Research with children of migrant and refugee backgrounds:
A review of child-centered research methods

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Abstract

This paper outlines a participatory research methodology we have found to be successful in researching the educational experiences and perceptions of children with migrant or refugee backgrounds in Australia for whom English is a second language, aged between 5 and 7 years. As such, the paper focuses on research methods that are effective in research with (rather than on) young children who have experienced transitions involved with forced or voluntary migration and resettlement. The paper outlines these methods, together with their effectiveness and usefulness in allowing children to express themselves on their own terms and become fully involved in the research process. In particular, the paper is interested in allowing children to have voices in research concerning perceptions of ‘doing well’ at school. Finally, the paper addresses the ethical issues of working with migrant and refugee children, and the common critiques of participatory research with young children.

Introduction

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In recent years there has been an increased interest in research processes that are child-centered, and which model participatory research designs that place children at the center of the process as active participants (see, for example, Clark and Moss 2001; Barker and Weller 2003; Dreissnack 2006; Crivello et al. 2008). This has particularly been the case in relation to interest in, and the development of, qualitative research methods that are designed to examine children’s own experiences and perspectives; especially in relation to children in vulnerable situations such as from refugee or migrant backgrounds (see Crivello et al. 2008; Van Blerk and Ansell 2006). Such research aims to place children at the core of the research process, arguing that children themselves are valid sources of data and able to communicate information about their own lives (Crivello et al. 2008; Smith 2011; Ebrahim 2010).

In this paper, we discuss the experiences we have had in designing and implementing a child-centered, participatory research project concerning the educational experiences of young children with migrant or refugee experiences in South Australia, Australia. These children frequently arrive in South Australia speaking little or no English, and are placed in Intensive English Language Centers (IELCs) before transitioning into mainstream schooling, typically after 12 months. The aim of this project was to consider the risk and protective factors for positive educational experiences for children arriving in Australia as refugees or migrants, together with how this cohort of children perceived ‘doing well’ at school in the first place (a previously under-researched area in Australia for younger children, see Matthews 2008; Tayebjee 2005). As such, we needed to research and develop child-focused research methods as part of an overarching

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participatory methodology which enabled these children to report on their own subjective experiences of education and well-being. Thus an important goal of the project became to focus on a participatory research methodology that provided the children involved in the study with the opportunity to actively participate in the research and for the data collection to reflect processes which were meaningful to them, particularly given the diversity of their pre-migration and settlement experiences. In this paper, we discuss our experiences of designing the project around this participatory research methodology with the younger cohort of children involved in the study (aged five to seven years), to report on both successful and less than successful research designs for working with young children with refugee or migrant experiences. Before doing so, we briefly discuss the fraught process of measuring well-being specifically in young children.

Considering well-being

The broader research project of which this paper is a part aimed to consider the factors which impacted upon the experiences of children with refugee and migrant backgrounds at school; particularly in relation to their transition out of the IELP and into mainstream classes. In addition, the project aimed to provide an overview of what it meant for this cohort of children to be ‘doing well’ at school on their own terms, given the importance of connection to school in relation to overall well-being for young refugees and migrants (Gifford et al. 2007). Traditionally, well-being school has been conceived as a dimension of child well-being (including overall cognitive development, academic

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achievement and perceptions of schooling, see Fernandes et al. 2011), and thus it is important to outline existing child well-being research here as it is broadly in this area that our project lay. However, it is worth noting that in this paper we use the term ‘doing well’ at school to examine children’s own experiences and perceptions of being at school in Australia rather than its more traditional association with particular outcomes or achievements. That is, we use the term ‘doing well’ to encompass a holistic experience of schooling that includes overall perceptions of being at school in a resettlement country for this cohort of migrant and refugee children that may or may not be related to academic achievement per se (Bankston and Zhou 2002).

In relation to well-being more broadly, Ben-Arieh (2005; 2006) notes that there have been numerous attempts at defining well-being in children, the majority of which typically focus on single or narrow criteria, and which lack the child’s own perspective and experience. These foci are explicated by Fattore et al. (2005), who argue that traditionally, approaches to defining well-being in children have shared three main themes, namely; the need to meet particular developmental milestones, behaviour problems or other issues, and performance according to the goals of child institutions (such as schools). Both Fattore et al. (2005) and Ben-Arieh (2006) point out that, whilst these approaches have had some positive influence on policy, there are a number of issues inherent within them. In particular, Fattore et al. argue that the lack of negative indicators does not equal positive well-being, and that there is a lack of knowledge concerning positive well-being that reflects children’s lived experiences and perspectives.

