The potential and challenges of rights-based research with children and young people: experiences from Bangladesh

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The potential and challenges of rights-based research with children and young people: experiences from Bangladesh

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Drawing on my PhD field research in Bangladesh, this paper contributes to the growing body of methodological literature on young people’s right to participate in research. I reflexively evaluate the approach and ethics that I employed in my research, arguing that we must recognise the social and spatial dimensions of participation, which shape ethical issues of access and the construction of obedience, privacy and confidentiality. I reflect critically on the impact of inter-generational power relations on young people’s voluntary participation, and conclude by arguing that methodology – including ethical responses – needs to be context-specific. My experience reveals the challenges of translating rights-based research into practice.

**Keywords:** young people; rights-based research; power relations; reflexivity; Bangladesh

**Introduction**

Children and young people below the age of 18 constitute 47% of the total population of Bangladesh, which is over 140 million (Government of Bangladesh 2007). Yet they have limited opportunity to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Despite the Bangladesh government’s stated commitment to children’s rights, through ratification in 1990 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), and in various policy documents, it is rarely translated into practice (Manusher Jonno Foundation 2008). One way in which children’s and young people’s lives stand the best chance of being improved is through research, which can be used to inform policy and practice. As Pain (2004) argues, so long as policies are informed by research that lacks children’s perspectives, the positive impacts that these can have on childhood experiences will continue to be limited. The application of a rights-based framework is a good way to gather contextualised knowledge and personal experiences, which can provide relevant evidence concerning existing conditions. This also has the potential to challenge policy that prioritises children and young people as future citizens (Morrow 2001, Bessell 2006, Cahill and Hart 2006). However, one of the main reasons why there has been only a handful of research projects carried out with children and young people in Bangladesh to date is the lack of expertise in an appropriate methodology (Singh 2003).

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Drawing on the framework of the UNCRC, and informed by the idea of children as social actors (James et al. 1998), rights-based research offers a comprehensive framework to ensure children’s rights to protection, and to participation in the research process and its outcome (Beazley et al. 2006, Bessell 2009). I therefore aimed to make my own research both rights-based and children-centred. Despite the proliferation of rights-based frameworks and the increased participation of young people as research participants, there is a need to share the lessons learned as to how methodologies, including ethical issues, are practically played out (Leyson 2002, Greene and Hogan 2005, Bushin 2007). Drawing on my doctoral field research experiences on children’s participation in decision-making processes in Bangladesh, this paper aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on rights-based research with children and young people, by exploring the following questions: How did the research settings influence ethical issues of access, compliance and privacy? How did inter-generational power relations influence my ethical practice? And how did I address the distinct ethical challenges generated within the field? I conclude by reflecting on some implications for policy and the practice of rights-based research with young people in the context of a developing country.

Overview of the study

I carried out this fieldwork as a part of my doctoral field research in a rural district, Tangail, in Bangladesh from July 2007 to March 2008. The main reason for selecting Tangail was the existence of a network of children’s organisations called Children’s Councils, which involved approximately 60,000 children, supported by an international nongovernmental organisation (INGO) where I had worked before I started my doctoral studies. Therefore, it was necessary for me to be associated with the INGO to facilitate my access to the community through its partner community-based organisation (CBO). Some of the research meetings were carried out at the training centre of the INGO field office at Tangail, where I lived during the period of my fieldwork.

In order to understand why there is so much resistance to the idea of children’s participation in decision making, and why the idea of children’s participation in decision making is yet to be institutionalised in practices in Bangladesh, I explored attitudes, values, views, experiences, and practices of some young people and adults. The purpose of this fieldwork was therefore to explore various factors and structures, which either inhibit or facilitate children’s participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives in the family, at school, in the community, or at the level of local and national government.

I selected my research participants through the CBO. A total of 210 young people (girls and boys) 12–17 years, as well as 80 adults, participated in this research. The young participants included members and non-members of the Children’s Councils, students from schools and a religious institution, children growing up in institutional care, children living in a brothel and a sweeper community, children of ethnic and religious minorities, as well as working children. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the young people.

