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Children and School-based Research: 'informed consent' or 'educated consent'?

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ABSTRACT *This article discusses 'informed consent' in relation to research with children and young people in educational settings. In particular, it reflects upon issues that arose in the process of gaining their active consent to participate in the authors' research on children's understandings of parental involvement in education. In line with contemporary approaches to research with children, the children were provided with 'information' through leaflets and classroom activities in order for them to make 'choices' about participation. On reflection, these methods can be seen as distinctly educational, in that they drew on liberal education discourses and on practices adopted in 'progressive' British schooling. The children and young people's responses to the consent processes must be seen in the context of the authors' implicit use of broadly pedagogic approaches, and of the research taking place in a school setting inscribed with differential power relations. The authors therefore interrogate the concept of 'informed consent' that is employed in research, and its prior construction of 'information'. This raises questions about distinctions between providing information and teaching, and implications for conducting ethical social research with children.*

Introduction

Much contemporary research 'on' children is conducted in educational settings and this article raises some methodological issues about such school-based research. Our aim is to explore how the research agenda or topic is thoroughly intertwined, and perhaps confounded with, the particular context of social research. This focus arises from our research into children's understandings of parental involvement in education in a project that was part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research programme, 'Children 5–16: growing into the twenty-first century'. [1] The ethos of the programme as a whole includes attempting to view children as 'active agents', and treating them as the 'primary unit of analysis'.

Traditionally, parents' permission has been sought for their children's participation in

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research. However, in approaching children through schools, we wanted, as far as we were able, to privilege their own self-selection and decision to participate in research, rather than that given by their parents and/or their teachers. We planned to conduct discussions with small groups of children and young people at primary and secondary schools, and then individual interviews, preferably in their homes but at school if they preferred. Given our interest in children's views of parental involvement in their education and home–school relations, we had hoped that, having discussed these substantive issues with groups of children in the school setting, moving to the home setting might shift participants as individuals out of 'pupil mode' and foreground the 'home' side of home–school relations. (See Edwards & Alldred [2000] for the substantive concerns of the research.) However, at the outset, we had not fully appreciated the ways in which our own consent procedures and introduction to the research rested on and invoked some of the social meanings that we wished to explore. That is, aspects of our research topic (specifically, education and schooling) were entwined with our proposed research methodology and, indeed, our actual methods of approaching our research subjects. In another article, we have discussed understandings of the notion of research in the written 'feedback' responses given by the children and young people whom we approached for this study (Edwards & Alldred, 1999). This article offers our critique of the methodological issues we encountered, rather than our substantive findings. It aims to contribute to debate about research with children as subjects and concerning education as a process or as a context.

'Informed Consent' to Participate

Within social science research, the notion of 'informed consent' is nowadays taken as given and essential. It is written into the codes of practice or ethics of professional and social research organisations (such as the British Educational Research Association, the British Psychological Society, the British Sociological Association, and the Social Research Association). The concept of 'informed consent' and especially the notion of information on which that consent may be based has rarely been interrogated. It has been assumed that presenting the objectives of the research and all the 'facts' about its methods is relatively unproblematic as a form of 'information' that will yield the kinds of consent that make for both a 'rational' and an ethical approach to research. Moreover, consent has usually been seen as given as part of a 'one-off' event at the outset, on the basis of the presentation of adequate information that provides sufficiently for the participants to 'know' and 'understand' what they are 'getting themselves into'. However, this idea has latterly been challenged by notions of consent as an ongoing process, especially in relation to children (but also with adults). Priscilla Alderson's work (1993) has addressed such issues for children's consent to medical procedures, and she and others have argued that consent must be renegotiated over time, whether in a medical or social research context (Alderson, 1995; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Morrow, 1999).

In the field of medical ethics, questions have been raised about informed consent, not only over the issue of what facts or information are presented, but whether or not an entirely rational approach can be taken to relatively unknown outcomes or risks at a personal level, such as for medical intervention. Moreover, a key decision in medical ethics relates to when and whether children become sufficiently 'understanding' to be able to give their consent freely and autonomously. The judgement of whether children

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are 'competent', as this is known in legal terminology, is usually left to doctors, who must decide whether or not to involve the parents. The House of Lords's landmark ruling in 1985 that girls below the age of 16 could be competent to make their own decision about contraception without their parents' consent, and that they should be the ones to decide whether or not to involve their parents, altered the legal notion of competence. Thus, the Lords decided against Victoria Gillick's argument for the necessity of parental consent, which she had initially won on appeal against her original case, which had been lost. Her name is lent to the status of being 'Gillick competent':

> A competent child is one who has sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable him or her to fully understand what is proposed and also sufficient discretion to enable him or her to make a wise choice in his or her own interests. (Barton & Douglas, 1995, pp. 125–126)

Other legislation concerned with children, most notably Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UK Children Act 1989, links consideration of children's views and feelings in procedures affecting them to a combination of their age and competence.

The issue of gaining informed consent from children to participation in social research is somewhat new. Morrow & Richards (1996), in their overview of the literature on the ethics of social research with children, argue that the ethics of medical and psychological research are of limited relevance to social or education research since the potential risks and benefits to children individually or collectively are more clear-cut in the former. As they also point out, medical and other legal ethical debates, such as that over the age of consent in sexual relations, focus on what are deemed age-appropriate understandings (and hence the provision of age-appropriate information on which to make a decision). Such principles rest on developmental presumptions about processes by which decisions are made and responsibilities that are attributed to the individual. Rather, they and others argue, chronological age and competence are not necessarily the same thing, and thus it is a question of providing children with information that is adequate to their competencies in order for them to make informed decisions. Nevertheless, in undertaking research in or through schools, researchers enter a setting that is structured according to age, and where age is explicitly linked to educational competence (notably recently through the National Curriculum key stages).

