Unlocking voices? Child-centred creative research methods in a school ethnography

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Abstract

This paper explores methodological findings from a study on the development of ethnic identities of migrant children and perceptions of their school environment in Brexit England. A school ethnography was undertaken in a multi-ethnic institution in Southeast England, involving participant observation and creative methods with pupils from migrant backgrounds. The study employed child-centred methods, specifically drawing, photo voice, and Persona Dolls. The findings show that the methods facilitated children to express their thoughts and feelings and offered deep insights into their school experiences, identities, and relationships. However, structural and procedural barriers in the wider school environment limited the full expression of children's voices.

Introduction

Within childhood research and social sciences scholarship more broadly, researchers have long grappled with how to authentically engage children within their research (Johnson and West, 2022). In particular, significant attention has been devoted to the use of different research methods, primarily creative methods, as tools for the facilitation of voice, enabling children to articulate their experiences in nuanced and ethically grounded ways

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(Azzarito, 2023; Everley, 2021; Moyse, 2023). Such approaches not only generate rich data but also position children as active contributors to knowledge production, challenging traditional power dynamics that often marginalise their voices. However, while creative research methods hold transformative potential, their application in institutional settings - such as schools - can be complicated by structural constraints, adult-centric norms, and the competing priorities of educational environments.

The original research project from which this paper is developed (see Bogossian, 2024) examined how migrant children construct and negotiate their transnational ethnic identities and perceive their school environment within the broader social and political context of Brexit Britain. This paper aims to explore the extent to which the creative research methods employed enabled these children to express their voices freely. By employing a variety of creative tools, such as drawings, photo-voice, and Persona Dolls, within an ethnographic approach, the study gave children a platform to express their experiences and perspectives in ways that traditional research methods might overlook. In doing so, the research not only uncovered important insights into their lives but also validated the children's voices by providing them with an active role in the research process. This approach fostered a deep, nuanced understanding of their lives, allowing for a rich and more authentic portrayal of their experiences that might otherwise remain unheard. However, while child-centred methods proved effective in generating authentic and detailed data in this study, some structural and procedural barriers limited the full expression of children's voices. The key contribution of this paper to existing methodological debates in childhood studies is a problematisation of the use of methods which seek to facilitate voices within environments which arguably may inhibit them. By highlighting the tension between the desire to authentically engage children and the realities of institutional constraints, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions about the ethical and practical challenges of employing creative research methods within educational contexts.

This paper is structured as follows. First, it provides a contextual overview of the population of the study, namely children from Polish families in Britain. We then move to present discussions around school ethnography and child-centred research methods, and how 'empowerment' and unlocking voices are key aspects of this approach. The paper then moves to discuss the specific methods employed in this study, with attention also devoted to sampling and positionality. In presenting our key findings, we focus on instances where creative methods facilitate children to express their thoughts and emotions in an open way, and others where their voices remained 'locked'. We then draw the paper to a conclusion, arguing that creative methods are valuable when undertaking qualitative research with children, offering an inclusive platform for children to share broader aspects of their lives. However, there is some way to go to authentically capturing children's voices when researching in spaces such as schools, which are skewed towards adult authority and control (Wilkinson and Budworth, 2025).

Background and context

After 2004, when the European Union's (EU) enlargement saw the accession of several Eastern European countries, including Poland, Vertovec (2007) coined the term

superdiversity to describe London and Great Britain more generally. This concept refers to a diversification of diversity, where unprecedented levels of immigration beyond more established gender, national, and ethnic groups meet in the same space at a level never encountered before. Ethnic groups established their own institutions such as schools, churches, cultural centres, and businesses, which helped solidify their place within the United Kingdom (UK).

However, this period of integration was paralleled by a growing wave of anti-immigration rhetoric and increasingly hostile attitudes towards migrants, which culminated in the 2016 Brexit referendum, where debates over sovereignty and immigration control dominated the campaign. The result was a narrow vote to leave the EU, largely driven by concerns about free movement and the perceived need to "take back control" of Britain's borders (Virdee and Mcgeever, 2017: 1804). In the years following the referendum, the atmosphere became increasingly hostile toward migrant communities, with a notable rise in anti-immigrant sentiments and xenophobia (Abranches et al., 2020; Narkowikz, 2023).

