Using small world toys for research: a method for gaining insight into children's lived experiences of school

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Abstract

The importance of children's perspectives is now well-established and there has been much attention afforded to appropriate methods for listening to children within the research. Whilst language-based research methods, such as interview, remain commonplace, children's representations are increasingly included as data in educational research. Photographs, drawings and tours have been used alongside the traditional tools of observation and interview to illuminate children's understanding of their school experiences but more are needed. This paper reports on an addition to this repertoire of tools, small world toys, and finds that valuable insight can be gained through using them as a data collection method. Drawing on research into children's lived experiences of school, it outlines the affordances and key principles of this method. It argues that capturing the *process* as well as the *outcome* is key in using small world toy representations and that using them in collaboration with other methods is needed in order to gain rich, reliable data. It concludes that whilst ethical praxis is key in using any method to research children's perspectives, crafting new and bespoke methods to more authentically hear and take account of children's perspectives should be an important and ongoing endeavour of researchers in this field.

Keywords: lived experience, children's perspectives, participatory methods, representational toys

Introduction

Despite the prevalence and growing recognition of the importance of listening to children, their experiences and perspectives remain underrepresented within education policy and literature (Shaw, Brady and Davey 2011; Freeman and Mathison, 2009). With the new sociology of childhood, there are a growing number of empirical studies attending to children's viewpoints and experiences (Harcourt 2011) but these are still relatively few (Mayne, Howitt and Rennie 2016) with an even smaller number

focussing specifically upon the school experiences of children in their first years of schooling (MacDonald 2009). There are paradigmatic challenges within participatory research with children where issues of power, status, ethics and visibility exist (Pascal and Bertram 2012; Bourke et al. 2017). Acknowledging this complex context, this paper reports on a study underpinned by the view that children are competent and knowledgeable contributors to educational research. Taking the position that childhood is distinctly different to adulthood, this research required alternative research approaches to those commonly used with adults. Research framed in this way requires methods that:

- utilise the multiple modes of communication of the child,
- enable the child to feel ownership over the data collection process, and
- align well with the child's world and frames of reference.

This paper reports on representation using small world toys as a research method that meets these requirements. Small world toys are scaled-down items for children to create and play with small-scale scenarios or worlds, typically for toy animals and people. Using illustrative examples from research with 5-7 year old children in the United Kingdom (UK), we present the rationale for using small word toys within research, the potential affordances of the method and the important methodological considerations of using this method with children.

The value of children's perspectives

There is broad acknowledgement that children's perspectives have value. Children have the right to participate, to express their opinion about decisions that affect them and to have their opinions listened to (UNCRC, UN 1989). These rights apply to

education, which globally we aspire for all children to access (Sustainable Development Goal 4, UN 2015). The challenge is in enacting these rights within dominant asymmetric adult/child power relations that effectively position children an underrepresented minority group (Palaiologou 2014; James, Jenks and Prout 1998). In order to meet this challenge, Lundy points to the potential of children's lived experiences in embracing the highly valuable knowledge that children possess.

> In truth, the strongest argument for guaranteeing the implementation of this right [article 12 of UNCRC] derives from its capacity to harness the wisdom, authenticity and currency of children's lived experience in order to effect change (Lundy 2007, 940).

Children have considerable knowledge of schooling, with much lived experience upon which to draw (Mason and Danby 2011). In the UK, where there is a statutory duty to educate, education policy does little to mobilise this valuable perspective. There is a superficial acknowledgment of the importance of listening to children's views about education. In the brief, two-page guidance document for schools, *'Listening to and Involving Children and Young People'* (DfE 2014), the benefits of such listening is framed in terms of improved attainment and active participation in democracy. This positions children's participation as beneficial to the children rather than valuable knowledge for schools and the sector. Other non-education specific governmental documents seek to present children's perspectives on a range of issues including school, such as those produced by the Children's Commissioner for each country in the UK, but these necessarily generalise children's views and make recommendations without the power, connectedness or reach to significantly impact education.

Without structural systemic inclusion, children's perspectives will continue to be

underrepresented in education, despite significant efforts in some schools. Student voice initiatives in schools have a minimal impact where they ultimately limit and reframe children's perspectives to fit within existing policies. Fielding (2004) summaries this approach as accommodation, accumulation and appropriation of children's views to fit the status quo. Children's participation needs to be more than merely consultation or being given 'a say' (Clark and Percy-Smith 2006) if their knowledge is to be valued and taken as seriously as adult knowledge. Currently in education, we are not routinely capturing, presenting or acting upon children's perspectives (Nutbrown 2018).