Researchers in the field of childhood studies have developed guidelines for ethical practice in social research that gathers empirical material from children. These focus on the processes of gaining consent or allowing for 'dissent' from being 'empowered' through having their voices heard (Edwards & Alldred, 1999). However, such guidelines do not consider the processes of presenting 'information' in particular contexts, such as education settings, and the implications of this. Indeed, generally, as Morrow (1999) points out, there has been a dearth of literature in the UK discussing reflexive accounts of undertaking social research with children. Thus, here we consider such issues, interrogating the concepts underpinning consent to involvement in research and the practices through which consent is gained. Our particular focus is on the interrelation of these with the educational settings of much social research with children, although some of the issues raised may also concern research in other settings and with adults. What is generally assumed in the attempt to provide sufficient and adequate 'information' for consent to be 'freely' given? What presumptions about 'information' and 'decision making' already constrain what information is seen as relevant, and what constructions of particular research subjects determine what is deemed adequate?

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Information or Education?

The information itself on which decisions about research participation are made, along with the concepts through which we imagine its processing, are socially constructed and are about particular forms of knowledge and approaches to understanding or learning. Moreover, the distinctions between education and information seem increasingly unclear. Indeed, in his review of postmodernity and its theorisation, David Lyon (1994) argues that the status of knowledge is changing. The construction of 'education' is shifting away from it being an intrinsically progressive process, concerned with emancipatory values, towards the transmission of commodified units of operational facts and skills, and productive competence (see also Kenway, 1992). Lyon identifies telecommunications and computer technologies as shaping what now constitutes knowledge—the 'information society' in a 'consumer age':

> The advent of computer technologies shifts the emphasis to 'performativity', the efficiency and productivity of systems, and away from the issues of intrinsic value or purpose of knowledge ... Knowledge is not sought for its own sake, but is legitimated by 'performativity' and becomes increasingly commodified. (Lyon, 1994, pp. 13/44)

It is arguable that this reduction of education to information is occurring at various levels of educational practice, from the pressure on primary school children to complete cards and units in narrowly defined curriculum subjects, to the modularisation of higher education and the selling of course 'units' as if university education could be contained within information packets. Such developments are allied to the spread of information technologies ('a computer in every classroom') and of league tables of achievement which commodify school attendance and learning. Liberal–humanist understandings of education are being transformed by changes in the technologies and practices of schooling.

This opening up to question of the nature of education and the schooling process as increasingly constructed as information also raises the issue of the nature of 'informed consent' in the case of social research, and particularly within educational settings. Knowledge deemed appropriate for the making of decisions about consent to research is usually rendered as 'information', processed into transferable packets. Indeed, as we will show in this article, we unthinkingly adopted this model of informed consent ourselves, including producing leaflets about our project both as a means of providing adequate and sufficient information to our potential research participants for them to make a choice about taking part, and as a means of 'selling' our project to them. Here, however, we are concerned also with the blurring of boundaries between education and information in the other direction to that posed by Lyon (1994). We look at the way that particular understandings of education, and developmental constructions of age and competence within this, also implicitly infused our 'transmission' of information about our project. We also examine the implications of this, combined with children and young people's relationship to knowledge in a school setting, for their participation in our research.

Our Research Plans and Methodological Approach

We had identified different geographical areas within which we wanted to conduct our research: inner-city and suburban London and the town of Brighton. As with other researchers, we saw schools as providing access to a fairly representative sample of children in a particular locality (for example, Denscombe & Aubrook 1992; Morrow,

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1999; Pole *et al.*, 1999). Schools in these areas were selected on the basis of the variety of the proportion of their pupils' entitlement to free school meals, as a proxy measure of poverty, in order to contact a range of socio-economic groups (see Edwards & Alldred [1999] for further discussion). We also planned for a spread of ethnic and racial groups and for a balance in terms of gender. Given the significant role accorded to age in schooling (and associated with competency in educational terms, as noted earlier), we selected two particular cohorts: children in Year 6 at primary school (aged 10–11 years) and young people in Year 9 at the secondary schools (13–14 years). We approached the schools and, after what were sometimes protracted negotiations, found six state schools, three primary and three secondary, whose heads, and sometimes deputy and year heads, and also class teachers, agreed to let us come into school in class time to present our research and ask for participants. As other researchers conducting research in and through schools note, however much agency they may wish to accord to children in consent procedures and the research itself, there are layers of gatekeepers who exercise power over children to process through (Denscombe & Aubrook, 1992; James, 1993; Mayall 1996; Pole *et al.*, 1999).