The socio-political context surrounding the Brexit referendum can be characterised by a renegotiation of the boundaries of whiteness. While Polish migrants, as white Europeans, were often presumed to assimilate more easily than non-white groups, this period saw them become targets of specific stereotypes, discrimination, and even violence. This targeting was evidenced by a documented rise in hate crimes (Cavali, 2019), including instances of explicit xenophobic hostility such as the distribution of letters addressed to "Polish vermin" in London communities with high Polish populations (Myślińska, 2016). A palpable climate of anxiety consequently led some individuals to avoid speaking Polish in public to prevent potential discrimination (Rzepnikowska, 2019).

Consequently, Poles in the UK came to occupy an ambiguous racialised position. While often benefiting from a degree of privilege relative to African or Asian migrants, their integration was simultaneously fraught with tension and othering. This liminality is exemplified by scholarly arguments that some Polish migrants engaged in racism themselves as a tactical manoeuvre for racial survival within the British racial hierarchy (Fox and Mogilnicka, 2019). Ultimately, this complex situation powerfully underscores that race and whiteness are not fixed biological categories but fluid social constructs, the meanings of which are contingent upon and reshaped by shifting political regimes and national narratives.

This shift is particularly significant for Polish children, who navigate both their ethnic heritage and the broader, often hostile, environment in British society. A study conducted by Daniela Sime and colleagues (2022) found that many Eastern European children reported feeling insecure, uncertain, worried, and scared about their position in Britain post-Brexit, with 77% experiencing racism or xenophobia based on their nationality, accent, or appearance, and nearly half observing increased racism since the EU Referendum. They highlighted the rise of anti-immigration rhetoric and class-based narratives of "undesirable migrants". Another study found that British teachers and pupils stereotype, marginalise, and pathologise Polish and other Eastern European pupils (Tereshchenko et al., 2019). These have potentially dramatic consequences for the identity development of these children and for their wellbeing and happiness in and outside their school.

Against this backdrop, the study on which this paper is based explored how Polish children experience their school climate and form their ethnic identities in this complex social landscape. The next sections discuss the ethnographic approach, which involved spending time and getting to know the participants in one school, and the child-centred creative methods employed that allowed the research to not only engage with their perspectives but also to provide a nuanced understanding of how children respond to these broader socio-political dynamics.

Research design: School ethnography

Ethnography is a methodological approach used to explore the cultural practices, beliefs, and social interactions of specific groups or communities (Madden, 2022). It relies on immersive fieldwork and participant observation, allowing researchers to deeply engage with the community they are studying (Madden, 2022). One of the strengths of ethnography is its flexibility in data collection, which can include interviews, observations, and even artifacts like children's drawings. Importantly, ethnographers must exercise reflexivity (Wilkinson, 2016), as their role and positionality, that is, how their identity influences their interactions, can shape the research process. Reflexivity is particularly important when researching in school settings with children and working adults because power dynamics, trust, and the researcher's presence can significantly influence participants' behaviour, the quality of relationships formed, and ultimately the validity of the data collected.

By spending time in children's natural environments, such as schools and playgrounds, researchers can gain deep insights into children's lived realities. Powell (2022) emphasises that these insights can reflect children's authentic experiences more accurately than traditional stand-alone research methods, such as interviews or focus groups. School ethnographies, in particular, are valuable for uncovering cultural and institutional norms (Nichols, 2019), revealing hidden inequalities that may not be visible through other research methods.

School ethnography is a research approach that involves the detailed observation and analysis of the everyday lives of school environments, practices, and cultures (Bethune and Gilbert, 2019). By immersing themselves in the everyday activities of schools, ethnographers aim to understand the social dynamics, power structures, and educational processes that shape pupils' experiences (González, 2023). This approach typically includes participant observation, fieldnotes, interviews, and document analysis (Bethune and Gilbert, 2019), though more creative methods can be adopted within the ethnographic study. Ethnographic studies in schools provide valuable insights into issues such as inequality, identity formation, teacher-student interactions, and institutional norms. These studies contribute to a deeper understanding of how educational systems function on a micro-level and offer critical perspectives on how broader social, political, and economic forces influence schooling.

