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# **Children's analysis processes when analysing qualitative research data: a missing piece to the qualitative research puzzle**

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Children's role in the research process is often limited to a passive role as subject, recipient or object of data rather than as active contributor. The sociology of childhood considers children to be competent social actors and advocates for them to be recognised as such. This recognition is yet to filter into mainstream research agendas with children often remaining a passive provider to research that seeks to elicit their perspectives. This paper presents an examination of the processes that children use when analysing their own qualitative research data as observed within a qualitative research project. It provides insight into the ability to increase the richness of data obtained when researching with children, by including their perspectives and contributions in the data analysis process. Children's capacity as capable and competent contributors to research beyond the more passive role of participant is described and the ways that children can have a greater participatory role in qualitative data collection and analysis processes are discussed.

Keywords: children's participation, participatory research, children's analysis, qualitative analysis, wellbeing

## **Introduction**

Children provide unique insight into various aspects of their lifeworlds that cannot be obtained by objective measures alone, and as such children's informed and personal perspective must not only be collected but also be given due consideration. While the use of qualitative methods when researching children is not new, the extent to which children are involved in different aspects of the research process such as data collection and analysis is variably received. The extent to which children are presented with the opportunity to have an active role in the research process is often limited (Gillett-Swan, 2013; Kellett, 2010). Varied views of children's capacity serve to perpetuate a dominant view of children as lacking the knowledge, experience and maturity to make meaningful

contributions (Coppock, 2011). Children's capacities are gradually being acknowledged in research, with some researchers actively and authentically seeking to include children of all ages in different stages of the research process, to varying extents (Gillett-Swan, 2014; Coppock, 2011; Kim, 2015; Robinson and Taylor, 2013). This includes research conceptualisation, design, and dissemination (Kellett, 2005; Kellett et al., 2004; Kinash and Hoffman, 2008). The Children's Research Centre (2014) provides a comprehensive list of research work that has been conducted and led *by* children. In acknowledging children's competence and being aware of their role in each project's research process, researchers are now including children and identifying them as competent in capacities as varied as research partner, participant and contributor (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014; Coppock, 2011; Kellett, 2005, 2010; Kim, 2015; Kinash and Hoffman, 2008).

Children's capacities are increasingly recognised within the sociology of childhood, a theoretical position where children are considered to be competent social actors (James, 2009; Mayall, 2002, 2013; Oswell, 2013; Smith, 2007; Wyness, 2012a, 2012b) and advocates that children should be recognised as such. The acknowledgement of children and their capacities in research is gradually gaining exposure, but is variably considered and applied in different contexts. Matters of interest to researchers relating to children and childhood are typically those considered important by adults (Birbeck and Drummond, 2005; Coppock, 2011), and reflect contemporary societal preconceptions (Hill, 2006). The matters that adults consider important may not be the same as what children consider important, which is reflected through adult-driven national and international research agendas and priorities. Birbeck and Drummond (2005: 582) state that 'research with children tends to be a process that is devised by adults, applied to children with results interpreted by adults, generalised and presented as a theory of childhood'. When seeking to understand children's

lifeworlds, it is important to ensure that children's perspectives have a place in research and in practice, beyond the passive role of a source of data. To this end, adults can involve children in *conversations* about children's lives and co-construct understanding rather than being objects of research (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Coppock, 2011). Adults and children can co-construct meaning where children have a greater participatory role in research processes that recognise them as 'experts in their own lives, but not the only experts' (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008: 511).

Although there have been multitudes of qualitative studies involving children, significantly less attention is directed towards reflecting on children's involvement in qualitative research beyond the role of participant. As such, this study provides insight into the ability to increase the richness of data obtained when researching with children, by including their perspectives and contributions in data analysis processes. The analytic focus on the processes children engage with in analysing their own data enables another contribution. This both builds on and contributes to work in qualitative methodologies and seeks to be accessible to all qualitative researchers conducting research with children, not just those aligning with sociological positioning.

