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Play in Research with Children

Tamara Pribišev Beleslin
Faculty of Philosophy, University in Banja Luka

Abstract

At the time when there is growing importance of the participant-friendly research (Christensen & James, 2008) new dimensions are added to research in the early childhood: it is based on the rights of young children, it takes children's perspective, requires careful listening, emphasizes active participation of children and researchers, combines techniques sensitive enough to allow children to speak their languages. The shift is particularly evident in the acceptance of the equality of young children's points of view and understanding of the reality around them. That led to methodological "allowing" the research process to become contextualized in the children's world, where play has a special place. Play is now accepted as one of the many languages with which children can express, interpret and construct their experiences and meanings. Therefore, play has become a research area within which children have the right to be different, compared to the adult research participants (Punch, 2002). There is controversy regarding the involvement of adults in children's play, and "using" it for didactic and other purposes. However, findings show that adults do not necessarily disturb children's play. It can become a space for sharing between children and playful adults, within which the balance of power and hierarchy is adjusted. The empirical basis of the paper is an analysis of ten play-based focus groups, which included over fifty children who were five and six years old, a doll researcher and an adult in the role of an "assistant researcher."

Key words: children and adults' participation; play-based focus group; research in early childhood.

Introduction: Research of Adults, Young Children and Their Play

As a complex and diverse phenomenon, children's play has attracted many researchers and scientists who have been seeking for an insight into its essence up until today, leaving many influential theories (e.g., Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999;

Kamenov, 2009) and ideological values of their “scientific opinion” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 8). Among them, the developmental-psychological and evolutionary theories of play were the most powerful. They developed within “*the rhetoric of play as progress*” (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The most influential discourse of play as adaptation, learning and development, this rhetoric mainly served as the basis for numerous studies of children and animals’ playing behaviours, which characterizes the entire twentieth century, and continues throughout the XXI century (Pellegrini & Smith, 2005; Smith, 2010). *The rhetoric of progress*, along with the “*play ethos*” which is dominant within a pedagogical discourse (Smith, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 1997), placed the requirement for using play as central “developmental tasks of preschool children” (Lobman, 2007, p. 604) as the main principle in early childhood pedagogy.

On the other hand, the rhetoric of progress as a paradigmatic framework, marked and shaped the reliable knowledge and beliefs about what is children’s play, how it could be investigated and how it could be used in a pedagogical context. It was assumed, very early in its implementation in the educational process, that play contributes only to child’s development, but not to the development of adults (through the processes of conscious and subconscious development of personality, individual cognitive development, socialization of the child and, ultimately, cultural development and maintenance of humanity). These theoretical interpretations within the pedagogical context led to different models of applications of play into education (Johnson et al., 1999). One of the influential models, dated from the end of XIX century, was the separation of “spontaneous play” from the academic learning and development as a more serious work of children (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997). This separation and marginalization of the play in an educational context, came probably from a conceptual and a real separation between childhood and adulthood (James & Prout, 2005; Jenks, 2005). Play is not as serious as adult business, play is frivolity, and in some situations it is even considered to be bad (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Even today, that attitude is reflected in the consideration of play as a substitution for the environment and life of adults in an adult-like sense. Play is seen as an “as-if” area within which the child grows up safely and carelessly. From *the rhetoric of progress* perspective, the division of academic and developmentally appropriate play on the one hand, and spontaneous play on the other, has an impact on the development/empowerment of a complete identity of didactic games which are “in many ways like work (in factories and offices)”. In an educational context, within the didactic game and play, children are under the guidance of adults and rules, they are assessed, subjects to tasks and supervision (see James & Prout, 2005, p. 237), or in the sense of its most liberal form, left to play in the “as-if” kitchen area arranged by adults.

