CHILD CENTERED RESEARCH: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Jose Antony*

Abstract

(The article examines the concept of research from different slants and tries to focus on the efforts undertaken by children by themselves or in collaboration and shore up from adults in doing researches on child related issues. It deliberates on the rationale for research by children unfiltered and uncensored by the "adults" parameters and sets this within a context of participatory methodologies and empowerment philosophy by acknowledging the importance of child perspective and voice. This effort highlights the original contribution that child researchers can make to our understanding of childhood and children's lives in the natural conditions they are living and budding. It traces the historical and rational patterns that have led to this concept and explores the availability and possibility of child centered research efforts and methodological supports in the current research traditions. Based on the experiments and related reviews the paper tries to put up the possibility and practices of different perspectives on children and research. The paper also discusses about the process, tools, methods and techniques very specifically to be applied in child centered research along with the ethical and logical issues involved in the process. The basic conceptual paradigm of this effort will be the child rights, child governance issues and the empowerment of the children to become authentic and contributing partner in their survival, development, participation and ownership as successful children today and accomplishing adults tomorrow.)

Key words: *Child centeredness, research, methodological issues, data generation and management and knowledge dissemination*

Introduction

The "childhood" as a period of life, social existence and psycho-physiological entity remains to be one of the fascinating areas of research and researchers. Millions of research initiatives are available in the contemporary scholastic and practical domains of knowledge. Doing

* Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit Kalady, Kerala India.

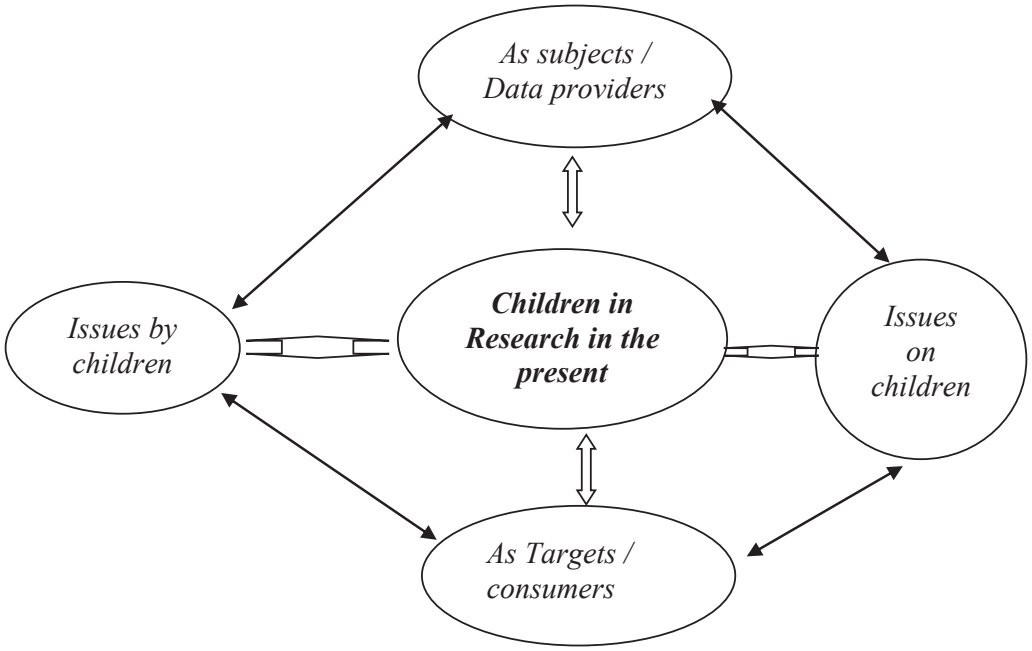
rigorous research on them, their living conditions, experiences and encountered problems is a mandatory requirement to make their life empowered and enthusiastic and it is a million dollar concern to have a contributing, and contented child population in the world to carry the heritage of the universe and humanity to the millenniums to come. The contemporary system of research related to children is that the adults and the professionals conduct researches on children and issues related to children. These researches are basically on the psycho social aspects of the development of the children, the socio economic and cultural correlates that contribute to the development and anomalies among children, the impacts of various patterns of social and familial care and protection to children, the behavior development , modification, academic and non-academic achievements, troubles, educational research programmes and to an extend the recent interest and interventions in the issues of the child rights and child governance. One of the major research interests on children today is the impacts of these intervention porogrammes on their social, educational, physical and relational life. The Concern of the child rights, child governance and related issues has not yet developed as a serious concern for the researchers and practitioners.

