Analyzing ethical considerations and research methods in children research

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Oct 18, 2018 Revised Mar 8, 2019 Accepted Apr 20, 2019

Keywords:

Differences Ethics Methods Researching children TESOL

ABSTRACT

Research involving children and young people has a particular challenge in comparison to research involving adults. Of this particular challenge is related to the issues of ethical considerations and research methods that the researchers have to commit when conducting research. These are two essential research components and integrally linked to one another because they determine the quality and integrity of the research being conducted. These issues require thorough consideration and implemented differently from the research involving adults. Therefore, this paper aimed to discuss the ethical issues and research methods in researching children and critically evaluate these issues from the research practices by taking the cases of the articles in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Three articles were selected for further analysis to identify the ways the authors address these issues in their articles. The findings indicated that the authors mainly reported common ethical principles, such as voluntary participation and anonymity, but did not explicitly outline the ethical procedures specific for their children participation in their papers. There was also no indication that they employed appropriate methods to work with children such as using child-friendly methods encouraging children's participations and giving them space to express opinions and thoughts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested by O'Reilly et al. [1] and Tisdall et al. [2] that research involving children and young people, to date, has been increasing and the attitudes about children have begun to change. Indeed, McLaughlin [3] and Wilkinson [4] have maintained that involving children in research has a particular challenge for the researchers resulting from the facts that this research has some differences in comparison to the research involving adults. Much has been written in the literature of these differences which are particularly related to the issues of ethical considerations and research methods [1-4]. These two issues are of paramount importance for the researchers to take into consideration as they are deemed an essential prerequisite to the quality and integrity of the researchers in the western countries, to our full knowledge, it is still rare to find out from the literature that the same case has been acknowledged and practiced by the researchers of Other Languages (TESOL). This gap has also been addressed by some authors in several recent studies [7-11]. On the basis of this, the present paper aims to critically analyze how the researchers in the TESOL field have addressed these two issues in their research

papers. In conducting this analysis, three research articles published in the field of TESOL that have involved children as the participants are selected for further analysis. To provide theoretical ground for this study, the discussion will begin with a brief explanation of the concept of children, their rights and the perspective on children in research. Then, the discussion continues to address the contemporary changes in the nature of research that engage children particularly in regard to the ethical considerations and methods. Finally, a critical discussion on these debates is further seen from the research practices as evident in the selected research papers in TESOL area.

2. CHILDREN, CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, AND CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES IN RESEARCH 2.1. Children and their rights

For the purpose of this essay, it is necessary to clarify from the outset what it is meant by children and young people and the possible consequences of their status in conducting research with them. According to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child [12], a child is defined as "a person below the age of 18 years, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger". The convention has clearly stated that a human being under the age of 18 is categorized as a child. As the consequence, UNCRC [12] has determined any rights entitled for any person under the age of 18 which all countries who have ratified the convention are obliged to implement. These rights range to covers all aspects of a child's life including the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights as stipulated in 54 articles of the convention. The convention, in general, contains four core principles of children's rights consisting of *survival rights* which recognize the child's rights to life and the basic needs to existence such as access to food, housing and healthcare; *development rights* which spell out the children's need to reach their full potential as individuals, for example, access to education, leisure, and cultural activities; *protection rights* which recognize the children's active role in their communities and societies by allowing them to freely express their views and have a say in matters affecting their lives [13].

Relevant to this study, the convention has emphasized the possibility of involving children in order to get their voices heard in research practices. However, the involvement of children in research requires specific attention, so all their entitled rights can be protected and safeguarded during all research activities. In addition, Calkins [14] asserts that children are entitled to individual right to grow up healthy and free, with, among other, freedom of speech and thought, freedom from fear, freedom of choice and the right to make decisions.

2.2. The perspectives of children in research

Since the beginning of studies involving children, there have been four different identifiable ways of viewing children, including the child as object, the child as subject, the child as social actor and the newest perspective, seeing children as participants and/or co-researchers [15-18]. In the early years of developmental psychology in particular, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Kellett and Ding [19] and Hendrick [20] maintained that children were merely seen as the object of the research. It is the traditional and common approach that principally neglects children as social persons. This perspective is based on the underpinning assumption of adults on children's dependency and vulnerability [15, 21]. The children, within this perspective, are perceived as individuals who are incompetent to know and understand the notion of research, and unreliable for giving and receiving factual information. It is, therefore, the children have not been provided more opportunities to speak for themselves [16, 22, 23]; rather, their lives are investigated from the perspectives of adults, obtaining accounts of everyone involved with the care of the child such as parents and teachers.

