Methods and Potential Applications in Educational Ministry Contexts

Conducting Research with Children:

By Donald Ratcliff, Ph.D.Presentation at the

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Abstract

Educational ministry with children often is overlooked as a potential area for research. This is, in part, because research with children can involve distinctive research approaches. While many standard research procedures are important to follow in the research of youngsters, this session emphasizes aspects and adaptations of research methods that are distinctively helpful with children. While the emphasis is on qualitative methods, some of the suggestions are also applicable to quantitative research with children.

The session considers five general components of research: (1) theoretical frameworks, (2) the setting and participants, (3) researcher role/s and experience, (4) data collection, and (5) data analysis. From a survey of several research studies of children, the components of each of these that are more or less unique to preschool and elementary-aged youngsters are considered. Some of the applications and innovations made in the presenter's doctoral research work and other research studies of children are included. The session concludes with potential applications for educational ministry contexts. There are many issues related to children in educational ministry that deserve the attention of students and others conducting research.

Many of the methods used in previous research of children are summarized on a section of the presenter's home page. The original review of the literature, which includes both general methods and those distinctive to children, is titled "Qualitative Research Design in Studies of School Transitions (Parts I and II)" and is available on the internet at http://don.ratcliff.net/qual

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[presenter's notes]

Jesus, the Master Researcher-such as woman who gave her last penny, in contrast with Pharisee. Book of Luke is striking in number of times children or allusions to children are mentioned—begins with two chapters on babies. Was Luke a pediatrician??!! [I'm not serious here-I know the specialization of pediatrician was invented in the twentieth century, but perhaps Luke's emphasis on kids may have reflected a special interest in this area in his medical practice.]

Sometimes the church marginalizes children, much as culture does. For example, not many theologies of childhood-Timothy Sizemore wrote one, but can't find a publisher;

Roy Zuck's recent book on children and childhood in Bible is a rare but great contribution. Very few published research studies of kids in educational ministry contexts.

Yet Jesus includes children as an important aspect of his teaching. Some of Christ's teaching reflects observations that are not that removed from methods of modern research. Example: Luke 7:31-35-use of metaphorical analysis, a widely used qualitative method of analysis. Jesus describes child behavior "sitting in the marketplace," describes their speech "calling out to each other," then gives a specific quotation—evidence for conclusions in qualitative research: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry." Jesus uses what was apparently the child folklore of his day, what kids said in the street. He observed kids' behavior and even listened to their rhymes and games. He's a good example for educational ministry research.

What are the distinctive aspects of research with children-what methods are different when you study kids? Strangely, there isn't that much literature on the topic—reflecting society's marginalization of kids? And how do these differences relate to research of kids in educational ministry?

Certainly this report is not the last word; just a beginning. Will focus on distinctive aspects of research that fit children, and ignore general research guidelines that can and do apply to children.

Today we will use materials from

1)the scant literature on kids in the methods literature [references included at end-if you know of others, please let me know], 2) some good examples of specific research studies where methods are described in detail, and 3) what I've learned about methods of researching children in some of my own research. Some of my work was in church settings, but most of it in school settings-including dissertation study-four months of observing an elementary school hallway and interviewing kids about the hallway. Most of methods used in schools apply to educational ministries. A few potential applications in the presentation today, several detailed suggestions in the handout.

I. Theoretical Frameworks—many, many possible theories can apply to kids, but what theories apply specifically to children?

In concrete operations stage, metaphors supposedly not understood until adolescent or pre-adolescent years. Yet seven-year-old Emma Beth made spontaneous comment that wax on car is like eczema. My son, at age five, spontaneously offering a spiritual metaphor from a campfire.

Child development theories as windows: sometimes they give light, sometimes they distort. Example: Goldman's use of Piaget—overlooked children's experience of religion in quest for their understandings and misunderstandings. Multiple theories may give more light, or obscure even more—can miss the real events and meanings because attention is so focused by the theory.

