Observations of Babies and Toddlers in Library Settings

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Abstract

Participant observation, unlike the more traditional approach of querying adults about children's experiences, is identified as an appropriate and effective method for studying babies and toddlers in public library settings in order to explore these experiences from the children's own perspectives. In an observation study of eleven, thirty-minute baby storytimes conducted at two branches of a large public library system, the naturally occurring behavior of the children captured through observation field notes and audio-recording and transcription of the program successfully revealed numerous incidents of emergent literacy activities and social interaction. This article discusses the practicalities of implementing participant observation in storytime programs for very young children. Special requirements related to informed consent, the need to protect baby and toddler participants, and the challenge of gaining and maintaining access are addressed. Included is an appendix of recommended observation, child development, and research methods texts.

Introduction

Library programs for very young children (birth through two years) and their adult caregivers are common public library initiatives designed both to introduce caregivers to library resources for young children and to provide two conditions thought to enhance children's emergent literacy: a print-filled environment and "a caring adult to introduce the child to literary pleasure" (Greene, 1991, p. 7). Although much literature exists for practitioners justifying such programs and providing instructions on

how to conduct them (for example, ALA, Association of Library Service to Children, 1990, 1997; Dixon & Dowd, 1993; Dowd & Dixon, 1996; Feinberg & Deere, 1995; Feinberg, Kuchner & Feldman, 1998; Flatow, 1997; Maddigan & Drennan, 2003; Nespeca, 1994), little empirical research has been conducted to delineate what actually goes on in such programs and the benefits of the programs for the children and their caregivers. It is likely that this is at least partially due to the difficulties inherent in collecting empirical data about very young children in library settings.

Infancy and toddlerhood are seen as important periods in the human lifespan. In addition to library and information science (LIS), the disciplines of developmental psychology, early childhood education, sociology, anthropology, and the health sciences have had a deep and continuing interest in very young children. While most of these disciplines recognize that babies and toddlers "take an active role in exploring the physical world and shaping their interaction with others" (Caulfield, 2001, p. 3), Greig and Taylor note that "the younger the child, the less likely the child is to be heard in research" (1999, p. 46). "Traditionally, childhood and children's lives have solely been explored through the views and understandings of their adult caretakers" (Christensen & James, 2000, p. 2). However, participant observation in naturalistic settings is emerging as a technique that is particularly well suited to studying young children in a variety of contexts. It has been identified as "particularly helpful for doing research with young children who may be unable to communicate any other way" (Greig & Taylor, 1999, p. 85). As Cohen, Stern, and Balaban note, "[c]hildren communicate with us through their eyes, the quality of their voices, their body postures, their gestures, their mannerisms, their smiles, their jumping up and down, their listlessness. They show us, by the way they do things as well as what they do, what is going on inside them" (1997, p. 6). The participant observation study described below demonstrates that this is an effective method for studying young children in library and other information settings.[1]

The Study

In order to discover what happens at library baby storytime programs and if and how these programs benefit the children who take part, we[2] conducted an exploratory participant observation study. Two sessions of baby storytime, consisting of a total of eleven, thirty-minute programs at two branches of a large public library system, were observed and audio-recorded. Interviews, both individual and focus group, were also conducted with adult participants. Data collected included observation field notes, transcripts of audio-recorded storytime sessions and interviews, and relevant documents such as program flyers and thematic booklists. Following the practices of Strauss and Corbin (1998), the data were scanned for emergent themes. Trustworthiness was ensured through strategies such as

prolonged engagement, triangulation of data collection sites, triangulation of researchers, member checking, and peer debriefing. Results of the study indicate that library storytimes provide a context in which young children are engaged in early literacy activities and social interaction and where adult participants seek, give, and exchange information (McKechnie & McKenzie, 2004). While the adult interview data was particularly useful for confirming and complementing what we learned from the children, this article focuses on the methods used to collect data directly with the babies and toddlers themselves.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AT STORYTIME

Doing Storytime

   A team of two researchers and one research assistant attended each program, observing before, during, and after each session. Before the program families were observed as they arrived at the library and used library facilities and services. During this time data were collected in the form of observation field notes. One researcher checked out the room where the program would be held. Careful notes were made to document the layout and set up of the room as well as any materials such as information brochures, book displays, or toys that the librarian had set out for program participants. Samples of brochures were collected and inventory lists of books and toys were made.