Researching children's perspectives

As within education in general, children's perspectives are underrepresented in educational research where adult voices typically take the focus (Burke 2010; Freeman and Mathison 2009; Shaw, Brady and Davey 2011). Significant efforts to view children's voices as valued forms of knowledge have led to a growing number of empirical studies attending to children's viewpoints and experiences (Forbes 2019; Harcourt 2011). Research *with* children rather than *on* children (Harcourt and Einarsdóttir 2011) has developed rapidly as a field with the ECE (Early Childhood Education) community having led the way in developing methodological approaches for a praxeological paradigm (Pascal and Bertram 2012). Participatory research has increased with children working as both researchers and co-researchers in some studies (Forbes 2019; Fielding 2004; Bucknall 2012; Shaw, Brady and Davey 2011). Such research *with* children requires appropriate methodological approaches to attune to, capture and present children's perspectives effectively. Such approaches should follow ethical praxis – an approach which is cautious, wise, democratic, relational and

ultimately valuing of children in practice - in order to be genuinely participatory in nature (Palaiologou 2014).

Clark's (2005) literature review on listening to and involving young children documents a range of tools available to researchers. As she points out, these tools are not new and not exclusively the remit of research with children. There is, for example, a long tradition of play-based techniques in therapeutic work with children (see Axline 1981; Lowenfeld 2005). The existing range of tools includes using props such as toys, puppets and persona dolls that act as intermediaries between researcher and child or as concrete materials to supplement conversation (Clark 2005; Doverborg and Pramling 1993). Other approaches draw upon children's social, visual and physical modes of communication in tours, photographs and role-play. In tours, children's spaces act as research tools that scaffold the construction and expression of their perspectives that are captured as data in such forms as maps, photographs and audio-visual recordings (Clark, Kjørholt and Moss 2005). Within visual methods, tools such as photography and the video recording are popular amongst researchers as they capture children's multimodal communication (their multiple means for making meaning, Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran 2016). Photography and video recording can be more accessible than drawing (Rose 2016) although drawing is also commonly used in research with children. Drawing has been used effectively to research children's understanding (Einarsdóttir, Dockett and Perry 2009), views (Clark 2005) and feelings (Søndergaard and Reventlow 2019), including subconscious feelings (Literat 2013), as well as their lived experiences (MacDonald 2009). The process is important in drawing as children construct thinking and engage in meaning making (Einarsdóttir, Dockett and Perry 2009). Photo-elicitation (commentary with and upon photographs) can support

communication of multiple perspectives including contrary narratives (Lomax 2012; Woolhouse 2019) and can appear inviting to children. Videography is particularly useful for capturing non-verbal communication, avoiding some of the limitations of more linguistic-focussed methods that can privilege some children's perspectives over others (those providing more of this linguistic data, Einarsdóttir 2010). It is important, however, to note that photographs and video (or any research tool or method) do not ensure children's participation in themselves as it is research design and relationships that leads to genuine participation (Palaiologou 2014, Scott-Barrett, Cebula and Florian 2019). Essentially, *how* we enact these methods is what determines if they are participatory (where researchers engage in ethical research praxis, addressing issues of power, status and visibility).

Perhaps the closest method to small world toy representation is the use of construction toys, such as Lego®, which have been used effectively in research with adults (for example, McCusker 2019). Pimlott-Wilson (2012) offered Lego Duplo to 5-6 year olds as an option in her research and asked children to represent their home. She found that Duplo provided 'a hands-on tool for children to recount elements of their everyday lives and to think creatively about their practices, whilst normalising the research process for participants' (146). Construction toys, like Duplo, offer the child the opportunity to connect pieces together to create larger structures. While this makes them more open-ended than small world toys, it also requires more of the child in terms of construction skills and imagination.

For all research methods with children, there are issues of interpretation, plurality and inclusion. Child interpretation of data is important to prevent the adult interpretation

fitting the children's perspectives into dominant adult hegemonies (Fielding 2004; Waller and Bitou 2011). Careful attention is needed to the range of children's perspectives being presented in research to avoid reduction to a singular voice, reported as 'the children', and omission of some children's perspectives altogether (Einarsdóttir, Dockett and Perry 2009; Fielding 2004). Indeed Clark (2005) and Robinson (2014) both concluded that more studies are needed which broaden the range of young voices within educational research, particularly children with identified special needs and from marginalised communities, as the children's perspectives currently included in research lack the breadth and depth to be authentically representative. Issues of plurality and inclusion require careful methodological attention in the design of data collection methods that genuinely attune to individual children when researching their school experiences. This article presents one such approach.