Addressing the ethical challenges generated within the field: the significance of taking the context into consideration

As a young, female Bangladeshi, speaking the majority language and being familiar with the overall socio-economic, cultural, political, religious and historical contexts of the country, coupled with my experience in child rights, I was confident that my fieldwork would go smoothly. In reality, I encountered a number of issues related to my identity that influenced
my research processes and outcomes. Besides, being a national with a privileged position, rather than a foreigner, I encountered some resistance to my fieldwork as well as expectations that I would quickly fix existing problems.

I had been employed by the INGO in its Bangladesh programme from July 1996 to January 2006, initially in the position of Projects Coordinator and later as the Deputy Country Director. Therefore, I had some familiarity with the prospective research field and with the CBO that assisted me in selecting participants and organising meetings. My previous practitioner background helped me gain comparatively easy access to the community. In my research, I could also capitalise on my experience in working on child participation issues with the young people. However, my previous practitioner role with a donor organisation turned out to be quite problematic in carrying out my research. Whilst my present role as a researcher and my previous practitioner identity generally encouraged the young people, as well as adults, to trust me and to express their subjective experiences and opinions, on many occasions they treated me as though I were still a representative of the funding organisation.

In research with young people, it is crucial to recognise two important aspects of children’s position in Bangladeshi society: that they are powerless compared to adults, and that they are embedded in relational structures (Boyden and Ennew 1997, Matthews et al. 1998, Christensen and Prout 2002, Mason et al. 2003, Alanen 2009). Young people and their competencies are therefore situated in a context that fundamentally shapes any research processes and outcomes. In the following sections, I discuss the challenges that I encountered in putting into practice ethical principles regarding young people’s rights to voluntary participation and to maintaining privacy and confidentiality. Finally, I discuss how I addressed power relationships between myself and the young people, by employing a reflexive research practice.

The impact of inter-generational power relations on young people’s voluntary participation

A number of child researchers have highlighted the power of gatekeepers and the consequences in restricting children’s access to participation (Valentine 1999, Cree et al. 2002, Mason et al. 2003, Hill 2005). My attempt to adhere to rights principles, by giving the young people a choice to participate in my research, was significantly constrained by my lack of access to young people. Even before I could seek their consent, I first of all had to negotiate for access with various hierarchies of adult gatekeepers (cf. Bushin 2007, Powell and Smith 2009). This made the young people vulnerable to power imbalances in the research settings, since they were unable to exercise their independent choice free from the influence of their adult guardians. This meant that gaining their consent was hard to achieve (Boyden 2004). As Skelton (2008) correctly points out, ‘within ethical research practices, the notion of children as competent actors is watered down somewhat when it comes to the rules around consent.’ In this section, I demonstrate how my attempt to treat the young people as competent agents – giving them a choice over whether or not to participate in my research – was weakened by the impact of the inter-generational power relations that predominate in Bangladeshi society.

In order to enable the young people to make a voluntary choice to participate, it was important for me to provide them with appropriate information regarding my research. However, with few exceptions, I had little control over the information given to the young people by others. The presence of various adult gatekeepers (teachers, parents, CBO/INGO staff) meant that the information about my research was filtered through their lenses, their understandings and their interests, all of which might have influenced the young people’s voluntary choices about participation (Sime 2008). For instance, in one school and in one community meeting, in my presence, the CBO staff intentionally introduced me in terms of my previous practitioner position so that they could give me status.
Similarly, the information about my research given to a group of young people from an ethnic minority was somewhat manipulative. I found out that they had been told by the CBO that their participation in my research might help solve the ethnic minority issues that they experienced in their community. In addition, during my introductory meeting with some other young people, it was quite apparent that they had not been given full information about my research. For instance, Aklima (girl, 15 years) said, ‘Bhaiya [CBO staff member] talked to my parents and then asked me to get on his bike and I did not know exactly the nature of this meeting . . . I was not even told that we’re going to stay here for two days . . . I did not bring my clothes . . . ’ In all these instances, the very first condition of my ethical methodology (empowering the participants with appropriate information for their voluntary participation) was therefore largely compromised and negated.