Our original research proposal had outlined our intention to gather data through small group discussions and individual interviews, but as we approached the fieldwork, we felt that we needed an initial whole-class session in order to introduce the project and ourselves to the children and young people. Our main rationale for this was that, in order for children and young people to give their informed consent to participation in these data-gathering gathering methods, we had to allow them to become informed about the research—its topic, our methods, our discursive rather than evaluative approach, and what we could say about what the outcomes might be. The growing literature on ethical issues in research with children drew our attention to the requirement to be mindful of the 'rights' of children, and to make 'appropriate' the information we provided on which they could make their decisions about participation. We also wanted to assume that, in being provided with appropriate information, all the children involved were 'competent' to make their own understandings. In this respect, we were concerned to try to give them as much choice as possible about whether or not to participate and in what ways (as we discuss further later). We thus assumed the conventional model of subjects who, so long as they are not labelled pathological, are assumed normatively competent to take in appropriate information, process it rationally in relation to their own particularity and decide about participation. In tandem with the 'competent' subject goes a simplification of the 'information' and its processing to a straightforward and rationally-based decision. This model places individualising responsibility on them and may leave researchers somewhat less burdened by responsibility for participants' well-being.

We also wanted the children and young people's choices to be free of the constraints of either parents or schools as far as possible. Or rather, we endeavoured to avoid any pressures to participate or penalties for not doing so, and explicitly to emphasise that we were recruiting participants for our study; that is, that the children were being asked to opt into the study, not opt out. We also wanted to treat their consent as a process rather than a single event, checking that they wished to continue to take part in the research, and in what ways, at each stage of their involvement. This is in contrast to the starting point of most pupil participation in school, and particularly within the classroom, which is of compulsion, requirement, or the teacher's 'request' that pupils participate in school work and life. As several other researchers collecting data in schools have noted, children's consent to research participation in this context can shade into coercion, and

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their participation becomes 'just another form of schoolwork' (Denscombe & Aubrook, 1992; Pole *et al.*, 1999)—an issue we revisit later in this article. As Denscombe & Aubrook (1992) point out, the school context is inscribed by differential power relations, making it very difficult for children and young people to opt out of participating in research. They argue that the high pupil response rates achieved in school-based studies is rooted in this hidden pressure, and that researchers need to consider the ethics of their practice in this respect.

We were mindful of this potential classroom pressure to participate, as well as the teacher's approval for participating and being cooperative and helpful to 'visitors' (and perhaps the negative consequences of not doing so and creating a 'bad impression' of the school). For this reason, we produced consent forms, with 'tick boxes' for whether or not, and how, they might wish to participate in the research, to be distributed to the children and young people for them to fill in near the end of the whole-class session, and to be returned to us confidentially in 'postboxes' at the end of the session (which we would then take away with us, to sort and select from).

As well as attention to ethical issues of consent and anonymity for participants in research, some expectation is emerging that generally they will be recompensed for their time and trouble—including payment as an incentive to participate. Marketisation and consumerism in this form do not appear to have reached research with children, and we did not consider it (although in the town secondary school, some of the young people did enquire, apparently jokingly, as to whether they would be paid, or at least receive a bar of chocolate, for participation). Non-marketisation in this instance, however, reflects children's marginal status as social citizens. Compared with adult participants, we were able to exploit the fact of children's location in school as compulsory, without payment, adult-led and institutionalised. Even outside of an educational setting, the fact that children's time is not valued financially by the hour is because of their developmental status in capitalist culture as non-workers. Thus, the construction of childhood on which our research practices rest is this particular one, of which education has come to be a defining feature (Rose, 1990; Burman, 1994; Walkerdine, 1984).

In following the common practice of approaching children and young people through schools, what we had not anticipated, however, was that this was likely to contextualise our actual relationships with them as 'educationally based' (as opposed to 'familially based' if we had approached them through parents). Whether or not the children and young people then opted to take part in the research through small group discussions in the school setting, or interviews at school or at home, we and the research might be associated with the school and with education—issues on which we elaborate later. Thus, our research interest in the relationship different children experience or would prefer between their school and home lives was already embedded within our research methods. That is, our methods were not neutral tools but themselves mobilised meanings of education (as opposed to family), complicating the boundary between home and school, and the family–education interface. The choice of setting for treating children as active research subjects is another way in which our research topic (including how they see themselves in each setting) is intertwined with research practices.

Information about our Research

We had not initially planned to provide information leaflets about our project, but decided that they would serve to introduce the study to heads and teachers as we negotiated access to schools, and to the children and young people we approached to

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participate. We thus designed three leaflets. Two were directed at the children (see Fig. 1) and young people (see Fig. 2), and differed from each other in what we considered to be 'age appropriate' cover illustrations, paper colours, and their respective references to 'children' or 'young people' in the body of the text inside. The other was directed at 'adults', as heads, teachers, parents and other interested parties (see Fig. 3). In practice, each of these leaflets aimed to 'sell' the research to the different groups, emphasising their different interests.

In designing the leaflets, while we did see them as 'informative', we did not, consciously at least, see them as particularly 'educational'. Indeed, our project itself was in part concerned with deconstructing notions of 'education'. Within home–school relations discourses, the education of children is regarded as taking place in the home as well as school (as well as sometimes in the wider 'community'), necessitating closer home–school links. Other perspectives, however, may see this as the colonisation of home and family life by educational discourses, which may be resisted (see David *et al.*, 1993; Edwards & Alldred, 2000).

The format of all three leaflets was similar, using a question and answer approach that was aimed at providing accessible 'information' and yet aiming not to be too didactic. On reflection, they are, nevertheless, didactic, in spite of the claims of much liberal educational discourse. Most notably, in the text of both the primary and secondary school leaflets, the question, 'What do you think?' recurs (see Fig. 4 for example), meaning to signal our intention to emphasise the subjective opinions/'no right answers' approach, and to prompt reflection. Additionally, our posing and answering of questions that the children and young people might want to ask about the research to help them make an informed decision about whether or not to participate has an instructive tone.

