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”Finally, at the weekend... We have time to play and be together” Interviews with 5 to 7-years old children

This paper has two aims. First, I will discuss the potentials and drawbacks of the method of child interview. Some of the examples for the discussion are taken from my study about the everyday life of 5- to 7-years-old children. Second, I will present some of the results of my study focusing on the sorrows and joys children experience in their everyday life.

For the study I am presenting here, I collected the research data during one spring in three kindergartens in Northern Finland. The data consists of interviews with 29 children, whose age varied between five and seven years. Of the 29 children, I interviewed 21 at the kindergarten and eight at their homes.

At the beginning of the research I spent a lot of time in the kindergartens, because I wanted to get familiar with the children. I told the children who I was and that I would like to interview them. Then I told them that after I had interviewed every child, I would write a book about them. The children were given time to get used to the tape recorder before the interview. Before the interview, I gave every child a sticker. The children spoke to the tape recorder, which they thought was a lot of fun. Every child was given an empty album, to which the children started to draw with the kindergarten teachers and me. The children drew with me on the following subjects: 1) Me, 2) My family and I, 3) Mother’s work, 4) Daddy’s work, 5) Our family at the weekends, 6) My day in the kindergarten and 7) What I am doing at home.

The issues of the pictures were connected with the interview questions. The interview schedule contained a list of four major themes: 1) The child’s family and home, 2) The child’s day in the kindergarten, 3) The parents’ work and 4) Togetherness between child and parent. Most of the children spoke openly and without hesitation about their experiences of their everyday life. The interview lasted from 15 minutes to almost one hour. In each case the child him-/herself decided how long the interview went on.

Difficulties and potentials of interview methods with children

How can we get information about the everyday life of children with the interview method? Even the research field includes a diversity of applications of interview methods with children. Here, I will focus on discussing some general observations on the use of interviews with children. The method of interviewing contains some problems. One problem is that the method is adult-centred. It is very important that the questions are posed from child-centred perspective. In my own study, I paid attention not to use terms that adults use among themselves such as: “What do your parents do at work?” or “Would you like to tell me something about yourself?” These were very problematic for the children. By avoiding such formulations, I think that the children found the interview was a nice experience, but someone mentioned it to be also hard work, “ Luckily this doesn’t take as long as speech therapy”, said one 6-year-old boy.

Some researchers, for example Liisa Karlsson (Karlsson in print, 5-7) argue that interviewing is difficult with children while on the other hand, some researchers like Ritala-

Koskinen (Ritala-Koskinen 2001, 160-162) point out that interviewing with children is quite. Not all researchers see the interview method as problematic.

The second problem is that it is difficult for the child to tell about his/her own things and issues, if it is the adult who determines the themes of the discussion (Karlsson 2005). For example, interviewing is the adult's way to get information about children's experiences (Bardy 1996). As an alternative method to adult centred interviews, Karlsson (2005) and Riihelä (2000) suggest story telling as a way to get information about children's own culture and out of the child's point of view. Ritala-Koskinen (2001) argues that the method of interviewing was not an obstacle to get information about the children's experiences.

In the process of interviewing it is important that an adult is capable to understand children's childhood and their experiences. In line with Ritala-Koskinen, also Bardy (1996, 200-210) mentions interviewing as the method for the adult to get information about children's experiences. Bardy (1996) sees that childhood is defined by its relationship to adulthood. Childhood has its own place in the social order and the relationships between child and adult are either invisible or visible. The cultural structure of childhood contains four fields: 1) Children's childhood, 2) Adults' childhood, 3) Adults' adulthood and 4) Children's adulthood. Each of these relationships is present in the individual's life and in society at the same time and side-by-side.

On the basis of my own work, I think that the method of interviewing is difficult and challenging. One can even ask, whether it is possible to get information about children's everyday life through the interview method. In my opinion it is possible, if the interviewer possesses a specific sensitivity to listen to the child. I think that by applying what I call the "toolbox of the child interview" it is possible for the adult to develop and reflect upon his/her sensitivity in listening to the child. The "toolbox" is a metaphor for a theoretical and philosophical idea that I have developed on the basis of my work with interviewing children.

The "toolbox"

The toolbox consists of three main themes: 1) Wondering 2) Dialogue and 3) Play. These are the elements that should be present when conducting interviews with children. Democratic dialogue is included in each of these dimensions that should be present in an interview that is sensitive to children's own viewpoints.

1) According to Irigaray (1996) wonder is the open space where the adult could listen to and watch the child without any preoccupation. In other words, if there is no open space between the child and the adult, the adult reflects his/her own attitude towards the child. The value of the wondering is that the child is accepted as the person she/he is and without any demands from the side of the adult. (Heinämaa 2000; Irigaray 1996, 92-93.).