Other than being denied appropriate information regarding my research, the young people’s capacity to make decisions to participate and give informed consent was further compromised by the adult view that emphasised various formal and informal principles of selection and exclusion (Christensen and Prout 2002). For instance, the teacher in one school invited me to the classroom of Grade 10 and allowed me to introduce my research. As I was about to complete my introduction by asking for voluntary participation, I was stopped by the teacher who took the lead and gave an order: ‘Roll numbers one to eight, stand up, take your bags and come along with us’. When I expressed surprise and asked her to give the young people a voluntary choice, she smiled and whispered, ‘this sort of situation demands direct action . . . ’

Likewise, in the community setting, the CBO staff members made the initial selection of the participants mainly from the Children’s Councils, based on their adultist view of who should be included and excluded. Their selection was driven by considering which young people were good speakers. This was evident from a remark made by the CBO staff member accompanying me in the village who said, ‘I’m quite disappointed by the fact that despite my effort to choose the best members of the Children’s Councils in this area, they couldn’t talk to you, they couldn’t contribute in your research . . . I’m quite ashamed of that . . . ’

Furthermore, whilst I requested that young people should be invited for my research, irrespective of age, the fact that a group of the same participants were supposed to participate in a public hearing meeting with the district government officials meant that these young people were selected based on age and competency, in other words, being articulate. As the field manager of the INGO asserted, ‘We’ve been organising such hearing sessions for some time . . . we know very well who can speak and who can’t’. When I shared my concern with the programme manager, to my utter surprise, I was told, ‘Our experiences tell us that older children can talk better than younger ones . . . this kind of forum needs older, vocal children . . . ’. Such a perspective suggests that my access to the participants, and also the characteristics of the participants to whom I was given access, were highly influenced by the gatekeepers’ goodwill, choices and interests (Matthews and Tucker 2000).

There were instances when the young people’s right to participate was compromised by the gatekeepers without giving them a choice at all. For instance, in line with other research experiences (Kendrik et al. 2008, Powell and Smith 2009), the manager of a government-run care institution refused me permission to interview the young people there because . . . it’ll risk our jobs if the government officials come to know that we’ve allowed you to interview our children.’ In contrast, my access to the young people at a privately managed care institution would have been equally denied had I not been a previous practitioner of a donor of the organisation. As the manager of the centre proudly admitted, ‘many students like you come to do research with these children, but we never allow anyone . . . you never know what they’re going to write about them in their theses . . . however, we don’t have any problem with you as you’re very well known to us for so long . . . ’. On the one hand the ‘structures of compliance’ of various institutions prevented me from gaining access to some young people; on the other
hand, they might have acted as institutional pressures on the young people to participate in my research, denying me the opportunity to gain the young people’s informed consent (Valentine 1999, p. 144).

The young people’s ability to make voluntary choices was further constrained by their social status within the different sets of power relations in the community (Freeman and Mathison 2009). For instance, I had to address the consequences of participation (Hart and Tyrer 2006) of a group of girls (14–16 years) from a sweeper community. The sweeper community is socially excluded due to the stigma attached to their occupation. My meeting had raised local concerns and fears, shared by the girls, of damaging the girls’ moral reputation, which might ruin their prospects for good marriages. As I entered the colony for the second meeting, Joya (girl, 16 years) asked me, in a frightened tone, ‘are you going to publish our stories in the newspaper?’ In contrast, Ashis (boy, 14 years) proudly announced to his friend, ‘She is going to publish our stories in the Prothom Alo [daily newspaper] tomorrow’. There is a gender dimension in relation to the girls’ participation and their subordinate position within the community. Such power dynamics within social relations restricted some girls from participating in my research, but not the boys.