The practice of this approach has received strident criticism which has leaded to the emergence of a new perspective and different way of working with children which treat children as the subjects [24, 25]. Christensen and Prout [15] outlined the fundamental idea of child-centered approach that recognizes the children as persons with subjectivity. This perspective maintains that children's views are acknowledged, but still seen subjective and not independent. In most cases, the children's age becomes the most common criteria used to include or exclude them when carrying out the study within this approach because their age is considered to provide indication for their cognitive ability, social competency, development, and maturity [15].

The next perspective of children in research is the status of children as the social actors. The researchers, in this approach, presume and recognize the children as autonomous individuals with their own experiences, concepts, ideas, and understandings [15]. This implies that the children directly become the focus of the study and analysis where their status in the research is no longer seen solely as part of social institutions, such as family and school. It is furtherly explained that one of the key features from this

perspective is treating the children the same as adults in research which shows no distinction between them such as the necessaey for the researchers to apply the same basic research principle in choosing methods to work with children and methods to work with adults [15].

The latest approach, developing from the perspective of the children as social actors, considers the children as participants or co-researchers [15, 17, 26]. This current perspective is particularly in accordance with UNCRC which outlines the entitlement of children's rights to have their own views heard for the purpose of maintaining any matter that may impact their lives, including participation to be actively involved in family, social, and cultural activities. This conviction also promotes the idea that the children must be involved, informed, consulted, and heard in research. Thus, the researchers extend the acceptance of the children's agency to involve them in the research process itself including the data collection and analysis processes [15].

These aforementioned perspectives of children in research suggest that each approach is substantially different in seeing and treating the children in the research. It also implies that the researchers have changed their views on children over time. These perspectives, in practice, do coexist and are used alongside each other in the research [15]. This means that there is a tendency of mixing the practices of one approach with the practices of another. Nonetheless, any research involving children directly as the participants particularly from the last two perspectives "children as social actors or co-researchers" contains significant challenges because the researchers are required to find alternative methods not only to obtain expected data from them, but also to maintain their entitled rights as mandated by the UCRC.

3. THE DEBATES IN RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

As it has been mentioned, there are two major issues and debates that differentiate research on/with children from research with adults, particularly in relation to ethical considerations and research methods. These issues are believed to be integrally linked and cannot be separated from one another. In this regard, Jones [27] contends that "ethics has methodologies and methodologies have ethics" (p. 177). Therefore, it is argued that bad science is bad ethics [26, 28]. These obviously indicate that ethics and methods cannot be separated from one another because there are, in ethics, some procedures or methodologies to be followed and, on the other hand, there are ethical considerations in all research methods. The following section will particularly represent the review of literature of those issues pertaining to the research involving children.

3.1. Child research ethics

Ethics simply means the principle of right and wrong conduct. The term derives from the Greek ethos which means custom or character. In the context of research, it is defined as the principles of appropriate conduct to govern research, and as a procedure to protect and respect the participants' dignity, welfare and rights in a multitude of varying research disciplines, methods and participants, including research involving children [29-31]. The general principles of ethics of research on/with children, to a large extent, are similar to adults. There must be informed consent, protection for all participants, anonymity, and confidentiality [1, 2, 32]. However, the ethics involving children in the study may be more specific and need some additional principles because of the vulnerable status that children may be afforded [33-35].