The current practice

The review of available literature very clearly establishes that the current practices are designed and implemented by the adult community for the concerns of the adults and also for the programmes implementation for the children. The primary rational underpinnings of all these readings are the policy level and practice level interests of the adults. They say that the research by them are always "*in the best interest of the children as defined by the adults*". (Danby 2002, James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, Tobin 1995,

Waksler 1991, 1996) The voice of the children, the participation of the children, the ownership of the children, and the influence of the children in the research process etc… are not taken cared in these efforts. The process, the tools, the techniques, the procedure of data generation, analysis, interpretation and the dissemination are done by the adults and are shaped in the scientific skill and knowledge of the adults.

Most of the researches conducted about the children as the major concern have dealt the children as research subject. (James and Prout, 1997) The doers and takers of the research in this perspective among children and child related issues are the adults. "The research" proclaimed as painstaking systematic effort remains even today as a domain of the adults and there is a popular notion (misunderstanding that children are children after all) and are not capable of conducting any research or other serious scientific activities. They are not capable of doing these types of activities and always believe that children can only provide the data needed for the research about them. They are always kept away from the process of research and always treated as the subjects or data providers of the research. The current practice followed in the research related to children may be conceived as follows.



The common practical stand is that the children at the most can only provide data or information about their life and experiences to the researcher who is seriously committed and trained person in research. (Danby and Farrell 2002)The general feeling is that the research is a scientific and technical process and can't be undertaken by the children. The language of the research, the tools used in the research, the methodological practices talked and followed I the research process, the tools development, administration, and the data generated can't be managed or worked out by the children. This approach in the case of children is naturally and scientifically against the philosophy of the child governance and child rights.

Child Centeredness in Research

In general the term "Child Centered Approach" carries varying connotations. In one version it promotes the right of the child to choose, make connections and communicate. It allows freedom for children to

think, experience, explore, question and search for answers. It presents a creative celebration of children's work. (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000; Kellett and Ding 2004) The concept also has a meaning that the process is around the children and it will be evolving the children and their multifaceted life situations. It may include the issues and concerns related to children and their surroundings. This process of getting the child in the centre of research or issues about children was there from the very beginning of the social science research efforts on family and human life in social geography. The emergence and emancipation of the Child rights conventions, child governance paradigms, child labor prohibitions, and policy cum legislations on child's importance give prominence to the child centeredness in all aspects of human life. The future led present and initiatives also is in the backyard of this development.

