Researcher positionality in eliciting young children's perspectives


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Abstract

Research that uses innovative approaches to elicit the views of young children has grown hugely over the last 20 years. Against a backdrop of a greater acceptance of children’s rights and sociological approaches to understanding children and childhood, with their combined emphasis on the competences and capacities of children, it is now accepted that young children can be engaged with to seek their views, experiences and perspectives as part of research studies. The range of methodological approaches is extensive including arts and play based methods, digitally based games, the use of photography and recordings. This article focuses on issues connected with researcher positionality that arose in a research study that sought to elicit children’s views about their early childhood settings using a teddy bear called ‘Ted’. The article draws attention to contingent and contextual nature of children’s engagement in research processes and methods and therefore the critical importance of researchers developing detailed reflexive accounts of their positionality, so that the contextual and relational aspects of methodological processes and the findings that emerge, are as transparent as possible. Implications for other similar types of research are considered.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increase in research that seeks to elicit the views of young children in pre-school settings (Sirkko et al., 2019; Mayne et al., 2016; Start Strong, 2011). Building on the seminal work of Clark and Moss (2001) and Clark (2004, 2005) researchers now use a range of innovative methods motivated by the concern to a) support young children to engage in research in ways that are comfortable and meaningful for them, to b) ensure that
young children are given suitable and appropriate opportunities to express their views, experiences and feelings, to c) capture their lived experiences and to d) accurately represent the voices of young children to maximise the impact of any findings. However, with a wealth of research illuminating various methodological approaches, there is a need for further work that builds on the work of Coyne et al. (2021) and that details, by way of reflective accounts, the fluid relational processes and approaches that underpin their use and that captures issues relating to researcher/child positionality. This is because it is not just the method being used that is of note, but rather the reciprocal social and relational processes between child and researcher through which data (and thereby knowledge) is generated. Given that the generation of data is subjective and relational it is imperative that researchers give a reflexive account of their positionality and its influence and impact on research processes.

Acknowledging this complex milieu, this paper provides a detailed, reflexive and critical account of issues related to researcher positionality that emerged during a study designed to elicit the views of young children in early childhood settings and that involved the researcher using a teddy bear, called ‘Ted’. The article begins by outlining why reflective accounts of researcher positionality are necessary. It then moves on to consider issues emerging from research literature where teddy bears have been used to elicit children’s views, before considering the current study and specific issues regarding researcher positionality that emerged when using a teddy bear to seek children’s views about their early childhood settings.

**Researcher positionality**

Stemming from sociological thinking that emerged in the 1980’s which constructed the ‘child’ as having agentic capacity rather than a ‘passive object’ of the research processes, as well as the influence of the children’s rights agenda, the use of participatory methods with children is
now extensive and the associated research literature is vast. For example, there is a wealth of research documenting how photographs, drawings and other play-based methods can be used to support children’s multiple means of expression and how the use of these methods contributes to the realisation of children’s agentic rights (e.g. Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Blaisdell et al., 2019). However, as noted, it is not just the availability of child friendly methods that supports children to express their views. Rather ‘researcher positioning’ and its influence on the entire research process is of crucial importance.

Researcher positioning is a broad concept. Darwin Holmes (2020, p. 1) states that ‘positionality both describes an individual’s world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context’. Darwin Holmes (2020, p. 1-3) also explains that a researcher’s world view or how they see the world comprises a) the nature of reality b) the nature of knowledge c) views on human nature and agency. These are filtered through an array of possible influencing factors including gender, age, experience, geographical location, social status and so on (Swaminathan and Mulvihill, 2018). Providing reflexive accounts is important for several reasons.