This paper reports on one part of a qualitative research project investigating how children, aged 8 to 12 years, conceptualised the complex issue of wellbeing, with the full results from the study reported elsewhere (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014, 2017; Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2015; Sargeant and Gillett-Swan, 2015). Wellbeing is an elusive concept that is difficult to define (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014, 2017; Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2015; Crivello et al., 2009; Dodge et al., 2012; La Placa et al., 2013; Pollard and Lee, 2003). With no agreed cross-disciplinary definition of the construct of wellbeing in itself (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014; Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2015; Dear et

al., 2002; Dodge et al., 2012; Hird, 2003), definitions are often ambiguous and contested (Jones and Sumner, 2009).

However, there is consensus in that wellbeing is multifaceted (Gillett-Swan, 2013; Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2015; Fraillon, 2004; Pollard and Lee, 2003), dependent on context (Gillett-Swan, 2013; Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2015; Crivello et al., 2009; Fattore et al., 2007; Pollard and Lee, 2003), and includes social, psychological, emotional, economic/environmental, and cognitive components (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014; Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2015; Fraillon, 2004; Schickler, 2005). The importance of context is highlighted when considering wellbeing to be ‘a socially relevant, culturally anchored construct that changes over time, both in terms of individual life course changes as well as changes in socio-cultural context’ (Crivello et al., 2009: 53). Therefore, when considering how children conceptualise wellbeing and approach conceptualisation processes, contextual and cultural influences should therefore also be acknowledged. While some aspects of interpretation and prioritisation may be culturally contingent, the process and means by which children arrive at their conceptualisations may have universal, or at least transferable, characteristics. Literature was reviewed across philosophical, medical, psychological, economic and educational literatures. This review provided a basis from which comparison could be made between each of the children’s conceptualisations of wellbeing and those presented in the literature. While wellbeing is considered to be either a construct (Seligman, 2011) or a state (Dodge et al., 2012), dependent on the extent to which its qualities are considered as being measurable, as this project sought children’s conceptualisations of wellbeing, it was considered as having the potential to be both a construct and a state, depending on how the children focused their discussions.

## Research context

The following discussion provides reflective insight towards the *processes* the children engaged with to analyse their own data that had been obtained during a prior session.

Four schools from the same educational region in Australia participated, with all children in grades 3, 4, 5 and 6 who returned signed parental consent forms participating in the project.

In Australia, a school's ICSEA value is used to compare the Socio-Educational Advantage across schools calculated based on geographical location, proportion of Indigenous students, parent's occupation, and parent's education (ACARA, 2013). While ICSEA values were not used to select the four schools, these details have been provided in Table 1 for broad contextual information about the schools' and students' cultural and class backgrounds. The average value for ICSEA is 1000, which means schools that fall over or under this benchmark are considered to have either a higher or lower socio-educational advantage to other comparable schools.

Table 1<sup>1</sup>  
*School Site Demographics*

School	ICSEA	Level of Socio-Educational Advantage	% EALD <sup>2</sup>	% Indigenous
School A	1000 – 1049	Average	5 – 10%	<5%
School B	1100 – 1149	Above average	30 – 40%	<5%
School C	750 – 799	Below average	20 – 30%	50 – 60%
School D	1100 - 1149	Above average	10 – 20%	<5%

<sup>1</sup> To preserve anonymity of participating schools, data has been reported within range indicators.

<sup>2</sup> This number refers to the percentage of students attending the school with English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EALD).

The project consisted of three focus group sessions held at each school, during school hours. Each focus group session contained a range of qualitative individual or small group activities to explore the notion of wellbeing. Groups consisted of children from the same school whose parents had signed and returned the consent forms. Of these children, the formation of each group was decided by each school usually based on their timetables.

Consent was sought from participating children prior to the commencement of each session and children could participate in all, some, or none of the activities and sessions involved in the project. All of the children in session two were also involved in the first session. Prior to the first session, none of the children had met the researcher before. The researcher's involvement in the school was limited to the three data collection sessions with each of the groups. There were seven groups of children (4 to 6 children in each group) over the four schools. In the first session, the children completed a short introductory activity where they each rated their own wellbeing and provided a reason for their rating, before conducting individual wellbeing brainstorms on blank pieces of paper. For the brainstorm, the researcher asked the children to *"put down everything you can think of to do with wellbeing on your [blank] piece of paper – you can write, draw, write and draw, whatever you would like."* At the end of the session, each child was then invited to share their brainstorm with the group. The second session involved the children thematically analysing the items generated by each person in their first session brainstorm, while in the third session, the children developed definitions for wellbeing. Each session ran for approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded. Throughout each of the sessions, the researcher explained the task, answered questions (except for questions about wellbeing), and responded when the