Moreover, although our assumptions in the leaflets for the children and young people were relatively unarticulated, we associated them with the idea that we wanted the children to think about their involvement in the research and the topic itself. Thus, the leaflets are sprinkled with question marks as a sign or symbol of the questioning nature of liberal education and our liberal approach to children and their rights to a voice. It can also be read as signalling that children and young people could and should be questioning and challenging dominant received ideas about parental involvement in education. Our presentation of the research as 'to listen to the views of children and young people', however, plays into discourses of voice about which we are sceptical, preferring to situate participants' accounts firmly in the context of their production in the dynamic interaction with the researcher and sometimes classmates too, as well as the social and material contextual circumstances of their lives that shape their understandings (Edwards & Alldred, 1999; Ribbens & Edwards, 1999).

The design of the leaflets inevitably displays our adult presumptions about what appeals to children and adults, which reproduce commonly held ideas. We produced the leaflets for children and young people in bright colours in an attempt to show the project in a fun, rather than educational, light. Bright 'sunshine' yellow was seen as cheery and unthreatening for the primary school children, a more muted yellow for secondary pupils, and a serious and 'sensible' pale lilac for adults.

The front of the primary school children's leaflet contained a drawing originally found on a card in the 'Hip Hip Hooray' series, designed by Julie (see Fig. 1). Its choice reflects the assumption that it was friendly and a bit 'trendy', with its seventies retro style and simple hand drawing. An open, child-friendly and egalitarian, rather than authoritative, image was intended, but its 'hippie' associations could be seen as embodying an embarrassing liberal attitude towards children. The smiley face of the girl

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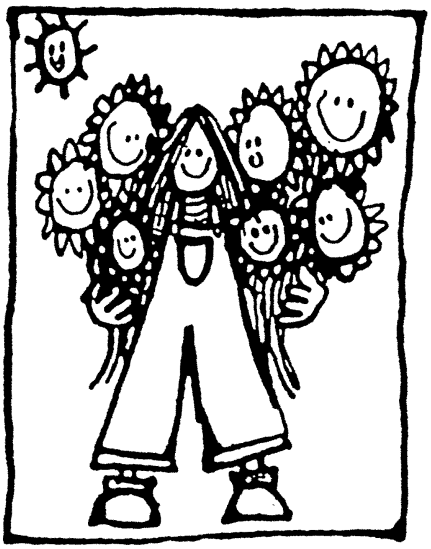
Parents' Involvement in Education

What do you think?



A research project to listen to the views of children and young people

Social Sciences Research Centre
South Bank University

FIG 1. Front of information leaflet for children.

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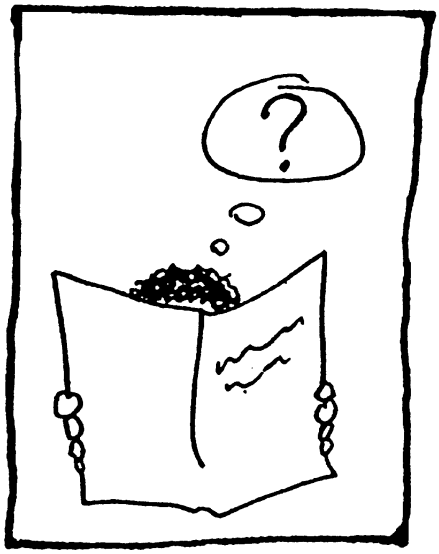
Parents' Involvement in Education

What do you think?



A research project to listen to the views of children and young people

Social Sciences Research Centre
South Bank University

FIG 2. Front of information leaflet for young people.