Firstly, reflexivity is an active acknowledgment that the construction of knowledge through the use of particular methods is not an objective process but that the researcher has an active role on the construction of knowledge by their own subject positioning. If one accepts this, it is imperative that researchers give full, honest and transparent accounts of the influences and biases they may have brought to the research process, so that the parameters of the knowledge gained are clear (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Secondly, engaging in reflexivity contributes to the transparency of the findings by identifying any underpinning biases (Swaminathan and Mulvihill, 2018). This is particularly important in
research with children where issues of power are ever present. The process of openly acknowledging positionality though a reflexive account does not eliminate power dynamics but rather openly engages with the relational, contextual and contingent nature of the research process and issues of positionality inherent in these dynamic contexts (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Swaminathan and Mulvihill, 2018).

Thirdly, this contributes to the integrity, credibility and reliability of the qualitative data gained and the findings reported. It avoids any tendency to create lists of ‘methods that work’ because it draws attention to the fact that certain methods might be more effective in some settings more than others depending on the knowledge, skills, attitudes, choices and preferences of both the researcher and the child involved. It also avoids any tendency to generalise from findings using particular methods, rather it accepts that the same method used in different contexts, with different children and different researchers may generate different types of finding and themes that underpin these findings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

This article aims to contribute to existing knowledge by exploring researcher positioning in relation to the use of a teddy bear to elicit the views of young children in early childhood settings. Specifically, the article highlights how the changing motivations of the researcher throughout the data collation phase influenced the research process and the knowledge generated. Before considering the key issues salient to researcher positionality in this study, the article provides a brief review of other research literature that uses teddy bears and the issues raised before then outlining the current study.
Review of literature regarding the use of teddy bears in research with young children

Teddy bears are a key cultural artefact and bears that come to life as part of our literary culture. For example, the stories of Winnie the Pooh, Paddington Bear and Baloo in the Jungle Book are internationally renowned. Alongside this and in western society, adults accord meaning to teddy bears by choosing them for their children and reflecting on their own childhood memories of their favourite teddy bears. Designed for interactive play, with a strong emphasis on affective relation, they are seen by adults as an icon of childhood particularly in Western society.

Within this context it is not surprising to find a wide range of research literature that features the use of teddy bears by adults to engage young children in research processes. The appeal of teddy bears to children is outlined in psychological literature, which defines these (and other toys/objects) as ‘transitional objects’. Winnicott (1951, p.10 ) defines a transitional object as ‘ a designation for any material to which an infant attributes a special value and by means of which the child is able to make the necessary shift from the earliest oral relationship with mother to genuine object-relationships’.

A reflection of human social and emotional development, a child’s relationship with transitional objects is seen as a mechanism to helps children manage stress associated with new events, separation, simultaneously living through events around them whilst using the transitional object to self-soothe for example. Children can incorporate the transitional objects into their daily lives as if they are living things; interacting with them, caring for them, playing and talking with them and deriving comfort and security from them. The transitional object is therefore like a link or a bridge between a child’s inner world and the world around them.

Other literature draws attention to teddy bears featuring in anthropological, sociological, criminological and health and medical research literature (McDougall, 2017). Importantly the
use of objects (toys, puppets and teddy bears) is thought to help support children’s engagement in research processes. This can happen in several ways. First, the object (for example a puppet, a teddy bear or another toy) can be presented by the researcher as a living being with a name and then be used to relay information about the study, be part of the consent process and/or be part of the data collation phase (Coyne et al., 2021). Second, the object might be present but have no active role as such. Children are invited to express their views by being asked ‘what do you think the teddy bear here might feel’. Third, the presence of the object might encourage children to engage in research processes because they identify with the object more readily than they might do with adult researchers. Fourth, children are known to derive comfort and confidence from the presence of objects (such as puppets, teddy bears and dolls), which can lower anxiety and facilitate engagement in research (Epstein et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2021).