Perhaps need to see a common message of most child development theories: children are different from adults—although they are similar in some respects. Theory should sensitize us to look for differences and similarities. Need more theories, especially theories related to educational ministries, theology, and children's experiences of faith and learning. Researcher can try on lenses of theories to see if they fit, but lenses can be too narrow, too broad, too dark, too light, thus need the freedom to set them aside and generate new theory grounded in research data.

Examples of theories specific to kids:

Child culture theory (Corsaro, 1997) has influenced me a great deal—the unique culture created by kids, often in opposition to adult culture. This theory sensitizes to the distinctions of kids, yet they also attempt to infuse aspects of adult culture into child culture (Corsaro).

Control of adults over children, sometimes to point of oppressive rules without rationales (Herrera, 1988; Metz, 1978).

Hidden curriculum concept, taken from symbolic interaction theory, where latent influences within activities is emphasized—who teacher calls on, varying reactions to students, use of class time, etc. May be related to social class and teacher perceptions of kids—are we unintentionally teaching something different from what we intend-such as style of teaching may teach more than content (Jim Lee). Socialization theory—do we socialize children into society's values in S.S. classroom; do we influence understandings of gender by teaching (Best, 1983; Thorne, 1993)?

Rites of passage theory (Van Gennep, 1960; Cox, 1980) might be applied to promotion Sundays, church membership classes, and what can be done with new child converts.

I dabbled with all of the above theories, but the orienting theories were child culture theory, symbolic interactionism/hidden curriculum, and Edward T. Halls' theory of proxemics and event analysis. Very general theories purposefully chosen, so could move in many possible directions. Another very open theory that I could have used is Frame Analysis (Erving Goffman).

II. Setting and Participants—choosing, entering, and describing context; selecting and describing participants.

Description of setting

- **Community**-demographic information such as region, unemployment, ethnicity, social class, social services, family characteristics, politics, religion, occupations, population turnover, style and quality of buildings, size of city/town, views of education, career expectations for children, and maps of the community.
- **Denomination**-ethnicity represented, social class.
- **Church Buildings**-architecture, physical locations of rooms, hallways, offices, playground, other buildings.
- **Drawings/maps** often included.
- **Organization of Church**-socially, organizationally.
- **History and Doctrine of Church**-denomination and local church.
- **Leadership of Church**-ethnicity, progressive/traditional. Annual Schedule of Events-particularly those related to children, both the church as a whole and the specific classroom and/or program/s.
- **Classroom**-physical description, drawings/maps, relation to rest of church or other teachers.
- **Teachers, Assistants, and Other Staff**-ethnicity, background/s, perceptions of community and church, spiritual expectations of children, interactions with one another and children, degree of autonomy, years of experience.
- **Children**-characteristics of all the youngsters in the church or department, not just participants in the research.
- **Entry to context**—gatekeepers of setting are central to research: need general research plan (Herrera). Gatekeeping will vary with church, as they can be pastor, church board, CED, others. Need time for children to habituate to presence of researcher—"hanging around" time (Herrera; LeCompte & Preissle; Pellegrini, 1996). Can observe routines and time schedules, as well as map the surroundings during this time (Herrera).
- **Participants**—selection process should reflect purpose: involves grade levels, ages, locations (Metz; Cox). Describe participants—needed for subsequent generalization of findings grade level/age/ability levels

1. degree of cooperativeness/personalities spiritual development/previous experience with church groups
2. student/teacher ratio
3. teacher typologies of students
4. home environment
5. race/ethnicity
6. number of students and selection process (representative?)
7. common experiences with peers
8. socioeconomic status

Need parental permission for individual interviews and probably for group interviews (Metz describes letters, telephone follow up). Need child's permission to extent possible--see "Ethical Standards for Research with Children" and Subpart D of the Code of Federal Regulations.

I tried to describe setting in ways child might see it, by taking a "studied naivity" perspective and trying to minimize preconceptions. Trying to view environment as might an anthropologist studying a new tribe-kids are a "new tribe" if indeed really different from adults.