   The actual programs themselves were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Two, and at times up to three, tape recorders were spread throughout the room to capture the program. At one of the first sessions visited in the study, one of two recorders failed, underscoring the importance of using backup equipment. More important, the use of two or three recorders was necessary as many conversations and other interactions and activities occurred simultaneously during the programs (for example, a mother speaking with a baby to direct her gaze to the librarian reading a picture book), resulting in noise levels that obscured activities in other areas of the room. During transcription, having access to two or three recordings of the same program resulted in a more complete record for that program. The research team also observed and made field notes during the program.

   Anyone who has seen a baby storytime will understand just how difficult observation in this setting can be. With eight to fifteen pairs of children and caregivers (and often older siblings, friends, and relatives) and one librarian, there were a large number of participants to keep track of at any one time. Many of the children were mobile, crawling and toddling throughout the space and making it difficult to track their movement. The noise in the room made it hard to hear what was going on. To deal with these challenges, we devised a number of observation strategies. First, we always made sure to have three observers at each session. More would have been preferable

but probably too intrusive. Second, we spread ourselves throughout the room, choosing spots where we had good sight lines and covered the entire space. We divided responsibility for observation of adult-child pairs among ourselves. This allowed each observer to focus on a reasonable number of participants, usually three to five pairs. As children moved in and out of observation areas, we assumed or passed on responsibility for observing them as appropriate. Finally, while the participants we were observing were usually across the room, we also watched and listened to what was going on immediately around us. As the recorders were typically placed near an observer, this data complemented what was caught on tape. After the program was over, we again observed what families did in the library. Immediately after leaving the field, we sat down and discussed what we had experienced. This peer debriefing was important to clarify and make sense of our data and to theoretically focus our observation in subsequent sessions.

While it was impossible to observe and record everything that went on in each storytime, participant observation worked well to capture significant episodes of the children's naturally occurring behavior. The following excerpt from our field notes is typical of the many literacy events we observed.

Library 2, Session 4, Field Notes

Context: Librarian is reading a story where a double-spread illustration of an animal is followed by a double spread showing the animal making its characteristic sound.

Observation Note: Louise (8 months) is smiling in anticipation of the page turning. Librarian turns the page. Librarian and Moms roar like a lion. Louise excitedly waves her arms up and down all the while smiling broadly.

While Louise could not yet talk or even roar like the adults in the room, her smiles and body movements speak clearly to her engagement with this shared story reading. Anticipation, an important emergent literacy skill, is evident in Louise's smile. While she was not yet able to speak, Louise "roared" in her own way through her energetic arm waving. In a similar fashion, Mark and David danced their way through a story.

Library 1, Session 6, Field Notes

Observation Note: Mark (17 months) and David (15 months) are dancing around in the middle of the room. Mark is singing, twirling, and making a galloping movement. Other children move in and out of the middle of the room as the dance goes on.

Theory Note: . . . it was such a joyful thing, spontaneous and comfortable. To me it felt like magic. It's clear that both boys really enjoy their time at storytime and they express that enjoyment through their bodies.

Observation also worked well to capture the social interaction between program participants, including the youngest babies, as is evident in the following field note.

Library 2, Session 4, Field Notes

Observation Note: Thomas (8 weeks) is sitting in his Mom's lap. Daniel (6 months) leans forward and reaches out to touch his hand.

Attending a series of sessions involving the same children afforded an opportunity to observe children developing new skills. For example, during the first of six weeks a baby might watch while his mother manipulated his hands during a tickle rhyme. By the third or fourth week that child might smile and hold his hand out to be tickled when the librarian announced "let's play 'Teddy bear, teddy bear, turn around.'" The following excerpt shows how many of the children were able to learn the rhythm, conventions, and rites of storytime practices.