children invited her to be part of the process. When any of the children asked about wellbeing (e.g., its meaning or purpose), the researcher said, '*wellbeing can mean different things to different people ... I'd like to find out what wellbeing means to you*'. This paper critically reflects on the processes and procedures that the children utilised in session two to thematically analyse this qualitative data that they generated in session one through the children's coding, grouping and justifications for their analysis decisions. That is, the focus is on *how* they approached and engaged with the analysis task and the approaches they utilised to fulfil the task objectives.

### ***The process of analysis***

Session two focused around the thematic analysis activity. The children were asked to organise their responses from their session one brainstorm into categories or themes named and chosen by them. To do this, they were asked, '*Using all of the things your group said during the first session, are there any things that can be grouped together and given a group name?*' In preparation for the session, the researcher had transcribed verbatim everything identified and discussed by the children in the first session. This included the children's commentaries accompanying their drawings, individual items identified and drawn, as well as the children's written and spoken responses. Each of these aspects were printed on paper and cut into what the researcher refers to as individual 'units of analysis'. The units of analysis included words, sentences and phrases incorporating;

- Any singular parts of text/phrases (e.g., being naughty)
- Individual concepts or ideas (e.g., family)
- Chunks of passage (e.g., negative things in my head)



- Descriptions and labelling of drawings<sup>3</sup> (e.g., feeling unsafe, my friends)
- Verbal discussion as recorded with the audio recorder.

While the choice of unit length was ultimately determined by the researcher in deciding how to ‘split’ the units, the researcher referred to how the children had chosen to break up the units through their descriptions, placement of words/phrases, or sequencing in discussion. For example, if the child had written a word by itself on the drawing, this single word (concept) would be what was used as one unit of analysis. Similarly, if the child used a phrase to describe different aspects of their drawing, each phrase would be separated in the same way the child reported it. For example, ‘*it’s all about family*’ might be the phrase the child used to describe the whole drawing, which was then used as a unit of analysis along with the child’s descriptions of other parts of the drawing as separate units. The researcher endeavoured to include everything that the children talked about and referred to in the session, even if it may not have seemed by the researcher to be relevant to the topic. Made up words and grammatically incorrect information was also included such as ‘*dun dun dunnnnnn*’<sup>4</sup>. The researcher chose to include these elements in the units of analysis provided to the children for session two, to enable the children to have greater autonomy around what information they considered relevant to each theme they identified. It was also included to see how they responded to less relevant or seemingly nonsensical data. Names of individuals mentioned were also included and usually referred to the peers or siblings of members in the group. Reflections on this aspect are included in a later section.

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<sup>3</sup> Drawings were not included as analytical material due to time constraints for each session.

This is discussed in more detail later in the paper.

<sup>4</sup> Sound of dramatic/suspense sound effect

To introduce the task, the researcher said, *‘What I have here in this envelope is all the things that you said last time [pulls a couple of slips of paper out to show the children] ... there are a couple of blank ones in there as well ... What we’re going to do in just a minute is, I’d like you to decide how all of the things you said last time could be put into groups’*. To check the children’s understanding, the researcher continued with an example: *‘If we were to group the things in this room, what groups could we make?’* The children grouped the items in the room in terms of furniture (*‘we could have furniture with the chairs, tables, desks ...’*), boys and girls; some groups also looked for patterns to describe their room grouping: *‘You could put in a pattern, like chairs, tables, chairs, tables ... or ... look! Look! [children walk to spare furniture in the room, putting them in a pattern to show what they meant] ... Ohh! We could also do it by their colours as well!’* The examples provided were considered by the researcher sufficient evidence that the children understood what they needed to do for the task.

As the project did not specifically involve a ‘child-as-researcher’ component, it was not deemed necessary to include more explicit training in data analysis. The purpose of the task was for the researcher and the children to make connections between and across the data and for the researcher to see how the children extracted meaning from, and organised and applied meaning to, data generated by them rather than in a ‘child-as-researcher’ role.

