

# **Methodological Issues of Applying Focus Groups with Children**

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Children are increasingly seen as competent informants where their interests and needs are in question. We cannot only rely on assessments of adults, as children have their own view. This has consequences for the social research methods we apply. Typically research methods are developed with adults and their abilities in mind. But children have different needs and abilities and therefore pose specific demands on research design and researcher. Although in practice there has been some research employing children, so far methodological conclusions are rare.

In this paper focus groups as means of data collection are examined. The guiding questions are: Which peculiarities result regarding the method of focus groups when carried out with children? How can we enhance children's potential for participation? How can we improve data quality by adapting the method to respondent abilities?

The analyses are based on five focus groups conducted with children and adolescents aged 6 to 16 in Germany, dealing with comparable topics and tasks. The core categories of the analyses were verbal, interactive and cognitive abilities of children in focus-group situations, different levels of activities during the focus groups, specifics of group interaction, as well as procedural aspects and their implications for the feasibility of focus-group research. Furthermore, to achieve a broad picture of the focus groups, not only respective qualitative (e.g. evaluation of the content of the statements) but also quantitative aspects (e.g. number of words used) were considered. These factors were used to draw conclusions regarding cognitive, social and verbal abilities of children at different ages in focus-group situations, the consequences for the method, as well as its resulting advantages and disadvantages.

The results show the different abilities and needs of each age group and point out the feasibility and potential gain in insights possible through using focus groups with children.

**Keywords:** focus group, children, abilities

## **Introduction**

When the interests and needs of children are the object of study we should rely not only on the assessments of adults but be prepared to perceive children themselves as competent informants. Social research methods are typically developed to be employed on adults. Due to different needs and abilities, specific demands are made on research design and researchers when children are the main subjects of research. Although in practice there has been some research employing children (e.g. market research), so far methodological considerations have been rare.

The study presented here aims to contribute to this methodological discussion in regard to children as participants in focus groups. The age-related abilities and specificities of the behaviour and thinking of children in focus-group research is analysed and the strengths and weaknesses of employing focus groups with children aged 6 to 15 are discussed.

But why focus groups? Focus groups seem to be especially suitable for researching the perceptions of children, for with such a non-standardized and communicative technique children can have their say (Billmann-Mahecha 1994: 288). As the children themselves govern the data collection to a wide extent, the risk of being a mouthpiece of adults is decreased (Richter 1997: 79). On the other hand focus groups require certain verbal and social skills in participants. Therefore a number of questions arise: Are focus groups with children feasible? At what age can children be constructive participants in focus-group research? Are children able to discuss seriously? What difference does age make regarding behaviour and how can facilitators react adequately? Do focus groups with children offer similar advantages to those with adults? And what are the drawbacks?

Based on a comparison of age groups, a cross-sectional study was conducted of five focus groups. The theoretical basis was drawn from general methodological knowledge on focus groups, and secondarily on results from child and youth research. A very brief introduction to this theoretical background is given now.

## **Theoretical Background**

The central characteristics of qualitative focus groups are a comparatively natural setting, communicativeness and openness. Naturalness is due to the fact that participants know different kinds of 'round tables' from everyday life and this setting for a communicative process is considered to be the most convenient for them (Lamnek 2005: 51).

The goal of openness and communicativeness is to let participants say whatever they have to say, with their own relevancies and in their own words. The strength of focus-group

research lies in its suitability for exploring new fields and generating hypotheses. Different to interviews, not only the view of one person is surveyed, but a view that is validated through the group dynamic. Interaction among the respondents stimulates new ideas. 'The group interaction produces data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group' (Morgan 1988: 12). Focus groups elicit a wider spectrum of opinions. At the same time group pressure challenges participants to be more realistic (Albrecht et al. 1993: 51). Therefore 'such a forum of opinion gathering may render data that are more [externally] valid than methods that assess individuals' opinions in relatively asocial settings' (Albrecht et al. 1993: 54). Only in the process of a discussion does one have to take a certain position, articulate and defend it.

