibility in research relationships, that is, in research in practice, is much more than simply asking children to join in (Canosa et al., 2018; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 263). The situated ethics in intergenerational research encounters means that researchers must consider the everyday realities of children, and carefully read their expressions and cues to allow them to withdraw from research activities if they wish (Kousholt & Juhl, 2021). In their generational position, children have the right to participate, but also to be tired, bored, unknowing and passive (also Kiili et al., 2021). For researchers, tiredness or boredom is not a desired condition, or ethical, as they are the ones who have invited the children to participate and bear the overall responsibility for the research process.

In the SUSU workshops, flexibility was needed when the children were hungry and tired after a long day at school and doing their hobbies. However, it remained a challenge for the researchers to draw a line between their duty to understand the limits of children and protect them and, assuming

that the children are willing to proceed with the research process, their duty to support their participation (also Fern, 2014; Kiili et al., 2021; Warrington & Larkins, 2019, p. 134). Below, we present excerpts from our discussions with the children on the topics of being tired, bored and/or hungry. Children wanted us to recognise and take into consideration their individual situations.

> Researcher: How are you feeling, has this autumn been tiring for you?
>
> Child 1: Yes!
>
> Researcher: You all seem a little tired today. Are you tired?
>
> Child 2: Yes, because I was only at home for a few minutes today, I came here straight from my hobbies, when XX (support person) came and picked me up.
>
> Researcher: Okay, so you've had a long day already.
>
> In the workshop, the children are testing the form and answering the questions. Child 1 is hungry and bored with the task.
>
> Child1: When are we having lunch?
>
> Researcher: We could have a snack soon. Would you like to fill in these from the beginning? We can have a snack now and then you can think about these while eating? Is that OK?
>
> Child1: Boooring!
>
> Researcher: (Laughs.) We'll have a snack, and then we can just discuss these if you like. You don't need to fill in anything there anymore; we can just chat, and you can tell us your opinion if you like.

The children were considered as having knowledge that was important for SUSU. In this respect, they were key informants. This means that, in the research encounters, the children were generationally positioned as responsible for providing their knowledge for research purposes, as they had agreed to take part in the research process and were expected to provide us with knowledge we lacked. It was therefore of key importance that the process was voluntary, which is a universal ethical imperative in all research activities with humans (World Medical Association, 1964). In the SUSU study, the children could withdraw their consent or decline to participate in activities that did not interest them (see also Barley, 2021). This manifested in various behaviours. For example, a few children declined to answer questions, stating they were tired or did not know what to say, while others were shy in group discussions and for that reason did not speak much. However, all were eager to vote (e.g. with stickers) when important questions were at stake. Not all the children answered the e-diary questions, although the majority did, and some children did not answer all the questions when evaluating the sketches for forms, although most gave their opinions.

The study would not have been possible without the children, meaning that as researchers we were heavily dependent on their participation and willingness to share their knowledge (by talking, voting, writing and answering e-diary questions). As Åkerström and Brunnberg (2013) state, children's participation in research fundamentally relies on intergenerational and social relationships of dependency. Research with children means that intergenerational dependency is ingrained, as it is at the core of all research encounters with children. However, the intergenerational positions of children and adults are context specific, which is why it is important to empirically analyse them (Kogler et al., 2021; Punch, 2020). We were present as researchers, but we also had a professional background in child welfare services, where the intergenerational positions are different from those involved in research. In professional contexts, such as in child protection services, professionals can make decisions if children decline to participate. In research contexts, this is not possible. If children refuse to take part, the whole research agenda changes.

In one workshop, an 8-year-old child declined to give his consent before the workshop, as he wanted to know what he was consenting to. Even though the aims, working methods and timetable of the workshop were explained to him, and he was happy with the explanation, he was not ready to

give his consent beforehand, but he did not want to leave the workshop either. For us researchers this was a situation where we needed to quickly decide how to proceed, and to remind ourselves that consent is a continual process (see also Barley, 2021; Kogler et al., 2021). We informed the child that we would start the workshop, and he could decide afterwards whether to give his consent or not. If he declined, we would erase all the data connected to him. At the end of the workshop, he gave his consent. After he felt he had received sufficient information, he made an informed decision to take part in the research. The example demonstrates how dependency on children is not something adults are necessarily used to, as most decisions are under adult responsibility. The right of an 8-year-old to prolong the consent process was a situation where we needed to critically and quickly examine our responsibilities, the rights of the child and other participating children and research ethics.