However, the “*play ethos*” (Smith, 2010), based on a strong child-centred approach, and child perspectives (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010) situates play in a central place in the educational process. There are many controversies regarding the involvement of adults in the play, and its “use” for didactical and other, e.g., therapeutic, purposes (Johnson et al., 1999; Kamenov, 2009, Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Nevertheless, findings show that adults do not necessarily interfere with children's play, especially if adults are characterized as playful. In this case, play becomes the space of sharing (satisfaction) for children and adults who are playing, among which the balance of power and hierarchy starts to disappear. The view that both children and teachers are playful learning beings has recently been stated (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

The comparative studies of play in primates, humans and big apes, even in some animals like birds and insects, deductive reasoning about human cognitive characteristics as findings from the research on animals and observations on their playing patterns as well as the mapping of the biological theories into the child development, and human beings in general (Šmit, 1999), were dominant pylons in the *rhetoric of progress*. Given as a frame of reference, the rhetoric implicated the angle of observation and the interpretation of play in education, seeing it as a kind of practice for the future (Scarlett & New, 2007, p. 629), in which children practice their skills for coping with life, and above all, language and symbolic behaviour (e.g., Jerome Bruner, see Scarlett & New, 2007). Driven by another type of the *rhetoric of science*, as Sutton-Smith indicates (1997), the *rhetoric of progress* relies on methodological approaches as well as on the empirical bases and foundations of knowledge; observing and interpretation of human beings and animals' development, based on the principles of ethology on the one hand, and elegantly designed experiments (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) on the other. A powerful research apparatus and methodology of neurosciences has recently been added to the mentioned research methodologies (Smith, 2010).

The means of data collection such as psychological experiment, psychometric testing, sociometric mapping, ethnographic description and longitudinal surveys have all been applied to childhood and structured our reflections on children (Prout & James, 2005, p. 9).

Nested in a paradigm which shaped the preconceptions about children as "human becomings" (Qvortrup, 1994, see Halldén, 2005) and the social perception of the child as a project of adults (Tomanović, 2004), the interpretation of play was based in the dominant conceptual pair: socialization – development (James & Prout, 2005, p. viii). It denoted the focus of research on children and children's play. Play is mostly explored from the issues of the developmental stages through which a child and her/his play behaviours and interests pass. However, the emergent paradigm in childhood provides the basis for laying down the assumptions that childhood is socially constructed, and its relationships and culture are worth studying (James & Prout, 2005, p. 8). That allows young children to get a voice in the research, where the play is, surely, the authentic one, leading to shifts in research design and problems to be studied.

Child-Friendliness in Research and Children as Research Participants

With new research questions paradigmatic changes occur and new research claims are posed. One of the key demands is the active participation of young children

in the research, with equal respect and acceptance of their angle of observation and understanding of the reality. The new role and position of children create an opportunity for researchers to realize the often latent and invisible social experiences of young children. By giving children the right of voice ‘child-friendly’ research is implied: “children’s research voices are recognized alongside their right to participate in the design and production of research” (MacNaughton, Smith, & Davis, 2007, p. 168).

The empowerment of research in the early childhood, oriented towards a qualitative paradigm (Hatch, 2002, 2007), coincides with the emergence and the rise of a clear paradigm shift within the social sciences. A development paradigm, still shaping the social status of young children, is based on several assumptions in pedagogy; the respect of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Sommer et al., 2010), the furtherance of the theory of children’s hundreds of languages, and describing young children as “rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10, as cited in Moss, 1999, p. 148), but also the importance of social and cultural context of early childhood (Halldén, 2005; Rogoff, 2003).

The right of children to use their own languages, conceptual meanings and authentic actions are crucial for child-friendliness (Qvortrup, 2005). This is the key principle and basic assumption in the research involving children of an early age (Johansson, 2011). There are some opinions that child-centeredness is a narrower conceptual framework in comparison to an already established *participant-friendly research* (Christinsen & James, 2008), which is now undeniable in research with adults. However, the basic idea is to enable the participation of children in research in a way that will allow them to express their views through their languages, and to reshape the study in which they can actively participate together with the researcher (van Berk, 2006). Giving children the possibility to become the “informants of their own life words” (Prout & James, 2005, p. 1); their angle of observation and understandings of reality within which they live are recognized and respected as worthwhile, and are as appreciated as the point of view of the adults (Punch, 2002; van Berk, 2006).

Christensen and James (2008), for example, found that just like the adult participants, children can accept different or particular methods, but what makes a difference is the *adults’ approach* to children. That allows the reciprocal process of children’s agency and vice-versa. While children are included in the research process, they are supported to develop the understanding of the research process. In other words, children who actively participate in research, become responsible researchers (van Berk, 2006).