As the groups consisted of children from different ages and year levels, some children had varying levels of familiarity with one another. This sometimes influenced the within-group decisions as some groups chose to discuss the placement of each item as part of their entire group while others chose to split into smaller sub-groups: for example, girls/boys, or younger/older children. The researcher indicated that the children could engage with the tasks however they chose; individually, in pairs, in

groups, or a combination. There were nine separate sub-groupings in this session across the seven groups (see Table 2) with the sub-group formations decided by the children.

Table 2  
*Group demographics for children's analysis*

Group	Gender	Number in group	Year level/s
A1	Mixed (boys and girls)	5 (3M, 2F)	Grade 3
A2	Girls	3 (3F)	Grades 4 & 6
B1	Mixed (boys and girls)	6 (2M, 4F)	Grades 5, 6 & 7
C1	Mixed (boys and girls)	3 (2M, 1F)	Grade 3
C2a <sup>5</sup>	Girls	3 (3F)	Grades 5 & 7
C2b	Boys	2 (2M)	Grades 5 & 7
C3	Mixed (boys and girls)	4 (3F, 1M)	Grade 3
D1a	Mixed (boys and girls)	3 (2F, 1M)	Grade 3 (younger)
D1b	Mixed (boys and girls)	2 (1F, 1M)	Grades 5 & 7 (older)

Groups C2 and D1 decided to split into sub-groups. Group C2 decided to split because *'you kids [the boys] are soooooooooo annoying – I'm trying to think ... then am I on this table or the other table?'* Group D1 decided to split because three of the children were in the same year level (grade 3) and knew each other, whereas the other two were older (years 5 and 7) and preferred to work together. There was no real discussion among the children about this; instead, the older children and younger children each asked for the supplies (A3 paper, glue sticks, units of analysis, and coloured pencils) and began the task on separate tables:

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<sup>5</sup> Group C2a/D1a and C2b/D1b refer to the same information being categorised by different people within the larger, original group of C2/D1.

Children from group D1 while standing around the supplies table: *Can we get anything [pointing to the supplies on the table]?*

Researcher: *Of course – use whatever you need.*

For each of the groups, duplicate cut-outs of the ‘units of analysis’ from the session one data were also offered so the children could provide multiple codings for the same items or split them into sub-groups within their larger 4-to-6 person group, if they chose<sup>6</sup>.

The children also edited the units of analysis when required, through correcting spelling errors that were purposely left in the transcription by the researcher, and removing superfluous or irrelevant filler information, such as someone asking for a pencil or expressions such as ‘*as she said...*’. While each group and subgroup decided to approach the task in different ways, similar themes emerged consistently across all seven groups such as named themes of people/relationships, health, feelings, happiness, activities, and ‘random’ (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014). Depending on the amount of data generated originally by each group, the children each thematically analysed between 87 and 132 units. Some of these units were separated or duplicated by the children with the additional copies of the units or blank cut outs based on how they edited the data.

### *The process of categorisation*

In thematically analysing their own group data from the first session, the children tended towards categorising the information in three ways:

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<sup>6</sup> As the children were told they could choose to participate in this activity by themselves or in groups of their choosing, the researcher made multiple identical duplicate envelopes for each group to cater for different grouping options that they may have utilised when engaging with the task. There were also blank slips of paper, pens and pencils that they could use.

- (1) Individually (inductive or deductive)
- (2) Collaboratively (inductive or deductive)
- (3) Eclectically

Each way will be discussed in turn. The groups who chose to complete the task *individually* did so in one of two ways. The first had children sorting through the slips of paper (units of analysis) to find their own items from the brainstormed words and commentaries associated with their drawings, provided in the previous session. These were then sorted into groups using an inductive process (bottom-up analysis) (Patton, 2002; Rich, 2012): that is, the children used the items that they considered were theirs from the previous session (e.g., ‘*I wanna look for mine ... where’s mine? ... hermit crabs ... that’s yours*’ (age 8)). In effect, these children were thematically analysing their own individual data, rather than the collective data from the whole group.

