

Because “*grown-ups don’t always get it right*”: Allyship with children in research – from research question to authorship

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Abstract

This study engaged children as research allies throughout the research process from developing research questions to authorship. Our approach recognises children’s right to participation under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) by developing a form of inquiry that invited children’s critique of adult knowledge and authority. The project was fully co-constructed with children, with adults who guided them through planning, analysis and authorship. We discuss our reflections on the children’s lived experience of Allyship itself, with the issues raised by children in focus groups and interviews illuminating this methodological approach. We conclude that children see and accept adult failings and seek to contribute to social worlds, and that these priorities have been enacted in their lived experience of this project. Our approach provides a platform for further endeavours in Allyship with children in the fields of qualitative psychology and childhood studies.

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Introduction

In this paper we present an innovative methodology for Allyship in research alongside children. This project was inspired by a child, and as adult researchers we embarked on a reflexive process to enable children to design and deliver their own research. We recognise Allyship as distinct from research which engages children; rather it is research in which children are partners and advocates in the fullest possible sense, being both *of* and *for* their peers within the research team. We conducted this research by purposeful recruitment of participants, who became our research allies, and we worked closely with them as they found their position within the research environment. Our focus

group, interviews and observations were immersive in the children's lived experience. We applied a collaborative process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), chosen for its flexible nature, and our main priority was the engagement of children as allies in the process. Our research aims were used as a structure for our paper as we explore the process and outcomes of this project. The aims were:

1. How can we involve children as research allies? (*Addressed by considering our context, process and methodology*)
2. In what ways do children engage with, or dissent from, a role as research allies? (*Addressed by considering our observations and reflections of Allyship with children*)
3. How do children interpret and respond to the statement "Grown-ups don't always get it right you know", and what can this tell us about Allyship?

Our focus is therefore on our methodological processes and our particular relationships in this role. We identify the themes that resulted from the analysis, but these findings are primarily a vehicle for understanding more about the children's lived experience of this research project. The three themes we formulated from our analysis are: *Getting it Right*, *Care*, *Being noticed*, and *Authority*. These themes can also be seen as pillars of our methodology itself, and so we identify a symbiosis of experience, where children spoke of the need to be noticed and demonstrate knowledge, while participating in a process which specifically set out to harness these same priorities in order to speak with them and learn from them.

The children involved in this project advocated for their generation as allies, and the role, which we adults assumed, was as supporters and guides, rather than leaders. We acknowledge the conditions of this research team as particular and unusual, with peer friendships and a mother/child relationship within the team itself, and we contribute these challenges to the community of practice surrounding critical qualitative research in psychology. Our intention is that this work supports the emergence of Allyship with children as a distinct methodology, where children emerge as capable

peer researchers to build on existing literature on this type of research relationship (Price & Hawkins, 2002; Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2017; Horgan, 2017).

Our First Aim: How can we involve children as research allies?

We turn first to the question of why we should develop Allyship with children. What is to be gained by researching *with* children as full partners, rather than simply engaging children in our research? Allyship has developed through commitment to valuing lived experience, while jostling for position within a hierarchical agenda where traditional scientific research typically assumes kudos (Happell *et al*, 2018; Happell & Sholtz, 2018; Sholtz *et al*, 2019). Allies are typically encouraged among marginalised groups such as women, mental health service consumers, and LGBTQI communities, where peer advocates inhabit positions of influence (Happell & Sholtz, 2018), although, Happell *et al* (2018) note the power differential between allies and professional bodies is still a significant obstacle, noticed in the degree of influence afforded to allies. There are similarities to be drawn between Allyship with marginalised groups and with children, where participatory methods have also gathered strength in recent years and are now regarded as “*de rigour*” (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015, p162; see also Alderson, 2008), despite adults retaining control over children’s lives.