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In addition to issues with traditional models of child well-being, positivist research paradigms traditionally used for researching child well-being are increasingly seen to be problematic in that they have typically relied upon large scale quantitative data collection; a methodology that has frequently been criticized as seeing children as objects, and which relies upon adult-centric understandings of the topics under consideration (Barker and Weller 2003). Additionally, whilst there have been some attempts to develop scales to measure well-being in children - particularly by substituting questions to make them more valid for younger children’s cognitive competencies – Fattore et al. (2005) correctly argue that such methods continue to assume that children’s experiences are lesser than, rather than different from, the experiences of adults, and thus fail to center the experiences of children in the research process.

In response to the limitations outlined above with regard to previous quantitative measures of child well-being, knowledge concerning children’s understandings of ‘doing well’ in more recent research has used participatory methods in an attempt to gain an understanding of how children perceive well-being. In their research on well-being in children, Fattore et al. (2005) found a number of themes, including: positive feelings (such as happiness, but an ability for some children to also integrate feelings of sadness into an overall concept of general well-being), feeling safe, feeling that you were an ‘okay’ person, and positive physical spaces around them. Fattore et al. present these themes with the caveat that children will experience them in different ways at different times in their lives, thus again reflecting the importance of considering context when conducting research in this area.

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It is also important to note that any attempt to define well-being must not only take into account the nuances of children’s understandings of doing well, but also acknowledge that the term is culturally-bound, and by definition will take on different meanings in different countries, cultures, and social contexts, thereby requiring forms of data-collections which are sensitive to changing contexts and meanings (Carboni and Morrow 2011; Fattore et al. 2007). These issues of context in relation to culture were particularly pertinent for our present study, given that the students participating in the study came from a diverse range of backgrounds, including over 20 countries-of-origin, with many children having lived in multiple countries before arriving in Australia. Thus, not only were we cognizant of the need to consider the well-being of children in their own right - rather than in terms of their ‘well-becoming’ towards adulthood (Ben-Arieh 2006; Fattore et al. 2007; Crivello et al. 2008) - but we were also mindful of the need to consider individual differences in what it meant for these children to be ‘doing well’ in the school environment.

In this paper, and for the research project more broadly, we were interested in considering well-being within the specific environment of school, particularly in relation to positive or negative perceptions of being at school. As such, we began our project by including a range of measures which could be explored using the participatory research methods outlined below, all of which were designed to provide an overall picture of how a child ‘doing well’ at school might look, and how definitions of ‘doing well’ for children might differ between individuals along lines such as culture, age, previous experiences and gender.

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Background to the present study

The present study sought to examine the experiences of children within IELCs in South Australia, Australia. The research built upon previous research in the area of education and well-being for young refugee and migrant children, including research which suggests that teachers feeling underequipped to deal with growing numbers of newly arrived students without adequate knowledge about the factors which impact upon their well-being at school (Matthews 2008; Cassity and Gow 2005; Woods 2009), and previous research conducted at secondary school level which indicates that in many instances students do not feel ready to enter mainstream classes when they are required to do so, causing a level of anxiety (Miller 2006; Olliff and Couch 2005).

Across Australia, the structure for entering students with migrant and refugee backgrounds into mainstream schooling differs, and this paper will focus on the structure within the state of South Australia where this project took place. Within South Australia, students of primary school age (five to 13) enter IELCs which are located on mainstream state-run primary school sites. Students are placed in classes which roughly correspond to their age, but which are devoted to the study of English. They remain in these classes for approximately a year before transitioning into mainstream classes either at the same school or at a different one (depending on decisions made by their parents or caregivers). These sites therefore offer a unique environment in which to consider what it means for young children with migrant or refugee backgrounds to be ‘doing This is an Author’s Accepted Manuscript of a paper published in Child Indictor’s Research 7(1). Copyright Springer DOI: 10.1007/s12187-013-9214-6
well, and to date there is little research in Australia which has considered the educational experiences and perceptions of these students. The present study utilized a longitudinal design, following participants from either the start or the middle of their time in an IELC through to one to two years after their transition to mainstream classes (and see also Crivello et al. 2008 and Gifford et al. 2007 for examples of longitudinal research in this area). The precise experiences of these children are the subject of other papers by the authors. The present paper is written specifically to outline the participatory methodology found to be useful with this cohort of children to whom the authors believe researchers have a responsibility to ensure that research techniques are participatory and child-centered.

**Child-centered research methodologies**

In the present study, a participatory methodology was developed that comprised both qualitative and quantitative methods, and which was used in order to promote child-centered research processes in our work with newly arrived children for whom English is an additional language. As such, the research design reflected other research in this area by using a ‘toolkit’ of approaches (and see Crivello et al. 2008 for an example of this research design in a longitudinal project with children aged six and seven). Such a design is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allows the researchers to give young children a range of options in terms of research activities, thereby increasing the likelihood that some of the activities will suit the child’s preferred communication channels, as well as aiding in breaking down power relations between children and adults.