Children's lived experiences of school

Notwithstanding the methodological challenges, we might expect a plethora of research into children's experiences of everyday schooling given the vast numbers of children in school (over 8 million school pupils in the UK alone, DfE 2019). However, the available research does not reflect these numbers and is particularly sparse for younger children. From the evidence that is available, some thought-provoking themes emerge. It appears, for example, that children generally express liking school but are affected by testing regimes and pressures to achieve (Robinson 2014, AynsleyGreen et al. 2008). They also perceive school as controlled by teachers who hold the power, with young children in particular feeling that they have little influence over what happens in school (Einarsdóttir 2010; Robinson and Fielding 2007). Children are aware that teacher

expectations of them vary and that teaching and learning strategies are differentially employed (Robinson and Fielding 2007). Some children experience teaching away from the rest of the class, and this is perceived negatively by many, particularly if they do not agree that this additional support is needed (Robinson 2014).

Research has also found that children's friendships, social activities and social spaces are important to them, and additionally, that they experience collaborative learning situations particularly positively (Robinson 2014; Torstenson-Ed 2007; Einarsdóttir 2010). Such research suggests that children would like greater choice and freedom to make decisions for themselves at school (Kostenius 2011; Robinson and Fielding 2007; Torstenson-Ed 2007). Further research is needed to establish how and where this lack of agency is experienced by children and indeed how this is different for individual children. Researching lived experience, as in this study, offers a window into how these feelings are shaped and enacted in the classroom – to gain an appreciation of what it is like to be them (the child) in this place (the classroom) at this time.

In researching children's school experiences it is important to understand that what constitutes experience is varied (Freeman and Mathison 2009). Lived experience can be understood as the meaning made by an individual of the everyday (Van Manen 1990; 2017). These experiences, and the associated thoughts and feelings, influence how the world is understood and what is learned from it. It is an internal construct and therefore never fully understood by another (Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2016; Pring 2015). Researching children's lived experiences therefore requires research methods that are able to capture the layered emotions, actions and conceptions of children that form lived experience (Løndal 2010). For researching children's lived experiences of school in this study, we needed research methods which could attend to 'the diversities and

commonalities that give shape and structure to children's everyday experiences' (James and James 2004, 12) and 'unravel the complexities of everyday interaction in schools' (Apple and Weis 1980, 149) in ways that could be understood by the adult researcher. This required an approach that could build bridges with childhood rather than erect fences around it (Harcourt 2011) and was the intention that underpinned the research design in this study.

Research design

> "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
>
> "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
>
> (Lewis Carroll, 'Alice in Wonderland')

The quotation from 'Alice in Wonderland' reminds us that our research methods are determined by where we seek to get to; the type of knowledge sought determines the route to generate it. The endeavour to harness the expert knowledge about education held within children's lived experiences of school requires methods that support children's perspectives to enter this space authentically, with ethical research praxis (Palaiologou 2014). Crucially, such methods need to be founded within an axiological epistemology that fundamentally values and recognises children's perspectives as knowledge.

Valuing children's perspectives involves 'listening' through the hugely varied ways that children communicate (Clark 2005). As argued by Malaguzzi (in Edwards, Gandini and Forman 2012), to listen to the hundred languages of children, we need a hundred ways of listening. To achieve this, mere adaptation of methods used with adults is insufficient and instead we need methods expressly designed to collect data *with*

children. Such methods support children's representation and participation when enacted within ethical research practice (Palaiologou 2014). Effective research method design in participatory research with children recognises the need to both capture data through children's multiple modes of communication and support adult researchers in attuning to these modes of communication (Pimlott-Wilson 2012). Notably, the asymmetric power relations, which position children as a minority or disadvantaged group, are reversed here. Adults are less powerful and competent contributors requiring assistance in utilising and interpreting modes of communication where children are the more competent. The intention within this study was to use toys symbolically to help ameliorate communication and power issues whilst drawing upon play as a familiar context for the children.

Play is considered central to the world of the child and a key form of expression for children (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva 1976; Smidt 2013). Additionally, representation or symbolic play have long been recognised as essential modes of learning and communication for children (Vygotsky 1962; Quinn, Donnelly and Kidd 2018). Language and thinking entwine with symbolic representation, and symbolic substitution in play supports the construction of meaning making and expression, based upon lived experience (Lillard 1993). Through small world toys, which provide the tools for symbolic substitution, children explore and construct understanding within play at home and in early years educational provision. Research involving small world toys, as familiar tools of symbolic play, acknowledges these as authentic to the child's world and to childhood.

Small world toys offer manipulability and can be positioned and crucially repositioned as thinking develops and ideas are connected and evaluated. They have this benefit over drawing, which is more permanent, and they also provide something to work with (to attribute meaning or significance to), rather than a blank canvas, so that children are offered stimuli and can begin quite quickly. One potential disadvantage is that as children are provided with a limited range of small world toys, these may guide children towards more literal or existing meanings that they ascribe to the toys. Drawing, as a much more open-ended medium, can be a powerful tool for children to communicate lived experience (MacDonald 2009) but can also present challenges in research with younger children where drawing skills may be less conventionalised and more variable (Bland 2018). Small world toys offer manipulability, flexibility, immediacy and accessibility for children to represent their experiences. This study makes a case for the potential of small world toy representation as a useful and valid data collection method for researching children's lived experiences of school.

