

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284216573>

Using a picture book to gain assent in research with young children

Article in *Early Child Development and Care* · November 2015

DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2015.1100175

CITATIONS

26

READS

2,286

2 authors, including:

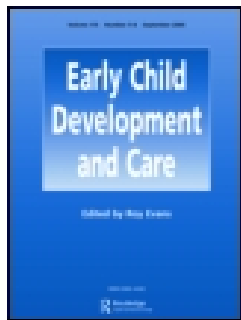


[Angela Pyle](#)

University of Toronto

52 PUBLICATIONS 1,807 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Using a picture book to gain assent in research with young children

Angela Pyle & Erica Danniels

To cite this article: Angela Pyle & Erica Danniels (2015): Using a picture book to gain assent in research with young children, Early Child Development and Care, DOI: [10.1080/03004430.2015.1100175](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1100175)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1100175>



Published online: 19 Nov 2015.



Submit your article to this journal 



Article views: 46



View related articles 



View Crossmark data 

Using a picture book to gain assent in research with young children

Angela Pyle and Erica Danniels

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT

There has been a shift in perspective from viewing children as adults-in-the-making to individual agents, possessing the right and the competence to meaningfully participate in research. Many researchers are striving to obtain informed assent from young children prior to their participation in research. Methodological concerns have been presented which differ from traditional consent for adults, many related to language and process issues. In light of these, an assent protocol utilising a picture book that included photographs of young children engaged in research activities was developed to help capture children's interest and aid in their understanding of the research project. Children in two separate studies were presented with the book and demonstrated their understanding through engaging in meaningful discussion about the research process, assenting, and dissenting to participate. Important process considerations are discussed, along with the appropriateness of using a picture book to gather informed assent from young children.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 September 2015
Accepted 22 September 2015

KEYWORDS

Children's assent; research method; early years; children's participation; children's rights; ethics

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a shift in perspective regarding how children and childhood are discussed, recognising that children are independent agents who influence the lives of others and the communities they live in, rather than being passive receivers of knowledge (Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2012). Guided by the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) as well as the recognition that children make up a distinct social group in what has been deemed the 'new sociology of childhood', this has resulted in a call to seek more input from children in the research process (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009). In addition to gathering informed consent from the parents of children recruited for a study, many researchers are striving to gather informed assent from individuals who have not yet reached the age of consent by seeking agreement to participate from children after they receive clear information about the project (Dockett et al., 2012; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). When developing an assent protocol there are several methodological concerns which differ from obtaining informed adult consent, such as using simple language (Cameron, 2005), presenting opportunities for discussion (Lindeke, Hauck, & Tanner, 2000), obtaining verbal assent rather than written assent (Dockett et al., 2012), including an appropriate amount of information (Alderson, 2004), and striving to form positive relationships with child participants to combat social power differentials (Gallagher, Haywood, Jones, & Milne, 2010). In light of these considerations, existing assent protocols are reviewed, and a new approach is proposed which utilises photographs of kindergarten-aged children paired with simple text in a picture book format, in

order to capture young children's interest and aid in their understanding (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Carney & Levin, 2002; House & Rule, 2005).

Literature review

Children's role in research

In the past, children have been viewed as future adults-in-the-making, properties of their families in need of care and protection from adults (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Smith, Taylor, & Gallop, 2000). They were seen as vulnerable not only due to their physical size but their lack of experience and knowledge (Lansdown, 1994). However, over the past few decades and across many disciplines, this commonly held view has shifted towards one that seeks out and values children's perspectives in research (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). This shifting viewpoint was influenced by the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), recognising children as active participants in the community who have the right to express their own views in all matters that concern them. This document is regarded as one of the most comprehensive statements on children's rights and provides support for the inclusion of children's voices in research (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Additionally, this shift has been influenced by the study of the new sociology of childhood, which emerged during the 1980s when scholars recognised that the sociological study of children and childhood was near absent (Alanen, 1988; James & Prout, 1990; Matthews, 2007; Waksler, 1986). The new sociology of childhood acknowledges children as active participants in their own lives, along with the lives of others and the societies they inhabit, whose viewpoints should be considered in order to inform domains of research which concern their needs, interests, and rights (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006; James & Prout, 1990). Two basic principles emerging from this research have formed the foundation for children's increased participation in research: endorsing children's rights and believing in children's competence (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006).

Research with young children has supported the idea that even very young children are capable thinkers with viewpoints on the issues that affect their lives (Clark & Moss, 2001). Children under the age of six have been shown to form hypothetical 'what if' statements, children as young as three bring to light things they don't understand and will ask for more information if needed, and four-year-olds have been found to offer alternative suggestions when there are disagreements with peers (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Some of the potential drawbacks cited in conducting research with children (e.g. children having trouble distinguishing truth from fiction, making up ideas to please researchers, and not having enough experience or knowledge to provide useful information on a topic) apply equally to research conducted with adults (Mayall, 1994; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Informed assent

One of the cornerstones of ethical research with adult participants is gathering informed consent, or voluntary agreement to participate in research based on sufficient and appropriate information (Dockett et al., 2012). This means that participants must be told the nature and purpose of a research project, along with any potential consequences. Additionally, individuals must agree to participate without being coerced, as well as be given the right to withdraw at any time during the process (Gallagher et al., 2010). In order to respect children's rights and competence as decision makers in their own lives, researchers should strive to gather informed assent from children prior to engaging them in research (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Assent has been defined as a clear agreement to participate given by an individual who cannot enter into a legal contract, and not simply as the absence of objections towards participation (Ford, Sankey, & Crisp, 2007; Vitiello, 2003). Even if children are unable to give fully informed consent due to a lack of maturity or experience, explaining the research project in

basic terms along with the expected research activities gives them the opportunity to choose whether they want to participate (Lindeke et al., 2000). In addition, viewing consent as an ongoing process, rather than a contract agreed upon solely before participation in research begins, is becoming more prevalent in studies involving children (Gallagher et al., 2010; Heath, Charles, Crow, & Wiles, 2007).

