The practice of observing children has long been regarded as foundational in early childhood education. Detailed and interpretive observation allows early childhood practitioners to perceive and understand children’s behaviour and characteristics, thus developing a deep “quality of thought” (Monti & Crudeli, 2007, p. 57) which arguably underpins reflective and responsive practice (Curtis & Carter, 2000).

Many publications discuss the processes and challenges experienced by early childhood practitioners as they undertake observations (Carr, 2001; Curtis & Carter, 2000; Fleer & Richardson, 2004; Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007). This paper, however, does not address the practitioner perspective, but instead discusses tensions that arose as I implemented an observational research project in an Australian long-day-care nursery1. While ‘looking out’ at infants in the nursery, I was challenged to turn my focus inward to observe and reflect on my own ideas and feelings about observing others. In this paper, I share these thoughts and tensions which, I hope, will contribute towards open dialogue and collaborative partnerships between researchers, practitioners, and children in early childhood centres.

The project: Aims, methods, and preparations

The detail presented here derives from my involvement in an exploration of the relationship-related experiences of three infants, their teachers and parents during the infants’ first three months in the nursery (Degotardi & Pearson, 2007). While a range of techniques was used to generate detailed data about the experiences and perspectives of each participant, naturalistic observation was deemed the most appropriate means of obtaining data about the infants. This technique, which involves unobtrusive observations of naturally occurring behaviours, was selected on the basis it is ideally suited for investigations of children’s experiences in their normal contexts (Pellegrini, 1998).

It was decided that I would observe each infant for approximately 90 minutes each fortnight, capturing any behaviours which illustrated social overtures or connections between that infant and others in the nursery. These data would predominantly be recorded on a small, hand-held digital camcorder, allowing the capture of the brief and often subtle social exchanges characteristic of very young children (Eckermann & Whatley, 1977; Vandell, Wilson, & Buchanan, 1980), and the detection of changes in relationship indicators over time (Lee, 2006). The generation of video data would also permit collaborative review and analysis, thereby contributing to the reliability of the analysis (Walsh et al., 2007).

Once our methodological decisions were made, ethical requirements were addressed. As the occurrence of research in early childhood settings has increased, many have written about ethical issues that arise during the conduct of such research (e.g., Bae, 2005; Bone 2005; Cullen, Hedges, & Bone, 2005; Moss, 2001). As is the case in many countries, Australian universities have stringent guidelines relating to the ethical conduct of research, and require researchers to document methods, recruitment procedures, and provisions related to participant information, informed consent, and confidentiality. After scrutiny and questioning from our Human Ethics Committee, permission was granted, access was negotiated with the chosen site, and infants and parents were approached, informed and recruited. With these hurdles out of the way, I entered the nursery to begin to collect data.

In any field-based project, researchers need to invest time in context before collecting data so that they can ‘fit in’ and be accepted by participants in the setting. The resulting familiarity with people and events reduces researcher intrusiveness and increases the likelihood of capturing naturally occurring behaviours (Graue & Walsh, 1995). With this in mind, I drew on my own early childhood background to become involved in the nursery activities.

1 In Australia, the term ‘nursery’ generally refers to an early childhood programme for infants from birth to 24 months.

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and spent time getting to know the teachers and children. Encouraged by welcoming staff and children, I began observing with the quiet confidence that data collection would now progress smoothly.

It quickly became evident, however, that these formal ethical and practical preparations, while necessary, constituted the first stage of an ongoing process of deliberation and decision making (Cullen et al., 2005). Issues related to my researcher role, ethical choices, power and my relationships with others demanded my attention, and prompted me to reflect on and reassess my own identity as a researcher in the nursery context.

Who was I in this context?

No matter how we position ourselves, how close our relationships, how good our intentions, we remain outsiders ... an other (Graue & Walsh, 1995, p. 145). These words by Graue and Walsh brought about a sense of personal disquiet. Was I such an outsider? I felt that I knew the staff well and that they were comfortable with my presence. The children soon began to greet me warmly and increasingly incorporated me into their experiences. While a lack of welcome was clearly not the issue, there remained an uneasy tension about what it meant to be the other in this context.

From the outset, decisions had to be made about my level of participation in the room. A researcher can assume the role of non-participant observer; watching as discretely as possible with little or no interaction between the observer and those being observed (Smith, 1998). At first, the potential of data that would be 'untainted' by my presence was appealing. By remaining in the background, I reasoned, I would be able to capture what 'really' happened in the lives of these infants as they settled into the nursery. It did not take long before I realised that this was not only impractical, but in this context, it was neither expected nor accepted by the children and staff:

Early in the data collection period, I was observing Bella (13 months). Tabatha (the nursery teacher) suggested that I observed after lunch, as only Bella and a couple of other similarly aged children would be awake. Tabatha had observed that Bella and Millie appeared to be striking up a relationship, so she felt it would be a good time for me to observe what was happening. When I entered the room, Tabatha was sitting on the floor next to Bella, with Millie playing close by. I started the camera, sat on a low bench a few meters away and began to film. After a while, Tabatha left the area to assist another child and Bella remained sitting. A few minutes later, she looked up, pointed at me, and smiled. Gaining my attention, she pointed at a mobile that was swaying in the breeze, looked back at me and said "ha!" with her head to one side, and her eyes and mouth open in a look of excitement. She held her gaze and expression until I smiled back and nodded in acknowledgement. Bella repeated her actions, and Millie, first an onlooker, crawled to Bella and began to join in with the pointing game. Tabatha called from across the room "It's moving isn't it." Bella smiled, pointed, and vocalised towards me again. Both children alternated their gaze between me, Tabatha and the mobile. It was clear that in the children's and Tabatha's eyes, I was part of this game and was expected to interact with them accordingly.

