Focus Group Methodology and its Usefulness in Early Childhood Research

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Abstract

Focus groups are increasingly being used by researchers as a method of qualitative data gathering in educational contexts. The history of the focus group started with the ‘focussed interview’, for identifying a group’s beliefs about a particular issue in a non-directive manner in a non-threatening environment. Focus groups can be a powerful means of obtaining much information from a group in a short period of time, but there are serious issues regarding group dynamics, ethics, structure and management of the focus group. This paper will explore some strategies for successfully using focus group methodology in research in early childhood education services.

Introduction

This paper examines a method of group interview called a focus group; defining, explaining, pointing to the implications, and discussing how to get the best out of using this method when undertaking research in early childhood education services.

The history of focus groups dates back to the beginning of the Second World War. The United States war department employed a sociologist, Robert Merton, to examine the morale and loyalty of American soldiers. Merton developed the focussed interview method as a way of obtaining information on the attitudes of these men (Thornton and Faisandier, 1998). He used open ended, non-directive questions as a research technique and interviewed in surroundings that were as non-threatening as possible. The notion of ‘focus’ comes from the pattern of questioning. Questions started at a broad and general level and then were gradually focussed to become more specific as the interview proceeded. Merton’s interviews usually started with the most important question. At the time, this method caused many debates within the research community because many believed that data contamination would result by letting participants listen to each other’s opinions. Another issue debated was how to analyse data when participants changed their minds during the course of the interview. Merton argued that shifts of opinion as a result of social interaction were normal and that analysis should highlight the nature of the interactions and the resulting shifts in opinion (Thorton & Faisandier, 1998).

In the 1960s and 70s, market researchers began using the focus group. The feedback received from focus groups was used to help identify the best ways to market products. It was also used to identify was what wrong with a product when sales slowed down
inexplicably (Thornton & Faisandier, 1998). During the 70’s and 80’s the focus group was often used for community needs assessments, educational planning and particularly in public health research. In this context, focus groups were used to identify how best to target public health messages to the community. Current uses include the use of focus groups as a starting point for obtaining social opinion and perspectives to inform public policy, rather than necessarily seeking empirical evidence as the starting point, and also as a means of facilitating consultation with communities on social issues and policy changes (Thornton & Faisandier, 1998).

Kitzinger (1996) defines focus groups as group discussions organised to explore a specific set of issues. McDaniel and Bach (1996) define it as a discussion, which takes place in a social setting, moderated by a group leader, to generate descriptive or explanatory information. It can also be defined simply as a process of group interaction that serves to generate data for analysis (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Templeton, 1994). The use of group interaction as the basis for an interview sets the focus group apart from other forms of interview. It has been argued that the data gained can be difficult to gain in an individual interview alone (Lane, McKenna, Ryan & Fleming, 2001).

**Use of the Focus Group as a Qualitative Research Method**

Qualitative research is often criticised for lacking the rigour and objectivity of quantitative research, but it must still be guided by a set of principles for good research method. It should be guided by credibility (truthfulness), fittingness (applicability), auditability (consistency) and confirmability (Lane et al., 2001). As a qualitative method the focus group should be guided by these principles also. Qualitative research is not an easy option – it requires considerable skill. Focus groups can be used alongside other qualitative and quantitative research methods for the confirmation of the validity of data from different sources - triangulation (Saulnier, 2000). Group methods are particularly useful “if interactive phenomena such as communication, including teaching or learning interactions, are the focus of the study” (Hayes, 2001, p.89). Often group process is used as the planning step of an action research project, to bring all the involved parties together to discuss the research (McNaughton, 2001).

Focus groups have been used successfully in the early childhood context for determining parental beliefs and attitudes concerning school issues (Lambert, Conklin & Meyer, 2001), as they are a rich method of revealing attitudes, experiences and perceptions of the target audience. They have also been used for determining parental beliefs about immunisation of their young children (Leask et al., 2001). Many researchers have used them for identifying teachers’ beliefs about quality in childcare (Ceglowski, 2004), literacy environment rating scales (Wolfsberger, Reutzel, Sudweeks & Fawson, 2004), mastery of and resistance to technology (Laffey, 2004), early intervention (Wesley, Buyssse & Tyndall, 1997) and reporting child abuse and neglect in children with disabilities (Mitchell, Turbiville & Tumbull, 1999), amongst numerous other topics.
In New Zealand, Hampton (2000) used focus groups for her analysis of the kindergarten teachers’ experiences and views of professional development. Bedford (2004) used focus groups for a study on communicable diseases in early childhood education. His method used ‘nominal groups’ across a diverse range of early childhood services to identify their priorities with regard to prevention of communicable disease in early childhood. Kolt, Schofield and McLachlan et al. (2005) recently used focus groups as a means to gather information on current active movement initiatives, awareness of the importance of active movement for young children, barriers to and support required, and methods of evaluation. Although the results gleaned are limited in terms of significance, because they are typically gained from a small, non-random sample of a target population, they can be useful for identifying issues which need to be further examined with a larger more representative population and by using other research techniques.

