CHAPTER 6

Interviewing

The interview elicits interpretations of the world, for it is itself an object of interpretation. But the interview is not an interpretation of the world per se. Rather it stands in an interpretive relationship to the world that it creates.
—DENZIN (2001, p. 30)

Interviewing may be the most ubiquitous data-collection strategy in the social sciences. Indeed, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) estimate that nearly 90% of social science research includes the collection of interview data. Denzin (2001) suggests that we have become an interview society, one in which the interview form is a primary way of interacting in many social contexts (e.g., giving a medical history) and a mode of interaction depicted in both print and nonprint media. Adults and children alike are exposed to the interview form as part of their cultural knowledge, and so it is little wonder that interviews are favored by social scientists.

Research interviewing can take different forms, from informal conversations occurring over time within participant observation studies to more semistructured interactions requiring a separate time and space. Unlike participant observation approaches, which generally allow young participants to take the lead in determining the nature of the activity or topic of conversation, interviewing, by its very structure, is usually planned by the researcher. As we dis-

cuss in this chapter, this does not preclude opportunities for participants to direct the conversation, only that in general an interview provides a space to talk about something that has been determined in advance.

Interviewing children, whether individually or in groups, is rewarding work. Interviews reveal story fragments, narrative representations of social experiences, and the meanings they might have to the speaker. With planning, attention to details, flexibility of design, and the belief that children and adolescents are worth listening to, the likelihood is that the interview will go well, perhaps not as planned and not with the expected results but nonetheless a positive experience. Within a social constructivist framework, the individual or group interview is viewed as a social event that enables children to express their interpretations of events and experiences within the interview interaction. Individual interviews provide a personal space for children or adolescents to voice their thoughts on an issue, share an experience, or reflect on an event. The focus is on the individual child in relation to a particular topic and on the child–adult interaction. Group interviews diffuse the attention of the researcher across all participants as well as provide a setting for children to interact with peers on common topics. In our study of student experiences with state-mandated testing in schools, eighth-grade participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to hear what their classmates had to say about testing and test preparation. Interviewing children in groups may also reduce the researcher's power within the research context, because the presence of peers will typically take precedence over the presence of the researcher.

Figure 6.1 illustrates that 9-year-olds are quite capable of sitting in a group, listening to the researcher's questions and peers' responses, and sharing their own experiences. The fact that they can do it does not mean that they always will or that facilitating such interactions is a straightforward affair. This group interview occurred after we divided 12 student participants into two groups, provided time for children to draw self-portraits of themselves taking the test, and listened to each describe their feelings during the test and how they represented that feeling in the drawing. Once in small groups, the researcher used a role-playing approach suggesting she was a newspaper reporter who was interested in how each student represented him- or herself in their drawings. This approach worked well, even though one group dissolved into uncontrolled giggles because one of

RESEARCHER: What was the most important strategy that you used on the [English Language Arts test]?

KYLE: On the first time when we were doing the fill in the bubble, probably the most important strategy was to read the questions and then to go back and read the story.

RESEARCHER: OK, so you read the questions first and then you went back.

KYLE: Yeah, on the first day.

ANDREW: The most important strategy that I used, or it's not important, but I went and asked the teacher if I can read it to her, and then it made sense again after I read it to her [MEGAN: Yeah!], because sometimes you miss on a word and then you don't know what it is, but it doesn't make sense, and then you go and tell the teacher "I don't get it," and then she usually has you read it to her, and it makes sense.

RESEARCHER: So reading it out loud helps you.

ANDREW: Yes.

MEGAN: I never thought of doing that but I like that idea.

RESEARCHER: Did you have a most important strategy?

MORGAN: My most important strategy is to read, I mean, is to read through the questions first, and then you read them twice, or if you want you read it one time, and then you can read the story. So it takes less time, and if you find the answer in the book you can, you can just fill what you have to write about that.

MEGAN: Um, when I do, like the ones where you have to answer a question with writing, um, I go through and first I read the question and then I write a sentence starter for most of them, and then I go on and keep going until I'm at the end of it, and then from the beginning I read it and I fill it in, and if I can't figure it out then I skip that again, and I go on to other ones. So I have the hardest one for last, but I can sit and concentrate on it more because there are only one or two, instead of if I spent all my time on that then the rest of the questions would be unanswered.

