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# Giving up the 'Good Research Child'

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## Abstract

Do you like apples? Do you want to plant trees? Do you love books? Qualitative research with children is peppered with vignettes of what we conceptualise as the 'Good Research Child'. Good Research Children tell stories, plant trees, eat healthily, love reading and engage enthusiastically with researchers as co-playmates. They explore the world with drawings and oral stories and are enthusiastically portrayed by their adult researchers as unique, special and meaningful. Even when their actions are unexpected, this can provide rich material to be 'used'. How are Good Research Children produced, what work do they do and how can we resist their pull?

## Keywords

children, ethics, sociology of childhood, representation, children's geographies

## Introduction

In this paper, we share emerging and ongoing concerns about the frameworks we find ourselves caught up in as researchers, that seem to (re)produce and affirm particular kinds of child(hood). In particular, we discuss how the figure we term the 'Good Research Child' shapes the field of qualitative research, and endures even as researchers make concerted efforts to represent, celebrate and advocate for a wider range of children and childhoods.

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We want to emphasise that this is not a critique of certain approaches to researching with children, or of individual researchers or methodologies. Rather it is a (self)reflection on a field, interdisciplinary childhood studies, that we ourselves work within and are committed to. Hence, this paper offers reflections on the methodological, ethical and political orientations that we and many others within the field hold – particularly around concepts like 'voice' and 'agency' that are ascribed to (Western) notions of the individuated child. For three of us, our early careers as inter-disciplinary childhood researchers were shaped by our membership of the Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth (CSCY) at the University of Sheffield led by Allison James and Penny Curtis. For the fourth, two influences were key: being part of the Centre for Children and Youth, at the University of Northampton, led by Hugh Matthews; and, being part of burgeoning 'nonrepresentational' scholarship in human geography, which foregrounded the role of affect, embodiment, materiality and everydayness in the social sciences. Our approaches to childhood were shaped via feminist, supportive and de-hierarchised networks of interdisciplinary researchers, who were exercised by different theories and empirical concerns. At the same time, what united the members of the CSCY and CCY was an interest in children's perspectives and lived experiences, together with how childhood as a social and material construct shapes societies and social spaces. In our subsequent careers, we have researched children's experiences of literacies and education (all of us), arts (Kate), dental health (Mel), families (Mel), nature and environmental challenges, (Abi, Kate, Peter), dementia (Mel), museums (Abi) and cities (Peter). In seeking to emphasise children's experiences – and their articulation of those experiences – we became implicated in producing Good Research Children. In this paper, we articulate and critique the notion of the Good Research Child not as embodied by any one individual child subject – but rather as a kind of composite representation and construction of how ideal children should be and act when taking part in research. There are no easy and neat solutions to escape or subvert the frameworks we find ourselves caught up in, and that is not what we are looking for in this paper. Instead, we offer our analysis in the hope that a greater awareness of the 'Good Research Child' and how it exerts something into the field, might enable interdisciplinary childhood studies a route into critical analysis of the versions of childhood we ourselves collectively create and perpetuate.

Discourses about the 'right' kind of childhood have long been shaped by classed and raced assumptions, frequently resulting in an over-representation of particular modes of acting and communicating coupled with a lack of awareness of how this enthusiasm can silence other modes, stories and ways of being. Moreover, these 'right' constructs and performances of childhood are historically, geographically and socially situated – often dominated by Western (and particularly Anglophone) understandings of what it means to be a child. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008), Hohti (2016) and Rautio and Winston (2015) warn against the valorisation of the sensible and fascinating child and record the playfulness and mundanity of the children they worked with which is offered as an alternative, but could also be a different 'good research child'. Spencer et al. (2020) worry that particular kinds of 'voices' in childhood research can too easily become 'the "correct" way of knowing'. Notions of childhood that emphasise innocence, agency, competence, individualised lived experience, rational perspectives and self-determined subjects, are not taken-for-granted universals but, as scholarship has demonstrated (Burman, 2019; Kromidas, 2019; Tsing, 2015; Webster, 2021), emerge from

historical contexts bound up with colonialism, capitalism and racism, and work to over-represent and validate particular versions of being human (Kromidas, 2019; McKittrick, 2015).

Kuby and Rowsell (2017) suggest researchers 'focus on moving with children as a political decision', echoing Rautio's (2013) recommendation to give 'time and space and due value' (p.402) to what children do of their own accord. We agree starting with where children are, what they are already doing and what they themselves are invested in, is a good starting point for ethical childhood research (Yoon and Templeton, 2019). However, even with these underpinning commitments, an evaluative and discerning researcher gaze, shaping fieldwork, fieldnotes, camera gaze, data analysis and so forth, remains inextricably entangled with categories of childhood that are themselves problematic, developing in western thought through axes of colonialism, capitalism and (in many contexts) neo-liberalism (Burman, 2019; Kromidas, 2019; Walton, 2021; Webster, 2021).