Therefore, the research area must be contextualized within childhood, which is enjoyable, stimulating and relaxing for children. The request can be achieved by techniques that are close to young children’s learning, thinking and understanding, by which they can participate through *relating to others and self, doing and playing*. Researcher’s sensitiveness to children’s worlds and cultures, spoken in children’s language, through the meanings that are important to children (van Berk, 2006), is essential for the authenticity and validity of the research process and body of knowledge, constructed in the research with children. Children differ from adults

as research participants (Punch, 2002). In addition, researchers must be aware of their own assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and understanding of children and their way of life and learning, which are strongly influenced by the socio-cultural context (Christensen & James, 2008, p.7) and the context of educational institutions which they usually come from. These constructs can greatly affect and even shape the researcher's assumptions about children, the design and focus of research, but also the process of interpretation and design of the body of knowledge (MacNaughton et al., 2007).

Listening to children deserves special attention in achieving child-friendliness in research with children and learning about them.

Listening to young children. Giving children powerful voices in the society (Prout & James, 2005) within the research with children, refers also to the need to find pathways on how to carefully "listen to young children" (Clark & Moss, 2001, 2005; Clark, 2005) with respect to "children's perspectives" (Sommer et al., 2010). This is the way that teachers answered the request to the "need to find a relationship to both children's own activity and to the social processes which shape and constrain children's lives but in which they themselves are not necessarily involved" (Prout & James, 2005, p. 28). Listening to children, as a paradigmatic framework of research in early childhood, is mostly developed within the Mosaic approach, which originated as the Appraisal Participatory Approach (Clark, 2005; Clark, McQuail, & Moss, 2003; Clark & Moss, 2001).

Inspired by Reggio Emilia's "pedagogy of listening" (Clark, 2005), Clark and Moss (2001) have developed a new approach to research with young children in the pedagogical and institutional contexts, which involves children under five years of age. The basic principle is listening to children's perspectives and consulting with children through an active process of communication that does not rely only on verbal language (Clark et al., 2003; Clark & Moss, 2001), but on active meaning exchange within the network of complex interactions between researchers and children (Clark, 2005). It uses a mosaic of participatory methods (multi-method, see Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) to access young children's perspectives on their early experiences.

Clark (2005) distinguishes several types of 'listening to children's voices' in research:

- Internal listening, which directs children to express themselves and to reflect on their life experiences, through careful facilitation of conversation with children, ensuring that everybody can be heard;
- Multiple listening within which peers and adults listen to each other. This dimension deals with an assumption that research, based on the focus groups or, some participatory techniques in particular, could be the space for shared experiences, attitude construction, as well as for collectively shaping meaning and understanding. Moreover, it can be a "mutual dance" in listening between participants, children and researchers;
- Visible listening where children's experiences in the research are made visible by preparing research documentation: by drawing, photographing, mapping, and recording. Visualisation is a way of understanding the process of research, making it visible to children, parents, pedagogues, researchers.

This process takes into account the diversity and multitude of children's languages and different media of expression (play, movement, graphical and visual languages, emotion, interaction, etc.), interpretations and construction of meaning. Assembling together the puzzle pieces gathered by different methods, the researcher creates a "vivid picture of everyday life of the child" (Clark, 2005, p. 13), which is the platform for the new listening. The goal of research with young children is to deepen our understanding of them and of their contemporary realities (Walsh, Bakir, Lee, Chung, Chung et al., 2007, p. 59).

An important way to focus on listening to children's perspectives is triangulation, a common technique to achieve the validity of qualitative research, and an "attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5), as well as to achieve multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon. Triangulation in research with children is an instrument used "to discover a more complete truth than the children are able to tell" (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2011, p. 92). In the case of the Mosaic approach, each participatory technique (photograph, map making, recording and explaining the tour children are taking, web chart with children, etc.) represents a source for a new piece of the puzzle (Clark, 2005), and an area for understanding children's perspectives. Also, it is a means of creating the conditions for the richness of experience and opportunities for children to contribute with their many languages in which they can talk about the phenomenon under investigation.

Using a variety of multi-sensory methods such as role play activities, participatory games and the use of puppets (Clark et al., 2003, p. 8), suitable for research with children, the researcher acts as an 'architect' (Clark, 2005) and creates a friendly environment close to their everyday experience. Thus, children are given powerful tools for entering the research process in a meaningful way.