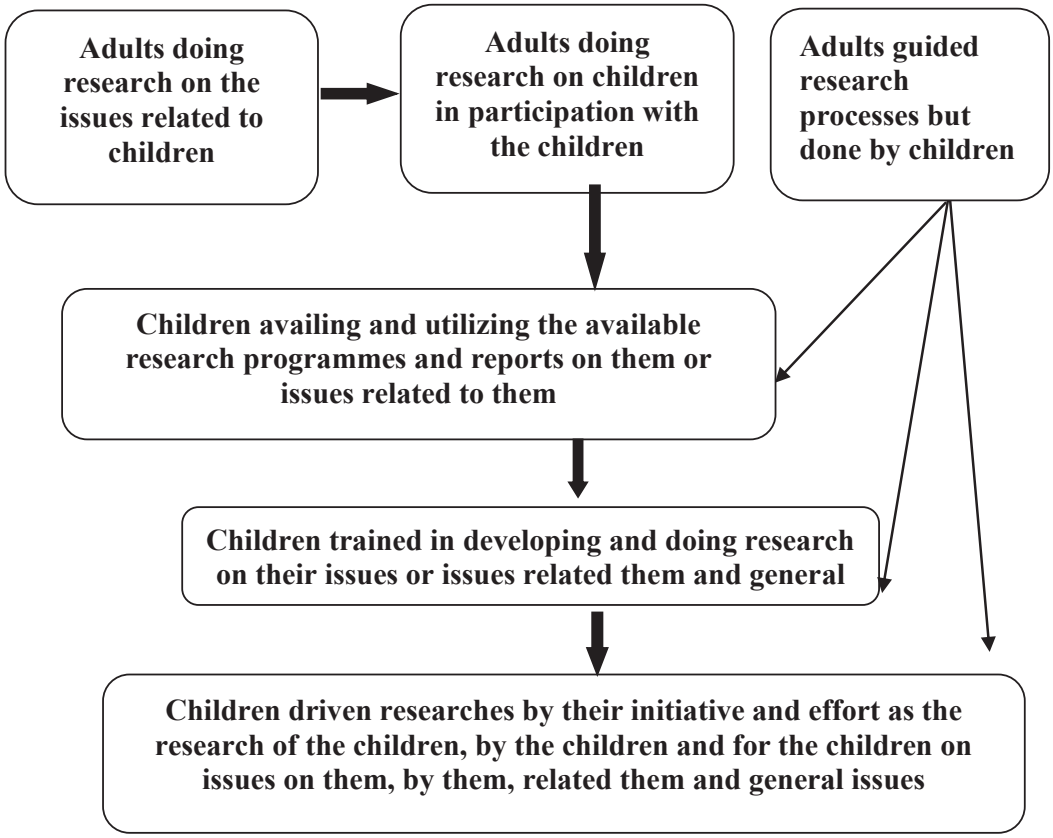
The deliberations on the child centered research became an issue of discussion only very recently. The newly emerged philosophy of child governance is the most important contributor to this development. There may be various conceptualizations about this initiation like ***child friendly research, child centered research, child owned research, child led research, research with children, research for children or research by children.*** (Alderson, 2000; Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Fielding, 2004) Child centered research begins with a rationale for research by children and sets this within a context of participation and empowerment, acknowledging the importance of child perspective and voice and valuing the original contribution that child researchers can make to our understanding of childhood and children's lives. It traces the chronological and idealistic patterns that have led to this point and explore the query of whether delve into by children can be accommodated within existing

research considerations or whether it requires a new approach, even a new research paradigm? In the very strict sense the concept means the research led by or owned by the children.

The current understanding about the issue as the children as the subject matter of research should give way to an idea of children *as doers of research and takers of research.* They are the concerned and group and they know the issue in the best way and can do the research by themselves. (Punch, 2005) If children can study whatever we teach them in the classroom and other situations, and if they can go for governance experiences by themselves in a very successful way they can also be researchers. This thought of children as researchers of their issues and surroundings or even the involvement and intrusions of the adult community into their life in the cause of shielding and developing them is very relevant and enthralling.

The expression child centered research also carries different meanings and claims in the theoretical and usable senses. The term child centered research in a very systematic sense may be defined as the process of a conscious and original inquiry about the child generated or adult created issues and concerns (child related) in the light of child rights, child governance, and self-governing frameworks that applies acceptable scientific methodology to solve problems and generate new knowledge that is normally applicable. (Waksler, 1991; Solberg, 1996). It can be further expanded as the effort of the children or adults concerned with the scientific inquiries about the children or issues pertaining to them to apply scientific methodology in their practice as a creative and conscious effort of inquiry instead of the usual enquiries. The endeavor will bring out incredibly new about the children and their life experiences and opens up

with the ways to resolve the tribulations posed by the children in understanding and practicing their life evocatively in the contemporary social organizations of life.