The second way children participated in the analysis task *individually* consisted of the children determining one or more ‘groups’ that they would use to categorise wellbeing. From this, individual children chose items from the units of analysis that they considered deductively would fit in their group (top-down analysis) (Patton, 2002; Rich 2012). This was done without consultation with the rest of the group and included information that had been previously generated by themselves and the other group members. Children who undertook this process did not know what themes or categorisations the other members of their group were nominating until it was discussed near the end of the session. For example, ‘*Where’s family? House definitely goes with family ... Toys, I’m not really sure if they go with family because you don’t really NEED them do you? But you need family ... I’d name my group family tree – it’s like one big tree*’ (age 8).

The children who engaged in the analysis task *collaboratively* also exhibited two distinct methods. The first saw them starting to group the concepts/units of analysis into similar themes. As above, they used an inductive coding method, allowing the themes to emerge from the patterns and associations revealed in the data (Patton, 2002). For example, ‘*Hmmm, food ... That might go with happiness ... but where would that go?... Feelings? ... Does anyone have happiness?*’ (group B1). Another group picked each item in turn and read to other group members for discussion/negotiation, for example: ‘*Being naughty ... well, definitely good [all chuckle] ... well it feels good, but probably isn’t [all laugh] ... we can put that here then*’ (group D1b). As a group, the children continued to revise the thematic groupings until all of the units of analysis had been sorted into themes and there was consensus on what each theme should be named.

By involving children at various stages throughout the research process, such as through their involvement in analysing their own data, the researcher can better ascribe validity with the data obtained. This is because the focus for the qualitative researcher is then on presenting the views and perspectives of the participants rather than the extent of alignment between data and abstract concepts (Neuman, 2007). If the participants verify the information on multiple occasions, determinations of trustworthiness and credibility can be made (Rolfe, 2006). Accepting children’s responses at face-value was therefore of particular importance for this research as it acknowledges the need to accept and allow responses as they are provided, as all emergent themes are of interest, not just those that are attractive to the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007; Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012).

The second method within the *collaborative* coding process involved children choosing to be responsible for a particular group/theme that they considered would be reflected in the units of analysis they were about to go through. For example, ‘*People.*

*We should have people ... Mum and Dad should be people, so we should have people [theme]*' (group A2). Once this process of coding was completed, one person took responsibility for each theme in collating the information: *'I think my group is "things that make me happy" [theme]. That's my group'* (group C2). This analysis and organisational process was conducted deductively and often involved the children discussing the most appropriate place for an item to be coded: *'Anyone got medicine? ... that would go in health ... smiles? ... smiles would go into happiness wouldn't it? ... Bullying? ... bullying could go in a few things ... could go with "games" like cyber bullying ... what about friends? ... yep'* (group B1 discussion).

The third and final method that the children used to approach the task involved an *eclectic* approach. This involved a combination of individual and collaborative, inductive and deductive methods. The methods the groups used during the session alternated between individual and collaborative strategies as well as inductive and deductive nominations, as described above.

### *Conceptualisations of wellbeing*

While the overall findings of the project are reported elsewhere<sup>7</sup> (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014, 2017; Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2015; Sargeant and Gillett-Swan, 2015), to add context to the implications discussed throughout the rest of the paper, the children's

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<sup>7</sup> The findings of the project in terms of the children's research data and conceptualisations are reported in the publications listed above and in ways that are split by session, conceptualisation, and methodology. For context, the emerging themes from the researcher's analysis of this second session (reported throughout this manuscript) included; Social (Relationships), Physical (Health), Psychological (Self), Economic (Responsibilities), Environmental, Experiences, Survival, Spiritual, Cognitive, and Safety aspects.

discussions and justifications for their ratings from session two are paraphrased as follows:

doing things that I like that make me happy (group A1)

what I need to survive and have [positive] relationships with others (group A2)

your existence in the world, what you like and what's good for you (group C2b)

what you learn from your experiences, relationships and feelings (group D1a)

what you need to live, how healthy you are and how you feel (group D1b)