Library 2, Session 4, Field Notes

Observation Note: Suzanne (15 months) is carrying a nametag and she takes it over to Daniel's Mom. Suzanne looks at the nametag in her hand, then very deliberately points to the nametag Daniel's Mom is wearing. Daniel's Mom says, "You're right. It is like my nametag."

Observation proved to be an effective method for exploring what happens during storytimes from the perspective of the babies and toddlers themselves. We agree with Greig and Taylor when they say "Very young children are able to identify people, objects and places either verbally or by pointing to them" (1999, p. 78). The trick is to use a method appropriate for their developmental stage.

Getting Informed Consent

Obtaining informed consent when working with young children presents both philosophical and pragmatic problems to the researcher. Because of their legal status as minors and their limited ability to understand the research process and its potential risks, parents and guardians exercise proxy consent for them (Langston, Abbott, Lewis & Kellett, 2004; Thompson, 1992). Even when parental consent is given, researchers must take care to ensure that a child does not experience distress or any other harm. We carefully monitored the babies and toddlers whose parents allowed us to observe them at baby storytime, looking for signs of distress or discomfort. Fortunately, and possibly because the children were attending with a loving and trusted parent or caregiver, we encountered no evidence of distress on the part of any child participant. Had we done so, we would have ceased observation immediately. While some parents gave us permission to use their children's actual first names, as researchers we felt obligated to protect the privacy of the babies. In order to maintain confidentiality,

we use pseudonyms in all reports (including this one) arising from this study.

While we worked hard to collect informed consent from all child and adult participants before both storytime sessions began, the very nature of the program made this difficult. Even though pre-registration was required, this was more frequently done by telephone than in person. The requisite information sheet and consent forms were then mailed to families. Some children were registered for and attended storytime with a caregiver rather than a parent. In these cases, the researchers either contacted a parent directly or asked the caregiver to give the form to the parent and direct them to call if they had any questions. Several parents, although willing to participate in the study, forgot to bring their signed forms with them to the first session, making it necessary for them to sign new forms. Both librarians welcomed new families into the program at the last minute either just as the storytime was starting or five minutes into a program, affording us no opportunity to explain the study and get informed consent. Participating children and their caregivers often brought unexpected guests such as older siblings or visiting grandparents for whom informed consent was needed before observation could take place. We quickly learned that it was essential to have information sheets and consent forms available at all times and to designate one member of the observation team as having the responsibility of identifying new storytime attendees and seeking their consent for participation in the study. There often were one or more child/caregiver pairs present at storytime for whom we did not have signed consent forms. One grandmother, for example, did not remember to bring in the form her daughter had signed giving permission for the granddaughter to participate in the study until the penultimate session of the program. After reading a description of the fluid structure of a typical library storytime, the Research Ethics Board at our university allowed us to collect data under the proviso that we would not observe individuals for whom we did not have informed consent and that we would stop observation if anyone expressed discomfort with being present in a storytime where others were being observed. This approach worked well. Portions of the audio-recording involving such attendees were not transcribed; nor were observations and field notes made in regard to situations where the attendee interacted with other children, caregivers, or the librarian. Omission from the observation record assured that the rights of these attendees were respected.

Gaining and Maintaining Access

Carey, McKechnie, and McKenzie define access as "gaining entry to participants over a sustained time" (2001, p. 320) and describe it as "an emergent process dependent on the characteristics of the researcher, the participants, and the research context" (p. 319). Research suggests that a number of factors influence the ability of a researcher to gain access to

young children. These include gender (Pattman & Kehily, 2004; Holmes, 1998), differences in power (Robinson & Kellett, 2004), and differences in ethnicity (Holmes, 1998). In this study access was negotiated and maintained with the children in a variety of ways.