Advantages of the Focus Group Method

Kitzinger (1996) argues that focus groups can be used to examine what people think, how they think, why they think in specific ways and their understandings and priorities in a given subject area. Focus groups are in this sense quintessential qualitative research, in which the researcher is by necessity an ‘insider’ to the process. The focus group has the potential to bring the researcher closer to the topic through a direct and personal encounter with key individuals (Lane et al., 2001). According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), Morgan (1988) and Krueger (1994) focus groups can be useful for:

- Orientation to a particular field of focus.
- Developing themes, topic and schedules for subsequent interviews and/or questionnaires.
- Generating hypotheses that derive from the insights and data from the group.
- Generating and evaluating data from different sub-groups of a population.
- Gathering feedback from previous studies.

Focus groups can be useful for groups who feel disempowered as it provides a safe environment for participants to share their thoughts and feelings. Sensitive topics may be able to be probed more readily in a relaxed group atmosphere (Krueger, 1994). The focus group approach can assist with the validation of experiences by other group members. Focus groups are designed to use group dynamics to yield insights that might not be accessible without the kind of interaction found in a group (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). In focus groups, the goal is to let people bounce ideas off one another, suggesting interpretations, dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion.

Several things can be accomplished with a group that may not necessarily occur with individuals (Patton, 1990). A group process for evaluation research in particular can be particularly powerful for the following reasons:
An environment of openness can be established to reduce fears and suspicions about what is going on in an evaluation. Key stakeholders know who is involved in consultation and decision making.

Participants in a group process become sensitised to divergent perspectives and varying agendas.

New ideas emerge out of the dynamics of group interaction.

A sense of shared responsibility for evaluation is engendered that is greater than the responsibility that may be felt by isolated individuals. Commitments made in groups are typically longer lasting than those made in private.

Touchy or sensitive issues may get raised and discussed.

Evaluators get a first hand chance to observe interactions between stakeholders.

Momentum can be established within groups that will continue after the group session.

Limitations of the Focus Group Method

Focus groups are least likely to be successful from a researcher’s perspective when participants in the group are not equally and fully participating. This might be when there are uneven power differentials or when speaking may endanger personal, working, or home relationships. A major issue is that while the researcher can undertake to maintain group confidentiality, the researcher can not be responsible for members of the group doing the same. The success of using the focus group may further be threatened by the group serving purposes other than that of the generation of data for research. For example, participants may express emotional or employment problems that are opened up by the group process, or participants may use the process to put-down others or to attempt to recruit others to their viewpoint.

There are some common misconceptions about focus groups that should be taken into account before the method is chosen (Thackeray and Neiger, 2004). These misconceptions include:

1. **The focus group is quick, easy and inexpensive.** This depends on the amount of data and depth of analysis. Morgan (1988) estimates that a focus group takes two weeks to plan, two weeks for recruiting participants, one week to run and two and one half weeks to analyse. These estimates could be multiplied by the number of groups required for a representative sample.

2. **The focus group can be used as a source of quantitative data.** As the data is collected in a way that constructs new knowledge, it is not a good method for collecting numerical data, nor is it a good method for collecting summative data as people’s ideas may be shifting and changing as a result of the discussion. A survey would be a better method to use for these purposes.

3. **Only one or two focus groups are necessary.** This depends entirely on the questions to be answered and the diversity of the sample population. In some instances, some projects may require further focus groups to gather more in-depth data. Focus groups may need to be used in conjunction with other methods to ensure confidence in the data.
4. **The focus group opinion accurately reflects or represents individual opinion.** Group interaction can cause moments of catharsis and epiphany, where people suddenly achieve new insights, but these are often collective, rather than individual discoveries and could be transitory or heat of the moment reflections.