Obtaining parental consent for a child is currently sufficient for that individual to participate in research. However, supplementing this with informed assent respects the opportunity for children to make their own choices, including the right to dissent or drop out, and be involved in the decision-making process (Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2013). Some researchers argue that obtaining assent serves as an important reminder to treat children with respect and dignity, but also may benefit children's development as autonomous decision makers (Ford et al., 2007). The idea that parents act as surrogate decision makers for their children, whose views are sufficient for defining their children's needs, has been shifting towards the idea that listening to children and understanding their own needs and wishes not only shows respect for children's rights but is relevant to the improvement of social policies and practices (Lindeke et al., 2000; Mayall, 2000).

Methodological considerations

When engaging in a research project, Human Research Ethics Committees are a valuable resource for information concerning the creation of letters of information and consent forms. However, guidelines for creating similar forms to obtain informed assent from children are not typically provided (Ford et al., 2007). Given this room for interpretation, researchers have commented on some methodological considerations when developing tools for gathering informed assent, including what should and should not be involved, with some clear differences emerging from methods used to gather informed consent with adults.

One point frequently emphasised in the literature is the importance of using simple language that children can understand, paired with opportunities to engage in meaningful discussion before agreeing to participate (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Cameron, 2005; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Information needs to be aligned with the level of the children's comprehension, and any written documents need to be paired with opportunities for the children to ask questions, voice any concerns, and discuss their thoughts on the research to ensure that the researcher has conveyed the information accurately (Lindeke et al., 2000; Ungar, Joffe, & Kodish, 2006).

Researchers have also emphasised the principle of ongoing assent. That is, the idea that assent is an ongoing process open for renegotiation at any time (Dockett et al., 2012; Flewitt, 2005). This highlights the importance of acknowledging children's right to dissent at any point during a project, as well as the possibility that participants may choose to assent to participate in some activities but not others, such as choosing to participate in a drawing or photography activity but declining to do an interview (Dockett et al., 2012).

Typically, when gathering informed consent from adults, a signature on a consent form is required from participants to indicate their agreement to participate. Although some assent protocols discussed in the literature involve a written indication from children to signify agreement and understanding (e.g. Dockett et al., 2013; Ford et al., 2007), some researchers warn against requiring written affirmation (e.g. Gallagher et al., 2010; Ungar et al., 2006). Having children record their assent is meaningful if it signifies an autonomous decision to participate and a commitment to follow research protocols, including the right to dissent at any time, and provides researchers with clear evidence of participants' decisions (Ungar et al., 2006; Wiles, Heath, Crow, & Charles, 2005). However, some researchers warn against prioritising the gathering of signatures as a defence against any charges of failing to obtain assent over the more important goal of discussing the research project with the children in a meaningful way, and doubt that young children can comprehend the meaning behind giving a signature without risking children seeing the document as unchangeable or feeling unable to give a proper signature (Dockett et al., 2012; Gallagher et al.,

2010; Ungar et al., 2006). Alternatively, children can signal their decision with a verbal response, behaviourally by engaging wilfully in an activity, or emotionally by demonstrating happiness or distress (Dockett et al., 2012).

Some researchers have discussed the inclusion of information on researchers' duty to report if children discuss neglect or abuse during a research project (Dockett et al., 2013). However, children have reported some confusion with this idea when it is presented (Dockett et al., 2013), and researchers have emphasised the importance of striking a balance between providing too little or too much information during the assent process to avoid overwhelming children with information, leading to boredom or confusion (Alderson, 2004; Crow, Wiles, Heath, & Charles, 2006; Dockett et al., 2012). Although this is an important point to consider in research that addresses, or has the potential to address, sensitive issues in children's lives, some researchers have emphasised that assuring that children understand the obligation to report is not as important as avoiding statements which imply that information provided by children will be kept private or 'just between us' (Cameron, 2005, p. 601).

Lastly, researchers have acknowledged the importance of building positive relationships between researchers and child participants, since a child's decision to participate in research is embedded within a context of a power imbalance between children and adults (Gallagher et al., 2010; Mayall, 2000). Research has demonstrated that this difference in power is acknowledged and accepted by children themselves (Mayall, 2000). A child's decision to participate might be based on perceived pressure from an authority figure to comply or fear of the consequences of not being co-operative (Dockett et al., 2012; Heath et al., 2007). Some suggested ways to combat this include ensuring open discussion during the assent process, using language that is easy to understand, allowing children to dissent from the research at any time without repercussion, giving children extra time to formulate questions or responses, discussing familiar activities with the children first, and even engaging the children in play (Cameron, 2005; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Researcher-participant relationship dynamics need to be actively considered, and it is recommended that researchers adopt a reflexive attitude (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) recommend adopting an attitude of 'methodological immaturity' (p. 508), which is in contrast to the idea of an expert adult and vulnerable participants. Instead, the adult has incomplete knowledge of children's viewpoints and is seeking this information, and thus can occupy a more vulnerable position of 'incompleteness and immaturity' (p. 508).