Here, we delineate the problem of the Good Research Child, illustrating how the usual solutions presented to make research able to more generously listen to a wider range of perspectives and ways of being, do not go far enough. Firstly, the enthusiasm for consenting individual child participants as central to knowledge claims within childhood studies, shapes who is represented in childhood research. Secondly, research design and methodologies, even when explicitly child-centred or open ended, play a part in self-selected Good Research Children in the dataset. Thirdly, a tendency to story childhood research frequently acts to recuperate the Good Research Child. By this we mean, often children's contributions that seem unhelpful or off task are eventually discovered to be relevant and insightful for the research *after all* (whilst others might *still* be ignored or effaced). Fourthly, since the Good Research Child does not (only) refer to any individual child, we extend our argument to indicate how we often make certain assumptions about what constitutes a 'Good Research Environment' (where the Good Research Child is likely to be found, to be supported, and to be easier to 'hear'). Such environments are not stable or pre-defined spaces; rather, the Good Research Environment refers to the material, performative, discursive and affective aspects of 'where' we do our research. Finally, and by extension, university funding, governance and ethics regimes that require research to be carefully planned, productive and useful, with a focus on impact, all work to undergird the above processes. In this article, we attune ourselves with the adult-centred contexts (consenting children who produce something that can be made legible for the adult reader and useful for their agendas) within which childhood research is situated, as well as considering how we might go forward from here.

## The emergence of the good research child in colonial, capitalist, neo-liberal academia

Good Research Children are hopeful and utopian.

The purpose of universities is of course, multi-faceted, comprising economic, intellectual, educational, scientific and cultural functions (Collini, 2012). Academics are constructed as motivated by a desire to advance their subject, but are based at universities

which are profit-driven public bodies (Dare and Yamada Rice, 2023; Fisher, 2009; Fleming, 2021; Torrance, 2020). As part of the apparatus of research projects, methodologies and publications, the 'Good Research Child' is also situated within these frameworks. Even the most ardent of child-centred researchers are nested within adult-centric institutions. Thus, Good Research Children are required to be legible, discernible and relatable to the adults who are creating and using them (Horton and Kraftl, 2018). The 'findings' the Good Research Child makes available to the adults in this relationship are frequently required to both meet the requirements of the funding bodies and advance the research agendas of the academics involved. The political economy of academia rests on the Good Research Child, who is helpful with their data sharing, says yes to the ethical review and shares their drawings and stories. The field is enriched, and research (and careers) built on these stories.

In this example below, a group of children gently resisted an adult's attempt to link them to a university-generated critique of normative educational outcomes. Their resistance was based on lived experience that ran counter to the liberalising discourses of academia.

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**Getting a job – Kate**

The mining areas of South Yorkshire have a long history of disinvestment after the collapse of the coal mining industry (Charlesworth, 1999). As an 'ordinary affect' (Stewart, 2007) this resulted in a way of being that is often resigned, but also constrained by the structures of capitalism.

The research that critically explores this includes exploring the 'haunting' that these communities experience (see Bright, 2016). Understandings of how the 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1983) within such communities is shaped by accent and also by class precarity led to a focus by sociolinguistics researchers on the relationship between social class and accent (see Snell, 2013). This understanding of language as situated and ideological stands as a critique to the current DfE regime that positions standardized English as a universal gold standard. In this tradition, as part of an AHRC funded project called 'Language as Talisman' (Hyatt et al., 2022), a group of researchers worked with a school in an ex-mining community in northern England to explore how accent shaped a sense of identity. We aimed to explore language as creative and decoupled from the performance metrics designed to produce future economic citizens (Escott and Pahl, 2019). We invited the young people to make a film of their choice; in it, they chose to explore the implications of not being able to spell on getting a job. The resulting film featured a job applicant who was rejected because he could not spell. Tearing up a piece of paper and throwing it in the bin, the recruiter berated him for his lack of spelling skills. Thus, the commentary by the children did not uphold contemporary ideas of sociolinguistics (that spelling was an artefact of sociocultural processes) but instead showed that, from the young people's point of view, good spelling was desired, reflecting the discourse of 'you need to spell to get a job'. Jobs were key in a community that had major industries taken from it. This perceptual shift was made in a context, but needed to be heard as a commentary on the efficacy (or not) of academic generated sociolinguistic frameworks on young people's own perceptions of their worlds.