FIGURE 6.1. Excerpt from a group interview with fourth-grade suburban students.

the boys made silly faces to the student being "interviewed" behind the back of the researcher acting as a reporter.

This chapter discusses the strengths and weaknesses of individual and group interviewing and then presents a variety of strategies to elicit interview responses from children in ways that are engaging and open-ended and that feel safe. As we discussed in Chapter 4, consideration must be given to the researcher–participant relation-

ship, the setting where the research or interview is to be conducted, and the reason for using interviews.

INTERVIEWING AS A RELATIONSHIP

From a social constructivist perspective, interviewing is a relationship in which the researcher and participant collaborate to construct a narrative, a storytelling experience that orders some experiences and understandings of the material world. An interview cannot be seen as "an expression of the interviewee's own 'authentic voice'" (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p. 181); it is not a revelation of the true private self. Nor is it a reflection of some external world. Indeed, there are no true private selves nor single external worlds to be revealed, only contextual presentations of meaning and experience. The interview itself is a co-constructed narrative of meaning and experience. In Figure 6.1, the experiences of the researcher are reflected in the questions asked, in this case about what sorts of strategies kids used while taking the test. The story of these kids' strategic engagement in the testing event is coauthored by the researcher and all of the children involved in the interview.

All interviews require that participants determine, among other things, the purpose of the interview, their relationship with the interviewers, how they will negotiate the presence of peers in group situations, the meaning of specific questions, the directions to different activities, and the spoken and unspoken rules of engagement of this social event. Differences in contexts, interviewers, topics, time of day, and age of participants all need to be taken into account when seeking to establish an interviewer–interviewee relationship that will produce high-quality data on the topic of interest. It is important to remember that the interview is not an everyday interaction, and so socialization into ways of being and behaving in the interview is often necessary, especially with children who are likely to define it by relating it to other similar activities with teachers and professionals.

When care is taken to explain the research project in ways that children understand, there is every reason to believe they are capable of making a decision about whether or not they wish to be interviewed. Depending on the interview topic, however, it may also be important to clarify for children what actions, such as changes to their living situation or health condition, can and cannot happen

as a result of the interview. It is important to be clear about what this encounter entails, especially for children involved in similar-appearing relationships with tutors, therapists, case workers, or counselors. In these cases, interview interactions may be meant expressly to identify problems and possibilities for amelioration, but seldom is this taken for granted in a research interview. So the limits of a research interview need to be clear.

An interview's effectiveness resides in the closeness and intimacy of the interaction between researcher and participants as well as its purposefulness. Participants are invited to talk about *something*. The personal nature of the interaction gives the researcher flexibility to seek more information, probe for more detail, or "follow up on vague, confusing, even contradictory information, sensitively and systematically" (Rogers, Casey, Ekert, & Holland, 2005, p. 159). It also gives freedom to interview participants to answer in their own way, using their own terms, and making their own connections to the interview topic. Children and youth have an opportunity to use their own language and voice rather than employing adult language and interpretations. "The central challenge before the researcher who uses the interview is the *management* of the relationship so it facilitates but does not contaminate the collection of subjective data" (Parker, 1984, p. 19). Therefore, researchers must not only choreograph but must monitor and acknowledge the role they play in interviews with participants.

Competencies of Children and Interviewers

In his commentary on what we know about young children's language competencies, Coles (1996) provides two examples of how our questions reflect our views about language and meaning. When language is viewed as the means by which people communicate what they mean and know, then our questions are seen as a tool to get at that knowledge, much like "teacher questions which often demand quick, terse, factual answers and leave little time for children to respond, elaborate or reason out loud" (p. 13). But when language and meaning are interconnected and shape each other, then our "questions have a particular potency since their role is to help realize thought which is yet unthought, which is only potential" (p. 14). A social constructivist interview engagement is of the latter sort, an opportunity to co-construct meaning.

Although much has been written about children's competencies as interviewees, these competencies are a function of the mutual abilities of the interviewer and interviewee to relate and communicate with each other. The many studies that have now been conducted with children show that, even at a very young age, children have the capacity to be participants in research, to understand what is being asked of them, and to share their experiences in response (Clark, 2004). Different children, whether because of age, inexperience, language ability, or attention span, will promote different forms of interaction. It is important, however, not to predefine those differences too narrowly but rather approach each child or group of children as responding to a situation that may be unfamiliar, so that an otherwise articulate child may become quite mute or a tense, serious child may become silly.