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(Barker and Weller 2003; Einarsdottir 2005). Secondly, it allows the researchers to examine a number of different forms of data, to allow cross-checking of results and comparison of data (Beazley and Ennew 2006). Finally, the different data collection techniques go some way towards ensuring that children remain interested during the process of data collection. We also believe that using a toolkit of approaches enables one of the central tenets of participatory research with children, namely for the researcher to enter the world of the child, and, in doing so, modify research agendas to ensure that the experiences of the participants involved are reflected in the research process (O’Kane 2000). In this section we discuss the participatory methodology further, including the strengths and limitations of the various methods used in working with children in this age bracket.

_Building rapport and trust_

Based on similar research with older migrant and refugee children, we acknowledge the importance of spending time with children participating in the project in order to build rapport and establish trust, and feel that this is equally important with children aged five to seven years (see Gifford et al. 2007 and also Camfield et al. 2009 for a discussion of rapport-building in longitudinal research with children living in poverty). As such, we designed our project with an ethnographic component, such that the researcher (the first author) would spend a day a week for at least a term (approximately 12 weeks) in the schools in which the project was being undertaken, before conducting any further This is an Author’s Accepted Manuscript of a paper published in Child Indictor’s Research 7(1). Copyright Springer DOI: 10.1007/s12187-013-9214-6
research stages. This ethnographic component served two main purposes: firstly, it allowed the researcher to get to know the children in the IELCs, and secondly, it formed a component of the data collection in its own right.

Following Van Ausdade and Feagin (2002) in their groundbreaking research on young pre-school children in relation to learning about race and racism, the first author spent time getting to know children in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. In particular, and since the research setting was a school environment, the first author was careful to ensure that they were involved in as few typical ‘adult’ activities, particularly including ‘telling children off’ or giving instructions more generally. The first author typically spent time playing with children, reading with them, and allowing them to sit on her knee and chat; a popular activity amongst children in early primary school years. In particular, the authors were keen to ensure that the students involved in the research were not only comfortable to speak to the first author, but that as far as possible they were able to see her as ‘not a teacher’ to ensure that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences when it came to interviewing the children. This is particularly important given that young children are typically keen to please adults and thus to give socially desirable or confirmatory responses (Zeinstra et al. 2009; Hart 2002).

This issue of building rapport with children in research therefore brings us to two of the first points we’d like to make about participatory research with children from refugee and migrant backgrounds; the research process takes time, and rapport building is crucial. These two elements are particularly
important to ensure that the responses given by children during data collection are as valid and reliable as possible, and that children who are likely to have been through traumatic experiences are able to trust the researcher. In the present project, rapport was developed not only through spending time in the classroom at the beginning of the project, but also through regular visits (at least once per term). These visits not only formed a part of the data collection, but the first author spent time with students outside the official data collection process itself getting to know students further and engaging with their interests (for example, spending time with them at recess or lunch time, or chatting more generally about their interests and experiences). The usefulness of this approach is demonstrated in the fact that students almost always expressed excitement to see the first author, and typically asked if she could continue to visit them beyond their first year post-transition, as they progressed through their schooling (although this raised some issues in relation to ethical research practices, as discussed later in this paper).

_Photo elicitation and other visual techniques_

Given that the participants had limited English language skills, the present project used non-language based research methods where appropriate, and these have also been identified as useful when working with younger children (see Crivello et al. 2008; Beazley and Ennew 2006; van Blerk and Ansell 2006 for some examples of previous uses of visual research methods with children and young people across a variety of ages). These visual research methods included

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getting students to draw images of their happy and sad experiences at school, as well as using images such as a circle to denote the community of the school, and asking students to draw themselves in terms of where they felt they belong in that community (that is, towards the center of the circle if they felt they belong, and outside if they did not) (see Gifford et al. 2007 for examples of this work with adolescent refugees, and a discussion of the need for meaningful research methods in this area).

Research methods such as these have frequently been discussed as not only suitable for a child-centered research process, but even more so for research with children with limited literacy or who may have complex experiences of trauma (see Crivello et al. 2008 for children aged 6 and 7; Clark and Moss 2001 for children aged 3 and 4; Young and Barrett 2001 for children aged over 9 years). As outlined by Crivello et al. (2008: 56): “visual data enable the researcher to ground discussion in children’s experiences and social environments thus making the interpretative process more collaborative”.

Where appropriate, interpreters were used to help convey these instructions, however it was typically found that children understood these concepts and enjoyed the activities. Interpreters were avoided if possible in case their presence minimized the rapport developed between the first author and the children.

Another visual method used within the project was that of photo elicitation.