Using creative research methods with children

Creative methods have been widely adopted in childhood studies and the social sciences more broadly (Von Benzon et al., 2021). Creative methods place children at the very heart of the research process, recognising them as agentic beings, capable of shaping their own experiences (Johnson and West, 2022). These methods often involve creativity and play as core tools for engagement and data collection, making the process enjoyable and accessible for children (Wilkinson et al., 2022). A key feature of creative methods is the sensitivity to power dynamics between adults and children. Researchers pay special attention to how power relations might influence the research process and strive to minimise any imbalances (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2022), whilst recognising that it is impossible to eradicate power differentials completely (Spyrou, 2016a); even the researcher's taller stature and age can create a power dynamic (Corsaro, 2004).

Empowerment and 'unlocking' children's voices are central goals of creative methods, offering children a platform to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them (Stafford, 2017). In this paper, 'unlocking' is a term we use metaphorically to describe creating conditions in which children feel comfortable and supported to share their voices. Further, we define 'voices' as encompassing not only verbal expressions but also non-verbal communication, embodied practices, and creative forms of expression, such as drawings and play. We acknowledge critiques of privileging 'voice' in childhood research (James, 2007; Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011, 2016a; 2016b). These scholars critically interrogate assumptions of authenticity, representation, and adult mediation, and we position our work within these debates.

Research methods

This research adopted an inductive, qualitative methodology with ethnography as the primary approach. By adopting an ethnographic lens, this study offered deep insights into the ways in which migrant children navigate their complex identities and school experiences within a politically charged environment. A 'palette' (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018) of child-centred, creative methods was employed with primary school children of Polish backgrounds, namely drawing, photo voice, and Persona Dolls, to explore their identity development and sense of belonging in their school setting amidst a 'hostile environment' against ethnic minorities in the UK. In this paper, 'child-centredness' is understood as a methodological and ethical orientation that seeks to prioritise children's perspectives within the constraints of relational and structural contexts. Rather than assuming a binary in which adults are active and children passive, this approach recognises children as agentic participants whose expressions, which include resistance, silence, and non-verbal communication, are meaningful contributions to the research process. This conceptualisation acknowledges both the agency of children and the influence of adult researchers, institutional settings, and wider social norms. Further, our decision to employ a palette of methods (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018), recognises that children are not a homogenous group and that different methodological approaches may be more or less effective for children with diverse ethnic

identities, highlighting that child-centred practices must be flexible and responsive to the varied ways in which children engage, participate, and express their perspectives.

The drawing method offered children a valuable nonverbal avenue to express their emotions and experiences, fostering deeper insight into their perspectives while increasing engagement through an enjoyable activity (Literat, 2013). In this study, children were invited to illustrate a "happy day" and a "sad day" at school, revealing both emotional responses and mundane aspects of school life - from football victories to tedious spelling lessons. The drawing sessions doubled as discursive spaces, with spontaneous conversations about their outputs and other topics providing rich supplemental data, documented through field notes and vignettes. Following completion of their drawings, children verbally explained their creations, offering crucial interpretive context for the visual data.

Photo-voice empowers children to visually capture meaningful aspects of their environment, stimulating discussion and memory in ways that verbal methods alone may not (Shaw, 2021). By taking and selecting photos, participants gain agency (Padgett et al., 2013) while providing rich, nonverbal insights into their experiences. This approach is particularly effective for cross-cultural research, as it transcends language barriers and invites diverse interpretations. The photo-voice method empowered the children to take pictures of areas within their school that were meaningful to them. These photographs served as a springboard for discussions about their daily school lives, highlighting spaces where they felt comfortable or marginalised (Ali-Khan and Siry, 2014).