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Considering this example, one of the tropes of the Good Research Child is the child who somehow 'helps grown-ups in their quest to liberate a repressive regime' (in this case, Ofsted and standardized English as gold standard). We see and read about children advocating for free play, delighting in nature or campaigning against 'bad guys' such as

big corporations. Whilst there are undoubtedly many children doing these things every day, sometimes children might want to create a world which is not the world of the academic researcher. Our point here is not that research where children trouble academic discourses never happens, but that it is rare, whilst an oversupply of Good Research Children seem to rail, with the researchers, against injustices. Sometimes children resist adult interventions in mundane ways. One example of this, which Kate witnessed, was of a child being asked, by a keen adult, in an environmental showcase meeting, whether they felt different after hugging a tree, and the child, politely, saying 'no, not really'. This silenced the group.

Obtaining research funding, is of course competitive, requiring extensive, structured applications; not only must applicants be proven experts in their area, but the topic should be novel and, in some way, improve the world. Across the fields we have researched in, including literacy, climate change, health, children's care work, early childhood and more, the discourse of the Good Research Child is deeply entangled with policy frameworks concerned with what makes a better world (e.g. Ashton, 2022). Research on children's futures are bound up with the Good Research Child; via the research they help academics produce, the utopian possibilities of a better life chime with the attribution of goodness to the (caring) child who participates in such research (even if such possibilities might be emergent from and possibly promulgated by more 'disruptive' kinds of child).

## Saying yes

Good Research Children say yes, willingly, and if they say no, it is for good reasons, and in the 'right' way.

Children become research participants when they volunteer or agree to take part in research (assent), and when their legal guardians provide written consent. In this way, their involvement embodies specific qualities, including a willingness to engage in research through its own terms of reference and to provide a response that is articulatable or translatable into the framework of the research (Rautio et al., 2022).

The willingness of children to participate in research, and concern about how to ensure consent is genuinely a choice, has long been of interest to childhood (Boden, 2021; Kirby, 2020; Ormalm et al., 2022). Researching children, particularly in school settings, is tangled up with ideas of goodness more generally, outside of the goodness of the research child, in performing well and answering questions correctly (MacLure et al., 2010; Nespor, 1997). We have researched in schools where the teachers selected certain children to participate in our studies. We are aware that families in the most challenging circumstances are less likely to volunteer for our research and more likely to have higher participant attrition during projects on account of children or parents' ill health, for example. Childhood studies favours authentic accounts of what children *really* thought or said as a central facet of claims to knowledge about childhood, resulting in a self-selecting group of children and families who consent and participate within the terms of engagement of qualitative research, being over-represented within our systems of knowledge (Rautio et al., 2022).

**Making a difference – Mel**

My doctoral research, 'Children's perspectives of the cleft lip and palate care pathway' was borne out of a concern at children's lack of 'voice' during a long treatment journey (in the UK, beginning in infancy, intermittent to late adolescence) which involves a multi-disciplinary team comprising plastic surgeons, speech therapists and dentists. I conducted biographical interviews with children and young people in their homes, with participants drawing timelines of their life and of their treatment.

One of the participants, 'Matthew', was thirteen and had been born with a visible gap in his lip, which had been operated on when he was only weeks old, as well as a hole in the roof of his mouth which was treated at 9 months. At the time of the interview, he was undergoing extensive orthodontic treatment, as is typical for those on the treatment pathway (although also common for adolescents more generally). I interviewed Matthew in his home, at teatime, alone for the most part, though his Mother entered towards the end.

Mel: So we've chatted about operations and braces. Will any of your treatment make any changes to you?

*Matthew: No.*

The child-as-expert model indicated that I should take Matthew's 'no' at face value but of course I was keen to know more, particularly since this did not resonate with participants in a similar position who really felt it had made a difference. But instead of asking why not, my follow-up question suggests I felt the need to probe further, just to double check and to be more specific, in case I wasn't clear enough.

Mel: Have any of your operations changed how you look or anything?

Matthew: No not really.

Maybe this was Matthew's genuine perception: having undergone surgical treatment so early, he would likely not have had a concept of the alternative - the feeding implications, his appearance – had he not begun treatment. Perhaps his no was implemented to close the interview down and get on with his evening. At this stage, his Mum (who would have been keenly aware of the impact of being born with the condition) interjected:

Mum: Of course they have! If you didn't have that stitched up, you'd have a big hole in your face. So yeah they have made a difference to how you look haven't they?

In the encounter, I remember being a bit taken aback by this – my doctorate was on the voice of the child! However, this plurality of voice offers an insight into the construction of the Good Research Child and the competent child-researcher and how I unwittingly perpetuated a different construction of childhood.

At this point, Mel was fully immersed in her supervisor's – Allison James – work and thus firmly aligned with a mission to augment the voices of children who were marginalised in the medical arena. She wanted to get research with children 'right' to be awarded her doctorate and position herself as a 'good' child-centred researcher as she navigated her post-doctoral career. Reflecting back, Matthew's mum raises a pertinent point.