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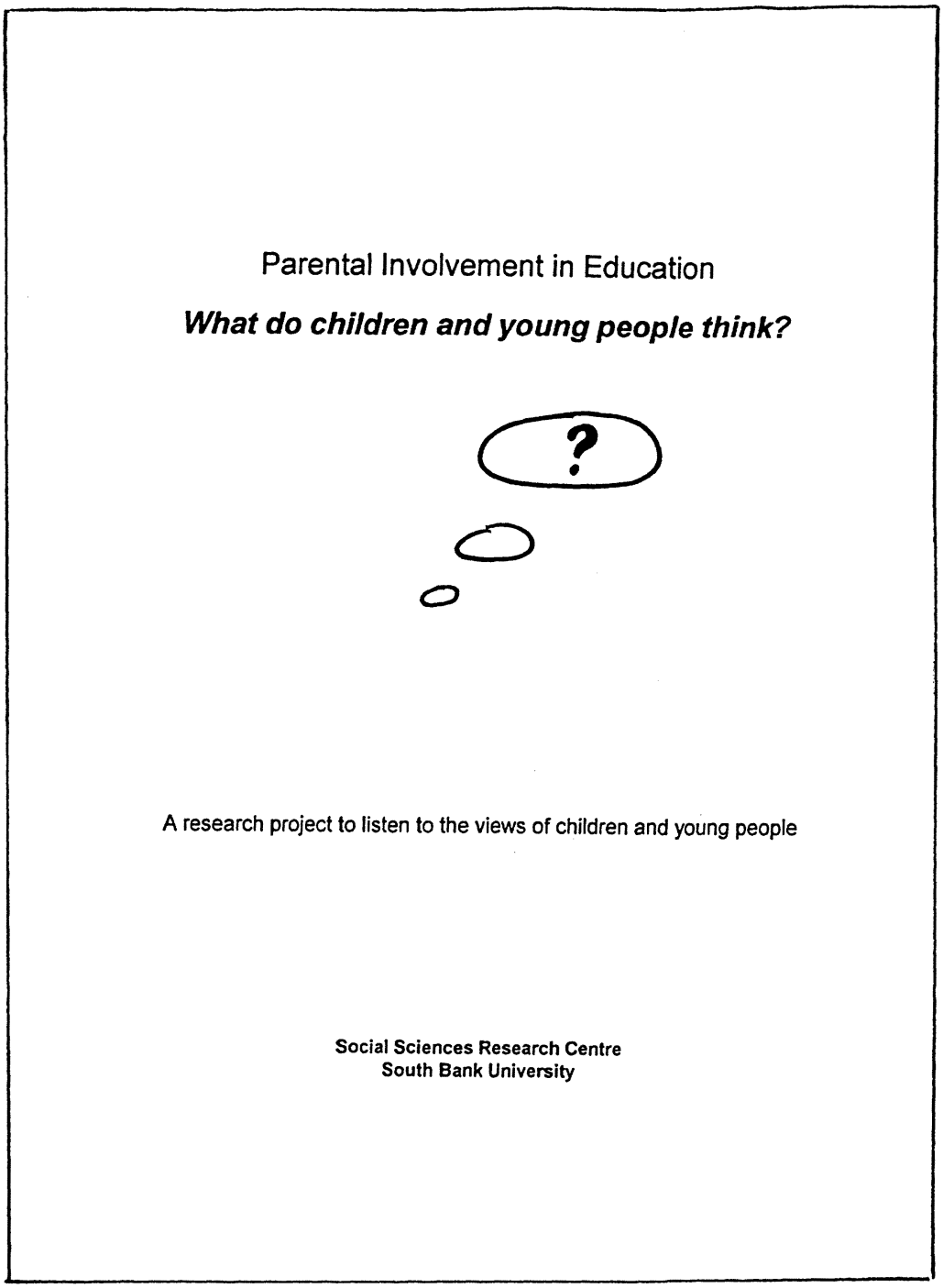

FIG 3. Front of information leaflet for adults.

was assumed to be inviting to young children, seeing involvement in the research as relatively fun (rather than parental involvement making children happy, which is another potential reading—see also discussion that follows). However, this approach could also be seen as part of the growing commodification of children's perspectives rather than being necessarily child-friendly. In hindsight, the attempt to use such a representation to appeal to potential participants implies the construction of children as homogeneous group, who can be marketed to as an 'age-appropriate' unity.

The cover illustration and colour of the leaflet for young people in secondary schools differed (see Fig. 2). The drawing here was deliberately chosen to be ambiguous with

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Who is involved in your education?
Some children feel their parents have a lot of influence in decisions about their education, others that their teachers do, and others feel that they themselves should make the decisions.
What do you think?

Some children are happy to have their parents or other carers, like grandparents, come into school, but some prefer to keep their family or home-life separate from school.
What do you think?

How do you feel about homework?
How does it affect your life at home?
Some children think that taking schoolwork home is good, others feel it gets in the way of family life or other things they want to do.
What do you think?

THIS RESEARCH WILL

Listen to the views of children and young people about school, home and how they fit together. We're interested in what children from different backgrounds and at different schools think. There's no right or wrong answers.

HOW WILL WE DO THIS?

There are 3 ways we will listen to children:

- class discussions about the links between family and education
- small group discussions with about 6 people from a class
- And, with children who are happy to do this, separate interviews, probably at home. These will allow you to talk about your personal views and experiences.

WHO ARE WE?

We are Ros Edwards and Pam Alldred and we are researchers who work with Miriam David at South Bank University, London.

Questions you might want to ask us:

What will the group discussion be like?

It'll be 6 or 7 people from your class sitting around a table in a room in your school with one of us (Ros or Pam).
We might give you questions to talk about or play a card game to help you figure out what you think. It'll be during school time and will last about an hour. We plan to tape record it, so that we can remember the discussion afterwards.

What will you do with the tape?

We'll listen to the tape from your group and from other schools. Then we'll write a book or report about the views of children and young people.

Will my name be used?

No. We'll give you a different name, so we can describe what you think without anyone knowing it's you.

FIG 4. Part of text of information leaflet for children.

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respect to gender and to ethnicity (with only the top of the child's dark curly hair visible). Only later, as we discussed this article, did we realise that this image could be read in several different ways: the question marks could make the figure seem studious, or questioning and challenging of received ideas, or as not understanding and thinking 'what' or 'why', or perhaps even considering whether to ask for help. It could map onto illustrations of adults in reading mode, and could be interpreted as aiming to ensure an adultist version of 'information'. These interpretations in turn map onto the two educational discourses we outlined earlier: liberal pedagogy that emphasises pupils' questioning and active learning, or an 'information' discourse in which material is understood or not understood.

Thus, notions of education were embedded in our approach to the leaflets directed at our potential research participants in complex and relatively unarticulated ways. When we produced them, we had not thought through the ways that these embedded ideas mapped onto educational and research discourses.

The third leaflet, for parents, teachers and other adults, also posed the same question on its cover as those for children and young people, though without exaggerated question marks or any figure, except for a question mark in the largest of three thought bubbles (see Fig. 3). Our use of the voice discourse in the other leaflets was reformulated to address children and young people indirectly. The leaflet was altogether much more serious in tone, with the text elaborating 'what the research asks from schools', 'what the research offers schools', and 'what the research offers children', as well as addressing the details of remit and methods. Indeed, to some extent, this leaflet drew on, and played to, the dominant professional discourse about parental involvement and home–school links.