The use of Persona Dolls[1] as a research tool provides an opportunity to facilitate discussions around difference, migration, and racism (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2022). Through these dolls, children can project their thoughts and feelings, enabling the researcher to explore sensitive topics in an accessible and engaging way. In the Persona Doll session, the researcher introduced the children to a doll named Maciej, a recently arrived Polish boy whose story was partially inspired by the experiences of some of the research participants. The researcher 'voiced' Maciej's experiences and invited the children to engage with his story by asking questions such as, "Why do you think he feels sad?" or "What would you do in this situation?" This encouraged them to reflect empathetically on their own lives. At the end of the session, the children created postcards for Maciej, incorporating words and themes from the research discussions.

The fieldwork was conducted over a period of 3 months, from September to December 2021, at Saint Achilleus' Catholic Primary School (SACS)[2] in Southeast England. Due to the multi-ethnic composition of this school, children's migration background was ordinary and not salient, making it an overall welcoming environment for all pupils to form connections. The participants were 15 Polish children, aged 9–11 years (Years 4–6), comprising eight boys and seven girls. While three of the children were born in Poland, the majority were UK-born to either one or both Polish parents; however, country of birth was understood as only one of the many repertoires the children used to enact their identity (Bogossian, 2026).

To gain access to the children, the first author embraced the role of a "special adult", as conceptualised by Corsaro (2004). This status was established by spending little time in the staffroom and instead embedding themselves in the classrooms and playgrounds. They

were introduced to the children as someone writing a book about Polish children's experiences and would therefore be spending time chatting and playing with them. By actively participating in their games and conversations without directing them, eschewing typical adult authority, the first author built trust and rapport, becoming a familiar and non-threatening insider in their social worlds.

The process of data collection and analysis followed the core tenets of ethnography, where these activities are understood as concurrent and iterative processes rather than distinct phases. This approach generated a thick ethnographic description, which wove together fieldnotes from participant observation with the outputs and vignettes from the creative sessions. This integrated corpus of data, which constitutes the social world of the research context, was then analysed in search of recurring social patterns. This was achieved through a thematic analysis of the material (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2023). This allowed for the iterative development of themes throughout the research process, ensuring that the findings were closely tied to the children's lived experiences and emerging narratives.

Positionality

It is important to reflect on researcher positionality in a school ethnography as a way of acknowledging that researchers bring their own perspectives, biases, and assumptions to the field, and these can shape the way they engage with participants and interpret data (Powell, 2022). The first author who conducted the fieldwork activities with children is a migrant researcher in England and a former schoolteacher. Due to their migrant and ethnic background, as well as their non-native command of the English language, the researcher found it relatively easy to access children's social worlds as they shared a sense of being "outsiders" within the broader English social context, as thus in some way can be considered to have "insider" knowledge (we refer the reader to Adu-Ampong and Adams, 2020, for an interesting discussion of negotiating the insider-outsider researcher positionality in fieldwork). This shared experience of navigating life in a host country fostered rapport with the children, allowing them to feel more comfortable and understood during the research process.

The researcher's background as a former schoolteacher informed their adaptive approach to the school environment. This required ongoing cultural and procedural negotiation with gatekeepers, particularly regarding differing norms around physical contact - where affectionate gestures common in the researcher's previous cultural contexts (like hugging school children) were deemed inappropriate in the UK and required conscious restraint. Nevertheless, the researcher's institutional familiarity facilitated navigation of these cultural differences in adult-child interaction norms, while ensuring all engagement adhered to local safeguarding protocols.

However, the researcher's positionality also brought challenges. While their background created a sense of solidarity, it may have also shaped the way they interpreted children's narratives, potentially introducing biases influenced by their own experiences of migration and belonging. Moreover, the researcher's non-native English language skills, while an asset in establishing connections, occasionally created communication barriers that required careful reflection to ensure the children's voices were accurately

captured and represented. This duality reifies the importance of reflexivity in under-standing how the researcher's identity intersects with the research process, influencing both opportunities and limitations in the field.

