Student researchers preparing to work within families – a critical discussion of the important issues

Jess Hamblin

When planning to undertake research with any participants there are many considerations to take into account. However, when researching the development and lifestyle of young children it is especially important to prepare thoroughly and sensitively. The main issues to think about are the ethical implications of the research and the practical aspects of areas such as research methods, data collection and much more. Child protection has always been an important issue for those working in an educational context and even more so now with the recent coverage in the news so it is important to ensure that, as professionals, we have a good knowledge of the issues and responsibilities that come with working with children. This article takes into account relevant readings around the area and looks at reasons for choosing different research methods, as well as an in depth look at ethical issues that may affect a researcher when attempting to undertake a research project. Only with detailed and careful planning will a research project be successful and create the most valuable information.

Key words: Research, Observation, Ethics, Early Childhood

Every child is unique and therefore, when preparing to observe a child it is important not only to look at the practical aspects of observations, but also the emotional and social aspects in relation to the child. Children today have such varied environments and experiences when growing up. Each child's individual situation can affect their development in all areas, which is why it is necessary to take account of the influence of society and family life on a child.

When looking at one particular child it is important to look at their personal circumstances. This includes their family background. The child I will be observing is 16 months old, an only child and she lives in a town, near a busy main road. However, the family has a garden and behind the house are fields with a small playground. Both parents live at home and her grandmother is a few houses down the road which provides a close support network and convenient babysitting facilities!

On the first visit I made, I could see that her mother talks to her constantly about what is happening and they spent time looking through catalogues and pointing out objects the child liked the look of. This allowed me to see that she can babble quite happily and "respond to the different things said to [her] when in a familiar context with a special person" (DCSF, 2008, p.49). On a practical level, this means she is at an age where she can attempt to engage in a situation and communicate feelings quite well. This will make it easier when observing her, as it means she will be able to communicate if she is not happy with the situation, meaning I should discontinue that particular observation or
When carrying out observations, it is important to realise that our personal biases and situations can affect how we interpret what we see. An important point to remember as adults when looking at children is that it is difficult to fully appreciate the way a child sees the world. Consequently, as researchers, we have to "remain open-minded to a range of possible interpretations, explanations and influential factors" (Woods, 2005, p.19); we have to ensure that our family backgrounds do not affect how we think about others. For example, coming from a large family I have to ensure that I look at the child and her behaviour in the context of being an only child and not let my own personal experience of family life influence my interpretations. It is also important to look at how I was expected to behave as a young child, as this can affect how I perceive children's behaviour and the parent's expectations of their child (Willan, 2007a).

It is also very important that I do not look for what I want to find in my research, rather than what actually happens. By this I mean that I need to report on everything that happens whether it supports my predictions or not. As Willan states, "we all have a tendency to see what we are looking for and to look for what we already know" (Willan, 2007a, p.111). In the case of my research I will have to ensure that I remain objective throughout the project. The child will do everything at her own pace and I will need to report on the facts and not what I would like or expect to see.

One very important area of preparing for observations is to consider ethics. One of the main ethical considerations is informed consent. In the initial visit the child's mother signed to give consent to the research project. She read the Working Agreement and I explained any elements of it that needed clarification. It is more difficult to gain informed consent from a 16 month old child, so I will tackle this on the basis of each individual observation. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, states that adults need to respect the rights of the child. In other words, all children should have the right to be listened to and they should be free to give their beliefs and views (Morrow & Richards, 1996 cited in Roberts-Holmes, 2005). With this in mind, when I visit the family I will talk to the child about why I am there and what I want to look at (even though perhaps she will not necessarily understand exactly what I am doing). Each observation I carry out will be on the condition that the child seems happy to continue. If at any stage I get the impression that she wants to stop an activity, I will need to adapt the activity, or the way that I am observing her to make her more comfortable whilst still fulfilling the aims of the observations. Having the initial informed consent will help to create trust and a happy relationship between me and the family. I will continue to build trust by keeping the family honestly informed about my aims, methods and results throughout the research (Roberts–Holmes, 2005).

