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INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES IN INTERVIEWING ORANG ASLI CHILDREN: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract:

Interviewing children is challenging and a privilege, especially working with marginalised communities like Orang Asli. Immersing myself in their world, rich in culture, traditions, and untapped stories—required me to explore the complexities of ethics, communication, and trust with care and adaptability. I am writing a reflection on my experiences interviewing Orang Asli children, sharing eye-opening and insightful moments. From overcoming language barriers to finding culturally sensitive ways to engage, each interaction taught me the importance of creativity, patience, and empathy. I also discover the ethical dilemmas of working with children from marginalised communities. While it is important to collect meaningful data and make children feel comfortable, with these reflections, I share practical strategies and insights for researchers seeking to make the voices of children from Indigenous communities heard by emphasising the need for respect, cultural sensitivity, and genuine connectedness.

Keywords:

Orang Asli Children, Communication Barrier, Group Interview, Indigenous People, Qualitative

Introduction

Interviewing children poses both advantages and disadvantages, especially when working with marginalised or culturally diverse populations like Orang Asli. However, children's views could be important sources of knowledge that can give much information about their

experiences and opinions. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), Article 12 states that children have the right to express their views on all matters affecting them. However, studies show that only 30-50% of child-centred research studies actively include children's voices (Lundy et al., 2024).

Children are still growing and learning cognitively, emotionally, and socially. Researchers must be empathetic and use child-centred approaches. As opposed to adults, children might be uncooperative, uninterested in the questions being asked, or even afraid of sharing their views with strangers (Camponovo et al., 2023). These factors demand new and flexible strategies to establish contact with the participants and to gain their trust, interest, and willingness to participate.

This is especially important when children have different cultures or backgrounds, for example, if they speak a different language or are not used to being interviewed by strangers. In this study, the children's culture significantly affects how they respond and view things differently. Culturally appropriate methods in the survey will make the data more accurate, reflect their actual life conditions better, and enhance children's self-esteem and sense of belonging (Bajo Marcos et al., 2023) However, it is crucial to discover how to tackle practical issues—for instance, shyness or short attention spans—so the child feels safe and secure.

This article explores the insights and challenges of interviewing children regarding the researcher's experience in a classroom. It emphasizes key strategies for engaging children through creative methods, building trust, and incorporating cultural elements. It also looks at typical issues like language, overcoming shyness and short attention spans, and how to solve them. By considering these insights and challenges, researchers can improve their child-centred research practices and guarantee that children's voices are heard and valued in the research process.

Literature Review

The literature review explained the theoretical foundations of interviewing children. The theories highlighted are Piaget's developmental theory (1952), Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (1963), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), and Clark and Moss's mosaic Approach (2011).

Numerous theories have shaped how researchers approach interviews with children and interpret their responses and data analysis methods in research studies involving child participants. Child interviewing has been guided by theories, developmental psychology principles, and research paradigms centred on children. These theoretical frameworks aid researchers in comprehending how children express their experiences, interact with their environment and process information.

Piaget's theory of development, from 1952, sparked interest in conducting interviews with children by emphasizing how their cognitive abilities evolve and impact their comprehension and responses to questions. In Piaget's four four-stage model, he proposed at the age (of 2–7 years), children may struggle with thinking and may benefit from communication methods involving play or visual aids. Structured questions are more effective for children at this stage (ages 7–11) as they rely on logical reasoning during this developmental phase. By

understanding these stages of development, they can adapt their interviewing techniques to fit the child's cognitive abilities and ensure that the questions are clear and suitable for their age.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) is another important perspective on the role of social interactions in child development. His Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept is that children can understand and articulate more complex ideas with the help of a more knowledgeable other, such as a researcher, teacher or peer. The theory of guided questioning, where the interviewer provides prompts or scaffolding to help children express their thoughts, is also highlighted. Furthermore, Vygotsky's work highlights cultural and linguistic context, such as that storytelling, shared cultural references, or peer-supported group interviews can improve communication and engagement.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory is another significant contribution to child interviewing techniques, examining how children develop trust, autonomy, and identity through different life stages. Young children, especially those in the initiative vs. guilt stage (3-6 years old), may have problems opening up in strange surroundings. On the other hand, children in the industry vs. inferiority stage (6-12 years) are more likely to engage in organized games and provide extensive answers if they feel they can do the job. Erikson's theory is significant in highlighting the need to establish trust and rapport before interviewing children so that they feel safe and important.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) offers a more comprehensive view of child development than other models, proposing that children's experiences are influenced by multiple ecological systems—families, schools, communities, and cultural contexts. This theory suggests that interviews should include the social context of the child's life because family expectations, school environments, or societal norms may determine their responses. For instance, Indigenous children or those from marginalized communities may have different reactions to interviews based on their cultural background and previous encounters with adults or authority figures such as interviewers. This awareness of the contextual factors enables the researchers to create culturally appropriate and ethically correct interview protocols.