The obvious ethical issue in research on/with children that shows salient differences from research with adults is the informed consent. According to Bogdan and Biklen [36], informed consent means that the research participants take part in the research project voluntarily and fully comprehend the nature of the study and obligations, as well as the consequences from their involvement. Related to this, Gallagher [31] outlines four general core principles of informed consent, among others; 1) consent that involves some explicit acts indicated by either verbal or written agreement, 2) participants, including children, who can only consent if they are informed, and understand the nature, purposes, procedures, and consequences of the research, 3) consent that must be given voluntarily, without coercion, and 4) consent that must be renegotiable. These suggest that informed consent is the participants' voluntary agreement to become involved in research. It is not merely a form that is signed, but it is a process whereby the participant has an understanding of the research and its possible risks. With regard to research involving children, gaining their consent is often a more complex and time-consuming procedure when it is compared to gaining consent from adults. Its complexity refers to the aforementioned convention [12] which states that those under 18 years old are not legally competent to provide consent [37, 38] although many researchers see them as autonomous individuals who are capable of expressing opinions as well as making decisions. To get access to the children, in practice, the researchers should have gained initial consent from parents [39-41]. The procedure becomes more complicated when the researchers carry out the study on/with children in the school settings where there may be different layers of gatekeepers that must give consent before they can officially get in touch with the children, such as principals, teachers, and parents [3, 42]. This implies that it is not impossible for the researchers to end the project and/or find other populations if one of the gatekeepers feels reluctant to agree with the children's participation. However, although all the gatekeepers give their consent to the researchers, they still have to pass through another step prior to involving them in their research, which is ensuring the children give their own consent to voluntarily take part in the research. This is sometimes challenging and problematic for the researchers even though in the literature it is noted that children's consent is often shaped and influenced by peers or adult gatekeepers [2].

One of the problematic matters in seeking children's consent is the process of ensuring children's willingness to participate. This is a tough process since their nature is different from adults, in terms of characteristics, behavior, cognitive skills, and power. Einarsdóttir [42] notes that the researchers must give ample information regarding the project in an understandable language to the children that makes it possible for them to provide an informed decision about their participation. It is necessary for them to earnestly understand the notions, purposes, involvement roles, expectations, consequences, and possible risks of the research as the information is an integral part of the informed consent. Also, the children must be able to comprehend that participation is without coercion and that they have rights to withdraw at any time during the research [3, 42-44]. Another concern in relation to assuring children's consent is potential misinterpretation that the children have regarding research information. According to Edward and Alldred [45], the children are inclined to interpret the information about the research based on their own perspectives. This proclivity may cause misunderstanding of information, and makes informed consent more complicated and challenging. To address these issues, it is suggested that the researchers continuously encourage ongoing discussions and dialogues with the children [33, 46]. Besides, it is also crucial for the researchers to have good communication skills, so their effort to ensure children's participation is much easier.

Another ethical issue in research involving children is their protection from the risk of significant harm which places the emphasis on the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. The principle of anonymity means that individual participants must not be identifiable, so not mentioning participants' names or replacing them with pseudonyms; whereas, the principle of confidentiality concerns the participants' identifiable data protection from other people unless otherwise agreed to [2, 42, 36]. With regards to this issue, children, in principle, should be entitled to the same degree of privacy and confidentiality as adult research subjects; however, it is often the case that it becomes a dilemma for the researchers who work with children. In terms of the anonymity principle, for instance, Gallagher [31] exemplifies that children sometimes do not share researchers' concerns about privacy, and ask the researcher to put their real name in research report, while the confidentiality principle is potentially problematic when the children are involved in sensitive or taboo topics.

The overall discussion on child research ethics suggests that it is highly important to consider the ethical issues in research involving children, as it is an effort to protect their privacy and confidentiality, to minimize harm, and to prevent against the falsifying and fabrication of data. Child research ethics, in a particular context, is to certain extent different from ethical considerations in research involving adults, even though its general principles are applied similarly to both adults and children. The ethics of children's protection is regarded as more challenging and complex for researchers, especially the issues of gaining their consent procedures.

3.2. Child research methods

Methodology is a prominent element in research as it comprises the principles, philosophies, ideologies, and values that underpin a study [47, 48]. It provides the rationale for particular ways to generate and analyze data in research [49-51]. This means that methodology involves a set of methods or procedures which guide the researcher(s) to identify, collect, and analyze the data. The general principles of research methods, either qualitative or quantitative, are applicable to all types of research, including the study involving children. As Punch [41] states, the methods used in studies with adults are also relevant to use with children. This indicates that there is no principle distinction between the methods of research with adults and children. Nevertheless, owing to the children's different characteristics from adults and their unequal power relations, the methods in research with/on children contain certain differences from the adults [1-3, 32] in particular pertaining to the way of gathering the data.