Responding to every individual as a person-in-situation (Westcott & Littleton, 2005, p. 147) can enable the researcher to respond sensitively and appropriately to a variety of behaviors. In our focus groups with fourth and eighth graders, for example, we found that participants whose first language was not English were reluctant to speak aloud in the group. Their silence could have been construed as shyness or inability to understand the question. When we asked similar questions in writing, we found they understood our questions and were able to respond in writing. Had we assumed simply that they could not understand, we might not have provided them with an alternative way of responding.

> Rather than theorizing incompetence . . . we need to develop our understanding of the activity and responses of the child in context. We need to understand how the situations in which children are placed, and the meanings they ascribe to interviewer's questions, support or constrain their activity and performance. We also need to recognize that notions of "competence" are problematic, and are informed by cultural beliefs and negotiated by participants in particular social, institutional and cultural contexts. (Westcott & Littleton, 2005, p. 146)

This requires attention to the child as a meaning-making, active agent, which poses a challenge to researchers who do not inhabit the same cultural space or social position as children and young people. Figure 6.2 summarizes characteristics of a good interviewer of children and youth.

- Develops rapport with youth.
- Genuinely demonstrates empathy with youth.
- Calms an anxious, shy, or hostile young person.
- Invites and responds to youth questions and concerns during the interview.
- Allows youth to participate in setting the direction of and strategies within the interview.
- Clearly communicates the purpose of the interview.
- Uses appropriate language and sentence structure.
- Asks open-ended questions and follow-up questions to encourage youth to tell their story.
- Gets an interview back on track when a young person becomes fixated on one question or responds in a silly way.

FIGURE 6.2. Characteristics of a good interviewer of children and youth.

DEVELOPING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROTOCOLS

Questions and answers are forms of communication that consist of two primary features: "They contain both *informational* and *relational* intentions" (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986, p. 219, emphasis in original). The informational refers to the *what* of that which is being communicated and the relational to *how* the information is understood within the relational context of the interaction, but neither stands alone. Besides the relational challenges already discussed in Chapter 4, different questions will shape the interaction in different ways. Drawing from Lortie's (1975) work, Tammivaara and Enright suggest four dimensions for developing questions: direct–indirect, abstract–concrete, personal–impersonal, and cathected–low affect (p. 222).

Although Lortie studied teachers' goals and perspectives on teaching, his views on the nature of questions and their relation to data elicitation are more broadly relevant. Lortie discussed three types of questions and their usefulness for understanding the core of teachers' experiences: (1) direct and personal, (2) indirect and concrete, and (3) indirect, personal, concrete, and cathected (i.e., connected to emotions), which he felt to be most valuable. In our work with fourth- and eighth-grade students, an example of a direct and personal question might be, "What do you do when you feel nervous while you are taking a state test? How did you learn that?" An

indirect, concrete question might be, "How does your teacher let you know what he or she expects during the ELA [English Language Arts test]?" Indirect, personal, concrete, and cathected questions might be, "What do you think happens to students who don't pass the state tests? Who do you think is responsible for their failure?" Having more than one kind of question provides multiple opportunities for children to narrate their experiences and the meaning they ascribe to them.

Within a social constructivist interview, it is necessary for the researcher to create and maintain a nonjudgmental response. Communicating a dislike for or discomfort with some responses (such as the use of curse words or racist comments) will either end the interview or result in the co-creation of a narrative of youth experience driven by a particular moralism. We experienced a slightly different manifestation of this when an interview with a group of inner-city teens was interrupted by the personnel running the after-school program in which the youth were participating. Program staff were reluctant to allow us to interview the youth without their presence, because they perceived we were likely incapable of handling situations that might arise. During the interview, several youth played out some long-standing and personal disagreements, which resulted in shouting and aggressive physical posturing. As interviewers, the relationships among the youth helped to understand how they understood themselves within this program, but the noisy exchange resulted in the program staff bursting into the interview and bringing it to a halt. Our nonjudgmental response to the youth increased our credibility with the youth but diminished our credibility with the program staff.