Child-focused research methods have become more popular lately due to the Mosaic Approach introduced by Clark and Moss in 2001. This model advocates for research practices that involve children as participants rather than just recipients of information. Using traditional interviews, the Mosaic Approach suggests utilizing various methods, like drawings, photos and play activities, to help kids communicate their ideas in diverse ways. This unique approach encourages a form of interviewing, shifting away from the usual adult-dominated methods to prioritize listening to and valuing children's perspectives during research projects.

These theories combined offer a clear and comprehensive basis for applying child interviewing in practice and theory. Knowledge of cognitive development, social influences, and participatory approaches can help researchers design more engaging, culturally appropriate, and developmentally suitable interview techniques. These theoretical insights integrated into child interviewing mean that interviews for children are respectful and capable of providing a rich insight into the child's perceptions and worlds.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative case study approach to explore the interview experiences of Orang Asli children. A case study design is particularly appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth examination of the unique cultural, linguistic, and developmental factors that influence the children's responses and interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)The study's qualitative nature emphasizes understanding the children's lived experiences and the contextual details of their environment, providing a holistic perspective that quantitative methods may not capture.

Participants

The participants in the study are six Orang Asli children aged seven. This age group was chosen because it is the first year of primary school and is the earliest exposure to a new language and culture for most of them. It is, therefore, an ideal stage to explore communication challenges, cultural identity, and engagement strategies. The children were chosen using purposive sample sampling to ensure that they represented the linguistic and cultural diversity within the Orang Asli community in the school. Careful consideration was taken to ensure a balanced representation of gender and other demographics to provide a comprehensive understanding of the children's experiences.

Data Collection

The study used three main data collection methods: group interviews, a semi-structured interview protocol, and observations.

Group Interviews

Group interviews created a supportive and familiar environment that allowed the children to interact with their peers while discussing the topics of interest. This method also provided the opportunity to observe the social dynamics and interactions between peers, which is important to understanding similar cultural experiences.

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interview protocol was used to easily adapt the questions based on the situation during the interview. It is to give flexibility to the researcher in dealing with the children's behaviour and language levels or any unexpected events while interviewing the children without neglecting the main objectives. The open-ended questions allowed the children to express their thoughts freely, and the follow-up questions were used to clarify and expand the answers. The interview questions were carefully developed using previous literature and refined through expert validation to ensure its validity and relevance.

Observation

Data was collected from interview sessions and casual contexts to collect observational data on nonverbal communication, behavioural patterns, and environmental context (Yin, 2020). Some additional observational information was helpful to supplement the spoken data, especially with children who may not have tended to use words to convey what they meant.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a method widely used in qualitative research. Thematic analysis captures detailed and complex data (Braun, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It helps to identify the main themes related to the topic investigated and capture the details of the phenomenon explored. Through this process, thematic analysis identified rich, contextualised themes that illustrate the researcher's experience in interviewing Orang Asli children. This approach enabled the study to transform these valuable insights into clear findings by synthesising them into coherent themes.

Findings

The findings section is divided into insights and challenges of interviewing Orang Asli Children. It is written as reflections based on the researcher's experience during the session.



Figure 1: Interviewing Orang Asli Children

Insights

The main insights observed during the interview include engagement through creative methods, building trust and rapport and pride in cultural identity.