In this second session, some children's conceptualisations indicated that wellbeing could be considered as in a state of continual flux based on the individual's subjective responses to and interpretations of situations and experiences. Investigations into the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals on concepts, phenomena and experiences are inherently influenced by a variety of sociological factors and influences such as social class, culture, and issues of power and control as applied embedded within an individual's perceptual understandings and biases. By this reasoning, and based on the backgrounds of the children, for these children, individuals could experience (enhanced) wellbeing providing they were engaging in activities that made them happy. By contrast, if what they were doing did not make them happy, then their wellbeing might be hindered or reduced. For other children, the ability for an individual to achieve wellbeing was dependent on the extent to which they could acquire the things they needed to survive (food, shelter, warmth) (Maslow, 1970) and the extent to which they belonged to social and/or family groups (groups A2/B1/D1b). Wellbeing could therefore be influenced by the extent an individual's survival needs were catered for, as well as by their ability to maintain physical health and feelings. The children described activities, interpersonal relationships and bad things as having the



potential to impact on these areas. These prioritisations and focus areas may indeed have differed if the same data were generated or analysed by children from more diverse cultural and class backgrounds (e.g., refugee children) or if cultural comparisons were a focus of the study.

### *Ranking the importance of wellbeing categories*

After determining their thematic groups, the children were asked to rank their identified groups in order of importance for wellbeing. After categorising the information generated during session one, each child individually ranked the themes in order of importance for wellbeing. In this it was expected that the aspects of wellbeing most important individually for each of these children would emerge.

The children interpreted the components of the analysis task (grouping and ranking) in different ways. Despite all engaging in a grouping activity where specific items were categorised, some children still chose to rank the individual items listed in the ‘units of analysis’ rather than the thematic group names they had created. For example, one child’s ranking for this activity was: ‘1<sup>st</sup> friends/family, 2<sup>nd</sup> health, 3<sup>rd</sup> food, 4<sup>th</sup> nature, 5<sup>th</sup> peace’, although the categories that the group identified were ‘outside things, health, things that make me happy’. While an analysis of the children’s prioritisations here may provide insight around some cultural and class-based nuances of the participating group, the point of this example is to illustrate how some of the children recreated the themes and named them differently to the ones determined in the activity rather than analysing their choice/categorisation and subsequent prioritisation. Other interpretations of an importance ranking included the children ranking the groups that they had created: for example, ‘People, food, happy things, animals, hobbies’. These rankings corresponded to the categories that the group had developed. One group

commented, *‘why do we have to think of the reason for our decision for everything? The reason is so confusing! ... it’s what’s most important, what I need, and what I like’*

(group B1), which reflects other children’s sentiments around their process justifications.

### ***The process of power***

Three different issues relating to the process of power are highlighted: the in-group power distribution, the empowerment of children through their involvement in the data analysis process, and attempts to reduce existing in-group power imbalances. Only one of the groups discussed how they would approach the task prior to starting the grouping exercise: *‘Let’s do it all together as a group ... Anyone want to do pairs? ... Nah ... let’s do it all together’*. There was no process discussion within the other eight groups/sub-groups. In some groups, the process discussions (or lack thereof) were influenced by apparent power imbalances in the group, manifested in different ways. In one group, one child [James<sup>8</sup>] took the lead and directed the others. In this group, the child acted assertively and the others did as they were told. At one point, a discussion between two children occurred where they queried the categorisation:

Wade: What’s this one?

Rachel: Doing things?

James: [in an annoyed tone] It’s DOING THINGS.

Wade: No, it’s non-doing things.

James: NO. That’s a doing thing.

Rachel: Mood?

James: Don’t you put it there, that’s in the middle of the thing.

Ellie: So the groups are doing things and ... mood?

Wade: No it’s not doing things!

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms used

James: NO, IT'S MOOD.

At this point, one of the children wrote 'mood' at the top of the page and the name of the category was not queried further. In other groups, children shared the leadership role and problem solved together to determine the most appropriate and relevant category for the item they were coding. Some of the children shared the leadership role:

Natalie: That should be in happy things! Eating cake is Yum!

Cally: But it's also a food.

Erica: Well we already got one there [in food] so we can put one in happy.

Children's involvement in coding their own data increased the ability for the researcher to understand and reproduce codes during the researcher's own analysis that were meaningful for the children. The children's involvement in the analysis and coding of their data in the second session enabled the children to have a greater participatory role in the research process as well as greater influence in informing the researcher's subsequent analysis and reflective processes.

Having each child engage with the notion of wellbeing individually in the first and third sessions, prior to discussing their understandings with the larger group, allowed for a personalised response free from the possible influences of others who might be more assertive, dominant communicators (Hill, 2006). Furthermore, offering the children the opportunity to write their responses rather than communicate verbally removed some of the potential intimidatory effects of other children or of the researcher that might be present in traditional interview formats (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012). When utilising hermeneutics as the analysis frame, this procedural and contextual information is important as it assists the reader to understand the context as lived and experienced by the participants and the researcher.

