

Towards learning dialogs as data: researching children's lifeworlds in global cities.

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Abstract

Purpose: This article contributes to the research methodology literature that arose out of the (new) sociology of childhood and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) with regard to conducting ethical research *with* children rather than *on* children. In particular, this article reflects on the development of a method (learning dialogs).

Design/methodology/approach: Learning dialogs were designed to enable children to share their responses to prompts about specific aspects of their lifeworlds. They were one method used to produce the data corpus which also included a large-scale survey, classroom ethnographies and (video) re-enactments of children's lives after school.

Findings: The piloting of the learning dialogs took place in several iterations and a particular form was used for the main study. The original idea and development of the learning dialogs highlights they were both a rich source of data that complemented the other data sources in the study and an activity that children indicated that they enjoyed. We discuss the practicalities involved with adapting a qualitative method to different settings and to projects with large numbers of children.

Originality: The conceptualisation of the learning dialogs as sources of personal documentation about aspects of children's lifeworlds was unique to this research. In thinking about the learning dialogs as one source of data within a broader project, the research aimed to be more inclusive of all participants in contributing to the findings produced in the project.

Keywords

research with children; school; education; methods; lifeworlds; learning dialogs

Article classification

Research Paper

Introduction

There is an increasing recognition of the importance of involving children in research, particularly in fields such as education, sociology, anthropology, and geography. From children previously being the object *of* studies, research has moved from being *on* or *about* children to research *with* (or *by*) children. However, with this shift there has come many subsequent debates, including around how research with children is conceptualised, which research methods are used, and what constitutes ethical research with children (e.g. Bartholomaeus, 2016; Hill, 2006; James, 2007). In this article we document the origin and progression of a research method conceptualised by the first author, that was used in pilot studies and a subsequent larger study exploring children's lifeworlds in the global cities of Melbourne, Hong Kong, and Singapore (the Global Childhoods project). In linking the aims and questions posed by the research project with the educational and cultural contexts, it is important to recognise that multiple sources and perspectives are needed to understand children's lifeworlds. The research aims should be central to determining which methods are used. As James (2007, p. 269) argues, 'the methods chosen must fit the task at hand', not be undertaken simply because they are viewed as 'participatory'. We also highlight that the children's perspectives are produced in research, with different methods and methodological approaches impacting on the data that is generated.

In this article we first briefly outline the key shifts in thinking about children and research before documenting the process of developing a method to explore children's experiences of aspects of their lifeworlds. We document the method that began as digital dialogs in the pilot studies and evolved into learning dialogs in the larger study with a greater number of students, considering the practicalities of research and the way in which one method fits with the overall research project

before providing some data examples. Rather than advocating for the use of a particular method, we document the origins and development of learning dialogs to show the process of designing a method as part of a larger research project. We use the term learning dialogs when discussing the method generally, and digital dialogs when specifically talking about the origin of the process used in the pilot studies.

Shifts in thinking about children and research

Ways of thinking about research *with* children, rather than *on* children, have been influenced by a variety of events and ways of thinking. These have included the shaping of ideas originating in Italy with the conceptualisation of preschools in Reggio Emilia in the post war period, the evolution of the (new) sociology of childhood which was consolidated in the 1990s, and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Each of these examples had a major impact in shifting thinking towards a view of children as 'capable' and 'agentic' in their lives and learning.

While children were the focus of much research conducted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including in the work of Darwin and Piaget, this was largely research conducted *on* children (Bartholomaeus, 2016; Prout and James, 1997). Studies of children and childhood were primarily confined to disciplines such as psychology in areas of development and learning. Of particular note was Piaget's work on 'the (universal) child', which theorised that learning is dependent on cognitive structures which develop in invariant sequences from birth. Further, the work of Vygotsky extended and connected the cognitive dimension of children's learning to their social world (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978). He theorised that learning occurred on a social plane, that is between children and or adults (inter) before the young learner was able to 'internalise' and make meaning of concepts/ideas (intra). Vygotsky also conceptualised the 'zone of proximal development' to indicate the learning that might take place on an individual level, but also on a social plane, which

could be scaffolded and guided to higher levels of understanding. This notion, in some ways, might be regarded as an early example of supporting young children to achieve higher goals of learning with adults, or more experienced peers, supporting that learning.

