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Szulevicz, Thomas

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# Observational methods in educational psychology

## A Day in Qualitative Psychology

Thomas Szulevicz

Aalborg University

thoszu@hum.aau.dk

In this presentation I will discuss the role of observational methods in educational psychology practice.

Psychological matters literally take place in everyday life. Children live their lives with other kids, teachers and parents, and if educational psychologists are to understand and help children and students in difficulties, they need access to knowledge of children's ways of participating in everyday life. But how do educational psychologists get access to this kind of knowledge?

In this presentation I will argue that observational methods can be a productive way of gaining insight into children and student everyday life. In my discussion of observational methods, I am inspired by Jean Lave's use of Clifford Gertz' notion of 'outdoor psychology'.

Jean Lave begins her book 'Cognition in Practice' from 1988 with the quote:

*"The problem is to invent what has recently been nicknamed "outdoor psychology". The book is an inquiry into conditions that would make this possible. The conclusion: that contemporary theorizing about social practice offers a means of exit from a theoretical perspective that depends upon a claustrophobic view of cognition from inside the laboratory and school. The project is a "social anthropology of cognition" rather than a "psychology" because there is reason to suspect that what we call cognition is in fact a complex social phenomenon." (Lave, 1988: 1)*

An outdoor psychology thus takes seriously the dialectic between persons-acting and the settings in which their activity is constituted, and in this presentation, I will discuss whether educational psychology practice actually can be termed an outdoor psychology. To illuminate this question, I will discuss the role of observational methods in educational psychology practice.

The educational psychology's field of practice has for the last 10-15 years been undergoing a shift from an individualized focus on children with problems to a focus on how a systemic, consultative approach extends the possibilities for understanding problems experienced within schools.

Theoretically, I will frame the consultative approach within a sociocultural tradition in which children's learning and development are conceptualized as situated in concrete, historical and

cultural contexts. The sociocultural tradition has been part of a broad theoretical critique of so-called mainstream developmental and educational psychology's basis in an individualist and often medical understanding of children in difficulties.

Traditionally, the majority of the educational psychologist's working time has been devoted to the individual assessment of children, and it is widely accepted that the Danish educational psychology service, for the most part, has been rooted in a medical model in which IQ-testing has been a prominent feature. Criticisms of the "medical model" are well-known and focus on the fact that the approach tends to ignore the contribution that the school or family can make towards prevention and intervention for individuals, groups, families and communities.

The consultative approach stresses the fact that, in order for school psychologists to maximize their impact on helping children, it is important for them to have a detailed knowledge of the systems where children live and work (which essentially means family and school) and to develop mutually supportive trusting relationships with people who work in or with the system, including the children; and to work jointly with all relevant parties adopting a problem solving framework (Farrell, 2009, 77).

The shift towards a consultative approach requires that educational psychologists use new methodologies that are able to grasp the complexity and socially distributed character of students' everyday life. In this context, I will argue that qualitative observations provide a promising method. But while observational methods are relatively well established as qualitative research methods, their status as a valid means of gathering information about student life in educational psychology's field of practice is more dubious. My claim is thus that observational methods play a significant role in scientific research, and in educational research for example, there have been many observational studies that have been specifically designed to describe specific educational phenomena. However, in educational psychology practice observations are conducted, but they often seem to be considered blurred and time-consuming. At least in a Danish context, it seems that observational methods play a minimal role compared to other ways of gathering information about students. In a recent study, we investigated all the written reports in an Educational Psychology Service-center from 2007 to 2011. Among 3000 reports, 125 were randomly selected and coded. The result was that the WISC-test was used by the educational psychologists in all but one case. Thus, in 124 of 125 cases, the educational psychologists conducted a WISC-test as part of their intervention. In comparison, observational methods were used in only 22 % of the cases.

Firstly, the results indicate that the use of WISC-tests and other tests are still widespread in educational psychology practice. There is no necessary contradiction between testing and working consultatively. However, the consultative approach implies minimizing the use of tests and instead evolving methods that grasp the socially distributed character of students' everyday life.

Secondly, the results indicate that educational psychologists are reluctant to observe students in their natural everyday activities in school.

This impression was confirmed in another research project in which I did field work in a different EPS-centre for three months. During these three months, I did not one single time observe any psychologists conducting classroom or other kinds of observations.

In the remainder of this presentation I will address observations in educational psychology's field of practice, and discuss how observations can contribute meaningfully to a consultative approach in educational psychology. Furthermore, I will argue that observations of children and student everyday life actually can be a promising way of approaching an outdoor psychology in which we take seriously the dialectic between persons-acting and the settings in which their activity is constituted (Lave, 1988).