It has been noted in some literature that researching on/with children requires methods that suit their competence, knowledge, interests, and context [2, 42, 52]. This suggests that the researchers need to carefully consider the appropriate methods that support the children's intellectual interests, and social abilities, either by employing 'child-friendly' methods [41], or positioning their role as sensitive, empathetic, and caring adults [53, 54]. Its purpose is to enable the children to feel more comfortable and actively engage with adult researchers. With regard to this issue, the researchers involving children have to develop and carry out many different methods in their studies to elicit children's voices and perceptions including employing multiple research methods, creative methods, and participatory research methods [41, 42, 55, 56].

4. RESEARCH METHOD

As an attempt to evaluate whether or not ethical considerations and methodological issues are appropriately considered in researching on/with children, analysis was conducted by looking at the researchers' attempts to address these issues in their published articles. The researchers selected research articles in the field of study of Teaching English to Other Language Speakers (TESOL). Of the relevant rationale to take TESOL context is the scarcity of studies that indicates the compliance of the researchers to these two issues in conducting research on/with children. From abundant articles available, the researchers have finally selected three articles used for analysis. One of the underlying reasons for selecting these articles is that they were published in international peer-reviewed journals. In addition, they involved children as the subjects and/or participants in their study and employed different methods to get the child-respondents' voices. The list of three selected papers is as the following:

The first article of the discussion is authored by Liu and Chen [8] which investigated the interrelation of the foreign language anxiety among the fifth and sixth graders to their multiple intelligences, attitudes on English learning. The study involved 216 students from two primary schools in Taiwan. Three surveys consisting of (1) learning anxiety adopted from Horwitz et al. [57], (2) multiple intelligences adopted from Hsieh [58] and (3) learning attitudes adopted from Chen [59]. The surveys adopted in this study were initially used for adult participants [57-59] which made it relevant to elabora to what extent the authors of this article responded and adjusted their data collection process to their involved participants of children at the fifth and sixth grades of the primary schools.

The second article for analysis is from Dhillon and Wanjiru [9] which set to explicate the challenges and strategies for teaching and learning English in Kenya. By employing a case study research in one urban primary school, the authors involved the teachers and the students as the participants with three data sources consisting of the questionnaire, the semi-structure interviews and the learning diaries. Despite the mixed use between adult and children participants, the article was selected for the analysis to cloasely assess how the authors treated them differently in order to effectively achieve the goal of the study particularly between the adult teachers and children-students.

The last article to elaborate is from Akasha [60] that highlighted the challenges in English learning faced by the young learners from Arabic-speaking background as well as the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching them. Like the second article, the author took a case study design carried out at a public middle school in Washington with the involvement of the teachers and students as the participants. The data were gathered through the interviews with both the teachers and students, classroom observation and parent survey. The selection of this article for the discussion in the current study is to identify the involvement of the young children (in comparison to the children in the previous articles) and the ways they were treated by the author in comparison to their adult counterparts (teachers) in order to obtain the intended data (the young learners' voices).

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Ethical considerations

As it has been explained, research ethics is incredibly crucial as it is the principle of appropriate conduct which governs the research [29-31]. The researchers need to consider the ethical issues as an attempt to protect and respect the respondents' privacy, minimize harm, and promote goodness. With regard to the study involving children, the procedures of ethics are undoubtedly more challenging and containing certain differences from the research on/with adults in particular the process of gaining children's consent. It is, therefore, very helpful to explicitly state the description of ethical considerations, so it gives the readers a complete picture of how the researchers deal with ethical issues in all process of involving children.

After doing a thorough investigation and analysis from the three selected TESOL articles, it is, then, found out that the details of research ethics were not explicitly outlined in two articles. Of the three articles, only the third author specifically mentioned the participants' agreement to take part in the study and used the respondents' pseudonyms in the report although they were not in a specific and separate sub-heading. The authors of article 1 and 2, on the contrary, did not even provide any statements which indicated the ethical research procedures particularly related to participants' voluntary agreement to participate in the research and/or their data protection procedures. Despite that, they still implemented one of the ethical principles that was related to the participants' anonymity. The anonymity principle refers to ensuring that information about research participants is unidentifiable by not mentioning the names or replacing them with pseudonyms [2, 42, 36] in order to protect the participants' identity. In the attempts to conceal any identifiable information, the authors of the article 1, for example, even disguised their participants' school names by only mentioning their school area, not the name of the schools. In a similar way, the authors of article 2 did not mention their child participants' names but changed them into 'a boy' or 'a girl' in their research report.