This work rarely considered children's perspectives and expectations and usually described their performance in terms of what they could not do. An exception to this occurred in post-war northern Italy in the town of Reggio Emilia. Educators in Reggio Emilia both drew on, and moved away from, Piaget's theories, and suggested innovative forms of early childhood education involving the community (Gandini, 2012). Children were viewed as capable citizens of the present with a hundred languages to communicate (e.g. Edwards *et al.*, 2012). Such an approach, that incorporated listening to children and viewing them as citizens in their own right, was slower to appear in academic research, even while it was enthusiastically embraced by educators.

Research in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in anthropology and sociology, started to break away from traditional ideas about children that originated earlier in the twentieth century, such as child development (e.g. Alanen, 1988; Ambert, 1986; Hardman, 1973; Jenks 1982). At the intersection of sociology and anthropology, James and Prout (1997) published their influential edited collection *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* in 1990 which outlined the new sociology of childhood. Prout and James' (1997 p. 8) new paradigm incorporated six features that shaped this way of thinking about children:

- childhood is a social construction,
- childhood cannot be separated from other social variables (e.g. class, gender, ethnicity),
- children's relationships and cultures are worthy of study,
- children are active in the construction of their own lives and societies,
- ethnography is a useful methodology for studying childhood, and

- a new sociology of childhood is connected to reconstructing childhood in society more broadly.

The new sociology of childhood presented alternative theoretical frameworks to developmental discourses which had previously constructed and emphasised differences between children and adults, which described children in terms of maturation and developmental stages. Furthermore, the new sociology of childhood shifted the view of children as passive to positioning children as active, agentic and capable.

Just prior to James and Prout's influential book being published, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) was released. The CRC also positioned (some) children as active social agents, able to provide their views on matters impacting them. In particular Article 12 is often regarded as the impetus for including children's perspectives in research and beyond:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. (United Nations General Assembly, 1989)

While the CRC has been viewed positively by some for elevating the status of children, it has also been heavily critiqued, including in relation to its rights-based approach, lack of attention to

diversity amongst children, basis in the Minority World, and lack of practical accountability (e.g. James, 2007; Lundy, 2007; Tisdall and Punch, 2012).

Influenced by these and other ideas, there is now a significant amount of research conducted with children, that represents a diversity of ways of conceptualising children and research with children. In this article we argue for the importance of including children's perspectives in research in order to provide a broader picture of their lifeworlds, and to gain a particular understanding of their experiences, as it is produced in the context of the specific research study. However, we situate our position as different to the now frequently used notion of 'voice' which suggests there is a 'true' voice waiting to be uncovered, and which can ignore the broader discourses impacting children's perspectives and the ways in which these are (re)produced in research (for similar critiques see e.g. Bragg, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). We also highlight the methods used in research with children impact on their responses. In addition, as Hill (2006) writes, different children may prefer different methods in research, although this may be impacted by broader discourses relating to ways children are used to expressing themselves, particularly at school (Bartholomaeus, 2016). For these reasons we also suggest that multiple methods are most useful to provide a multi-faceted picture of children's lifeworlds, which can include perspectives of both children and adults (see also Clark, 2005).

It is also important to consider the cultural contexts where research is conducted. Research with children (and ways of engaging with children's perspectives more broadly) may be more common in western contexts, or the global north. It's particularly clear that the sociology of childhood is centred around a small number of influential key texts and most discussions of the sociology of childhood focus on English-speaking countries and Europe (at least of those that are published in English) (Bühler-Niederberger, 2010). In contrast, educational research in Asian countries is often positivist and quantitative, with ethnographies in schools being rare (Yelland and Saltmarsh, 2013). This can create challenges with designing research if the children (and educators) are not regularly asked for

their opinions or perspectives. Others have also argued for the need to consider particular cultural aspects in research, including a consideration of how researchers are viewed, which may differ from dominant western research perspectives (e.g. Graham *et al.*, 2014; Im and Swadener, 2016).

In our approach, we view children's perspectives as one representation of their lives that can be produced in research, with different methods and methodological approaches influencing what is 'found'. Furthermore, when exploring children's lifeworlds, we use methods to explore children's perspectives, as well as including the perspectives of adults and our own classroom observations to provide a multi-faceted picture of children's lives as produced in research. In this article we draw on the pilot studies and main study from the Global Childhoods project conducted in Melbourne, Hong Kong, and Singapore, focusing on the development of the learning dialogs method. In the examples discussed here, we advocate that it is more meaningful to be inclusive of children's lifeworlds when considering as many of their experiences as possible, rather than focusing on one aspect of their lives in isolation. We conceptualise the *lifeworlds* of children as including all aspects of their everyday lives, which includes school, home and community contexts (Yelland *et al.*, 2008). We extend the concept of lifeworld as theorised by Husserl (1970) and later Habermas (1987). Additionally, for de Certeau (1987, 1997), examining everyday life means exploring and analysing the ways in which individuals negotiate the institutions and constituents of their social world, which of course includes their schools, homes, and communities. It is important to consider children's lives as whole in this way to gain greater understandings into the contexts and meanings of their lives and to ask them to consider their own experiences by drawing on a range of research methods.