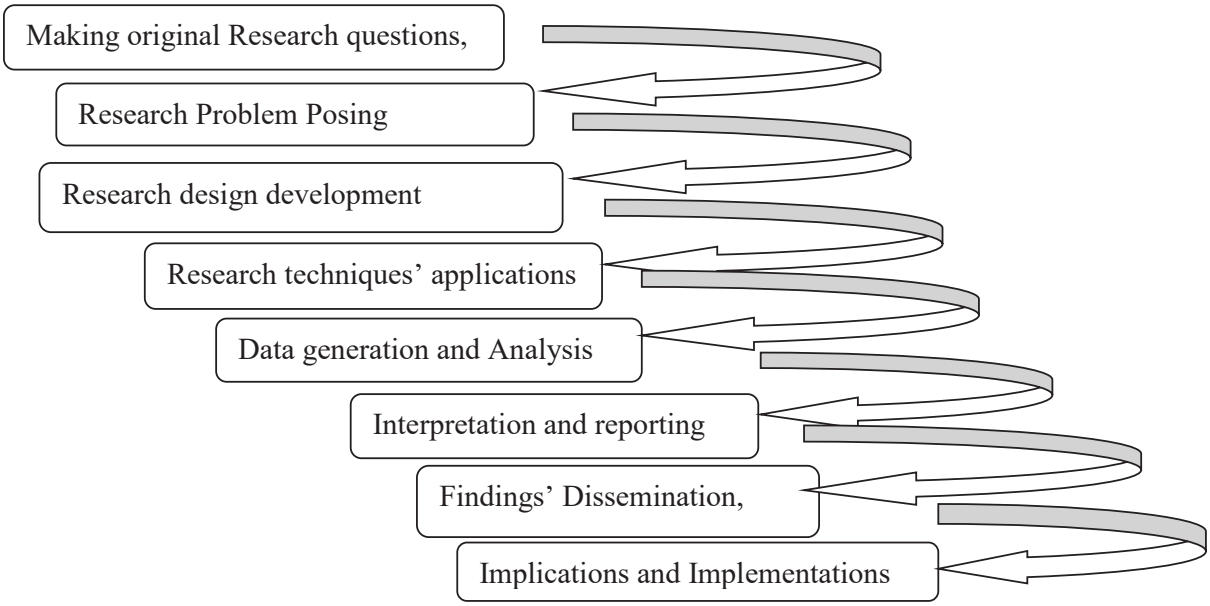


The perception also incorporates the accessible and established methods and strategies of scientific practices in the creative inquiries by the children. The efforts can be characterized as the research initiatives on Child Originated, Child related, Child experienced, Children affected, sustained, managed and involved Issues. They can be researches in the Context of Child rights, Child governance. The entire process will be child friendly, child owned, and child led research. The Children will avail and use the on hand research programmes and reports on them or issues related to them. The children will be trained in developing and doing research on their issues or issues related them and general issues. The children driven

researches can be by their initiative and effort as the research of the children, by the children and for the children on issues on them, by them, related them and general issues. They also may include the thoroughness of adults doing research on children in participation with the children. Another system may be adults guided research processes but done by children. The concept is that the children as respondents, partners or doers and traders of research.

The Process of child centered research

The application of the scientifically sound paraphernalia and procedures in the procedure of data generation, data analysis and reporting also is envisaged in the process. The child centered research gives a hope that the children who are the owners of their life and experiences will become the doers of research in due course with sufficient training and scientific rigor. The process will take care of the entire exertion and process of researching with definite emphasis and centeredness on children. The process will make the steps and concerns in research such as



child centered. The complete process will be embryonic around the child related (child originated, experienced, persistent, managed and involved) issues and processes. The children will be in the mainstream of the research as owners and doers of research.

The child centered approach is an effort to make the entire domain of the scientific research about the children child sensitive, and mainstreamed. The fundamental philosophy of this paradigm shift will be identify the new perspective of child centeredness in the process of developing evidence based practice in the sector by the children. It believes that the children are capable and potential in becoming efficient and effective researchers by themselves and also in collaboration and guidance of the adult researchers. It is an effort to make the research communities perspective that the research is possible only by the so called adult researchers deconstructed and also to make a new philosophical understanding that the children also can be good scientific researchers. .

