Navigating consent and dissent in early childhood research: An Australian perspective

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Notions of consent, including assent and dissent, are paramount ethical considerations in human research, but have different connotations in research involving young children (aged 3 to 8). While discussion surrounding consent in the early childhood literature has progressed from paternalistic views surrounding the need to protect the child, to recognising their capacity to make decisions in line with their rights, needs and interests, some studies suggest that the application of this change may still be problematic in practice. Many researchers still grapple with notions of who provides consent, what consent may look like, and how it is applied both before and during research. This article reports on the practical application of consent, framed by the hierarchy of *Children's Participation Rights* (Mayne et al., 2018), within a study into young children's demonstration of creative thinking behaviours when using digital technologies. It provides a brief overview of contemporary views of children's rights and consent for context before outlining the study itself and how consent was applied throughout, informed by the Mayne et al. (2018) framework. It presents a series of vignettes describing elements of consent as they arose in practice and discusses them in relation to the literature. The article concludes by considering rights-based consent in contemporary early childhood research in terms of study design for future researchers to consider.

Introduction

Notions of consent are fundamental in all human research, including those involving young children aged 3 to 8 years. It is now widely accepted that children's rights should be at the fore in the context of research and policy affecting them (Lyndon, 2023; Mayne et al., 2018; Palaiologou, 2014). However, a meta-analysis of peer-reviewed articles by Mayne and Howitt (2015) found few projects involve children as meaningful participants, with the vast majority positioning them as elements under investigation rather than genuine participants. Despite the rhetoric that researchers should acknowledge children's consensual rights to participate in research, the meta-analysis by Mayne and Howitt (2015) revealed that this may not yet universally be the case, therefore suggesting an ongoing need to critique how best to listen to children. In practice, researchers wishing to acknowledge the rights of young children can face challenges from parents, educators and other adults, whose desire to protect can act as a barrier to young children enacting their rights to choose to participate or not, or to what extent, in research (Dockett et al., 2013; Lyndon, 2023; Schelbe et al., 2015).

Further, to affirm a research culture which acknowledges young children's voices as inherently valuable, their rights need to be upheld throughout the research process (Mayne et al., 2018; Sherwood & Parsons, 2021). Reflecting on experiences during an early childhood research project, our article considers ongoing practical issues associated with young children's informed participation decisions throughout the research process, the

way they may indicate and withdraw their consent, and the potential impact upon research design necessitated by acknowledging the rights of children's agency in research participation.

Background

In a modern research context, the conceptualisation of young children requires considerable critical reflection by the researcher (Dobson, 2020). In previous traditionally framed research, children were framed largely as 'not adults'; that is, through a deficit model where researchers understood them in terms of adult skills and understandings yet to develop (Danby & Farrell, 2004; Hammersley, 2017; Westman & Alerby, 2012). Historical assumptions regarding children's abilities and understandings meant that some groups within the broad definition of children as being under 18 years of age (*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*) (UNCRC, 1989) were left out of considerations as to how rights apply to them (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Children at the upper end of this definition (aged 9 and above) were often treated more like adults, while those at the lower end were considered incapable of asserting their rights (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

However, societal views have shifted towards seeing all children as whole people whose perspectives, understandings, and rights should be respected and valued (Broström, 2012; Palaiologou, 2014). In particular, the UNCRC (1989) represented a clear shift in thinking beyond the original *Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (GDRC, 1924) and an earlier UN *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (UNDRC, 1959). Two key convention articles (UNCRC, 1989) provide legal frameworks for children's participation, namely:

- Article 12 – Respect for the views of the child: [T]he child who is capable of forming his or her own views [shall be assured] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (p. 5).

- Article 13 – Freedom of expression: The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice (p. 5).

Whereas the earlier declarations enshrined 'protection rights,' the UNCRC (1989) shifted to 'choice rights' (Hafen & Hafen, 1996, p. 450) which framed children as autonomous individuals capable of making decisions and asserting them, rather than immature beings in need of protection both by and from adults (Lundy et al., 2019).

Children's agency

Since its adoption, meanings attributed to children's rights in research have been based largely upon the UNCRC (1989) text (Quennerstedt et al., 2018). However, Tobin (2013)

and others noted the lack of academic attention to the text's conceptual foundations, especially around notions of agency enshrined in *Article 12*. For example, Sutherland (2021) suggested that the role of the family is diminished by the article's emphasis on children's agency, while conversely Hafen and Hafen (1996) argued that it can leave children vulnerable and encumbered with responsibilities beyond their capacities with potentially long-term, irreversible consequences. Both views highlighted that children's rights ascribed in Article 12 are located in developmental models of childhood, which view the child as in a process of normative maturation requiring experience and instruction before reaching the state of logical rational adulthood.