It is a common mistake to develop interview protocols that are too broad or too abstract. For example, one might ask, "What motivates you to learn?" or "What role do you see yourself playing among your friends?" Such a question begs other questions: What is motivation, what is role, what do they look like, and what are you really trying to understand about these concepts? For example, role can be understood as the quality of a person's presence in a particular setting; an alternative question might be, "If you suddenly had to go live with your uncle for a month, what would your friends miss most about you? What would they have to do to fill the gap you left? Who would be most affected? Why? How?" Understanding as much as possible what is relevant about role or motivation within the research context allows the researcher to empathize with the other and thus ask

questions that elicit rich stories about their experiences. This is especially important with children because many of the words we take for granted are abstract, and so rethinking abstract terms in relation to children's daily experience is important. Open-ended questions are almost always better. "If the questions are open-ended, the children will have more opportunity to bring in the topics and modes of discourse that are familiar to them. Also, nondirected questions provide more opportunity for children in group interviews to collaborate in their answers and to expand on the responses of others" (Eder & Fingerson, 2003, p. 36).

More important perhaps than the kinds of questions is the interview structure. The interview is an interaction between or among people who typically do not know each other. Paying attention to the setting, initial greetings, opening activity, subsequent activities, and closing comments are all essential components to a successful interview situation. If child participants do not feel welcome immediately, they may ask to leave. Consider the context. How comfortable and welcoming is the designated interview space? How will you and your participants be seated? Take the time to find an informal, friendly place, or make a formal space more inviting by bringing in a few props (cushions, stuffed animals, markers, and paper) and equally sized chairs or a rug to sit on. Consider the time of day, avoiding scheduling conflicts such as a child's favorite TV show. Consider the importance of using an icebreaker or warm-up activity.

Interviews often begin with open-ended questions to allow the child to become comfortable talking to you before engaging with the topic of interest. However, with children, especially younger ones, it is essential to capture their attention even before you begin the questions. Icebreakers work well. If this is an individual interview, a drawing game like Winnicott's (1971) squiggle game works well: The researcher makes a squiggle on a piece of paper and then asks the child to turn it into something. Once done, the child makes a squiggle for the researcher to turn into something. In a group situation, the choice of icebreaker should help group members get to know each other and promote group cohesiveness. Games, such as lining up according to month of birth, throwing a ball around and stating your name, or a favorite activity or music group, work with a wide range of age groups. Using visuals or other elicitation strategies should not be reserved for icebreakers and can be important strategies for generating responses. "Young children generally find *doing* something *with* something and talking *about* that something to be easier, more com-

fortable, and more interesting than only talking about something that isn't physically present" (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986, p. 232). "To focus solely on discourse processes neglects a further important sense in which meaning is created—namely, through our engagement with, and use of, tools and artifacts" (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986, pp. 147–148). Figure 6.3 provides tips for successful interviews with children and youth.

Before
  - Develop complete protocol with backup activities for shy or hesitant participants.
  - Consider alternative activities such as drawing, writing, keeping a written or audio journal, taking pictures, or using video clips, pictures, scenarios, maps, or other visual elicitation strategies to engage the children.
  - When planning for drawing or other creative activities, consider what you want to be able to do with these products in the future and plan to use darker markers and paper sizes that are manageable.
  - Check out the room where the interview is to be conducted.
  - Set up recording equipment before children arrive.

During
  - Address children by name.
  - Remind children of the purpose for the interview and let them know how it will be structured.
  - Ask open-ended questions.
  - Use clear, explicit language for directions and questions.
  - Let children take the lead in the process whenever possible.
  - Express empathy authentically.
  - Treat children with respect, but remember that child and adolescent behavior is unpredictable.
  - Place recorders on a notebook rather than right on the table.
  - If providing snacks, stay away from noisy packaging.

After
  - Assign pseudonyms and label all tapes, drawings, and other materials.
  - Transcribe interviews immediately and record important information about the interview such as the children's and researcher's attitude, behavior, receptivity, and other pertinent information such as interruptions.
  - Revise the protocol if necessary.

FIGURE 6.3. Tips for interviewing children and adolescents.

STRATEGIES FOR ELICITING VERBAL RESPONSES

Interviews with children work best when structured around several activities (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Mauthner, 1997). This breaks the routine and helps children stay engaged; each activity can mark a new focal point or be a different way of asking similar questions. Having something specific to respond to helps younger children make connections to the topic of inquiry.

