

ERD 2016: Education, Reflection, Development, Fourth Edition

Participant Observation of Children in Kindergarten Environment

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Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.12.63>

Patterns of ethics must be applied in participant observation of children. This article presents an ethical approach applied in one investigation regarding some aspects of children's behavior in kindergarten environment. Drafting informed consents and describing the procedure for obtaining agreements are detailed. Conducting participant observation, in order to eliminate subjectivity, requires compliance with rigorous practical steps and customized grids following the research objectives. The steps for participant observation implementation are presented, respectively: the researcher's relationship with the environment before observation, entry into the observed environment, setting in the observed environment (accommodation, relationship development, data collection, actual audio-video recording), leaving the observed environment, making notes, interpretation, and coding and results presentation. The theoretical steps follow a concrete research regarding the process of cultural identity building of Romanian ethnic children enrolled in German kindergartens teaching classes in Sibiu. Finally, following the example, this article presents concrete limits and recommendations for conducting participant observation of children.

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Keywords: Participant observation; ethics; steps; procedures.

1. Introduction

This study presents a possible research approach through participant observation. The method is exposed by exemplifying a study aimed to examine the process of cultural identity building of

Romanian ethnic children enrolled in German kindergartens teaching classes. The approach presented here was used in a more extensive research resulted in a doctoral thesis.

The literature highlights clear differences between direct observation and participant observation. We will expose here the main differences as arguments for choosing the right method of investigation in strong connection with the intentions of the study.

Direct observation does not necessarily imply the presence of the observer. Audio or video recordings can be collected in the absence of the researcher and pursue ordinal data collection or factual descriptions such as: how often, how much, how intense, who exactly etc. Interpreting data will regard strictly the frequencies collected. In participant observation, data is connected with other information and the goal is to explain in depth and complete interpretation. The question is mainly *why*, not only who, how many, how many times (Spradley, 1980).

For the study used as an example participant observation was chosen, not direct observation, because the research goal was to understand and describe the process cultural identity construction. The presence of the researcher was necessary to achieve interpretations, especially taking into account the issues observed (free play, the autonomy of children, shame, guilt, initiative etc.).

Discussion about participant observation has many dimensions. To exemplify this study, we will expose the steps taken in conducting a research using this method and ethical issues in relation with children involved in the process.

Roughly, the stages for participant observation are: establishing rapport, getting in the field, recording observations and data, and analyzing data (Ambert et al., 1995; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Richardson, 2000). We will further detail the steps, exemplifying concrete procedures in the mentioned study.

2. Method

2.1. Research approach

This research is descriptive and has a non-comparative and non-experimental approach. It's important to specify this in order to establish the observer's status in the investigation field.

2.2. Steps in participant observation

For the chosen subject, participant observation followed the steps proposed by Peretz (2002):

Researcher's relationship with the environment subjected to observation

The observer is a kindergarten teacher. She has six years of experience in education, is a Romanian ethnic and does not speak German. For this particularly study, knowing German is an asset rather than a limit, because it provides a clear observation and focus on objectives.

Entry into the observed environment

The kindergarten in which the observation was made is one of the 28 pre-school units in Sibiu that have a German department.

Class teachers were the first contacted. Once they have accepted the proposal, a written request was sent to the institution manager and to Sibiu School's Inspectorate. After all approvals were obtained, the investigation started.

In September 2015, researcher attended the first annual meeting with parents and obtained their agreement for the study.

Setting in the observed environment

- Accommodation

Participant observation began in October 2015. The first two weeks, the researcher visited the children only five days, randomly chosen, and in five different periods of their program. The goal was to gradually accommodate preschoolers with the presence of the newcomer. The visits were in the beginning short, and up to 3 hours/day. Initially, contact was only with the class teachers. In these two weeks, the researcher did not note anything in presence of children and did not record anything (video or audio).

The researcher was presented short to children. The teacher was asked to tell children the researcher's name and that she will spend some time with them from that point on. Without further explanation, with the desire to leave children discover the observer's role there and to make the difference between her role and the teacher's.

- Relationship development

Since October 19 permanent participant observation started. A notebook was carried, in which the researcher noted in the sight of children. When they were curious about the agenda, they were let to look and draw in it. Gradually, the children got used to the presence of the observer.

The researcher have not intervened in any situation, except when one of the teachers asked for help (if one of the children was in danger and she was closer to him).