Viewing young children from such a perspective risks conceptualisation of the child as 'immature'. This argument can be used to justify the restriction of children's rights as much as their promotion, because developmental constructs lend themselves to deficit models of children (Danby & Farrell, 2004); what they cannot do at specific ages, rather than what they are fully capable of achieving (Clark & Flewitt, 2020). Driven by a desire to protect them from harm, it is possible to overlook opportunities for young children to make choices in developmentally appropriate ways. As Danby and Farrell (2004) suggested, relying on adult views of children's abilities to act in their own interests may "perpetuat[e] stereotypical, normative views of children as ignorant, capricious, and untrustworthy" (p. 42). It is also possible that decisions around children's participation in research may serve the interests of adults rather than truly representing the wishes or needs of the child.

Despite conceptual issues surrounding Article 12, the notion of children as holders of rights within research has gained international acceptance, with the UNCRC (2009) calling for the need to "develop national and local capacities for early childhood research, especially from a rights-based perspective" (p. 9). Overall, this has contributed to a shift within early childhood research from empirical approaches focused on children's needs in isolation, to more holistic participation based on the rights of children to demonstrate agency over their own social lives (Gray & Winter, 2011), although developmentalism remains an ongoing challenge, especially in relation to notions of research consent.

Informed consent of young children

Ambiguity exists within the terminology of consent in research contexts (Coyne, 2010; Mayne & Howitt, 2019; Sherwood & Parsons, 2021). While some researchers preference 'assent' (Dockett et al., 2013; Ford et al., 2007) in the context of "agreement obtained from those who are not able to enter into a legal contract" (Ford et al., 2007, p. 20). Coyne (2010) noted that in some countries, children of sufficient understanding have a legal right to consent and therefore referring to assent is inappropriate. Assent can also be used to describe less formalised and sometimes implied signifiers of willingness such as body language (Mayne & Howitt, 2019), or acquiescence (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). Determinations of assent under this definition are often reliant on the observations and judgements of researchers (Sherwood & Parsons, 2021) and may therefore be subject to researchers' own biases. Although assent appears variously across the literature, consent is

more consistently used to denote the agentic enactment of one's rights and thus this article uses the latter term.

Debate is also ongoing within the literature as to the nature of informed consent for research involving young children (Arlinkasari et al., 2021). Ethical standards require that for consent to be given, participants must have the capacity to understand what research participation involves, be free from coercion by others, and participation must not conflict with the participant's best interests (NHMRC, 2023). In countering the developmental deficit argument, research by Flewitt (2005) suggested young children are capable of providing consent in ways which demonstrate their understanding of participation requirements and implications. The 3-year-olds in Flewitt's study asked "highly appropriate questions" (p. 555) and displayed levels of confidence in voicing their concerns to the researcher, suggesting their competence to give and remove their consent. Further, in addressing concerns surrounding deficit developmentalism, *General Comment No. 12* (UNCRC, 2009) "discourages States/parties from introducing age limits either in law or practice which would restrict the child's right to be heard in all matters affecting [them]" (para. 21).

Challenges to hearing children's voices

According to Clark & Flewitt (2020), young children can attribute consent in different ways to traditional adult-conceived research; researchers therefore need to engage with them in ways that may require greater effort and creativity. Non-deficit developmentally appropriate, multimodal methods such as visual signals (Chesworth, 2018; Ruscoe et al., 2018), narrative approaches (Mayne et al., 2016), and animated videos (Blaisdell et al., 2019) are examples of non-standard methods used to explain research and seek consent. However, young children's ability to understand and convey dissent may be more problematic. Given the power differentials that inherently exist in participant-researcher and adult-child relationships, it may be difficult for a child to directly say they do not wish to participate or continue (Broström, 2012). For Mayne et al. (2018), some level of adult direction in research is required; the challenge is how much. Agentic consent therefore becomes a balancing act between caring autonomy or reinforcing a sense of dependency (Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013), and who is afforded the power to speak, listen and act (Theobold et al., 2011). Accordingly, researchers must be open to noticing the non-verbal and written signals children send (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014).