Photo elicitation is a research technique that involves children taking photographs, and then using these photographs as an impetus for discussion led...
by the child around the photographs they took. Photo elicitation works successfully as a child-centered research process due to the ways, as Crivello et al. (2008) argue, it affirms children’s agency in that they are free to photograph whatever they choose, and since, by using the photographs as a direction for conversation, children are also able to drive the direction of the research process. Photo elicitation also has the potential to allow children to capture aspects of their lives which adults may otherwise not have access to, and don’t require the presence of the researcher, therefore allowing children to take photographs on their own terms (Young and Barrett 2001). However, this positive aspect of cameras may be somewhat nullified by the fact that, in the present research project at least, the cameras were returned to the researcher for developing the photographs for discussion, meaning that children were aware from the outset that the researcher would be able to view their photographs. Once again, this highlights the critical importance of developing rapport and trust with the children participating in the study to ensure that positive aspects of research design aren’t minimized by issues such as some children’s desire to give affirmative or socially desirable responses (as discussed in more detail later in this paper).

Specifically, in the present project, children were asked to take photographs of places within the school which made them feel ‘safe’ or which they enjoyed being in and were important to them, following previous research (see Riggs and Due 2011). Participants were provided with a small digital camera which only required one click to take a photograph, and were given instructions concerning how to use the camera: no children seemed to have difficulties with doing so.
Children typically enjoyed this component of the project and indeed, we feel that this aspect of the project further facilitated the development of rapport between the first author and the participants in that the researcher was able to gain an insight into the school lives of the students, as well as providing them with an activity they found enjoyable and which resulted in an object they could keep (students were able to keep photographs of themselves or which depicted areas with no other students - other photographs were unable to be distributed due to ethical concerns). This enthusiasm could then be captured by the first author in subsequent discussions about photographs, which frequently returned invaluable data concerning the students’ experiences of school, their friendship groups and their sources of support. These discussions were child-centered in that they revolved around how the participants wished to speak about their photographs, with the researcher being careful to avoid what Barker and Weller (2003) term ‘adultist’ interpretations of the photographs. However the photos typically enabled the researcher to gain an insight into the child’s experiences of their days at school, including issues such as; who their friends were (and how many they had), where they liked to play, how they liked to play, whether they enjoyed spending time in the classroom or outside, what subjects they liked, and whether they had any favorite teachers or other members of staff. An example of this is provided below, taken from a focus group with three students aged six and seven (all personal details have been removed to preserve anonymity):

Researcher: What’s this photo of?
Student 1: X
Researcher: Is X your friend?

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Student 1:  Yep!
Researcher:  And this is a teacher? Who is this teacher?
Student 2:  Miss X
Researcher:  Why did you take a photo of Miss X?
Student 2:  Because I like her. She is nice to me.
Researcher:  And this is the library?
Student 1:  Yes
Researcher:  Why did you take the library?
Student 1:  Because we like to play in the library at recess. Together.

The extract above demonstrates the information that could be obtained in a fun activity led by photographs taken by the children themselves. The researcher was able to gain information about staff who students felt they gained support from, peer relationships, and spaces in the schools where students felt safe, as well as building rapport and getting to know students better. This information could then be compared pre- and post-transition, to determine how students’ reports of their experiences of support and well-being at school changed across the duration of the project and as the students changed classes or schools, and as their time living in Australia increased.

**Novelty scales**

A less well-covered research technique which we found little existing literature on was the use of 'smiley faces' for encouraging students to talk about their experiences at school and how they felt they were going more generally. The use

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of a 'smiley face scale' ranging from a sad face, to a 'straight' face, to a face with a small smile to a final face with a larger smile was a technique already in use at one of the schools involved in the project, which regularly undertook 'school yard surveys' to evaluate the experiences of its students in the yard, and particularly to note any instances of bullying or aggression. There is also a small body of research reporting success with using 'smiley faces' with children in a variety of areas (see, for example, Eiser et al. 2000 in relation measuring quality of life in children aged between four and eight years, Zeinstra et al. 2009 in relation to food preferences in children across primary school years, and Buchanan 2005 for anxiety over dental work in children aged five to 13).

In the present study we used 'smiley faces' to engender discussions about children's' evaluations of their experiences at school. In this sense, 'smiley faces' were used as a 'spring board' for further discussion, as well as a way of getting comparable quantitative data using a Likert-scale that could subsequently be used in data analysis. Children were asked to indicate which face they were during particular days (for example, the day before, or their first day at their new school), and during particular times (for example, during a particular lesson, during recess, or during an activity such as assembly). After indicating which face they felt they were, children were then prompted to explain their choices further. An example of this is provided in the following extract, taken from a discussion with a seven year old girl who had recently changed schools after exiting an IELC:

Researcher: How are you going at your new school?

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Student: Its good.

Researcher: How was your first day? Do you remember it at all? It was a week ago now, wasn’t it?