Indeed, given the tripartite nature of children's health care, Matthew's mum is (and has likely been used for) an expert on her own child's medical history. Perhaps she disagreed with his answer and her (uninvited) input reveals an insight into the difference it made to her as a parent struggling to feed and worried about the impact of speech and language difficulties and a visible difference on her child. Perhaps she was concerned with making sure that Mel left her home with the 'right' information. Although it is interesting that Matthew perceives that it hasn't made a difference and that is very telling about the

role of memory (which was one of the findings of the research), it also suggests that it is vital not simply to assume the child's account as being the 'right' one.

The Good Research Child is maintained through our field's continued investment in the truth and authenticity of the 'voices', 'lived experiences' and 'truths' of individualised children, and in particular, the assumed necessity of individually consenting individuals, willing to have their voices shared and interpreted, as central to being able to make knowledge claims within the field of childhood studies. It is also premised on Western notions of rights and agency that privilege the idea of the individuated human subject (Diaz-Diaz, 2023), rather than increasingly prevalent notions of the (child) subject that see the child as part of constantly shifting assemblages and relationalities of human and more-than-human (Aitken, 2018; Kraftl, 2013; Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018). However, it is worth keeping as an open question whether the latter kinds of feminist new materialist, posthumanist approaches to childhood studies – even with their more relational bent – actually still hold within them remnants of the Good Research Child, even if somehow more diffuse.

We cannot (quite rightly) write about the children who say no – refusing to participate in our study at all (Truman et al., 2021). By the same token, we each carry with us stories of children we cannot or will never write about, even though consent was given. A child who stamped repeatedly on a woodlouse, asking curiously, 'is it dead?', a child who did not feel better after hugging a tree, and the young person who resented her parents' illness and said so. Often our decisions not to write about these children are justified and made to protect that child, refusing to hold them up to scrutiny of judgement by adult readers they will never meet. Ormalm et al. (2022) address similar concerns in their analysis of the 'absent child', asking 'how can we listen to children whose verbal and embodied encounters we cannot and do not wish to display?' (p.70). In agreement with Ormalm et al. (2022), we argue for the importance of including all children 'in the concept of the child' (p.71), even if modes of (un)representation may vary. We explore this in the following section through the lens of 'doing fieldwork'.

## Participating in fieldwork

Good Research Children are exceptional, creative, engaged, passionate and/or agential.

Structured research methods, carefully designed to produce the 'right' kind of research data, that will best address the pre-determined research questions, have been critiqued by childhood scholars for their failure to recognise children's expertise and preferred modes of communication (Christensen, 2004; Christensen and James, 2008). Methodological innovation is frequently viewed as a route to 'improving' childhood studies data (Spyrou, 2016), with a hope that different methods or better researcher interpersonal skills will produce a subject more at ease or better engaged, who might have said 'something more, or something else, or something more true, or something deeper' (MacLure et al., 2010: 495). What can research do to circumnavigate a data set filled with well-behaved children who ask the 'right questions' and come up with apposite quotes and engaging data vignettes? Whilst we have an interest in methodological innovation and tend to deploy more open-ended methods, this is not a self-congratulatory position in

which we advocate some approaches as superior or less problematic than others. Rather, we have become increasingly exercised by the question; how does the Good Research Child continue to be constructed within ethnographic and qualitative research, despite moves towards more-open ended and child-centred methodologies (such as co-production, collaborative ethnography and research creation)?

Participatory activities can be self-cleansing in that the 'wrong' kind of research subject will either decline to participate in such an activity, or remain silent, or else their data will be skimmed off at the point of initial data analysis, deemed off topic and not relevant to the questions in hand (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Millei and Rautio, 2017; Rautio et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2020). Even within ethnographic research, there is often a process of self-cleansing in that regularly attending families or children, who get to know the researcher and agree to sign the consent forms, take centre stage in the dataset (Hackett, 2021). Stories about the Good Research Child are replete with a quote from the willing child, or drawings that are particularly cogent, or an act of sharing or generosity that exceeds observer expectations. Notions of a 'Good Research Child' and 'less preferable research child' continue to haunt our work every time we make an evaluative judgement, even a positive one. Every individual child celebrated for their engagement, passion, creativity, agency or competency, leaves in their shadow a 'lesser' child, one who presumably did not fulfil the evaluative criteria routinely employed by researchers quite so convincingly. The quirky drawing or the playing child or the imaginative answer can be given more attention compared to the plain drawing, the still child, the shy child or the simple blunt answer. As Millei and Rautio (2017: 469) have worried, 'It seems that who and what have entered into the research was still decided only by me'. We agree with Millei and Rautio (2017) who caution that how we 'frame' our research can be too limiting; downward pressures to make a dataset legible, engaging, useful, a contribution to the field and/or to offer useful messages for practice, all act to filter and shape what and how research is able to pay attention.