Thus, the most important advantage of focus groups is obviously interaction among participants (and not, as in more standardized procedures, the question-and-answer process between researcher and participant). Irrespective the fact that focus groups seem to be more realistic and relevant to day-to-day experience than interviews, they still take place under laboratory settings, which presents a threat to external validity (Lamnek 2005: 26).

'Although the above benefits of social interaction for opinion formation are compelling, the communication process in group settings is also subject to problems' (Albrecht et al. 1993: 55). 'One of the greatest disadvantages of the focus group technique is its highly subjective nature' (Greenbaum 1998: 68). Results from a focus group are very much dependent on the dynamic within the group, so that the comparability of the outcome is not necessarily given (Flick 1995: 139). Further drawbacks are: The group setting can on the one hand enhance expression of opinions, but on the other hand, also prevent them, e.g. due to fear of negative sanctions. The more or less public setting of a focus group and the related social desirability can inhibit giving one's 'private' opinion (Spöhring 1989: 215). Furthermore the group dynamics can become more important than the content of the focus group itself (Lamnek 2005: 89). The biggest advantage, the group dynamic, can therefore be a hindrance at the same time.

Altogether the employment of focus groups can be seen as ambiguous. The usefulness depends on the research interest. But why should focus groups be more suitable for research with children?

### **Children as Informants**

Children need careful treatment in methodological as well as ethical respects. The specific psychological, interactive, cognitive and verbal abilities of children must be taken into

account as well as the inability of adult researchers to put themselves into their position (Wilk 1996: 75). Therefore qualitative methods appear more adequate due to their greater orientation towards participants' needs. Now the advantages of focus groups come into play: The openness of the method allows the researcher to get closer to children's views. And the relation of authority, otherwise difficult to eliminate, can be diminished through establishing communication and trust (Richter 1997: 77). The superior number of children present, as compared to the adults, can be helpful under the same aspect (Heinzel 2000: 117). It is not the interaction between child and adult, but the one between children that is focused on.

But there are limits to the focus-group method. Focus groups include quite specific types of interaction: they offer opportunities for self-promotion, narration and argumentation (Neumann-Braun/Deppermann 1998: 244). But at the same time they require corresponding skills and cooperativeness. It is not said that children possess these abilities. In any case data collection should be adapted to the abilities of children. But, to assess their abilities correctly, we need far more practical experience. Although childhood research is innovative, newly developed methods are rarely systematically reflected upon and published (Fuhs 2000: 94), and especially focus groups are neglected to a wide extent. The present study is an attempt to help fill this gap.

## **Research Design**

Five focus groups with participants aged 6 to 15 were conducted in Germany on the basis of focus-group principles and experiences with children as participants in social science research. In the following the most important aspects of the research design are presented.

The main interest was in the interactive, discursive and cognitive skills of children in focus-group situations. Because aspects of content were considered secondary, the guideline of the focus groups was constructed according to anticipated group dynamics caused by different ways of asking or different kinds of tasks. The formal setting of the tasks remained the same for every age group. The general topic of discussion – 'leisure time' – was varied only slightly to adapt to specific, age-related interests of participants. The course of the focus-group sessions was the following: After a short preliminary sequence with the function of 'breaking the ice', informational questions on daily aspects (most liked and most frequent activity) were asked in the introduction to ease the transition into the discussion. Afterwards two group-oriented tasks followed (mapping of leisure activities and creating a daily routine for two types of pupils) where participants should find a solution together. Then a discussion about one presumably amicable (e.g. favourite music) and one controversial topic (e.g. ego-

shooters) was initiated. Finally a 'fantasy story' was given to provoke a process of building up opinions to be justified with pros and cons. (For time-related reasons not every topic could be discussed in every group: no amicable discussion for the 8-9 year-olds and no controversial discussion among the 6-7 year-olds.)