Intergenerational dependency in research relationships can also be described as manifesting the social accountability of the stakeholders. Being socially accountable means that the researchers recognise the conditions that enable children to participate in research and understand what happens to the knowledge they furnish the researchers with (Tisdall, 2017; also, p. 65; Åkerström & Brunnberg, 2013). In our case, we adopted a variety of data production methods. This was important because it assisted us in gaining deeper and richer insights into children's experiences. We understood that children shared experiences of having a support person or support family, but we did not assume they had a shared understanding of each other's lives as they were not familiar with each other (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015, p. 167). The children were told that the forms would be finalised based on the e-diary and workshop data. However, as the children also gave conflicting and contradictory comments in different workshops, the final layout of the forms was decided by the researchers, and this was also indicated for children. During the pilot phase, new children were recruited to give their views on how the forms work. Thus, participation can be described as a rolling process in which it is considered important to obtain as wide a variety of experiences and knowledge as possible from as many children as possible (Larkins et al., 2014). However, from the intergenerational perspective, being accountable also means that children are accountable for their actions, such as taking responsibility for providing researchers with knowledge. This should be recognised not only as their right but also as their responsibility when (voluntarily) participating in research processes.

Adult authority and the least adult role

When planning the research processes, our aim was to design the workshops so that children would feel encouraged to speak and act in ways they found comfortable. Thus, we recognised research as a two-way social relationship (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Kiili et al., 2023) and sought to achieve the status of a 'different type of adult'. For us, it was important to avoid adopting an adult authority which would hinder children's possibilities to freely express their views and experiences, as the authority that adults have based on knowledge, age, and social position is not something that is easily overcome (Cuevas-Parra, 2020). Atkinson (2019) discusses the concept of 'least adulthood' or 'least adult role', as suggested by Mandell (1988), where the aim is to challenge and critically reflect on the adult power and authority over children. However, this position involves many practical, ethical and emotional complexities that are connected to the generational positions of children and adults. The least adult role is challenging, since, as adults we are unable to be anything else but adults (Atkinson, 2019; see also Raffety, 2015).

In the workshops, it was challenging to overcome our social locations and form relationships that were free from the habits and understandings connected to our social positions as adults (see also Kiili et al., 2023). Our somewhat unsuccessful attempt to create this distance from adult authority was to use teachers as examples. At the beginning of the workshops, we explained our different type of adult role by saying 'We are not teachers, but researchers'. We distanced ourselves

and the working processes from those in schools. We did this because school is one of the institutions in children's lives where the generational authority of adults is foregrounded (see also Atkinson, 2019). We explicitly stated that participating in the workshops is not schoolwork (although some of the tasks seemed like schoolwork) and that we adults were not there to educate children. However, despite this attempt at distancing ourselves from teacher-like adults, children understood us to be in the position of adults who are there to guide them. For example, the children asked us to help them fill out the forms and clarify and explain some of the concepts we used. Because of this, it is valid to ask if we were the ones reinforcing the established generational order, even though the intention was different. We as researchers raised the issue of teaching and teachers, meaning we introduced the idea to the children and focused their thoughts on it.

> Child: Can I use this marker pen, what if it all goes wrong?

> Researcher: Well then you can have a new one

> —

> Child: Could you clarify whether we need to answer these questions, or do we need to evaluate if they are OK questions?

> —

> Child1: What is zempathic [sic]?

> Researcher1: Empathic? Well, it means like, if I'm feeling sad because somebody has insulted me, or has been mean to me and I talk about it to X (another researcher) as I'm feeling sad and then she comforts me and says, like, I know you are feeling sad now.

> Child1: I will put empathic here, even though I am not that sure if the support person is that empathic, but I will put it in here anyway.

> Child2: For some people it is very common (to be emphatic), like for me.

In the extracts above children asking for help can be considered unknowing subjects in need of adults' knowledge, and we as researchers the ones with the knowledge. Children were thus, at the same time, active agents who sought clarifications so they could form their own opinions. Intergenerational dialogue and conversations helped us, as the main aim of the research was to learn from children. Our position as adult researchers was to provide clarifications and help with capacity-building, which has been considered an important element in participatory research with children (Cuevas-Parra, 2021). In this domain, we were positioned as the ones who did not know much. We were able to help children, but ultimately it was the children who had the core knowledge that was valuable for the research. However, it is again valid to consider how we would have responded if the research subjects were adults asking for help and clarification. We probably would have thought that our questions were unclear, not that those adults lack the ability to answer, and we certainly would not have used teachers as an example. From a structural perspective, generational positions carry many presumptions about the competencies of children and adults (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; McGillivray, 2022, pp. 113–114).