Thus, overall, there were various 'educational' biases in our provision of appropriate information as a basis for informed consent, embedded in the designs and approaches of the leaflets we produced as part of this process, despite our original intent to be as neutral as possible with respect to the two contexts of home and school as part of our topic. Moreover, our leaflets can be seen as part of the broader changing research context towards a more consumerist and marketised style of research. We now move on to look further at our process of attempting informed consent to research participation through schools, and the implications of this for the framing of children and young people's forms of participation in our research.

The Whole-class Sessions

The whole-class sessions served to introduce the project, by means of information provision, to the six classes with whom we wanted to work. They also served to provide us with 'information' from the children and young people, as a point of departure for the project, including their decisions on the 'tick box' consent forms (discussed earlier) but also encompassing their involvement in the whole-class sessions in which we were imparting information to them. Most notably, after introducing ourselves, the project and its methods, accompanied by our leaflet, we conducted several discussion activities with the children and young people, which drew on progressive methods of teaching. For example, we brainstormed meanings of 'family', 'education', 'home' and 'school' onto four big paper sheets, and discussed some vignettes detailing aspects of parental involvement in education. The material resulting from children and young people's involvement in these activities in itself constitutes data (see later). We expected that this method of working would be familiar to the children and young people involved, as part

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of their schooling experience. As well as illustrating the topic of our research, and our 'there are no right or wrong answers' approach, these activities followed a more educational approach, albeit not didactic in the traditional sense. They were very much in the liberal 'progressive' tradition of working closely with children and actively involving them in the processes of teaching and learning.

Indeed, the educational tone of our whole-class sessions was further reinforced by our physical location in the classroom for these sessions. Our own and the teachers' (and perhaps the children and young people's) implicit assumptions about where we should place ourselves in the classroom resulted in our taking on the physical location of 'teacher'. We stood or sat in the space at the front of the class, where the teacher stands. The seated children thus gazed at us, as 'quasi' teachers. We also acted as such to some extent, raising our voices to be heard and quietening children who started chatting amongst themselves when we thought necessary. The issue of how children can place researchers in a school is complex (for examples of some different perspectives on this, see Denscombe & Aubrook [1992], Epstein [1998], Morrow [1999]), but it is certain that they will attribute some form of role to researchers, and that the images invoked will have implications for how they make decisions about participating in research, as we elaborate later. Furthermore, there is also the issue of how children and young people view researchers' requests for 'non-assessable' answers to questions about their understandings in the school context, where it is adults, as teachers, who generally have authority as 'knowers'. As Graue & Walsh point out, children have come to expect that when adults ask them a question, the adult already knows the answer: 'Few children have had the experience of being approached by an adult who wants them, the kids, to teach her, the adult, about their lives' (1998, p. 113).

Finally in the session, along with our consent form to be filled in individually, we handed out a 'feedback' form, one question on which was, 'Did the discussion we had in class help you to decide whether or not to take part?' This question provides a clue to the contradictory nature of giving information as a basis for gaining informed consent. By implication, the children and young people had already given us some forms of data as part of the overall process we used to elicit their consent to participation, and specifically in their responses within the activities we used to provide them with an informed basis for consent, and their consent and feedback forms themselves (for examples of our use of that data see Edwards & Alldred [1999] and this article). Thus, despite our efforts to allow for both opting in and opting out of the research process by means of giving the children and young people sufficient and appropriate information for consent to be 'freely' given, our 'potential' participants were in fact already participating in our research to some extent, and had become involved through what could be seen as an 'educational' rather than informative activity. The boundaries between education and information became blurred and not readily susceptible to detailed delineation. In the event, we would now argue, our efforts at ensuring informed consent altered the nature of the research process somewhat, and placed its contextual location within education discourses.

The additions to our research strategy—the leaflets and whole-class session—were, we reckoned, to the benefit of our potential participants (children and young people) and also our 'gatekeepers' (the school and teachers). With respect to the children and young people, we thought our approach would illustrate the subject matter of the research more vividly, thereby allowing them to make more informed decisions about if and how they might participate. Moreover, we hoped that the opportunity for involvement in the whole-class session might prevent those whose agreement to participate further was not

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taken up from feeling excluded completely. Nevertheless, we also saw benefits to the project, in that this initial session would help the small group discussions and individual interviews by having stimulated thinking and discussion about relevant issues, as well as helping recruitment and rapport by generating enthusiasm and some familiarity with the researcher involved.

With respect to the teachers, we felt that our conduct of a whole-class activity functioned as some form of 'payback' for their involvement with the project, by providing a session in which they could take a break and 'rest' their voices. We were also aware that schools could draw our session into curriculum criteria, such as 'how we live', 'communicating your thoughts' and 'citizenship'. Thoughts of rendering our whole-class sessions in narrow curriculum terms on key stage markers reflect the nature and pressures of contemporary British schooling. In addition, carrying out the whole-class session during 'lesson time' meant that it could potentially be perceived by children and young people as part of the curriculum, and thus as 'education'—with the coercive implication for their participation noted earlier.