Engagement through Creative Methods

As I entered the classroom where the Orang Asli children gathered, their energy caught my attention—curious eyes, shy smiles, and giggles. I knew conventional interview techniques would not work here, so I was prepared to break the ice. It wasn't long before I discovered the power of creativity in breaking down barriers. Instead of asking them to introduce themselves, I started the conversation by introducing myself and referring to myself as Cikgu Najah. Then, I took out some juice and snacks to share. I let them enjoy it and asked them how it tastes. A girl had difficulty opening the snacks. I gently volunteer to open it for her. And one by one, they came to me and asked me to open their snacks too.

Things improved; the atmosphere changed from hesitation and shyness to warmth and lively. We began the session with sketching. I asked their names as I handed out drawing papers and colour pencils. They eagerly answered my questions and started to sketch. They asked me what they needed to sketch. I told them to sketch anything they liked. They came out with sketches of cars, animals, and anything dear to them. Everyone rushed to raise their hands, too excited to share their sketches and tell me the stories. I welcomed their enthusiasm.

The atmosphere changed from quiet to lively. What surprised me most was that these drawings served as a key to deeper conversations, allowing the children to express emotions and ideas

they found hard to understand. For example, one child drew a picture of a man with a tie. I later discovered that the man was her teacher, whom she adored. She then explained to me about the teacher, his name, the subject he taught, and why she drew him.

Creative methods like drawing are a nonverbal way for children to express themselves, especially for those children with limited vocabulary. This is in agreement with studies which have proved that visual activities are very useful in helping children to express their feelings and ideas(Okada, 2025).

Building Trust and Rapport

There was a particular child who caught my attention. She seemed relatively quiet compared to other children in the group. Even the sketching activities earlier could not make her speak. She was a timid girl named Fiqa who sat two seats away from me—occasionally looking at me with a smile. I smiled back, and she quickly looked away or hid behind her friend. I thought she was shy and needed longer to open up as I asked the children questions about their Bahasa Melayu class. Their learning experience and their favourite activities in class. I started to ask them to read the Alphabet. Fiqa joined along. And I realised Fiqa had speech impairment; perhaps she was born with a cleft palate. I confirmed it through the scars on her upper lips. She had a nasal-sounding voice, which was difficult for me to understand. I pretended not to notice it and continued to sing with the children.

After singing, I tried to ask Fiqa some questions.

Me: What is your favourite letter in the alphabet, Figa?

Figa: K

Me: Why do you like K? Figa: I like Kucing (cat)

Me: Do you have a pet cat at home?

Figa: Yes...her name is Koko

Me: I like cats too, even though I don't have one.

Figa (smiled with big bright eyes)

I knew I had gained trust and rapport with Fiqa from that moment. It was worth trying. Fiqa eagerly chatted with me and was no longer shy. She told me more about herself, her family, her friends, and her school. She is not a quiet girl, after all. The class was full of laughter and reassurance. My decision to have a group interview seemed to work, maybe because children appeared more confident when surrounded by their peers. Subsequently, trust and good rapport came from it. This experience has also taught me the importance of making sure that I work with each child's needs as far as my approach is concerned.

Pride in Cultural Identity

The most heartwarming and positive insight was when I asked the children about their culture, the traditional dress they wear, the food they eat during celebrations and *Sewang*. *Sewang* is a dance and music ritual performed by the Orang Asli people in Malaysia. It is considered culturally, spiritually, and socially important and is used to celebrate, heal, and relate to the natural and spiritual world. I showed them some pictures of orang Asli in their traditional pit fit and dancing. The children's faces lit up with excitement. Some eagerly described the

rhythms and movements; a few even demonstrated small steps. They were so proud of their culture, and I, as a researcher, tried to relate their cultural experience with the school activities.

Researcher: Do you do Sewang in school?

Nur: No

Researcher: Why not?

Nur: Only big children do it in school. We watch

Researcher: Can you dance?

Nur: Yes, but not in school. Everyone in my family can do Sewang?

(some other children nodded their heads and agreed)

This moment underlines the importance of cultural pride for children's sense of belonging and self-esteem, especially in marginalised communities such as the Orang Asli. The children's pride in their cultural practices suggests that if these elements were integrated into school activities, their heritage and formal education could have a stronger connection.

