

Ethical Principles and Children's Rights in Early Childhood Research: Tensions and Possibilities

Celebrating Early Childhood Contemporary Research
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Set the scene - ethics

- All research activity is governed by own ethical conventions.
- Educational and Early Childhood research draws on principles guided by BERA (2018), EECERA (2015) and own institutional procedures.
- There is an expectation that ethical behaviors are exhibited by individuals undertaking research with children.


Ethical practice is how researchers.....'conduct their work through morally upright practices, and how different points of view are considered' (Palaiologou, 2012:3)





The lives and stories that we hear and study, are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us.

Denzin, 1989:83



Set the scene – UNCRC (UN, 1989)

- Social, cultural, political, civil and economic rights in its 54 articles – PROVISION, PROTECTION, PARTICIPATION rights
- Mandated for children's place in the world as equal holders of rights to adults
- With rights goes the responsibility to uphold them
- Annual reports to the General Assembly: Providing impetus for research involving children
 - As **active**, rather than **passive** participants on matters that impact on their lives
 - to **have a voice that is heard** and is **taken seriously**

Levels of participation in research

- Historically, our empirical knowledge of children has **been by proxy** (Riddle and Tisdall, 2021; Gallagher and Gallagher, 2008)
 - Children have been marginalised and excluded from decisions that affect them
 - Children's lives captured through adult-centric view
 - Children's views filtered through adult interpretations
- Research **on** children: as providers of data
- Research **with** children: as consulted and collaborators (participatory)
- Research **by** children: as co-researchers, having ownership (Shaw, Brady and Davey in Brady and Graham, 2018 p.31)
- **Tensions:** can children truly own their own research? (Hammersley, 2015, 2016; Hammersley & Kim, 2021; Kim, 2016; Thomas, 2021)
- **Possibilities:** 'Rights'-motivated methodologies (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012) BUT: scepticism about children's participation and involvement in research addressing their right to have their views heard (Hammersley, 2015; Kim, 2016)

Ethics and rights working together in research

Ethical principles

Confidentiality/privacy - 'is considered the norm for the conduct of research' (BERA, 2018)

Voluntary informed consent – children are 'provided with full and honest information about the content, purpose and process of the research' (EECERA, 2015)

Right to withdraw - 'should be given the right to withdraw from the research at any point.' (EECERA, 2015)

'All social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm' (BERA, 2018)

Rights in research

Provision rights: *framed by Article 3* (confirm to high scientific standards; highly skilled researcher, well supervised; reassuring, secure ethical environment where children can realise their rights)

Protection rights: *framed by Article 36* (no harm or exploitation through taking part in research)

Participatory rights: framed by *Articles 12 & 13* (voice in all matters affecting children and views taken seriously; seek, receive and impart information of all kinds in media of children's choice; right to privacy vs right to autonomy)



Case study – is this really *voluntary* informed consent?

- "Why haven't I got one of those?"
- "I have to wear it. Cos that visitor said. The visitor said I have to."
- "Because I'm going to forest school. I need to keep the thing dry. The machine. I have to wear it. The lady gave them to us."
- "Because it's for forest school. It's for forest school and I do it today"



Case study – Children at the nexus of negotiating consent while exercising their rights

Szilvi: Stands up and turns to the adult: I'll be back in a minute, I am just going to meet the people you have brought with you. I don't know their names.

Hédi (Adult): You said such an important thing, Szilvi, take a seat and I'll introduce you to everyone....

(She points to the camera and tells the children that we would like to record as they are telling the story to the group. She asks if the children are ok with this. Children say yes but Hédi notices that Szilvi is starting to cry)

Hédi : Szilvi, what happened?

Szilvi: I have only met Palma, Piroska and Judit, these three people who look after us at nursery.

Hédi : So you don't know us, you see us as strangers?

Szilvi : I have told you... I have never met you in my life . Ever.

Hédi : What can we do to make it right for you?

Szilvi: Whatever you want to. I have seen you in the stories and in adverts but never in real life.