The group size varied from eight in the groups of 6-7 and 8-9 year-olds, to ten of age 10-11, and nine in the 12-13 and 14-15 year-olds. The participants were recruited from their schools and randomly selected from class lists. Except for the group of seventh graders all groups consisted of members of one class. The seventh-grade group consisted of pupils of two different classes, to test whether it makes a difference that participants are friends or complete strangers.

To avoid a sense of strangeness between participants and towards the moderator in all groups, a preliminary meeting was held a few days before the focus group took place. The procedure was explained, technical equipment shown and the moderator introduced. The access to the discussion was facilitated especially for younger participants this way. Simultaneously the moderator was able to gain impressions of the group and prepare herself for the focus group. The preliminary meeting as well as the focus group itself took place in a quiet room within the school building.

As the content of the focus groups was interesting but 'not of interest', the analysis dealt with more formal aspects like the progress of the conversation, group dynamic, role differentiation and of course the abilities of children. The analysis aimed at methodical and methodological specifics by comparing results from among the age groups and in a kind of 'secondary analysis' with experiences drawn from focus groups with adults discussed in the literature.

On the one hand quantitative aspects served the analysis of relevant aspects: Number of words, requests to speak and breaks were counted. The content of the statements was categorized with the scheme of 'interaction process analysis' developed by Robert Bales (1950). Positive and negative social-emotional interactions, answers and questions could be differentiated. Subsequently interaction profiles of participants and individual tasks could be created. In addition interaction-matrices – so called 'who-to-whom matrices' – and participation hierarchies could be construed. These aspects were very helpful in examining group structure and role differentiation (these results are not presented here).

On the other hand, the more qualitative aspects were analysed, e.g. social, cognitive and verbal skills – for example the ability to change perspective (decentration), deal with

different views, argumentative skills and so on. These more or less descriptive aspects could be supported by the more quantitative aspects mentioned above.

## **Results**

### *6- and 7-year-olds*

Generally the 6- and 7-year-olds talked openly and joyfully according to their relevance system. Despite great commitment and many requests to speak only few new aspects arose. But statements were often loose and expressions of opinion remained without debate. Altogether contributions seemed mostly unreflected. This might be a sign of a lack of changing perspectives and difficulties with abstraction. According to Selman (1984) children aged 3 to 8 do not recognise that somebody else might interpret the same situation differently. However, a discussion was aggravated.

For constructing guidelines and tasks for focus groups this lack of the ability to abstract has to be considered. Additional material, like puppets, a form table for constructing a daily routine, or pictures to illustrate rules of a conversation, turned out to be very helpful. Playful elements shouldn't be lacking because this way children can be kept attending to the discussion. As the attention span is quite short, instructions should also be very short. During the focus group it seems to be important to give the group enough time to come to an end independently. At the same time the expenditure of time increases, for the planning as well as for conducting the focus group.

The group size of eight turned out to be too large. In a smaller group single participants would have a greater chance to talk, discussions and group work would be facilitated, the moderator would have to intervene less, and transcription would become less difficult because of fewer overlapping contributions. To develop this further, one could have groups with children of different ages so that the older ones could be responsible for coordination. At the same time the difference should not be too big to avoid a 'suppression' of the younger ones.

All things considered, focus groups with children of 6 and 7 are feasible but the gain in knowledge is limited. Rather information than in the group process validated or deeper-lying opinions could be discovered<sup>1</sup>. The (necessary) intervention of the moderator, the participants' pursuit of dominance, and a lack of ability to compromise challenged the validity of the results in regard to content. Planning and conducting the focus group requires

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<sup>1</sup> The advantage of focus groups – to get insights into more detailed and deeper-lying opinions – is questionable in this case because the necessary 'collective orientation' was absent or maybe even because there were no deeper-lying opinions.

considerably more time to adjust to the children's abilities (but this would also be necessary with any other research method).

### *8-and 9-year-olds*

The participants aged 8 and 9 worked in a very concentrated and dedicated manner. Group tasks and developing a consensus wasn't been a problem for this age. The third graders were able to use their cognitive skills to coordinate and organize the discussion; therefore the moderator had to be involved less than before. They were able to distinguish between self and other and the respective perspectives. They took over the other perspective and knew the others would do the same. This reciprocity facilitates the course of interaction and the structuring of conversation. This was important for the success of the focus group.