Importantly, we are not talking here about individual children necessarily; at different times each child may display any of the qualities listed above *to a degree, shaped by environment, context and what we as the researchers are willing or able to perceive.* The kinds of properties or capacities performed by children vary (as we emphasise later) with the environment in which research takes place: for instance, children might be 'too passionate' in a school environment where we can't undermine teacher authority, but that threshold might be higher at an adventure playground or in a youth work setting. In some spaces, children have very little agency, particularly in schools, to redress the researcher/child power relationship (Kirby, 2020). In many instances, Good Research Children is all researchers have. However, recognising this is an important aspect of cracking open the process. Giving up on the Good Research Child might require giving up the individual child and recognising a more multi-faceted mode of inquiry that includes the non-human.

## The 'Good Research Environment'

The Good Research Child can be found in contexts and spaces that are conducive to particular kinds of research practices and outcomes.

As we plan for, or reflect on, 'Good' research in childhood studies, many of us may have in mind an image of a space in which that research takes place. Some projects might require a stable, well-organised, quiet space – such as a classroom – where adults largely appear to be in control, and where the environment is conducive to children simply getting on with a task. For projects requiring children to undertake an individual piece of writing, drawing or to fill out a questionnaire, such a space might be ideal. Other projects might require a more energised kind of atmosphere – perhaps a less formal, out-of-school setting like a youth club or playspace, where children are encouraged to take the lead and to engage in group activities through play, drama or music. In each of these settings, the Good Research Child – engaged, creative, passionate, agential, etcetera – is able to emerge, to flourish, and to produce good research outcomes. When the converse happens – when the environment is not good – it might be that Good Research Children get lost. Importantly, the idea of the Good Research Environment extends beyond the notion of the Good Research Child to the interpersonal relationships, material properties, rules and shared emotions that characterise successful childhood studies research.

It might be that some of us have in mind a specific space that constitutes the Good Research Environment – a particular school where the Headteacher always returns our E-Mails, where teachers know in advance that we're coming and what we're doing, where we are introduced to the children 'cleanly' at the beginning of a session, where we can get our Powerpoint presentation onto the Smartboard without any issues, where the children listen and ask questions, where the classroom is big enough for additional adults to move around to each table, and where the noise level is *just right* for the level of creativity, passion that is required for the task at hand.

The Good Research Environment is also – like the Good Research Child – produced by the machinations of the neoliberal academy: doing research in a school, with its manifold safeguarding procedures, risk assessments and other institutional processes, is usually far simpler to get past an ethics committee than doing research with children in their bedrooms. Teachers – and teaching assistants – can also produce 'goodness' by their adherence to particular modes of listening and supporting the research, as 'listening' to children, thus creating a Good Research Environment for the researcher. However, the Good Research Environment is just as likely to be a momentary, fleeting, ephemeral memory or projection of that moment where things just come together and *feel right* (at least, to us as researchers). The Good Research Environment is akin to an 'affective atmosphere' (Anderson, 2009): a trans-personal feeling, push, or direction in a space, in which collectives of humans and non-humans become enrolled and swept up, and which might be sensed in a shared (albeit differentiated way). As Anderson (2009: 78) argues: an atmosphere 'exerts a force on those that are surrounded by it, and like the air we breathe it provides the very condition of possibility for life'. By contrast, some research environments might produce a 'less good' research child, a context in which unpredictable and problematic behaviour emerges. But this, on its own, should not be a problem – it is more that the story is less clear and the researcher might appear less heroic.

> **Struggling – Peter**
>
> We were doing research in an English school that teaches young people who have been excluded from mainstream educational settings. The young people – mainly teenage boys – have been excluded for a range of reasons, many of which are beyond their control as individuals: because their behaviour has been deemed 'challenging', 'problematic' or otherwise disruptive; because they have been diagnosed with specific emotional or social conditions; because their home lives make it difficult for them to engage at school in the ways that schools expect; because (it turned out) they were subject to institutionalised, societal processes of marginalisation and minoritisation on the basis of their age, gender and ethnicity.
>
> We struggled to do research in this environment. Upon our arrival, there had clearly been some kind of urgent incident as we were ushered straight into an office and the door was locked behind us. The research began half an hour late, meaning we had less time and were feeling flustered. As we were introducing our project to a small group, most of the students fiddled with pens, got up and walked around, looked in cupboards and complained that it was too hot. They asked questions that felt irrelevant, and the teaching assistant didn't seem interested in taking 'control'. Students from elsewhere in the school were repeatedly coming into the classroom, shouting expletives; at one point, one of our group left the room with another student and a fight broke out in the corridor.
>
> We felt hot and bothered; thrown off guard; out of our depth. We wanted to get out of there. But we wanted the research to work, and we really wanted the research to work with these young people, because this is precisely the kind of research environment, and these are precisely the kinds of children, who rarely figure in research (especially in research that is about a topic like the environment, and which aims to explore what they know and think).

