

# Ethnographic Observation of Preschool Children

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Methods commonly used in public library research such as interviews and questionnaires are not suitable for use with young children whose oral and written language skills are not well developed. Effective alternatives may be found in methods associated with ethnographic field observation. Using examples from an ethnographic study of public library use by 30 preschool girls, this article describes three methods appropriate for studying the information-seeking behavior and library use of preschool children: audio-recording of naturally occurring talk, participant observation, and key informant diaries. Selected issues important for ethnographic field research with young children are discussed, including gaining access and informed consent, observer effect, and young children's understanding of research. Relying on data arising from the naturally occurring talk and actions of the children, it is argued that these methods are unique in reflecting the perspective of the children themselves.

While review articles (see McKechnie, 1991; Schontz, 1982) suggest that more and better research is being conducted in the area of public library services for children, the literature and the profession continue to call for more (see, e.g., Chelton, 1990; Fitzgibbons, 1990; Rollock, 1988). While public libraries serve children from birth through 12 years of age, preschool children are an especially important user group as no other universally accessible public agency serves them. The prominence given to preschoolers as public library users is evident in the inclusion of "Preschoolers' Door to Learning" as one of the eight roles for public library service included in the American Library Association's *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries* (McClure, Owen, Zweizig, Lynch, & Van House, 1987) and in related studies that have identified this role as important to public library directors and other professional librarians (Van House & Childers, 1994), general American adults (D'Elia & Rodger, 1994) and community leaders (D'Elia & Rodger, 1995). Yet, very little is known even about basic questions such as "What do preschoolers do when they visit the

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public library?," "How do preschoolers use materials borrowed from their public library?," or "What impact do public library services have on the lives of preschool children?" To some extent at least, this may be due to the unique methodological challenges presented by preschoolers as subjects in library and information (LIS) research.

Many sources on studying very young children (see, e.g., Boehm & Weinberg, 1997; Garbarino & Stott, 1989; Touliatos & Compton, 1983; Yarrow, 1960) agree that because of their dependence on language and interpersonal relationships, interviews are not suitable for use with preschoolers. Similarly, as very young children are unable to read, written questionnaires are of no use for data collection either. While it is possible to interview and survey adults such as parents and librarians who may act as important informants about children's use of public libraries, these methods only indirectly capture a picture of that use. In contrast, the techniques of ethnographic observation, which allow exploration of research questions from the perspective of subjects themselves in a manner that may be adjusted to be age appropriate, provide a promising approach to research with young children in LIS settings.

This article examines three methods (audio-recording of children's naturally occurring talk, participant observation, and diary keeping by key informants/observers), which were used in an ethnographic field study of the use of public libraries by preschool girls (McKechnie, 1996). The article begins with a brief overview of the study, describes the three main methods used, and discusses selected issues especially important for ethnographic field research with preschool children, including gaining access and informed consent, observer effect, and young children's understanding of research. As the processes are not very different from those used with research involving adults, data analysis, including methods for increasing and assessing the trustworthiness of data, is not examined. The final section offers general conclusions and recommendations about the use of ethnographic field methods to study young children within LIS. An annotated bibliography of useful methodology texts is presented in the Appendix.

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Thirty girls within three months of their fourth birthdays were audio-recorded and observed during one of their usual visits to their local public libraries with their mothers. During the week following the visits, mothers acted as observers and maintained diaries where they recorded incidents involving their daughters' use of library materials and other library-related activities. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the mothers to verify and find out more about the behavior observed during the library visits and reported in the diaries. In most cases, the children were present at and also participated in these interviews. Visit, diary, and interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed and coded for general themes.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH: THREE METHODS

### Audio-Recording of Children's Naturally Occurring Talk

While it may be difficult to conduct interviews with preschool children, their naturally occurring talk comprises an alternative, robust source of data. To record the children's talk during their library visits, I adapted a method first used by Tizard and Hughes (1984) and Hughes, Carmichael, Pinkerton, and Tizard (1979) in a study of 30, four-year-old British girls concerning their learning at home and at nursery school. I placed a small, portable, battery-operated, high quality digital microcassette recorder (Sony Scoopman NT-1 Digital Micro Recorder) in a quilted pocket sewn into the back of a hooded fleece shirt. The microphone was housed in a smaller quilted pocket situated below the front neck opening of the shirt. To avoid injury to the children and prevent the equipment from coming loose, I used wide masking tape to fasten down the microphone cable. I met the girls as they entered the library, turned the recorder on, and helped them to put on the shirt which they wore over their clothing throughout their library visits. Complete, verbatim transcripts were made of all visit recordings. The quality of the recordings was exceptionally high with less than 1% of the girls' talk being unintelligible. The range of the recorder was about 20 feet. The children's library visit lengths ranged from 12 to 118 minutes, with a mean of 52.1 minutes and a median of 45 minutes. Visit transcripts ranged from seven to 59 double-spaced pages, with a median length of about 21 and a total of 643 pages. Follow-up interviews with the mothers and the children allowed me to clarify, expand on, and check the typicality of what I had recorded and observed during the library visits.

