

Considering local contexts in research: presence of young children

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In January 2020, I was PI on a [research project](#) exploring the links between language, identity, and healthcare among a small Mayan community in Yucatan, Mexico. In order to understand the local context fully, we adopted a case study approach, including interviews with teachers and healthcare workers, as well as focus groups with parents. Understanding the local context was imperative, and was very much facilitated by having local researchers as part of the team, as well as a Mayan translator, and working closely with the school, specifically the headmistress, in facilitating the parent focus groups.

In the local community, mothers are typically the carers during the week, with fathers away at work. This meant that any time taken for focus groups would mean time away from other children who would need looking after. In order to maximise participation, and make participation as equitable as possible, parents were able to bring younger children to the focus group sessions. This obviously raised safeguarding issues regarding the children, which we mitigated with the help of considering setting, equipment, and staffing.

Setting: The focus groups took place in the school library, a single, open plan room with books around the four walls. We set up a table and chairs for the focus groups, but apart from that, the entire room was immediately visible, meaning parents could keep an eye on children without having to get up, and children had minimal opportunity for injury due to furniture, sharp edges, etc.

Equipment: the school library also housed a series of toys suitable for young children, including simple sorting games, stuffed toys, etc. We actively encouraged children to use spare information sheets and consent forms for drawing/mark making.

Staffing: the research team conducting the focus group was deliberately large (5 people), and the headmistress was also present. At least one researcher actively kept an eye on children who were not at the table (while the children were also in view of their parents the whole time). While the research team thus did not assume responsibility for the children per se, they actively supported parents to take part in the focus group.

Through the examples above, all parents were able to participate equitably in the focus groups. Children were entertained for longer than they would be on a parent's lap, or in a buggy. If issues arose (such as a child starting to cry), there were no visible barriers to understanding the context, and having parents and children in visible contact for the full duration of the focus groups (without being immediately distracted by each other) reassured all involved.