A good relationship between child and researcher needs enough time to develop, the child has to trust the researcher and the power relationship between the adult and child has to be as equal as possible. For example, a five years old boy asked me:

Child: Guess what?

I: Well...?

Child: We got a huge fish yesterday... (The child showed with his hands)

I: Who will wake you up in the morning for the kindergarten?

I did not listen to what the child wanted to tell me, and therefore, used my power over the child.

Sometimes the child trusted me, consequently she told me honestly what she thought about me. An example is this conversation with a six years old girl:

I: What are your parents like at home after the work?

Child: They are very tired...

I: How do you know that they are tired?

Child: They are always violet in here...(The child shows under her eyes.) You are here too. You are probably tired.

I: Well, well...

2) According to Karlsson (2003, 23) dialogue means that the child and adult are equal partners in conversations and they both respect each other. Engel (1996,167) argued that when the adult is listening attentively it may have a great impact on the child's tendency to continue to tell about her/his experiences and stories. I found that towards the end of my interviews I gave more time and space for the children to tell me about their everyday life.

3) When children play they use democratic dialogue. I also agree with Karlsson (2005) that there is not a child who does not play. The children's lives consist of play. To be consistent with these assumptions, I gave time and space for children to play for example with a dollhouse while interviewing them. When the method of interviewing was used, the child had an opportunity to play or draw at the same time. Karlsson (2005) says that in play, children express themselves in various ways. My toolbox ideas will be further explained in the following.

Joys and sorrows in children's everyday life

I have been inspired by phenomenological psychology, which originates in descriptive phenomenological philosophy. The purpose of this research is to analyze the joys and sorrows of children's everyday lives. The child perspective provides new information on children's experiences about family life, parents and kindergarten. According to the theory of social construction, all information is relative, which means that information is not neutral, but represents somebody's viewpoints of their lives. The relativity of knowledge makes reality very complicated, but at the same time very fascinating. If one wants to obtain information about children's everyday life, one has to ask the children themselves (Strandell 1995).

The joys of the morning: Some children said that they enjoyed going to the kindergarten, because there are more friends and more pleasant things to do there than at home. For these reasons the child does not feel tired and his/her parents are not in a hurry.

The sorrows of the morning: Children mentioned some sorrows related to the morning, like when your parents are in a hurry to get to their work and they let their irritation spill over on the child. Besides, the child might feel tired and does not want to go to the kindergarten. She/he wishes to stay at home.

The joys of the kindergarten: Children mentioned that they enjoy playing with their friends and sometimes they like to draw, sing and be at the pre-school. Some children had the impression that five hours was enough for him/her in the kindergarten.

The sorrows of the kindergarten: There were three things in the kindergarten which the children disliked. The first thing is when the teacher sets limits to the child's actions. Additionally, the child feels insecure when another child teases him/her and the child misses her/his parents in the daytime.

Finally, the child feels that the parents' work causes inconvenience to his/her life, because his/her day in the kindergarten is too long.

The joys at home: Many joyful things happened at home. Children enjoy being at home because they may play peacefully, either alone or with their siblings or friends. Home is the place where the parent(s) are and they are very important to the child. The child enjoys playing, building constructions with Lego blocks, and to play computer games. He/she also enjoys being together with parents/parent.

The sorrows at home: Children mentioned that they feel deep sorrow when the parents have no time to play with them, because they are too tired after their working day. The child does not like the parent to put limits to the behaviour of the child. The child hates fighting with parent/parents. Sometimes the father does work at home, and because of that the father has no time to play or be together with the child. The child misses the father in the instances when he does not live at home because he is dead or the parents are divorced.

The joys of the weekend: During weekends children have the opportunity to play freely and peacefully with their friends, alone or with the parents. Children love to play freely and they are happy, because they may sleep enough or as long as they want. Children enjoy being at home and not go to the kindergarten. The best things for the child are that she/he watches television together with the parents and that they are allowed to eat sweets. The children might have a close relationship with their grandmother and grandfather. Because of that the child feels sorrow, if she/he does not see her/his grandfather or grandmother.

The sorrows at home: Sometimes children miss kindergarten, because there is not enough to do at home. The child feels insecure if the father lets it watch violent TV programs and video films or if the father is violent towards the child. The child feels sorry if the holiday time is cancelled because of the father's work.

To conclude, the observations throughout this study show that the children are experts in telling about the experiences of their everyday life. It is a challenge, and even a duty, for the adult to listen carefully to the children stories. As it is the adults' responsibility is to provide a good childhood and everyday life for the children, we as scholars should continue to develop methods to produce more detailed knowledge of children's own perspectives to these issues.

Literature

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