> For example, pictures of the children in a classroom can be very useful for getting at children's understandings of classroom social interactions. One might array the photos on a table, then pick out the photo of Mary and ask, "If Mary was working at the art table, what other children would come and work with her?" (Graue & Walsh, 1998, pp. 114–115)

The use of prompts when interviewing children is not new. Child therapists and clinicians working with children have been using them for years. Dolls, toys, and puppets have been used to elicit information about suspected child abuse, to allow children to act out their feelings, or to tell a story (Brooker, 2001). More recently, researchers have turned to a variety of elicitation props so children and young people are able to share everyday experiences. Finding ways to tap into the lived experiences of children, researchers have invited children to

- Role-play scenarios concerning living with asthma (M. Morgan et al., 2002).
- Create and act out dramatic scenes of real-life issues (Veale, 2005).
- Watch and respond to short video clips from television programs "as a springboard for further discussion about how young people cope with their problems and how they perceive adults' reactions to their problems" (Punch, 2002a, p. 51).
- Use blueprints of the interior of their school to identify violent events that had occurred in the past year and then use these as the basis for a focus group discussion with peers (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999).
- Fill out a "pocket decision-maker chart" representing significant decisions they had made in their life and the people who contributed to them (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998).

We have constructed interview questions as beginnings of sentences that children would choose out of a hat, read out loud, and then complete. We call it the Honesty Game because, as we told the students, the intention is that you finish the question as honestly as you can. Although this game functioned much like any open-ended question, the act of selecting a question from a hat and having something to hold in one's hand prompted students to respond, whereas they may not have responded to a spoken question. It allowed students not to have to memorize the question, and they enjoyed passing around the tape recorder and speaking into it. When we first used this strategy, the students suggested that more than one student could finish each sentence beginning, a strategy we readily incorporated because it allowed children a significant role in defining the interview situation and because it gave us fuller, more complex data. We also used the interaction to probe other topics if the opportunity arose, such as in this example of a group interview with urban fourth graders:

> JAKE: *The kids who fail the ELA . . .* have to repeat the grade.
>
> TRACY: *The kids who fail the ELA . . .* didn't pay attention and didn't do what they were supposed to do.
>
> DAPHNE: *The kids who fail the ELA . . .* didn't think about the tricks that the teacher had taught them.
>
> RESEARCHER: Can you think of one of those tricks?
>
> [The children introduced us to the notion of trickery, both in terms of attempts by the test makers to trick them and in terms of the tricks the kids used to do well on the test.]
>
> DAPHNE: You have to read the question very, very carefully.
>
> ALEXA: If you see an answer that you might think is right, still go back and read the other answers.
>
> FAITH: Answer the question very, very carefully.

Stimulus Drawing Approaches

Images have long been used to elicit responses in therapeutic consultations and in art therapy. The well-known Rorschach inkblot test is based on the assumption that people's immediate free associations can open a path into their emotional or subconscious worlds. These

tests, known as "stimulus tests," evolved into combinations of stimuli and responses, creating a more interactive give-and-take between therapist and patient, especially when working with children. For example, the Draw a Story test starts off with 14 stimulus cards depicting a variety of situations. The child is asked to select two pictures and then draw and narrate a story based on the subject of those two pictures. The emotional content of the responses is then rated using a predetermined scale. "In the stimulus drawing approach, drawing takes the place of words as the principal channel for receiving and expressing ideas" (Silver, 2001, p. 16).

As we discuss in Chapter 7, the use of drawing in social science research typically involves participant-produced drawings. Although stimulus methods such as Silver's are still widely used when working with children, especially in the fields of psychology and social work, those methods are not the ones advocated in this book. A social constructivist approach views images as a visual resource that assists in the co-construction of understanding and meaning on a topic of interest. As researchers consider the options available, it is not uncommon to see them using drawings to tap into the emotional and cognitive lives of children, a stimulus sorting task to understand children's perceptions or relations to certain people or activities, written tasks for information on specific events, and open-ended interview questions for understanding children's experiences.