Since I did not have much control over giving my research participants a choice for voluntary participation at the initial contact, I found it important to give them a further choice for informed dissent as the research progressed (Ennew and Plateau 2004). I created that space by trying to empower the young people by informing them about the research, allowing them to ask questions, giving them time to decide, and also creating options for informed dissent as we went along (Alderson and Morrow 2004, Beazley et al. 2006). In other words, I practised ‘process consent’. That is, instead of a one-off event, I considered consent to be something negotiated as an ongoing concern throughout the research process, as some other child researchers have suggested (for example, Barker and Weller 2003a, Sime 2008). I therefore sought consent from the young people before every aspect of fieldwork by reminding them about the particular tools to be used or activities to be undertaken, as well as the purpose of my research (Hart and Tyrer 2006). As a result, out of 210 young people, three did not consent to participate after my introductions. For example, Rezina (girl, 17 years) refused to participate in a focus group discussion, saying, ‘I don’t attend this kind of seminar’.

With considerable hesitation, thirteen others dissented to the whole research at some stage, although none straight away. Dissent was not a simple choice for these young people to make. I revisited the consent issue every now and then to give the young people a choice for renewing or withdrawing consent. I reiterated that if anyone chose to withdraw, they were not going to be blamed by anyone. This approach helped me to explore with relevant young people their uneasiness or unwillingness to continue to participate. For example, two boys (14–15 years) expressed real concerns about losing private coaching time while they were in the research meeting. Thus the young people needed continuous reassurance about the voluntary nature of participation and about the no harm principle to enable them to make informed choices, whether for renewing or withdrawing consent.

There were two separate occasions, one involving a schoolboy (Shibu, 12 years) and the other a girl (13 years), on which the mother did not want them to continue in the research. Whilst the girl dissented and left the session along with her mother, Shibu requested that I ignore his mother’s request, and he continued the session along with his peers. I was not sure whether Shibu chose to continue to participate voluntarily, or because of pressure from his peers who had chosen to continue, or because he had been selected by his teacher, or because he wanted to respect me.

As a result, I am not entirely confident that a young person’s failure to dissent always signalled their voluntary consent. Some might have felt pressures to conform because they had been chosen by more powerful adults (Sime 2008). Even though I made it very clear that dissenting...
would not create any negative consequences, on reflection I now ask myself how I could have ensured their protection from any negative consequences. Making such a statement could be a false promise.

My findings contradict those of some researchers (for example Hart and Tyrer 2006) who suggest that the quality of information provided, and the researcher’s effectiveness in conveying it to participants, largely determine the extent to which informed consent can be gained. I acknowledge the importance of this claim statement. However, my findings lead me to the conclusion that the dual forces of the impacts of inter-generational power relations exercised by gatekeepers (Harden et al. 2000, Bushin 2007, Punch 2007, Mayall 2008) and the influence of the research setting (Valentine 1999, Christensen and Prout 2002) significantly influenced my efforts to treat the young people as the final gatekeepers, and thereby to ensure their right to voluntarily participation. Although the various gatekeepers had no legal right to prevent the young people from voluntary participation, their responsibilities to protect the young people’s well-being in their respective settings allowed them to exercise considerable power over potential participants (Wiles et al. 2005). As Mason et al. (2003) and Munford and Sanders (2004) argue, underlying the two constructions of children’s rights to participation, on the one hand, and guardians’ responsibilities of protection, on the other, are two assumptions: agency and vulnerability. To some extent, these factors are in tension, and I found that they posed a significant challenge in translating rights principles into practice in my research.