Despite their age, the third-graders managed to compromise and establish a positive atmosphere within the group: Although some conflicts occurred – mainly during group-oriented tasks – the participants were able to resolve them themselves. Role differentiation facilitated the work on the group tasks. At the end of every topic at least a short conformity phase took place in which conflicts decreased and laughter increased. It seems to have been helpful that participants knew each other beforehand and that they had an idea of what to expect of the focus group and moderator through the preliminary meeting. Thus, a relaxed atmosphere could develop and the focus group showed greater relevance to everyday life.

Group tasks aiming at consensus were unproblematic. Through the debate with peers a wider spectrum of opinions was voiced and presented in more detail than would be possible in an individual interview. That deeper-lying opinions existed and could have been brought out is questionable. Otherwise focus groups with children at this age seem to have advantages and disadvantages very similar to the ones we know from focus groups with adults. Nevertheless, the amount of time invested for planning and preparing tends to be higher for this age-group.

### *10- and 11-year-olds*

The 10- and 11-year-olds had an enormous need to talk and were quite excited. No reservation or nervousness was noticeable. Therefore the basic aim of a focus group – to break up the formal interview situation – was achieved. But opinions were lacking due to many (and extensive) narrative elements. The chance of a focus group to elicit a wider variety of opinions was therefore limited. Many times, the approval and sympathy of the moderator – she was the one they told their stories to – seemed to be more important than substantial

contributions to the topic. At the same time interaction among peers was limited and the relevance of the results for everyday life remains questionable.

Unlike in the younger groups, in the group of the 10- and 11-year-olds more topics than expected could be discussed, but, of course, in less detail. After a relatively short time the participants grew tired of one topic and wanted to move on. (Probably they were over-motivated.) A clear role differentiation facilitated the organization of group tasks. Obviously this group was trained in 'democratic' procedure.

Altogether the focus group with the fifth-graders was successful but could be improved further by some small changes. Compared to the results with younger participants, with adults we could clearly get closer to the ideal of focus groups. Overall, it is advisable to have smaller groups; in this case it was 10 persons. The rate of silent members should be smaller and individuals prompted to participate more. The fast change of topics and the fixation on the moderator could probably be diminished. As role structure seemed quite definite, probably a group of total strangers could be helpful in some respects.

### *12- and 13-year-olds*

The nine seventh-graders were very reserved and especially protective of anything regarding their privacy. Most successful were topics with no 'intimate' content. The individual topics were handled quite briefly and further inquiries did not provide new details. The number of refusals (in terms of silent members) was quite high without any chance for the moderator to influence this. However, cognitive and verbal skills would have been sufficiently developed for 'adequate' participation. The roles taken were limited to self-centred or group-related aspects, not to the task. As a consequence the content suffered and the effectivity of the focus group is questionable. An intense pursuit of homogeneity within the group was omnipresent. This focus group was the only one that did not consist of members of the same class community. So a group identity had to be built up first and, since for an identity the separation from others is vital, the group distanced itself from the moderator<sup>2</sup>. Most likely it is an age-specific phenomena to reject adults and orientate to peers. Differences in girls' and boys' behaviour may have brought about this pursuit of homogeneity. So nobody wanted to contradict the previously stated opinion. Due to fear of isolation and search for approval, no real conflict occurred and opinions were stated very carefully if at all. Most likely there was simply a lack of the self-confidence to participate more actively. Nevertheless participants

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<sup>2</sup> The seating arrangement illustrates this reservation pretty well: While younger participants tried to be as close to the moderator as possible, the 12 and 13 year-olds moved their chairs as far away from the moderator as possible. A 'front' developed instead of a circle.

should not be challenged to deviate, otherwise motivation could decrease further. But the gain in insights was limited and the validity endangered by the strong impact of the peer group, although this might reflect its true influence in everyday life.