### **Critical reflections on the process**

In analysing the ways the children approached the importance ranking element of this task, six possibilities emerge. First, instructions given to the children were not prescriptive and were open to interpretation. As such, some children utilised a far broader application of the task than was anticipated. The researcher saw this as a strength of the research as the children were able to engage with the tasks in ways of their choosing and with flexibility in their interpretations. The nature of the school environment often provides little freedom with ways children can engage with classroom tasks and academic work with certain scaffolds and processes typically required.

Second, some children were able to group all of their session one data (units of analysis) in less than five thematic analysis groups. As a 'top 5' importance ranking was printed on their sheet, some children may have considered it more relevant or appropriate to nominate their items from the units of analysis than from the thematic groupings. Third, some children may have completed the task to be compliant to instructions rather than considering the importance ranking, using their thematic groupings as truly reflective of what they considered to be the most important elements for their wellbeing. Fourth, the children may have considered the thematic groupings chosen by them to be appropriate representational summaries of the broader, important elements of wellbeing. Fifth, some children may have chosen to engage with the task in their own way. They may have felt that the aspects relevant for wellbeing for them were not clearly represented by categorising the thematic groups. Instead, they may have considered the most important aspects of wellbeing better represented through individual items, particularly as some of the discussions acknowledged directionality within some thematic groupings. For example: *'Friends ... can be in the middle, because friends can go either way ... travel could be good or bad'* (group D1b). Finally,

despite all of the children verbally agreeing they were satisfied with the final thematic groupings and names associated with each, some may not have been. Perhaps due to the dynamics of power inherent within the group, some children may not have felt the others were hearing their opinions in the group task. There were a number of examples of such dynamics at work, both between children in groups and between children and adults, throughout the data collection sessions, which are discussed elsewhere (Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014).

### **Children's insights and implications for future research**

While the reported reflections present a small element of the entire process that was undertaken when researching with children, it also presents an important element. Reflective insight into the additional richness of information obtained when researching with children as well as considering the processes they utilise when analysing their own data contributes to discussions around children's role in qualitative research practices and adds layers of meaning to inform and complement any other additional analyses.

The processes that the children utilised to explore and thematically analyse wellbeing provides an additional layer of insight and context that would not be revealed if the researcher's analysis was the only analysis considered and incorporated from the original data. This was evidenced through the children's descriptions and justifications for their decisions and categorisations. When viewed through the researcher's adult lens prior to the analysis session with the children, many of the children's interpretations would not have been identified. This is particularly evident through the groups whose analysis departed significantly from other groups' representations as described above. However, through the children's descriptions and justifications for their categorisations, the researcher could then see additional layers of complexity associated with each child's representation for wellbeing, which in some cases then completely altered the

original meaning the researcher thought was presented based on the children's initial descriptions in the first session. For example, drawings and descriptions of a mansion and limousine may be considered materialistic; however, the children's representations for the same data instead described '*being able to provide for my family, it's all about family*'. This emphasises the importance of seeking additional layers of information when researching with children, to support adult interpretations and contextual assumptions. The procedure undertaken in this project also provides some transparency in the ways that hermeneutic processes can be used to continually inform, construct and reconstruct understanding and knowledge when analysing qualitative information provided by children for research purposes. The addition of cultural and contextually based analysis may serve to further enhance this process particularly in relation to how the children prioritise and justify the categorisations of their own (or others') research data, as well as the processes undertaken by both the children and the researcher.

Upon reflection, the preparation of the data to be analysed by the children was in essence provided in edited format, as unlike the researcher when preparing the 'units of analysis', the children did not have access to the full sequenced transcript, original drawings or other complete information. Instead, the children were provided with each of these aspects in an individual, chunked and random format that lacked context outside of their memory when generating the data in the first session. It could be questioned whether the children would have chosen to use and thematically group the same information in the same way if they were transcribing their own data and extracting it from the completed transcripts and original documentation themselves. Despite well-meaning intentions to have the children more actively involved in the research analysis processes, it could be questioned whether the researcher in transcribing the data generated for the children in advance of the session, then also

engaged in some initial analysis through determining the level of detail included and what constituted a ‘unit of analysis’ in each instance (e.g., a single concept, phrase, sentence etc.). While the researcher sought to include as much detail as possible, contextual indicators such as pauses and non-verbal cues were not available to the children for their decision as to whether these indicators should be included. The drawings were also not included as units (data) for the children to thematically group beyond the transcribed verbal descriptions provided in the session one audio recording.