Watts and Ebbutt (1987) also argue that focus groups are of little use when a researcher wants personal information, as people are unlikely to share such information in public. Further follow up interviews with specific individuals would be required in this situation. Another major limitation is that coding data from focus groups is time consuming and can be difficult, if good notes haven’t been taken at the time, indicating who gave each response (Lewis, 1992). In common with other qualitative methods, the reliability of focus groups on their own as a data collection method is only fair (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). To strengthen validity and reliability of the data, the researcher needs to either collect data with a representative range of groups or to triangulate the data with other methods of data collection.

**Implementing the Focus Group Method**

**Characteristics of Focus Groups**

The ideal group size is usually regarded as being between six to eight people (Krueger, 1994). Smaller group size is recommended when participants have ‘expert’ knowledge to bring to the group (Thornton & Faisandier, 1998).

There is some debate about the merits of natural versus constructed focus groups. In theory, if a wide range of opinions is to be canvassed then the focus group should be constructed using a sampling technique which will provide an accurate representation of the study population in terms of characteristics such as age, sex, and socio-economic status. However, random sampling becomes very difficult if it is intended that the group be representative (Lane et al., 2001). For this reason focus groups are often constructed using purposive sampling. A non-random sample limits how much the findings may speak to the views of others who share similar characteristics, however generalisability of the findings may not be what is considered important when the decision to use the focus group method is made.

constructed groups (where the participants have not met before) can be useful where the researcher wishes to minimise potential for group conformity brought about by pre-established norms and patterns of leadership (Leask, Hawe & Chapman, 2001). Participants who are unlikely to meet again face less personal cost if they express divergent views and are likely to be more honest (Krueger, 1994). Participants in newly formed groups that lack pre-established preoccupations are less likely to attempt to set the discussion agenda.

Natural groups are useful when it is pragmatic to use an existing group or when the goals of the research require or are enhanced by the presence of a pre-existing group dynamic. Natural groups are typically used when researchers are interested in the
interactions between participants as a phenomenon in itself. Natural groups are also used when bringing together a group of strangers would be culturally insensitive and would inhibit interaction (Leask, Hawe & Chapman, 2001).

Patton (1990) argues that homogenous groups, those groups with a significant amount in common, are more likely to yield rich data than constructed groups with little in common. He states that the worst combination is a group that has experienced and inexperienced members, as the experienced members will dominate the group and render the inexperienced mute and engender feelings of inadequacy. In addition, when discussing sensitive issues, a mixed group, with significantly different opinions can create difficulties.

**Running a Focus Group**

Sometimes the researcher cannot run focus group meetings for political, cultural or social reasons, or because it would lead to sanitised, or incomplete data. For example it would be problematic for a Dean or Head of Department to run a focus group with members of his/her staff for the purpose of a research study. Sometimes it may not be appropriate for a researcher to be the person running a group for participants from a different cultural/ethnic group, particularly if the focus of the discussion is a cultural issue. Yelland and Gifford (1995) found that it was necessary to ensure that groups were clustered into appropriate ethnicities and led by moderators with community credibility. McLachlan-Smith et al. (1999) employed Maori and Pacific researchers with credibility in their communities to run focus groups with Maori and Pacific Islands nations people and to analyse the data collected.

The moderator of a focus group needs to remain objective and not take sides or express beliefs or opinions. A moderator needs to be skilled in managing group interactions and to use pauses and probes to good effect. Thornton and Faisandier (1998) state that in the focus group the moderator is the research instrument in the same way that a questionnaire is in survey research – the moderator needs to ensure smooth presentation and clarity in process and requirements for participants.

Greenbaum (2000) identifies several key functions of the role: strategic consultant and planner, content manager, project coordinator/implementer, facilitator, analyst, communicator and psychologist/friend. The moderator should perform all of these functions well if participants are to feel comfortable in sharing their opinions, regardless of individual opinion differences.

The recommended pattern for running a focus group is as follows: welcome, overview of the topic, ground rules and first question (Thornton & Faisandier, 1998). The questions should start off broad and become increasingly specific as the interview proceeds. There is a standard flow of questions for focus groups (Kreuger, 1994):

- Opening questions (or ‘round robin’).
- Introductory questions.
• Transition questions.
• Key questions.
• Ending questions.

Not all questions are of equal importance – the key questions are the purpose of the focus group, but opportunities for the group to warm up and get comfortable with talking in front of each other are important. It can be useful to trial the questions with a group similar to the research focus group to establish the level at which the questions should be pitched. At the end of the focus group interview participants should be given a summary of the key points that emerged in the discussion and opportunity to add to or challenge this (Thornton & Faisandier, 1998).