Assent protocols

In this burgeoning field, researchers have developed a few different explicit assent protocols. Dockett et al. (2013) designed forms for children as young as four, with a combination of text and cartoon images of faces and objects. The children demonstrated that they understood the text in the booklet by providing definitions and examples of the chosen terminology and that they understood what some of the images were conveying. The children called it 'the yes/no book' (Dockett et al., 2013, p. 815), signifying their understanding that there was a choice to be made. However, the participants deemed some of the cartoon images confusing or inappropriate. For example, when presented with a cartoon face with outstretched hands, some children interpreted this as a happy figure, while others thought it appeared sad or confused. Another exaggerated cartoon face was deemed to be too mean looking, and a bandaged up face meant to convey researcher's duty to report if children describe any harm done to them was deemed too confusing (Dockett et al., 2013). Through discussion, it was found that the concept of a duty to report was generally not well understood by the young children. Subsequently, this protocol gave children the opportunity to choose a pseudonym for themselves, and while they had fun selecting a new name, they did not demonstrate clear understanding of the rationale for keeping information confidential. A similar study found this choice created breaches of confidentiality because the children tended to pick their friend's name or inform teachers of the name they chose (Epstein, 1998). Lastly, although the children appeared to understand that they could leave at any time, Dockett et al. (2013)

presented opinions gathered from children regarding the assent form directly, but not on children's opinions and behaviours regarding assent during the subsequent research project. Consequently, how the children demonstrated their understanding of the informed assent protocol during the study itself was not reported.

Alderson and Morrow (2004) recommended using a written leaflet to gather informed assent, with the benefits being that the information is standardised, it can be taken home to discuss with others, and it transmits information quickly to a large number of participants. However, children run the risk of losing it, not reading it carefully, or assuming that the leaflet contains all of the important information and hold back from asking questions (Gallagher et al., 2010; Reeves, Bryson, Ormston, & White, 2007). Children have reported preferring to be verbally told about a project because sometimes written information by itself 'doesn't go in' (Reeves et al., 2007, p. 18). Similarly, Lindeke et al. (2000) presented a model assent form for children aged 6–9 years, asking permission to obtain health and growth information. The children were given the option to sign the form or assent verbally, and families reported positive reactions from the children for being respectfully included in the decision-making process. The assent form was one paragraph containing eight lines of text and was read to the children by an adult. While the text used simple and straightforward language, the absence of any images or visuals may not be the optimal format for catching young children's attention or interest (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Since assent protocols need to be geared to children's level of understanding, the use of visual aids may be more appropriate for younger participants since children use pictures to help their understanding of written text (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Carney & Levin, 2002).

In light of the call for more participation from children in research, Ford et al. (2007) developed an assent document with input from children themselves. A group of children aged 6–12 years were presented with a plain language assent form and asked how they would choose to present these ideas. Since the title 'assent form' was confusing, the children decided to call it 'the letter that gives you permission' (Ford et al., 2007, p. 10). This resulted in a written form that contained ideas that were understood by the children when read out loud. However, the younger children in the group complained that they could not read it by themselves. Like the model assent form created by Lindeke et al. (2000), no pictures were utilised to aid in the children's understanding and pictures may have contributed to the younger children's ability to read it by themselves.

Although a few different assent protocols have been described in detail in the research, many of them utilise the idea of a written form similar to a written consent form for adults. This overlooks the idea that children can gain a greater understanding of text when paired with pictures or images (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Carney & Levin, 2002). Dockett et al.'s (2013) proposed assent protocol utilised cartoon images; however, the exaggerated faces resulted in some confusion by the children. In light of this, an assent protocol utilising photographs in a picture book format was developed for use with kindergarten-aged children. This assent protocol focused on the use of simple language, conveying the idea of ongoing assent, providing an appropriate amount of information, and obtaining verbal assent from participants.

Method

The assent protocol described in this article was used in two separate studies. The purpose of the first study was to gain insights into children's perspectives of their learning in kindergarten with a focus on the role of play. The second study built on those findings to explore children's perspectives concerning the role of play in the development of literacy skills.

The development of the assent picture book

To garner student assent to participate in these studies, we sought to develop an assent protocol that communicated the information about the study and students' rights as participants in a manner that was both clear and developmentally appropriate for our young participants. To this end, a picture

book describing the purpose of the research and the role of the students in this study was created. A picture book was selected as the vehicle for child assent because the familiar nature of the medium allowed the researchers to communicate information about the research study in a manner that was both comfortable and appropriate for this age group. In addition, research has demonstrated the usefulness of picture books to communicate new information to young students (e.g. Skoumpourdi & Mpakopoulou, 2011). Once a picture book was selected as the medium for communication, consideration was given to the stylistic elements of the book. Prior research has demonstrated that young children are better able to translate information from books to the real world when the illustrations are realistic (Ganea, Pickard, & DeLoache, 2008; Simcock & DeLoache, 2006). As such, photographs were used to provide the most authentic representation possible. The assent book contained photographs of two kindergarten-aged children (who were not participants in the research) participating in the research activities. As two slightly different data collection protocols were used in the two studies, two variations of the assent book were created (Assent Book 1 was used with three of the classrooms and Assent Book 2 was used with the other 12 classrooms; Figures 1 and 2).

