



Saudi researchers' perspectives on the ethics of children's participation in research: an exploration using Q-methodology

Lina Bashatah

Doctoral student at The University of Manchester & Lecturer at King Saud University

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ABSTRACT: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which requires it to implement the articles of this convention and provide reports every five years about the country's achievements of all articles. The aim of this research is to focus on article (12) from the UNCRC by investigating the perspectives of educational researchers in education departments at different universities in Riyadh, KSA, concerning the ethics of children's participation in research. This study will use a Q-methodology, which is a method infrequently used in the KSA. Thus, a review of this method will be provided, along with an explanation of how it can be used with educational researchers.

Keywords:- Children's rights, article (12) UNCRC, ethical, Q-methodology

I. INTRODUCTION

This research will use Q-methodology to identify the perspectives of educational researchers. The proposed research will identify their different ethical perspectives on conducting research with children and examine similarities and differences. Q-methodology will be used to determine the viewpoints of educational researchers working in education departments at different universities in Riyadh city in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Furthermore, this study will contribute to the field by informing the Saudi community about current understandings and practices related to children's participation in research.

1. Rationale

My motivation for conducting this research stems from my MA findings. While studying for my MA, I included children as participants in my dissertation research and became aware of ethical issues with which I had hitherto been unfamiliar. I examined article 42 from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states that 'the government should make the convention known to all parents and children' [1]. The findings identified a number of significant issues regarding Saudi society's awareness of the concept of children's rights and the UNCRC.

Interestingly, adults' perspectives on the concept of children's rights highlight their physical needs (Article 6), whereas the children are concerned about their participation rights (Article 12). The findings show that the awareness of the UNCRC should be promoted more effectively in Saudi Arabia for both adults and children; currently, it is limited for adults and non-existent for children. In addition, the National Commission for Childhood in Saudi Arabia should increase its role in society's awareness and the government has to increase the awareness in society about the concept of children's rights from an educational perspective. Furthermore, the National Commission should support studies and research illustrating the reality of children's rights in KSA and implement their suggestions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The UNCRC has brought the concept that children should have the opportunity to voice their ideas and be heard to international prominence. Researchers around the globe are showing increased interest in children's research, especially that which allows the children to raise their voices as participants and share their knowledge as researchers [2]. Until recently, in Saudi studies, researchers have been slow to have children

participate in research and the ethics issue has been unclear, although the ethics of research with children is an important issue. In this respect, Christensen and James [3] claim that one reason for this delay may involve possible ethical dilemmas which they may need to confront. Researchers who give children a voice by enabling them to participate in research are obligated to afford children their right to be listened to and to use ethical guidelines [4].

1. Voice and Ethics in Children's Research

As mentioned above in the rationale, I am interested in children's rights issues and I have found that worldwide, researchers have shown increased interest in children participating in their research and sharing their knowledge [2]. UNCRC Article 12 states that '*children should have their right to express their views on any topic and share their knowledge with others*' [1]. Fielding and Bragg [5] mention that as the UNCRC gives this right to children, it also asks adults to be flexible by giving them opportunities to exercise their rights and have their voices heard. Saudi Arabia ratified the UNCRC in 1996 [6], and this means that the government is mandated to implement all articles, including Article 12.

2. Children's Voice

As a result of submissions to the UNCRC, every participating country is required to provide a five-yearly report to the UNCRC to show how it has implemented all articles [7,8]. In general, James (2007) [9] discusses how the importance of including children's voice in childhood studies research has become much more widely recognised and a powerful source of input in social science research. More recently, Geldenhuys and Doubell [10] have stated that although there are still major obstacles to children promoting their voice, researchers continually attempt to develop their participation. However, for some researchers, having children participate in research means using them as sources of research data [11]. In research language, the key words have changed over time and with changing practices; in the past, practitioners conducted 'research on' children, then 'research with' them, now the field can also include 'research by' children [12]. However, as Reddy and Ratna [13] point out, 'Unfortunately, though children's right to participation is a much discussed and heavily debated issue, very few have actually been able to translate this into action and make it a ground reality' (p. 5).

3. Children's Voice in the KSA

Saudi Arabia's second report from the National Commission for Childhood [14] to the UNCRC mentions, on the one hand, some attempts to implement Article 12; for example, children have the freedom to express their opinions in their school and cultural clubs. On the other hand, however, Bin Said [7] and Bashatah [15] note a lack of studies of Saudi children and childhood in the KSA, stating that no reports or statistics published show the reality of childhood except for those from UNICEF and the UNCRC. In addition, Bashatah [15] conducted a study in which she asked Saudi children about their understanding of children's rights and reported that all of their answers were related to Article 12 of the UNCRC: They wanted to have their voice heard. As yet, the National Commission for Childhood has not conducted much research about Saudi children and childhood in the KSA [7,15]. In addition, the third and fourth UNCRC reports from Saudi Arabia (2006–2010) stated that the government should focus more on Article 12 from the Convention because the cultural perspectives of children, especially girls, have been limited. They typically can express their viewpoints only within their families, schools and via social media [16].