The deep-seated approach of the study will not be developing only the quantitative enumerations or assessments based on the positivistic understandings. The process will be rather an effort of constructivism and interpretive systems of the social world in the context. The child centered research will focus on the course of INQUIERY which means an in - query into the depth of the behaviors and experiences of the children in the contextual premises of their life. Instead of making a statistical data bank the child centered research will be getting into the experiential level of child existence in the community/family contexts. The child centered research will focus on the causal conditions of the present status and also will look into the multi-dimensional childhood experiences and developments. Hence it will ask the pertinent qualitative questions. It tries

to explain the dynamic interaction of the subjective perception, objective actions and the context in which these take place. It also looks at the phenomenon of child experiences and life in the context as a complete phenomenon and explains the interrelations among the experiences and behaviors of children in their living context.

The process also tries to look into the dynamic interactions among these dimensions of childhood existence at the present in the light of the child governance and child rights. It proposes to ask Why?, How?, Under which circumstances things occur? to trace the natural experiences of the children and propose appropriate interventions and management programmes. These processes will be undertaken by the children as the owners or collaborators of the research process. The process seeks depth of Experience and understanding of children and their adult world about the children's' world and experiences. The effort will be viewing and considering the children as a holistic phenomenon in a given context. It also has to try to explore and discovers the inter and intra relations among the factors and contexts affecting the issue in concern

Data Collection/Generation

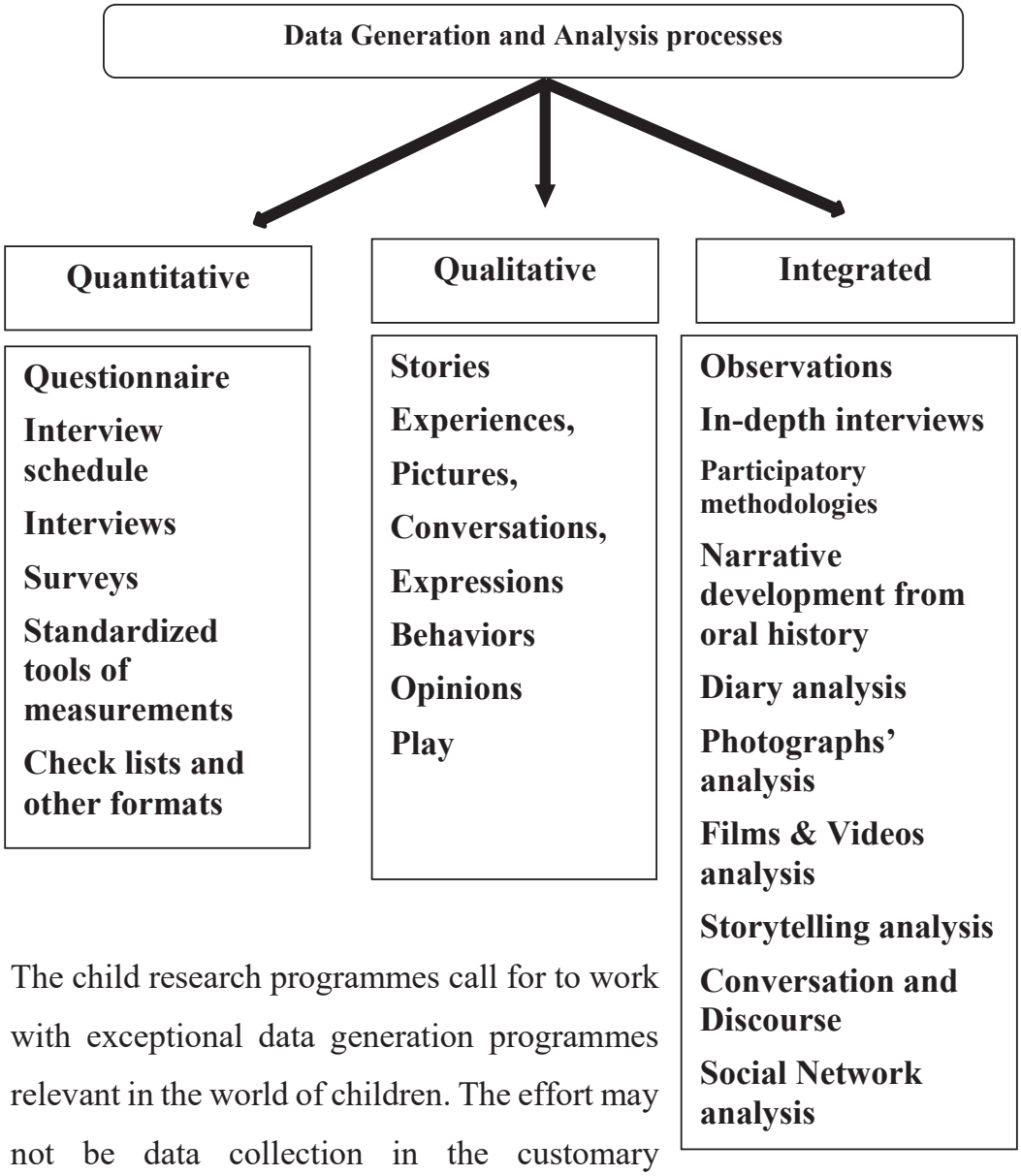
The concept and practice of child centered research poses a number of methodological issues to the existing system of research. The experience of the already involved researchers says that the issues are grave but manageable by adapting the existing methods, tools and techniques workable and handy to the children. The effort provides grown-up researchers with a child-savvy channel to gain knowledge of children and their world effectively *of, from, and with* children. The tinted methods' are consistently child-attuned, in order to free children to participate with empowerment. From fieldwork and observation, to focus groups and depth