Photoelicitation Interviewing

Using photographs is one such elicitation strategy. Photoelicitation is a way to not simply get more information but to evoke "a different kind of information" (Harper, 2002, p. 13). American photographer John Collier, Jr. (1913–1992) used photographs in interviews in the 1950s when he worked with a Cornell University research team examining mental health in changing Canadian communities. Collier (1957) noted that graphic imagery had a "compelling effect upon the informant, [with] its ability to prod latent memory, to stimulate and release emotional statements about the informant's life" (p. 858). Using photographs in interviews with children is helpful to build rapport and to disrupt children's preset ideas about one-on-one interactions with adults (Cappello, 2005; Dempsey & Tucker, 1994; Mauthner, 1997) or, in Collier's terms, "shatter the composure of a guarded reply" (1957, p. 854). Photoelicitation is effective with

children and has been used in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes: to explore 5- to 13-year-olds' attitudes and beliefs about different careers (Weiniger, 1998); thoughts about disabilities (Diamond, 1996); differences in historical thinking in third-, sixth-, and ninth-grade children (Foster, Hoge, & Rosch, 1999); and the effects of magazine images of beauty on 14- to 18-year-old female athletes' physical self-concept (Hurworth, Clark, Martin, & Thomsen, 2005).

Using photoelicitation requires the selection of images with the research goal in mind, some idea of its relevance or import to the respective participants, and an understanding of its purpose within the larger research design (i.e., to expand on themes the researcher has identified as potentially significant, to build rapport and explore participant-expressed ideas in the beginning of a new interview, to elicit a group response on a topic around a shared image).

In her investigation of writing practices with young children in an urban southern California elementary school, Cappello (2005) conducted individual photoelicitation interviews with 6- to 9-year-old students. She observed the children in their classroom for several months, engaged them in formal and informal interviews, and invited them to take pictures of what they considered to be "important writing" at school using cameras they could sign out whenever they wanted. She was interested in how writing played a role in shaping the children's social identities and the kinds of decisions children made about their writing. When she prepared for each photo-driven interview, she focused on that child and his or her own photographs.

> The pictures in the kit included the likenesses of the participants engaged in the many stages of classroom writing . . . . The pictures were assembled in a large binder and protected by clear sleeves so the children could easily remove and organize them. Nearly a hundred 4 × 6 images were included in the kit. All were coded and numbered for easy refilling after the interview. The photographs were not captioned, but the binder was separated into three clearly defined sections: children at work, public displays, and informant-made images. (Cappello, 2005, p. 174)

In this example, the students did not see their own pictures before the interview and did not participate in the selection process. Instead, Cappello started off each interview by highlighting the

images taken by the students themselves and using these as a basis for separating nonimportant from important images and then talking about them.

Researchers have used images in a variety of ways in their work with children, but only recently has the focus been on how the child or young person is using the medium to communicate and express a viewpoint within a specific interaction, not as an "objective" representation of some aspect of development or identity. In Chapter 7, we explore how researchers can incorporate art and photography in research with children.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Individual interviews prioritize the individual. Their strength is that they allow the researcher to give each participant his or her complete attention. Their challenge is that they accentuate the researcher–researched relationship in ways already discussed. Many researchers, however, have worked with this challenge, paying closer attention to setting up the room in a playful manner, engaging the child immediately in a nonthreatening and fun activity, and working positively toward a successful encounter.

Individual interviews are recommended for exploring sensitive or private matters and for going into depth about an experience or issue or if the topic has something to do with how each child understands the topic of inquiry or engages with the material. Studies that have used individual interviews have explored helpful and harmful relationships in the lives of 5- to 14-year-olds (Rogers et al., 2005), perceptions of classroom writing with elementary-age students (Cappello, 2005), and views of disability in school with 7- to 10-year-olds (Holt, 2004).

Interview studies often use other methods such as participant observation to get a fuller picture of the context of the inquiry and build rapport with children before inviting them to participate in an interview. Studies that solely use interviews may use multiple interviews to allow time for the relationship between interviewer and interviewee to develop. The study by Rogers et al. (2005) on children's perceptions of their personal and social relationships is one such report. In that study, two to three interviews were conducted annually for 3 years.