Challenges

The main challenges observed during the interview session are the language barrier, Shyness and Reluctance and Short Attention Span.

Language Barrier

Not everything went smoothly; communication was a constant challenge throughout the interview. The children in the group spoke their native language at home, and their limited proficiency in Bahasa Melayu often resulted in misunderstandings. I had to simplify my questions, sometimes using visual aids or gestures. Sometimes, the children would look at me blankly, waiting for me to speak more and comprehend the whole sentence. Once, I asked a question to a boy named Mark. One of his friends quickly said,

"Mark couldn't understand what you are saying". While Mark just smiled.

I then asked one child.

Me: What do you learn in school?

Ali: I learnt many things....but I don't know what to say in your language.

We played a game where the children needed to raise their hands they. Some raised their hands simultaneously, but a few only raised them after watching their friends do so. They were not sure what to do. It seemed that the language I spoke was unfamiliar to them. Our conversation became limited and hindered by the language barrier

Me: Which language do you find easier, Bahasa Melayu or your home language?

Lila: Home language... it's easier to speak.

The language barrier was not only the limitation of the depth of conversation but also the limitation of the children's ability to fully think and express themselves, which could have left much insight undeveloped. To avoid confusion in future sessions, using bilingual assistants or translators who are familiar with the children's native language could be helpful to reduce the linguistic barrier.

Shyness and Reluctance

I could hear the children chattering and giggling from afar. When I entered the room, it became quiet. Everyone stopped talking. All eyes were on me. I could see two girls whispering to each other. Some were smiling, others were looking down and avoiding eye contact with me. I introduced myself and asked them to introduce themselves, but no one dared. At this point, I started an ice-breaker session. No more questions were asked, it was just fun activities. They ate snacks and juice together and later sketched anything they liked.

They started opening up to me, showing their curiosity and asking me questions about myself.

- "...What is your name?..."
- "...where are you from?.."

I willingly answered their questions, and things warmed up. Slowly, I asked them to introduce themselves, to tell me their names and what I should call them. They waited impatiently for their turn. It started with them simply saying their names, favourite books, and family. All except two students were still reluctant to talk to me.

Addressing this through one-on-one interactions or enlisting the assistance of a trusted adult, like a teacher, could create a more comfortable environment for these children to open up.

Short Attention Span

One of my biggest challenges was maintaining the children's focus during interviews. It didn't take long to realise that their naturally short attention spans could make even the simplest questions seem like a real stretch. I remember one particular session vividly; I was sitting with a small group of children in their classroom and attempting to steer the conversation towards their favourite school activities. At first, they seemed interested, but it wasn't long before one child was playing with a pencil, another was following a cat outside the room, and the third had begun whispering to their friend about something that had nothing to do with the conversation. My carefully planned questions weren't holding their attention.

I came to understand that—this wasn't going to work unless I changed my approach. I put a hold on the interview and asked if they would instead create pictures of their favorite activities instead of just talking about them. Their faces immediately lit up and before long, the room was filled with the scratching of pencils on paper again. They eagerly showed me their drawings and pointed to the different parts of the pictures and explained the stories behind the photos. They were engaged again, and I was able to push the conversation more naturally and excitingly for them. A boy suddenly started to sing and others followed him. I also had to join in. we sang, we clapped hands. Once we stopped. i asked them some questions.

- "..why do you sing the song?.."
- "..we like the song a lot, the teacher taught us to sing..."

I learned that short and dynamic sessions are important. I should divide the interview into shorter sessions with frequent breaks, during which we could play simple games or sing songs that they knew. These breaks were not merely diversions but also a focus reset and group energizer. Frequent breaks were not just opportunities to rest but were used strategically to refocus, re-energise the group and create a positive atmosphere. Games, songs and creative tasks served as effective energisers while fostering a sense of collaboration and enjoyment. By

tailoring the sessions to the participants' attention spans, I maintained their engagement and gathered richer, more meaningful responses.