Research design and the beginnings of learning dialogs

The Global Childhoods project had its origins in the first author's study Millennial Kids Learning (MKL) from 2009 to 2010, based in Hong Kong but also including children from Melbourne and New York. The MKL project aimed to explore children's lives and learning in Kindergarten, Primary 1, and

Primary 5 (ages 3, 6, and 10), drawing on a student-completed quantitative survey and classroom ethnographies (Yelland and Muspratt, 2018; Yelland *et al.* 2012, 2013, 2017). The Global Childhoods project extended this earlier project, with a focus on the lifeworlds of Year 4 (ages 9 and 10) children in global cities (Melbourne, Hong Kong, and Singapore) in the year that the first international high stakes testing regimes (TIMSS and PIRLS) begins. It thus had a broader scope than the original project with more focussed research questions pertaining to the children's lifeworlds inside and outside their schooling experiences. Our goals in researching with children in these projects was to explore aspects of their lifeworlds and generate new understandings about their experiences, beyond high stakes testing. In order to do this, a broad range of methods was used which we detail below, with a focus on learning dialogs. The research projects discussed here had ethical approval from the universities at which the first author was based at the time of each project.

In the MKL project, students and parents completed closed question surveys and the research team conducted classroom ethnographies in order to study the lifeworlds of children, primarily in Hong Kong. What became apparent in conversations with some of the children while doing the ethnographies, was that the design of future projects would benefit from more directly asking children about their personal experiences by developing a qualitative method for this purpose. While conducting research with children is now fairly common, it still remains infrequent when considering classroom practices and children's learning, especially with early childhood and primary school students (an exception to this is the literature exploring children's 'ideal' school and learning environments e.g. Bland and Sharma-Brymer, 2012; Burke and Grosvenor, 2015). In the initial planning for the Global Childhoods project, the notion of video diaries/journals or video/digital diaries was explored, before conceptualising 'digital dialogs', using alliteration for effect. The digital dialogs sought to explore children's experiences and perspectives on their lives and learning, where children were given a choice of method to use.

In order to explore the 'usefulness' of this method, the digital dialogs were piloted with an intact class in an outer metropolitan suburb in Melbourne and then in the same school a year later. When conducting research in schools in intact classrooms we are always aware of fitting in with the busy schedules of teachers and students, and minimising disruptions to formal school learning. After talking with teachers, we decided that the provocations (questions) raised in the digital dialogs were of interest to the teachers and students and could best be conducted as a class activity. The digital dialogs arose out of the need for more nuanced responses than those obtained in the survey that was incorporated in the MKL project. They were conceptualised so that children were able to respond to the following provocations in any format, in their own words (written or verbal), and with or without images:

Monday morning

1. What are you looking forward to at school this week?
2. What activities did you do on the weekend? What was the most fun you had this weekend?

Friday afternoon

1. What did you learn at school this week? Was it hard to learn, or easy to learn? And did you enjoy it?
2. What are you looking forward to doing most on the weekend?

When this method was first piloted in Melbourne the idea was to incorporate a 'video diary' called 'digital dialogs' where the children were asked similar questions and responded on camera, in a voice memo, or via an app like Explain Everything (<https://explaineverything.com/>) which allows for text and static and moving images. This was in a school that had a bring your own device (BYOD) policy and the students were fluent in the use of the Explain Everything app. While offering different modalities, including technology, worked quite effectively in Melbourne, it was more difficult to

implement in the context of the classroom experiences of the other cities – Hong Kong and, later, Singapore – due to lack of immediate access to technology. In these cities, technology was located in computer labs in the schools with scheduled times and taught by specialist teachers. At this point, because some children would not have the opportunity to use technology to document their views, it was decided to refine the method further to focus on paper-based responses and a template was designed for this purpose. At this stage the name was changed from digital dialogs to learning dialogs.