4. Ethics

O'Reilly et al. [17] present a conceptualisation of ethical practice in connection with children's participation in research which is central to the design of my study. They present and illustrate the following four key ethical principles for researchers when conducting research with children: *respect for autonomy, justice, beneficence and non-maleficence* [17]. I now present a brief description of how each of these principles apply to research with children.

4.1 Respect for autonomy

Respect for autonomy means recognising that children have the right to make active decisions about whether or not to take part in research. This concerns providing children with detailed and accessible information about the proposed research so that they can make informed decisions regarding their participation. For those able to provide written consent, this is provided by their signature on the consent form and having permission from their parents [17]. In addition, children have to be informed about their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. The withdrawal process could involve understanding how to withdraw, either by expressing it through a behaviour like unexpected crying (without any reason) or verbally saying no [2]. Moreover, children have the right to decline participation in research, even if their parents give the researcher their approval [17].

4.2 Justice

Researchers need to listen to all children by including diverse groups; they should not exclude children on the basis of gender or ability [18]. Alternatively, researchers need to be aware of their power in the research process. As Lahman [19] states, 'The child as othered in research is intensified by the power adults have over children due to size and age' (p.282).

4.3 Beneficence

Researchers have to explain in detail the research steps; they have to inform the children of the advantages and disadvantages to them of participating in the research [17]. For example, the benefits that many children will gain from their participation might occur at the moment of their participation, such as the friendly relationship that will be built between the researcher and the child, or the child's feeling of enjoyment when he or she finds an interested listener during the interview [18].

4.4 Non-maleficence

This principle is considered at the heart of research ethics and is about protecting children from any kind of harm, whether it be psychological or physical [17]. The researcher has to plan well for this principle in the early stages of the research to decrease the chance of harm and increase the chance of benefits [20]. Thus, the idea of children's voice and these four ethical principles underpin the development of the Q set.

III. RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

The aim of this research is to identify educational researchers' perspectives concerning the ethics of children's participation in research. The statements of the Q-set are developed to investigate the perspective of the sample of researcher participants in order to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the different perspectives of the educational researcher participants concerning the ethics of children's participation in research?

RQ2: How can these voices be understood in the context of Saudi Arabia and children's rights?

IV. METHODOLOGY

1. Background of Q-Methodology

The first introduction of Q-methodology was by William Stephenson in 1935, in a letter to the journal *Nature* [20,21]. He offered a new approach which combined quantitative and qualitative methods [22]. Stephenson developed this method after he obtained his PhD in Physics and Psychology and his aim was to change the traditional technique of 'R' methodology, which emphasises people, variables and so on [23], to opposite process implicate people to an appropriate statements [21]. Stephenson sought people's perspectives about specific topic and then analysed their reactions as factors; thus, he correlated persons instead of tests [24], and this is the aim of the Q-methodology. In this respect, Q-methodology is described as being 'designed expressly to explore the subjective dimension of any issue towards which different points-of-view can be expressed' ([21], p. 215).

2. Definition of Q-Methodology

Brown [25] describes Q-methodology as 'a set of procedures, theory and philosophy....' (p.4). On the other hand, Wint [22] describes the foundation of Q-methodology as the idea of subjectivity. Woods [26] suggests that Q-methodology is 'a methodology developed for small-scale research with the aim of capturing and contrasting subjectivity' (p. 892). I have chosen the Q-methodology approach for this study because it can effectively address my research questions and help to achieve my aim of capturing participants' perspectives and examining the differences between groups [27]. In addition, Watts [28] asserts that research using Q-methodology will reflect the participants' perspectives about the topic. Q-methodology is 'a method that requires a participant to sort items according to some kind of criterion' ([24], p.61), such as the degree to which they agree, and the items are usually statements written on cards.

Researchers disagree as to whether Q-methodology is a qualitative, quantitative or mixed method. Hayne [27] claims that 'Q-methodology is an approach comprising both quantitative and qualitative methods' (p. 8). Moreover, Davis and Michelle [29] and Ernest [30] stress that Q-methodology is considered a mixed-methods approach because qualitative researchers describe it as a quantitative method and vice versa. Woods [26] explains that Q-methodology is quantitative in form, but has a qualitative aim because of its interest in subjectivity. Quantitative researchers tend to construct it as qualitative, while qualitative researchers tend to emphasise the use of numbers in obtaining the results; thus, they often see Q-methodology as mixed or as quantitative. However, in some ways, discussions about the nature of Q-methodology as qualitative, quantitative

or mixed are less important than understanding what Q-methodology achieves. Q-methodology identifies a set of qualitatively different perspectives on the topic investigated; the perspectives are written up by the researcher to capture them holistically in verbal form, rather than numerically. These different sets of perspectives are commonly referred to as 'voices'. In other words, Q-methodology is used to identify qualitatively different points of view. It is therefore important to sample participants for diversity, that is, to include participants who can be expected to have wide-ranging and contrasting perspectives.