Incidents such as this made me realise that in my initial efforts to become familiar with the children - in chatting and playing with them - I had invited them to interact with me as another adult in the room. Why should that stop when the camera was on? I realised that my research expectations were not only in conflict with those of the children and the staff, but also with my expectations of myself as an early childhood professional. Graue and Hawkins (2005) capture the reason for this tension when they write:

Who we are as researchers is related to who we are as theorists: as mothers, as middle-class, white women. And who we are in all our complexity is constituted by the other - through our relationships and response to those in life. (p. 46)

I became aware that the idea of remaining distant in these situations was personally untenable because it went against my own professional belief in the importance of responsive and respectful interactions with young children. This realisation illustrates how researchers, as "moral agents" (Moss, 2005, p. 1), are obliged to consider both personal and context-specific values to determine what constitutes ethical research behaviour (Bone, 2006). In my case, the decision was made to incorporate participant observation in my repertoire of techniques (Peilegreni, 1998), so filming and interactions often occurred simultaneously from that point on. Not surprisingly, in this close, relationship-rich context, my participation seemed to make me less, rather than more conspicuous, which, I contest, resulted in the generation of more authentic data than would have resulted if I had remained a peripheral observer.

On one level, the children's interactions suggested a sense of personal acceptance, yet they clearly differentiated my role from that of other adults in the room. Researchers observing older children stress that children find cameras fascinating and despite all researcher efforts, a camera presence will provoke certain behaviours (Walsh et al., 2007). The infants in the present study were no exception, but, while older children want to see themselves captured on film, these infants wanted to use the camera to see others. My field notes captured what occurred:
A routine has developed with three or four of the children. As soon as I take the camera out of its case, I am approached by at least one who tries to look into the viewing screen. It is no use discouraging this, as the children simply persist until I let them look. Mind you, I don't actually want to discourage them because it's becoming interesting data in its own right. Now, for the first few minutes of each visit, I have one or more children sitting on my lap, looking through the screen, and naming the children that they see. When I am interested in how children are connecting with others in the nursery, the camera has become an interesting tool that is capturing (and maybe) facilitating those connections.

The above example highlights what Labov (as cited in Hatch, 1995) refers to as the observer paradox or the “dilemma of trying to capture naturally occurring behaviour in the unnatural context created by the presence of a researcher” (p. 218). It also stresses Hatch’s point that research contexts are inherently social, and that authentic representations of any context must consider the intentions, interactions, and ideas of those within that context, regardless of whether those people are participants or researchers.

When to look away

“In an age of electronic eavesdropping (licit as well as illicit), videotaping inevitably carries with it an unsavoury whiff of videotaping, of intrusion, surveillance, and expanding technologies of social control” (ToBIN & Davidson, 1990, p. 276). By allowing me to observe, the parents had permitted me to capture close and often intimate details of their infants’ experiences. While observing the infants’ first months in the nursery, I saw hesitation as they arrived, distress as parents left, and uncertainty as they negotiated and formed relationships with staff and peers. While I had intended to film as many aspects of the infants’ experiences as possible, some experiences caused me to reconsider this decision.

The infant’s transition from parent and teacher was one such time. While the Centre had a sensitive and capable way of assisting infant and parent during the ‘hand-over’, this routine was often accompanied by an intensity of emotions. My reaction to such displays caught me off guard as I soon found these events impossible to film. As I struggled to make sense of this reaction, I wondered whether my response originated from a feeling of personal upset at the infants’ distress. After some reflection, however, I discounted this initial theory on the basis that I was able to watch and write notes about these events as long as I did so from a discrete distance. Furthermore, I experienced a similar reaction to observing nappy-change routines which were rarely accompanied by infant distress. Instead, I recognised that my discomfort originated from the use of the camera, or more specifically, the notion of surveillance and intrusiveness attached to filming. I realised that I was caught between a desire to observe rich relationship-building opportunities and the need to consider the privacy of those involved (Cullen et al., 2005). For the same reason that I would avert my eyes from a couple’s emotional farewell at an airport, I concluded that the emotional and physical intimacy of certain events in the nursery demanded respect, sensitivity and distance that could not be conveyed from behind the lens of a camera.