The observer answered to children if they asked questions, but didn't challenged conversation. For any request, she directed children to teachers, in order to differentiate roles. This differentiation is important, because researcher and educators are adults, and, in children's eyes and in the kindergarten context, the role could be transferable only by this criterion.

- Data collection. Actual audio-video recording

From November until April, recording had started (video and audio). The process was the same as for the agenda. The researcher let children discover the devices, put their hands on them, and answered all their questions. From the beginning, was noted that children were accustomed to being filmed, but not audio recorded. The audio recorder showed more interest for them.

To record, the observer used three methods (Sparrman, 2005):

- Place the camera/recorder in a key spot and left the group. In these case the aim was to eliminate intervention as much as possible.
- Record scenes in which the observer was included and moved the camera/recorder from place

to place to capture what intended.

- With the camera/recorder in hand, the researcher filmed/recorded moving among children.

Leaving the observed environment

A week before leaving the kindergarten, children were informed, without many explanations, but on a positive note, that the observer will not participate in their activities anymore. Last observation week (25th to 29th April 2016) was conducted normally in terms of participant observation.

Upon departure, in the last day, keeping a note of normality and not a festive one, the investigator thanked children for their participation.

Parents were informed about the departure, one week before the end of participant observation. The researcher personally thanked parents and wrote them a card, attaching contact in it (email, telephone).

Making notes

Notes were made following the two scales of observation. The first one concerns the environment itself, and the second one free play of children. The two grids are attached at the end of this paper.

The notes were collected in writing (agenda) and audio (voice recorder).

Interpretation, coding and results presentation

Collected data was synthesized in conceptual maps, following the main points of observation attached in grids.

3. Discussion

3.1. Research ethics

Before starting the participant observation the observer attended the first meeting with parents/legal tutors. She informed parents/legal tutors about the purpose and duration of the research, answered their questions and all parents/legal tutors signed the informed consent. She also obtained the kindergarten management agreement and Sibiu School Inspectorate for the study.

Regarding children, because they cannot give an informed consent, we have to specify that records were made only with their agreement. Whether they expressed, verbally or nonverbally, any disagreement in any situation, whether recording devices or simple presence/conversation created them discomfort, recording or taking stopped.

The names of children and teachers used in the analysis and interpretation of data were not the real ones. Citations exposed as arguments to the interpretation of results was presented as personal communications. Citations were placed in quotes and had names attached, which were not the real ones.

3.2. Limitations and recommendations

The following limitations and recommendations of the research can be mentioned:

- The angle of the camera in surprising different situations is sometimes a

disadvantage, because it doesn't manage to capture everything. The kindergarten classroom is divided into several spaces of various sizes. Children play in different places and it is difficult to record them all at once. For this reason, video recordings are supplemented by pictures, written notes and audio comments.

- Low quality of recording; captured sequences are regarded as arguments and sources of explanation, not for their artistic value. The researcher has basic technical skills.
- The recordings were made only by one researcher, so it bears the imprint perspective. At some events (activities with parents of St. Martin, carnival) recordings were made by a parent who usually handles filming activities.
- Researcher's profession (teacher) who performed most of the filming can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. The profession is regarded here as a pole attention focus by professional knowledge.
- Lack of knowledge of German language was an advantage because it allowed focusing on research objectives.

4. Conclusion

Conducting participant observation, in order to eliminate subjectivity, requires compliance with rigorous practical steps are customized grids following the research objectives. When subjects are minors, the rigors of ethics has special requirements that meet the peculiarities of children's age and their rights expressed directly or guarded by parents/legal tutors.

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Appendix A. Observation grids

A.1. Kindergarten environment

Observation aim

Institution

Location

Building and facilities

Classroom

Inventory

Group description (children, parents, teachers)

Teacher's experience in the German department

Vision over children education

Rules and regulation

Daily program

Events and extracurricular activities

A.2. Free play

Date

Play and space

Children involved in the game

The approximate duration of game

Language used in game

Roles

Ambiance

Materials used in game

Scenario

Autonomy	Shame
Initiative	Guilt

Appendix B. Informed consent structure

INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

RESEARCH PURPOSES

PROCEDURES

RISKS

BENEFITS

ALTERNATIVE OF DECISION

COSTS

WITHDRAWAL FORM RESEARCH

CONFIRMATION OF PARTICIPATION

PARENT/LEGAL TUTOR CONSENT FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION IN RESEACH

PARENT/LEGAL TUTOR CONSENT FOR use of visual images (pictures, video)