The learning dialogs method for the main Global Childhoods project included a new iteration of the method where children responded to questions by writing and/or drawing, to reflect on aspects of their lifeworlds, with a particular focus on their educational experiences. The provocations were changed slightly to be more responsive to the new study and research questions. We calibrated the components of the survey, and we revised the four provocations in the learning dialogs to produce additional qualitative data. Thus, Monday question 2 and Friday question 2 were included, alongside two of the earlier questions:

Monday morning

1. What are you looking forward to at school this week?
2. How do you feel about how you are doing at school?

Friday afternoon

1. What did you learn at school this week? Was it hard to learn, or easy to learn? And did you enjoy it?
2. What job do you want to do when you leave school?

These revised questions focused more on children's school experiences (and future career aspirations) as a complement to the other methods. In particular, children were asked to complete the learning dialogs during the first week of the ethnographies in each school, thus from our observations we were able to understand in more detail which aspects of school children were looking forward to and the contexts around their learning as we were present in the classrooms for the whole week.

Due to practicalities of time and managing a project across three global cities with a larger number of children, and with varying access to people and resources across sites, a template was used for the learning dialogs so that it could be completed in the classroom as an activity with paper and pencils/markers. Children were asked to respond to each provocation on one page, with writing and/or drawings, along with demographic details (date of birth and gender) on the first page (with date of birth used to determine age and to match the Monday and Friday responses). The template was translated into Chinese for the students in Hong Kong, with two researchers checking the translations of student responses into English for analysis.

The goal of the learning dialogs as a method was not to present children's accounts of (aspects of) their lifeworlds and then claim to see the world from their perspective. Instead, the method focused on children sharing their reflections on their lifeworlds and foregrounding them as part of a broader picture of their lives and the contexts in which they lived. As James (2007) notes, this does not make the research more 'authentic', or break down power relationships between the adult researchers and the children, but it represented an attempt to broaden the data that was produced in the research. We made an explicit link here to the notion of learning dialogs as contemplations, as the children were invited to reflect on their lifeworlds directly in relation to the questions asked of them. The children's responses formed an integral part of the data, complementing and extending the other data which was collected. The learning dialogs provided a picture of children's lives alongside

the quantitative survey, which provided a broader view of lifeworlds from a larger number of children from a range of contexts, the classroom ethnographies, which focused on everyday practices at school, and the re-enactments which were an intimate video portrait of a small number of children in their home environment (based on the work of Pink e.g. Pink and Leder Mackley, 2014). These different data sources then came together to form the data corpus, providing a broad-ranging picture of the lifeworlds of 9- and 10-year-old children in three global cities.

The data produced in the learning dialogs method was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). This begins with the coding of data and looking for patterns in the data in order to produce themes. As previously stated, our purpose in this article is to present and discuss the process of developing a qualitative research method that included children's perspectives. Our intent here is not to analyse the data per se, but rather to highlight the potential of the method, and to show the different ways it was interpreted and undertaken by students. A more detailed discussion of the findings, analyses and discussion can be found in (Bartholomaeus and Yelland, forthcoming).

Learning dialogs data examples

Here we detail some examples from the digital dialogs and the learning dialogs in order to consider how the method was interpreted (and responded to) by children. We present examples here that we have chosen to illustrate some of the different responses to the provocations. Four examples are presented from the pilot studies followed by two examples from one student from the revised format in the main study. We allowed a 30-minute session for the activity and all the children produced some sort of artifact for each of the two questions on each of the two days. There were a wide variety of examples and we chose four of these here to highlight different approaches:

1. Handwritten format with no drawings

2. Handwritten inset on panel with decorations
3. Digital (iPad) Explain Everything app with animations (spinning stars)
4. Digital (iPad) Explain Everything app with embedded video, sound and text