The 'struggles' described above are not only struggles to find some semblance of control or order in the moment, look like good researchers or responsible adults, or to 'rescue' the research; indeed, we rally here (somewhat) against the hero narratives of the researcher overcoming all odds, living to tell the tale. These are struggles about more than the immediacy of the situation: there are internal wranglings going on for the researchers, as they attempt to come to terms with their commitment to undertaking research whilst attempting to get over or work around their own preconceived ideas about what a Good Research Environment should be; and, there is the challenge of *really wanting the research to work* so that these young people can, for once, feel included (but, we wonder, included into or reconciled with what notion of 'Good Research' and 'Good Research Outcomes'?).

The Good Research Environment is, then, a complex, emergent and multi-scalar phenomenon. The school described above is absolutely not a *de facto* 'Bad Research Environment'. Rather, a range of processes, performances, discourses and material conditions came together to create a feeling that we were struggling to produce a Good Research Environment on that day, in that school (Pahl and Pool, 2021): from engrained, intersecting processes of marginalisation, minoritisation and pathologisation, to the mismatch between the researchers' Good Intentions and what might have constituted Good Research in that moment, in that space.

We here reflect on a tension that emerged through ongoing research at the school described above. On the one hand, that session felt like a write-off; we are still not sure what we achieved in that session, what we learned, or whether any 'useful' data

were produced (although, as luck would have it, the opportunity to reflect on the methodological and ethical implications of the Good Research Child in this paper means that it sees the light of day after all). On the other hand – and once again resisting casting ourselves in the image of the heroic, flexible researcher, able to turn their hand to any situation – some of the later sessions *did* work out, even if they still did not confirm with our pre-existing imaginaries of the Good Research Environment. Indeed, from moments that seemed slightly chaotic, challenging – violent, even – emerged overspills of 'data' (Millei and Rautio, 2017). Were the young people we were working with performing the Good Research Child in those moments – or were we attempting to reconcile, reinscribe, colonise and recuperate what they were telling us into the logics of the Good Research Child? These are questions that we consider next, bearing in mind that the Good Research Environment very often constitutes the 'field' within which we broach such questions.

## Storying research and recuperating children

> When Good Research Children do seemingly meaningless things, they turn out to mean something.

Childhood studies has a rich tradition of scholarship that embraces, critically interrogates and takes seriously the child participants who do not conform, who take participatory methods in an unexpected direction, or who speak back to the original research questions in a surprising way. Childhood studies' openness to unexpected or divergent data or responses creates space for child participants to push somewhat against the frameworks of the originally conceived research design. As published research, unexpected reactions or unintended datasets are often presented within a narrative framework of surprise, of challenging previous assumptions, of reframing the subject or offering something completely new. These 'stories from the field' have gained a structure, a struggle, a moment of insight, and a way of making a contribution to the field 'after all'. This offers the reader a narrative arc in which, for example, at first the research was confused, thought the child had misunderstood the question, but then eventually realised what the child had said contributed an important new dimension to whatever was under consideration.

Such methodologies can recuperate Good Research Children by uncovering the meaningful in what might have been assumed to be meaningless (Horton and Kraftl, 2018). For example, Kate's work found interest in ephemeral objects (Pahl, 2002), and Abi wrote about how meaningful children's running can be (Hackett, 2014). Again, this is not a critique of individual papers or studies, but a commentary on an over-representation of stories across childhood studies in which the seemingly meaningless turned out to be insightful and meaningful. Perhaps it is also a reflection of the assumption (indeed, the compulsion) that our 'job', as academics, is to make sense and meaning in order to communicate the fruits of our research to others.

Sociologists of what is conceptualised as 'everyday life' have asserted the need to recognise the 'mundane' (Holmes and Hall, 2020). As Scott writes

> …day after day we engage in the same mundane activities, at the same times and in the same
> order, and this routine predictability allows us to take the everyday world for granted (2009: 69).