III. Researcher Experience and Role/s. Autobiographical aspects of the researcher that influence roles and understandings. What role/s are assumed by the researcher and the influence that has on research, What past experiences with children are most likely to shape the role you assume (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993)? Initial reflection on related experiences and values, latent reasons for wanting to study topic. Make ongoing reflective personal notes that document memories and feelings elicited by ongoing research. This can be used for later credibility of results (validity issue). In my dissertation I summarized my experiences as a child in hallway settings, as well as previous observations and research in similar settings. Described past experience and opinions in detail in my personal notes-so could look them over for possible biasing effects during data analysis. Teaching experience can be helpful-thus researcher can know the context, purposes, etc., yet teachers tend to be as aware of the school (church) environment as a fish is of water (Lancy, 1993). Many things are just taken for granted.

Perhaps being an "outsider" to a researched church has advantages in studying kids:

naivete, which can produce greater sensitivity to what actually occurs, and possibly make you more approachable by children by being naïve and teachable. Your gender, age, size, and preconceptions about children all affect perspective and role. Don't try to hide these biases, explicate them so outsiders can assess their degree of influence, but do try to suspend preconceptions when collecting data (LeCompte & Preissle).

Role-

Try to enter child role? Corsaro says preschoolers let him assume role of "big kid," yet Baker (1985) states school-aged kids never let her completely enter child role. Even partial assumption of child role required numerous "rites of passage"-they diverted her away from central events. Corsaro speaks of not initiating with small children because youngsters rarely initiate in new context; he waited for them to come to him-as another child would.

Only three times in hall research did children act as if I was a child-girls teasing about loving one of them (occurred twice), and boy who told me I'd get in trouble for standing on bench.

My students in a research class tried to interview preschoolers with no success; I suggested being a bit like another child—using stuffed animals, each taking different roles in situation or story told by researcher, and asking how the animal felt in the situation. Play with them on floor, learn kids' names and use their names a lot. Could use dolls, toy trucks, blocks, etc. A bit like play therapy (new Christian book here: Daniel Sweeney Counseling Children Through the World of Play from Tyndale, 1997). Students told me this

worked much better; four-year-olds that wouldn't talk before, now said a great deal. Using toys is probably good for early elementary kids too. Learner role used by Metz (role of college student observing class)--be introduced as a student. I was asked several times each day who I was and what I was doing-said I was a university student and trying to learn what happens in hallways. Bible speaks of having a "teachable spirit"-open to God and open to the data.

To the degree you can, avoid the teacher role, as children usually don't share genuine feelings with teachers-perhaps because of teacher emphasis on children being correct. Teachers may try to get researcher to take on a teacher role (Goetz, 1975). Avoid being placed in role of teacher by: referring questions kids ask about curricula to teacher, turning away when kids are disciplined, avoiding teacher lingo and avoid talking to teachers, not trying to mediate conflicts between kids, avoiding evaluative comments (Baker).

I sat on hallway floor to distinguish my role from teachers, but kids asked me to sit in chair for greater comfort and because kids in hall sometimes sat in chairs. Also used my first name to distinguish my role from teachers, officials. In other research I sometimes needed to get on floor or on knees with small children to minimize height differences (equal role with kids).

Perhaps friend role is possible, but only to a limited degree as friends may show their friendship by hurting others, cheating, etc. To some extent I tried to develop role of friend. In member check I found that most saw me as a friend, but-in spite of my efforts to the contrary—also a teacher, because I asked so many questions. Probably can't avoid that part of teacher role, but can minimize it. My favorite response, though, was boy that said, "You're a grown-up kid."

Another possibility is writer role (Metz; Goetz)--you are trying to get their views to put in a book (fits well with learner role). In interviews I added the idea that I was writing a book, but needed their ideas because I thought lots of adults didn't understand kids—they readily agreed.

Neutral stance-traditional researcher role; trying to be totally objective and avoid any role will probably limit access to feelings and opinions; may produce suspicion (Goetz); rapport more likely via friend or learner role.

Example of suspicion: I was asked by one boy if I was a spy for the FBI, and another if I was an informer for the principal—danger of trying to avoid a role-people will infuse a sinister role. Much of time I ended up with an audience role—thus they performed for the camera and me. Perhaps this is what detached research encourages (at best).