Student: Yes

Researcher: How did you go?

Student: Good.

Researcher: You went good? OK, can you tell me if your day, was a great day *(big smiley face)*, an OK day *(little smiley face)*, a poor day *(straight smiley face)* or a bad day *(sad face)*?

Student: Mmmmm. An OK day *(points to little smiley face)*.

Researcher: OK why was it OK? Can you tell me?

Student: Cos I was new. I was quiet.

Researcher: So you were just feeling OK then, because you were new?

Student: Yes, I just felt OK.

Researcher: What about this week? Which one have you been feeling?

*(indicates faces again).*

Student: This one *(indicates small smiley face)*. I feel better.

Researcher: Better? Why did you feel better this week?

Student: Because I said hello to some people. And I felt good.

The above example illustrates the way these ‘smiley face’ scales frequently enabled the researcher to gain information about the students’ experiences at school that would not have been gained without the use of the visual prompt (as seen in the example above where the student initially only offered that their first day had been ‘Good’ but was later able to offer more information after the use of

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a visual scale). This again highlights the importance of using child-friendly and meaningful data collection techniques.

The other novelty scale used in the study was that of ‘lolly jars’. These jars were filled to varying heights with lollies, and similarly reflected a traditional Likert scale, with the first jar being empty, the second jar full to a quarter, the third three quarters and the final jar being completely full. Again, these jars facilitated answers from the students in relation to their agreement to a particular question, which could then be explored further using open-ended questions.

Four jars were used in an attempt to encourage students to provide categorical responses (rather than providing the nominally neutral middle category), however it should be noted that students frequently circumvented this restriction by simply stating that they felt their response fell between two jars, as seen in the following extract with a six year old girl:

Researcher: How important do you think it is to try and do well at school?
Student: It’s in between here and here (points to middle two jars, to a position exactly in the middle of the visual Likert scale). A little bit here and a little bit here. I’ll tell you why. Because if you do more well then you get tired and so you only learn a tiny little bit more.
Researcher: So you get tired if you try and do well and then you don’t learn as much?
Student: Yes.
This example demonstrates the fact that students in the study were able to exert agency over their responses, to provide their own interpretation of the question, often in a great deal of detail. As quantitative data collection was not essential for the project, such responses were typically accepted by the researcher in line with a child-centered research project, however it is noted that lolly jars and smiley faces do offer a useful way of gaining quantitative data from children. Jars containing lollies were also useful incentives for children given the promise of a lolly at the end of the session. Stickers and other ‘rewards’ were also used to keep children interested and excited about the project and their time spent with the researcher.

Other written research techniques

Given the focus of Intensive English Language Centers on English language development, the students involved in the project were frequently quite proficient at written English towards the end of their year in the IELC, and thus where appropriate, these children were also asked to write “about me” descriptions to complement drawings immediately prior to their transition to mainstream classes. Again, this points to the necessity of the time spent in building rapport and getting to know the children involved in the study, in terms of gaining awareness of what individual children were comfortable to complete or participate in. In the current project, it was found that several children preferred participating in written activities rather than talking to the researcher, reflecting similar findings from previous research (see, for example, Theis 1996).
These children were frequently given the option of writing their responses to questions, as well as participating in activities such as the one mentioned above.

‘About me’ sections were also useful in that they provided data concerning students’ self-perceptions, and what they felt was useful to them. Students were asked to write about themselves, and what they felt was important about them.

An example of this is provided below:

My name is X
I am X years old.
I am from X country.
I have 5 sisters. Their names are....
I am a good girl and help my mum and dad.
I believe in Allah (my God).

The above extract from a participant’s ‘about me’ responses clearly demonstrate the importance of family, ethnic identity and religion to the participant in question. For this particular participant, the importance of these elements to her identity remained the same across the project. Other students highlighted favorite activities, school, or peer relationships in these sections. In general, these activities served multiple purposes, including getting to know participants better, and an ability to track any changes in participants’ self-perception across the duration of the project and the transition from IELCs to mainstream schooling. Children were also given the option of verbally talking about themselves with the researcher where they were unable to write ‘about me’

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sections themselves, and this largely depended on children’s ability levels, associated with both age and experiences of prior education.

It is important to note here the context-dependent aspect of research with children, and the impact of this on such activities. Previous research suggests that children’s responses to research questions or activities are frequently oriented to their immediate environment (Punch 2002). As such, the ‘about me’ responses may well have reflected those written at school already, or pertained specifically to issues relating to school rather than home. Whilst comparable ‘about me’ sections were not collected from home to test this, the context-dependent nature of students’ answers and the need to be critical and vigilant in relation to these is discussed further in the next section.

**Ethical issues and challenges**

Having outlined above some of the participatory research techniques used with the migrant and refugee children involved in the project, we turn now to an examination of some of the ethical issues and challenges involved in research with this cohort of students.