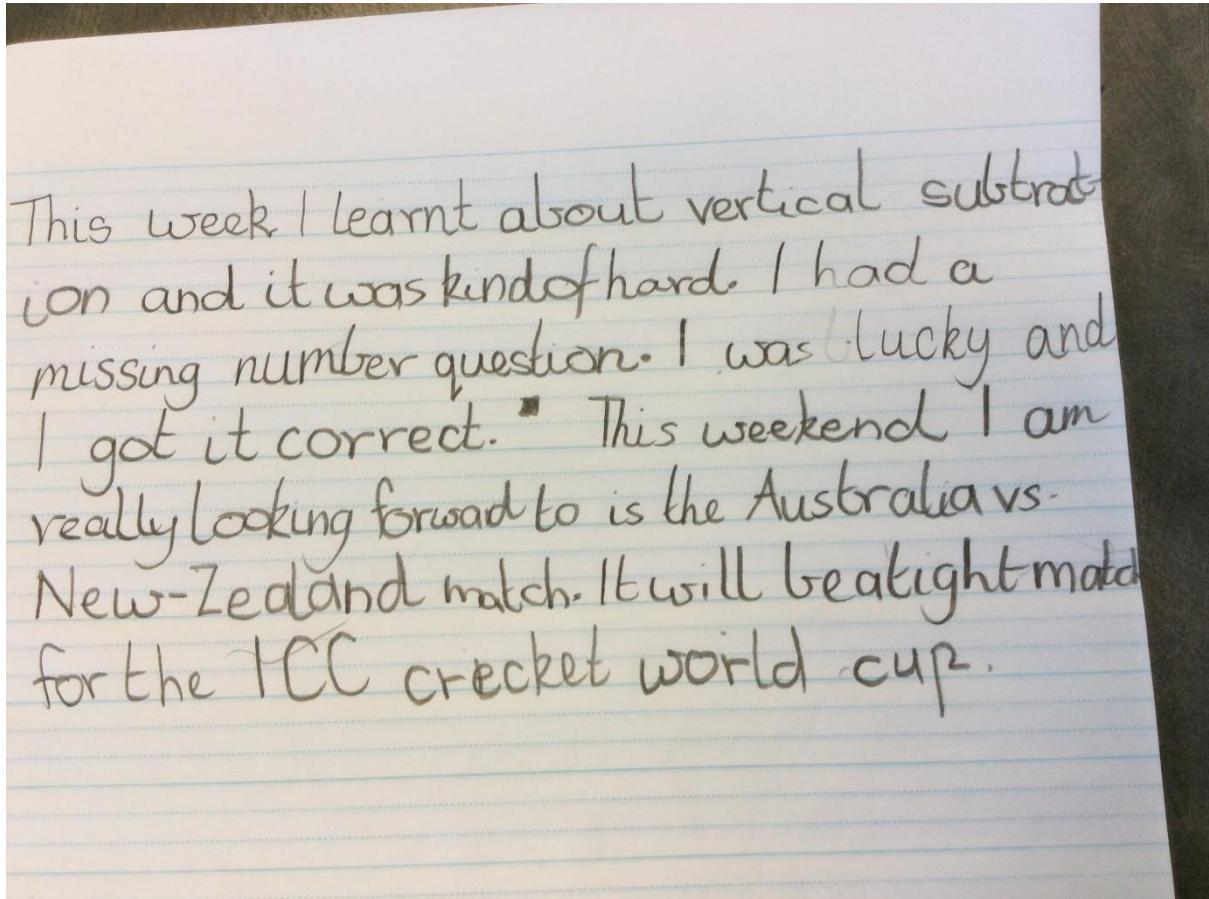


Figure 1. Handwritten format with no drawings

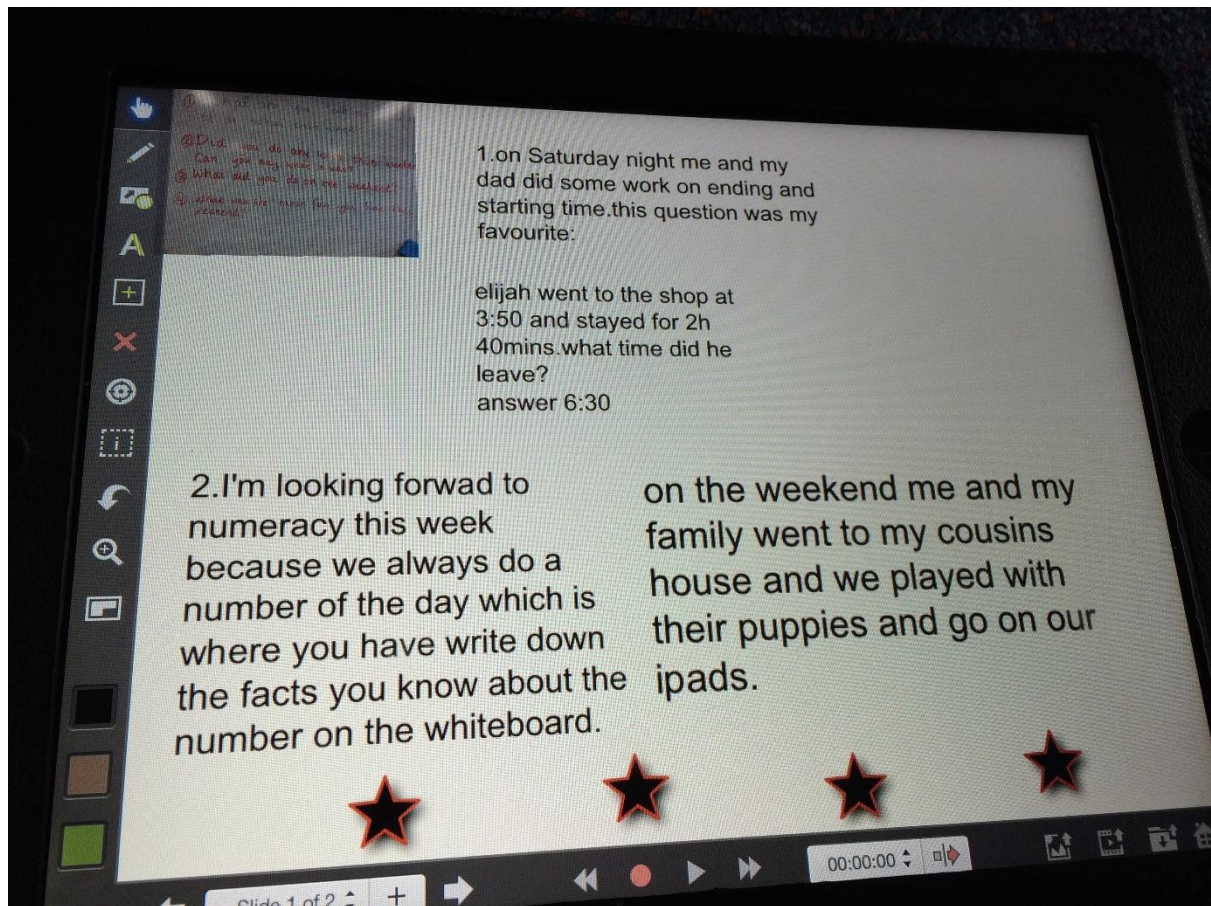


Figure 3. Digital (iPad) Explain Everything app with animations

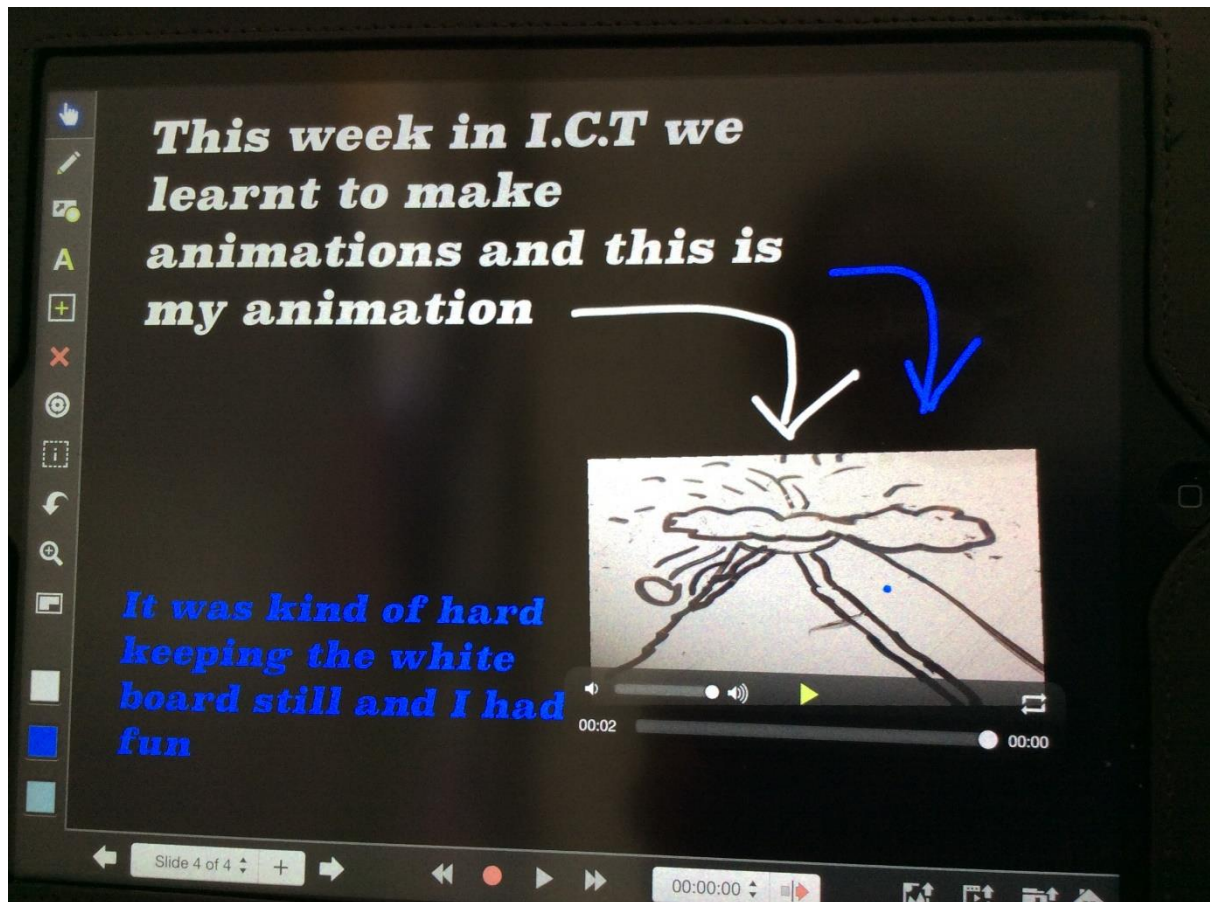


Figure 4. Digital (iPad) Explain Everything app with embedded video, sound and text

The children responded with data items that were not only varying in modality but also in content, as we would expect. It appeared as though most children enjoyed planning and deciding the format of their responses and that they were more enthusiastic about responding to some of the questions than others. For example, in Figure 1, the boy wrote in pencil that he really liked doing mathematics and found it challenging and juxtaposed this by sharing how much fun his Dad and he would have watching the cricket. In Figure 2, a girl wrote a longer narrative sharing a detailed account about a series of events over the weekend and not only spent the whole session on her response, but took it home to finish and brought it back to her teacher on the next day. In Figure 3, a boy chose to write brief responses on his iPad and also included animated stars at the bottom of this 'page' which spin perpetually as the information is being read when viewed on the iPad. He also included a photo of the questions he was responding to. In Figure 4, the boy wanted to include a volcano animation that

he had created in an Explain Everything 'slide' as the highlight of his week. He did this in less than 15 minutes and then went on to type his responses to the other provocations without illustration – or proofreading his final copy.