The researcher team adopted participant-observer roles. We attended the storytimes, sitting on the floor among or very near the participants. Holmes notes that with very young children "female researchers may have an inherent size advantage over male researchers because they appear smaller and perhaps less intimidating and unthreatening" (1998, p. 56). As the researchers and the research assistants were all female, gender was not a significant intervening variable during data collection. Nor did ethnicity come into play. Very few participants were members of visible minorities and all appeared to speak English as their first language, characteristics shared by the research team. In our larger study of early literacy environments, we hope to explore multicultural settings and will need to attend to and ameliorate for cross-cultural influences. The majority of caregivers in both branch libraries were the children's mothers, with the exception of one father. Both researchers are mothers and both, as professional librarians, had given a number of baby storytime programs in public libraries before becoming academics. The observation team members took care to dress like the caregiver participants. Familiarity with the setting, shared backgrounds with the adult caregivers, and making an effort to appear and act like the mothers meant that we looked very much like the other adults in the room and as such were not likely to stand apart in the eyes of the children. While there always are inherent differences in power between children and adults (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; Graue & Walsh, 1998), by taking great care to be warm and welcoming in all our interactions with the children, we minimized this as much as possible. As can be seen through the following field note excerpt, we frequently observed incidents where the children treated us as they would any of the mothers at the program, an indication that we were successful in gaining and maintaining access.

Library 2, Session 4, Field Notes

Context: The storytime has not yet started. However, families are beginning to arrive. A basket of toys to be put out for the children at the end of storytime is on a table.

Observation Note: Suzanne (15 months) reaches into the basket of toys on the table and pulls out a sheep hand puppet. She then toddles over to Pam (a researcher), and holds out the toy toward her. Pam sings Baa Baa Black Sheep. Suzanne stays to listen, carefully looking at Pam and smiling. She toddles off at the end of the song.

Suzanne became so comfortable with Pam that she ended up "adopting" her as a caregiver for part of the final program of the storytime session.

Library 2, Session 5, Field Notes

Context: The librarian is reading Tomie DePaola's *My Halloween,* a board book.

Observation Note: Suzanne (15 months) has settled into Pam's (researcher) lap. She stays there throughout the story.

Some behaviors did differentiate us from the other adults in the room. All three observers had clipboards, paper, and pens and were almost constantly occupied writing draft field notes. None of us had a child with us. We were not the only adults with a different role —the librarian, of course, had her own distinct role and activities. The following incident provides evidence that at least some of the children were able to discern the differences between adult participants and differentiate our observation activities from the actions of the other adults.

Library 2, Session 2, Field Notes

Context: The structured part of the storytime has just ended. The librarian is moving around the room, trading cookies for the finger puppets she had passed out earlier for use with one of the rhymes. Several of the children have left their mothers and are moving around the room.

Observation Note: Samuel (14 months) wanders over to the window. His gaze is fixed on the butterflies that are hanging there. He then looks down at the recorder which is on the window ledge. He reaches up and touches the recorder. Sam then turns and looks at me. He walks over to where I am standing. He reaches up and touches my clipboard while looking directly in my eyes. Sam then moves off toward the books and toys on the floor in the middle of the room.

We did our best to remain as unobtrusive as possible. Samuel's interest in the recorder and the clipboard indicates that our presence was associated with some observer effect. However, a systematic search of field notes and audio-recording transcripts revealed no incidents where our presence seriously disrupted the normal routines and activities of the storytimes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While labor intensive, participant observation clearly is an appropriate and effective method for studying babies and toddlers in public library settings. As can be seen in the data collected in our exploratory study of baby storytime, actions speak as loudly as words. Children's spontaneous, naturally occurring behavior may be observed and recorded and provides rich information about their interaction with library staff, materials, space, and services. However, in order for participant observation to be successful in group settings such as storytimes, researchers are advised to adopt the following practices:

- Remember that storytimes for babies and toddlers are complex and usually noisy events, with many activities of different types going on at the same time
- Use multiple observers to capture as much data as possible; however, do not use so many observers as to be intrusive
- Divide observation duties among the observers so that each is responsible for and can focus on a reasonable number (three to five pairs) of participants
- Expect the children to move around as soon as they are developmentally able to do so and develop strategies for tracking movements in your field notes
- When audio-recording library programs, use multiple recorders spread throughout the activity space in order to accommodate for noise blocking
- Recognize that getting informed consent requires flexibility and diligence due to the large number of participants, visitors, and new families; remember that special permission may be needed from ethics review boards and provisions made to avoid observing attendees before they have provided informed consent
- Ensure that child participants do not experience harm through the research process by continually looking carefully for signs of distress
- Protect the confidentiality of babies and toddlers by using pseudonyms in all research reports
- Remember that gender, ethnicity, and power all play a role in the relationship between adult observers and children and take care to minimize the impact of these variables as much as possible
- Whenever possible, select observers who are familiar with baby storytimes, share characteristics such as gender and motherhood with the adult caregivers, and are willing and able to dress and act like the adult participants so as to enhance their ability to gain and maintain access
- Systematically monitor data collection sessions and analyze transcripts and field notes for incidents of observer effect
- To increase the trustworthiness of your data and reduce observer effect through habituation, plan to observe at multiple sessions of the same storytime program series
- Use peer debriefing immediately after each program to confirm and help make sense of observations and to theoretically focus subsequent data collection

Appendix: Useful Resources

Guides to Observing Children

For the last sixty years instruction in the observation of young children has played an important part in the training of educators. Many guides

have been published, generally covering children from birth to age eight. While few of these are scholarly research method texts and most emphasize home, daycare nursery school, kindergarten, and early grade classroom settings, they all contain practical advice and many examples that demonstrate how to observe babies and toddlers and that are readily applicable to other settings such as libraries. Notable recent examples of these texts include the following.

- Bentzen, W. B. (2005). *Seeing young children: A guide to observing and recording behavior* (5th ed.). Clifton Park, NY: Thompson Delmar Learning.
- Billman, J., & Sherman, J. A. (2002). *Observation and participation in early childhood settings: A practicum guide* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cohen, D. H., Stern, V., & Balaban, N. (1997). *Observing and recording the behavior of young children* (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hobart, C., & Frankel, J. (2004). *A practical guide to child observation and assessment* (3rd ed.). Cheltenham, UK: Nelson Thornes.
- Sharman, C., Cross, W., & Vennis, D. (2004). *Observing children: A practical guide* (3rd ed.). London: Continuum.

Child Development Texts

Child development texts for early childhood educators provide good overviews of the physical, psychosocial, and cognitive development of babies and toddlers illustrated with real-life examples and case studies. Usually included is a chapter on methods for studying and observing very young children.

- Caulfield, R. A. (2001). *Infants and toddlers.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Charlesworth, R. (2004). *Understanding child development* (6th ed.). Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning.
- Puckett, M. B., & Black, J. K. (2005). *The young child: Development from prebirth through age eight* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Research Method Texts

The following books on doing research with children are exceptional in that they are well referenced, include examples from the research literature, and address the theoretical aspects of research design. Though these titles cover children from birth through about twelve years, each has a significant section on infancy and toddlerhood.

- Greig, A., & Taylor, J. (1999). *Doing research with children.* London: Sage.

Includes sections on theoretical approaches, appropriate research methods, and ethical considerations. The book is especially strong in encouraging an understanding of the unique nature of children as research participants.

- Fraser, S., Lewis, V., Ding, S., Kellet, M., & Robinson, C. (2004). *Doing research with children and young people.* London, UK: Sage.

In addition to separate chapters on the main stages of childhood and adolescence, this book has excellent coverage of issues such as power, ethics, gender, diversity, and involving children in the research process. The editors work in the fields of health and child development.

- Graue, M. E., & Walsh, D. J. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

An in-depth look at doing fieldwork with children, including how children have been conceptualized, the role of theory in research design, ethics, the role of the researcher, field research data collection methods, analysis, and report writing. Selected case studies illustrate concepts. Graue and Walsh work in the discipline of education.

- Pellegrini, A. D. (1996). *Observing children in their natural worlds: A methodological primer.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Step-by-step instructions for designing, conducting, and analyzing diverse types of observation studies with children in field settings. Pellegrini comes from the discipline of education.

Notes

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