> In the first interview, we did not use a prearranged protocol. We went to meet the children with drawing materials, cards, jokes, puppets, and ourselves, hoping first to form a relationship in which children could begin to trust us enough to tell us something real about their lives . . . . Interviewers followed the child's stories and play, rather than setting the agenda. In the second interview, we drew upon developmental materials (art materials and particular questions designed for specific age groups) to create an individually tailored interview based on the first interview. (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 158)

Interviewing is a flexible data-collection method that accomplishes much in a 15-minute block of time or an hour. When designing interview studies, one needs to consider the who, how many, how often, how long, when, where, and why of the study and then remain open to making alterations when necessary. Sometimes a friend or a parent is invited to sit in on the interview because it makes sense to the researcher perhaps as a way to reduce researcher–participant power inequalities (Mayall, 2000) or because, if the interview is occurring in the home, not to give a child the choice to have his or her parent present seems unethical (Barker & Weller, 2003). The consequences of these decisions are varied, but one of them is that the researcher is no longer conducting individual interviews and the data analysis needs to reflect that. For example, when parents and children are interviewed together, there may be disagreement, with parents contradicting or correcting their children or vice versa, thus making interpretation of the child's perspective more difficult.

GROUP INTERVIEWS OR FOCUS GROUPS

Group interviews that focus on a common topic, engage children with a common set of activities, or bring together participants who have had a common experience or life situation are suitable for children of all ages (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Mauthner, 1997; M. Morgan et al., 2002). We do not differentiate between focus groups and group interviews and use the terms interchangeably. We use the term "focus group" broadly, like D. L. Morgan (1997), to mean "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (p. 6). In fact, it is because of the qualities it offers of being a group

that makes this approach appealing to researchers working with children. A focus group is less conducive to getting to know individual children's experiences in depth, but it offers other opportunities for understanding their experiences. They are not, however, a substitute for multiple individual interviews, because the group interaction is seen as a crucial component in the generation of data. "Instead of asking questions of each person in turn, focus group researchers encourage participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others' experiences and points of view" (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4).

In some situations, the group dynamic is the focal point for the research. As children come together in conversation, they engage their social and cultural worlds as they interact together, agree and disagree, laugh, or get upset. Studies that focus on particular group dynamics, such as families or friendship groups, are ones in which group interviews may be useful, because the usual patterns of negotiation, communication, and control are likely to arise during the interview. In other situations, the collective knowledge of the group is of interest and is, in fact, seen as conducive to constructing that collective knowledge. "Group interviews grow directly out of peer culture, as children construct their meanings collectively with their peers. In group interviews . . . participants build on each other's talk and discuss a wider range of experiences and opinions than may develop in individual interviews" (Eder & Fingerson, 2003, p. 35).

Focus groups are often used to get a sense of some aspect of children's collective viewpoint or lived experience. The idea is not so much to hear what different individuals have to say but to engage the group in generating knowledge about a topic with which they have had direct experience. For example, Veale (2005) used focus groups with 7- to 17-year-old displaced Rwandan children. The groups, which were called workshops, "served the more specific function of engaging [children] in an analysis and articulation of their perspectives on the lives of children in the community" (p. 255). The process involved giving children, who had lost much, a space to share their experience, voice their anger and grief, and act out their beliefs through stories and role-playing. The activities they used, including social mapping, story games, drawings, and drama, were meant "to facilitate reflection, debate, argument, dissent and consensus, to stimulate the articulation of multiple voices and positions, and through

the process, to lay the foundations for empowerment" (p. 254). If you think of the differences metaphorically, an individual interview might resemble more of a funnel, where the researcher follows up on the interviewee's story asking for more detail of the experience just shared, whereas a group interview is more of a series of sunbursts, with each experience shared eliciting a variety of related ones.

Many researchers believe group interviews engage children because they diminish the effects of adult power, reduce the pressure on individuals to answer questions, and provide support from others in the group (Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Mauthner, 1997). However, power and status differences play out among children as well and affect the interaction and contribution of each member. Hurworth et al. (2005) caution researchers to pay attention and observe the interactions and the way meaning is negotiated because "it is possible that one or two of the more vocal participants may have influenced the discussion and swayed the 'shared' consensus of the group" (p. 59).

The interactive nature of the focus group can work to enhance the input of children, or it can interfere with the ability for all children to find a voice. For example, our final activity in the second group interview we conducted with fourth graders was to have each child finish the sentence "I am glad the ELA is over because . . . ." Corbin, one of the students in our suburban group, restlessly waited for his turn as we went around the circle. However, when it was his turn, he had been listening, and said:

> *"I am glad the ELA is over because* . . . um, like Morgan, Lynn, and Megan, I don't like taking notes from a book or something and, um, like you know, it's kind of like if you're practicing for a play, I don't like to, if I'm in a play I don't like to do skits that, um, like are there for me. I like to, you know, make up my own skits. But, um, it's kind of like dirt biking freestyle, or monster truck freestyle, and also it's because like I don't like, like David said, I don't like the real, I like the real test, because the real test is actually what your grade is really getting graded on. And because we only take three sessions of the real test and like we take like, on each session, we do like, um, at least three pretests, so it's like more than nine pretests. And when we do the real test we only do three sessions."