Drawing on the existing literature, the current study used a teddy bear, Ted, presented as an animate being with thoughts, feelings (and in this case a job supporting the researcher), to help elicit young children’s views. The technique adopted was loosely based on the Teddy Bear Hospital (TBH) and the ‘Teddy Bear Therapy’ approach which features in research literature. In work with ill children who need to attend and stay in hospital, the Teddy Bear Hospital (Jazrawy et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2021) involves the use of teddy bears which are ascribed various illnesses and/or in need of various treatments as a means of imparting information to children regarding their illnesses and planned medical interventions in a way that is accessible to them and that also aims to reduce children’s fear and anxiety regarding their situation. Jazrawy et al. (2021) in a scoping review that involved 11 studies of the Teddy Bear Hospital (TBH) and medical role plays involving the teddy bears, found that they were overwhelmingly positively received and that children’s level of anxiety was lowered whilst their health knowledge improved. In a further review by Moore et al. (2021) it was noted that while the Teddy Bear Hospital (TBH) contributed to better communication skills by medical
professionals, further training on how to listen (rather than ask questions and/or impart information) was recommended.

Research by Beyers et al., (2017, 2018) has explored the use of teddy bears in the development of family therapy interventions with children and their parents. Known as ‘Teddy Bear Therapy’, the therapist and the child are involved in a process of telling a story about a teddy who faces similar problems to those of the child and then exploring together (with wider family members if appropriate) various ways of helping the teddy bear resolve the problem and what these approaches might be experienced like. In both the Teddy Bear Hospital (TBH) and the Teddy Bear Therapy (TBT), the primary motivation for using a teddy bear is that it is more likely to be viewed by the child as non-threatening. Furthermore, as argued by Van der Ryst (2012) and Vorster (2005), the power relationship can be further shaped by delegating to the child the role ‘helper’ in their relationship to the teddy bear). This can empower the child and change their position in the relationship.

The current study

The research study explored young children’s experiences and views of 3 different types of pre-school setting in the Republic of Ireland namely play-based, Montessori, and outdoors. The aims and objectives of the study were to elucidate the views and experiences of children and to compare and contrast emerging themes across the different types of setting with particular regard to constructions of childhood and how far and in what ways children could exercise their rights. In total 90 pre-school children aged between 39 months and 54 months who were attending either a play-based, a Montessori, Montessori and play based or an outdoor setting were involved in the study. There were 44 girls and 44 boys.
As noted earlier (ANON), the main findings of the study are reported elsewhere. This paper focuses specifically on researcher positionality and the changing contextual, contingent dynamics and relational processes. It begins with an introduction to the author as researcher and some of the key characteristics influencing my own positionality before introducing ‘Ted’ the teddy bear and the reflexive account of researcher positionality and the use of ‘Ted’ in the research process.

**The researcher’s own positionality**

I was born in the early 1980s, in rural setting in Northern Ireland and my early childhood experiences like many of my peers, was grounded in free play and was largely an unsupervised activity. The educational significance of the pre-school period was not widely recognised at the time, consequently pre-school provision was limited. However, due to societal, political and economic changes, pre-school has emerged as a necessary steppingstone for children’s development. Thus, paradoxically while I was cared for at home until I started primary school, consistent with current thinking, I believe that a period of quality pre-school education has many benefits for young children, families and communities.

This belief is reflected in my professional career where I have worked as an educator and Early Years lecturer. Years of working and studying in the field of early years education led me to have an understanding of children, child development and childhood which is informed by both psychology and sociology. Much of my practice experience with young children in early childhood settings has been influenced by psychological concepts including attachment, transitions and the importance of attachment relationships. It has also been influenced by pedagogical principles underpinned by respect for every child and seeing the potential (rather than the limits) to each child’s competencies and capacities. A further set of influences
regarding ‘risk in childhood’ and ‘preparation in childhood for school – school readiness’ were tangible to me in practice and reflected in the way settings are designed, their lay out and the range, types, purpose and nature of activities engaged in. My ‘practice wisdom’ (the knowledge I gained from practicing in the field) was attuned to tensions between these different influences; most evident was the gap between children’s agency and voice and discourses that shaped practice like school readiness.