However, cognitive and verbal skills would have been sufficiently developed for conducting a focus group. In sum, the advantages of a focus group could hardly be realized – no deeper-lying opinions, no more detailed statements, no reduction of psychological control, no private opinions were stated – and some disadvantages were reinforced – greater requirements for cooperation, higher refusal rates, lack of a chance for the moderator to influence refusals. Probably the focus group was too closely linked to the institution ‘school’ so that participants showed the ‘cool’ and dismissive behaviour they usually projected towards school. The only advice here is: although the recruitment via school is cost-effective, the focus group should probably be more clearly separated from any association with the school situation.

#### *14- and 15-year-olds*

Characteristic for the focus group with ninth-graders were many questions, especially those nonverbally expressed, which can be traced back to insecurity – probably they didn’t understand what was expected of them. Insecurity also manifested itself in comparatively few proposals, information and opinions. But as soon as an opinion was stated it was illustrated by quite many details. As participants focused on the moderator, interaction among the peers was lacking and no group dynamic could evolve. Characteristic of this group were also conflicts between the sexes with the boys being dominant. The only active girl was an ‘outsider’ and therefore the only one who contributed deviant opinions, mostly after some provocation. Due to reservation not only a lot of breaks occurred, often filled with giggling, but the moderator had to ask many questions. There was either a consensus (presented with one voice), or nobody wanted to contradict and therefore attract attention. (Proof of the second assumption was the topic ‘music’. They obviously had different preferences but did not want discuss them.)

Generally focus groups should be applicable with adolescents of age 14 and 15, but problematic here was a lack of peer interaction and group pressure that inhibited statements of deviant opinions. As adolescents at this age are self-assured enough to take part in a focus group with strangers, this could be an alternative because structures are less hardened. At the same time attempts to gain approval can be reinforced. But conflicts can evoke more detailed opinions and make the participants defend their positions. To allow both sexes to work freely

without a dominating need for recognition and role behaviour, it is worth considering separated groups for males and females. Due to the negative image of schools among this age group, the focus group should be clearly separated from (and not identified with) this institution. Furthermore, clear instructions and hints about the expected procedure should be given. Topics to discuss seem to be more adequate than group tasks.

### Comparison of age groups

After an overview of the individual age-group, results will be compared and a few important differences between different ages picked out.

The preliminary meeting turned out to be very helpful, especially for the 6- to 11-year-olds. Children could get used to the camera, get information about the moderator and the procedure, and they had time to talk freely. Thus a relaxed atmosphere could be created and the access to the focus group later on was easier.

The table below illustrates the varying willingness to participate in the focus groups with some selected quantitative characteristics:

**Table 1: Comparison of selected quantitative characteristics (without moderator)**

	1st grade	3rd grade	5th grade	7th grade	9th grade	average
<b>Number of participants</b>	8	8	10	9	9	9
<b>Duration (minutes)</b>	44	42	44	37	36	41
<b>Requests to speak</b>	828	725	921	451	254	636
<b>Words per request to speak</b>	4.1	4.5	5.2	4.6	15.4	5.5
<b>Words spoken at the same time</b>	1075	718	1099	372	181	689
<b>Pauses (seconds)</b>	181	246	201	263	469	272
<b>Duration of pauses (%)</b>	6.9 %	9.8 %	7.6 %	11.8 %	21.4 %	11.1 %