Thus, the examples show a range of types of modes and formats, and also that some children chose specific events and activities in response to the provocations that were highlights for them, while others (e.g. Figure 2) presented a chronology of their whole weekend. It was useful to be able to have such rich data produced for thematic analysis in a relatively short period of time (two sessions of half an hour each) in a format which we could take away with us. In contrast, if we had interviewed children individually or in focus groups, we would have needed to spend longer collecting the data and/or it would have only been feasible for a smaller number of children to be involved. Further, being in conversation with children is very different than having them choose the format and modality for their responses. This is not to say the learning dialogs might be better, or worse, than other methods, but rather that each data collection method produces different data, and the learning dialogs method allows for responses to come directly from the children in their own 'hand'.

As stated above, beyond the pilot stage, when the larger project took place in three global cities with six classes of students, we modified the format in order to accommodate a larger number of students. We also modified the questions to align more effectively with the modified research questions, as well as to complement the other data collection methods used. However, the process remained the same, that is, the activity took place in a session of approximately 30 minutes with the researchers present. A total of 150 students in Melbourne, Hong Kong, and Singapore completed both the Monday and Friday learning dialogs for the main project. The example included here from Melbourne highlights that, although the options for responding were more limited than in the pilot studies (responses with handwriting and/or drawing), students could still have some influence on

how they responded and how much detail they included. Figures 5 and 6 are an example from a boy in a Melbourne school, to two of the provocations (one from Monday and the other from Friday). As in the pilot studies, the responses were varied with some students selecting more than one event, as this boy did, while others simply noted one activity they were looking forward to. In the example, the boy was quite detailed in his description of both the processes inherent to long division and achieving a gardening licence. His attention to detail was also evident in his explanation of what he wanted to do when he left school with two options being provided, both accompanied with the reason behind the choice. This student's text and drawings almost interacted in his responses in a conversational style, which was also reflected in some of the other students' responses. While student responses ranged from a few words to a whole page of writing, with various drawings, the examples from this student represent somewhere in between.