Playing in the Research with Children: An Example

Growing up digitally (2012) is an ongoing research project, created as a logical step in my inquiry of the phenomenon of the usage of computers and digital technology over the past ten years, in the local context of the perseverance of the last one of the "analogue oasis" within the early childhood education system (Pribišev Beleslin, 2010, 2011). Starting with the need to meet the requirements within the constructivist research paradigm and the general attitude of respecting children's perspectives as well as ambiguity and diversity of life in the digital age which young children actively construct and shape, the research focused on children's stories, collective constructs and understanding of what it looks like to be growing up digitally, which is everyday practice of young children. Two research questions emerged: how do children live their digital *social lives*, and what is important for them in the digital culture and practice. The approach is especially important when it comes to young children's experiences which are latent, socially invisible and hard to explore. This often hidden side of children's everyday lives, especially from the institutional pedagogical context, remains beyond the reach of the researchers, although it is real and multi-dimensional in the social setting.

The study was designed as a multi-method approach, and inspired by the Mosaic approach (Clark et al., 2003; Clark & Moss, 2001). The participatory research techniques appropriate to children's competence were used (Clark & Moss, 2001; Punch, 2002; van Berk, 2006), which included children participants, aged four to five, in the city of Banja Luka and other cities¹ in all of the Republic of Srpska, the entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Listening to children's everyday experiences through an active process of communication within the "as-if" pretend play situation does not rely only on verbal language (Clark et al., 2003; Clark & Moss, 2001), but include a multitude of children's ways of expression. This included a play-based focus group (No=10, with 59 five year olds), combined with the task-based technique, e.g., making a spider web (see van Berk, 2006) of computer activities around their computers at home within the focus groups (N=5), children's photographs of appropriate places for their computer activities at kindergarten (No=59), collecting research documentation, children's drawings of computer activities (No=874) as well as their comments on what they drew.

Special attention was given to ethical considerations, such as: parental agreement, anonymous personal data coding, a researcher's ongoing reflexivity, consent of the Ombudsman for Children of the Republic of Srpska (No. 1270-1-5-S/12 from September 21, 2012), and children could leave the research situations when they wanted to.

The paper is a methodological discussion on the characteristics and peculiarities of a focus group. It is based on play, and represents an approach to listening to the children's voices and a technique for gathering data with young children.

Play-Based Focus Group

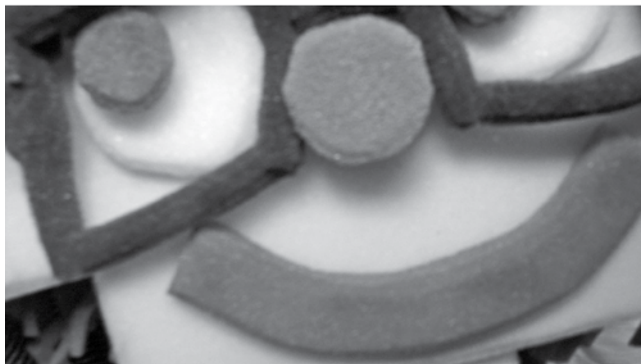


Figure 1. Vanja, a researcher (participant's photo, five-year-old boy)

...This time the doll was the one taking initiative. I was in the background. Children paid attention to the doll; one boy had the need to constantly refer to it by its name, and spoke to her in whisper. Everyone looked at the doll, laughed with her ... (Author's comments, Focus 4).

¹ Berkovići, Bijeljina, Bileća, Bratunac, Čelinac, Derventa, Dobož, Gacko, Gradiška, Laktaši, Ljubinje, Modriča, Mrkonjić Grad, Nevesinje, Novi Grad, Pale, Prnjavor, Srebrenica, Šipovo, Teslić, Trebinje.

As a technique for “listening to people and for learning from them” (Morgan, 1988, as cited in Madriz, 2000, p. 835), a focus group has been created for the research with adults, especially within the qualitative approach. Unlike the child-focused interview (Cameron, 2005), the focus group is rarely used with children under eight, possibly because it is a social practice and an approach which seeks attitudes, opinions, experiences, emotions, participants’ perspectives, and a deeper understanding of what is happening around the researched phenomenon. It is a social space within which people can talk in depth about an issue (Ryan & Lobman, 2007). Therefore, it is often the arena where the “multivocality of participants’ attitudes, experiences, and beliefs” (Madriz, 2000, p. 386) come together. The focus group, as a research approach towards data gathering, provides access to personal and collective interpretations on what is happening based on the research problem. As it promotes the multiple meanings for different participants, focus group is a situated action, where the group dynamics influences the shaping of a collective perspective on the phenomenon. Often, participants of the focus group create attitudes that are impossible to achieve in one-on-one interviews (Ryan & Lobman, 2007).