Partial or full? The practical challenges and moral dilemmas in maintaining privacy and confidentiality

There have been considerable debates around issues of privacy, and the question of to what level confidentiality should be maintained (Boyden and Ennew 1997, Alderson and Morrow 2004, Hill 2005, Kesby 2007, Reeve 2007, Roberts 2008). Thomas and O’Kane’s (1998) proposition of offering full confidentiality can be empowering for children. However, I find the principle of assuring full confidentiality is quite problematic (as also argued by Mudaly and Goddard 2009). I also find the principle of breaching confidentiality equally problematic (Gallagher 2009). My position fell between these two extremes as I spoke along the following lines in my introductory meetings with the young people: ‘Whatever you’re going to tell me will be used for my thesis/book only and you will remain anonymous. I’m not going to share your information with anyone else, unless you want me to do so for any reason. Also, in case anything is revealed through our meeting that is considered as harmful for you or any other children, I’ll discuss with you first about what to do in that case’. Kendrik et al. (2008) suggest a similarly balanced approach that aims to be explicit about the limits of confidentiality. Having introduced my position in that way, I think I neither disrespected the young people’s confidentiality nor breached it. Instead, I set the scene in the beginning for possible reporting of child protection issues, should any arise – if required, in consultation with the young people – as well as for respecting their wishes and considering their contexts. I do not consider this practice as a breach of confidentiality but rather as mutually agreed action.

Thus, I followed the advice and practice of those child researchers who consider ethics as ‘situational and responsive’, that is to say specific to the socio-cultural setting and the context of the moment. Priority should be given to any responses arising from the participants’ own perspectives; this requires researchers to develop a set of strategic values for reflexive ethical practice (Christensen and Prout 2002, Beazley et al. 2006, Morrow 2008, Pain 2008). This means ethical practice cannot be fully pre-defined, but needs to be constantly negotiated and contextualised, because there may be some factors which have different, even conflicting, implications (Lindsay 2000, Bushin 2007, Horton 2008). In the following examples, I show how I adopted
the strategic value of doing no harm, and demonstrate how I responded to the issue of whether to report a child-protection issue by exercising different principles in different contexts.

In the first example, some young people’s development and protection issues were involved. While the young people revealed the information in the hope of having their situation improved, they were equally worried that any disclosure of such information to the authority would only increase their sufferings. In the second example, some other young people revealed a child-protection issue about which they had never had an opportunity to unburden themselves of the pain and frustration that they had been suffering. Unlike the first example, there was no child-development issue involved. In contrast also, although the young people in the second example wanted to have the situation improved, they explicitly appealed to me to report it.

These conflicting demands put me virtually in a ‘minefield of ethical dilemmas’ (Mudaly and Goddard 2009, p. 261). Mudaly and Goddard observe that this type of research generates critical issues of striking the right balance between children’s right to be protected from any possible harm and trauma, and their right to be listened to about matters affecting their lives. These demands also point to a lack of clear standards and guidelines for researchers to follow in order to balance these seemingly conflicting situations. In such circumstances, I was guided by the reflexive practices of participatory ethics as situational and responsive. I also took account of the alternative possibilities considered by Young and Barrett (2001). Montgomery (2007) makes a similar observation that ethical responses must be treated as highly contextual. Therefore, though it was not a straightforward decision to make, the more fundamental rights issues seemed to be more pressing in relation to my first example. This led me to choose the option of protecting and advocating for the young people’s rights through these research findings, instead of breaching their confidentiality. Regarding my second example, I chose to fulfil the young people’s expectation that I would make a report, after carefully considering the circumstances and concluding that my action would not be likely to cause them any harm.

Generally, the young people in my research valued the fact that the information they provided was confidential. They placed a high value on their privacy, as evident in the following statements: Dipti (girl, 12 years) fearfully asked me, ‘Are you going to show this to our teachers?’ Another girl (16 years) warned me, ‘If our teachers come to know that I’ve told you all about these, my life will be at an end’. It was also important for them that the research settings offered a certain level of privacy (Christensen 2004, Bushin 2007). For example, boys (16–17 years) in an institutional care setting cautiously looked around to see if anyone was listening to us from behind the wall. However, it was sometimes difficult for me to maintain privacy in research settings. As Valentine (1999, p. 146) rightly remarks, adults’ authority over children ‘generates a further minefield of ethical problems’ surrounding children’s privacy and confidentiality issues. For instance, in a home interview with a girl (15 years), her uncle came into the room in the middle of our conversation and, after listening for a while, asked the girl, who had fallen silent in his presence, ‘Why don’t you tell her that it’s our family tradition to respect our elders?’