I did encounter some difficulties and challenges with this method. Problems with the equipment, although not insurmountable, were bothersome. Given their age, some of the subjects were extremely physically active and inadvertently turned off the recorder by bumping it as they climbed, crawled, and somersaulted through the library. This affected three of the early library visits. When data loss was restricted to a few minutes that were well documented in the observation field notes and not a large or significant portion of the visit, this was simply noted. In one case, where almost all the visit was lost, a second data collection was completed. The solution which completely solved this problem was to encase the recorder in a sheath of thick corrugated cardboard. When library visits lasted more than 45 minutes, the microcassette in the recorder had to be turned or changed. I wore an alarm watch to signal the need for tape turning. Tape changing resulted in some observer effect. However, systematic analysis of the transcripts showed that the children quickly returned to whatever activity they had been engaged in, suggesting that the impact was minimal.

Researcher error also resulted in the loss of some data. Once I failed to restart the recorder after turning a tape. Luckily, the family agreed to a second visit. General strategies such as selecting durable, high-quality equipment, always using fresh batteries for each data collection, checking and double-check-

ing the equipment at the beginning of each data collection session, and making sure I was very familiar with the recorder and how it worked helped to minimize equipment failure. I also developed checklists and routines with built-in redundancy, such as checking for the “record” light and making sure the counter was advancing both at the beginning and the end of a taping session.

Subject cooperation also could be problematic. Although most of the children seemed to have no major problems with the recording procedures, some did not like wearing the shirt. To help the children feel comfortable, I introduced the equipment to them at the preliminary informed consent interview, allowed them to handle and operate it, as well as to try on the shirt. To increase their sense of control, I offered them the choice of either a red or a blue shirt. I also allowed them to determine how the shirt would be put on. Some chose to do this independently, some sought assistance from their mothers, and others wanted me to help. Despite these precautions, three children asked to have the equipment removed part way through the library visit. Mothers helped to resolve this problem by negotiating consent to continue and keeping the shirt near the child; as a result no data were lost. In the follow-up interviews, a number of reasons for not wanting to wear the shirt were identified by both the mothers and the children. One mother reported that her daughter was very fussy about what she would wear. One child told me she thought the shirt was a boy’s shirt. One way to overcome this difficulty might be to offer the children more choices.

A few times unpredictable subject behavior affected the audio-recording of the visit. For example, after the study visit was over and the recorder turned off, a few mothers and children surprised me by resuming their visits. This never lasted more than a minute or two. It involved activities such as returning to the library to retrieve a forgotten item or to use the washroom. While not part of the visit audio-recordings, these activities are documented in the observation field notes.

Transcription is labor intensive work. It took 10 to 12 hours to transcribe each hour of library visit time. The library visit recordings, because they took place in a field setting, were complex. For example, they often included background noises and parallel conversations between other people that were relevant to the research study and therefore had to be included in the transcription. It was also important for the transcriber to have had some experience with young children’s speech and with children’s libraries to be able to understand the recording. While the transcription process was long and sometimes frustrating, it had the advantage of bringing me very close to the data as I listened to the tapes repeatedly.

While labor intensive, audio-recording of the children’s talk provided rich data that helped me understand not only what preschool girls do while in the library, but also how library materials and services affect their lives. In the following excerpt, Elissa and her mother were browsing through the picture books to choose materials to borrow:

Elissa: [Pulling *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, a picture book by Eric Carle (1969), off the shelf] You know what?

Mother: What?

Elissa: This is it. This is the caterpillar one.

Mother: What happens to him?

Elissa: Gets big.

Mother: And then what?

Elissa: Then . . . he gets more bigger.

Mother: Uh, huh?

Elissa: And then he gets fat.

Mother: Right! And then when he finishes eating and getting big and fat, what happens at the very end?