Putting the camera down

Observing therefore threw up ethical dilemmas related to status and power (Bae, 2005; Graue & Walsh, 1995). How much could I, as a researcher, intrude on the emotional or intimate experiences of these children and their caregivers? Should my researcher desire to obtain ‘good’ data take precedence over my uneasiness about privacy? When else should the camera be put down?

Bella (now 14 months) was sitting at a low table making marks on paper with a ball-point pen. Millie approached, and Bella turned and stared at her before returning to her drawing. Millie reached over and touched the pen. As Bella turned to look at her again, she met her gaze with her head to one side. Bella frowned and shifted the paper across the table so it was a little further from Millie. Then, as Bella began to draw, Millie reached over and grabbed the pen. Bella immediately tried to sweep it away but Millie held on and a shaking tussle evolved, with both children holding fast. Bella frowned, vocalised loudly, looked up at me and vocalised again. I said, “Oh. What’s the matter?” and continued to film. With a swift movement, Bella separated the pen from Millie’s grasp. She looked sternly at Millie, and then pointed the pen towards her, catching her across the cheek. Millie immediately stepped backwards and cried out, and Bella looked seriously towards me and then towards the now wailing Millie. I hesitated a moment longer before putting the camera down and approaching the scene.

Hatch (1995) describes how researchers experience dilemmas about their levels of involvement when observing incidents that may place someone at risk of harm. What stops researchers from intervening, he suggests, is their “own selfishness, being caught up in the moment, and [their] view of the ‘superior’ nature of the researcher role” (p. 218). There are uncomfortable elements of truth in his words. I had watched these girls’ relationship grow over two months, and, knowing that relationships encompass moments of cooperation and conflict (Dunn, 1993), I admit that I was keen to capture this example of an
altercation. Yet as I comforted Millie, I wondered whether my lack of action during the incident contributed towards her being hurt. Did my own research agenda cause me to privilege my data over a child’s safety? Or was my hesitation driven by a teacher-based desire to allow the children opportunities to resolve the altercation themselves?

Answers to the above questions were elusive, and the tensions were never completely resolved. Such incidents heightened an awareness of my responsibility to the children, and my responsibility to avoid falling into the trap of treating research participants as “mere objects to be observed and categorised” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. xii). These and other similar examples caused me to reflect again on my own role. Was it even my place to step in, or should I leave such interventions to the nursery staff whose roles and expertise I respected and admired?

Once I had finished data collection, I decided to ask Tabatha for her views.

Sheila: As time went on, I became more of a participant - as much as I felt I could be. I’m interested in your view in regards to that notion of having me as a researcher in the room.

Tabatha: I guess you being in the room, we felt like even though your hands were full, you were still an extra pair of hands. Like, you let the children look at the screen. Everyone [the children] was just there and involved, and you were so welcoming of everyone else to come in. So that was really great for us to have those experiences.

Sheila: There have been the ethical issues that I’ve had to deal with really quickly. And so there was a boundary between what I felt comfortable doing and situations when I stop and think ‘no - that’s not my role’.

Tabatha: I think if you hadn’t played a role in the room, then you wouldn’t have felt like you were intruding … [also] you wouldn’t have had the trust of the child, and then you wouldn’t have got the footage that you wanted.

It was comforting to hear Tabatha support my own reflections, though I did wonder whether I should have asked her these questions earlier! Maybe, however, I needed time to personally appreciate what these tensions meant for my actions, identity, and relationships with others within the setting. This being said, the process of reflection does not need to be individual and private. As I learnt through speaking to Tabatha and others, identities can be strengthened by revealing personal questions for discussion and debate.

My experiences brought to the fore a realisation that field-based research invariably throws up methodological and ethical dilemmas (Goldstein, 2007; Graue & Hawkins, 2005; Tobin & Davidson, 1990), and that the process of critically working through these issues is “a necessary ingredient in a researcher’s identity” (Bae, 2005, p. 290).

Concluding remarks

This article has focused on some of the personal and professional dilemmas that I experienced while collecting observations in an early childhood nursery. While written from a researcher’s perspective, these issues hold implications for early childhood practitioners. The fact that researchers and practitioners use observations to gain a rich understanding of the perspectives and experience of young children is well established. Less attention, however, is paid to the notion that conscious reflection on the practice of observation can alert observers to matters that were
In particular, there is a growing recognition that we need to extend the current knowledge base about infant-toddler programmes.

A decade ago, Pellegrini (1998) advocated the use of naturalistic observation in educational research, writing that "there is a crucial need for good (that is, reliable and valid) descriptions of children in settings where they spend substantial portions of their time" (p. 77). With a current world-wide interest in the experiences of those in early childhood settings, Pellegrini’s words are as relevant now as they were then. In particular, there is a growing recognition that we need to extend the current knowledge base about infant-toddler programmes. My experiences emphasised how observational research in nursery settings is built on cooperative and supportive relationships between researchers, practitioners, and participants, so it is important for those on both sides of the camera to have the opportunity to explore and come to understand the views and dilemmas faced by the other. In this way, researchers and practitioners can collaborate to contribute towards a sound and authentic research-base that will ultimately inform professional practice.

References

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