Indeed, the literature documents a distinct increase in the authentic engagement of children’s voice in research and social institutions (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). Hill (2006) notes this is particularly apparent in qualitative research, which has blended somewhat with practice techniques in creating dialogic ways of engaging children’s voices through respectful and time-rich methodologies (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor & Graham, (2012) outline how the Childhood Studies discipline has been instrumental in pioneering a construction of “children as competent social actors, who actively participate in the construction of their own childhoods” (p6), reflected also in seminal works such as Bruner, (1996), Vygotsky (1962), and Corsaro (2011). We acknowledge that this is not the first child-centred research project in which children have assumed a lead role; indeed, Alderson (2008) summarised a range of child-led research projects. However, while

respecting the strides that have been taken in engaging children's voices, we also reflect that this movement may have a greater profile within the academic and professional world than it does in the lives of these children.

It is true to say that children in the UK in the 21st century will experience respect for their agency in a way that previous generations may not have done. But despite this we suggest it is unusual in the life of an individual child to become a member of a research team. Arguably, children's involvement in this co-constructed project which sought to voice shared peer experience, was an original event in their lives experience in the lives of these children, and so we consider how our allies responded to, and reflected on, the process itself. Their engagement itself is also a reflection of the contemporary constructions of childhood, adult authority and voice. While children in the contemporary and western world are generally regarded as agentic beings in their own right (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Corsaro, 2011; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Shute & Slee, 2015; Neale & Flowerdew, 2007; McNamee, 2016), their lives are still managed by adults in educational, familial and social settings.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child established children's right to participation, however, it did not give children equal power in discussions and decision making (Johnny, 2006). Indeed, Darbyshire, *et al* (2005) note that children lack political clout; although consumers, they neither campaign nor vote. Their absence from the realms of politics and policy making is commonplace, reflecting an adult professionalised agenda in which children are sometimes invited to share their voice. However, in very recent times we have seen clear evidence of how this tide is turning. In a radical move, teenage activist Greta Thunberg has led a global uprising against the establishment, bringing swathes of children and young people to adult attention through resistance (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2019; The Lancet, 2019). Even prior to this, the United Nations had called upon children and young people as critical agents of change (United Nations, 2015). In the political world therefore, children appear to be challenging the status quo with great success; forcing their eloquent objections and downright rejection of adult leadership in the battle for their future world. In this context we question whether children and young people will be less inclined to wait for an

invitation, but rather, assume their position among stakeholders, and whether Allyship is an agenda which *they* will pursue. The reality for children as our allies is that their lives are still predominantly set and controlled by adults, and despite the encouraging increase in participatory methods (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2016; Alderson, 2008), others report children rarely have the opportunity to sculpt their own research (Horgan, 2017; McNamee, 2016; Powell et al, 2012; Carter, 2009; Grover, 2004). This is something we have attempted to invert here.

Crafting our Allyship with Children

One of the distinctive features about this project is the nature of the pre-existing relationships between the adults and children, and among the allies themselves. The lead author, Emma Maynard, is the mother of one of the children, Oscar Maynard, and had known the other children over time in the context of their families and the school playground. Sarah Barton knew some of the children through her role as a school governor. Kayleigh Rivett was an outsider to the children, acting as a more neutral person in this team. Will Davies, a friend of Oscar's, was also a key member of the team, alongside seven other children of the same age, who are not named here due to ethical parameters. The sub-title of this paper is quoted directly from one of our authors, Oscar Maynard, who was aged eleven when he told his mother - that "*grown-ups don't always get it right, you know*". This statement led to a conversation, through which Emma was inspired to invite Sarah and Kayleigh into this co-constructed project where we would learn about their perspectives on adult decision-making, authority and care.