The research questions addressed in this article are:

- How do children respond to a research task that asks them to create a representation of a classroom using small world toys?
- What do children's small world toy representations of classrooms reveal about their lived experiences of school?
- What are the key principles for research design when using small world toy representation as a data collection method with young children?

Participants

Fifteen 5-7 year old children took part in the research. They were drawn from two classes, one in each of two case-study schools, located in the English East Midlands. For the purposes of this article, the schools have been given fictitious names. All Saints School, a faith school, catered for 3-11 olds and was located in a suburban area close to a city centre. English was an additional language for approximately one third of the children and almost half were from families with low socioeconomic status. Field Lane School catered for 4-11 year olds and was located in a rural village on the outskirts of a city where the families were predominantly from the same ethnic group (white British) with varied socioeconomic status.

All children and adults working in these two classes were provided with information about the research and were invited to participate. Parent/caregiver consent for children's involvement was also sought. All children who consented (and whose parents/caregivers consented) were included in the research and assigned pseudonyms. Informed consent was continually sought from each child both verbally and by attending to non-verbal indicators such as body language and facial expression. Additionally, data collection tools, including video recording equipment, were placed prominently in the children's view (when they were not handling them) as a continual reminder of the research context, and recordings were reviewed by the children who gave verbal consent to their inclusion in the study. No children withdrew any of their data from the study.

Data collection methods

Representation using small world toys was one of four data collection methods used in the study of children's lived experiences of school. These methods were conducted in the same order for each child, as outlined in Table 1.

Sequence	Data collection method	Raw data
1	Non-participant observation of everyday classroom life	Written notes
2	Classroom tour by individual child	Video recording
3	Classroom representation using small world toys by individual child with researcher	Video recording and photograph
4	Semi-structured interview between individual child and researcher	Video recording

Table 1. Data collection methods in chronological order

The methods sequence was established following a small pilot study where it was determined that the data was richer and the children more comfortable when researcher participation was steadily increased with each method. The non-participant observation was an important first method as this provided knowledge of the culture of the classroom including the language, systems and routines that were integral to the everyday life of the classroom (essential for the accuracy of data analysis). This was followed by each child creating a video tour of their empty classroom, showing the video camera what was important in their classroom and explaining to it why these aspects were important. The classroom tours video recordings ranged from 38 seconds

to 28 minutes in duration. Next was the classroom representation using small world toys (explained in the next section) and finally there was an interview between child and researcher, based around the child's construction, which was video recorded.

Small world toy representation: classroom representations

In order to gather data on the constructed meaning each child made from their classroom experiences, children were given a box of small world toys (Playmobil®) with which to make a classroom with the simple instruction, 'make a classroom'. The child and researcher were seated together at a table whilst the child constructed their classroom representation on the table surface. The children took their own photograph when they felt it was complete to support children's ownership and reduce adult influence upon the data collection (Bucknall 2012). The process of creating the classroom representation was captured using a brightly-coloured desktop mounted video camera so that the children remained continually aware that they were being recorded.

The selection of small world toys needed to be sufficiently open-ended that the children had the freedom to represent and find all of the pieces they needed whilst being sufficiently representative of the children's individual contexts so that they could see their lives in the items provided (informed by the pilot study). This meant that in addition to books, tables and computers some more ambiguous pieces were provided (for example fences and benches) as well as some less expected pieces such as a skateboard and baby bottle. A range of larger and smaller people figures was included and, using knowledge of the classes gained through non-participant observation, more were added so that figures were included with similar physical characteristics (skin tones, hairstyles and clothing) to the children, their families and the teachers in these

classes specifically. Following non-participant observation in All Saints school, some toys were added which represented the religious faith of the school. All children were presented with the same toys in both schools.

Method of analysis

Children supported the interpretation of their own classroom representation through their verbal and non-verbal communication (including the relative importance and emphasis of particular parts of the representation) which was captured in the video-recordings. This provided stronger analysis than relying upon researcher interpretation alone (Darbyshire, MacDougall and Schiller 2005; Einarsdóttir 2010). Adults, as outsiders to childhood, can easily misinterpret the significance of an element within a child's representation (Bland 2018). This was notably evident at All Saints School when the researcher asked Diya why she had placed a hat on a figure and she responded saying, 'it is just for her style' (Figure 1). Without the child's interpretation, the adult researcher might have attributed significance to this that the child had not intended.