IV. Data Collection—methods of obtaining data.

Might consider using key informants, rather than always using a cross-section of children (Goetz). Key informants are highly verbal, kids with insight. But also good to use a cross-section sample.

Should you allow children to read your field notes (i.e. look over your shoulder as you record)? Goetz did, but emphasized confidentiality of who said what in reports for adults. Field notes may be interrupted by children wanting to talk with you (Goetz). Some researchers believe field notes are intrusive in observations and recommend notes be made afterward—King used the restroom for this purpose.
*Observations of kids:

I used standard handwritten field notes. Directly making field notes with laptop computer may be distracting to kids. I added audio field notes about a month into the study-microphone suspended from viewfinder of camcorder, and quietly whispered comments on what I saw. Effective—more notes, but perhaps less reflective than notepad comments (can always reflect when transcribing).

I apparently didn't observe a number of activities children saw-during interviews they listed a much wider variety of hallway behaviors than I saw over several months of observing. Emerging theoretical framework of social formations apparently caused me to overlook some behavior, or perhaps the other activities were hidden from me, or perhaps they just didn't happen to occur when I was there.

Reactive effects to camera: making faces, obscene gestures, covering lens with hand, dancing, etc. Never did see this completely go away-even with attempt at satiation. Such reactivity is most likely when friends are present. Initially dismayed at reactivity, later realized it is part of child culture-part of what I was studying! Children and I could readily separate normal behavior on video screen from the obvious acting-e.g. kids looking directly into camera more likely to engage in reactive behavior. Could minimize this problem by placing lens on extreme wide angle, and pointing camera very low—kids didn't think it was recording their behavior.

*Interviews with kids:

A classic source is Yarrow (1960). Often kids have a difficult time reflecting upon their behavior and meanings in preschool and early elementary years—or perhaps we haven't discovered how to tap those reflections—but King (1978) emphasizes that subjective views might be inferred from emotional reactions and spontaneous speech as well as informal conversations.

Kids can see inclusion in interviews as a complement, not an invasion of privacy (Goetz). I used group interviews because of child-culture theory—desired kids talk about thing in the midst of child-culture context; talk to each other, as well as me-contextualized comments. This was a tradeoff: individual kids (in member checks) gave more reflective remarks, whereas in groups I found greater diversity in responses and more spontaneity. I found enthusiasm for being in interviews and dismay among kids not asked to participate. Some kids even begged for the interview to last longer-I limited them to a half hour—avoiding classroom boredom?.

Photographs used in interviews to help identify kids-I studied about 50 kids, so hard to learn all their names. Put photos in plastic album sleeve and used during interviews. I let the kids choose which group to be in, and allowed one child to change groups. Had to exclude three kids after first interview because of disruptive aspects. This resulted in loss of data, but might have lost all data from group otherwise. Video stimulus used for some interviews-tried to use videotape segments in which they and their peers were observed and asked them to describe what was happening. They tended to just name kids they saw, but after video ended they talked at length about their experiences and feelings.

[Example: videotape of cluster social formation]

Questions asked in group after this video segment (sometime paraphrased these questions or used in a different order):

- What is happening? Why? What are the reasons? What are they trying to do? 2. How are these groups different from the rows we saw last time? How are they the same?
- Would you rather be in a group in the hall or not? Why?
- What are your feelings when you are in a hall group?
- What's it like to be in a group? What does being in a group mean to you?
- Are groups different when a teacher is around? Which teacher/s?
- What are all the things that can happen in a group? [brainstorm for awhile]
- Do you think the groups we saw are typical and normal, or unusual? Why? 9. What is the most important thing you said during today's session? The most important thing anyone said?

I allowed kids to go off on some tangents—to maintain rapport and to better include their perspectives on school life in general. Sometimes what they tell you then is providing you with a better view of their world

of experience than would answers to your questions. Sometimes mentioned what another group said to get their reactions and alternative views. Encouraged them to disagree with me and each other. Changed order of questions if they naturally moved in that direction. Added new questions for other groups when they emerged in previous groups—if they fit with purpose and goals. During first session, kids floundered when I asked them to talk about what events meant-either silence or one and two word responses. Realize now that I asked too early; in later sessions children came to understand the idea of describing their understandings better and told me more. Perhaps best to start with what happens, then-in later sessions-ask what it means to them.