There are a variety of techniques that can be used for asking questions. ‘Think back’ questions can make people draw on their experience and remove them from the immediacy of their feelings about the present situation of being in the focus group. Participants can be asked to draw pictures to illustrate their feelings or experiences and to explain these to group, or participants can be shown pictures by the moderator and asked to respond to these. Another technique is to ask people to make lists of three things they liked or disliked and then to discuss them. Be careful of using ‘why’ questions too early, as people do not always think about why they have done things or believe in things and it can lock people into positions very early in the interview. ‘Why’ is a probe question, not an initial question (Thornton & Faisandier, 1998).

Getting all members of the group to speak early in the group helps to ‘break the ice’, enabling people to feel comfortable about speaking again (Thornton & Faisandier, 1998). The moderator should lay down ground rules for interactions, particularly when there is a controversial topic to be discussed. The moderator needs to identify the typical group interaction pattern of the group and learn how to interrupt the group, without causing offence.

Pragmatic considerations when planning and running a focus group include:

• Ensure ethical issues are covered and participants understand the purpose and process of study and have given their consent.
• Choose a room that is comfortable to participants and preferably familiar. Seat participants in a circle so that all faces can be seen.
• Tape-record the session for a record of what was said. This is useful for checking against any written record. Use a powerful multi-direction microphone.
• No focus group should go longer than two hours. Allow about 15 minutes for the introduction and 15 minutes for the conclusion. Consider the needs of your participants, for example if they have young children or babies present the interview should be much shorter in length.
• If finances permit an assistant is useful to employ to organise the environment and take care of needs while the moderator focuses on running the group.
**Analysis of Interview Material**

The moderator and/or assistant are in a better position to identify who is talking and to track particular viewpoints when transcribing the tape-recordings than someone who was not present at the focus group interview. Krueger (1994) suggests that to enhance the legitimacy of the method that the same person who conducts the group should also analyse the data.

Common methods of data analysis for focus groups include:

- **Content analysis**, where ideas or words are identified along with the number and frequency of how often these ideas occur are noted. When conducting focus groups with more than one group, it can be useful to do a content analysis of the responses to common questions asked.
- **Thematic analysis**, where key themes emerging from the data are identified. This approach is often useful when there are no preconceptions about what the findings will be, so finding out what people have to say is the purpose of the analysis.

The Qualitative Research Unit at the National Centre for Social Research in the United Kingdom developed a framework for analysing qualitative data. For group data, the unit of analysis is the group, rather than the individual. It involves summarising and classifying data according to a thematic framework (Lane et al., 2001). The five key stages are: familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation of key objectives. Using this approach, the transcript of each focus group can be read and annotated. If more than one person is involved in analysis, a group process is also required for deciding on themes. Discussions about similarities between analyses will be necessary to decide upon emergent themes (Saulnier, 2000).

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored the notion of focus groups as a research method. Only a small number of researchers have used focus group methodology in New Zealand early childhood education studies, although it is clearly a method that has much potential as a research method for the sector with children, teachers, families and the community.

As this paper has indicated, the focus group, when it is used well, has many advantages. The focus group is particularly useful for bringing people together to generate multiple and diverse understandings of a topic, in an empowering way. It is also particularly useful in the planning stages of research, such as action research methods, to generate research focus, strategies and hypotheses. Along with other group methods of communication, the focus group has the potential to generate moments of catharsis and epiphany, whereby participants and researchers may arrive at new or deeper understandings of a topic.
However care needs to be taken with this method, as it is considerably more time consuming than it appears to be at first glance and the skill of the interviewer is of paramount importance. Like any qualitative methodology, based on communication, it is limited by both the researcher and the participants. Without careful and skilful management by the researcher, this is a method that has the potential to at best generate poor data and at worst, like any other group process, to cause embarrassment, discomfort and possible harm. It is also limited by the choice of sample, so researchers need to think carefully about whom they run a focus group with, and how they may be able to strengthen their confidence in their data by running more than one focus group or triangulating the focus group data with other research methods.

Despite the inherent challenges of this method of research, focus groups are a valuable means of gathering diverse understandings of complex topics in an efficient and collaborative way. The focus group is a powerful method, which is consistent with the early childhood focus on communication and collaboration with our communities, and one which rightly deserves a place in our stable of research and self-review methodologies.

References


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Claire McLachlan is the Programme Leader: Early Years Education at Auckland University of Technology. Claire has a range of current research interests in early childhood education, which include emergent literacy, physical activity in young children and self-review in the early education setting. Claire teaches research methods at undergraduate and postgraduate level at AUT, as well as papers on child development and learning and teaching.