In response to the legal requirements surrounding children's rights enshrined in *Article 12* (UNCRC, 1989), Hart (1992) created his *Hierarchy of Children's Participation* in society. The hierarchy comprises eight levels of agency from manipulation (level 1) to child initiated and directed participation, across the four *Article 12* participation rights, namely information, understanding, voice and influence. These have been adapted and expanded by Mayne et al. (2018) specifically to identify levels of children's research participation (Table 1). Hart's original participation categories are presented in column 2, and Mayne's specific research participation categories in column 3.

Table 1: Hierarchy of children's research participation rights (Mayne et al., 2018)

Level	Hart (1992) participation categories	Mayne et al (2018) research level descriptors	Participation rights (Article 12)			
			Information	Under-standing	Voice	Influence
8	Child initiated and directed, shared decisi-ons with adults	Child's voice having greatest influence with adult overseeing	Information created by children	Understandi ng greater than adults	Voice equal to that of adults	Significant influence
7	Child initiated and directed	Significant scope for child voice and influence	Information greater than adults	Understand-ing equal to that of adults	Significant voice	Selected influence
6	Adult initiated, shared decision with children	Selected scope for child influence with scaffolded influence	Information equal to that of adults	Significant understand-ing	Selected voice	Scaffolded influence
5	Consulted and informed	Volunteers with a measure of voice and influence	Significant information	Selected understand-ing	Scaffolded voice	Restricted opportunities for influence
4	Assigned but informed	Volunteers but restricted to practical yet symbolic role	Selected information	Scaffolded understand-ing	Restricted opportunities for voice	Negligible influence
3	Tokenism	Assigned, some-what informed. May offer opinions but no action taken	Scaffolded information	Restricted opportunities for under-standing	Negligible voice	No influence
2	Decoration	Assigned, largely unaware, not consulted	Restricted opportunities for inform-ation	Negligible understand-ing	No voice	No influence
1	Manipulation	Assigned, unaware, possibly misled to facilitate involvement	Negligible information	No understand-ing	No voice	No influence

In terms of guiding research participation, the first three levels (shaded grey) are described as non-participatory. They include children as: (1) manipulated individuals; (2) 'decoration'; or (3) token participants afforded little or no agency, and unlikely to understand what participation is about or their involvement. The five higher levels describe increasingly complex participant initiative and responsibility. Level 4 ascribes children volunteering and understanding why they are involved, while at level 5, children are consulted, have a full understanding of the process and their opinions are taken seriously. Level 6 describes adult-initiated, shared decisions, with children involved in planning and implementation, while level 7 describes child-initiation and direction whereby they provide the initial idea and decide how the project is undertaken, and level

8, which describes child-initiated, shared decisions where they have the ideas and set up the project. The hierarchy

> … highlights the knowledge-power dynamics … inherent in early childhood research… and the elements that need to be considered when seeking to afford children their full rights as research participants (Mayne et al., 2018, p. 649).

Overall, the hierarchy affords researchers support in planning research which upholds children's rights, shifts the balance of power towards the child, and provides opportunities for children to exercise voice and agency. However, for our study, the researchers applied the hierarchy retrospectively as a checklist for assessing their responses to ongoing consent and whether they had meaningfully addressed children's participation rights throughout the process (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014).

Our study

This research project was one of a series investigating young children's demonstration of creative thinking behaviours when using digital technologies (see Fielding & Murcia, 2022; Maslin et al. 2024). However, this article limits itself to the consent/dissent seeking and giving processes within one related project and asked the specific research question: *How do young children convey their consent (and dissent) to participate in research?* University ethics approval was granted for this project (HREC approval: 2021-0358).

Research was undertaken across three early learning environments (two K-12 schools; one early learning centre) in Perth, Western Australia. Five participants ranging from 4 to 8 years across the three centres were involved (Table 2). They were selected by purposeful convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009), via indications of interest expressed in a preliminary questionnaire delivered to all families of 4 to 8 year olds across the three settings. As part of the wider research project, each child was asked to provide their own pseudonym; doing so ensured children were aware of the anonymous nature of participation and were provided with input as to how they would like to be represented in the research. Accordingly, names used in this article were those chosen by the participants.