This does not indicate irrelevance or that social phenomena do not matter on account of their ordinary-ness, but that the foci of our research which might be special to academics and ripe for theorization do not necessarily carry the same weight that we might attach to them for those we research. Furthermore, research tends to be overwhelmingly concerned with '*positively defined objects, actions and identities*' (Scott, 2018: 15), rather than paying attention to the significance of 'nothing'. Scott's work conceptualises dimensions of 'nothing' that are significant. These include: non-identities, for example, being identified by others as 'childless'; inactivity, for example, not voting; absences as illustrated by bereavement; and silence/quiet (Scott, 2018). This lens has implications for how we conduct research with children, and crucially how findings are conceptualised and disseminated. Repetition, same-ness, ordinary, the bus tickets carried by children, the list-making that adults do, these all move in the terrain of the unremarkable world of the not necessarily Good Research Child. They resist the kind of narrative arc described above. Placing the gaze on, for example, the child who is unmoved by tree-hugging, creates a polyphonic and multiple research child, who is not necessarily pin-pointed by the concept of 'good'.

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**McDonalds and JDSports in a small ex-mining village – Abi**

Years before my doctorate, I worked as a community heritage officer, employed on a series of precarious fixed-term contracts to work with communities who were 'disengaged' from their local heritage. One of my favourite jobs was funded by the Heritage Lottery funding to enable young people (11–25 years) to explore their heritage; I worked with young people in a small ex-coalmining village on the Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire border.

In an early group activity, I brought large sheets of paper and other craft materials and asked the young people to 'map' their community and add words and images that encapsulated their hopes for the future of their place. The young people worked with focus and energy to cut out a series of logos for established high street brands from magazines, filling the streets of their village (currently served by one village shop and a pop-up community café), with major high street brands. There was nothing about heritage, independent businesses, pride in local identity or 'aspiration' (key Young Roots themes) that the Young Roots programme was intended to support, included in the mapping.

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The mapping activity described above did not end up in the final project 'dvd' or end of project report. Readers at this point may be considering how, even this unexpected and seemingly unhelpful piece of data, could be storied to show the mismatch between young people's needs and available funding, or to critique the notion of individualised authentic voice accessed via creative methods. To which we would reply – yes it certainly could, but such a storying would work to recuperate the young people as Good Research Children 'after all' (as legible, useful and so on). This illustrates the slippery inescapability of how the Good Research Child seems to shape thinking.

In addition, in such recuperation stories (as with our struggles in the school in the previous section), the researcher (including ourselves) can become the heroic protagonist just as much as the child concerned – the one adult who listened differently, made

space and took their time, saw what others did not. A narrative arc that moves from researcher confusion to researcher expected insight. One starting point then, for interrogating the 'Good Research Child' and what it is doing in qualitative research is to ask – how does this finding or perspective position you as a researcher? Do you emerge ultimately triumphant, and continuously ethical, with your core beliefs or values still intact? If so, be wary and reflect on what a Good Research Child is doing within the story.

## Discussion: giving up on the Good Research Child

> What would it mean to give up on the Good Research Child? Is it possible and what would it look like?

Despite excellent and ongoing critical scholarship in the field of childhood studies, the Good Research Child remains, for us, a sticking point. In terms of how to 'do' childhood research, whichever way we try to pull the logic, push against parameters and escape the Good Research Child, we find ourselves circling back, caught within the same paradox. In response, we propose a more radical review of childhood studies as a field; this is not about the value or necessity of individual studies that express children's views or story fieldwork with children, but about the parameters of a field and the way in which the body of research, existing within these parameters, over-represents the Good Research Child. In other words, our response needs to be both methodological and epistemological. In this section, we offer some starting discussion points for what this shift might look like.

### Saying yes

Consenting individuals are the starting point for empirical childhood research. We cannot (rightly) gather data on individuals without their consent, however this leads to an initial self-selecting or over-representation of children who are compliant, accessible to the researcher and willing to engage within the framework of research. Improving or innovating the consent process does not address this problem.

One response would be to move away from a reliance on, or preference for, empirical, individual child participants. How could literature, film or art, for example, play a role in cracking open the kinds of child(hoods) represented in childhood research? We see examples of engagement with film and literature (Ashton, 2022), artworks (Dyer, 2020; Holmes, 2012) or speculative fiction (Nxumalo and Ross, 2019) as productive ways to broaden the conversation beyond what the individual consenting child did or said. Thinking with and beyond empirical data of current children can open up different kinds of temporalities and more-than-human shifts, such as Kraftl's (2020) discussion of children as a transitional phase in the life of toys as objects, where specific children move in and out of focus. We reflect on the force and intensity of moments and encounters we have had during our fieldwork that do not fit into the category of 'legible contributions to the dataset', and wonder what these moments can still productively do. Like working with the bas relief of the fieldwork, what is left once the data and consenting individuals have been stripped away? An example of this was a project on 'Feeling Odd' whereby Kate (author) and Steve Pool asked an animation artist to describe films

from the children in an animation, thus drawing away from the empirical work, for which many of the children had said 'no' to us showing directly (Pahl and Pool, 2021).