The particular nature of this research setting and the relationships within it were not accidental; we used purposive sampling (Gallagher, 2012; Etikan, Musa, & Alassin, 2016) and utilised the nature of these relationships to develop this study. We acknowledge the tendency to recruit participants via more neutral means (Horgan, 2017), and clarify that we pursued this line due to our primary interest of how a peer group would engage as allies, rather than attempting to obtain generalizable findings for a population of children. Thus, we accept the agenda was still held by us to a degree – we encouraged, arranged, and ultimately held control in the situation (Horgan, 2017). Our

relationships were pre-loaded with experience and understanding, subjectively interpreted over time (Bruner, 1996; 2002) – and we conjecture that this added to this process. The power dynamics will have been influenced by these relationships, and while this can occur in any research study (Brinkman, 2007), it is even more significant when researching with children: the imbalance is amplified by children’s status as minors in an adult-dominated world (Corsaro, 2011).

Christensen (2004) reports on her extensive experience of researching with children, finding that the close relationships she developed – in her case, through ethnography – enabled children to be more relaxed and forthcoming. This, she argues, is quite different to one-off occasions where the researcher/participant power imbalance is further amplified by the societal adult/child imbalance, and in which shyness can inhibit interaction (Grover, 2004; Christensen, 2004). Our ready-made rapport as researchers in this project supported us in creating an environment that was child-led and had fewer relational obstacles. The children were able to settle into the research context as a peer group with familiar adults (Horgan, 2017), which arguably enabled a more natural flow of ideas than inviting them into a ‘cold’ environment. Furthermore, we were able to avoid the usual restrictions of formalised access and time constraints which can detract from child-led methodologies (McNamee, 2106). The data analysis was held in Emma and Oscar’s home, enabling relaxed contemplation of ideas between adults and children in which we took the time to listen authentically, laying down our assumptions and tuning into the children’s state of both being and becoming as we co-constructed meaning (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Grover, 2004; Neale & Flowerdew, 2007).

Christensen (2004) also highlights children’s power in research, reflecting that “Power was not fixed to or residing in me nor in them” (p171), as children took control of voice recorders and interjected their own ideas into conversations. In our case, we deliberately set out to invert the power imbalance by trusting the allies to design and implement their research, and reinforced them as expert at each stage. The continued presence of their peer group against a smaller number of adults also helped keep this in check (Horgan, 2017). Their role in designing the questions, interviewing each other and being interviewed themselves before turning to analysis positioned these children as both informants and researchers, and as a result, lessened possible difficulties with representation;

ultimately, they spoke *for* themselves and *of* their peer group (Horgan, 2017). The children were immersed in the culture of their generation, with intimate knowledge of one another in school and in social times; thus, we consider their Allyship also reflects other immersive peer led methodologies such as peer ethnography (Price & Hawkins, 2002) and participant action research (Pociano, 2013).

Allyship in our Research Process

We built the processes for this project through two-fold parent/child consent, an initial adult-led focus group, peer-led interviews, and an adult and child team for data analysis and authorship. Gaining children's consent (or rather, assent) is complex in itself. At age ten to twelve, children are not necessarily Gillick-Competent (also known as Fraser Ruling/Competent) (Cornock, 2007; Maynard et al, 2019), and cannot legally give their consent. Thus, our consent process required a two-fold consent from their parent/carer, and active assent from the children themselves (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell & Britten, 2002). We felt the distinction within this was that it was likely the children could understand, and therefore assent, for the basics of the research process: talking in a group, interviewing each other, recording each other, and being allocated a "fake" name in publication. However it was less likely that the children could fully foresee ways in which their data could be used and interpreted in the adult world. They may not have reasonably been expected to understand the types of discussion this paper could evoke, or the platforms in which this could be debated. However, the socio-political position of children as within adult direction (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998) did not mean that children would be directed to take part, thus we gained parental consent to invite the children into the process, and children's active assent to participate.

As noted by Docket *et al* (2009), children's consent should be gained patiently, allowing time for children to understand, process and decide about their possible participation. Therefore, an introductory video featuring Emma and Oscar was disseminated to the families via email. This was a short recording, explaining the purpose of the research and inviting children to take part. The research was explained as a wish to understand more about what children thought about the decisions and rules adults make, to help other adults learn more about children's lives. It was explained that we would ask

the children to decide their own questions and interview each other. The video was emailed so that families had time to discuss the research in their own space and time, avoiding the risk of feeling pressured.