Table 2: Age and context of study participants

Participant	Age	Learning context	Observation location	Interview location(s)
Hulk	4	Kindergarten (location A)	Classroom	1. Classroom 2. Child's home
Luna	4	Kindergarten (location B)	Classroom	Classroom
Rainbow	4-5	Early learning centre (location C)	Centre room	Meeting room in researcher office space
Ella	5	Pre-Primary (location A)	Classroom	Classroom
Luke	8	Year 2 (location B)	Classroom	School interview room

Method

The researchers met individually with participants twice (three times with one participant) in familiar environments. The first meeting involved a video-recorded observation of each child using digital technologies in their usual learning environment in the presence of their educator. Subsequent meeting(s) comprised a video-recorded semi-structured interview with the child and a parent, drawing on artefacts gathered during the observation. Interactions lasted between a few minutes, and an hour. In addition, a research journal was updated during and after each meeting to account for observations occurring outside the recording, for example, in relation to consent processes. While the overall purpose of observations, interviews and journalling was to ascertain children's creative thinking whilst using digital technologies, the method offered the researchers the opportunity to reflect upon how children gave and withdrew consent during these interactions. Inspired by *Article 13* (UNCRC, 1989), formal consent was gained from each child at the outset of each session via a simplified written consent form, asking the child to write their name and colour in a 'thumbs up' if they consented. From there, a large, brightly coloured 'smiley face' was affixed to the camera to draw continuous attention to a recording being made, while reversible green (consent) and red (dissent) thumbs up signs were provided for use during observations and interviews (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Double-sided consent indicator (green 'thumbs up') on one side and dissent (red 'thumbs down') on the other, and a 'smiley face' indicating recording is happening

Data analysis

Eleven recordings of observations and interviews were made and transcribed. The use of video data allowed for multimodal qualitative analysis of children's consent/dissent behaviours and speech (Jewitt & Mackley, 2018). Video data were analysed using *V-Note Pro* analysis software (V-Note, n.d.) initially individually and then across cases, using an inductive approach to identify examples of consent/dissent. These were grouped under four labels of convenience which functioned as themes: (1) making statements of consent/dissent; (2) using the provided consent indicator; (3) behaviour indicating dissent; and (4) shifting power dynamics. From there, short episodes were chosen to illustrate each theme and compared against the *Hierarchy of Children's Participation Rights* to gauge

children's afforded agency in consent/dissent decision making. Each episode is presented as a dynamic interaction in the findings section, along with reflections on each.

Findings

Theme 1: Making statements of consent/dissent

> *Episode 1:* The researcher sits with Luke to explain the consent form and asks if he has any questions. Luke asks, "who will be able to watch [the recording]?" The researcher explains only people with permission from the university would be allowed to watch, for example, those in the research team. The footage would be carefully looked after so no one else was allowed to watch it. The researcher asks, "is that ok?" Luke enthusiastically answered, "Yes! You can even come again to watch me if you want to!"

Luke demonstrated his understanding of the potential implications of participation by asking a highly relevant question: "who will be able to watch it?". This suggested awareness that it may not be private, and that he may not be happy with who those viewers were. After receiving a satisfactory response, Luke enthusiastically confirmed his consent. This interchange indicated significant understanding at level 6 on the *Hierarchy of Participation Rights*.

> *Episode 2*: Hulk spends a few minutes on the activity his educator has shown him on the *iPad*. He displays apathy towards it, looking around at what others are doing. He turns towards the researcher and states, "I don't want to do this anymore." The researcher says "ok" and turns the camera off. Hulk moves away from the *iPad* station to play outside.

Hulk made an explicit statement of dissent, simply stating he did not want to do it anymore. In immediately acting on his statement by stopping the recording and allowing him to leave without question, the researcher reinforced his right to dissent at any time, for any reason. This interchange demonstrated Hulk's rights voiced at level 7 on the *Hierarchy of Participation Rights*.

Theme 2: Using the provided consent indicator

> *Episode 3*: Luna reaches towards the signpost as though to turn it to 'red' and looks expectantly at the researcher. Her educator asks, "what are you doing with that?" Luna turns the signpost all the way to red. The researcher rises and switches the camera off.

Luna demonstrated her understanding of her right to withdraw consent by using the provided tangible object. Even after her educator questioned her actions, which may be construed as an implied reprimand, Luna continued to turn the sign to red and looked up

at the researcher, smiling. By simply rising and immediately stopping the recording, the researcher demonstrated respect for Luna's right to withdraw without explanation. This equated to level 7, whereby the child's rights were equal to those of the adult.