Elissa: Butterfly! [Elissa and her mother both laugh joyfully]

In this excerpt, we can see that Elissa's use of library collections has increased her knowledge about children's literature (she clearly recognized this title) as well as her understanding of how the world works (she describes the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, a process which is outlined in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. We can also see how Elissa's mother becomes a collaborator in this learning process, scaffolding Elissa's interaction with the text by providing prompts, using restatement to reinforce Elissa's emerging understanding, and by giving positive reinforcement and feedback to encourage and support her daughter.

### Participant Observation

Unobtrusive participant observation, where the researcher remains apart from but carefully observes the behaviors of interest, is particularly suitable for data collection with young children. It reduces the impact of the unequal status between the observer and the observed, an inequality inherent in studies of children because of the natural authority adults have over them (Fine & Glassner, 1979; Fine & Sandstrom, 1988).

Assuming that the children would be familiar with the concepts of both libraries and students through their everyday life experiences, I adopted the role of a student who wanted to learn how small children used libraries. This allowed me to record field notes while observing, as it would be natural to see a student making notes while in the library. As note taking during observation is believed to increase observer effect (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Spradley, 1980; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), I was prepared to defer the preparation of field notes until immediately after the study visit. This precaution turned out to be unnecessary as the children exhibited very little behavior, such as asking repeated questions about the note taking, which would have indicated that it was interfering with the observation. In keeping with the recommendations of Lofland and Lofland (1995), Mellon (1990), Patton (1990), Spradley (1980), and Taylor

and Bogdan (1984), I recorded field notes including: observation notes or a chronological, non-interpretive description of the events, settings and people as they were observed with notations of time and duration and sketches of the locale; method notes or a record of the techniques used and the reactions, impressions and feelings of the observer; and, theory notes or emergent analytic ideas.

Observation worked very well to document non-verbal activities during the children's library visits. Chloe, whose library visit was one of the longest I observed (95 minutes), while very active in the library and reluctant to leave when it was time to go home for lunch, did not speak as much as most of the other girls. As evident in the following excerpt, observation yielded data that helped me understand that playing with toys and observing and interacting with others are important elements of library visits for some children.

Observation note: Chloe had built a very high tower from the blocks. She then began to search for and retrieve more blocks from the floor. This went on for quite a while, in a repeated pattern of search, retrieve, sit and build. Another child (female, about two years old) was now playing with a large wooden truck on the floor in the picture book area near Chloe. The other child's mother suggested that she gather up some of the wooden blocks on the floor, put them in the back of the truck and drive them around. The other child gathered up some blocks. Instead of putting them in the truck, she carried them over to the table where Chloe was building with the same type of blocks, carefully put them on the floor beside Chloe and looked up at her. Chloe picked up the "gift" and the girls smiled at each other. (Later in the visit, Chloe used the wooden truck to move around her materials for other building projects.)

Coupled with the audio-recordings, the field notes provided a comprehensive ethnographic record of the library visits. They were used both to provide context for the recordings and as sources of data themselves. Draft visit field notes totalled 287 pages or about ten per visit.

### **Key Informant Diaries**

To capture a picture of events following the library visit, I asked the mothers to keep a diary in which they were to record all incidents they observed related to the library visit or the use of library materials. In particular I used the diary/diary interview method first described by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977), which couples the diary keeping with a follow-up interview during which the diary contents can be expanded and clarified. This method allowed evidence to be collected about the use of library materials and the impact of the library visit as it was manifested in the child's life in general. A limitation of this approach was

that it did not provide data as directly from the child's own perspective as did the audio-recording and observation portions of the study. Instead, the approach relied on the mother to observe, interpret, and report on the child's behavior. The technique of observation by the researcher in the child's home was rejected as impractical because of the difficulty of finding subjects who would have agreed to a stranger observing their family life for several days or more. Further, the presence of an observer in the home setting would have altered normal behavior.

I did not receive diaries from two mothers. One diary was lost and another was accidentally destroyed by a father. Both of these mothers were asked to recall and report on post-visit incidents during the follow-up interviews. These data are less trustworthy because they are more likely to be incomplete or inaccurate.