interviews, to the use of photography, artwork, and metaphors, viable methods are discussed with an old-hand's sharpness for making the dealings realistic with children in the field. Playfully interviewing children as young as five years old, as well as empowering youngsters to tell it like it is, are tasks revealed to be both achievable and essential.

The question of the methodical thoroughness can be managed by building the application of the scientific methods appropriately custom-made to the world of the children. This adaptation itself is a major concern in the research effort. It needs real research effort by the children or in collaboration with the children as partners of the research. The numerical software and the tools of quantitative data generation such as the Questioners, Interview schedules, Observation details etc… can be very well utilised. It is also very well suggested that the children need to be made aware and trained in the Qualitative approaches and research strategies based on the interpretive theories. The primary data generation methods and tools can be used by the children as researchers. They also may be trained to use their tools appropriate to their age by them like the stories, conversations, discussions, contents of the interactions, pictures and so on. The interpretation and data processing also can be made child friendly and manageable to them. It is also suggested that the possibility of mixing the traditional qualitative and quantitative methodologies and strategies in research will be of great help in doing the child centered research. There should be serious effort to make the new research tools, strategies, and methods emerging in the research sector made available to the child centered research and child researchers accessible and usable.

An added major prospect in the child centered research is the deployment of the participatory methodologies. Participatory methodologies include

the efforts of applying qualitative data generation practices, of the qualitative data processing systems and report development activities.



The child research programmes call for to work with exceptional data generation programmes relevant in the world of children. The effort may not be data collection in the customary understandings. It has to be data generation because it follows the practice of in-depth inquiries. Again, the process should depend on the methods and strategies which are familiar to the children and the people working with them. The data generation systems usable in the child cantered research process are Stories told to children and told by children, Experiences of the

children and people around the children, Pictures by the children, interpretations of the children about the pictures they have developed, Conversations of the children between them, by them to others, to children by others, Emotional Expressions of the children in the contexts they are put in and exposed and to the different people they are related and interacting, Behaviors of the children as expressed by them and the responses of the children to the behaviors of others, the Opinions made by the children and the opinions made by the significant people on children, The Play people are engaged and the way children are playing and the learning the children make from the play, the Observations children are making about various systems and institutions in society, the observations the adults are making about the children in situations, In-depth interviews with the children done by the adults and also by the children, Focus group discussions conducted by the children among different groups or done by the adults with the children, Diary analysis of the children, Analyzing the Photographs' taken by the children and also by the adults on children, Films & Videos taken by children and by the adults on child issues, the Social Network of the children and the networks made by the adult society for the children, etc… are some of the possible data collection as well as data generation tools and strategies in child centered research.