Theme 3: Behaviour indicating dissent

> *Episode 4*: The researcher arrives at Hulk's classroom to meet him and his mother for their scheduled interview. The researcher discusses the interview process and consent form with Hulk, and he agrees to participate. However, prior to the interview and recording beginning, he gets up from the table and finds a large stick on a shelf. Hulk begins hitting it on various objects to make loud noises, moving around the room. His mother apologises and attempts to re-engage Hulk. Seeing he is clearly disengaged, the researcher assures Hulk's mother it is fine to not be in the mood to talk today. They reschedule the interview for another day and location.

Hulk's behaviour demonstrated he was not interested in being interviewed. Without words, Hulk's behaviour was a clear communicator of dissent. The researcher was confident he understood the process and was able to give informed consent before beginning the interview. However, his behaviour suggested that his verbal and written consent did not provide a full picture of his feelings and could equate to level 8 whereby he demonstrated understanding greater than an adult.

> *Episode 5*: After several questions, Luna rises from the interview table and retrieves a picture book. She brings it to the table and says, "I want to read you a story." The researcher asks if she can finish asking her mother some questions and then read the book after, noting "I'd love to hear you read it." Luna replies, "ok" and begins to read quietly to herself. The researcher asks her mother some questions before playing footage of Luna recorded during the classroom observation. Luna looks up when she hears the educator's voice on the recording. During the video, she returns to reading and participating intermittently.

The researcher respected Luna's desire to do a different activity and did not question her implied decision to withdraw. She indicated to Luna that she would keep talking to her mother and read the book with her later. As the video began playing, Luna began to re-engage, highlighting that consent and dissent can wax and wane. This suggested interplay at level 8, with the child's voice having greatest influence.

> *Episode 6*: The researcher arrives at Hulk's home for their rescheduled interview. Hulk and the researcher discuss what would happen during the session; written consent is sought and given. Hulk answers a few questions before indicating with the signpost he wishes to leave. The researcher asks, "Have you had enough?" Hulk nods and enthusiastically rises from the table and runs outside.

Hulk's decision to withdraw from the previous interview session had been respected and a second session was organised. However, after a few questions it became clear he was disinterested and had other priorities. Although Hulk's choices were always respected at the time, the researchers later reflected on whether the very act of rescheduling the

interview diminished Hulk's agency. This again suggested a level 8 interaction, with rescheduling suggesting level 5.

Theme 4: Shifting power dynamics

> *Episode 7*: The researcher visits Rainbow's centre-room to take some photographs of the space. While waiting for the educator to arrive, the researcher sits at a table and starts stacking some blocks. Rainbow notices the researcher and joins her. For a few minutes, they talk about Rainbow's day and why the researcher is visiting until her educator arrives.

Rainbow displayed familiarity and comfort with the researcher in a non-research context. Having spent time together in the observation session, Rainbow showed no hesitation in joining the researcher to talk and play. The researcher felt pleased about this indication that Rainbow's previous experience with her had been positive. This suggested a level 7 child initiated interaction, albeit outside the formal research context.

> *Episode 8*: The researcher meets Ella and her mother in the classroom. At various times during the interview, Ella rises and moves around the classroom showing the researcher points of interest (e.g., the birthdays chart, displays of her work). The researcher conveys her interest in the items Ella points out.

Ella's enthusiasm and pride in showing off aspects of the classroom was an enjoyable part of the interview. She demonstrated a familiarity with the researcher, implicitly inviting them into her space as a welcome visitor. Again, this indicated a level 8 interaction whereby the child's voice had the greatest influence.

Discussion

The selected episodes provide examples of the ways in which young children demonstrated consent/dissent when participating in this research project. They revealed their capacity to understand some of the potential issues arising from participation, such as needing to consider who may be able to view the recordings. Each chose their pseudonym thoughtfully, and some made overt use of the tangible consent signal to communicate their (un)willingness to continue. These abilities ran counter to the developmental deficit discourse supposedly underpinning UNCRC *Article 12* and highlight young children's ability to comprehend consent/dissent in unique ways (Clark & Flewitt, 2020; Flewitt, 2005). Further, guided by the *Hierarchy of Participation Rights*, each child's wishes to continue or end participation were respected, even when inconveniencing the researchers or causing loss of data. Thus, it becomes incumbent on researchers to plan for the likelihood and consequences of children unexpectedly or suddenly withdrawing from a project or experience (Arnott et al., 2020; Dockett et al., 2012).