Both children and parents were invited to raise questions over the course of the project. Parents and children were also reassured that they could opt out at any time up until data analysis, and that parents would need to remain contactable during the research process in case a child wished to go home (Gibson, 2007). Strategies for handling a dissenting child were discussed among the research team and parent group, explaining that a child not wanting to say they dissented might demonstrate dissent through becoming withdrawn, avoiding the process, or showing distressed or disruptive behaviours. Lastly it is important to note that all three adult researchers have come from a professional background of working with children, and that we drew on our practical wisdom of this work in order to create a child-friendly environment. This enabled us to engage with the children in a way which demonstrated care, interest, and respect for each of them, and supported our analysis of their language, meaning and contextual references (Landman, 2012; Gibson, 2007; Moss, 2011; Maynard, 2017). We note that none of the children dissented and all appeared enthusiastically engaged throughout, seen in lively contributions and positive behaviour.

As adults, we reflected on the position and typical lived experience of children of this age, and used this to shape our specific processes, from the initial invitation to participation, analysis, and authorship. We determined our role was to ensure we created a child-friendly research environment through using accessible language, pacing the conversations for questions and reflections, and ensuring each child's contribution was visible to the whole group, and valued equally. We explained the purpose of the research was to understand more about children's lives, and about children's *views* of their own lives, so that adults could learn about this, and that we could also learn more. We also explained what the research was *not* about; i.e. determining whether someone had a "right" answer, or telling other people they had got something wrong – be this with the research group, or the wider audience for the work. As adults, we took responsibility for ensuring the children understood the

parameters of the project, explaining to each individual child the consent process, and reaffirming this to the group as a whole at the focus group, interview and data analysis stages of the research.

Once consent was obtained from adults and children, the parents left the environment, with the chaperone parent remaining as an observer. Throughout the process we adopted unstructured observation techniques, so that we could witness the children (now allies) interact in this specific environment, learning more about the meaning it held for them, and enabling us to note ways in which they extended their thinking (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). We began with an adult-led introductory focus group, in order for the allies to identify interview questions they would then ask each other, at which point, leadership of the project was taken up by the allies themselves. The original statement “*Grown-up’s don’t always get it right, you know*” was shared with the children and the adults asked children:

1. What do you think this person meant?
2. What do you think adults think about children’s lives?
3. What questions could we ask, to understand what children think about the decisions adults make?

The adults facilitated the focus group reflecting back, confirming meaning, and scribing the allies’ contributions. This resulted in the allies having identified their interview questions. Our observations and reflections of this process are discussed further on.

The children’s interview questions were:

1. What have adults done to make you feel upset?
2. What have adults done to make you feel happy?
3. Is it right that adults think they know better and why?
4. What would you like adults to do more of?
5. Is there anything that you think adults get wrong and why?

The allies organised themselves into three groups of three and were given their own clipboards with the questions and a voice recorder. This configuration enabled greater independence from adult

researchers and reduced the adult/child power imbalance (Brinkman, 2007). The children decided their own processes, the only parameter being that everyone had a turn. Adults maintained a discreet distance during the allies' interviews, ensuring safety, while avoiding any interference either verbally or merely by presence. Thus, nine interviews were generated by children themselves in peer-led environments.

Assent and Authorship with Oscar and Will

There were specific ethical considerations for Oscar as the son of the lead researcher, Emma. The risk of Oscar feeling coerced to participate with this project was mitigated due to the original idea being his own, and evidenced somewhat, by the proactive and enthusiastic manner in which he reported it to his family and friends. Oscar's father was asked to sign parental consent for him, and he acted as Oscar's representative in case he wished to opt out. The peer-led environment was even more pertinent for Oscar with his own mother's involvement, and so we ensured that the data was transcribed and anonymised, prior to Emma having access to it.