Ethics

Due to the delicate nature of the research and the young age of the participants, ethical protocols were a key priority throughout the study. The first author introduced themself to pupils in Years 4–6, clearly outlining the purpose of the research and emphasising that their involvement was entirely optional. Following Corsaro's (2004) non-intrusive methodology, they positioned themselves discreetly in classrooms and communal areas during breaks, allowing children to approach them voluntarily. The researcher respected the children's autonomy, viewing silence or withdrawal as a temporary choice to disengage. At times, children invited the researcher to join in games like basketball and tag, which they accepted as a way to foster trust and gain insight into children's peer interactions. Parents were informed of the study via the headteacher through email and school bulletins, with op-portunities to ask questions or decline participation. Since obtaining individual consent from all guardians was not practical, the headteacher provided consent in loco parentis.

For the structured group sessions, Polish children's guardians were given a compre-hensive information sheet and signed a consent form permitting their children's partici-pation. The children themselves received a simplified, child-friendly version of the information sheet and were asked to give verbal assent before participating. To help reduce power imbalances and promote a sense of ownership, children who participated in these sessions were invited to choose their own pseudonyms. For those not directly involved in the group activities, pseudonyms were assigned to protect their anonymity. Throughout these sessions, the researcher remained observant of non-verbal cues and signs of discomfort to ensure the children felt safe and had the freedom to participate or withdraw as they wished.

Formal ethical clearance was granted by University of Surrey (Reference Number: FASS 20-21 085). All collected data was anonymised and securely stored on OneDrive, managed by the University of Surrey, with access restricted via password protection. Personal identifiers were deleted, while research data was retained for a decade in line with the Data Protection Act of 1998. All data handling complied with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as outlined by University of Surrey.

Findings and discussion

Herein we present findings under two key headings: some voices unlocked, and others remain locked. This highlights how, to a certain extent, the methods allowed for the expression of some children's voices, while in other instances, their voices were restricted within the research context of the school setting.

Some voices unlocked

We found that the use of creative research methods in this study facilitated open conversations about children's perceptions of the school climate. During the drawing activity, for example, children not only talked about different features of the school they valued but also made suggestions for improvements. This can be seen in the excerpt below, where children talked freely about SACS.

> Researcher: how do you feel about SACS?
>
> Agatha: They don't exclude us. They always treat us like other children.
>
> Snipe: Maybe they should like make more activities like this.
>
> Researcher: Like this?
>
> Snipe: Yeah. Like, like, crafts, like, you can do different things with cardboard paper. Colourful paper.
>
> Researcher: There's a class after school you could do it.
>
> Snipe: Yeah, but like… during school.
>
> Agatha: So there's a school right next to my house, but I didn't go to it because it's, like, the list of schools in [county] from best to worst. SACS is always right at the top. Yeah, and [the other school] at the bottom. There was that school and it always had racism and things like that.
>
> (Drawing session, Year 6, October 2021)

The excerpt shows that children reported feeling included in the school community. For example, Agatha commented, "They don't exclude us. They always treat us like other children." This highlights a sense of belonging among her and her classmates, suggesting a positive school environment. Othering can be an emotionally triggering experience that often cannot be easily articulated in words (Ahmed, 2004). However, in this case, Agatha was able to clearly articulate a comparison between the two institutions, based on official rankings and instances of racial discrimination. It is interesting to note that the drawings she produced during the session were not directly related to the themes she was discussing in the interactions. Agatha drew a school trip as a good day and a spelling session as a negative day - quite mundane events that were part of their school everyday lives. In fact, drawings represented typical school days, such as playing outdoors with friends as a good day and being left out as a sad day. By engaging in child-centred creative methods, the study created a space where children could share their perspectives on their daily lives at school, without the pressure and the pre-empting structure of direct interviews.

The process of creating visual representations and engaging in reflective discussions about these images provided participants with an expressive channel to voice their inner stories as well as an active and empowering stake in the research study, which has been highlighted by previous research that employed drawings as a key research method (Literat, 2013). Additionally, the method's playful approach and minimal reliance on language make it particularly effective for working with children and young people from

diverse cultural and social backgrounds (Coyne et al., 2021), including recently arrived migrant children (Due et al., 2014). This participatory approach allowed the researcher to capture nuanced insights into their experiences in a relaxed setting, while minimising power imbalances between the adult researcher and child participants.