It is also specified that the traditional methods of data collection like the survey system, interviewing, sophisticated scales and assessment tools also are very well workable in the child centered research. The children need special training in making the data objective, specific, and valid. Hence they need the support and training in the data validation and reliability assurance systems. The most important point to be noted is that the children

engaged in research need to be systematically and carefully trained to develop the research tools and to apply them with the scientific rigor.

Data analysis and interpretation

The carry out of data analysis and interpretation also require exceptional consideration in the child centered research programmes. The data processing needs logical rigor and system to make the research effectual and accurate. The children taking up research need to be trained to work with the coding system, tabulations of the coded data, doing the preliminary and inferential statistical treatment, editing and validating the data, and also making the primary trends identified and located. The adults can very well support the children in analyzing their research data and also to develop appropriate interpretations to make the inference and research conclusions. The research conclusions should take the researchers to the possible practical and theoretical solutions and suggestion the problem solving direction and also in the development perspectives.

In the case of the qualitative data the following system of data processing may be made available and trained with the children involved in the child centered research practices. The first step will be the process of converting the collected or generated data into a systematically prepared case narrative. This can be done by the children or supported by the adults in the forms of stories, photographs or even the drawings. Then the team of researchers can start to Read through transcripts carefully with a purpose. The purpose is basically the research objectives and also the scientific quest. Through the reading and re-reading the child researcher can identify important themes in relation with the research hypothesis and objectives. Once the important subthemes are identified the researcher should read through the system and develop a code system to code the subthemes in

the prepared narrative. The researcher after coding the significant issues in the narrative has to Sort the data to the new files organized by themes. Then the process should explore the richness of each thematic file and identify the key concepts. Then the researcher can configurate the key concepts to subgroups and then move to discover the perspectives of different subgroups . The researcher then should synthesize the Subgroups to reach the big picture of the research programme. Then the researcher should move to the process of interpreting the themes and big picture to develop the conclusions. These conclusions will further move to the practical aspects of policy making and implementation to solve the problems of the children by the children for their development and empowerment.

Reporting and dissemination

From the review of the available research reports on children related research in the Indian contexts it is observed that the current practice is that of making technical reports with the language structure, presentation (of, by, and for) the adults. The language and style of appearance of research reports are usually highly technical and not as easy to get to the children and child intelligence. The description language and style should be made simple and in terms of the reach and range of the children in child centered research process. The presentation of the research report should be understandable and interesting to the children and designed by the children. Because the child centered research (research of the children, by the children, for the children) should be reported in the language of the children. Hence the research reports can be in the form of Cartoons, pictures, stories, documentaries, Films, Magic shows etc… These presentations can be very interesting to the children and people related to

the children. It is also suggested that these approaches to the presentation of the research reports will make the child governance concept really workable in the child rights frame works. The rights of the children to do the research and also to access and utilize the research on them will be mad real only once these children are involved in the research process and reporting systems.

Potential research concerns in the child centered research.

Once the issue of the child centered research programme is in practice the present research process will get into a new light of the child participation and leadership in the sector. Hence the existing research programmes may be rescheduled to the new light of the children's perspectives and concerns. If so the research efforts may be more intensified and qualitative in nature and may concentrate some of the burring issues put forward for consideration. The issue is not exactly the matter of concern but the way the research is conceptualized and practices. The following is a list of the researchable issues within this child centered research paradigms.