In each step from design to authorship, we ensured safeguards were in place to enable Oscar to step out of the process if he wished to do so, by creating distance from Emma in the consent and dissent process, anonymity of his data and reaffirming his assent alongside the other allies. This also helped reduce his *difference* among his peer group. We felt that additional verbal consent and assent was required when Oscar and Will joined the data analysis stage, as the research was moving into a different realm. We were also conscious that their additional life experience since the first part of the project may have influenced their wish to be involved or not. Having discussed the options, Oscar and Will chose to be named in the publication so that they could be credited for it, but agreed that their data, already anonymised, would not be linked to them specifically. As adults were paid for their time, children were paid in kind. Tools of the qualitative research trade were given to all allies: clipboards, pens, post its and highlighters, to value their contribution on equal terms, and with the aim of

inspiring them in the future. Oscar and Will were additionally given cinema vouchers for their input as authors.

Our Second Aim: In what ways will children engage with, or dissent from, a role as research allies?

The research was conducted over an extended period beginning while the children were in year six of primary school, aged 10 and 11, and continuing with the co-authors in year seven, aged 12. Thus, the children of this study were in the midst of the seminal life experiences of this age group during the research. At age 10-12 children straddle key transitions in their lives; from primary to secondary school in the UK, and from childhood to the cusp of adolescence. The contemporary primary school system in the UK appears preoccupied with assessment and attainment, amidst endless rhetoric about the dissolution of a care-free childhood amid a mental health crisis. Year six children hotly anticipate their move to secondary school, with a symbolic and actual shift towards greater independence and disrupted friendship groups within this watershed transition (Weller, 2007; Topping, 2011). Their move from big year six children, to small and at the mercy of a melee of teenagers (Zeedyk *et al*, 2003; Topping, 2011), encompasses both excitement and anxiety (Weller, 2007). The research occurred at a time in the children's lives when the drive for peer recognition is intense, both intoxicating and anxiety-provoking, with friendships pivotal to identity and self-esteem. Reciprocity, and co-construction of meaning are potent experiences, as children gain confidence drawn from shared perspectives and allegiances (Ryan, 2000; Troop-Gordon, MacDonald & Corbitt-Hall, 2019). So it was, that we injected a peer context in which to critique adult decision making, into this realm of experience.

We note also that when the two co-authors came to the data analysis, they had crossed into adolescence, and had gained an additional eighteen months of life experience, learning and maturity. Therefore they may have engaged at a more abstract level at this stage able to look back and see their responses in the context of their younger selves, and we note that all our young allies may have had

variable ability in making concrete and abstract links, between the research questions and their own lives (Piaget, 1955; Shute & Slee, 2015). Our allies brought their lived experience into the research (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), and both their engagement and their data, is further contextualised by the peer environment we created. These factors were present in the children's construction of the questions, their responses, and their treatment of one another within both the live environment and the data analysis, and we acknowledge the likely personal significance for these children in advocating for their peers.

Unstructured observations of the children negotiating the research process

Throughout the process, we adopted a strategy of unstructured observation (McNamee, 2016; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018), which enabled us to capture the ways in which children negotiated their Allyship role and extended their shared thinking. As such, conversations which occurred during the focus group, incidental exchanges, and data analysis, added additional meaning, and thus are presented here. Children's comments are paraphrased and indicated in italics.

