

Jonna Leinonen  
012401215  
jonna.leinonen@helsinki.fi

## **Early Childhood Qualitative Research (edited by J. Amos Hatch)**

### **A Book Review and Points of Discussion of a Becoming Researcher**

Even if Early Childhood Education has been a subject of scientific research for few decades (in Finland only from year 1995 when early childhood teacher education was adopted to University Level) there exists still a wide doubt of the scientific quality of studies in Early Childhood Education field. The influence of psychological perspective has been strong in the field of early childhood and psychologist have been fond of scientific (quantitative) measurement states N. Yelland , the editor of the series. Early childhood education research has been adopted views and research traditions also from other disciplines (such as sociology, cultural studies and educational philosophy). The complex nature of childhood (and our lives) and the diversity of being a human in postmodern era is reflected in a new tradition of Early Childhood Education studies together with the voice of participant and many-sided description of everyday life in classrooms. These three aspects, according to Yelland, are the reason why qualitative research with wide range of theoretical perspectives and different methodological orientation are needed in the field of Early Childhood Education Research.

#### **Positivism vs. Postmodern Paradigm**

In the first chapter Hatch discusses about the conflict between positivist paradigm and the postmodern paradigm when they are facing the issue of 'scientific based' approach. He claims that the attempt to define general educational research as 'scientifically based' (or positivist) is based on the idea of medical and psychological measurements. The idea of positivist research tradition is to believe that reality is driven by unchanging and inflexible natural laws, which can be measured from large groups of students. Goal of a positivist is to predict a phenomenon in controlled conditions. Hatch points out that in U.S. the National Reading Panel (NRP) is determined the 'scientific educational research' from the basis of positivist approach and has standardized the research making as well as had effect to educational policies.

The postmodern research seems to be the best solution of making educational research according to Hatch. In postmodern tradition the diversity is inevitable and the truth cannot be revealed, assumptions can only be proved false or not false in the context of certain research position. From the field of postmodern research Hatch identifies four different qualitative paradigms that he claims to be lost, if educational science returns in positivist paradigm: postpositivist, constructivist, critical/feminist and poststructuralist. As examples Hatch describes a research from each paradigm above that have been ranked “not scientific” by the NPR only because they don’t use the paradigm that been ‘raised to the status of science’. The four research ideologies he describes do challenge the program proving agendas (such as Head Start) and seems to give information about being a child that doesn’t fit in the status quo of educational science.

As a European reader it is hard to believe that politics has so much to do with the qualifying scientific research. When thinking a bit further I have to admit that the same problem might exist here too. In Finland we for example don’t have any quality measurement test for the day care center. We don’t in fact even know what children do during their long days in day care. The only acceptable research measurements have been past few years the action research focusing on play, the discourse analysis on interaction between adult and child or child and her peers or research that describe a program (curriculum etc.). So we too do have problems with narrow focus.

The book after the Hatch forewords about paradigms was a collection on Early Childhood Education researcher’s short papers. The focuses of paper were from hermeneutical text analysis to focus groups and action research based studies. Also the problematic issue of small children’s as a co-researcher was subject of the book. For this short book review I however chose two papers for closer examination: Golstein’s descriptive paper of Surviving Methodological Crisis, because as a becoming researcher I feel Methodological Crisis are part of my everyday research life. And MacNaughton’s, Smith’s and Davis’s paper of building research as “child friendly”, because I do believe that doing research with children is one of the future’s goals in early childhood education research.

### **Methodological Crisis** (by L.S. Goldstein)

Some sort of crisis in data collection is certain, even if the researcher has experiences over 15 years of doing research states Goldstein. This is not very relief information, because I have

pondered the problematic issue of learning not to do mistakes in research. Goldstein describes her study of observing and documenting teaching practices of kindergarten teachers during the typical working day to create narratives of teaching strategies of the participant teachers.

One of the crises was caused by the different curriculums effect on teacher strategies. When reading an example of crisis of this kind I found myself wondering, if the case should be dropped out from the data. Goldstein however use time to skim through several curriculum and guidelines papers and found a reason why the participant teacher seems not to implement the idea of teaching practices differentially than expected. Goldstein states that she found herself as a tourist in a different cultural approach and after red through the guidebook (guidelines) to that particular teaching culture the value of the data grew stronger than expected.