Participants

In total, this assent protocol was used in three school districts. One school district was located in a small urban area, the second was located in a suburban setting, and the third school district was located in a large urban centre. Upon receipt of ethical clearance from both the university and all three school districts, 15 kindergarten classes were recruited for participation in the studies. Approximately 10 hours of observation were conducted in each classroom prior to student interviews, which provided the opportunity for students to acclimatise to our presence and to speak with researchers in informal situations prior to the structured student interviews. Within these classes, consent was received from the parents of 195 kindergarten students aged from four to six years. These students were interviewed in small groups of between two and six students as recommended by prior research (e.g. Graue & Walsh, 1998; Parkinson, 2001). The first step in each interview, and the focal aspect of this article, was to ensure informed student assent. To this end, researchers read the assent book described above to the groups of students prior to beginning the interview protocol.

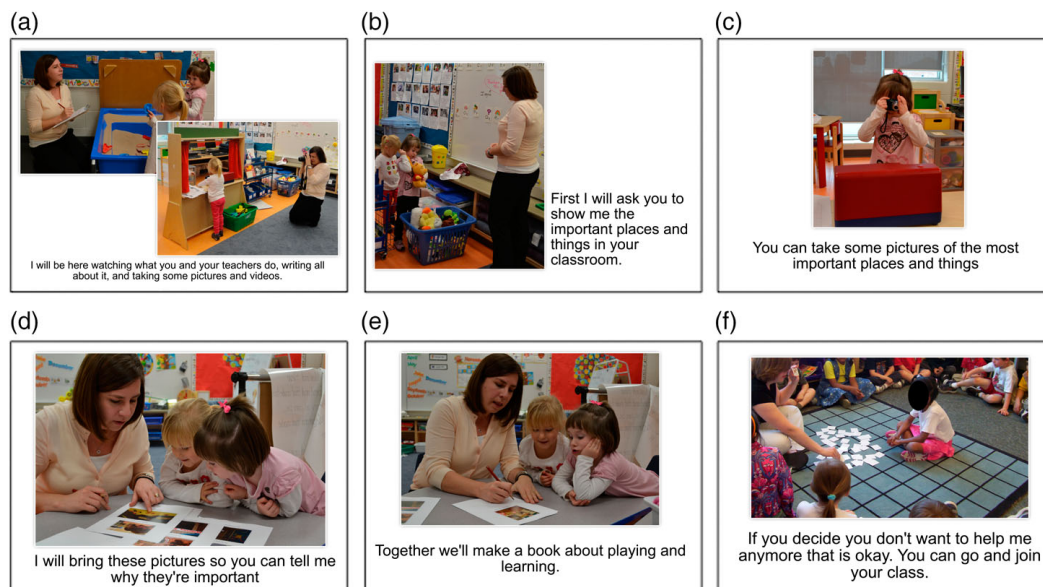


Figure 1. Assent book 1.



Figure 2. Assent book 2.

Assent process

Students from whom parental consent was received were invited to join a researcher and small group of their classmates to share their perspectives concerning play and learning in their kindergarten classroom. These groups met in a variety of locations depending on the school setting, but all were located in spaces that were familiar to the students, including cubby rooms attached to classrooms, hallways outside their classrooms, and resource rooms that were commonly used by teachers in the school.

Every interview started with the researcher reading the assent picture book to the students. Students were invited to ask questions and share their thoughts during this time. Following the reading of the book, each child's individual oral assent was sought. It was essential to ask for individual student assent so that group assent did not mask an individual child's discomfort with the research activities. The following conversation portrays a typical assent exchange in these studies:

Researcher: I have a little book to show you first so that you know what we're doing today.
And you can decide if you want to do it with us.

Winnie: Cause we're doing it!

Researcher: I have been here, watching you and your teacher, writing all about what you do, and taking some pictures and videos. Have you seen me doing that?

Winnie: Yeah.

Crystal: I wanna see!

Researcher: Today, I brought the pictures for you.

Crystal: Yippee!

Researcher: Some of the pictures that we've taken.

Crystal: I wan- let me see!

Researcher: I'm going to show you all of these pictures and I'd like for you to tell me if and why they're important.

- Winnie: But if you're looking for Sarah and AJ they're not here.
- Researcher: No? That's okay. Together we'll make a book about playing and learning. So you will decide which of these pictures belong in a book about playing and learning in kindergarten. If you decide you don't want to help me anymore that is okay. You can go back and join your class. So, would you like to help me with the pictures?
- Crystal: Yeah!
- Researcher: Would you like to help me with the pictures, Winnie?
- Crystal: Me too!
- Winnie: Yes.
- Crystal: Me too!
- Researcher: Would you like to help me, Crystal?
- Crystal: Yes.
- Researcher: Would you like to help me, Tia?
- Tia: Yes.
- Researcher: Would you like to help me, Ryan?
- Ryan: Yes. (Class 6)

There were several steps included in this conversation that were essential to the garnering of student assent. First, the most significant portion of this book clearly outlined the activities that students would be expected to participate in should they agree to participate in the interview. Accompanying the words read to the students, were images showing kindergarten-aged students participating in the research activities. Several groups of students were very interested in the children portrayed in the book, including who they were and what school they attended:

- Bradley: What's this?
- Researcher: This is in another classroom where I've also been to visit.
- Bradley: Oh that's, that's the other classroom.
- Jordan: I wanna go there!
- Researcher: Well, I can't take you there right now.
- Bradley: Why?
- Researcher: It's far from here. (Class 1)

This type of questioning demonstrated students' engagement with the photographs included in the assent book and their comfort with asking questions about the research protocol. In addition, these clear photographic portrayals of the research activities provided both a realistic portrayal of their participation and the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Throughout the interviews, students sought to clarify the research process, including questioning the activities that they were being asked to complete.