We noticed that during the focus group at the beginning of the process, the children followed typical classroom behaviour, putting their hand up to ask or answer a question despite an informal setting, and deferring to adult authority (Morgan *et al*, 2002; Lauzon & Berger, 2015). Allies policed those who talked over other peers, prompting them to wait their turn, reflecting the importance of fairness in gaining adult attention. Some of our allies rushed to answer a question themselves, rather than keeping their ideas for interviews, and we consider that their evident excitement about giving the "right" answer was an echo of classroom behaviour, where children report in to teachers for verification of knowledge (Alderson, 2008). A focus group may also represent 'Circle Time' (Mosely & Tew, 2014) as their interviews were a familiar pattern of group working, listening and responding. This may also explain our observation that the children were resolutely supportive of one another throughout each stage of the process, unlike findings reported by Farnsworth & Boon (2010), that focus group interactions can be hostile and off putting; in this case, the allies exemplified their peer

group bonds. We note that this behaviour was reflected in the data, where the children referred extensively to being acknowledged by adults, an example of how the children enacted their own data; they spoke of being acknowledged by adults, *while* seeking acknowledgement from adults.

In observing the data collection, we found that allies liked to put their own mark on their research process. Group 1; Noah, Sam and Harry went through question by question, taking it in turns and making some minor references to one another, continuing in a conversational style. Group 2; Ben, Charlie, and Jamie discussed their questions as a group, giving longer responses. Eve, Molly and Esther (Group 3), asked supplementary questions and probed one another. Responses were sometimes embellished further, or flatly refused. We also noted a pattern among all three groups, with children referring to one another in their responses, and consider that this reflects the peer context for the children, reflected by Troop-Gordon et al (2019) as both influencing, and influenced by, psycho-social interpretation and meaning.

We used a thematic approach for analysing the data as we judged that this foundation methodology within qualitative research allowed the flexibility to enable the range of perspectives to be explored freely, rather than being rooted in a specific philosophical paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Morris & White, 2017). We were therefore able to observe *how* the children responded, as well as their actual answers, and reduced concerns about the potential inconsistencies evoked by a group of children interviewing each other. The data analysis began with the adults' immersion into the data, where we disassembled the density of data to make it more accessible for the allies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Nowell et al, 2017). At this stage the codes and themes were emergent, used as talking points with Oscar and Will. Therefore we avoided imposing our own judgement away from the allies, as well as providing space for the essential reflection of thematic analysis (Nowell *et al*, 2017). Thus, the greater part of the analysis was convened as a small focus group, between the two allies and the adult researchers. We provided a range of coloured pens, paper and refreshments, and recorded our discussion while talking together informally. The data was available for analysis in both audio and hard copy formats. We noted the children moved straight to

the pens and paper, choosing to doodle while they talked and writing down the odd word, therefore the audio worked particularly well.

The analysis stage signalled a shift in experience for Oscar and Will. In the focus groups and interviews, they were speaking for themselves. Here, they needed to understand their job was to interpret what *all* the children had said, and how they could make sense of this. To this end, we talked through the difference, using examples of data to think about different perspectives, and repeatedly clarified where a given idea originated. This reflects the bracketing commonly used in qualitative methods, where researchers' own responses are consciously set aside in order to get closer to the authenticity of the data (Shaw, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Our allies contributed directly to authorship by clarifying their thinking in precise language, which was scribed by adults and incorporated into our text. Critically, we consistently found that Oscar and Will brought their own lived experience of the themes into their interpretation and for us this illustrated how full Allyship offered a much more authentic analysis than taking the data back into adult hands for interpretation.

Our Third Aim: How do children interpret and respond to the statement “*Grown-ups don’t always get it right, you know*”, and what can this tell us about Allyship?

The allies' themes were identified as *getting it right*, *care* and *authority*, with *being noticed* emerging as an umbrella for their lived experience of relationships with parents and teachers. Looking at the data as a whole, a hub-and-spoke picture emerged, with *being noticed* at the centre, and *getting it right*, *care*, and *authority* originating from this centre point. We noted that themes such as *care* and *authority* are typical constructs within children's lives at home and school (Bergin & Bergin, 2009) reflecting the social positions of adults as protective and in charge, and children as in need of protection and guidance. The project itself was a vehicle for enabling these allies to *be noticed* – we set out to give voice and understand their lived experience, while inviting their critique of adults “getting it right”. The extent to which they discussed being noticed, together with a negotiation of knowledge through *getting it right* conveyed a strong sense of our allies' desire to articulate a balance of knowledge between adults and children. They gave a strong emphasis to the importance of adult

knowledge for protection, and attributed high value to adults in their lives. However, their messages conveyed a perception that it should not be assumed that adult knowledge is superior, posing a critical question over adults' own engagement with learning, their distance from it, and the uniqueness of their own childhoods, as expressed below.