Discussion

Insights

Engagement through Creative Methods

Children can effectively engage during interviews using creative tactics like storytelling, play, and painting. In addition to making the process fun for everyone involved, these techniques give kids other ways to communicate when words aren't enough. For instance, researchers can collect rich, valuable data by asking kids to illustrate their favourite pastime or write a story based on a theme. Group interviews and drawings proved to be a practical approach to understanding children's wellbeing. It also confirmed the children's perspective and established that they should be directly involved in the research. For small children, a drawing could be a good start for ice-breaking or even gathering extra information related to their real-life experience. This method eases the burden of verbal expression and creates nonverbal communication channels, especially when working with younger children or those from various language backgrounds.

Through creative methods, especially in groups, it becomes possible to get responses that go beyond what individual responses might offer, and they can provide insight on how children interact with their peers, communicate ideas, and take on social roles within their group. For instance, when children work together on a drawing or project, their input could be considered shared values, leadership, and collaborative skills. This was demonstrated by Alexandre et al. (2021) in a study through collaborative drawings by Indigenous children about village life, which they depicted through their representations of roles within their community and collective cultural symbols. Additionally, group storytelling enables children to feel connected and, from the researcher's perspective, allows for observing how children contribute to each other's ideas, negotiate narratives, and include (or exclude) cultural elements in the process.

To implement these methods effectively, researchers can improve role assignments within the group, for instance, by choosing a storyteller, artist or presenter to ensure that every child has meaningful input. This is because a more structured approach will help reduce dominance, usually seen in a few participants and low participation from others. This is because, in addition to what they have created, asking peers to comment or reflect on an activity, such as what happened in their group work, can also give insight into their thought processes and collaborative efforts. These strategies increase the richness of the data collected and create a participatory and empowering environment for children.

Building Trust and Rapport

Trust is the key to successful interviews with children. A rapport forms children to make them feel comfortable, secure and valued, making them more likely to answer more honestly. A safe space for children to express their opinions can be created through informal conversations, humour, and empathetic listening, frequently used by researchers. This could be, for example, beginning the interviews with light-sided questions about their favourite games or cartoons to break the ice and establish a more relaxed atmosphere. Interviewers should create supporting and non-threatening environments as much as possible to enhance disclosure rates, as stated by Lavoie et al. (2021) in their study. The use of child-appropriate language and nonverbal cues

is important in building trust. Trust takes time to build, but it is well worth it in terms of the depth and quality of the data collected, especially when children are made to feel respected and understood.

It is not a one-off process of building trust but rather an interaction likely to take several interactions. Children may be unwilling to come in for the first session, especially if they do not know what the interviewer intends to do with them or are afraid of the environment. Consistent and sensitive engagement can eventually establish a safe environment for children to share their perspectives. Some of these may include going back to basic topics, enabling the children to take the lead in certain parts of the conversation, or simply spending time with them outside of the formal interview questions. The fact that trust has to be earned over time and that the child's point of view has to be understood a great deal of the time makes the research interactions better, and the data collected more accurate. This approach of stepping back and forth between the two helps ensure that children are treated gently and genuinely during the research.

Pride in Cultural Identity

When given the chance, children enjoy sharing aspects of their cultural heritage. In the case of Indigenous communities like Orang Asli, traditions such as Sewang (a traditional dance) or the use of native languages are a source of pride and identity. Encouraging children to speak about their cultural practices enriches the data and empowers them by acknowledging their experiences and backgrounds. Adapting the questions to the child's level of development, language skills, and cultural context is important in gaining useful data(Rogers et al., 2021). This approach shows respect for their cultural context and inclusivity, making children more engaged and confident during the interviews.

However, there can be challenges when working with cultural elements, especially if one is not well-versed in the culture and traditions of the participants. Inexperience with the culture and traditions may result in misinterpretation or omission of significant elements of a child's heritage (Danby et al., 2021; Sürig et al., 2016)Researchers should address these challenges by seeking guidance from community members or cultural experts to guarantee accuracy and appropriateness. In addition, they should be willing to learn from the children themselves when asked to explain their traditions in their own words. This improves the research's authenticity and empowers children to act as experts in their own culture.

Challenges

Communication Barriers

Language limitations are significant when interviewing children, particularly in multilingual or cross-cultural settings. For instance, Orang Asli children who primarily speak their native language at home may struggle with Bahasa Melayu, the national language used in schools and interviews. This linguistic gap can lead to misunderstandings or overly simplistic responses. Researchers must often simplify questions, use visual aids, or involve translators among the children to bridge the communication divide. Even with these precautions, subtle expressions may occasionally be lost, compromising the comprehensiveness of the data gathered.