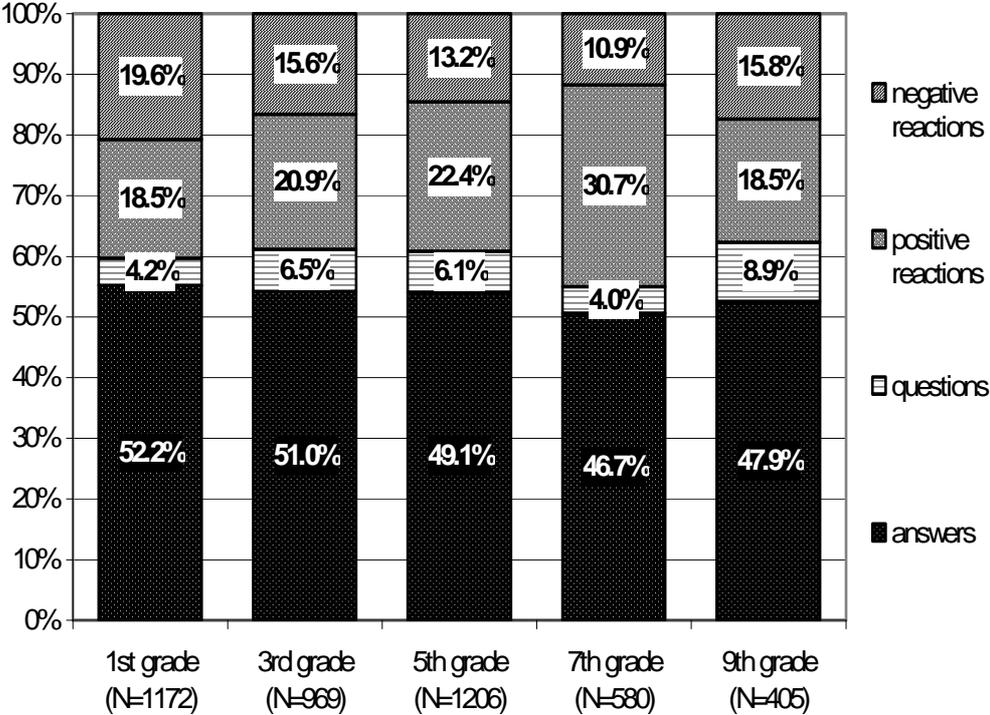
In regard to participation it turned out that the duration of the focus group discussion decreased with age although more topics were dealt with. On average participants made fewer requests to speak the older they were, but used more words for each statement. Due to weaker cognitive and social skills, younger participants' statements were shorter. Thirteen-year-olds responded more briefly because of age-related reasons. In contrast, the contributions of the 14-15 year-olds were particularly detailed, on the one hand because they were not interrupted by others, and because their verbal skills were rather good. Older children talked less at the

same time, which illustrates the finding that attempts to dominate decrease with age<sup>3</sup>. At the same time the share of pauses of the duration of the focus group increased with age.

An activity ranking (see Table 2) documents that the moderator contributed less, the older the participants were, mainly because less structuring from her side was necessary<sup>4</sup>. The higher activity rate on part of the participants can be ascribed to a wider role differentiation. This doesn't mean that the general level of activity rose, but that the difference between active and silent participants grew with age. The older the participants were the clearer the role ascription was: More silent members appeared and 'leaders' took over the 'discussion'. But the leaders did not coordinate the activities of others, but acted rather as a spokespersons in the group.

So not only was the role differentiation more distinct in the groups of older children, but the structures were more rigid as well. This confirms results of Moreno (1974: 57) stating that group organization differentiates with growing age.