3. Why Q-Methodology?

I have chosen the Q-methodology approach for this study because it is an appropriate methodology to answer my research questions and achieve my aim to examine differences between groups [27]. Studies that measuring attitudes generally use quantitative methods such as questionnaires [20] or qualitative methods such as interviews, which is considered a vital approach to elucidate participants' perspectives [20,31]. On the one hand, the quantitative approach requires a large sample and returns general findings, while qualitative methods test small populations in depth; on the other, the Q-methodology mixes both approaches by using a small number of participants to obtain deep findings [27]. In addition, Hughes ([24], p. 58) mentions about his aim to choose this methodology as the most important reason for his study as follows:

I was keen to go beyond the notion of using method to transfer information from a research participant's head into my own, as if I was emptying a vessel. If I was serious about voice, then I needed to explore and understand approaches that facilitate co-construction between researchers and researched.

4. The Sampling Frame (P-Set)

My sample will include between 40 and 60 participants, because this is considered the ideal range for Q-methodology [21]. Thus, a range of participants will be recruited to include a variety of perspectives; they will be educational researchers spanning two different universities within Riyadh city and a range of different schools within the education departments at both universities (see Table 1).

The participants will be males and females with doctorates who have studied in the KSA or abroad. The education college is considered one of the larger department at universities in Riyadh, so this will provide a wider range of participant profiles, including age, length of experience in the field and background, such as study outside/inside the KSA.

Table 1. Schools Under Each the Education College

Educational researchers Participants		
King Saud University (KSU) The Education College		Princess Nourah Bint Abdullrhman University The Education College
Female department	Male department	Female department only
Islamic Studies section	Islamic Studies section	General Education section
Art section	Art section	-----
Special Education section	Special Education section	Special Education section
Educational Administration section	Educational Administration section	Education Planning and Administration section
Education Technology section	Education Technology section	Education Technology section
Psychology section	Psychology section	Psychology section
Curriculum and Instruction section	Curriculum and Instruction section	Curriculum and Instruction section
Education and Early years Education section	-----	Early Childhood section

5. Developing the Q-Statements

In Q-methodology, the most important step is developing the statements [27]. This is usually done in the form of numerous statements, which may come from interviews with participants, literature reviews or informal discussions. For example, Størksen et al. [32] explains that the concourse of their study was from the findings of previous studies about the same topic. Researchers who use Q collect different statements from different sources to explore people's opinions about the topic [24], which should be 'representative, clear, appropriate, simple and applicable' (Cross, 2005, cited in [22], p.47).

For this study, the statements were developed from different sources informed by my own cultural knowledge and professional experience, as follows:

- A broad literature review about research ethics and children's voice issues internationally and in the KSA, such as books, articles, reports and so on;
- The findings of my first pilot study, conducted in April 2013. These were obtained via a questionnaire with educational researchers at KSU in different fields in the education department; interviews with postgraduate students studying at KSU in the education department; interviews with stakeholders working at the Ministry of Education; and an interview with a preschool head teacher;
- My MSc course, during which I conducted a focus group with PhD students in the education school and an interview with a lecturer with experience related to children's participation in research. I let them talk about their experiences when having children participate in their research;
- Informal conversations with my colleagues working at KSU as educational researchers in the early years education field;
- Informal email with a policymaker from the Ministry of Education (the Director General of the Kindergarten Department); and
- My experience as a Saudi educational researcher who has involved children in research (my MA dissertation from Sheffield University).

V. THE RESEARCH PROCEDURE

First, I gathered 150 statements from different sources, and then filtered them to remove the identical ones [21,33]. After filtering them, the number decreased to 100 items. I found that I had one key theme, namely the issue of ethics. I then found that there were four principles under this key theme, which are considered the key ethical foundation for any framework for research – *autonomy, justice, non-maleficence* and *beneficence* – as O'Reilly et al. [17] discuss. Furthermore, I found that there was a relationship between the ethics issue and children's rights if the researchers included them as participants in their research. This means that implementing research ethics is relevant to the UNCRC Article 12, which is about listening to and respecting children's opinions [18]. Thus, I ultimately decided to have two key themes, namely children's rights to have a voice and the ethical policy; the four principles from O'Reilly et al. [17] form sub-themes under ethical policy. I decided to adopt this framework to underpin my set of statements for this study, using O'Reilly et al. [17] and the idea of voice to structure the Q-set by drawing on other literature, professional experience and so on.