**Context and interpretation**

Our study highlights a number of issues in relation to context and interpretation, as briefly discussed in relation to the ‘about me’ writing activities. A further example of the importance of context was highlighted early on in the research.

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process in relation to questions from a coping scale (Brodzinsky et al. 1992) given to the students. These questions asked the participants to think of something which made them feel upset, with the instruction being that if they couldn't think of an issue then to provide them with an example such as that someone was mean to them at school. The scale then went through a variety of options in relation to how the students would cope with their upset feelings, including who they would tell or ask for help. Initially, participants provided with the example of bullying at school seemed unwilling to speak to their parents about the incident, however the researcher realized after a few interviews that where the context of the incident was changed to a park on the weekend, participants frequently indicated that they would speak with their parents but not a teacher. This example highlights the need to be aware of the fact that the context of a question, as well as the location in which the questions are asked, may well influence the responses given by younger participants (see also Punch 2002 for a discussion of this issue).

Secondly, ‘interpreting’ data in ways that might not be congruent with what the students themselves meant is a risk when working with children. This issue is highlighted in previous work, where, whilst children may be able to draw or photograph issues of importance to them, they are less involved in the interpretation of meaning during analysis (Barker and Weller 2003; Dreissnack 2006). As such, it is important that the participants themselves are given the opportunity to explain their responses rather than an assumption being made on the part of the researcher. The importance of interpretation in the present research occurred several times during the project, as demonstrated in the
following extract, in which the researcher is asking about the ease of learning particular subject areas in an attempt to consider self-efficacy (Bandura 1990):

Researcher: How easy is it for you to learn maths?
Student: Really hard

Researcher: Really hard? OK. What about...
Student: Maths is very hard because I already know many of it

Researcher: Oh OK
Student: Yes, cos the school helped me to learn that and I know so much now so it is getting hard for me

Researcher: OK so its getting hard because you already know so much?
Student: Yes. I am good at maths

As can be seen from the above example, it is important that researchers do not try to ‘interpret’ data collected from children without clarification, but ensure that children are able to discuss the meanings behind their responses themselves. In this example, it would have been easy for the researcher to record that the student felt that learning maths was hard (thus adding to a possible interpretation of low self-efficacy), without understanding the reason for this response which actually indicates a higher self-efficacy in this subject area. This aspect of data collection is also important in that it allows for rigour in ensuring the reliability of data and the application of meaning to the research question (Fattore et al. 2005).

Using scales and quantitative measures

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The above example also indicates another challenge that frequently arose, most noticeably in relation to established questions based on existing quantitative scales (frequently initially designed for older children or adults). This challenge relates to the issue of ensuring equivalency of understanding of the question itself – an issue which is not uncommon in research more generally, but may be particularly pertinent when working with children, and even more so when working cross-culturally (Eiser et al. 2000). These issues arose in a number of areas and highlighted the importance of ensuring that the research was able to be conducted using the principles outlined above – most obviously in relation to taking the time to sit with children one-on-one when administering scales or questionnaires and ensuring that there is adequate rapport and trust. For example, after the occurrence of several instances such as the ones above, students were asked if they wanted to give more information about their responses on Likert scales, enabling both the collection of data which could be coded quantitatively, as well as qualitative data that could verify interpretation of the question. These issues also highlight the importance of conducting a pilot study where possible to ‘test’ questions on children for possible misunderstandings or differences in interpretation of questions. Again, this may be even more pertinent where the information gained is quantitative, and where research is being conducted on younger children.

Despite these challenges in gaining quantitative data using scales, there is a strong case to be made for the utility of including children in quantitative research designs (Scott, 2000). As Scott argues, large-scale research with
children under 7 is complicated given the nature of interpretation as discussed above, however, quantitative information can be gained through one-on-one interviewing. Of course, one-on-one interviewing within the context of a broader qualitative interview raises significant questions of reliability and validity of questions, however, and as Scott argues, interviewing a child one-on-one has advantages of ensuring that children understand the intention behind the question, and of facilitating the use of visual aids. These measures can ensure the reliability of quantitative data, with Scott arguing that there is little evidence to suggest that children are any more or less likely to give reliable responses than adults.