- Researcher: You can tell me all about why they are important to your classroom.
- Ciara: Okay
- Hayden: So we know how to play this right? (Class 5)

Hayden's questioning demonstrates his understanding about the purpose of the assent book. That is, the assent book was intended to provide a description of the activities that the children would participate in should they decide to assent. Hayden's question served to clarify that this book communicated how to 'play' this research 'game'. Students also further questioned what was being asked of them by questioning whether the photographs that would be used in the research were photos from

their classroom and whether or not this was in fact a 'real' research project and that their opinions were an important part of this project.

Cassandra: So was this- This was actually real?

Researcher: What do you mean?

Cassandra: Was this real?

Researcher: This was real. I've been in your classroom taking real pictures so are you excited to see some of the pictures I took?

Felicia: Yeah.

Researcher: Some of you are in the pictures.

Cassandra: Like I was. I think I think I might see the one when I was sitting at the learning bins. (Class 7)

In addition to providing clear information about the research process, it was essential that it was clear that students did not need to participate in the research and what would happen should they choose to dissent. As such, the final page in the assent picture book read 'If you decide you don't want to help me anymore that is okay. You can go back and join your class'.

Student dissents

The data shared in the previous section demonstrate children's engagement with the assent tool itself, serving to demonstrate their understanding of the purpose of the tool and the information that we were trying to communicate with them. However, considering that the role of this tool is to ensure that children are assenting to the research in an informed manner, it is also essential to report student dissent. These dissents serve to demonstrate students' understanding that participation in this project was optional. Upon reading the book, several students immediately dissented to participate. The following conversation demonstrates a typical student dissent exchange:

Researcher: Okay. So if you decide you don't want to help me anymore, then that's okay and you can go join the class.

Theodore: I don't want to help you anymore.

Bobby: I don't want to.

Researcher: Okay. So if you don't want, you can go back. If you do want to help me, and look at all the pictures, then you can stay here and we'll work on them.

Theodore: Okay! I want to go back!

Bobby: Okay, I want to go back.

Researcher: Okay, hold on. Let me walk you back.

Jessica: Yay! Only girls! (Class 4)

Important to this conversation is the acceptance of the researcher in both words, by accepting their dissent, and in actions, by immediately seeing to students' safe return to their classroom. Researcher communication that dissent was an acceptable response was also demonstrated through the reaction to participating students once dissenting students had returned to class.

Researcher: Would you like to stay and help me today look at the pictures?

Students: Yes!

Kyle: I don't.

Researcher: Okay, thanks Kyle, I'll see you later.

Brad: I don't.

Researcher: You don't? Okay, thanks Brad, I'll see you later.

Adam: Now it's only three!

Researcher: That's okay. We can do it with three. (Class 1)

As participation in the study is ongoing and it is essential that students understand that they can terminate their participation at any point in the research without penalty (Dockett et al., 2012; Flewitt, 2005), overt acceptance of student dissent was essential not only to the students who immediately dissented but also to those students who chose to give their initial assent. This provided students with the knowledge that they could dissent at any point in the research and there were several students who demonstrated this knowledge by dissenting at differing points throughout the interview. For instance, Robert and Riley had been quite helpful throughout the first part of the interview sharing thoughtful responses to the interview questions; however, after 15 minutes they no longer wished to participate. They shared their desire to withdraw their participation in the following conversation:

Robert: I wanna go back in the class.

Researcher: You want to go back? You can go back if you want.

Riley: I want to go back too.

Researcher: Okay, you can go back. (Class 9)

This conversation and several others of its sort demonstrate that the students in these studies understood that their assent was not continuous and that they were within their rights to terminate their participation at any time. Once again, the researcher's reaction to the withdrawal of assent was essential to maintaining children's knowledge that their participation was their choice. The following conversation illustrates how researchers can reinforce the right to dissent with their words and actions:

Steven: I want to go back and play.

Researcher: If that's what you want to do then that's what you want to do. Just a minute I'm going to watch. You need to use walking feet please and please tell your teacher or ECE that you're back. (Class 14)

By ensuring the immediate and safe return of students to their classroom, other participants were shown that staying and sharing their thoughts continued to be completely optional. In addition to respecting overt student dissent, it was also important to allow students to participate at the level that they deemed comfortable. While many of the students in these studies actively and excitedly shared their thoughts about play and learning, some were more reserved in their participation:

Crystal: Tia didn't do one! Tia didn't do one!

Researcher: Tia is there anything you'd like to tell us about that?

Tia: No thank you!

Researcher: That's fine. She doesn't have to. (Class 6)

The ability to opt out of answering questions that participants find objectionable or questions that participants simply do not want to answer is key to informed participation for both adults and children (Punch, 2014). As such, students were always provided with the opportunity to respond, but this student and all others who opted out during the interviews were not obliged to provide responses to all questions. In addition to opting out, students were also provided with time to respond to questions when requested:

Researcher: I see. Okay very important information. Does anyone want to say anything else about this picture?