Empowering experiences

It has been widely stated that when children participate in research projects as co-researchers or in other active roles, it can be an empowering experience for them (e.g. Kellett et al., 2004; Thomas, 2021). Our experiences suggest that it can be empowering for the researchers as well. However, Punch (2002, p. 323) advises that researchers should reflect critically on the use of child-centred methods and explore their advantages and disadvantages in practice, as this is especially important when aiming to generate empowering experiences. In our case, the research agenda and methods

were decided by researchers before contacting the children. For that the methods used represent a participatory research approach that may shift but not necessarily reduce the power differential between adults and children (see also Coyne et al., 2021).

Although our workshops were planned by adult researchers, children's ideas and feedback on these methods were considered and acted upon during them. The key question for us as adult researchers was how to create research environments that facilitate feeling comfortable with speaking and listening, asking for help, disagreeing and showing emotions.

> Researcher: And if you need help say it, if…
>
> Child: Okay, I need…
>
> Researcher: You need help?
>
> Child: Yes.
>
> Child: I hate those cards! (My Story cards that were used during the workshop)
>
> Researcher: Have you been using them?
>
> Child: Way too much!
>
> Researcher: Let's not take them out then, so you don't get bad feelings.
>
> Child: It's okay to take them out. I'm just quietly protesting.

We met most of the children in person and some online (two workshops out of ten were online). Being online presented new challenges for creating a safe and dialogical space. We, as researchers, could not see the children's nonverbal messages, as most of them chose not to keep their cameras on. However, we did not challenge their choices of how to participate. At the beginning of the workshops, we asked everyone to introduce themselves with their cameras switched on, whereas thereafter the choice of being visible was made by the children themselves. This decision not to participate with cameras on may also mean that the children had created a comfortable environment for themselves, even if for us it felt distant and more adult-led, as the children did not, for example, talk among themselves (as they did in the in-person workshops). Nevertheless, they answered our questions and performed the tasks as we requested.

We were also aware that we could not just step into children's lives without reflecting on if the research process is considered to be a positive experience, and whether it would do any harm to the children. We needed to proceed with caution when building trusting research relationships (Burch & Osaiyuwu, 2021). One indication that the environments were comfortable for the children was that most of them decided to participate in the whole three-step research process (only one child was unable to attend the second workshop because of illness) and many of them asked us to organise more workshops for them next year. The children also asked us to play and chat with them at the end of the in-person workshops. They took active roles by deciding what we would do together before going home. For us researchers these were empowering experiences, as we were reassured and happy that the children were eager to continue working with us after the first workshops and that they happily spent time with us at the end of the workshops. However, some scholars question whether active participation in research is empowering for children and whether it may recreate and even exacerbate the asymmetric power of adults and children (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Kim, 2016). It is impossible to say whether our three-step research process with the children was empowering for them, since individual empowerment involves gaining an understanding of one's social position and developing assets such as self-esteem, confidence, and the belief that one can act to improve one's situation (Kim, 2016, p. 236).

In our research process, the aim was to shift the balance of power towards the children. However, this was limited because of the workshop methods, environments and timeframe, meaning that we as the adults invited the children into a space that we had chosen and to work with methods we have

chosen (see also Kirby, 2020). Although the methods used in the workshops appeared to help children convey their perspectives, and the children participated voluntarily and felt comfortable enough to share very personal matters with us and other children, this does not automatically mean they were empowered. So, though we cannot assume that our research process necessarily led to individual empowerment in the sense of, for example, an improved personal situation (Kim, 2016), we believe that these intergenerational encounters helped the children to allow us into their worlds and their perspectives and enabled empowering experiences for both children and adults (see also Coyne et al., 2021).

Discussion and conclusions

The debate on children's participation in research is ongoing and it can be analysed from multiple perspectives (e.g. Alminde & Warming, 2020, Pinter & Zandian, 2015; Punch, 2020; Satchwell et al., 2020). The focus in this article is on intergenerational relations, as the generational order cannot be overlooked when doing research with children. The results of this study confirm that participatory research with children includes at least three important intergenerational dimensions. Interdependency and generational responsibility, adult authority, and empowering experiences affect research as such, but they are also interlinked.