Through interviews with children, non-verbal communication can easily cover the language gap. Children, particularly those whose command over the primary language of the interview is limited, may find it challenging to put their ideas into words (Dockrell et al., 2022). In such cases, if the child can convey his message through gestures, facial expressions or drawings, then it becomes a good form of expression. For instance, a child who cannot tell a story may paint a picture to describe what happened, and the visual story may be stronger than the verbal one. However, actions or movements can also be a source of information that may have been missing from the conversation (Gabbert et al., 2021). Body language, tone of voice or whether or not the child is maintaining eye contact can also help to show the child's feelings or whether or not they are comfortable in the interview. Therefore, researchers have to be aware of these signals because they are often sources of information which go beyond what is being said.

Shyness and Reluctance

Shyness is a common obstacle, especially among younger children or those not used to formal interviews. Many children are slow to speak in the presence of unfamiliar adults or may fear saying the 'wrong' thing (Nyborg et al., 2023). This reluctance can lead to very short and relatively poor responses, which limit the data richness. This challenge requires researchers to spend time building rapport and reassurance. One efficient way to approach shyness is to make the environment more familiar and engaging. Incorporating toys, art supplies or other interactive materials makes the setting more child-friendly and less formal. Involving a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher or caregiver, in the initial interview stages also can help ease the child into the process. The presence of a familiar figure generally provides a sense of security and enables the child to speak more freely.

When these measures still fail to reduce the shyness of the child sufficiently, then it is important to respect the child's limits and lower one's expectations. Researchers need to understand that not all children will be willing to open up and that too much pressure may cause them to become even more closed off. In these situations, it may be more effective to rely on non-verbal communication, such as through body language or, for example, drawings, to gather information. Patience and empathy are essential because establishing trust and overcoming shyness cannot be rushed.

Short Attention Span

Due to their short attention spans, maintaining children's focus during interviews can be difficult. This challenge is worsened in lengthy or monotonous sessions. Children may become distracted by their surroundings, lose interest in answering questions, or shift their attention to unrelated activities (Asprilia et al., 2020; Murphy-Berman et al., 1986; Umida, 2024)Researchers often design short, engaging sessions incorporating interactive elements like games or drawings to address this. Frequent breaks and the use of dynamic questioning also help to retain their attention. These adaptations ensure children remain interested and engaged, leading to higher-quality responses.

Breaks can be used strategically to maintain focus. For example, short physical activities such as stretching exercises or a quick interactive game can help children to regain their concentration. However, returning to the conversation without interruption after these breaks is equally important. Using thematic prompts or visual anchors such as a storyboard or a series of pictures will allow children to quickly jump back into the discussion without the conversation feeling abrupt or disjointed. Also, making sure children understand the session

format— - by letting them know when there is a break or how long an activity will last — will help build their anticipation and prepare them for the next tasks.

Conclusion

Interviewing children, especially those from marginalised or Indigenous communities such as the Orang Asli, it is important to develop strategies to break the barriers and to be able to get meaningful information. This article also highlights the use of creative methods in breaking the communication barrier, the importance of establishing trust and friendship, and the benefits of accepting children's cultural identities. Other tips that may include telling a story, drawing a picture and using other culturally acceptable methods will enhance the child's compliance and will, in the process, give the researcher more accurate information. These methods allow children to feel comfortable and valued in their environment.

At the same time, the study points out problems for researchers, including language barriers, shyness, and short attention span. Other tips that may include breaking the interview into smaller parts based on the child's comprehension level, using body language, and integrating play-based activities are very useful in overcoming these challenges. Another important aspect is the development of trust through interaction, cultural awareness, and partnership with local communities to guarantee the quality and quantity of the data collected.

Future research should continue to develop these methods and focus on innovative and child-centred approaches that can be applied across different language and cultural contexts. In this way, researchers will be able to make the most significant contribution to the development of ethical research practices that allow children's voices to be heard and understood. This is useful not only for academic purposes but also for child welfare.

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