The video recording of the child creating the classroom representation and the child's final photograph of it was analysed using visual methodology including videography, taking a grounded approach to data analysis to avoid imposing an adult framework upon the data. In analysing each video recording, the researcher looked for indicators of significance or importance for the child. These indicators included time spent upon one feature and areas revisited or changes made as well as facial expression and eye movements indicating more intense focus. The researcher then reviewed this alongside the analysed data collected through the tours and interviews. This was a staged inductive process with all data for each child analysed together, one child at a time, to

retain the integrity of each child's perspective and to ensure that each was valued equally.

What follows is a summary of three children's small world toy representations (Diya, Jasmin and Petey) and how they contributed to the understanding of these children's lived experiences of school, supported by photographs of their classroom representations using small world toys. Play is then drawn out as an example of one theme to demonstrate how the small world toy representations illuminated differences in children's lived experiences of play at school.

Children's small world toy representations of classrooms

Diya

Figure 1 Diya's small world toy classroom representation

In Diya's small world toy classroom representation (Figure 1), children were sitting and working in order to learn (confirmed by her talk as she constructed her representation, using words such as 'study' and 'work' frequently). She rejected some items immediately, such as sun cream, saying 'you won't need this at school'. The affordances of the small world toys in terms of precision and flexibility were apparent in Diya's careful re-selection of specific items from those provided. From her initial selection, she changed the teacher chair and desk to ones that she felt were more suitable, giving the teacher a large armchair. She included a teaching assistant in her classroom representation, giving her a computer to work on. This is in common with data collected through the other methods where adults seemed particularly important within Diya's experiences along with structure and order within the classroom.

In her small world toy classroom representation, Diya spent much time and attention on creating a triangular fenced area which she put a child figure inside, stating that it was the 'naughty corner'. When asked by the researcher why the child was in there, Diya explained that they had 'pinched the little boy'. Diya's actions and explanation were key to the interpretation of the significance of this feature. This seemed both a reflection of the type of activity that would be punished and a punishment (separation with peers). Diya used a physical barrier where no such physical barrier existed within her actual classroom as the small world toys enabled her to represent the real and imagined together. The focus on 'behaviour' systems was also apparent in her interview where she explained about her sister being punished by her parents for misbehaviour, which she deemed fair. Through the use of small world toys Diya had the opportunity to represent her lived experience using both the real and imagined and

to adapt the representation as it progressed. This enabled Diya to communicate the meaning she had made of her experiences by providing evidence of her priorities and emphases, which showed what was particularly significant in her lived experiences. Complemented with the semi-structured interview, this enabled researchers to, at least partially, understand the meaning she had made of her experiences at school. The small world toys provided an additional prompt and means of communication that supported communication between the child and researcher whose first languages were different.

Jasmin

Figure 2 Jasmin's small world toy classroom representation

Jasmin, in a similar way to Diya, communicated that children are seated for learning when constructing her classroom representation (indicated by her determined bending of figures to a seated position and her explanation of what each figure was doing).

Jasmin's representation (Figure 2) included her previous as well as her current lived experiences of school. The square fenced area included figures of younger children (age 5–6 years) who were in a 'play area' building with bricks. These figures were standing and suggest that Jasmin perceived a significant difference in class activities between her previous class and the current one where figures were seated. The role of adults seemed more supervisory for the younger children ('watching') and more controlled for the rest of the children where adults 'call the children to the table to do some work' or give the children 'the task to see if they guessed right'. This perception of her current classroom experiences was also apparent in both her classroom tour and interview but the contrast with her previous class arose most clearly from the small world toy classroom representation. The manipulability of the small world toys allowed Jasmin to reflect and adapt her representation throughout the process. She removed hats from the figures just before she decided that it was complete, for example, saying that 'you don't wear hats in school'.

Petey

Figure 3 Petey's small world toy classroom representation

Petey named himself in his classroom representation (seated on the left) and changed his representation substantially throughout the process. The final image that he captured (Figure 3) shows only some of the features which he included whilst moving, introducing and removing small world toy figures and items. It was clear from Petey's classroom representation in particular that it is essential to capture the process of representing with small world toys and not just the final product. The manipulability of some of the small world toys was important for Petey as he carefully moved each of the figures in a row (the children sitting on the mat in front of the teacher) so that they had each had one hand up to answer the teacher's question. The small world toys, in contrast to the classroom tour, classroom observation and interview, allowed Petey to include fantasy and imaginative elements so he included a 'map about dinosaurs'

(square frame) and a ‘computer with reptiles on it’ (imagined to be next to the standing teacher figure) indicating topics which he would like to learn about at school. Petey was clear that children ‘all needed to work on themselves’ and sat one child figure at each desk. The movement and placement of small world toys provided a mode of communication as well as the impetus for construction. Petey, a child identified as having additional educational needs, was able to communicate with the toys, providing greater depth and detail than in his interview.