In their everyday lives, children are usually, and in many ways, dependent on adults. However, in research settings this dependency is more reciprocal than in many other generational relationships, such as teacher – pupil relations, or social worker – client relations, which also highlights the importance of empirical analysis of intergenerational relations, as they are context bound (Punch, 2020; Spyrou et al., 2023). Research on children's lives and perspectives is not possible without children, meaning that researchers are dependent on their participation. Research with children means that intergenerational dependency is deep-rooted. If children decline to take part, the research agenda changes. It can also change if children consider the research methods uninteresting or confusing, or if it is difficult for them to provide the researchers with the information they need. Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that children can participate in ways they find comfortable and meaningful and that they have an understanding of what happens to the information they provide to researchers (see also Åkerström & Brunnberg, 2013; Tisdall, 2017). However, intergenerationally, children are also accountable for their actions, such as providing researchers with information when (voluntarily) participating in the research processes. The information children provide is the key element because without it there can be no research.

Atkinson (2019) proposes the concept of the 'honorary child', thereby acknowledging both 'the inescapability of adulthood and the possibility – and crucially, value – of inclusion in children's social worlds' (p. 19). In our case, unlike Atkinson when she conducted ethnographic fieldwork with children in schools, we were not merged into the children's worlds. Our research processes were adult led, and our positions as adults did not include non-authoritative friendships with children, as we only met with them twice in person. We were unavoidably adults, despite trying to distance ourselves from the more authoritative adult positions, such as that of a primary school teacher. As researchers, we also aimed to be critical and self-reflective about the processes that enable children's voices, the generational power imbalance, and the situational context that shapes and influences encounters (see also Coyne et al., 2021; Pinter & Zandian, 2015).

The three-step research process was crucial because it enabled working with children in a participatory way, even though the main methods and timetables were decided by the researchers. Although we acknowledge that our research was adult led, we also emphasise that the children were not merely subjects producing information for research purposes but were participating in the analysis and evaluation of the information gathered during the three-step process. The method could be termed a rolling process of participation (Larkins et al., 2014), as other children will continue giving their insights and thoughts about their supportive relationships and how these relationships should be evaluated.

It has been stated that taking part in research projects can be empowering for children (e.g. Kellett et al., 2004; Thomas, 2021). Participatory methods do carry significant potential, but they should be used critically (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). What we have learned is that empowerment is an ambitious aim. Short-lived research encounters, no matter how pleasant they are, do not automatically create individual empowerment. Arguments stating that participatory research activities are empowering for children should be used carefully, and the arguments should be empirically analysed and reflected on. We do not know if the children we collaborated with have felt empowered by their participation. It is also naïve to assume that the few research encounters have profoundly shifted the intergenerational positions of children and adult researchers. As Bourdieu (1977, p. 12) stated, simply creating spaces does little to rid them of the dispositions participants may bring into them (see also Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). In the SUSU research, we had no opportunities for co-reflexivity with the children when planning the workshops or after them, meaning we did not critically reflect together on the methodological, ethical, and epistemological assumptions and engagements of the research (Kiili et al., 2023).

What we can say is that intergenerationally aware and respectful research contains elements of participation and empowerment, and that it has been empowering for us as researchers. During our careers and the SUSU project, we have collaborated with many children, and it has confirmed our understanding of how important it is to conduct research with children. However, institutional ethical requirements that researchers are expected to follow may restrict children's participation (see also Collins et al., 2020; Cuevas-Parra, 2021), and for that reason they should be critically reviewed (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Kiili et al., 2023). This does not automatically mean, however, that the researcher-led research designs should be denounced as non-participatory (see also Åkerström & Brunnberg, 2013). It is a question of critical reflection and empirical analysis, since participatory research designs might just as well end up being exclusionary for some participants (Wood & Ristow, 2022).

We suggest that researchers as well as professionals working with children should always carefully observe and analyse the consequences of intergenerational relations with the help of the three dimensions – generational responsibility, adult authority and empowering experiences. This can also be understood as a process when building research relationships. Intergenerational relations between children and researchers that are based on responsibility, including the critical assessment of adult authority, can, at their best, lead to empowering experiences for both children and adults.

Disclosure statement

Funding

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