

ASPE/BERA SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP: RESEARCH METHODS SEMINAR

The ASPE/BERA Special Interest Group 'Primary Teachers' Work' is supported both by ASPE and the British Educational Research Association. The BERA is divided into Special Interest Groups to organise annual conference papers and arrange other events. The ASPE/BERA SIG held its first research methods seminar at the University of Bath on July 12th, 2007. The seminar was well attended and well received by those attending. The subject of the seminar was 'Educational Research with Children: Methodological Issues'. Four speakers presented papers addressing aspects of childhood research, a discussant summarised and suggested issues for further consideration before those present put additional points and/or asked further questions.

Caroline Lodge from the Institute of Education, University of London, entitled her paper 'About Face'. She defended the use of visual images (such as digital photographs of faces) as a research tool, drawing attention to the moral dilemmas and taboos that plague educational research from time to time. At the heart of her case was a conflict between two responsibilities all researchers must take seriously. Researchers must protect the sensitivities of vulnerable groups such as children, preserving confidentiality, anonymity and so forth - while at the same time ensuring their research actually works. They must use suitable research tools and fulfil research objectives. Caroline explained how and why 'political correctness' sometimes intercedes: photographing children is often thought dangerous and banned. Using images of minority groups wearing traditional or religious dress can be thought provocative. She illustrated the power of visual images (especially of faces) arguing for their continuing use in childhood and adult research.

Yolande Muschamp, University of Bath, entitled her paper 'Interviewing Children: Recreating Experience'. She spoke of the difficulties researchers have getting interview evidence from children. Often, children tell interviewers what they think the interviewers want to hear, and small children especially are easily intimidated by being asked questions by adults. She thought a 'shared frame of reference' using an artifact (toy or similar object) fostered a relaxed relationship within which children feel free to put their views. Interviewers should 'come clean' with children about what they are doing. Preparing children properly for interview is essential. In the end, researchers may simply have to take evidence they collect at face value, given it is merely one way of studying what happens in classrooms.

Jill Porter of the University of Bath spoke about 'Eliciting the View of All Children'. She collects the views of pupils (and adults) with disabilities and special educational needs. It was impossible not to be impressed by the resourcefulness, ingenuity and persistence of researchers such as Jill, and chastening to realise how rarely such children are researched. Getting the methodology right in the way Jill pioneers gives these pupils perhaps the best chance they have of putting their view on vital issues – in the case of

Jill's (funded) research, barriers to development and support needed. Although there are sometimes real problems communicating with people with communication-related disabilities Jill suggested using pictures, symbols, games (e.g. 'talking mats', 'point to point') and similar research tools.

Finally, **Elizabeth Barratt Hacking** of the University of Bath spoke about 'Children Researching their Urban Environment'. She and a research team had joined with children to research their urban school environment. Her paper told how far we have travelled in researching with children over recent years. Not only might school pupils be better placed than adults to report on their experiences they might be better placed than adults to research their schools and classrooms, provided they see themselves as genuine research partners and not research subjects. Elizabeth explained in some detail how to empower children as research partners, including joining with them in developing research tools rather than teachers teaching these to children.

After summarising main points of the papers, the 'discussant' suggested relevant issues for further discussion and pointed out how our notions of childhood are altering under pressure from research. There appear few responsibilities even young children cannot take with suitable guidance. He pointed to the difference between the sophisticated 'concept of the competent child' assumed by today's researchers and the more cautious, paternalistic 'concept of the learner' held in primary school classrooms, asking why this difference had persisted for so long and continued to persist.

Peter Silcock, member of the SIG, 'discussant' at the seminar.