Similarly, due to the authority and power of adults, my attempt to try a diary-writing method with some of the young people and CBO staff largely failed. I came to know confidentially from members of both these groups that there was an implicit pressure coming from the INGO field office, ‘not to write anything that might jeopardise the project’s interests’. This was evident in the following query made to me by a female CBO staff member: ‘Should I write the diary as an NGO staff member or as a human being?’ Although the diaries gave both the young people and the adults a time and space of their own in which to reflect on their experiences, each was at the same time constrained by a different kind of power relation, which restricted what they felt able to write.

Therefore, the child–adult power relations, including institutional interests based on power and authority, on the one hand, and the young people’s particular vulnerabilities, on the other,
significantly shaped my ethical practice. The most important consideration in maintaining young people’s privacy and confidentiality in research is to recognise and respect young people’s perspectives in this process. What is best for one group or individual may not be equally applicable to another group or individual. This approach also demands looking beyond the young people’s immediate environment to the broader social context, and exploring the social, economic, cultural, political and historical processes that constitute the particular context of childhood (Montgomery 2007). Such analyses may help us to understand the complexities of context that constitute specific childhood experiences, and thus help us to devise successful ethical strategies. This conceptualisation, and the values associated with it, eventually led me to respond more flexibly to ethical issues, by applying different principles in different situations based on the particular context.

Mediating power relations between myself and the young people: the need to maintain reflexivity

The nature and outcome of any research is primarily shaped by the social relations between researchers and participants within a given context (Christensen and James 2008). There is a consensus that the generally prevailing cultural notions of child–adult power relations will tend to reinforce the inherent power relations that already exist between researcher and participants, which are characterised by adult domination and children’s subordination (Boyden and Ennew 1997, Matthews 2001, Robinson and Kellett 2004, Gallagher 2009). Recognising and addressing the imbalance of power is therefore a significant challenge, which makes reflexivity a methodological necessity, especially in childhood research that employs a rights-based framework (Davis 1998, Punch 2002, West 2007, Christensen and James 2008, Mayall 2008, O’Kane 2008). Reflexivity is defined as ‘a mode of self analysis and political awareness... [on the basis of which the researcher] questions his/her interpretations of field experience’ (Davis et al. 2008). Reflexivity can be achieved ‘through detachment, internal dialogue and constant (and intensive) scrutiny’ of the processes through which the researcher constructs and questions his/her interpretations of field experiences’ (Hertz 1997 in Davis et al. 2008, p. 224). If we claim to believe in reflexive principles, we need to be honest about contemplating our own feelings, assumptions and experiences. I therefore chose to reflect on my feelings regarding my positionality, which may challenge some of the existing assumptions about the normative idea of the positionality of a researcher.

In this section, I use reflexivity to analyse my assumptions, positionality and role as an adult researcher and to reflect on how far I was able to negotiate and share power with the young people – a factor which might had influenced the data generated (Barker and Weller 2003b, Mason et al. 2003, Langevang 2007). After all, the extent to which my efforts were able to empower young people to become active participants in my research was a central consideration in assessing the results. The following examples reveal how my assumptions about the suitability of interview method and the young people’s uses of language, and the consequences of such wrong assumptions, influenced the research process and its outcomes. In a one-on-one interview, Sabbir (boy, 13 year) found it difficult to communicate with me easily as he was trying to follow my way of speaking Bangla, which differed from his strong local accent. This not only made him nervous, he was also unable to write or draw due to his limited literacy skills and lack of practice at drawing. On reflection, I realised that a researcher’s language, as well as the interview method, may shape the children’s responses. So I stopped asking questions and simply invited him to tell his own story about how he, a former working child, ended up being a leader of the Children’s Councils. This worked well. The language issue also became apparent with two groups – with a Mandy-speaking ethnic group and with an Urdu-speaking group of young people from a sweeper community. Although the young people from these two groups communicated with me in
Bangla, there was less spontaneity compared to other Bangla-speaking groups. These situations revealed my incorrect assumptions that all the participants would be able to communicate with me in Bangla, or that my way of speaking Bangla would not be problematic for any of the participants.