In addition to Agatha's account of the school environment, the excerpt also shows children's engagement with the drawing activity through the account of Snipe, who suggested more crafts-based activities during school time to foster participation and feedback about the school environment. The cross-over of these two themes reveals how children see spaces such as the one offered by the study as appropriate to share their honest views about their school environment. Through the use of child-centred creative methods like drawing, the research helped to unlock children's voices and mitigate power imbalances between the adult researcher and child participants by offering children a more equal platform for expression. The drawing method allowed children to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in ways that are more comfortable and accessible to them (Literat, 2013), rather than relying solely on verbal or written communication, which may be influenced by the adult's expectations.

Another theme that was central to this study was the development of children's ethnic identities and their transnational links with their heritage country. During the creative sessions, pupils described their human and more-than-human connections in Poland and how they use holiday trips to update these relationships. This theme was not part of the original preoccupations of the first author while designing the study, but emerged as a key aspect of children's lives. Memories of their 'home' country, car travels, and holidays were common themes identified in the accounts of my participants, even though they were, again, not related to the products of their drawings. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

> Agatha: My birthday is in like, the summer holidays. In summer holidays are normally at the very end of school. I'm normally just given the sweets, it's not the best time [to have birthday].
>
> Researcher: Yeah, […] but [in Summer] you also get a chance to do a lot of fun stuff.
>
> Snipe: We go to Poland. But this year we couldn't because of Covid.
>
> Researcher: Do you always go to Poland?
>
> Snipe: Yeah.
>
> Agatha: We can go for a really long time. But we always go in the summer and in the winter.
>
> (Drawing session, Year 6, October 2021)

Adopting an inductive approach allowed for spontaneous topics that children brought up, as opposed to guiding them through predefined themes. This open-ended methodology created space for children to share what mattered most to them, offering valuable insights into their lived experiences. These spontaneous interactions revealed unexpected but significant themes, most notably the centrality of transnational mobility in shaping ethnic identities. While drawing sessions were designed to explore school experiences, they frequently became platforms for children like Snipe and Agatha to spontaneously share stories of regular trips to Poland - describing car journeys and visits to relatives as fundamental aspects of their lives. This flexibility underscored the value of creative

methods in capturing the organic flow of children's thoughts, highlighting themes of shared importance that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

The use of creative research tools provided children with an accessible means to reflect on their transnational identity. For instance, through discussions about their trips to Poland, children like Snipe and Agatha shared how these experiences were deeply intertwined with their sense of self. Methods such as drawing and photo-voice, rather than relying on direct questioning, offered a flexible framework that allowed children to navigate the concept of identity on their own terms (Ali-Khan and Siry, 2014; Literat, 2013). By avoiding adult-centric structures, these creative approaches facilitated a more authentic exploration of their lived experiences, shedding light on the nuanced ways they understood and expressed their transnational identities.

Others remain locked…

In some instances, even the use of creative and collaborative methods proved insufficient to enable children to fully express their voices. We found that, when undertaking a school ethnography, the researcher comes up against challenges such as time constraints, inflexible research structures (sometimes constrained by detailed ethics applications), and the negotiation of access with gatekeepers that can limit the potential of these creative methods. Furthermore, power relations may still marginalise children in the research relationship, as adults typically retain control over the interaction. Simultaneously, children's decisions about how much to share may limit the depth of information gathered, yet such choices should themselves be recognised as acts of agency and valid expressions of voice, even when conveyed through silence.

These complexities are evident in the following excerpt.

Researcher: What about you? You want to tell me about this drawing? Who are these people?

Simba: Me... and... Me and my friends.

Researcher: Which friend?

Simba: Charlie.

Researcher: Charlie?

Simba: We're playing... we're playing football together.

Researcher: So you're playing football together?

Simba: In the sun.

Researcher: In the sun? Yeah. When it's sunny. It's better. Of course. I totally agree with you and it's sunny and warm. It's much better than when it's cold. And drizzling. How do you feel that day?