While the children were involved in the analysis of their own research data from one of the sessions, this project may have been strengthened by greater children’s involvement in other parts of the research such as design and dissemination. It may also have been beneficial for the children to review the researcher’s interpretations as presented in this paper which would have enabled the children insights towards the researcher’s assumptions and descriptions of the processes of analysis they went through in analysing their own data.

The children’s analysis of their own research data provided additional layers of insight towards understanding wellbeing from the perspectives of each group of children. It may have also been interesting for the groups to analyse the data generated by other groups involved in the project to see what other insight would be revealed when analysing data other than their own, as well as the analysis processes and justifications provided for the data generated by others which would be unfamiliar to them and would have lacked context. However, the tensions between the ‘child-as-participant’ and ‘child-as-analyst’ adds additional complexity to validity processes and emphasises the importance of considering the ways in which adults describe, explain, and prepare children for the roles they will be undertaking in the research process. In the same way that adult researchers are expected to adhere to ethical, moral and informed

research practices in their own practice, the question is posed as to whether the same rigour in expectations and understanding should be placed on children when they are involved in research in multiple roles (e.g., as participant and as analyst).

In this project, the children's conceptualisations of wellbeing present a picture of their capacity and complexity in thought, as well as an ability to communicate a developed understanding of a complex issue. This is further supported by assertions of children's capacity through sociology of childhood positioning. While the main themes generated during the first session remained similar throughout, the children gave them varying degrees of emphasis depending on the focus tasks of each session. Each subsequent session was critical in providing opportunities for children to build on their initial responses – particularly through the analysis task.

The children's conceptualisations and analysis reflect an alignment with the notion of wellbeing across the disciplines relevant to children: health (Carlisle and Hanlon, 2008; Fattore et al., 2007), psychology (Diener et al., 2002; Keyes, 2006), philosophy (Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1979) and education (Australian Catholic University and Erebus International, 2008; Fraillon, 2004). To this end, adult conceptualisations of wellbeing were not being used to verify the children's perspectives. Instead, the consistency between the adult and child conceptualisations suggests the validity of the children's responses and cultural basis for their judgements, while also extending current knowledge as children's perspectives of and definitions for wellbeing have rarely been sought, but are gaining increasing attention (Adams, 2009; Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014, 2017; Fattore et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2016; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012; New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, 2009; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015; Simmons et al., 2015). It also serves to demonstrate one way that adults and children can develop a 'meaningful alliance' (Coppock, 2011: 445) where



shared meaning is created when seeking to understand different aspects of children's lifeworlds from children's perspectives. To this end, children's contributions should be deemed as providing one level of expertise about their lives that is taken as seriously and with as much merit as other (adult) contributors with a goal towards 'childhood emancipation' particularly within the research space (Coppock, 2011; Wyness, 2012b).

The children's knowledge and understanding of the notion of wellbeing, as relevant for them, in many respects goes beyond the adult understandings presented in the literature as they simultaneously describe and recognise the enhanced and deficit characteristics that wellbeing can have while presenting an inherently optimistic and pragmatic worldview. This presents further justification for seeking children's perspectives on matters that affect them. In each session, the children were able to categorise the sometimes abstract aspects that had been identified by other individuals within the group, in turn illustrating their capacity to think more deeply about issues to which they may not be fully informed.

When conducting qualitative research with children that seeks to reveal their perspectives, particularly with complex topics, providing a greater participatory role such as through involving children in the analysis of their own data can be a worthwhile endeavour. Incorporating flexibility within the research design that is more inclusive of children's rights and perspectives can provide researchers seeking to better understand children's lived experiences, additional layers to increase the richness of their data and communicated findings. Children's perspectives and contribution to the analysis process may be the missing piece to moving closer to completing the qualitative research puzzle.

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