Amelia: Can you come back to me?

Researcher: Sure. (Class 5)

This provision of additional time allowed for more thoughtful responses from students.

The majority of the students in these studies assented to participate with a total of 184 assents. Eleven of the students immediately dissented to participate and, of the initial 184 assents, another 12 participants chose to discontinue their participation in the study at a midway point in the interviews (see Table 1 for a summary of assents/dissents).

Discussion

Acknowledgement of children's competence

The extant research describes an important shift in approaches from researching *about* children to researching *with* children (e.g. Freeman & Mathison, 2009). The research described in this article aligns with this call to action. These projects were informed by the belief that information about classroom-based learning should come from all members of the classroom community, including the youngest members. Throughout this research, the students demonstrated competence by not only sharing valuable information concerning the focal topics of the research studies (i.e. learning in a kindergarten classroom and the role of play in the development of literacy skills), but also providing valuable insights into the usefulness of a picture book as an assent tool. While the shift to including children's perspectives in the research provides the potential for rich data and unique perspectives of children's lived experiences, it also provides the need to create tools that will garner informed child assent in a developmentally appropriate manner.

The appropriateness of the picture book assent tool

The child assent picture book was developed specifically for use with the youngest learners in the elementary panel. Picture books have been used successfully in various bodies of educational research to provide information to young children, including developing an understanding of mathematical concepts (van den Heuvel-Panhuizen & van den Boogaard, 2008), developing an

Table 1. Summary of student participation.

Class	No. of parental consents	No. of student assents	No. of immediate student dissents	No. of later student dissents
1	9	7	2	1
2	15	12	3	1
3	15	15	–	3
4	5	5	–	–
5	12	10	–	–
6	16	16	–	–
7	10	10	–	–
8	22	20	2	–
9	14	12	2	–
10	8	8	–	–
11	16	16	–	1
12	24	23	1	–
13	11	11	–	1
14	17	16	1	4
15	3	3	–	1

Note: Later student dissents indicate students who assented to participate, completed some of the interview, and then decided to withdraw before the completion of the interview.

understanding of cultural differences (Mendoza & Reese, 2001), and developing an understanding of scientific concepts (Sackes, Cabe Trundle, & Flevaris, 2009). The success with which prior researchers have used picture books to facilitate young children's learning indicates the developmental appropriateness of picture books as a tool for communicating novel information. In addition, the questions and responses of the participants in the focal studies provide further support for the developmental appropriateness of picture books as tools for communicating with young children, and the use of a picture book as an assent tool provides a novel context in which these books can be used successfully.

Further, examination of the research concerning the construction of picture books emphasises the importance of considering the alignment of images and texts (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). Researchers have found that young children often attend to pictures more than the print in a book when it is read aloud to them making the use of appropriate images essential to children's understanding of the information presented in a book (Evans, Saint-Auhin, & Landry, 2009). As such, it is essential that pictures and text work together to communicate a single message to students. The assent picture book used in this study was created as a parallel text, where the pictures and the text worked in harmony to communicate information about the study process and children's rights as participants (Pantaleo, 2008). This assent protocol used photographs portraying research activities to eliminate the challenges experienced in earlier research, which found that unclear images and the use of symbols, as opposed to realistic images, can be misinterpreted by students (Dockett et al., 2013). Use of this prior research to inform the creation of the assent picture book ensured that the tool was developmentally appropriate for the participants in this study. In addition, the results shared in this article indicate that the children understood what they were being asked to do and that they understood that they had the right to dissent to participate. Specifically, children's questioning of the process and their active dissents, both initial and later in the interviews, indicate that the students understood that their participation in the project was not required, but rather was their personal decision.

The assent picture book that was used in the focal research proved to be developmentally appropriate for this age group and provided the necessary information for the students, but an additional strength to be considered is the malleability of this assent tool. That is, we used two different versions of the assent picture book for two different studies. While the core of the message remained consistent, there was variation in the research activities that were presented. Despite these differences in the assent picture book, the data demonstrate that student discussion and the ratio of assents and dissents remained consistent. This serves as evidence that the use of this type of assent picture book in future research projects will require only minor modifications to the text and photographs, making it an appropriate and usable tool for researching with young children in various methodological approaches.

The process of informed child assent

The garnering of child assent is a process, rather than an end goal. That is, children can assent and dissent at any time throughout the research study (Gallagher et al., 2010; Heath et al., 2007). The process described in this article embraced this perspective, ensuring that the assent book explicitly communicated the option to return to class should students wish to discontinue participation. However, in addition to the assent book, it was essential that the researcher's response to student dissent was non-judgemental and resulted in the child's immediate return to their classroom environment. The results shared portray these responses and, combined with students' willingness to opt out throughout the research process, these results demonstrate the success of this approach.

Prior research emphasises the importance of providing opportunities for children to engage in meaningful discussion concerning the research process prior to assenting to participate (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Cameron, 2005; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Not only did the assent book provide information about children's rights in the research, but it also provided an impetus for further conversation concerning the expectations and activities that were part of their participation. In addition,

the assent protocol was presented in a small group format, as prior research indicates that this attenuates the power differential between a child and an adult, it is a familiar format in school settings, and it gives children more space to influence the conversation (Brooker, 2001; Formosinho & Araujo, 2006; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007). The data shared in the results section of this article portray students using the information contained within the assent book to inform their questions about the research study and the researchers' expectations for participation. In addition, these conversations demonstrate the need for researchers to respond in a manner that promotes discussion and provides an opening for further questions.