Often in my daily practice, I was positioned as the ‘adult-professional-expert’ in relationship to the children and their parents because of my professional qualifications (as a psychologist) and my practice expertise as an educator. To a certain extent I carried the characteristics of that role into practice by being ‘all knowing’ – knowing what was best for the children and taking charge of their day, the space they were in and the most suitable activities for the day. I became increasingly aware of and concerned by the power imbalances inherent in these relationships which did not sit easily with me because I have always considered myself to be ‘child-centred’.

A change in my views coincided with undertaking a doctorate, where I developed a real appreciation of the social construction of childhood, notions about the agentic capacity of children and their rights. These realisations proved to be a motivating factor in undertaking this research. My experiences have shaped the research questions which are driven by a genuine desire to explore children’s own perspectives of their early childhood settings. My experiences also shaped the method used; the teddy bear. The choice of ‘Ted’ and a critical account of researcher positionality is outlined below, before moving onto a critical and reflexive account of researcher positionality and the use of the teddy bear in the assent process and in data collection.
Reflective account: choosing ‘Ted’ the teddy bear for the research study

‘Ted’ the teddy bear was a brown, soft furry foot long teddy bear dressed in a blue sweatshirt top. He carried with him a small bag which contained his outdoor clothes and a snack. One immediate issue that needs to be addressed, is why I felt the need to use ‘Ted’ given all my professional and practical experience and expertise in engaging and communicating with young children. I was aware and quite surprised to discover that aspects of my professional role could be experienced by children (and indeed their parents) as ‘expert-professional’ exercising knowledge over children.

In my role as researcher I was keen to mitigate against this as far as possible. As I had used ‘Ted’ (bought by me much earlier during a holiday in America) as a teaching tool, I knew children related to him. Hence for a number of reasons, I chose ‘Ted’. I was able to emphasise the characteristics in him that represented a small child (his size, his bag, his clothes, his movable limbs) and also those characteristics that had sensory appeal – his softness. To further strengthen his appeal and mitigate against the obvious ‘adult-child’ power dynamics, I introduced ‘Ted’ into the research study as a ‘live character with a ‘back story’ which involved him having moved house, about to start at pre-school and as nervous because he did not know what pre-school was like or what he would be doing there. A pictorial aid was also developed comprising photographs of Ted asking various ‘friends’ (other soft toys) about pre-school to bring ‘Ted’ the character and the story to life for children. The aim here was to position children in the study as ‘experts’ from the start. My role as the researcher here was to support ‘Ted’, although in reality, the process of seeking children’s views through and with ‘Ted’ was a bit more like a dance with constant shifts and changes in who was taking the lead role; me or ‘Ted’ depending on children’s own interactions with ‘Ted’.
A second issue to be addressed, is whether the choice of ‘Ted’ to encourage children to express their views and feelings could be seen as manipulative. It is certainly the case that portraying ‘Ted’ as a ‘childlike’ and as needing help from other young children, might appear coercive. Children could feel that they had little choice but to be involved because they ‘felt sorry’ for Ted and/or they might be worried about his feelings if they said no. I addressed this in practical ways. I revisited in every encounter, the fact that children did not have to share their views if they did not want to. In the consent form I also incorporated a section to indicate that it was okay if a child wanted to stop talking and normalised this by saying ‘Ted will understand – sometimes Ted gets tired too if he talks a lot’. Also, when with ‘Ted’, I modelled out behaviours that I hoped the children would adopt (if needed) through Ted. For example, I put Ted in the chair/bed as he was tired and needed a little rest. I also ensured that all children, whether involved in the study or not, got free time to play with ‘Ted’, so that ‘Ted’ was not seen as the preserve or privilege of those who had participated in the study.