Simba: We were really, really happy and excited

Researcher: Excited? about about what?

Simba: About me and Charlie playing football

Researcher: So, your friendship?

Simba: Yeah

Researcher: How is this friendship?

Simba: Really strong.

(Drawing session, Years 4/5, October 2021)

This interaction highlights the persistent power imbalances between the adult researcher and the child participant, Simba. Despite using a creative method – drawing - to encourage expression (Figure 1), Simba's responses remained brief and unelaborated. The researcher's repeated follow-up questions, aimed at deepening the conversation, were met with minimal engagement, such as "me and my friends" or "Charlie." These terse responses reveal Simba's limited willingness - or comfort level - to expand on his thoughts,

Figure 1. Simba's drawing of a good day.

showing how children retain agency in choosing how much to share. The researcher's persistence, while well-intentioned, also reflects an adult-centric inclination to "extract" data, potentially amplifying the power imbalance. One explanation for the limited engagement is that, even when creative methods are employed, the encounter can still feel constructed and imposed. This is supported by the fact that Simba's interactions outside the research setting, such as during break time, were far more detailed and spontaneous.

The previous excerpt also illustrates the nuanced dynamics of child-centred research. While creative methods can reduce some barriers, they do not entirely neutralise the structural power disparities inherent in both adult-child interactions and research encounters. In some way, Simba's responses are not solely a reflection of disinterest or discomfort but also an exercise of agency, emphasising the need to view research as a shared encounter rather than a one-sided process. While creative methods such as drawing have long been celebrated for creating a less intimidating research environment (Yuen, 2004), the adult's role as the researcher still holds power over the conversation, which may influence how children choose to engage, or not engage, depending on their comfort level and agency. The interaction reflects the complex nature of power dynamics in ethnographic research with children reported by others (Huf and Kluge, 2021; Russell and Barley, 2020) and underscores the importance of reflexivity in child-centred methodologies (Phelan and Kinsella, 2013), as researchers must remain aware that even creative approaches may not entirely mitigate the inherent power imbalances in adult-child interactions. Within this context, Spyrou (2016a) suggests that childhood researchers also attune to children's silence with care and respect. In line with Nairn and colleagues (2005), we suggest that although this interaction can teach very little about Simba's friendships, we can reflect on the contentious nature of producing knowledge with children and the practices in qualitative research, particularly within the structured constraints of school-based research, where time and environment may limit expression.

Time constraints

Another instance where power imbalances hindered the full expression of children's voices arose from significant time constraints. The research was conducted under the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the fieldwork schedule due to lockdown restrictions. Designed as part of a PhD with limited funding and rigid deadlines, the fieldwork period was significantly curtailed to just 3 months, far shorter than the extended durations typical of ethnographic studies. Although the first author spent intensive periods of time in the school and engaged with strategies to build rapport with children, this shortened period of fieldwork may have impacted the ability to create the necessary trust with participants for them to feel comfortable being open about their lives.

Additionally, the school's strict routines, designed for maintaining discipline and order, imposed further limitations. While the headteacher and staff agreed to accommodate child-centred creative sessions, they inevitably disrupted the school's stringent timetable. Pupils could only be spared for one lesson, leaving limited time to engage fully with the research study. Although the researcher made concerted efforts to utilise the available time efficiently, these constraints often curtailed children's ability to express themselves, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Kiz: She did remind me of something that happened over there on the tree. Everyone is like climb up. Yeah. And then the twins … Aleksy is in our class … then he was climbing up and fell. And then he had blood like leaking. So they ran to the office with blood in his hand.

Mistral: There was this bit of food sticking on the ground and it always makes me trip over.

Researcher: Yeah, it's dangerous. Show us your pictures because we don't have a lot of time.

(Photograph session, Years 5/6, November 2021)

Sessions like the one where Kiz and Mistral shared their photos underscored the importance of providing sufficient time for creative methods to fully realise their potential. The structured environment of a school, combined with the researcher's need to adhere to tight schedules, imposed constraints that inadvertently curtailed the children's opportunity to elaborate on their stories. In a critique against research that claims to capture children's authentic voices, Spyrou (2011) reminds us that certain institutional contexts, which are highly circumscribed by adult authority settings, such as a school, would be different from a less adult-controlled social setting like a playground.