On many occasions I consider that I was successful in developing empowering research relations with the young people. Over time, they were able to take greater control over the research process. They became more relaxed and forthcoming, and gave me feedback that they had enjoyed the meetings. In order to achieve this outcome, I had to take a participatory approach, wear locally appropriate outfits, sit parallel to them and be cautious about my choice of words and body language. I also had to be vigilant in taking their visual and verbal cues into account, so that I could monitor any unspoken expressions of whether they were communicating unease or dissent (Matthews and Tucker 2000, Wiles et al. 2005, Hart and Tyrer 2006). Nevertheless, my attempt to empower the young people was significantly constrained by the existing social relations, which value hierarchy in child–adult relations. This was further complicated by variables such as gender, class, ethnicity, (dis)ability and the geographical location of the young people.

For instance, despite my effort to take a friendly adult role, and my attempts to offer the young people control over the research process in terms of the level, quality and nature of their contributions (Kesby 2005), strong socialisation of the young people which encourages obedience and respect and discourages children’s voices meant that I was not always successful in establishing a symmetrical relationship with my young participants. As a result, some of the participants found it hard to say no to my face as an adult researcher. This feeling of compulsion came on top of the pressure they might already have felt from their adult guardians and their peers. The situation was further complicated by the institutional interests that acted as a significant barrier in my effort to establish an authentic research relationship with my research participants. As a result, some of the participants accepted the tools without any questioning, and felt too intimidated to be able to actively engage in the research. For instance, after spending a whole day with three groups of young people in a remote rural setting, I received the following feedback from Alim (boy, 16 years), who had been brave enough to break many of their silences, ‘We never attended this kind of training before . . . nobody visited us from Tangail so far . . . we’re nervous that somebody like you is coming from Tangail . . .’.

Regarding the latter situation, it was clear that my identity and role had already been fabricated by the CBO, which had stated that I was a high official related to their organisation. This put the young people under tremendous psychological pressure, which was difficult for me to break within the short period of the research. The pressure was clearly evident in their nervousness. One boy (13 years) started sweating while talking to me, and I saw that the hand of another (14 years) was shaking in his attempts to draw a line or write a sentence. Everybody continued addressing me as ‘Madam’, despite my request to call me apu (sister); they even became too stiff to respond to my invitation to participate in ‘ice-breaking’ activities. Finally, the whole group of eight (boys, 13–14 years) ran away from the venue as soon as I was able to assure them about ‘informed dissent’. The girls’ group (14–16 years), however, remained stuck in the middle of the courtyard, neither contributing to, nor leaving, the session. I myself got stuck along with the girls as I could not think of anything else to help them make their choices. This experience also points to the importance of building good rapport between researcher and participants if interviewing is to yield good data (Ennew 2000, Harden et al. 2000, Punch 2007). I failed to develop such rapport with these particular groups.

Challenging the view that power always resides with the adult (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008), some researchers (for example, Barker and Smith 2001, Gallagher 2008) question the oppositional model of power, in which it is seen as a commodity held by the dominant adults’ group and not by the subordinate children. They argue that such a simplistic
conceptualisation masks the complex and multiple ways that power is exercised within the space of any research setting. The following two examples demonstrate how my attempts to take on the role of a friendly adult while being a native young female – while employing participatory techniques that allowed the young people to have greater control over the process – were appropriated by them in their own interests, so that they ended up exerting considerable power over me.