A third issue that needs to be explored, is whether the choice of ‘Ted’ reinforced dominant conceptualisations of children as ‘lesser’, and unable to relate directly to adults. On the one hand, it could be argued that this approach did indeed reinforce negative stereotypes about young children and their capacities. On the other hand, most young children appeared to have a personal interest in ‘Ted’ and were keen for him to have a pre-school that he would be happy in. As the study unfolded, I gained a deep insight into the specific ways in which children related to ‘Ted’ in real and meaningful ways hence ‘Ted’ became like one of their friends at times. He was put on the swing, and he went down the slide. At times I playacted with Ted to make him be a little cheeky (for example he wiped his nose on his sleeve) which made the children laugh. Some of the children also felt able to tell ‘Ted’ that his actions were wrong and explaining to him about how to use a tissue which subtly positioned them as experts. Other
times I would sing a song with Ted which helped sustain the children’s interests especially during mundane tasks like tidying up after the map making.

The examples above illustrate that choosing a teddy bear requires confidence and skills as indicated in research by Nheu et al. (2018) and Soares et al. (2015) regarding the Teddy Bear Hospital. In choosing the teddy bear for this study, I was therefore not just ‘the keeper’ of ‘Ted’, but also engaging with him in the same way as children did and bringing him to life in the same ways that children did. In the next section, I build on this reflective account by considering in further detail the assent process with children and the collation of data.

**Children’s Assent and ‘Ted’**

Nairn et al. (2020) contends that good ethical research is embedded in an individual dignity model which focuses on free choice, agency and autonomy. However, the power imbalance often inherent in research with children can make this difficult and even more so in educational settings where children are conditioned to comply (Kirby, 2020). Furthermore, assent which is defined by Ford et al. (2007, p. 20) as an ‘agreement obtained from those who are not able to enter into a legal contract’ does not have the same power as consent as it lacks legality. Kirby (2020) argues that it is the researcher’s duty to find appropriate ways of negotiating assent with children. However, with notable exceptions (Adcock et al., 2012; Antal et al., 2017; Arnott et al., 2019; 2020; Kumpunen et al., 2012; and Mayne et al., 2017) there are few reflective accounts on assent processes with children under six years of age (Baird and Grace, 2021).

The literature that does exist indicates that ‘pedagogically-appropriate methods’ aligned to the educational practices of the childcare setting are essential (Wall, 2018) and Arnott et al. (2020) argue that innovative approaches which are pedagogically appropriate are essential for creating spaces to support children to give informed assent. A common strategy adopted with young
children (Baird & Grace, 2017; Skanfors, 2009) involves simplifying consent forms and including images. However the issue as to what requisite skills are needed to facilitate young children’s assent and how these processes work out in practice is unclear (Parsons et al., 2016).

In this study, the use of ‘Ted’ as part of the assent process, appeared to facilitate young children’s engagement as explored further below. With regards to the practicalities of securing the children’s assent, the process began with staff reading the assent form with the children in the childcare settings. The form used simple language and contained images of ‘Ted’. The text and the images explained what would happen if Ted visited their childcare setting and they took part in the study. For example ‘Ted’ would also engage in the proposed research activities such as taking photographs and constructing a map).

Reflecting research by Baird and Grace (2017), each pre-school setting used different ways for children to make their mark on the assent form: either paint, scribbles, or stickers. When children had agreed to be part of the study and reflecting the notion that consent is a process rather than a ‘one-off’ event, I revisited the issue of assent with the support of ‘Ted’ throughout the research process. For example, I read the assent form to the children during circle time before data collection began and normalised the choice of children to withdraw at any point by reading out to the children the part of the form which said ‘If you get too tired or want to stop talking, that is okay, Ted will understand. Sometimes Ted gets tired too if he talks a lot’. Research by Nolas et al. (2018) points out the importance of non-verbal interaction to gauge children’s willingness to participate. I engaged the help of the staff in the settings for this. Between us we monitored this and observed the children’s corporeal language for example their emotions, body gestures and behaviour to guide my interactions with ‘Ted’ and to monitor their ongoing assent.
My positionality in the assent process is noteworthy in that I moved from being ‘Ted’s’ helper, to taking on the ‘expert researcher’ role with ‘Ted’ positioned in a ‘listener’ role. Hence, the children will have seen that it was not ‘Ted’ who led on the assent process rather it was me. This was accidental but necessary because ‘Ted’ became a bit of distraction in the assent process. To explain further, initially, I had envisaged ‘Ted’ talking through the assent form with the children, telling the children about his own ‘back story’ with me in the role of ‘helper’. However, from the very start of the assent process in the early childhood settings, the children appeared to have little interest in hearing more about the assent process and Ted’s own back story; rather their preference was to hold ‘Ted’ and play with him. I decided that the best way of dealing with this was that I would speak about the study while ‘Ted’ could be passed around from child to child in the circle that they were sitting in. I could have opted to keep ‘Ted’ with me all the time but felt that to ignore the children’s requests to hold ‘Ted’ and give him a cuddle would have positioned me in an ‘authoritative teacher role’ from the start which I thought could have negatively impacted my ongoing research relationship with the children.

