

Dialogue with a metaphorical character: An innovative strategy to capture children's experience

Christine Gervais, Naïmé Daoust-Zidane, Johanne Thomson-Sweeny & Isabel Côté

Theme: Innovations in research design and measurement on the focus of the Conference

Subtheme: Child participation and voices

Thematic importance: The paper presents an innovative research tool used to facilitate research engagement and participation with children from immigrant backgrounds.

Introduction and objectives: Researchers involved in the field of child-centred research are expected to develop strategies to engage children in order to gain access to their experience as accurately as possible while making their participation enjoyable and empowering. Among others, this research vision can be obtained by using a metaphorical methodology. However, little is known about the use of such a methodology. In a series of novel studies on physical punishment perceived by English schoolchildren, an alien was introduced to the children through a storybook. This method enabled children to interact with the character, building a relationship of trust with it and thus the research team, facilitating their participation. This presentation aims to introduce an innovative metaphorical narrative-based data collection method developed and validated in a study to document immigrant children's understanding and experience of their well-being.

Method: The methodology was first developed by conducting a literature review on culturally sensitive participative research methods that promote children's motivation to participate and their transparency. Subsequently, the method was created in collaboration with a Montreal-based community centre where the data collection would take place. The method was used through four multi-activity workshops with 22 six- to twelve-year-old Quebec children from immigrant backgrounds enrolled in the centre's day camp.

Results: The method consists of letter correspondence from an alien character wanting to learn more about Earth children's well-being. A letter was read to the children before each workshop in which the alien asked them questions on their well-being and suggested activities so that he could share the children's work with others on his planet. To encourage their sense of responsibility in an age-appropriate manner, older children read the letters to younger ones and assisted them in understanding the tasks. The use of a metaphorical framework allowed children to share personal opinions and life events in an indirect way without worrying about being judged. The different participative activities fostered self-expression through discussions, image sorting, drawing, crafting, writing, and acting. Beyond the expected result, the children translated the alien metaphorical story naturally into other activities at the centre.

Conclusion and implications:

The children were interested in the alien's story and his own interest in their lives. Their interest led to more engaged participation throughout the workshops and enabled the research team to collect a wealth of data on their well-being. The use of a pretend

character to interact with children helped them feel more comfortable and less intimidated, as they were cast as the experts, teaching someone who was unfamiliar with their reality. By demonstrating the use and advantages of a metaphorical character in research, this study contributes to the development of participative methods for child-centered research.