## Doing the research

What does it mean to be collecting 'research data' and what kinds of encounters, moments and artefacts fall inside and outside of this bracket? As well as the above-mentioned problematic that we can only include the contributions of consenting individuals, we have shown how participatory and child centred methods shift, but do not eliminate, the issue of the Good Research Child.

What would it look like to step away from making evaluative statements – even positive ones – about the things children do, that is, the results of the methods we have selected? We could instead experiment with collecting data that deliberately centres the mundane or illegible (Hohti, 2016; Kraftl, 2020). This might require a language of description that creates recognition of the hyper-usual, 'normal' and bored child, echoing our call for an interest in 'nothing' (Scott, 2018).

## Recuperation and hero narratives

Narrative studies scholarship has highlighted some of the dominant characteristics of research narratives, noting the Western compulsion for meaning, purpose, hope and coherence (Baldwin, 2017; Landau, 1991). In *The Wounded Storyteller*, for example, Frank (2013) notes the typologies of illness narratives, for example, restitution, chaos and quest. Turning the spotlight on childhood researchers, it is prudent to be mindful of a disposition towards dominant models of childhood and of recuperation of children – of ill, unruly, disengaged children – who can be rescued by hero researchers who 'give' them a voice and 'story' them in a sensitive way. The idea of the adult academic as expert in children's lives or saviour of the children is powerful, but needs questioning within the framework of the Good Research Child. Conceptualising the Good Research Child encourages attention to issues of the ethics of representation (Baldwin, 2017) and that the 'living story' is always unfolding and reconstructed (Boje, 2011; Gubrium and Holstein, 2016).

## The usefulness of research

The requirement for research to be discernibly useful, address research questions, be legible, and offer implications for policy or practice, has profound implications for childhood research (Horton and Kraftl, 2005). In a context in which research must be useful, anything else (including many of the possibilities we outlined above to crack open the Good Research Child) count as failure. Halberstam (2011) embraces the potentials of failure, writing,

> Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (P.2)

Halberstam questions 'the desire to be taken seriously' and sees this as being at the root of people following well-trodden paths. Certainly, we see this in research methodology, where qualitative research takes it cue from the 'more scientific' and powerful quantitative research model (St Pierre, 2014). Work that is legible and understandable is seen as more valuable to funders than work that describes failing or getting lost (Ahmed, 2019; Pahl et al., 2023).

We also appreciate less goal-orientated modes of working across communities and academic research, which frequently involve long term and personal commitments from researchers (Hackett, 2021; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). For example, Mason (2021) describes 'staying' relationships with communities that involve years of investment of time, energy and resources without fixed goals or function. He writes 'These slow or "obstinate" temporalities hold the persistent attachments we maintain with others despite more dominant temporalities of progress, productivity and work'. Clarke et al. (2017) write about critical social research that involves 'bearing witness' to long-term social justice campaigns, as a mode of being a researcher that largely falls outside of university metrics or measures of research success. These examples, whilst not specifically within childhood studies, invite reflection about the potentials of long-term attachment to childhood spaces, and how this might function outside of collecting data or answering research questions. They also invite questions about the kinds of privilege required to engage in such longer-term attachments – whether in terms of a researcher's job security or tenure, or the funding required to commit to that research over a period of many years.

## Conclusion

As academics in the field of childhood studies, our *raison d'etre* has been to rail against narrow constructions of childhood. Decades of teaching and research have critiqued notions of children as inherently innocent, vulnerable, immanent, unconscious, naturally developing or feral (James et al., 1998). However, examining our own practices and the contexts within which our research is situated, we concede that although we have deconstructed the aforementioned models, for example, centring children and young people as experts in their own lives, and advocating for research design that respects children's preferred modes of communicating, we recognise that we are part of a system that continually circles back to a specific view of children: one that we conceptualise as the Good Research Child.

As academic research unfolds in neoliberal, adult-centric structures, we need tools to help us *notice-with* (Tsing, 2015) children, and resist rushing to greedily gather up the voices that conform best with our notions of the Good Research Child, or which emerge most readily from the Good Research Environment. These tools need to be cognisant of the colonial, capitalist, neoliberal and/or racist entanglements of the construction of childhood, as well as continually keeping in mind how the stories emerging from our research benefit and position the researcher and the university, even when they present themselves as surprising, disorientating or contra to the original research aims.

Constructing a space away from the Good Research Child has proved challenging to think about. We advocate for further collective discussion and reflection about the figure

of the Good Research Child in childhood studies, what it produces, and how to value the possibility of dissensus as well as any sense of 'progress' in this discussion.

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