1. The Q-methodology Process

For this study, I will collect the data from the participants in different ways. To begin, I will give them a short questionnaire to ascertain their demographic information; after this, they will complete the Q-sort. I will ask them to fill in a questionnaire to clarify their statement selection, and finally conduct interviews with only the strongest voices emerging from the data analysis.

First, I will choose an appropriate sample using the snowball sampling method; Hayne [27] notes that this is suitable for a Q-methodology study. Then, I will ask the participants to sign the consent form and fill out the demographic questionnaire. After that, I will give them an envelope which includes statements cards and an information sheet to demonstrate how they should sort the cards, as well as a blank sorting distribution to enter their choices. The statements will cover different aspects and represent a possible knowledge domain regarding the ethics of having children participate in research. I will ask the participants to sort the statements according to their agreement with each one and arrange them from 'most agree' to 'most disagree' (see Fig.1) on the distribution paper. I have opted to use forced distribution to organize their distribution of statements (see Fig.2). After the participants have finished sorting the cards, I will ask them to complete the questionnaire to explain their sorting rationale. I will also ask them to comment on their experience of completing the Q-sort. After analysis of the Q-sort, I will conduct an interview with the two participants who load the most strongly onto each of the identified 'voice' profiles. For example, if the Q-sort identifies four voices, then I will interview eight participants. These interviews will allow me to better understand the nuances of the identified voices.

from English. The purpose was to gain feedback about the method and to learn about the accuracy of my translation.

4. Participants' Comments about Q-Methodology

4.1 Language

The participants indicated that the Arabic statements were clear but needed some improvement; however, the English ones were very clear for them.

4.2 The Sorting Method

Before the participants started sorting, I explained the method and offered two ways to implement it, either on a table or on the floor. Each of my participants wanted to complete the sorting in different ways, as noted below.

- a- Three of them preferred to read all the statements and then write their choices on the distribution that I gave them. As one participant commented, 'This way will organize my thoughts and be clearer for you as a researcher when you want to analyse the statements'.
- b- Two of them wanted to sort on the table because that was the method shown to them. They explained, 'I did it as it had been shown to me'.

4.3 Participants' Perspectives on Q-Methodology

- a- All of the participants said, 'It is an interesting method; I like it';
- b- 'Well organized, you explained very well, and you gave us the information paper to simplify the process';
- c- 'The size of the cards is perfect, and the font is very clear';
- d- 'The translation from English to Arabic is 95% clear, but it needs some corrections';
- e- 'I like it; it's like a game';
- f- 'What I like, you gave us statements about your topic; that shows me your interest in this topic, and at the same time you gave us the freedom of how we sorted it. I mean even if I have no idea about your topic, the statement gives me information about it'; and
- g- 'I like the (0) area because it's the best solution for the statement that I do not have any idea about'.

5. Ethical Considerations

For this research, I will provide participants with an information sheet and consent form pack to be signed by all participants. I will provide the pack to participants face-to-face before they start the process. All information will be provided in Arabic because this is the official language of the KSA. The information sheet will include the following components for the educational researchers: the aims and objectives of the study, measures implemented to maintain confidentiality and an explanation that answering the questionnaire after completing the Q-sorting is a part of the Q-methodology process. I will also ask the interview participants for permission to record the interviews. Participants will be informed that they have the right to withdraw from the research, at any stage, without needing to give a reason for their decision.

I will assure all the participants that their names will not be mentioned in the research, and their anonymity will be maintained by using a code for each of them. In addition, my supervisors and I will be the only people who have the right to listen to the recordings [35]. However, given that my supervisors do not use Arabic, they will access the translated transcriptions. After the research is completed, all the recordings or written data will be stored securely in a locked drawer which is accessible only to the supervisory team and researcher for five years after the last publication of the data, in accordance with the policy of the University of Manchester.

VI. CONCLUSION

My focus is on the ethics relating to children's participation in research, how it is effective in research and how research can identify their viewpoints and ensure their rights under Article 12 of the UNCRC. My aims in conducting this research are as follows:

- (a) To identify a range of voices in relation to research ethics when children participate in educational research.
- (b) To contribute to the understanding of how these voices relate to issues of implementation of children's rights policies in Saudi Arabia.

Implications arising from the research are expected to be as follows:

- 1) The opening of a new window for educational researchers to consider the ethical principles underpinning research with children and their use with children in future;

- 2) The design of a unit concerning how to have children participate in research in an ethical manner which can be taught in the education department at KSU or any other university.
- 3) Increased awareness by the National Commission for Childhood concerning children's rights issues and to encourage them to create and implement ethical guidelines suitable for children participating in research.

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