From this study, two practical issues arose for reflection. Firstly, when conducting research with young children, it has previously been considered appropriate for caregivers, educators, or other appropriate adults to be present (Hammersley, 2015). Guardians are

often judged to be in a better position to alert researchers if a child is unwilling to continue. However, this may not account for a young child experiencing frustration or distress but still being willing to continue; a developing capacity for resilience may mean that a young child works through an obstacle or difficult emotion to try again. At what point (if any) should a young child's agency be overridden in anticipation that they do not understand how to properly wield it themselves?

As evidenced in Episode 3, when Luna's educator noticed her reaching for the signpost, she implicitly signalled through asking "what are you doing with that?" that it was not acceptable to end the recording. Similarly, in Episode 4 Hulk's mother attempted to re-engage him in the interview and was very apologetic that he didn't wish to return to the table. In both examples, the accompanying adults did what they thought was the 'right thing'; they were trying to stop the children from disengaging. Although well-intended, their interventions were not necessary and potentially diminished the children's agency to withdraw consent. While research within the early childhood space has progressed from a social constructivist deficit position to a more post-human aligned understanding of what the child can do (Thomas, 2021), assisting accompanying adults in their role as facilitators of children's consent rather than wielders of it can be problematic in practice (Kim, 2016).

Secondly, Rainbow displayed comfort with one of the researchers in a non-research context, inviting her to talk and play without prompting. Similarly, Ella's comfort with another researcher was conveyed through her invitation to be an active member of her classroom space, by explaining and displaying various items with pride. However, the researchers later reflected upon whether such interactions could change the dynamic between them in that Rainbow and Ella may begin to see them as peers or on a similar level as an educator. The researchers felt conflicted that this might cause Rainbow and Ella to lower their natural defences and agree to participate out of obligation or altruism. Phelan and Kinsella (2013) noted that although a diminishment in the power differential between researcher and participant can be beneficial, especially in terms of participation rights, if the young child begins to see the researcher as peer or friend, inbuilt protective measures may diminish resulting in vulnerability. Rainbow's affability and comfort in the presence of the researcher outside of the research space presented opportunities for reflection as to the potential to overstep the researcher-child participant boundary. It can be difficult for researchers to know where to draw a line between friendliness and distance in such situations. Navigating how best to honour participants at the same time as allowing them the space to make choices should be an ongoing point of reflection and consideration for researchers as part of the emerging post-human discourse (Murris & Reynolds, 2023).

Challenges to obtaining informed consent from young children

Several challenges to engaging children in a meaningful consent-seeking process underpinned this project. Firstly, in order to recruit participants, parents were asked to 'opt in' via the initial questionnaire. Thus, the decision to be part of the study in the first instance was at the discretion of adults. In much research involving young children, adults act as gatekeepers; their wish to be involved in the research (or even know the research is

occurring) may overstep the child's desires (Dockett et al., 2013; Schelbe et al., 2015). This can become problematic; parental insistence for participation to begin or continue may serve the responsible adult's agenda rather than the needs and desires of the young child (Thomas, 2021). Despite the researchers' commitment to each child's agentic consent in this study underscored by the *Hierarchy of Participation Rights*, children were only able to make a decision about their participation *after* a parent nominated them.

Secondly, without parental consent for involvement, the child could not independently decide to participate. Conversely, if the child did not wish to participate but their parent was keen to do so, it is conceivable that the child's wishes may have been overruled. The information sheet and consent form initially provided made explicit that the project be discussed with the child before agreeing to participate, in line with their participation rights (Thomas, 2021; UNCRC, 1989). However, as these conversations happened outside of the project space, how or if this occurred could not be determined. Hulk's verbal and non-verbal behaviours during research sessions demonstrated a general unwillingness to be involved (Episode 2 and 4); this was respected by the researchers. After the final meeting with Hulk and his mother, during which Hulk answered only a handful of questions before leaving the discussion, his mother disclosed that their involvement was because she wanted a forum to discuss her concerns about the use of digital technologies by and with children at their school. In this case, it appeared that Hulk's mother privileged her own agenda over Hulk's preferences and highlights that research with children is still undertaken within an adult-dominated framework with adult agendas (Kim, 2016; Lyndon, 2023).