Ben: "adults... just need to realise they might have forgotten"

Jamie: "adults can't think they're just the best because they've already been through their childhood, and it's basically like the same as having a huge ego basically..."

Harry: "just because they're older and they've already been to school, it doesn't mean they've paid attention in school"

Eve: "...because they say that... they were once a child too but because we're different I think we should be allowed to have our own opinions sometimes"

The allies said adults should understand they are *capable* and that sometimes, adult decisions can be *overprotective*. They stated: *"most adults are afraid of being wrong to a younger person, because younger people are not seen as being as powerful or as important as they are, and so they feel they should know more and therefore they would be embarrassed (not to). They can't admit they are wrong."* The allies reflected that this is a trap where adults have to avoid being seen making mistakes. They saw this as a bigger obstacle for adults than children, who are used to being in learning environments where they have to accept mistakes as part of learning. The children were keen to problematize assumption; they commented: *"there are too many assumptions about us as a group of children – for example that we are always on our phones. Adults seem to use their own experience to make assumptions about children today – but they need to listen more because it is different."* They explained: *"there is too much pressure from tests and pressure to be better – there is no time out from social media. If everyone got rid of phones, everyone would be having a better time – but if only one person stopped, they would be left out. Body image is a big thing – you have got to have a 6-pack – it leaves you feeling insecure, not as good, sad, and stressed. Expectations are more now. This is why*

having credit and being noticed really matters. Because you always feel like you are never quite good enough – so it's really important to know we've done ok. If adults don't tell us, how else would we know?"

These exchanges gave us a context for our research with allies; a backdrop of continually striving for excellence and the use of adult acknowledgement as a benchmark for progress. In *getting it right*, we noticed allies moving between an adversarial rejection of adult authority, to accepting their fallibility. They appeared to share a belief that adults perceive they know more (*but they don't*), to provide care (*but they don't always*), yet still to hold the answers to problems beyond children's own experience. Oscar and Will felt there was a strong connection between the pressure to be striving for excellence in both learning and social situations. The data from interviews, and our unstructured observations of the allies, suggests they believe assumptions made about them, and the perception that adults hold superior knowledge reduces children's opportunities for involvement in decision-making. Allies reflected their acceptance of adult authority, acknowledging the value of adult decision-making for safety and protection, but simultaneously advocating for a co-constructed school environment. Some, for example Sam, identified that adults have the ability to transform lives, acknowledging a clear difference in status and power between the lived experience of adults and children, seen in social norms (Corsaro, 2011) and attachment bonds (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). But, when talking about whether parents and teachers have been acting as they *should*, with *should* iterated repeatedly against different questions, our allies were illustrating a willingness to challenge authority, and with clear notions of expectation.

The negotiation of knowledge (*getting it right*) and *authority* continued as a number of the children reckoned adults should listen to them, precisely because their childhood is different, and this extended throughout the data analysis with Oscar and Will. We identified that the *Being noticed* theme could be explained as an umbrella for the allies lived experience of their relationships with adults and the social positions they hold, encompassing care, authority and getting it right. Both *being noticed*, and *not being noticed* were conveyed emotionally and repeatedly by all allies and this signalled to us that our allies felt their need for voice deeply as personal affirmation from adults. The

allies' conclusion was that it is precisely because childhood is different that adults should be content with *not* having all the answers – children do not expect them to.