I noted grammatical and vocabulary differences of children—important to consider in making interview questions. Often difficult to understand speech of toddlers [my son at two saying "appadoss"].

Body posture and dress can influence interviews—and observations—I deliberately dressed casually to emphasize I was not a teacher or administrator. I had children go into halls and interview one another about activities there. This was pretty much a failure for data collection value-either asked vague questions or yes and no question of each other—but fun for the kids and a reward to them for attending interviews. Might have worked better if both they and I asked questions, and if done more than once—interview in classrooms and other areas of church they are familiar with?

*Artifacts and other data sources: Artifacts included drawings and writings of children (King, 1978; Thompson, 1989;

Coles, 1995; Heller, 1986). I gathered artifacts on film and videotape (such as hallway posters, graffiti). Perhaps kids are saying what they feel about church in such artifacts-e.g. church that had teens draw huge mural on youth classroom walls. Other artifacts included a school yearbook (church might have pictorial directory) and student handbook (policy manual of church?).

Created an "audit trail" including a photo viewbook of the school and how my equipment and physical location for research looked. Did not include viewbook in dissertation, but— at request of committee member—did include several pictures that illustrated key ideas. Also recorded video of me observing and interviewing kids. An assistant did some of the videotaping, including a video of me videotaping!

The "audit trail" also included my field notes, personal notes, methodological notes, and theoretical notes—and of course my audio and videocassettes. The purpose of the "audit trail" is to establish potential credibility or validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)--evidence.

V. Data Analysis—meanings of data, categories, hypotheses, conclusions.

Multiple analysts in a research project are helpful—Mehan (1979) used teachers, graduate assistants and his students who all analyzed videotape data of children. My own kids helped with data analysis-my (then) ten- and twelve-year-old boys developed and revised major categories of events and behaviors from terms listed by the children interviewed. We used cards with terms that my boys sorted and re-sorted. I discussed the categorization with them as they did it, and it was revised several times over several days, until all agreed.

My sons also did frequency counts on a few segments of video so interobserver reliability could be calculated. My kids didn't go to the school that was researched, so not completely emic, but they are kids which may make them more able to perceive certain events or details. Result: fairly high kappa coefficients--.61 to .99 reflecting 82.5 to 100% agreement between my observations and my kids' observations. I used a member check at the end of my original study—individual interviews with several students and teachers, where I described some of the basic constructs and hypotheses I had developed. Chose kids that were fairly verbal, but not those who talked the most in groups. Encouraged them to correct me when I was wrong, and to tell me more if I didn't have all the details. Asked if they or their friends had changed in any way during study— most noted the acting up in front of camera, but said other activities

weren't changed. Also asked them about who they thought I was most like-friend, teacher, or someone else (checking my role).

Tried a member check with two children at same time-result was more like another group session than a member check.

Surprised at strong interest in member checks, since interest in group interviews had waned somewhat. They sometimes corrected some misunderstandings, but more often elaborated ideas—particularly metaphors; even created some new metaphors that helped me understand what was happening even better-such as hallway crowds as bulldozers and herds of buffalo.

Long after the conclusion of the original research—and after completing my dissertation—I had college students analyze cassette tapes of interviews with no real direction as to what to look for. Multiple perspectives are valuable, including those who are naïve to kids and the situation. Later other students observed videotapes who were given specific directions as to what they should look for—constructs that had been emergent from my original study.

[See detailed potential research suggestions in next section.]

Conclusion

Too many books tell us what we should do with kids, without much or any evidence for those recommendations. But what is it like to be a child involved in educational ministry? Jesus points the way to an answer—observe carefully, even listen to what may seem a bit silly, such as child folklore—as Ronald Cram (1996) did. Talk with kids and learn from them. If we must become like children to enter the Kingdom of God, perhaps it can help to enter their world through research.

Ideas for Research of Children's Spirituality

Sources on Methods of Research of Children and Examples of Research and Children in Educational Ministry

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