Mothers were asked to keep the diary for one week, the period suggested by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) as being achievable based on the experience of other researchers. In fact, 24 (85.7%) of the 28 mothers who actually kept diaries were able to maintain them for at least the full week. Entry dates varied from two to 23 days after the library visit (with a mean of 7.6 days and a median of 7 days). I noticed that entries tended to get shorter as the post-visit time increased. Mothers used a variety of methods to maintain the diaries. Some noted incidents as they occurred. Others tried to find one time, usually at the end of the day after their children were in bed, to record the day's happenings. Some were able to do it only every second or third day. Changes in writing instruments indicate that all mothers made notes more than once during the week. Most of the mothers (85.7%) reported that they felt they had recorded most or all of the incidents they observed. The four mothers who were not sure they had been able to do this explained that illness, tiredness, or not always being around may have caused them to miss some incidents. One mother told me that, although she thought she captured everything, she had some difficulty with writing because this was not a common activity in her life at that time. Some of the mothers, because of related experience in child observation, research, journal writing or case note keeping were excellent observers/recorders. While it is likely that there is error in the diary transcripts associated with underreporting, and great variance in the quality of the diaries, I have little reason to believe that the mothers did not try their best to record everything they saw or that they deliberately misrepresented events. Altogether, 28 mothers completed 130 diary pages or about five per case.

Fatima's mother recorded the following incident in the diary:

Diary entry, Visit + 3 days [According to the diary entries, Fatima had already had several episodes of shared story reading with her mother and younger brother earlier in the day.]

Mother: Okay, bedtime.

Fatima: Can I read one more story?

Mother: You can read one in bed.

Fatima: You never read me any stories.

Mother: We read a lot of books and watched some movies. I have a sore throat and can't read any more tonight. You can take a book to bed.

Fatima: [Referring to a picture book that her mother had borrowed from the library for her on her way from work that day] Mom, thanks for *Mike Mulligan*. I love you.

Later: A lot of noise coming from Fatima's room. I peek in. Fatima is sitting on the bed "reading" *Rapunzel*.

As in Fatima's case, I found that stories and other materials were shared or used independently by the girls throughout the day, including at bedtime. The diaries allowed me to see how the materials were used outside of the library, providing a much fuller account of this than would be possible with other methods such as interviewing.

### GAINING ACCESS AND GETTING INFORMED CONSENT

A preliminary meeting with each of the families to explain the study and obtain informed consent, turned out to be crucial for negotiating a willingness to participate on the part of the children. Special procedures are required to obtain the informed consent of minors. Guidelines of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (1992), a research agency that provided funding for this project through a doctoral fellowship; the American Psychological Association (1968); and general works on doing research with minors such as Tymchuk (1992), require that written informed consent of a parent be obtained first, followed by consent from the minor in a form suited to their ability. Therefore, mothers were first asked for permission for their children to participate. Then, using an approach recommended by Ferguson (1978) as appropriate for helping preschoolers understand the purpose of the research, I explained the study to the children, using simple, concrete terms that related to their immediate and familiar life experiences. After this, I asked them if they wanted to be in the study. While the children were too young to provide written consent and I had not allowed a space for this on the informed consent form, all that participated actually "signed" the form in one way or another, emulating their mothers' and my behavior. A notation of their verbal consent was also made and witnessed through signatures from both the mothers and myself.

Two children who declined and did not take part in the study are of particular interest. In both cases, the girls were not present for the first part of the interview when the study was explained to the mother (one was at story hour, and the other outside playing). While both of these children received the same explanation as the others and similar opportunities to examine and play with the recorder and the study shirts, their experience was radically different in one

way: they did not have an opportunity to watch me interact with their mothers. It seemed that the children based their assessment of whether or not I was to be trusted at least partially on clues provided by the nature of the mothers' interactions with me, including smiles, friendly tones of voice, and cooperative behavior. After the two negative experiences, I was careful to ask that the children be present for all of the preliminary meeting. In work with young children, it is clear that gaining access and getting informed consent is a task dependent on and shared with their primary adult caretakers.

### OBSERVER EFFECT

Most research is susceptible to observer or reactive measurement effect which is said to occur when a "respondent's sensitivity or responsiveness to a measure is affected by the process of observation or measurement" (Singleton, Straits, Straits, & McAllister, 1988, p. 112).

While the behavior of the children, mothers and others in the study was altered somewhat by observer effect, good data collection strategies helped to lessen the impact. These included:

- Providing an opportunity for the children, the mothers, and siblings to become familiar with the researcher and the equipment in a preliminary screening/informed consent interview before the actual data collection sessions. Generally, children who had a lot of time to play with the equipment and interact with the researcher prior to the data collection paid less attention to both during the library visits than children (e.g., those who went through the informed consent interview immediately prior to the library visit) who had not had as much opportunity to handle the equipment and talk with and observe the researcher.
- Clearly communicating expectations both while explaining the study to the families and again at the beginning of the library visits. Some of the children were able to do exactly as asked as can be seen in this excerpt from the field notes I prepared about Lesley's library visit:

Method note: I was sitting at the table making field notes. Lesley sat down right beside me. However, she did not look at or talk to me. She really did seem to have understood that we would not talk until after the visit was over.