Hédi : We are here in the flesh, and we have brought you one of our stories.

Szilvi: Good. Is the camera playing it? (meaning 'recording' it)

Hédi : Is that ok with you, Szilvi?

Szilvi: Where is the machiner that's recording it?

.....

Tensions: Voluntary INFORMED CONSENT

Ethical tensions:

- *parental informed consent vs the child's assent*
- *written information vs situated aspect of being informed;*
- *Power differentials: trust through established relationships vs 'relationality' in everyday ethics*
- *Children who are participants vs those who are not (Richardson, 2019)*

Rights tensions:

- *Provision- Article 3- desktop ethical approval of proposed research design vs application of research skills in real-life contexts with flexibility and adaptability*
- *Protection – Article 36- reassuring secure environment vs doing harm by the invasion of children's space and personal privacy*
- *Participation – Articles 12&13 – children asserting their voice/rights vs dilution of rights by superficial application;*

Possibilities

Procedural ethics and everyday ethics push against each other in reality.

The four characteristics of an ethically virtuous researcher:

Ethical sensitivity

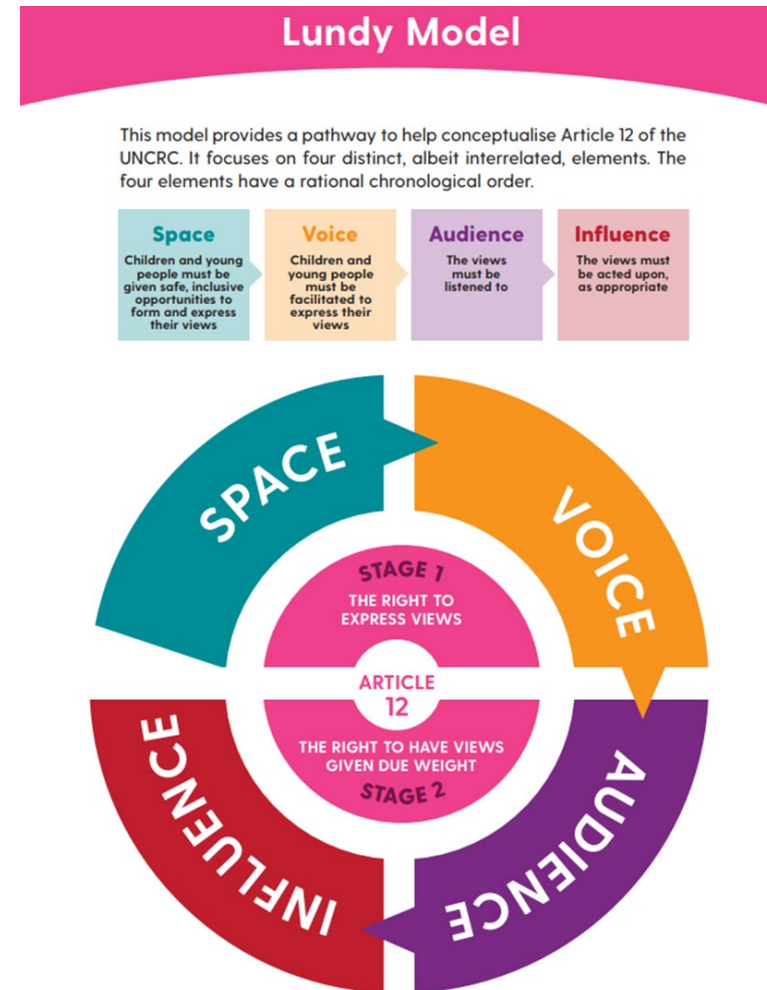
Ethical reasoning

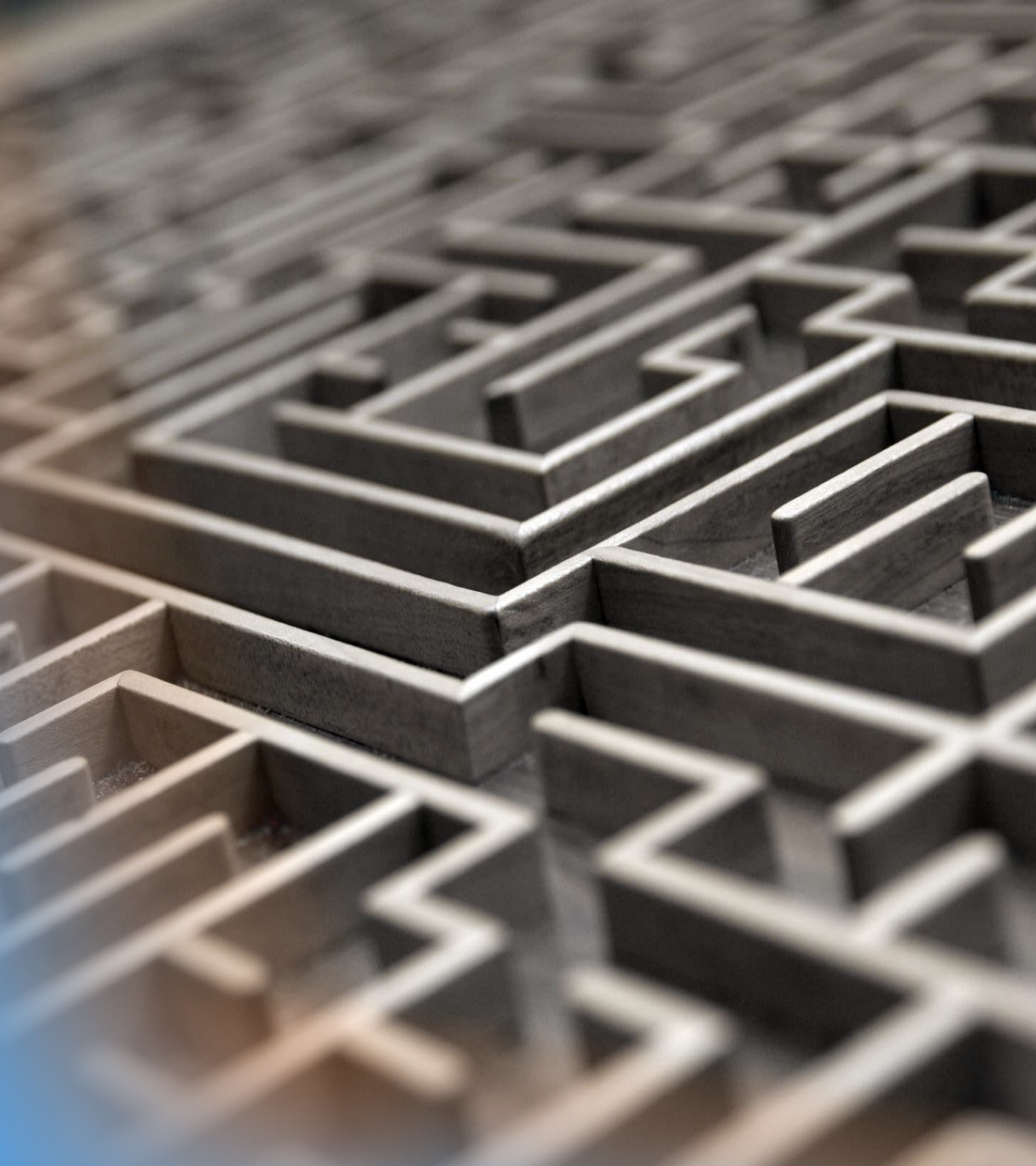
Ethical motivation

Ethical implementation

(Rest, 1982)

To meaning fully address children's rights: Lundy, 2007) :





Conclusion

- There are no easy answers – it is messy. All is subjective to given situation.
- Something unexpected will always occur – use UNCRC as guidance. Be mindful as this is not legally binding and does not offer a blueprint for researchers
- Tension is either do research and accept it's tokenistic OR this is tokenistic so don't do any research

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