Reflections and Recommendations

Our reflections on this process are fronted with a humbling acknowledgement of how much we have learnt as qualitative researchers and adults of the contemporary world through working with these children in this way. We would recommend this experience to others without hesitation given the learning derived by full Allyship with children as agentic, knowledgeable people, complete in their own lived experience. We offer these reflections for those wishing to pursue similar work – we will be taking our own advice in further endeavours.

At the start of this paper we acknowledged the wider context of research *with*, as well as *about* children, and conjectured that despite this now well-established tradition of participation, the experience of participating in research was still unusual in the lives of individual children – even less so where they design and deliver to their own research question. Our allies' engagement throughout this process indicated it was a special and important event, seen in their enthusiastic engagement, personal investment in sharing their lived experience, and for our co-authors, their extensive engagement over time. The allies related their responses in interviews and data analysis directly to their lived experience, and their words are strong and impassioned. We suggest that the value brought to this project by the children was reciprocated somewhat by our process which demonstrated we had indeed noticed them, having invited them to challenge assumed adult/child positions of knowledge. In doing so we echoed what they said they wanted, while they robustly justified their ability to convey their knowledge of the world on equal terms. We acknowledge that the importance of the peer group for these children was evident in their data and behaviour (Ryan, 2000; Troop-Gordon et al, 2019). There were many occasions when they corroborated each other, with group members quickly aligning their opinions where there were opposing views. An interesting further project would be to investigate whether peer collaboration might be more important to children than voicing a unique view. We recognise this behaviour as multifactorial, reflecting the nature of the research itself in bringing

together a community of experience (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010; Robinson, 2013), and reflecting the importance of allegiance to peer groups at this age (Schall, LeBaron Wallace & Chhuon, 2016; Troop-Gordon et al, 2019). We note that while identities were confidential to the research setting, allies' responses in the live environment were witnessed and recorded by their peers. Furthermore the research question itself asked for an exploration of children's experience of adult authority, and so by its very nature created two groups: adults and children. This may have encouraged peer allegiances perceived by children of this age as crucial to social survival (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Schall et al, 2016; Troop-Gordon et al, 2019). Critically, the themes identified echoed throughout this process in our own ethos of care for the children, the purpose of the research in investigating their lived experience, and the negotiation of authority in our attempt to reduce the power imbalance and invite their critique. We could not have predicted these themes, and it is in reflecting on them that we notice the symbiosis of meaning and action. In particular we note the additional value brought to this project by the involvement of Oscar and Will as co-authors. Ultimately, they held the checks and balances for the interpretation of data in the context of their peer experience. We suggest that without their involvement at this level, we would have concluded with an adult interpretation of children's lived experience, despite the child-led and co-constructed efforts earlier in the process.

In future we will record the initial focus group rather than scribing the children's conversations; had we done so we believe we could have captured significant data in those early moments. Although we had created an environment away from school, we underestimated the extent to which children would recreate this and as soon as we started the focus group, a forest of excited hands shot to the ceiling in a bid to give 'the answer'. We acknowledge our assumption that the allies would grasp more easily the notion of the focus group generating questions to be answered later, but their priority appeared to be demonstrating their knowledge in the moment for adult acknowledgement. As before, their participation behaviour was clearly articulated in their data; *being noticed*.

The social factors of growing-up have informed these allies' reflections about adult authority and their own capability. The original statement made by Oscar conceptualized a divide between

adults and children as he saw it, and this was further endorsed by the children's interview questions and responses. We understand that this stage of transition, in school, bodies and social behaviours, the children anticipate independence, yet the importance of adults in their lives is reflected with great tenderness. They observed a burden of assumptions in both directions – indicating regret in their perception that adults feel they should always *know more*. Ironically, these children do not seem to expect that for themselves – their complaints, where they occur, are about the lack of acknowledgement, and about the assumptions made about their generation. We consider that our observations of Allyship has told us much about these children and their worldview, and we have interpreted their behaviours as authentic to their situated identity in time and space. We recommend that Allyship with children as rich and insightful, and leave the final words to them:

If this childhood is different to yours, then listen to ours.

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