I took on a ‘negotiator role’, moving between my research agenda and the children’s agenda with Ted. I needed to create an equitable research space and felt I achieved this by shifting roles between ‘researcher’ and ‘Ted’s helper’. However, this was not without challenge and at times I felt like I was walking a tightrope as I wanted to adopt the least adult role as much as possible but not at the cost of surrendering ethical responsibility. I wanted the children to have voice and agency but equally I wanted them to have an understanding of the study, what it would involve and the implications for them. Thus I became acutely aware of my positionality and the relational dynamics as I manoeuvred between freedom (as constructed by ‘Ted’) and structure (through me). In the end, I asked the children to tell ‘Ted’ about the context and content of the research. Some of the children were able to tell ‘Ted’ but others seemed to disengage and become preoccupied with something else. Others repeated what a peer had said.
or nodded. Two children in one setting decided they did not want to be involved in the study and told me (and Ted!) that they were going to play ‘monsters’ instead.

This decision was informed by my professional expertise, my working knowledge of what young children are capable of if given the right support, tools and in the right context.

Hence this study reflected the principles that communicative ability, cognitive development and age were not stringent barriers to securing informed assent, as the approach could be tailored in meaningful and appropriate ways for the children involved. This approach was informed by my professional expertise, my working knowledge of what young children are capable of if given the right support, tools and in the right context. It is also worth noting that there are other researchers (for example, Fleet and Harcourt, 2018) who contend that children are capable of informed consent, and it is informed consent and not assent that should be sought from young children. My own perspective of assent and children has changed through the course of this research. I went from believing that all children regardless of age are able to give assent to one which contends that assent is only possible when adults engage in reflexive work to frame their approach when communicating with children. To expand on the points above, the paper moves on to consider the use of ‘Ted’ and researcher positionality during the data gathering stages of the study.

‘Ted’s and the researcher’s role/positionality in gathering data

In gathering the data, ‘Ted’ accompanied the children on the guided tours, taking photographs of their settings, group interviews and map-making and like the children, ‘Ted’ was positioned as being able to use a variety resources including photographs and art materials. However, rather than the children engaging directly with the ‘real’ researcher, they were facilitated to
express their views through ‘Ted’. At times I would mimic a voice for Ted and at other times Ted would whisper in my ear and I spoke for Ted.

Throughout the data collation, there was an underlying tension regarding ‘choice’ and ‘control’. With regards to the ‘control’ aspects, the early years staff had made clear to me that they were giving me permission to gather data in their settings within the context of the rules and regulations of the settings. The rules related to which spaces could be used and when, the timetable for the day and the activities on offer, break times, lunch times and so on. My role as a researcher was to respect these rules by not deviating from them. To do so may have compromised the research study. With regards to the ‘choice’ aspects, I wanted to support the children to engage with the aims of the research study and express their views in ways of their choosing. However, I was aware that some children’s choices and preferences were not always in line with the expectations within the setting. For example, children might ask to go outside to photograph items, when it was not outdoor playing time or they ran in the corridor to show me something when the expectation within the setting was that they should walk and not run.

