

Why alternative perspectives are important

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COMMENTARY

Why alternative perspectives are important

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Not all educational research focuses on the experience of learners, the children and young people who are arguably at the heart of the process—and nor should it. Yet, the emphasis on the learner that has blossomed over the last 50 years, propelled in particular by the socio-cultural paradigm, has made an important and indelible contribution to educational discourse and practice. Most of this research has been undertaken by professional researchers and educators. A small but significant part of it has been conducted in family settings and some of this could be categorized as child–parent research, although it might not have been described as such at the time. For example, Michael Halliday's close and detailed study of his own son's language was central to the development of his socio-semiotic theory of meaning and laid the foundations for the current and pervasive interest in multimodality, but it is rarely revisited or re-evaluated as child–parent research (see Merchant, 2020 for commentary).

Research almost inevitably proceeds from a point of interest and, despite some bold attempts in co-constructing the research agenda, in the end adult interest prevails, since the broader view that comes with maturity is a necessary ingredient (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2013). It is necessary because only an adult reading of the field can identify the gaps and growth points in knowledge, and only adults can fully engage with the discourses that map the contours of what is known. On the other hand, although adults may understand the wider social and cultural influences that impinge upon or shape children's lives, it is children who experience them and are affected by them, even if they themselves sometimes see them as given. This is notably the case when children are growing up unequal in conditions that are marked by racism, poverty, sexism, and ableism—either on their own or in combination. Work that documents the co-construction

of perspectives and resistance in this way lies on the cutting edge of child–parent research and makes an important contribution to knowledge.

The shift that recent child–parent research has made involves moving from a position in which the child is a conceived of as a research subject and the parent as a researcher with privileged access (this was clearly the case for Halliday, 1975), to one in which the child is a co-researcher. This is crucially important so as not “to privilege the dominant adult narrative” (Abrams et al. 2020, p.4). What children know and feel, and how they experience the world is central to the enterprise of the researchers whose work is included here. Whether the focus is on racial disparities, digital or multimodal literacies, remote learning or neuro-diversity, what distinguishes the contribution of child–parent researchers is the way in which they give voice to children and begin to uncover those aspects of literacy and life that are not always accessible to us.

Positionality and the ethics of representation loom large in this work, and they are discussed in detail by the contributors. There are lessons here for those working in other areas of literacy, too. Our position as a researcher is seldom straightforward—it is complex, multiple, and can often shift at different points in the research process. And just as we ourselves are not fixed, the same goes for our participants and research partners. The practices they engage in, which we so carefully note, the positions they take and the permission they gave at the time may not be as fixed as we might like to think. This fluidity looms large for any parent. After all, we are not the same parents to our children in babyhood, in adolescence and beyond; we develop as they do. In other words, the whole relational field is fluid, and hard to pin down except in a temporary or provisional way. The same applies in child–parent research and to more traditional relationships between

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the researcher and the researched—they change with the passage of time.

Boundaries to the study of literacies are notoriously fuzzy (see Burnett & Merchant, 2020) but if, as several of the contributors suggest, the field coheres around the idea of meaning making, which seems eminently sensible, then another set of complexities presents itself. While all of us may be committed to representing the meanings that co-researchers and participants make, whether they are children or young people, can we always be *that* certain? How stable, how durable are those meanings, and how can we be sure we have got them right? This is something I have often reflected on in my own research, and pre-occupied me in trying to present the media projects of a child with ASD in the family context (Merchant, 2020).

The questions that child–parent research raises—and I've only looked at a few of them here, have a larger prospect. They speak to the field of educational research more broadly, not just in the way that they bring to light meanings and meaning-making practices that might otherwise be occluded, but in the very methods and methodological issues that they rehearse, generate, confound, or cause us to revisit. Because of all of this, such research really needs to reach a wider audience, it deserves much greater attention. At the same time, there are many opportunities for broadening the focus of child–parent research itself. Although some important longitudinal studies have already been published, the family context offers the opportunity for more

detailed work that captures how meanings shift over time. And as the field matures it may well reach into areas that until now have mainly been the province of narrative inquiry, life story research, and disability studies. There is always plenty of scope for development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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