Sometimes, as is evident in the following exchange, mothers assisted with this.

Ruthie: Mommy. Where's the . . . where's the lady that Kendra [Ruthie's younger sibling] is talking about?

Kendra: Lady.

Mother: The lady wanted us to come here and do our regular library visit. So that's what we are going to do, OK?

- Staying out of direct sight lines, observing from behind obstacles, avoiding direct eye contact and appearing to be very busy with another task like note taking or looking through a book.

Habituation, in which a researcher would conduct several observations and discard the data from the first ones, reduces observer effect as it has been noted that behavior becomes more normal as subjects get used to the research process. In the interests of shortening the data collection for both myself and the families, I did not use habituation in my study. Little observer effect was noted in my careful scrutiny of the first few visit transcripts. Two library visits had to be repeated because of equipment failure. In both cases the second visits were very similar to the first ones. I also encountered five of the children in the library while collecting data with others. I informally observed them and prepared field notes about these encounters. The behavior of these children and their parents was consistent with what I had seen in their study visits. Finally, it has been noted that younger children are generally less self-conscious than older children (Slee, 1987), making observation a particularly appropriate method for preschool age children.

Strategies used to assess the impact of observer effect included:

- Using participant verification. Both mothers and, in cases where they knew the child, library staff were asked and confirmed that the children's library visits had largely seemed ordinary.
- Analyzing the data to identify and count incidents of observer effect. I coded the library visit transcripts, library visit field notes, and the follow-up interview transcripts, and identified 99 incidents of observer effect in the 30 library visits.

Many (47.5%) of the incidents of observer effect arose from intrusion of the equipment. This excerpt from Elissa's library visit is typical:

Observation note: Elissa and her mother sit down on the bench to read *Funny Bones*. Elissa fumbles with the equipment in the shirt.

Elissa: She got something in, something in right here.

Observation Note: Mother distracts Elissa by pulling her hand away and going on with the story.

Mother: OK. OK. Well, don't sit on it then.

Elissa: No.

Mother: OK. Sit down. This is how the story begins.

Some of the children, like Lisa near the end of a one-hour library visit, seemed to be completely unaware of the equipment.

Lisa: And, are we going to see the lady? We never did the tape talking.

Other incidents of observer effect arose from intrusion of the researcher (35.3%). Usually short and easily diverted, these often seemed to relate to a need on the part of the child to interact socially with the researcher. This interaction with Fatima was typical:

Observation note: Fatima approaches me where I am sitting at a table for older children which is located fairly close to the picture book area.

David [younger sibling]: Hi.

Fatima: Hi Lynne.

Researcher: Hi Fatima. Hm . . . I need to make my notes now. So I have to work hard. Can you go back to your library stuff? And I promise we will talk later.

Observation note: Fatima quickly returns to Mother and sibling who are looking through the picture book shelves.

Incidents were also analyzed to determine if they were persistent (defined as continuing for longer than one minute, involving more than ten conversation turns, or not easily ended through distraction), with 90% judged to be not persistent. Finally, I also looked for counter examples, specifically incidents of behavior that were potentially embarrassing. For example, I captured ten examples of mothers and three of staff members disciplining children during the library visits.

While observer effect was clearly present during the study library visits, it did not appear to have a major impact on the children's activities and therefore on the study results. I concluded that behavior associated with observer effect occurred largely in addition to rather than in place of the things that the children usually did while in the library. With good data collection strategies and careful scrutiny of the data collected, observer effect in field observation studies with young children can be minimized and its impact on the study results recognized and understood.

## PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF RESEARCH

A surprising outcome of the study was that it generated some data that indicate that the girls, although only four years old, were interested in and understood at least some of the research process. The mothers observed and recorded more than 20 incidents in the week following the study library visit in which the chil-

dren referred to the study. The following excerpt from Sadako's diary is typical of the talk about the study that the children engaged in with family, friends and neighbors:

Diary entry, Visit + 7 days

Just before we left for the library [for another visit] Sadako was explaining the study to our neighbour. She was really excited about the tape recorder.

Catherine, who also knew that I had once worked in a library as a children's librarian, assumed a role similar to the one I had presented to her as a researcher, in this incident of playing library reported by her mother in the diary on the fourth day after the study visit:

After a short nap Catherine and Meredith [younger sibling] are playing in Catherine's room. Catherine says she's working at the library. She has many children and she is also a student. Meredith is a child visiting the library and Catherine stamps Meredith's books for her.