The extant research also communicates the need for children's ongoing assent to take the form of a verbal response rather than a written signature (Dockett et al., 2012; Gallagher et al., 2010; Ungar et al., 2006). There is consistent debate about the appropriateness of using worksheets in kindergarten classrooms, with many expressing the developmentally inappropriate nature of this format (Gallant, 2009). Asking a young student to complete an assent form has many parallels with asking a student to complete a worksheet and this, combined with prior research describing the developmental issues with requiring signed consent (Dockett et al., 2012; Gallagher et al., 2010; Ungar et al., 2006), led us to opt for an oral assent protocol rather than a signature on a written form. In addition, acknowledging that the participants in the focal studies were 4–6 years of age, and that many could not yet read or write, we felt it necessary to use an oral assent protocol. Essential to this decision was ensuring that the oral assent of each individual student was requested, rather than accepting blanket assent from a group of students. The audio recording of each child's oral assent provided the necessary documentation in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Improving the assent tool

While assent is ongoing throughout the research process, the development of assent tools should also be a continuous process that is informed by the children who participate in these studies. The 4–6-year-olds in the two studies described in this article insightfully identified a flaw in the picture book assent tool we developed. On several occasions the students commented on recorders we were using to audio record the interviews.

Zach: What are those?

Researcher: This is recording everything so we don't forget what you say. You tell me such important things and sometimes I remember and sometimes I forget a little bit, so I take a recording and then I know just what you told me was important in kindergarten. Okay?

Cole: So you can listen back?

Researcher: So I can listen to your voice later. (Class 2)

These comments indicate the need to include a discussion of these recordings in the assent picture book. Failure to include information about the recordings and thus ask their permission to record their responses and discussions means we did not garner full child assent. Future versions of this assent picture book will include this information to ensure that children are assenting to all components of the research study, including the recording of their responses. By listening thoughtfully to the responses of young children as we research with them, researchers can gain further insight into how best to ensure that children are truly informed prior to their participation in a research project.

Conclusion

The results of the focal studies indicate that while the assent picture book was a useful tool in garnering students' assent to participate in the study, the process was of equal importance. That is, the use of

the assent picture book alone did not ensure informed child assent. Rather, the use of the assent picture book combined with the ability to dissent at any point in the research study, opportunities for open discussion with the participants, and the collection of oral rather than written assent were equally essential to the assent protocol. In addition, researcher responsiveness to children's questions and willingness to positively accept children's decisions about their participation were essential to garnering true child assent. The results do indicate that the assent picture book was a useful tool in communicating this process and as a stimulus for the accompanying interactions, making this type of tool a viable option for researchers seeking the informed assent of young research participants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council under Grant [430-2014-00926].

Notes on contributors

Angela Pyle is an assistant professor in the Dr Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Her interests centre on early years education and methods for meaningfully engaging young children in research.

Erica Danniels, M.Ed., is an instructor therapist who teaches children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, helping in the transition to the classroom environment.

References

- Alanen, L. (1988). Rethinking childhood. *Acta Sociologica*, 31, 53–67.
- Alderson, P. (2004). Ethics. In S. Fraser, V. Lewis, S. Ding, M. Kellett, & C. Robinson (Eds.), *Doing research with children and young people* (pp. 97–112). London: Sage.
- Alderson, P., & Morrow, V. (2004). *Ethics, social research and consulting with children and young people*. Barnardos: Ilford.
- Arizpe, E., & Styles, M. (2003). *Children reading pictures: Interpreting visual texts*. London: Routledge.
- Brooker, L. (2001). Interviewing children. In G. MacNaughton, S. Rolfe, & I. Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.), *Doing early childhood research: Theory and practice* (pp. 162–77). Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Cameron, H. (2005). Asking the tough questions: A guide to ethical practices in interviewing young children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 175(6), 597–610.
- Carney, R. N., & Levin, J. R. (2002). Pictorial illustrations still improve students' learning from text. *Educational Psychology Review*, 14(1), 5–26.
- Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- Conroy, H., & Harcourt, D. (2009). Informed agreement to participate: Beginning the partnership with children in research. *Early Child Development and Care*, 179(2), 157–165.
- Crow, G., Wiles, R., Heath, S., & Charles, V. (2006). Research ethics and data quality: The implications of informed consent. *International Journal of Research Methodology*, 9, 83–95.
- Dockett, S., Einarsdottir, J., & Perry, B. (2012). Young children's decisions about research participation: Opting out. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 20(3), 244–256.
- Dockett, S., Perry, B., & Kearney, E. (2013). Promoting children's informed assent in research participation. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(7), 802–828.
- Epstein, D. (1998). Are you a girl or are you a teacher? The 'least adult' role in research about gender and sexuality in a primary school. In G. Walford (Ed.), *Doing research about education* (pp. 27–41). Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.
- Evans, M., Saint-Auhin, J., & Landry, N. (2009). Letter names and alphabet hook reading by senior kindergarteners: An eye movement study. *Child Development*, 80(6), 1824–1841.
- Flewitt, R. (2005). Conducting research with young children: Some ethical considerations. *Early Child Development and Care*, 175, 553–565.
- Ford, K., Sankey, J., & Crisp, J. (2007). Development of children's assent documents using a child-centred approach. *Journal of Child Health Care*, 11, 19–28.