Generally speaking, all authors in the analyzed articles have well addressed how the issues of anonymity and confidentiality of their children participants were undertaken in reporting the study. Hence, potential harms either physically or psychologically that might affect the children could be minimized and avoided. In this respect, all authors have anticipated any potential harms for the children participants in afterresearch process through concealing any identifiable information of the participants. Despite this, the employment of the anonymity and confidentiality in the reporting is a common practice in conducting research either involving adults or children, so the consideration of these two ethical issues has not provided distinct indication that the authors have put specific consideration of the involvement of children as the participants. As a matter of fact, no specific information could be traced in these articles that the authors have also considered the welfare and security of the children during the process of research particularly during data collection. To provide some examples, some authors did not discuss how unbalanced power relations between adult researchers and children participants were approached during collecting research data, or how the items of the survey were designed in order to meet the ability, competence and interest of children. Although the authors' decision not to elaborate these issues could presumably occur due to the limited length of words that the researchers had to write in their articles, it was necessary and fruitful for them to include an explicit report or statement about ethical research procedures, albeit a few lines within the text, to avoid ethical obscurity or unethical research assumptions.

Indeed, the absence of explicit details of ethical considerations in these published articles seems to be a common phenomenon, including in TESOL studies [7-11]. For this reason, full awareness of the researchers is still required in order to conduct research on/with children that can meet the standards of ethics in involving them particularly as stipulated in the UNCRC [12]. For more detailed discussion, the consideration of children's welfare and safety during the process of research becomes the main concern of the following section.

5.2. Research methods

Aside from the ethical issue, the selection of research methods is another aspect that can distinguish between the studies involving children and adults. It is asserted that the methods of researching on/with children have to be appropriate to their competence, knowledge, interests, and context [2, 41, 42, 52, 53]. It implies that the researchers have to carefully select the methods that could make it easier for them to engage the children. As previously mentioned (see child research methods section), to date, the researchers could develop and employ numerous methods to work on studies involving children, including multiple methods, creative methods, and participatory research.

Having conducted a thorough investigation of the three selected articles, it was found out that the authors employed different methods to generate the data from their children respondents where each adopted method contained its own strengths and weaknesses. The authors of the first paper, for instance, designed their research quantitatively. Its design was in line with the purpose of the research that was to assess EFL students' language anxiety and correlate it with multiple intelligences and students' attitudes. In order to collect the data from their participants, the researchers used one of the most prevalent research methods in quantitative design, which was a survey by administering a close-ended questionnaire to 216 elementary school students with a total of 85 questionnaire items. There is no doubt that this chosen method is feasible with and has some merits, including generating more objective findings, enabling the results to be generalized into a wider population [49]. But, in some respects, it needed to look more closely when it was used for primary school children.

There were two underlying reasons why survey method seemed inappropriate to be employed in this study. Firstly, the design of the questionnaire was not renowned as being children friendly and was possibly inappropriate to primary school students' competences, knowledge, and interests. It is furtherly argued that structured questionnaires or questionnaire surveys are not the best and most appropriate method for young learners, in particular for primary school age children because it requires a high degree of literacy, has no fun content, and appears to be separated from the context [42, 54]. Secondly, the questionnaire was likely not realistic in terms of the number of items and the design. It was found out that there were up to 85 adapted questionnaire items that the participants had to answer which were remarkably complicated and far too many for them. It is well-known that children have short attention spans [41] and take longer than adults to process information [61, 62], so they may easily be distracted or lose interest which could presumably affect their objective answers in responding to the questions. Apart from that, it was also unclear how the questionnaire was designed and written up in order to be reasonable for the children's participants. This is not to say that this method is inappropriate for children. But, it would be more helpful if the researchers constructed the questionnaires in a more child-friendly format such as composed with short questions, a straightforward structure, simple language, and avoidance of negative sentences [37]. More importantly, the researchers

needed to give appropriate assistance to children in the data collection process instead of handing over the responsibility to teachers or other gatekeepers [37].