- Anomalies existing in laws relating to children
- Issues of migrant/emigrant children
- Working of children's home
- Quality of teaching in special schools
- Interventions of local governments for the disabled children
- Studies on adolescent adopted children
- Mental health issues among children and adolescents
- Children with learning disabilities/autism

- Prevalence of child abuse: physical, sexual and emotional among various age groups.
- Trend analysis of suicide among adolescents.
- Qualitative assessment of negative impact of TV serials, media advertisement- on children
- The issues of ever increasing children of "Immigrant families".
- Use of addictive substances among children – alcohol, tobacco, drugs etc.
- Child labor – child workers from inter-state migrant workers

Conclusion

To conclude with these deliberations on the child centered research practice it may be stated that the research programmes on the children and child centered issues either by them or on them should be done only with them. It should be noted that nothing on children without them. The original owners of the informations (data) on children are concerns of them and for them. Hence the research on children and around their issues should be with the children, for the children, of the children and by the children. The existing research methodologies need to be reworked and are suitable to the needs of the children and the levels of the children. The international and national agencies operational in the field of child rights, child governance, child resource development, and the child empowerment should get this idea incorporated with their practices and concerns so that the new world of the children will be a true world for them by them and of them.

References

Achenbach, Thomas M. and C. S. Edelbrock. (1983). Manual for the child behavior checklist and revised child behavior profile. Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, Department of Psychology.

Alderson, P. (2000). Children as researchers. In *Research with Children,* Christensen P, James, A. (eds). London: Falmer Press. 241-257.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2004). Ethics, social research and consulting with children and young people. Ilford: Barnado's .

Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice. *British Educational Research Journal, 30*, 2: 295-312.

Fraser, Sandy Lewis, Vicky; Ding, Sharon; Kellett, Mary and Robinson, Chris eds. (2004). *Doing Research with Children and Young People.* London, UK: Sage.

James, A., C. Jenks and A. Prout (1998). Theorising Childhood, Cambridge: Polity Press

Katherine, Curtis, Kristin, Liabo, Helen, Roberts & Maggie, Barker. (2004). Consulted but not heard: A qualitative study of young people's views of their local health service. DOI: 10.1111/j.1369-7625.2004.00265.x

Lansdown, G. (2001). Children's welfare and children's rights, in P. Foley, J. Roche and S. Tucker (eds.), *Children in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice*, Palgrave: London.

Mackay, R. W. (1991). Conceptions of children and models of socialization, in F. C.Waksler, ed., *Studying the Social Worlds of Children: Sociological Readings*. London: .Falmer, Press.

Morrow, V. (2001). Using qualitative methods to elicit young people's perspectives on their environment: Some ideas for community health initiatives. *Health Education Research Theory Practice* 16(3), 255–68.

Moss, P. (2002). Time to say farewell to 'early childhood'? *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 3(3), 435–8.

Moss, P. and Petrie, P. (2002). *From Children's Services to Children's Spaces: Public Policy, Children and Childhood.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Prout, A. and James, A. (1997). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems, in A. James and A.

Prout, eds., *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, 2nd ed., Falmer Press, London.

Punch, S. (2002). Research with children: The same or different from research with adults? *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research* 9(3): 321-341.

Danby, Susan and Farrell, Ann (2002). Accounting for young children's competence in educational research: New perspectives on research ethics. Queensland University of Technology.

Tennent, L., Tayler, C., Farrell, A. & Gahan, D. (2002). Use and integration of early childhood services: Insights from an inner city community, *Australian Research in Early Childhood Education*, *9*(1), pp. 113–24.

Tobin, J. (1995). Post-structural research in early childhood education, in J. Hatch, ed., *Qualitative Research in Early Childhood Settings*. CT: Praeger, Westport.

Waksler, F. (1991). Studying children: Phenomenological insights, in F. Waksler, ed., *Studying the Social Worlds of Children: Sociological Readings*. London: Falmer Press.

Woodhead, M. & Montgomery, H.(Eds). (2003). Understanding *Childhood an Interdisciplinary Approach. Childhood: The Series. Milton Keyes*, United Kingdom: The Open University.