Goldstein presents her five strategies of surviving methodological crisis, which I found useful. The first (and perhaps the most important) strategy was “staying calm”. Sound excellent idea for any trouble in research, but is maybe hard to realize when the panic strikes. Goldstein states that most of the missteps are not deadly and the emergency can turn out to be a false alarm. The second step is to carry on even when the study seemed to be in ruins. It seems to me, that even if the data don't answer the previous research questions it can reveal something new and unthinkable. Goldstein's third strategy is to remember that unexpected findings are valuable data and can be turned to be the most important results. That is for me the best part of research making: to find out something you haven't even thought about to exist when started a study. The data analysis method needed to be quite inductive though, because I could imagine a tight theory based methodology that will be wrecked when something extraordinary comes before the court. The fourth strategy is to remain open to possibilities and alternatives by attributing positive to participants of your study. In ethical basis this is also important thing, even Goldstein did not mention it. The participant gives a huge amount of trust to researcher when letting her enter in their classroom or their everyday life. Breaking that trust only because a researcher is frustrated or disappointed at what she views and explores is not acceptable. In the observation situation the researcher cannot control all the theories and aspects, which is why we collect data and make the analysis later. The final strategy of Goldstein is a learning process where she advises to anticipate unexpected turns as a natural part of research process that cannot be avoided. Designing a research process is taught to be the most important part of the research and sometimes it felt that the research

plans are more important papers than the actual results of the research. As a student of a department which relies on this principle I found Goldstein's ideas refreshing – if she makes mistakes, maybe I am allowed too. Founding new options from missteps that one is never imagined before can give new opportunities for early childhood education research.

### **Researching with Children** (by MacNaughton, Smith & Davis)

Positivist paradigm views scientific researches 'real' and the ultimate truth made by infallible and objective researcher who does not have subjective relationship with her study states MacNaughton & al. in their paper. Studying small children in their natural environment (if a daycare centre can be named such) can hardly be entirely objective and it is hard to avoid forming subjective relationship to children or teachers or daycare institution. I could claim that every person doing research about childhood has some kind of relationship to children and their learning and growing up. Firstly we have all be children and our memories, values and ways of thinking do come from our childhood and secondly the reason to study early childhood comes often from professional interest (such as teacher, psychologist, doctor) which have been grown during education and professional practices where we have learn to think 'right' about children. MacNaughton & al. brings out different perspectives to the complexity of positivist research traditional. They view the change from positivist to postmodern paradigm and the feminist researchers' idea of validity of the voice of researched being heard also in the research making process (and not only as data). They also raise the ethical problems when making research from minorities of some kind (children can maybe be seen as a minority too...). The most important issue of making children participants of research making is raised up from the UN convention of children's rights which in fact is familiar paper for my own field of research too. Children's right express their views should to be taken account when 'developing policies and services' also when making research about them. Research should be built children friendly so that well-being and democratic issues are took account and children could shape research for and about them states MacNaughton & al.

Making research with small children as co-researcher is a problematic issue. The power relations in research projects are complex and in project initiated and run by adults exist a manipulation and authority when children are pushed to achieve adult's goals. The issue of research plans as a design for program is one of the problems: Researchers design often research before implementing it (in fact it is required for grants etc.). It can however prevent children's voice to be heard and children's influence in between the project.

MacNaughton & al. offers a model for conceptualizing children's participation in research project. The model is based on Fajerman's (2001) adaptation and takes account the issues of knowledge and power, when children participate in research project, and offers a four axes witch expresses different knowledge-power dynamics. Modeling children's participation in research is one way of define children's part and role in research making. Models have been popular in determining other aspects of children's participation too past ten years, so why not use one to research too? However using a model can prevent researcher from hearing children voice, if the current opinion, initiative or decision is not fitting in selected model. MacNaughton & al. have notice this and they recommend for using reflection and evaluation of research process every time children are participated in research. I feel that they have knowledge about something very essential about postmodern research paradigm and their purposes do face the controversial issues of diversity and social justice when researching individual being. But as they state, every methodical innovation raises new questions to be answered.

## **Discussion**

In this book rewired of essay about Early Childhood Qualitative Research (edited by J. Amos Hatch) I have take a few narrow glances of the methodological problems every researcher in postmodern paradigm need to reflect on. The process of planning, implementing, analyzing and finally writing a good qualitative research from early childhood setting requires also discussion about ethical issues, children's voice, problems and pitfalls on the journey. Questions such as "what is my paradigm?", "what are my methodological and theoretical bases and do the research questions give any sense to them?", "what is my context, who are my participants and why and how do their voice is heard in my research?" are according to Hatch important to ponder and discuss openly not only at the start of research, but also in the middle of the process and finally, when evaluating the research. There are many issues to keep in mind and many issues which cannot become blind or forgot. I'm glad of reading a book about research in early childhood context because I feel to get new ideas and even learn something about doing qualitative research in general.