The focus group, as a specific form of group interview, can be conducted in formal and formalized environments, with strict and structured verbal and nonverbal communication, a directive moderator, but also in more natural, informal environments with a semi-structured question format (see Fontana & Frey, 2000). However, from the perspectives of participant-friendly research, as well as from the point of view of the oppressed or socially invisible groups (among them, surely, are young children), the key issues are, on one hand, a request to give them voices, and on the other, the participants’ feelings within the research area (Madriz, 2000).

The focus groups consisting of young children have their own characteristics: relying on contextual and situational speech, which often represents a “kinetic language” (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999), bearing in mind that movement and activity represent the natural states for children. This is contrary to the focus groups with adults that require sitting and concentration. Elements of play in the focus groups provide opportunities for being active in a dialogue between the researcher and peers. The analysis of ten play-based focus groups indicates that a conversation with a doll as a researcher, as a curiosity factor, keeps children focused on the research problem and they remain active in dialogue. Notwithstanding that it is a slightly different way of being active compared to the adult participants (which is shown through behaviours like: lying down, touching the other child sitting next to it, getting up, walking around the room, rocking, etc.). But, all the situations had a common element: children are connected with a doll researcher more closely and actively, and because of the doll they willingly sat with her in a circle.

‘Being active’ does not necessarily mean ‘moving around’. Being active means that young children engage in experiences, actively (as opposed to passively) bringing their existing knowledge and understanding to reflect on what is currently under investigation (Fisher, 1996, p. 9, as cited in Smith, 2010, p. 82)

However, playfulness as the approach for managing focus groups with young children, a “simple social play” (Johnson et al., 1999) in particular, provides a new dimension of the technique. A doll as the researcher as well as the mediator of social interaction, creates an “as-if” situation as a fictitious research framework. Even without much familiarizing, introductions and representation, when the doll researcher sets a few common questions such as: *Who would like to talk with me?*, children immediately start talking to it. The contact between the doll and children is easily achieved; children love to shake hands and hug it, they start talking to it immediately, and they listen and understand its questions.

[The children touch Vanja's hair, which is red and shaggy].

Vanja, a researcher: ... Oh, do not pull my hair. I'll be bald ... Laughter (Focus 5)

A doll researcher can shift the outer frame around the child into the inner reality of the playing plan, within the “‘as-if’ stance toward reality” (Johnson et al., 1999, p 16). Children, as “the best sources of information about themselves” (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999, p. 177), immediately focus on the ‘researcher’ and engage in the conversation, listen to each other, answer the doll’s questions. The doll starts contextualized conversations often addressing an individual child in the circle. Conversations are directed at the child’s preferences (Harden et al., 2000) and focused on research questions (Ryan & Lobman, 2007). As a researcher the doll contributes to the children’s motivation to participate in the conversation, maintains good emotions and positive atmosphere in the group dynamics.

[Vanja explains to children that she will put a tape recorder in the middle of the circle, and her “assistant” – the author, helps her]

Vanja talks to children about what she is doing: I have got to put this (showing the tape recorder) in here to record what we're talking about ... And now the paper ...

Child: Hold on, Vanja! ...

Vanja: Oh yeah, I'm always in a hurry.... (Focus 2)

However, the doll researcher has to follow the course of children’s thoughts and responses, as well as to anticipate issues in accordance with the answers. At the same time she has to introduce the issues of a focus group protocol. As a facilitator, the doll has a greater leadership role. She has to ask questions frequently, and if necessary, turn to each child with a direct view, to have the child return to the dialog area, and to remind them of the topic, the question where they left off, and so on.

On the other hand, the identity of researchers is changing: a doll researcher assumes the identity and takes the place of the researcher (which children love to touch, cuddle, sit besides, whisper to her and ask questions, etc.), while the actual researcher’s identity is immersed into the doll’s identity. The adult’s superior position that is often built into the research on children, is now free from the “adult perspective”. “From the children’s perspective, the researcher was someone who played with them, but did not have an

educative or authoritative relationship with them” (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2011, p. 88).