The following diary excerpt shows that Sarah clearly understood her important role as one of the main characters, an expert informant in the research:

Diary entry, Visit + 1 day

In the afternoon I had to drop off one book at [the library], and Sarah remembered the study being done yesterday. Wondered if Lynne was there again with red jacket and baby tapes etc. She then remembered mention of being in a book for the study. She wants to know if she's going to be a heroine, good/bad character, maybe the mother of the family in book!

## CONCLUSION

Including the associated follow-up interview transcripts and the field notes made for each interaction with the children and their mothers, the three ethnographic field methods used in my study of library use by preschool girls generated over 2,000 pages of textual data. Analysis of the data allowed me to construct a detailed, rich picture of what preschool girls actually do while at the library and while using library materials at home as well as to identify some of the impacts, including learning opportunities, provided by library services and collections (McKechnie, 1996). The most important thing about these results is that, arising from the naturally occurring talk and actions of the children, they reflect library use from the perspective of the children themselves. In the study described in this article, ethnographic field research methods allowed for the

collection of highly trustworthy data and should be incorporated into more research that attempts to study library use and the information-seeking behavior of preschool children.

## APPENDIX

### USEFUL RESOURCES

In addition to general standard texts on qualitative research and participant observation (see, e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Mellon, 1990; Spradley, 1980; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), works dealing specifically with the use of these methods with children are now available. As none of these are specific to LIS it is necessary to look at works in other disciplines interested in studying children.

For the last 50 years, instruction in the observation of young children has played an important part in the training of teachers, especially those working with children eight years and younger. Many guides have been published. While few of these are scholarly research method manuals, and most emphasize classroom settings, many contain helpful practical advice about how to observe young children which is readily applicable to other field settings such as libraries or children's homes. Notable, recent examples of these texts include:

- Beaty, Janice J. (1998). *Observing development of the young child* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bentzen, Warren R. (1997). *Seeing young children: A guide to observing and recording their behavior* (3rd ed.). Albany, NY: Delmar.
- Billman, Jean, & Sherman, Janice. (1997). *Observation and participation in early childhood settings: A practicum guide, birth through age five*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Cohen, Dorothy H., Stern, Virginia, & Balabam, Nancy. (1997). *Observing and recording the behavior of young children* (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nicolson, Sheryl, & Shipstead, Susan G. (1998). *Through the looking glass: Observations in the early childhood classroom* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

The following two guides to early childhood observation are exceptional in that they are also well referenced, include many examples from research literature, and address the more theoretical aspects of research design:

- Boehm, Ann E., & Weinberg, Richard A. (1997). *The classroom observer: Developing observation skills in early childhood settings* (3rd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

- Foster, Peter. (1996). *Observing schools: A methodological guide*. London, England: Paul Chapman.

While the number of ethnographic studies of children increased after the Second World War, little was written which addressed the issues related to doing field work with children. The following recent titles, rooted in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, focus specifically on ethnographic fieldwork with children:

- Fine, Gary A., & Sandstrom, Kent L. (1988). *Knowing children: Participant observation with minors*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Written by two sociologists, topics covered include the role of the researcher, gaining access and trust, ethical issues and informed consent, techniques, and observer effect for participant observation with preschoolers, pre-adolescents and adolescents.
- Graue, M. Elizabeth, & Walsh, Daniel J. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. An in-depth look at doing fieldwork with children which includes information about how children have been “constructed” through past research, 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 are used to illustrate concepts. Graue and Walsh work in the discipline of education.
- Holmes, Robyn M. (1998). *Fieldwork with children*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Holmes, an anthropologist, concentrates on the impact of the gender and ethnicity of the researcher on fieldwork with children.
- Pellegrini, Anthony D. (1996). *Observing children in their natural worlds: A methodological primer*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. This book provides 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.
- Slee, Phillip T. (1987). *Child observation skills*. London, England: Croom Helm. A manual covering ethics, research design and data collection methods in field observation studies of children written by a British social scientist.

Finally, the following text provides good information on the special ethical considerations involved in doing social science research with children:

- Stanley, Barbara, & Seiber, Joan E. (Eds.). (1992). *Social research on children and adolescents: Ethical issues*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Includes information on the legal constraints of social research with children, developmental differences and their impact on the ability of children to understand and consent to the research process, privacy, and informed consent both with and without parental participation.

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