Nevertheless, the whole-class sessions were also partly aimed at ensuring that we, rather than teachers, largely controlled the initial portrayal of our research agenda to the children and young people, and the selection of participants. We have already indicated some of the ways in which this process was imbued with educational assumptions. Furthermore, despite our attempts at control, teachers could put their own stamp on the process. One striking example is Mrs Gee at the suburban primary school, who was extremely welcoming of the research and of Pam as the researcher. Mrs Gee, according to Pam's field notes, 'did a very positive sell for me and for the project' at the beginning of the whole-class session, telling her pupils that they were privileged to be asked to take part because children did not used to be asked their views, but now are listened to. Mrs Gee was a vociferous proponent of 'parental involvement' in education and of research being educational and therefore 'good' for children. She took advantage of an unplanned break during the session to give a talk to her class about the value of parental involvement. To illustrate her point, she held up a copy of the information leaflet Pam had previously distributed and used the picture on the front (see Fig. 1) to illustrate how 'the sunflowers are the faces of all the people around you ... who are involved in your education'. The school's home–school policy emphasis was on inclusion and avoiding a narrow focus on the normative two-parent family, so she mentioned grandparents, uncles and aunts as well as parents. Apart from providing yet another (and to us rather disconcerting) reading of our leaflet cover drawing, this example illustrates the limits of researchers' control over the presentation and interpretation of their research, whatever their endeavours.

Our attempts at ensuring potential inclusion of all eligible pupils, whatever their backgrounds and abilities, rather than exclusion from the study on the educationally informed criteria that teachers might adopt (for example, educationally more able and/or more articulate children and young people being put forward by teachers), could also be compromised by, or implicitly posed within, educational discourses. For example, Ms Jay at the inner-city primary school suggested that Pam (who was also the researcher for that school) did not include David (who wished to participate) in the small group discussion because she warned that he was extremely disruptive. In fact, he did take part and the discussion went well, but Ms Jay later mentioned that she had had to get a male teacher to physically remove David from the classroom on one or two occasions. Ms Jay may have been operating on the assumption that the research context would merely mirror the classroom context—research as akin to education in this sense. In contrast, in field notes, Pam wrote about feeling pleased that David had been able to establish a new relationship

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with someone who supposedly did not know about the wider classroom issues and with whom he could therefore have a positive, uncharged rapport. In her turn, she was implicitly working within an educational discourse, here of providing positive experiences for children that are 'good for them'.

Thus, in choosing to control the presentation of information and selection of pupils, we were drawing both on education discourses for our own ends, as well as attempting to empower ourselves at the expense of one set of participants (schools and teachers) within those discourses. Indeed, we were imposing our own views of 'information' and 'education' so that we would ensure greater participation and easier forms of 'dissent'.

Parental Consent

We decided to take a pragmatic and contextual approach to parents' consent to their children's participation in our research. We expected that we would need to obtain the permission of parents to individual interviews with their children if they were to take place at home (once we had re-ascertained that the child wanted to proceed with this). Given our focus on the children and young people, however, we decided that we would only ask for parental consent to participation in other, school-based, data gathering if the school required it. We felt that our understanding of children and young people's lives and views had to be placed in the context of their family and school lives and relationships, and that, as part of this, obtaining parental permission might form part of a particular school culture. In hindsight though, given our intention to focus on children and young people as competent agents, where we did need to obtain consent from parents, we were much less concerned with how well informed they were before making a decision (beyond providing them with a copy of our adult-directed leaflet, with its implicit incorporation of parental involvement discourses) than we were for their children.

In the context of changing educational policies concerning parental permission, even to curriculum subjects such as sex education and personal and social education, as part of placing parents (rather than children) as the consumers of education, local education authorities and schools have developed varying policies and practices concerning parents'/carers' permission for children's involvement in some curricular as well as extra-curricular activities. There were indeed a variety of practices concerning requirements for the consent of parents to children and young people's participation in the research amongst the different schools, although none felt they had to obtain parental consent to our carrying out the whole-class sessions. The inner-city and suburban primary schools decided that parental permission was necessary for data collection conducted in school, whereas the town primary and all the secondary schools did not require it for any research participation. Age is thus an issue here, with young people being regarded by their educational gatekeepers as having the competence to make an autonomous decision about participation in ways that children were not. The town primary provides an interesting exception here, in that one of us (Ros) has children who previously attended that school and she knew several of the teachers. This perhaps generated a trust that overrode equations of (lesser) age with (lesser) autonomous decision-making.

Choices to Participate

Constructions of education as part of our project methodology, specifically as particular notions suffusing our attempts at enabling informed consent and school as the setting for this, raise a number of issues for our data gathering. We have discussed the way that it

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shaped the children and young people's understandings of the nature of the research topic and social research as a process elsewhere (Edwards & Alldred 1999)—for example, seeing participation in research as 'educational' in various ways, from instructive to liberatory, or as a break from the formal curriculum and therefore 'fun'. Here, however, we explore two important ramifications for one of our forms of data collection—the interview stage of our research. There were, in particular, two unexpected responses to our requests for children and young people to participate in the project. First, far more children than we expected decided to be interviewed *at school* rather than at home. Second, many children and young people wanted to participate in the so-called one-to-one interviews in *pairs* rather than individually. Both of these responses could be related to the educational discourses and contexts within which we were operating.

Opting to be interviewed at school rather than at home, as we had originally anticipated and indeed had conveyed as the 'probable' course in the leaflets, may have to do with the implicit messages of the educational nature of our research given by us and perhaps also the teachers. Having introduced our research within the school setting, we then became associated with 'education' rather than home. Thus, opting to be interviewed at school chimes with this approach. It may also be linked to the children and young people's concomitant understanding of the research as related to 'education' in some way, or alternatively (despite our implicit educational stance) as a way of avoiding other aspects of the curriculum at school. It may also have something to do with privacy boundaries, either protecting family life at home from intrusive surveillance or taking the opportunity to talk 'privately' about family-related matters away from home (see Edwards & Alldred [1999] further on this). Whatever the reason, education as part of our research topic and process had implications for the children and young people's choices about the venue for interviews.