The authors of the second article employed a qualitative which is considered popular research method in second language or TESOL studies to elicit the primary school students' views in their research which was conducted through "learner diaries" [63, 64]. This method, known as a diary study, is defined as a first-person account of learning or teaching experiences that is documented candidly over a period of time [60, 65]. It implies that the key principle of this research method is the participants' written reflection on their experiences in learning and/or teaching through a diary. The researchers, in practice, involved the whole students of the 6th grade as participants by asking them to reflect on and document their language learning strategies guided by ten simple questions. They were also asked to identify the different strategies they used in a four-week period. The use of this research method as a way to collect data is seen appropriate because it is more participatory that enables the learners to freely state their ideas or perspectives on the phenomenon. This is in line with what Baker and Weller [54] state that a diary is an innovative method which allows the children to freely record the feelings and experiences where they might be reluctant to express their feelings and experiences through other research methods, such as interviews or focus group discussions. Additionally, this method is beneficial in giving more in-depth data for the researchers due to the significant expenditure of time in collecting the data. As described, the researchers spent four weeks getting the data from learners, so they have spent enough time to generate comprehensive data and witnessed the development of the participants' perceptions over time [60]. Although a diary study is regarded useful when used with children, the author maintain that its implementation could be challenging because it requires the participants' commitment to regularly note the detailed accounts of their experiences, feelings, and thoughts. In this regard, the authors did not inform the adopted approach in order to maintain the participants' commitment, and at the same time did not sacrifice their well-beings as children participants.

Meanwhile, the third article was aimed to find out the Arabic-speaking ESL students' perspectives on their challenges encountered during English learning process. In doing so, the researcher used multiple methods by combining two traditional qualitative research methods, such as interviews and classroom observation. The use of multiple methods, in general, is incredibly beneficial for the researchers as they can document and analyze the different facets of the participants' lives across different contexts and offer the participants the opportunity to engage with their preferable method(s), explore the similarities, differences, and relationships between the data generated by individual methods, and strengthen the research reliability and validity [42, 66-68]. With regard to the traditional methods used for the research on/with children, in some respects, it was likely fair and equitable that the author treated his children participants in the same way as his adult participants, but he had to carefully consider that children's perspectives were often shaped by the unequal power relations between adult researcher and child [37, 41, 42, 54]. This unequal power relation could have significant effects during the process of data collection whereby the child may feel uncomfortable to share their perspectives with unfamiliar adults in a one-to-one communication. Unfortunately, the author did not provide sound elaboration how the issue was approached and conducted. As the alternative, it is maintained that the use of multiple traditional methods, combined with more innovative methods, such as incorporating activities, drawing, diaries, or photography can be an alternative way to lessen the power imbalances found between adult and children [41].

From the above analysis regarding the employed research methods, it implies that the researchers have not taken into full consideration regarding the involvement of children as their research participants before selecting the methods. Although in principle, all research methods are feasible to elicit the children's perspectives and opinions, thorough evaluation to determine the methods is still required in order to give the children more opportunity to participate, to feel comfortable, and to freely express their thoughts.

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to critically review the ethical considerations and methodological approach in relation to conducting research on/with children as reported in three selected TESOL articles. With regards to research ethics, the finding suggests that most selected articles' authors did not explicitly state the information on ethical considerations specific for their children participants, but all of them have considered some general principles of ethics particularly the voluntary participation and anonymity. Similarly, in employing research methods, the authors did not discuss how the adopted approaches have taken their children' participants into accounts such as in designing questions for survey as distinguishable from survey with adult participants. The findings suggest that the issues of ethics and methods in conducting research with children have not received adequate attentions from the researchers in TESOL context. Although the limited word length can be reasonable factor, it is maintained that the explicit report on the ethical procedures of the research can be very useful to give the readers a complete picture of their research

and to abolish unethical research assumptions. Moreover, explicit discussion of them, despite very brief, is imperative to inform how the researchers encourage children's participation and facilitate the opportunity for them to elucidate their opinions and thoughts. All in all, the findings of this study is far from being complete due to the limited sample articles being analyzed, so further studies by taking more sample articles and through other innovative approaches of research are required to find out the issues more comprehensively.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank to Dr. Katrina Lloyd and Dr. Lesley Emerson (Lecturers at School of Social Sciences, Education, and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, UK) for their expert advice and comments on this paper.

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