Children’s experiences of play

The children’s small world toy representations of classrooms provided insight into their individual lived experiences of school. These were complemented and confirmed by data collected through other methods as well as by other modes of communication (such as verbal) alongside the small world toy representation. Some themes arose across different children’s classroom representations, with the small world toy representations demonstrating the individual children’s lived experiences of these themes in a way that was accessible for researchers. One of these was play.

Figure 4 shows four children’s small world toy classroom representations where there are different physical representations of play (or absence of play) within their experiences. It communicates not just that there is an absence of play, as felt by these children, but also why they perceive that this might be. Adam and Brooke, at All Saints School, both created separate areas for play with Adam making it clear that play was available but within restricted times and Brooke deeming play as for the younger children exclusively. Megan and Chloe (Field Lane School) similarly made physical

barriers around spaces to play with Megan explaining that play should only happen at playtimes (recreational breaks outdoors) and Chloe placing a teacher figure as saying ‘no’ to the children wanting to play.

Play arose as a theme within children’s lived experiences of school from the small world toy representations without being raised by the researcher. The small world toy representations allowed children to represent missing (or former) aspects of their lived experiences as well as providing evidence of how they had made sense of/conceptualised this absence. Data collected through the other research methods strengthened and mediated this evidence but the small world toy representations were crucial in presenting this aspect of the children’s lived experiences.

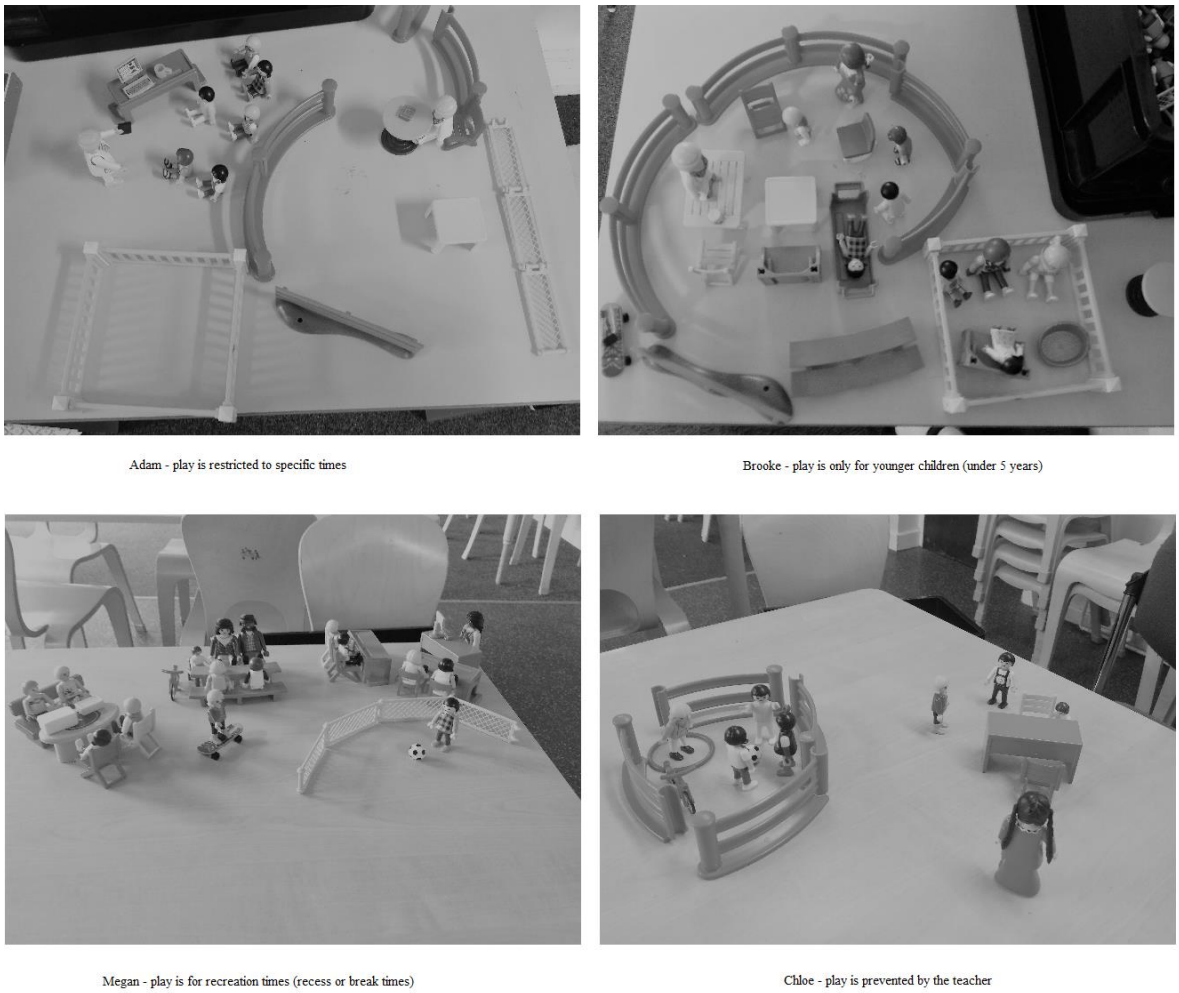

Figure 4 'Play' as a theme within children's small world toy classroom representations