- Formosinho, J., & Araujo, S. B. (2006). Listening to children as a way to reconstruct knowledge about children: Some methodological implications. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 14, 21–31.
- Freeman, M., & Mathison, S. (2009). *Researching children's experiences*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Gallacher, L., & Gallagher, M. (2008). Methodological immaturity in childhood research? Thinking through 'participatory methods'. *Childhood*, 15, 499–516.
- Gallagher, M., Haywood, S. L., Jones, M. W., & Milne, S. (2010). Negotiating informed consent with children in school-based research: A critical review. *Children & Society*, 24, 471–482.
- Gallant, P. A. (2009). Kindergarten teachers speak out: 'Too much, too soon, too fast!'. *Reading Horizons*, 49(3), 201–220.
- Ganea, P. A., Pickard, M. B., & DeLoache, J. S. (2008). Transfer between picture books and the real world by very young children. *Journal of Cognition and Development*, 9, 46–66.
- Graue, M. E., & Walsh, D. (1998). *Studying children in context. Theories, methods, and ethics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Greig, A.D., Taylor, J., & MacKay, T. (2007). *Doing research with children*. London: Sage.
- Harcourt, D., & Conroy, H. (2005). Informed assent: Ethics and processes when researching with young children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 175(6), 567–577.
- Heath, S., Charles, V., Crow, G., & Wiles, R. (2007). Informed consent, gatekeepers and go-betweens: Negotiating consent in child and youth orientated institutions. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33, 403–417.
- van den Heuvel-Panhuizen, M., & van den Boogaard, S. (2008). Picture books as an impetus for kindergartners' mathematical thinking. *Mathematical Thinking and Learning*, 10(4), 341–373.
- House, C. A., & Rule, A. C. (2005). Preschoolers' ideas of what makes a picture book illustration beautiful. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 32(5), 283–290.
- James, A., & Prout, A. (1990). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. New York, NY: Falmer Press.
- Lansdown, G. (1994). Children's rights. In B. Mayall (Ed.), *Children's childhoods. Observed and experienced* (pp. 33–44). London: Falmer Press.
- Lindeke, L. L., Hauck, M. R., & Tanner, M. (2000). Practical issues in obtaining child assent for research. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing: Nursing Care of Children & Families*, 15, 99–104.
- Matthews, S. H. (2007). A window on the 'new' sociology of childhood. *Sociology Compass*, 1, 322–334.
- Mayall, B. (1994). *Children's childhoods: Observed and experienced*. London: Falmer Press.
- Mayall, B. (2000). The sociology of childhood in relation to children's rights. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 8, 243–259.
- Mendoza, J., & Reese, D. (2001). Examining multicultural picture books for the early childhood classroom: Possibilities and pitfalls. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 3(2). Retrieved from <http://ecrp.illinois.edu/v3n2/mendoza.html>
- Morrow, V., & Richards, M. (1996). The ethics of social research with children: An overview. *Children & Society*, 10, 90–105.
- Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2001). *How picturebooks work*. New York: Garland.
- Pantaleo, S. (2008). *Exploring student response to contemporary picturebooks*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Parkinson, D. D. (2001). Securing trustworthy data from an interview situation with young children: Six integrated interview strategies. *Child Study Journal*, 31, 137–156.
- Punch, K. F. (2014). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative & qualitative approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Reeves, A., Bryson, C., Ormston, R., & White, C. (2007). Children's perspectives on participating in survey research. Retrieved from <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/118976/childrens-perspectives-participating-research.pdf>
- Sackes, M., Cabe Trundle, K., & Flevares, L. M. (2009). Using children's literature to teach standard-based science concepts in early years. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36, 415–422.
- Simcock, G., & DeLoache, J. S. (2006). Get the picture? The effects of iconicity on toddlers' re-enactment from picture. *Developmental Psychology*, 42, 1352–1357.
- Skoumpourdi, C., & Mpakopoulou, I. (2011). The prints: A picture book for pre-formal geometry. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 39, 197–206.
- Smith, A. B., Taylor, N. J., & Gallop, M. M. (2000). *Children's voices: Research, policy & practice*. Auckland: Longman.
- Ungar, D., Joffe, S., & Kodish, E. (2006). Children are not small adults: Documentation of assent for research involving children. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 149, S31–S33.
- United Nations. (1989). *The United Nations convention on the rights of the child*. New York, NY: UNICEF.
- Vitiello, B. (2003). Ethical considerations in psychopharmacological research involving children and adolescents. *Psychopharmacology*, 171, 86–91.
- Wakslar, F. C. (1986). Studying children: Phenomenological insights. *Human Studies*, 9, 71–82.
- Wiles, R., Heath, S., Crow, G., & Charles, V. (2005). *Informed consent in social research: A literature review*. ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. Retrieved from [http://incentrust.org/inclen/uploadedbyfck/file/2%20Research%20Methodology%20\(Presentations_Monographs_Guidelines\)/7/Ethics%20Material/Articles/Informed%20Consent%20in%20Social%20Research_Lit%20Review.pdf](http://incentrust.org/inclen/uploadedbyfck/file/2%20Research%20Methodology%20(Presentations_Monographs_Guidelines)/7/Ethics%20Material/Articles/Informed%20Consent%20in%20Social%20Research_Lit%20Review.pdf)