The ethics of working with children

There is a body of literature which addresses the ethical issues of working with children in general in research (see Ebrahim 2010). This is particularly the case in relation to gaining informed consent from children, since it is the notion that children do not have the cognitive development required to participate in research which has frequently limited studies that involve children as participants (Ebrahim 2010; Flewitt 2005). In relation to informed consent, Ebrahim (2010) argues for a concept of consent as a process, such that whilst primary care-givers give their consent for participation (as is standard practice), children give ongoing assent to participate in the situations which arise within the research process.
Within the current study, it should also be noted that there are particular ethical issues which arise in relation to working with children with refugee or migrant backgrounds, again particularly in relation to obtaining informed consent. In this study, standard practice in relation to the requirement to gain informed consent from parents or carers for child participants was followed, with information sheets and consents forms being translated into native languages, and translators used to explain the study if parents or carers were not literate in their native language. However, the fact remains that obtaining informed consent in this manner does not take into account the child’s own willingness to work with the researchers, and this is particularly the case given cultural differences and considerations in relation to obtaining consent from adults or assent from children (for example, determinations of power based on pre-migration experiences, see Hopkins 2008; Morrow 2008).

In an attempt to deal with this ethical issue, the first author was very careful to explain the study to children in ways which they would understand, and outline the different data collection methods, including asking them questions about what they felt comfortable participating in. The first author used child-friendly activities to try and make the process ‘fun’ (such as stickers and drawings at the start of, or during, data collection), and these activities were also conducted to ease children into the research process if they exhibited any unwillingness or hesitation in participating. Further, children were never pressed to answer questions or participate in activities that they did not wish to complete, and verbal assent was always gained from the children. In addition, practices such as those outlined by Ebrahim (2010) were followed, including monitoring body.
language and facial expressions to determine unwanted activities or interactions, a process which once again points to the imperative to build rapport with children in order to best gauge their reaction to different situations. In these instances, children were at first diverted to another activity (such as choosing a sticker) to see if that helped to regain their interest, and if not, interviews were finished. Regardless of these attempts, it is acknowledged that this process may not always reflect an autonomous agreement to participate in an activity, particularly where research is conducted in an ‘adult’ environment such as a school (Punch 2002; Gallagher et al. 2010), pointing to the ongoing requirement for a ‘situated’ ethical research practise in research with children (Ebrahim 2010).

Of course, ensuring ethical practice in this may lead to another challenge with the approach in relation to data collection. Practices such as the one mentioned above typically lead to missing data, meaning that the data obtained may not lend itself to straightforward analysis, or comparison with other data forms. Further, providing child participants with a range of alternatives in relation to data collection presents a particular issue when comparing data across participants who have not necessarily all completed the same types of measures. Given the exploratory nature of the present study, this issue was not felt to be a major concern as the issues relating to the children involved and their well-being at school could be identified from the data types available, however it may be a consideration when researchers’ wish to determine causation or ensure equivalency of groups. Again, this leads to the importance of pilot studies in

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ensuring that adequate and effective data collection methods can be employed across participants so that useful data is obtained.

One further ethical issue is that the result of the establishment of trust mentioned above inevitably leads to the possibility of developing close relationships with children which have to end when the research period draws to a close. In this project, this issues was dealt with by clearly articulating to the children the year in which they would be when the first author stopped visiting them - for example, if they transitioned to a mainstream class in Year 1, the researcher’s final visit would be in the final school term of Year 2. The researcher typically approached this visit with a gift to the students of photographs from their research, as well as copies of other items they had completed such as pictures or ‘about me’ writings. Whilst this occasion was sometimes a sad one for both the researcher and the participant, the researcher ensured that the student always returned to a positive environment at the conclusion of the interview, and as such the support of the participants’ schools were invaluable in assisting with this process.

Cultural Issues

Given that the children involved in the project came from over 20 countries of origin, there were times when there was the potential for cultural differences to affect the research process in addition to the issue of informed consent mentioned above. For example, we were aware that the increments of the smiley face scale may not mean the same thing to children from different countries.

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given some previous research concerning varying cultural interpretations of depictions of emotion (for example, see Masuda et al. 2008). These potential differences were minimised by ensuring that children had the opportunity to tell the researcher what they felt each drawn face represented. For example, the researcher would ask “what do you think this person feeling” as she pointed to each image, to gauge what emotions the children ascribed to each face. It should be noted that these faces were of an ‘emoticon’ style rather than an actual person’s face, and could therefore be considered ‘neutral’ in that they did not represent a particular gender or ethnicity, and were not located in any particular context (Reynolds-Keefer and Johnson 2011). This representation of the smiley faces appeared to limit cultural differences between the children’s interpretation of the emotions being represented, particularly in terms of the extremes of ‘very happy’ and ‘sad’. Further, children appeared to discriminate between the different levels of the scale quite well, with children often indicating increments in between two different faces to represent the nuances of their feelings (for example, between the face with a straight mouth and the face with a small smile to represent being “just a little happy, but sometimes just a bit not happy, but not sad”). Other cultural factors indicated issues such as initial hesitation in speaking with the researcher, particularly in light of any negative previous experiences of authority figures (Franks 2011), however again these issues indicate the critical importance of building rapport with children and the ongoing process of reviewing and re-developing the research to ensure ethical practices in cross-cultural research with children with refugee or migrant backgrounds.