**Table 2: Moderator and the three most active participants and their share of all words**

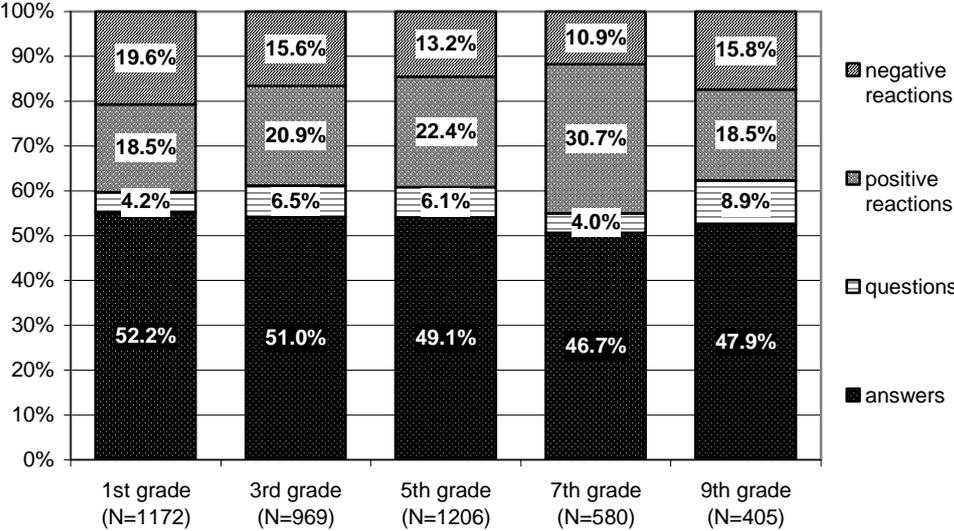


<sup>3</sup> At least domination through words, not through psychological pressure.

<sup>4</sup> Except for the 7th-grade group where the participants were very quiet.

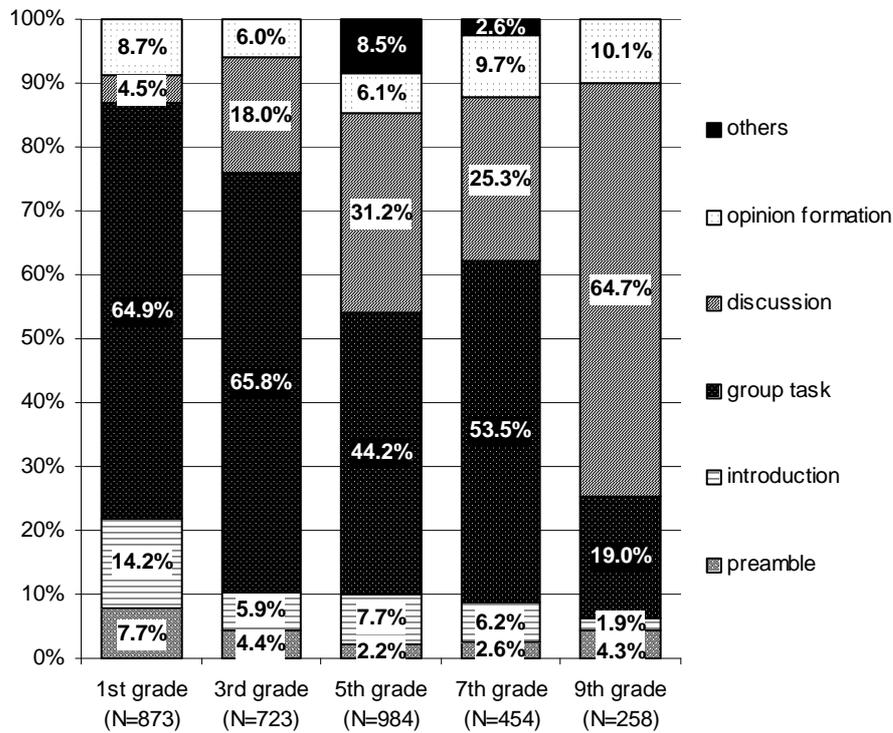
A comparison of interaction profiles of the groups (see Table 3) shows that the amount of positive reaction (solidarity, laughter and agreement) increased until the age of 12 and 13 and negative reaction (disagreement, tension, and hostility) decreased. This might be due to a growing pressure to conform until puberty, which goes hand-in-hand with a growing importance of the peer group. The fact that 6-7 year-olds disagreed more often than they agreed illustrates their lack of an ability to compromise and their attempts to dominate others. Solidarity and a sense of belonging together is natural for adolescents but children have to learn this first (Machwirth 1994: 249). Animosity and tension in the groups of older participants was mainly due to conflicts between the sexes and not to a lack of the ability or willingness to compromise or take somebody else’s perspective.