Our urban fourth graders were also listening to each other, but in this excerpt (which should not be read as indicative of their overall behavior in our sessions together) they are restless and interrupt each other.

> AMBER: *I am glad the ELA is over because . . .* shut up! (*directed at other students who are talking over her*)
>
> VINCENT: Because "shut up"? (*teasing*)
>
> JAKE: (*Amber's brother, to Amber, who makes a face at Vincent*): Watch when we go home, I'll take you on my knee.
>
> RESEARCHER: Let her answer.
>
> AMBER: It was hard. There.
>
> JAKE: *I am glad the ELA is over because . . .* it was boring.
>
> VINCENT: That's what I was going to say.

Interpersonal interaction is generally seen as an advantage of focus groups; however, it is important to consider the role of group processes in determining the nature of that interaction and to recognize that such interactions are not always positive. There is the possibility that intimidation within the group may inhibit some individuals from making a contribution (Lewis, 1992). There is also a possibility that an individual's expressed opinion may be influenced by a desire to fit in with other group members (Hennessy & Heary, 2005).

Focus groups present unique challenges, and they are more difficult to schedule because they require a time and place everyone can get to. They also create confidentiality issues because information shared in a group could be repeated outside the group. One strategy is to let participants know that it is not alright to share what was disclosed in any detail outside the group but to talk in general about what was said. Although this is a strategy that can work for some children, understanding the sociocultural dynamics of the group you are working with is important. Holding young participants responsible for confidentiality may cause anxiety because they may not share the researcher's criterion for what should not be shared. Furthermore, what might cause embarrassment among children may be very different from what adults think causes embarrassment. It seems that

if the topic of discussion is too sensitive to be repeated, then it may not be appropriate for a group situation, especially among children who may interact regularly. Conducting groups with children who do not regularly interact may be an option. Other strategies include reminding children before beginning the focus group to share only information they would be comfortable sharing with an acquaintance or limiting the group to same-sex friendship groups.

Punch (2002a) reported that her decision to conduct same-sex groups, when exploring 13- and 14-year-olds' perceptions of their problems, welfare, and coping strategies, was based on the literature indicating that girls and boys deal and talk about their problems differently. Just because a focus group is a group event does not preclude creating space for individual responses. We had students answer questions quietly and in writing. Although we had students pass their answers around so that others could write their responses beneath the others as a way of giving students a chance to respond, reflect, or disagree with what others had said, this activity could be adapted by not sharing the writing to create a private space for participants' comments.

In designing any study, every component should be considered for what it adds and also for what it replaces. Depending on the research goals, researchers use multiple approaches within one methodological approach, such as focus groups, or include multiple methods, such as conducting both individual and group interviews with the same participants. In her study of eighth-grade girls in school, Orenstein (1994) conducted focus groups and individual interviews to get a better sense of the breadth and depth of the issues facing young adolescent girls. In addition, Michell (1999) compared the responses of 11-year-old girls given in group and individual interviews and concluded that, depending on the social status of the girl (higher, medium, or low), the responses between the two interview settings were markedly different. Michell's findings reinforce our belief that understanding the social context of the group is essential to understanding the interactions and responses given in a focus group.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. We often see ourselves as needing to teach or guide young people. Sit with a child and talk to him or her as if he or she was the expert of his or her life or some aspect of life. Ask the child to talk about something important or interesting to him or her. How easy or hard was it for the child to talk to you? How easy or hard was it for you to let him or her take the lead in the conversation? What do you think made it easy or hard? What could you do differently to turn the interaction into a genuine conversation?

2. Develop an interview protocol of about 10 questions you would like to ask your child participants. Consider other approaches beyond open-ended interview questions for each question such as writing tasks, games, photoelicitation strategies, or mapping. Share these with a partner. Rework the protocol based on insights developed in your conversation.