The previous scenario also underscores a central tension in child-centred research: while the use of creative methods aims to empower children to share their experiences in their own terms (Azzarito, 2023; Everley, 2021; Moyse, 2023), practical constraints within the school setting can limit the extent to which this ideal is achieved. Researchers must navigate these challenges with sensitivity, recognising how logistical limitations, such as time pressures, can inadvertently shape the depth, quality, and authenticity of the data. Reflecting on these limitations is crucial for improving research design and ensuring that future studies prioritise children's voices, even within constrained settings.

On further reflection, revisiting the audio recording of these sessions revealed important lessons for the researcher beyond simply embarrassment. The playback provided an opportunity to critically assess the interaction, particularly the language and tone used, as well as the pacing of the sessions. Hearing the exchanges highlighted how subtle cues, such as the brevity of the children's responses, could signal a need for more time and space to encourage authentic self-expression. This reflexive exercise serves as an invaluable training tool, reminding researchers to prioritise children's narratives over the pressure to 'extract' data within constrained timeframes.

Conclusions

In conclusion, by employing child-centred creative methods, namely drawing, photo-voice, and Persona Dolls, this research provided a vital platform for children to express their unique perspectives. Importantly, the study highlights the efficacy of creative methodologies in ethnographic research, demonstrating how they can effectively engage children. Child-centred creative methods used within a school ethnography in this study offered children a space to share insights about their lives, though these insights did not always align with the researcher's expected outcomes. Despite the potential of these

methods, we found that certain structural and procedural barriers still limited the full expression of children's voices.

Challenges included power imbalances which, despite the researcher's best attempt to minimise, were still swayed towards adult authority. This is not necessarily surprising, and much research has reported that it is impossible to eradicate power imbalances (Spyrou, 2016a). Perhaps the most challenging factor to negotiate in this study was time constraints. Both the researcher and the pupils were mindful of the school timetable and that the school was a busy and time-pressed environment, which meant there was not always enough time to engage with children fully and meaningfully. In future research, such insights can inform a more thoughtful approach, including advocating for extended session times and adopting a more open-ended, child-centred approach.

Based on our experience, ethics applications often emphasise minimising burden on child participants, which can lead researchers to plan for shorter interviews, often less than 60 minutes. In this study, practical constraints imposed by the school further limited formal interview length. However, we raise the question of whether it is perhaps more unethical not to allow full scope and opportunity for children to have their voices heard. Longer research sessions with children could allow the researcher to foster a more authentic and less directive environment, where children's voices can be heard perhaps with greater depth. By embracing reflexivity as an ongoing process, researchers can better align their methodologies with the ethical commitment to unlocking children's voices and agency. We noted how, despite short research sessions, the ethnographic approach allowed extended engagement, enabling relationships to develop and providing children with opportunities to express themselves beyond brief, structured sessions.

Ultimately, it is important for us to reflect that, whilst researching with school children in the school setting (a necessary and fundamental component of school ethnography), the very setting of the research may have impacted on children's voices, reverting to the belief that children should be "seen and not heard" (Tisdall, 2014: 168). This can be reinforced by school settings, for instance, via authoritarian teaching styles, time demands from curriculum and assessment pressures, power imbalances, and indeed cultural norms. This research highlights the ongoing struggle to ensure inclusive and empowering research for and with children in these environments, even when the goal is to unlock and amplify their voices. It also underscores the necessity for ongoing reflexivity in research.

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Notes

1. Persona Dolls are hand-made dolls of cotton and polyester materials that can encourage discussion on issues of diversity with young children. They have been used in social research with nursery and primary school children as a tool to promote inclusion, fairness, equality, and empathy (Brown, 2008), to discuss delicate topics such as racial prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping and friendship and to foreground children's voices (Jesuvadian and Wright, 2011; Srinivasan and Cruz, 2015; Carter and Nutbrown, 2016).
2. All names are pseudonyms.

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