The above dilemmas also highlight issues perpetuated by formal research ethics approval processes. Guidelines such as the *International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children* (ERIC Charter, 2013) state that for research involving children as participants, their informed consent must always be sought; and that it "needs to be based on a balanced and fair understanding of what is involved throughout and after the research process" (ERIC Charter, 2013, item 7). However, this can be at odds with existing ethics approval systems which are frequently generic and may not understand the complexity of early childhood research (Lyndon, 2023). Children are still viewed as vulnerable and in need of protection, and participation needs to be mediated by an adult; the voice of the adult is required before the child is consulted. While safeguards are required from a legal perspective, they do perpetuate the deficit view of vulnerable children whereby ethics processes champion legal rights over participation rights. Under these constraints, it is not surprising that applications of consent embedded in meaningful participation in many practical research settings may be at odds with the evolving discourse, as uncovered by Mayne and Howitt (2015).

The ERIC Charter (2013) also noted that young children should be afforded ongoing opportunities to agree or disagree to participate and the outcomes respected. Bourke and Loveridge (2014) suggested that informed consent (and dissent) should be seen as "a process of negotiation that continues throughout the research process" (p. 154). As demonstrated in the episodes presented in this study, consent was formally sought but also informally attended to during each interaction. The body language, behaviour, and

explicit language was listened to and acted on. Luna withdrew her consent by moving away from the research space but demonstrated her willingness to continue by asking the researcher to read a book with her (Episode 5). Upon noticing the video playing, she re-engaged several times. Hulk initially gave written consent and demonstrated understanding of what was involved; he participated for a short time and then conveyed his decision to withdraw (Episode 6). Luna, in particular, made ongoing and confident use of the signal signpost during both observation and interview, despite implied discouragement from her educator. The children demonstrated movement between consent and dissent, choosing when and how much they wished to be involved. This underscores that consent needs at all times to be considered provisional (Dockett et al., 2012; Sherwood & Parsons, 2021).

Inherent power differentials exist in research involving young children, perpetuated at higher levels by ethics requirements that place researchers in positions of power and control over all research aspects (Lyndon, 2023), as well as at the coalface. As Broström (2012) pointed out, when the "nice… teachers and researchers" (p. 264) pose a question or ask them to do something, young children may feel it is impossible to refuse. Harcourt and Conroy (2006) also pointed out that there may be cultural expectations for compliance, and these expectations may be difficult to account for. The issue of power between young child and researcher may be impossible to completely overcome; researchers must remain sensitive to participants' needs, do their best to develop instruments and practices which have them front of mind or employ frameworks such as the *Hierarchy of Children's Participation Rights* and be transparent about choices made at throughout the research process (Broström, 2012; Lyndon, 2023). In this study, the children's comfort and affability with the researchers (Episode 7 and 8) presented opportunities for reflection on whether there was potential to unwittingly overstep the researcher-child participant boundary. It is difficult for researchers to know where to draw a line between friendliness and professional distance, particularly when trying to establish rapport with a young participant. Navigating these issues must be an ongoing point of reflection for researchers working with young children as they can influence participants' understanding of ongoing consent/dissent (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014).

Conclusion

As this study demonstrates, there is a need for ongoing discussion in the research space around what best serves the rights, needs, and interests of young children in research. Such discussion could begin with ethical considerations of consent/dissent in practical settings beyond formal ethics frameworks, as part of discourse into the broader context, purpose, and function of the research. Key considerations which link with consent or dissent includes how relationships are established and sustained with young children and families, how the research is paced and experienced by participants, and how power is distributed or re-distributed throughout the research process (Dobson, 2020; Thomas, 2021). The consent/dissent-seeking processes undertaken by the researchers during this study were based on an intention to provide genuine opportunities for children to make choices about participation and reflect upon their effectiveness against the *Hierarchy of*

Participation Rights (Mayne et al., 2018). The examples presented aim to provide others with a framework upon which to reflect, including how young children may move into and out of participation. Through asking relevant questions, using provided and ad hoc manipulatives, and verbally or physically expressing their (un)willingness, the children in this study demonstrated that giving and withdrawing consent can be both simple and complex, explicit and implicit.

It is incumbent upon researchers to be open to recognising the enactment of consent/dissent outside of formal plans made in the preparation of research projects. As Arnott et al. (2020) highlighted, researchers need to be open to alternative methods of seeking and recognising consent and dissent, and that full understanding cannot be based simply on techniques that replicate adult consent-seeking processes. Each of the children in this study enacted their right to participate (or not) by using their words, body language and actions. Through conscious actions and considerations made by the researcher, space was held for each child to assert their choices.

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