The family understands, through the explanation of the Working Agreement, that all information about the child and family gained through carrying out the research will remain confidential and that the only people who will see it are me, the family, if they so wish, and the university tutors. The family was happy for me to use names and take photographs if I wish, therefore I will include pictures of the child during my observations, however I will only include the most important and interesting moments to be included in my folder. To keep the research confidential, I will not disclose surnames and details of location etc. This protects not only the child and her family, but also me as a researcher in case something should happen to my folder meaning it is visible to the public e.g. leaving it in a classroom in university where it may be looked at by others. I have informed
the family that anything they say that is not relevant to my research will remain completely confidential and will not be included in my folder. I also recognise that in a situation where information relating to any risk to the child's safety is divulged, it is my duty to inform others that may have to intervene for the good of the child (Roberts–Holmes, 2005). Further ethical considerations include the family’s right to withdraw. If at any time the family wishes to discontinue the research or remove some information from the project, they have the right to do so. They have been informed of this through discussion of the Working Agreement. To protect myself I will ensure that when I am observing the child I am not left alone without another adult. Hopefully when a strong bond of trust is developed this won't be such a necessary precaution.

As well as preparation for ethical precautions, when carrying out research it is important to establish the methods before research commences. I will be carrying out a longitudinal case study. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982, cited in Wellington, 1996, p.39), a case study is a "detailed examination of one setting, or one single subject, or one single depository of documents or one particular event". For my study I will just be looking at the one child in her family context.

The type of method a researcher uses depends on the type of information they wish to collect – either qualitative, which is descriptive accounts of observations including quotes, thoughts and ideas, or quantitative, concerned with numbers and figures (Willan, 2007b). There are many things that can be researched about young children and Woods (2005) offers a good, detailed selection of things that may be observed. I intend to focus on the development of the child's communication skills (specifically speech) and her emotional development. I believe that these are some of the most important factors to look at when studying young children in the home.

For this research it will be most beneficial to gather qualitative data as it will be focusing on a child's development and feelings, so gathering quantitative data is not going to offer a clear picture. With this in mind observation is a strong method to use when gathering qualitative data as it allows the researcher to see what is happening, unlike questionnaires for example where the participant could be writing answers they think the researcher wants to see, which will therefore not provide a valid overview of what really happens or what people really think. Considering the subject of my research is a 16 month old child observation really is the most viable option.

Having decided on observation as a research method, it is important to decide between the two main types of observation – participant or non-participant (Bell, 1999). Participant observation in this case would mean joining in with the child's activities and playing, whilst observing what happens as well. Non-participant would mean that I just sat back and watched the child doing activities on her own or with others. There are many benefits to doing non-participant observation for this type of research as it means I can observe the child interacting with her family. As communication and emotional development are two areas I would like to focus on this would allow me to document these two areas quite well.

Of course there are some problems I may encounter with non participant observation. The child may be distracted by my presence; nevertheless, in my initial visit she seemed shy for a small amount of time and tried to hide behind her mother but then seemed to accept me being there and became more confident and carried on as usual. As I have seen her a few times, she should continue to feel comfortable around me and behave normally.
Another possibility is that the parents may feel as if I am observing them and behave differently around the child. However, I have explained why I will be there and will continue to do so every visit, so the family should feel comfortable with my presence and go about their daily lives as normal.

There is also the issue of how information is successfully recorded. Doing non-participant observation makes it easier to record information because if I was taking part in an activity and then recording information afterwards this might lead to problems as it relies on having a good enough memory to accurately record what happened. The fact that the family will allow me to use photography makes it easier for me as I can photograph what happens, meaning I will have images to look back at after I have completed a visit. It also means I can back up the things I say through a photograph. Another good tool in observation is video. This means that I will be able to look back at a video of a session allowing closer examinations of activity and interactions (Willan, 2007b). It will depend on what the objective of the observation is as to whether I require using photography and film. This will need to be decided before each individual observation.

It is obvious that when preparing to carry out research into a child's life we need to re-examine our own backgrounds, beliefs and expectations. We need to realise that just because we had one experience of being a child ourselves, it doesn't mean that the children we study will have the same experiences. The way we were brought up as children will often differ from the experience of young children today. When entering a new family environment we have to realise that our expectations of children may be different from those of the parent. That is something we have to accept and respect. When completing the family placement I will need to ensure that my opinions and biases about children and families do not affect the way I carry out my observations.

To successfully complete the project, the right method is essential and ensuring that all ethical guidelines are followed is extremely important to ensure a professional approach and to protect the interests of the family. A lot of time and consideration needs to go into research even before it has begun, to make the most out of the project and to get the most reliable and valid results possible.

References