I countered these issues by using Ted to help me maintain control. For example if the children ran in the corridor, I quickly reminded ‘Ted’ that we walk inside and asked the children to tell ‘Ted’ the rule. On other occasions, I modelled through Ted the behaviours that the setting expected of the children. For example, after the outdoor tour (which was part of the study), staff had requested that the children washed their hands. Rather than me adopting ‘the authoritative teacher role’, telling the children to do this, I asked them to show ‘Ted’ how to wash his hands and to sing to him the handwashing song which they happily did. This helped achieve the children’s compliance with the setting expectations whilst not compromising my role and ‘Ted’s’ role in the study. On other occasions when children got excited and started to
shout, Ted quietly whispered in my ear and said, “his ears hurt”. I then asked the children how we could help ‘Ted’ and they quickly responded ‘we could use our indoor voices’.

At other times, the children took turns carrying him and sometimes ‘Ted’ was pushed in the pram and one setting he was put in a baby sling. Children therefore took on a multiplicity of roles in relation to ‘Ted’, and they became ‘adviser’, ‘carer’, ‘playmate’, and ‘confidante’. The positionality I adopted was fluid with different facets emphasised at different times in the research process depending on what the context was. My role varied throughout data collection between ‘instructor’ or ‘investigator’ ‘listener’ ‘playmate’ to ‘practitioner’, ‘researcher’, and was dependent on the needs of the children. However, on numerous occasions throughout data collection I was still referred to as ‘teacher’ and on these occasions I felt as an adult the power imbalance could never be fully eroded. Despite this, through the continually changing roles and positions adopted by the children, ‘Ted’ and me, our relationships developed and this enabled the children to illustrate their own agency, to express their views and ultimately generated deep and insightful data.

**Final thoughts and reflections**

The purpose of this article is to provide a reflexive account regarding researcher positionality regarding the use of a teddy bear in research with young children to elicit their views. The article has endeavoured to be transparent about the motivations for choosing a particular method and has also endeavoured to be honest about other researcher influences and biases and their impact on data collation. Attention is drawn to the unique, contingent, complex relational processes that underpinned the research processes in this study and the need for openness and transparency to contextualise the findings. It is argued that these issues should be transparently addressed in all research with young children, in the same way that they have been in this article.
in order that growing knowledge in the area is appropriately contextualised and generalisations avoided.

Beyond this, one last reflection emerged from this study which is noteworthy and that concerns the careful management required when bringing the study, and the children’s relationship with ‘Ted’ to an end. Some children developed, from their perspective, a meaningful relationship with ‘Ted’ and I felt it was important therefore to have a clear plan to support the endings of the children’s relationships with ‘Ted’. I had originally planned to do a circle time at the end of the final day of the study explaining that ‘Ted’ would be going off to his new pre-school. However, it was during the pilot study and after conversations with the manager of one setting, that I realised my approach was inadequate. On her suggestion I introduced ‘Ted’s’ book which was used as a transition tool to support children with the end of the study. The book remained in the setting after the study was finished, and the children recorded things in the book that they would like ‘Ted’ to know about. ‘Ted’ and I then collected the book after approximately two weeks. One manager reported that some children eagerly waited for ‘Ted’s’ return and regularly drew pictures for him. However, other children appeared to forget about ‘Ted’ within a couple of days. All settings were also sent a card from ‘Ted’ about a week after his book was collected thanking the children for their help and telling them about his new pre-school.

In conclusion, the use of ‘Ted’ is an appropriate method to elicit children’s views but should only be used in a context where the researcher continually reflects on the dynamic, relational and social processes that occur in the research encounter to ensure that they are not exploitative, pressurising or adding to power imbalances rather than mitigating against them. What this requires is skilled researchers who have well developed communication skills and well-developed reflective skills because the method itself is only as good as the skills of the
researcher. It is hoped that this critically reflective account contributes to practice knowledge in the area.

References