Learning Dialogs

Birthday	
Gender	male/boy

Please share your thoughts (drawing is welcomed)

1. What are you looking forward to at school this week?

example
12 r 1 Long Division
$$\begin{array}{r} 10 \overline{)121} \\ \underline{-100} \\ 21 \\ \underline{-20} \\ 1 \end{array}$$

I would like to practice my long division or maths skills because I'm not that good at math and I sometimes forget how to do long division

I'm also looking forward to be doing ICT because I FINALLY got my garden scenes. I want to go into the garden and plant some plants.
shovel spade
garden scenes
I forgot how to spell

Figure 5. Handwritten with drawings

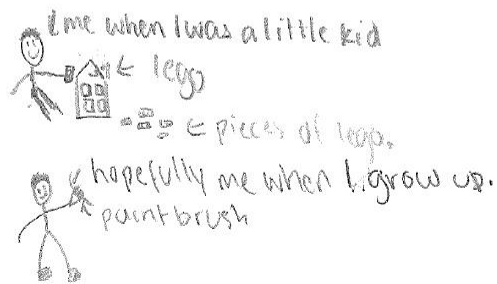
22nd Of MARCH

Friday Melbourne 2019

2. What job do you want to do when you leave school? I either want to be an architect or a doctor.

REASON: I want to be an architect because I love designing and building structures.

REASON: I would also like to be a doctor because I want to help save people's lives.



2

Figure 6. Handwritten with drawings

This iteration of the learning dialogs template was useful for a larger number of children, who did not all have straightforward access to technology at school. The use of a template made it possible to collate all the responses in each city effectively as well as to be able to sort them in a variety of ways for analysis (e.g. by question, city, gender, birth date).

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have focused on explaining the process of designing and developing a qualitative method in our research exploring children's lifeworlds. We have emphasised that learning dialogs are one method included as part of a larger research strategy, where multiple methods work together to create a picture of children's lifeworlds. We contend that when engaged in research design and when working with children in situ, in intact classrooms, it is important to conceptualise the project holistically, so that the component parts will complement each other and address the research questions posed. Furthermore, we have emphasised the importance of recognising that data is produced in research and that the methodology and methods impact on the 'findings', with researchers ultimately deciding what and how data is collected, analysed, and (re)presented (James, 2007).

In mapping the creation and piloting of the learning dialogs research method and its use in different iterations, we have also been able to highlight some practicalities of conducting research with children in schools. For example, access to technology, and familiarity with using technology to express ideas, can impact on how children are able to participate in research. While students in the Melbourne pilot studies had access to iPads as part of their regular schooling, access to technology was more restricted in Hong Kong and Singapore. As we outlined above, we would also argue that children may be more familiar with being asked questions about their lives in western contexts compared to Asian countries. This is likely to impact on how children approach such research activities. Another key practicality related to the number of students participating in the research, which increased significantly from the pilot studies to the main study. This impacted on how qualitative data could be produced and analysed with larger numbers of students. We suggest that using a template allowed for this data to be produced more effectively in the main project, and that this suited the project better than the broader choice of modalities in the pilot studies.

Ultimately, we would argue that different iterations of the learning dialogs method produced 'useful' research data aimed at addressing the research questions for the project. In terms of the main study, the learning dialogs method worked alongside a number of other methods to provide a picture of children's lifeworlds in the three locations. This highlights the importance of adapting methods for different projects and contexts, and being aware that what seems to produce 'useful' data in one setting may not in another. Indeed, the method of learning dialogs has already been adapted by the first author and her colleagues working with children from refugee and migrant backgrounds in the form of 'identity dialogs', as part of their broader research strategy. These dialogs will generate data that focus on the expectations and imaginings of children, what they think they can do and how they think they will be, when entering preschool.

Contemporary childhoods are complex and in seeking to understand the lifeworlds of children it is evident that simple answers to complex issues are not useful. Research needs to be designed to reflect this. In this research project we wanted to include data that reflected children's contemplations about aspects of their lifeworlds (in and out of school). Our approach includes engaging directly with children about their understandings and perspectives (in the qualitative learning dialogs and after school re-enactments, the quantitative surveys, and in informal interactions in the ethnographies), but also goes beyond this to more generally understand the contexts in which children live. We draw on methods that are broader than children's perspectives, such as talking with teachers and parents and observing in classrooms, considering children beyond being individuals, to seeing them in action with others and in connection with the locations and routines of their daily lives. This also includes considering the wider contexts that impact on their opportunities, particularly in the form of curriculum and policy imperatives. This both complements the existing research asking children directly about their lives and challenges the assumptions that children (or people of any age) can offer definitive pictures of their own lifeworlds.

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