The examples above illustrate the affordances of small world toys for providing insight into children's lived experiences of school. We now consider what the data indicated about children's lived experiences of school and what small world toy representations might offer educational researchers as a data collection method.

Small world toy representations and children's lived experience of school

Based on the evidence collected through small world toy representations and the other three data collection methods in the study, the lived experiences of school for the fifteen children in this study varied substantially. Their lived experiences were shaped by a

range of aspects of classroom life including behaviour management systems, curriculum, organisation, play, schoolwork, peer relationships, relationships with adults in the classroom and social learning. These were different for each child with some aspects of classroom life given much more attention and significance than others in the individual child's lived experience. Crucially, it was the interaction of the aspects of classroom life that the children attended to which shaped their individual lived experience. For example, where one child at Field Lane School particularly attended to classroom adults, schoolwork and curriculum then subjects such as mathematics and English were prominent in her lived experience and her perception of these was shaped by how her teacher presented problems or tasks in class. In contrast, another child in the same class attended much more to peer relationships and social aspects of learning. This child's attention was on her desire to work collaboratively (deeming this as missing for her much of the time) and dissatisfaction at having to do individual tasks. She noticed what her closest friends were doing and her perception was shaped by tasks given out by the teacher, if they were given to these specific children. For the first child tasks were important in shaping her perception of subjects and for the second child tasks were only significant to her if they were given to specific children and then shaped her perception of these children and herself (self-concept), rather than school subjects.

The small world toy representations included actions as the children were able to demonstrate these clearly using the toys. The children moved the arms (as Petey did to show what children did to answer a teacher question), legs (to sit or stand) and hands of the figures (sometimes putting items in them) to show important actions and activities from their lived experience of school. The small world toys enabled the children to represent the loss or absence of experiences (such as play or group work) and their

experiences from previous classes. In addition to selecting specific features for their classroom representation, the small world toys afforded children the opportunity to create social situations and express moods or emotions. For example, one child from Field Lane School pushed her items together to feel much more cramped stating, 'they need to be closer together and a bit more scruffier' which was confirmed by her explanation in her interview that she wanted to move to another table as it had fewer children and was quieter. Another child (All Saints School) represented many transitions in the school day in his classroom representation and expressed the feeling that life in his classroom was 'busy, busy, busy'.

The small world toy representations enabled the children in the study to represent imagined as well as more realistic classrooms. One child at All Saints School, for example, pointed to an empty table and said that it had books with facts about animals on top. In his imagination, the books were there. Similarly some objects were used to represent others, for example an upturned table became a place to relax (a bed type space to lay down) and an upturned fence was a doorway. The toys seemed to prompt but not restrict the children's constructions.

In this study, small world toy representations provided data on the full range of lived experience using our definition from Løndal (2010) that it is layered emotions, actions and conceptions. Children used the small world toys to represent emotions such as loneliness, concepts such as discipline and actions such as raising your hand.

Using small world toys in educational research

The findings of this study show that small world toy representation can successfully be

utilised as a data collection method in educational research. Children's responses were varied demonstrating that the toys and task were sufficiently open and flexible for the children to represent their individual thinking. Some children worked carefully towards a final representation, whilst others were more fluid and represented scenarios throughout the process. Small world toy representation provided particular affordances where other methods can be more limited by being more tethered to the present context (for example, photographs or tours of the environment).

Using small world toys, children are able to represent absent, imagined or aspirational elements within their school experiences and these indicated their feelings and constructed understandings. Children were able to use the small world toys to communicate *with* as well as communicate *about*. Some children verbalised from the outset of their construction whilst others were quieter, some talked or made noises for the figures and others talked about them (to themselves or to the researcher). In contrast to more traditional interviewing, the small world toys provided the children with time and stimuli with the benefit of not requiring an immediate response. The option to move the small world toys as well as remove or adapt their classroom representation offered flexibility. This flexibility provided stimuli and time for thinking which supported the construction of lived experience.

The process of construction, as pointed out by Lomax (2012) for photography, Einarsdóttir, Dockett and Perry (2009) for drawing, and Pimlott-Wilson (2012) for construction toys, provides important evidence of the child's interpretation, meaning and choices. In using small world toy representation as a data collection method with young children, this construction process should be captured and analysed as well as the

final representation. Within process we capture evidence of significance and emphasis alongside the imagined (non-physical elements of the representation) that the child sees but the adult, without the child's assistance, does not.