... [A boy is choosing the place for photographing where he would like to be a computer in their kindergarten. Together with Vanja he is walking down the hall. He is whispering into Vanja's ear].

Vanja: Why there [do you want to put computers]?

Child: Because it's there, and we can come typing, one by one...

[He continues to speak quietly, placing his hand on Vanja's ear. I am not able to hear what he says as his voice becomes very quiet, and the recordings become increasingly sputtered ...] (Focus 4)

The doll helps the researcher in balancing her/his own role in the research which is not neutral and invisible and in becoming an active participant who is equally affected by the flow, interactions and dynamics in the research area (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The interaction between the researcher and the participants shapes the context and situations in which the focus groups were conducted. However, when the researcher works with children, the main characteristic of her/his personality is the ability to become playful, and to include the elements of play into the research area, which can contribute to the quality of the research process.

Conclusion

Research *with* children is becoming more precious in the context of social science methodology, especially within the qualitative paradigm. Besides, a more valuable place is given to the pedagogy of early childhood, as an approach designed for careful listening to children, and for ensuring that they get the position of subjects in the research as opposed to simply being investigated and observed objects. Young children have the right to equal treatment in the research, just as the other socially marginalized groups have today (particularly, from the perspective of their participation, and relations to power and hierarchy). Therefore, research must be “contextualized” within childhood and designed so as to give voices to children and serve as powerful tools for making interpretations, understanding, values, and inner worlds more visible.

Play is powerful children's language through which they can talk about themselves. It represents a complex and multidimensional research environment which children can feel as appropriate, meaningful and enjoyable. By allowing play to become part of the research with children, as the language of children, not just a researched problem, new forms of research approaches and techniques will be developed. The Mosaic approach is one of them. Also, a play-based focus group can be an appropriate research tool for collectively shaping the understanding of children's experiences. As an easy-to-enter social space of young children, the play-based focus group can be an arena where children can work together to build collective perspectives towards the researched phenomenon.

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Tamara Pribišeč Beleslin

Faculty of Philosophy, University in Banja Luka
Univerzitetski grad, Bulevar vojvode Petra Bojovića 1A,
78000 Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina
tamara.pribisev@gmail.com

Igra u istraživanjima s djecom

Sažetak

Istraživanja u ranom djetinjstvu, u vrijeme pridavanja sve veće važnosti istraživanjima koja su prijateljski usmjerena prema sudionicima (Christensen & James, 2008), dobivaju nove dimenzije: oslonjena su na prava male djece, zauzimaju dječju perspektivu, zahtijevaju pažljivo slušanje, primat daju aktivnoj participaciji djece i istraživača, kombiniraju tehnike koje su dovoljno osjetljive da omogućuju djeci da govore svojim jezicima. Zaokret je posebno vidljiv u prihvaćanju ravnopravnosti dječjeg kuta promatranja i razumijevanja stvarnosti oko njih, što vodi metodološkom „dopuštanju“ da se istraživački proces kontekstualizira dječjim svijetom, u kojem igra ima posebno mjesto. Igra je danas prihvaćena kao jedan od mnoštva jezika kojima se dijete izražava, interpretira i oblikuje svoja iskustva i značenja. Postaje istraživački prostor unutar kojeg se djeca imaju pravo razlikovati u odnosu na odrasle sudionike istraživanja (Punch, 2002). Postoje mnoge kontroverze s obzirom na uključivanje odraslih u igru i „upotrebu“ igre u didaktičke i druge svrhe. Međutim, odrasli ne moraju nužno remetiti dječju igru. Igra može postati prostor dijeljenja djece i odraslih koji se igraju, između kojih se odnos moći i hijerarhije u igrovnom kontekstu poništava. Empirijsku osnova rada predstavlja analiza deset fokus grupa utemeljenih na igri, u kojima je sudjelovalo više od pedesetoro djece u dobi od pet i šest godina, lutka istraživač i odrasli u ulozi „pomoćnika istraživača“.

Ključne riječi: fokus grupa utemeljena na igri; istraživanje u ranom djetinjstvu; participacija odraslih i djece.