**Table 3: Shares of Interaction-Process Categories (without moderator)**



By comparing the amount of requests to talk per task complex (see Table 4), it turned out that with increasing age the focus moved from group tasks to discussions. Younger children used more time and words for group tasks while older children concentrated on discussions. On the one hand this shows that older participants had the skills to argue and that they preferred those tasks. Younger participants on the other hand soon became tired of discussion. They were better at handling group tasks.

**Table 4: Rate of participation per task complex (measured by requests to speak, without values of moderator)**



## Conclusion

After this comparison of the main results I draw some conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups. Whether focus groups with children can offer the same advantages like those with adults depends on the skills of the participants and their ‘utilization’ by the researcher. This table tries to give an overview of the results regarding the known advantages and disadvantages of focus groups with adults and my own results with children.

**Table 5: Conclusions about advantages and disadvantages of focus groups**

age	6-7	8-9	10-11	12-13	14-15
<b>Advantages</b>					
Interaction among participants	Limited	Yes	Yes	Limited	Limited
Variety of reactions	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly	Yes
Elaborate opinions	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Disadvantages</b>					
Public atmosphere	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Willingness to cooperate	No	No	No	Yes	Partly
High costs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly	No

The interactive and discursive skills were problematic with the 6- and 7-year-olds, if one concentrates on the discussions. In the older children it was age-specific behaviour instead which inhibited the necessary cooperation. Nevertheless the presence of peers enhanced a greater variety of reactions for the analysis. For a validation of opinions in the course of the discussion references to others are essential. But the first-graders lacked the necessary 'collective orientation', the fifth-graders were too focused on the moderator, and the seventh- and ninth-graders didn't cooperate among each other. The strength of validated opinions was therefore only partly usable.

Similar results could be found for the advantage of gaining more elaborate opinions. For the first graders it was questionable whether deeper opinions existed at all. The 12-13 year-olds were afraid of disclosing too much and therefore their opinions could hardly be elicited. For the 12- to 15-year-olds the public atmosphere was a disadvantage – group pressure led to uniform opinions. As a result of a fear of embarrassment the refusal rate or number of silent members was extraordinarily high at this age. According to our findings the willingness to participate is no problem for the 6- to 11-year-olds, but it is for the 12- to 15-year-olds.

In an economic respect the amount of time required (as a measure of cost) is higher the younger the participants are. Transcription was very time-consuming due to the many overlapping statements. Additionally, more time was needed for planning and conducting the focus groups.

Altogether, the disadvantages of focus groups remain and some even increase. Focus groups are indeed applicable at the age of 6 and 7, but the gain in insights is limited. With children of age 8 to 11 focus groups should be more successful if the procedure can be adapted to their abilities. Groups of a wider age range could be used so that the older participants could take over more difficult tasks of coordination. For 12- to 15-year-olds the question of feasibility is more difficult to answer because it remains the question whether other methods of data collection could not achieve better results for them. Probably groups of total strangers, of a single gender, and with a strict disassociation from school settings would work out better.

Although no general advice regarding age or research design for the successful employment of focus groups can be given, the foregoing discussion has documented at least that there cannot be a uniform approach for children: Age is the critical factor. Even with a small age discrepancy, differences in abilities and behaviour arise. Thus, depending on the children's age, different requirements are posed for the methodical design. A specific, but at

the same time flexible procedure is necessary in order to gain from engaging children in focus groups.

Summary of the main results (with a reserved degree of generalization):

- Group size should not exceed eight. The younger the children, the smaller the group should be.
- For the same amount of tasks, younger children need more time. But any focus group should not take more than roughly 45 minutes.
- A preliminary meeting before the focus groups reduces strangeness and facilitates the participants' access to the discussion.
- The moderator plays a central role and his/her being accepted is important. He/she should be young, experienced with children and empathetic.
- Playful elements and alternative ways to express oneself are helpful.
- For younger participants group tasks (with some help) are suitable, while discussions are more appropriate for older participants.
- For participants under 12 years of age, groups of friends are advisable, but for older participants there is a risk that existing group structures can dominate the content.
- From the age of 13 onwards groups should be separated by gender.

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