The young people’s greater power over me was demonstrated by a group of six adolescent girls (15–16 years) who did not take me seriously as a researcher but thought of me as a friendly person to spend time with. The girls were not sufficiently motivated to participate actively in the research, but were more interested in having fun and enjoying each others’ company in the relaxed and private setting of a training centre. By the end of the day-long session, I received feedback that the day had turned out to be liberating for them; they were freed from being subject to hard discipline either at school or at a coaching centre. However, as one girl (16 years) admitted, while others supported her, ‘... you seemed to be one of us ... you didn’t act like an adult, showing the kind of attitude that adults normally do ... that’s why we haven’t taken you seriously ... sorry about that.’ I remembered O’Kane’s (2008) caution about the challenges of participatory research, that the participatory element of the participatory technique can have the effect of making it seem less serious.

In another meeting, in response to my question, ‘What are the factors that obstruct or facilitate children to have their say in decision making?’ Mobin (boy, 16 years) – against strong opposition from the rest of the group, two of whom were female – drew a picture of a physical relationship between a boy and a girl, and kept on taunting the girls with the picture in my absence. I was quite puzzled and also felt insulted and embarrassed by the sensitivity of the situation, and was not fully sure how far I should intervene in such a situation. At the end, two participants made a remark to me in private: ‘If you were acting like an adult, then Mobin would not get any courage to act the way he did.’ In other words, my position – not as an adult but as a friendly, young, female native researcher – allowed Mobin to appropriate the research technique and exercise power, not only over his peers but also over me.

In line with Barker and Smith (2001), my experience suggests that gender – and, I would emphasise, also age and nationality – plays particular roles in field relationships. In both these examples, the young people trivialised my role as a friendly adult, categorising me instead as a young and female Bangladeshi, and thereby appropriated the participatory techniques for their own enjoyment. For these young people, this appropriation had the same result as exemplified in Gallagher’s (2008, p. 141) experiences ‘lots of fun, but there was little recorded that would be of any use to my project’.

In my research, I experienced the importance of being reflexive in the research process, which helped me address some of the multi-faceted child–adult social relations that exist in society. However, both inter- and intra-generational power relations (Punch 2007), as well as institutional interests, influenced my efforts to address inherent power relations in my various research settings – thereby significantly shaping my research processes and outcomes.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, this type of applied research has significant implications for providing knowledge to feed evidence-influenced policy and practice by engaging children and young people as relevant policy stakeholders (Tisdall 2009). This perspective therefore requires researchers to work from a rights-based approach that recognises children’s and young people’s autonomy and competence, and creates space for them to raise their voices (Munford and Sanders 2004). Nevertheless, my attempt to create a space for the young people to exercise their right to be properly researched (Ennew and Plateau 2004, pp. 28–30,
Beazley et al. 2006, p. 21) generated more questions than it answered. I have demonstrated that the use of a children-centred research methodology informed by rights principles poses significant challenges for the researcher, who will be obliged to confront the social relations already existing between young people and adults. My experience also suggests the importance of considering ethical responses as context-specific, while recognising the challenges of translating the ethos of rights-based research into practice. We must be prepared to ensure that our practice carefully takes careful account of the particular culture and context and the resultant tensions that rights-based research generates (Young and Barrett 2001, Mannion 2007, Montgomery 2007).

I therefore question whether the UNCRC can provide a universal foundation for this type of research. My experience raises the question of how far the universal rights framework is practically applicable in researching childhood experiences in developing countries – such as Bangladesh – which have their own distinct socio-cultural values and contexts. The idea of children’s participation in decision making that affects their lives is something that, in practice, is bound to be a relational matter demanding adult support and partnership. Yet it presents significant challenges to the existing pattern of child–adult relations, which, in Bangladesh as in many other countries of the Global South, are characterised by inter-generational authority, domination and power. Moreover, in a country such as Bangladesh the issues of children’s and young people’s present needs, and their rights to development and protection, are intertwined in a complicated way, in the absence of a welfare society. In such a context, might our attempts to have children and young people join us on our rights-based research bandwagon eventually increase their vulnerability, robbing them of protection in the name of their participation? Unless all these factors are taken into consideration, any romantic notion of applying the idea of rights-based research with children and young people will remain mere rhetoric rather than reality.

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