Analysis of small world toy representation data requires informed researcher interpretation. As with photo-elicitation (Lomax 2012), attention to context provides a better understanding of data. Collecting data of the process as well as the outcome supports this, providing valuable evidence of the child's intent and meaning (Pimlott-Wilson 2012). This meaning is apparent in the positioning and repositioning of toys, as well as pauses, focus, expression, gesture and spoken language. Researcher knowledge of the classroom and school ecosystem is similarly important for accurate data analysis. In this study, the non-participant observation of the everyday life of the classroom (data collection method 1 in the list) provided insight into the language, culture, routines and practices of the classroom which supported the researcher to interpret these when seen reflected back in the small world toy representations. A simple example of this is in the names and functions of groupings. In Field Lane School these were 'places' at named 'tables' and at All Saints, these were 'spaces' for specific purposes (maths spaces, English spaces and afternoon spaces). Knowledge of this is important for the researcher to interpret children representing these systems and perhaps using this language. Darbyshire, MacDougall and Schiller (2005) found that a major limitation of their study was that adults interpreted children's photographs, criticising this for engendering of an adultist approach. This is similarly a limitation in this study where capturing the process of children creating their representations provided stronger data analysis but the interpretation of this evidence remained within the adult domain. Taking a more participatory approach, child researchers could potentially analyse small world toy

representation data rather than, or in addition to, adult researchers (perhaps an advisory group of children from the class as suggested by Shaw, Brady and Davey 2011). This was not a design feature of this study and is an area for further methodological research. Questions related to the analysis of *process*, such as how best to interpret and present changes in a child's representation over time, and the accompanying gestures and vocalisations, would also benefit from further methodological development.

As with similar methods (such as drawing, Bland 2018), small world toy representation is unlikely to provide sufficiently robust empirical data as a sole method of data collection. Complementary methods used alongside small world toy representation provides a more comprehensive picture, opportunities for methodological triangulation and additional support for interpretation within data analysis to establish an accurate and stable overall picture.

Conclusion

Small world toys offer researchers a potentially valuable tool within the repertoire of methods for researching children's perspectives in education. Representation using small world toys has the potential to provide meaningful evidence of children's perspectives and contribute meaningfully to research aimed at gaining insight into children's experiences or views on school. When using small world toy representations, method design and data analysis are supported by knowledge of the children's contexts. The process of creating the representation provides important data that strengthens findings. Whilst small world toy representation yields evidence of children's perspectives that some other methods less readily afford, it has its limitations as a method. These include the limitations of the toys offered and issues of interpretation. It

is therefore advisable that small world toy representation is used alongside other complementary evidence so that findings are supported by a broad evidence basis. Further work is needed to ascertain whether children as researchers, interpreting their own or other children's data, might support the interpretation that is more authentic and ultimately provide greater insight. Additionally, representation with small world toys could be explored in appropriate research situations with older children or adults as a means to finding a fresh approach in an effort to reduce the impact of the researcher effect upon participants (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015).

Small world toys, as a method, have the advantage of being within the child's world and harnessing children's ability to communicate through symbolic representation and natural affinity to play. The results of this study indicate that small world representation might be useful in educational research, particularly with younger children. Used in conjunction with other methods they have the potential to provide more holistic, nuanced understandings of children's lived experiences of school.

With carefully crafted, appropriate method design and ethical praxis, children can make valuable contributions to educational understandings. These methods need to be suitably attuned to the child's world. It is insufficient to assert that all methods can be participatory if used within an ethical and valuing epistemological framework. Our educational research communities need additional specific methods, such as those presented in this article, which are able to authentically capture the languages of children and childhood. Such methods require us, as researchers, to learn from and utilise children's ways of listening to children rather than adapting adult ways of listening to adults for children but essentially still listening as adults. This requires

specific energies from researchers to recognise and ameliorate potential barriers including within data analysis. We need ways of hearing how children communicate their perspectives, not only at the point of data capture but also through the analysis and presentation of this data.

Whilst ethical praxis (ethics at the heart of research practice) is key in using any potentially participatory method, crafting new and bespoke methods to more authentically hear and take account of children's perspectives should be an important and ongoing endeavour of researchers seeking children's perspectives/educational researchers. This embraces ethical praxis and applies it to the crafting of method. Enacting ethical praxis within research with children requires careful and sustained attention from researchers to support our collective endeavour. This paper provides an example of how 'ethical knowing' (Palmer 1987) and representation using small world toys can be used, alongside other methods, to generate rich authentic data on children's experiences of school.

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