The small group discussions were all conducted in the school setting, given the difficult logistics of any other option, and thus a choice of venue did not arise here. While gaining participants for these was a relatively straightforward process, proceeding according to plan, the interview stage of our research threw up the intriguing problem that individual participation in the research was an unattractive proposition for many. The initial impetus for conducting interviews with pairs of children and young people as well as individuals came out of the first school in which we began the research process, the inner-city primary. In the small group discussion, they were asked why nobody had wanted to do an individual interview (whatever the setting), and several responded that they would not mind if they could do it in pairs. Pam thus returned to the classroom to make another appeal for participants, this time to be interviewed in pairs, and was more successful in enlisting them (although interestingly, this second appeal did actually yield some children prepared to be interviewed individually). Taking this on board, we then began to incorporate a choice of individual or pair interviews (in addition to choice of setting) in our introductory whole-class sessions in the other schools. Overall, nearly half of the children and young people participating in this stage of our research were interviewed in pairs, but proportionally far more expressed a preference for this than we actually selected to take part.

The reasons for this preference seem complex. In particular, they may have to do with the relation between the researchers as adults and the children as subjects, and particularly as this is constructed within the school context. Some researchers suggest that one-to-one interviews may be too pressurising and difficult for younger children (for example, Mauthner, 1997), but pair interviews were also a preferred option for many of the young people consenting to take part in our research. Furthermore, generally in

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school settings, children and young people are not often used to being drawn out of the collective category of the pupil body as an individual other than in contexts of disapproval or reprimand (see also Hall, 1996; Graue & Walsh, 1998), or assessment. Morrow (1999) has noted that the schoolchildren taking part in her research also said that they preferred being with their friends than interviewed individually. Thus, the more collective approach to participation in our research may well be linked to its educational approach, both in accessing children and young people through schools and in the embeddedness of notions of education in our information provision practices. It may well be that had we initially approached our potential research participants through and within their family and home setting, like other researchers doing this (such as Moore *et al.*, 1996), we would not have come up against this preference for collective involvement and gone ahead with individual interviews only. Certainly, this collective dimension of children and young people's potential competence to consent to participate in research, and as shaped by approach and setting, does not seem to resonate easily with notions of informed consent for adults, and may well be linked to children's marginal status in society (although see Edwards, [1996] regarding black women for another marginalised group who can make collective decisions about research participation).

Conclusions

Informed consent, and the processes by which it is ascertained, is a complex issue. In the context of research on children's understandings of the relationship between education and family, it becomes even more complex given the recruitment of children and young people to research through school. Our initial visits to schools to conduct our whole-class sessions threw up some fascinating issues about the construction and operation of informed consent in an educational setting. The way that children and young people decided to continue to participate in the project in relation to the interview stage of our data in particular was different from our initial expectations. They were shaped by an educational rapport. Should this have surprised us given our initial approach through schools? Our 'immersion' in the educational process inevitably meant that children and young people's involvement in the preliminary session was almost assured before their more formal consent had been elicited to the extent that they conformed to classroom etiquette. Thus, we argue that giving *information* as a basis for consent can implicitly be suffused by, or incorporated into, discourses of *education*.

Indeed, at the outset, we had not fully appreciated how contradictory our approach was. For example, in order to ensure the children and young people we approached 'knew' they were free to opt in to our research and to provide them with an adequate and accessible basis for this decision, we adopted traditional classroom practices of making them listen while we gave information about the project. Our process of enabling informed consent also illustrates how children and young people's understandings can be shaped by context, which was educational. In saying this, we are not arguing that research methodologies should, or indeed can, be context-free. Indeed, the dangers of researchers being 'caught' within the very educational discourses they are seeking to study and the difficulties of moving outside of them have been illustrated in other contexts (Bowe *et al.*, 1994; David *et al.*, 1996). However, it was important for us, as it is for other researchers working in this way, to recognise and acknowledge that such strategies concerning research consent and participation move us in the direction of 'education'.

Nevertheless, the children and young people actively responded to our research,

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raising unexpected questions for us about methodology and our own research practice, and giving us much food for thought about the relationship between home and school, and our means of researching it. Our engagement with children and young people in the school setting may have, on the one hand, produced our educational stance and their more educationally-based responses, including the desire to be interviewed in school rather than at home. On the other hand though, it resulted in the innovation of the request to be interviewed in pairs. It seems the didactic approach to providing information through questions and answers on the leaflets and in the whole-class discussions did not produce only conformity in the children and young people's responses, but their active response to the received information. In this sense, we as researchers ended up being 'educated'.

A straightforward notion of children and young people's right or freedom to choose to participate in social research on the basis of the provision of adequate and appropriate information in the school setting especially seems naïve. On reflection, our understandings of research with children and young people, and as conducted in the school context, were altogether too simplistic at the outset. Their responses to our topics and methodologies, however, forced reappraisal such that we are now able to see the complex relationships between, and contradictory natures of, notions of children and young people's competence and age, and information and education. We are left with difficult questions about whether consent should, or can, be 'informed' or 'educated'.

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NOTE

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