

# HARMS AND BENEFITS

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## **‘Your life looks like a fairytale’ : Challenges in building rapport with children and youth in contexts of protracted conflict**

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### ***Background context:***

My PhD research, titled 'Artisans of Peace', was conducted in the post conflict environment of Bogotá, Colombia. It consisted of an Arts based intervention with children and youth (ages 6-18) across 3 municipalities of Bogotá. The study adopted an ethnographic approach to the fieldwork, over a 4-month period. This involved the task of building rapport and gaining the trust of the children and young people, whilst navigating multiple roles - as researcher, teacher, support and, from the participants' perspective, a friend. The ethical dilemma emerged throughout the ethnographic fieldwork process, as I sought to balance the tensions around these different roles, particularly, being an adult and international researcher working with child and youth participants.

### ***The ethical challenge:***

Building trusting and respectful relationships with the research participants was of central importance throughout the fieldwork process. Ethical literature highlights the need to build rapport when engaging with children and young people in research, especially when being a researcher from a different country and culture<sup>1</sup>. The participants were keen to know information about me, my life and my country.

I was conscious of the ethical imperative to balance harms and benefits in research involving children and I adopted a reflexive approach as advocated by ERIC and others<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, while depicting my life to the participants helped to build rapport, I was concerned it also potentially highlighted the precariousness of their own lives. This concern was particularly reinforced when one child stated, 'Wow your life looks like a fairy-tale, like something in a movie'.

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<sup>1</sup> Maglio & Pherali, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Christensen & James, 2017



### **Choices made:**

As a researcher, I had to navigate choices regarding how much of my life I shared with the child and youth participants. I adopted a pedagogy based on following the interests of the child and, as they asked to learn about my life in Ireland, I felt it was important to disclose some of this information. Adopting a reflexive approach, I noted the dejection in the comments and gestures of the participants after the first day of discussing life in Ireland. I discussed this with them and learned that what they really wanted was to hear about possibilities for their future. This conversation resulted in altering the direction of the workshops, from learning about my life in Ireland to a discussion about the practicalities of learning English for travel purposes, and discussing the geography of Europe in a way that was engaging and fun for them.<sup>3</sup>

### **Reflexive questions / considerations:**

The reflexive, relational approach advocated by ERIC, along with the rights-based 'best interest's principle'<sup>4</sup> was something I referred to regularly when conducting my fieldwork, constantly asking myself, 'Will this do more harm than good?'. Being a researcher from a different country and culture, I found I was navigating an unfamiliar and, in my context, a fragile terrain<sup>5</sup>. While the participants are deemed vulnerable both in status and context, their agency and resiliency were also evident. Some questions I found myself asking regularly were:

1. Will this do more harm than good?
2. Have I considered the best interests of the child/young person?
3. Have I considered the agency and wishes of the child/young person?
4. What is my role as the researcher at this moment in time - teacher/friend/observer?

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<sup>3</sup> Barker & Weller, 2003

<sup>4</sup> Article 3, paragraph 1, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) gives the child the right to have his or her best interests assessed and taken into account as a primary consideration in all actions or decisions that concern him or her, both in the public and private sphere

<sup>5</sup> Colombia is now a country emerging from over 50 years of conflict, the consequences of which are still widely felt in society.



## **References**

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