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Such cultural differences lead to important implications in terms of designing the research project. We recognize that the technique discussed above concerning ensuring equivalency of meaning in relation to scales is an individualizing and time-consuming process. At a broader level, we argue that cross-cultural and child-focused research design needs to be sensitive from the very start to differences within participants. In line with methodologies developed within critical race studies (see, for example, Solórzano and Yosso 2002), we argue that multiple methods such as those outlined earlier in this paper are the key to ensuring that the resulting research will be valid across a diverse range of experiences, as well as sensitive to differences resulting from cultural or ethnic background. Multiple methods are also critically important when the research concerns issues such as wellbeing, which are not only constructed at an individual level but also at a broader socio-cultural level whereby normative understandings of wellbeing change across cultures and times (Fattore, et al. 2005).

These issues pertaining to cultural difference also highlight the issue of longitudinal research design when working cross-culturally. In relation to research concerning psychological constructs such as wellbeing, it is possible (or perhaps even likely or expected) that change will occur within the participants over the length of the project. In relation to the project that is the subject of this paper, such change included increasing English language skill development, and changes in perceptions of wellbeing that could be related to age, together with changing perceptions of self. In relation to the first issue, increasing English language competence meant that children were more able to participate in a
range of activities (such as the ‘about me’ activity), as well as arguably express themselves in a more complex manner (although this could also be related to age). Similarly, changing perceptions of self and wellbeing led to children engaging in different ways with the questions at hand, including some questions becoming more relevant whilst others were engaged with less. As an illustration of this, children were more likely to engage with questions of ethnic identity at later stages in the project, but were less eager to discuss how they made new friends. Whilst it is not within the scope of this paper to theorize these changes further, it is important to note that these changes have implications for longitudinal research designs. In particular, such changes meant that the research design needs to be flexible, whilst also ensuring that similar questions are asked throughout data collection to ensure that the data obtained is comparable for the purposes of analysis; that is finding “the right balance between standardization and flexibility” (Carboni and Morrow 2011).

Discussion

To summarise, the present study utilized a range of techniques to attempt to gain data from children with refugee and migrant backgrounds in relation to their well-being and experiences at school. Despite this, we were not always successful in obtaining commensurate data across all participants. This highlights the issue of response rates in child-centered research (Chambers and Johnston 2002), particularly with children aged 5 or 6 who often decline to answer questions. Whilst this could be seen as a negative in terms of its impact upon data collection, we feel it is also a positive in terms of its demonstration of

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children's ability to withdraw assent or assert their agency in terms of which activities they participate in. However, the use of the methods mentioned above, and particularly research which is led by the use of a child’s interests (such as taking photographs), will increase response rates among children, and a skilled researcher can lead the conversation to research topics using these prompts. Nevertheless, we acknowledge here that conducting research in child-friendly ways is likely to result in missing data, and thus poses particular challenges for the collection of quantitative data.

In relation to issues of reliability and validity in research with children, we follow Thomas and O’Kane’s (1998: 345) argument that “...both validity and reliability can be improved by allowing children to actively participate in determining their participation in the research and how the subject matter is approached”. In other words, ensuring that young children are able to be autonomous (as far as possible) in their choices to participate in research, rather than forcing responses, and that the research questions are meaningful to them and that there is equivalency in understanding of questions between participant and researcher, reliability and validity will be improved, and this is particularly important in research with children from refugee and migrant backgrounds for whom varying cultural interpretations may be a factor. Further, using a participatory research methodology that offer a ‘toolkit’ of approaches can, as mentioned above, maximize the chances that there is the possibility of triangulation of results across multiple data collection techniques; that is, that responses from any given participant can be confirmed or ‘checked’ across different data collection processes. Thus, we would argue that rather than

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detracting from arguments for participatory research, issues of reliability and validity actually support the tenets of this research process.

To conclude, our paper has highlighted the utility of using visual research methods and tools when working with young children with migrant and refugee backgrounds in areas such as the study of well-being. In particular, children successfully engaged in innovative research methods such as 'about me' narratives and novelty scales. Our current research project has demonstrated that research with younger children for whom English is a Second Language can be rewarding for both the participants and the researcher, and that using participatory research techniques has the potential to ensure that a number of issues when working with children can be overcome or at least minimized: particularly in relation to ensuring that the research is ethical in its treatment and consideration of young participants, and in terms of maximising the reliability and validity of the results. Most importantly, our research project has demonstrated that we have a lot of to learn from young children with migrant and refugee backgrounds. As researchers, we believe we owe it to this cohort of young people to ensure that any research conducted with them provides them with the opportunity to actively participate in the research process, and that their voices are given spaces to be heard.

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