### **1. Observations shed light on every day practices**

Firstly, I will shortly clarify what I mean by observation. Observational methods can take many forms. They can be conducted in laboratories, in schools, in homes, in after school programs or anywhere else. Observations can be standardized, or non-standardized, but what I refer to in this context is what I would call *outdoor or field-based observations*, referring to observations conducted in the settings in which real people live their lives. For educational psychologists this for the most part means that observations are conducted in classroom- or school-settings. And this is a central point, because in most other educational psychology practices like testing, supervision of teachers, network meetings or counseling of parents, kids, teachers or parents are taken out of their natural, everyday settings. Within these technologies students are tested, teachers are asked to reflect upon their own practices, parents are guided etc, but for the most part these activities are reflections or mental reconstructions of situated activities. Observations, on the other hand, are 'outdoor' and characterized by giving an insight into social processes as they unfold in everyday life. Most often, school psychologists make their observations in schools as classroom observations. Observations thus shed light on both students' and teachers' conditions for participation in school-activities.

Furthermore, observations make it possible to follow kids *across* different places and settings. You will often get different perspectives from observing a student in a math-lesson, an English-lesson or during a break. In his article from 1993 ‘The acquisition of a child by a learning disability’ anthropologist Ray McDermott made a compelling evidence of how children vary across different settings and institutional situations. McDermott and his colleagues observed nine-year-old Adam, who was described as a learning disabled child, in four different settings; 1) in everyday life, 2) in cooking clubs, 3) in classroom lessons and 4) in testing sessions. McDermott described how the different settings differed in the degree to which Adam appeared as a problem. In everyday life situations and in the cooking club, Adam did not stand out as a problem, whereas he appeared as a problem in comparison with many of his peers in classroom lessons and in testing sessions.

McDermott argued that the question about how to describe Adam actually turned into a question about how to describe the settings in which the different Adams could emerge.

McDermott makes a strong case for the benefits and potentials related to observing children across different institutional settings. He makes explicit how a powerful label like learning disabilities does not fit to Adam in all settings, and he thus also demonstrates how observations can shed new light on our existing understandings of a phenomenon and hereby pave the way for other understandings of a problem.

Often, educational psychologists emphasize that they observe children while testing them (Szulevicz & Højholt, in review). Of course, this kind of ”qualitative” information can be valuable. However, the test-situation does not allow for observing the child’s interactions and interplays with peers. Most often, a child’s or a students’ acts are related to what other students or children are doing, and if we want to understand and describe a single child, we often have to focus our attention on the child’s peers. If educational psychologists reduce their observations to observations-while-testing, they might miss out on the dialectics between persons-acting and the settings in which this activity is constituted.

## **2. Observations can make school counseling more practice-oriented**

Teachers often report that they overall are fairly satisfied with the quality of the services they receive from school psychologists. Even so, they demand more frequent contact with school psychologists, and they generally ask for more practice-oriented counseling. Additionally, they would like school psychologists to move away from routine assessments of individual children who might require special educational provision (Farrell, et al. 2005). The need for a more practice-

oriented counseling seems lately to have been strongly endorsed by the current inclusion pressure in our educational system. Inclusion is now a key part of the development of educational policy and practice around the world (Farrell, 2010). But the call for inclusion also leaves many school psychologists in a sort of identity crisis. In fact, educational psychologists have often been seen by advocates of inclusive education as part of the problem, rather than as part of the solution. Their role has been characterised as that of gatekeepers to special education. In Denmark for example, the number of students attending special needs education has increased substantially over the years. Paradoxically, this increase has taken place while the national educational strategy has been pushing for inclusion in schools. And school psychologists have inarguably played a major role in the increase of students in special education. Yet, school psychologists' role in inclusion practices is of course more complex than this and many educational psychologists engage in very productive partnerships with teachers to promote inclusive learning environments in schools. However, the challenges for inclusion ask for new roles and functions of school psychologists, and in this context, it is my contention that observations also have an interesting potential. By observing students in their different activities in school, educational psychologists can make systematic recordings of student behavior and/or teacher practices and they hereby get a different platform for sparring and discussing classroom activities with teachers.

As Tom Good (1988: 375) puts it: "One role of observational research is to describe what takes place in classrooms in order to delineate the complex practical issues that confront practitioners." Through mere describing of observations, teachers can become aware of how their classroom functions and thus bring about changes they desire.

### **3. Observations generate knowledge about and from a children's perspective**

Tests, interviews, rating scales or questionnaires can be effective ways to gather information about students. But they are also technologies in which professionals, in this case psychologists, set the agenda.

Moreover, a potential consequence of the consultative approach is that we focus very much on what is going on between professionals. Consultation usually evolves in a triadic relationship between a consultant (the ECP), a consultee (e.g. a teacher and/or parent/care-giver) and the focus of change (e.g. a learning environment, a school, a child in the classroom). As a matter of fact, it seems as though children and their lives almost are at risk of *disappearing* in discussions among professionals (Højholt, 2006).

I will argue that observing children in their common trajectories across different social practices potentially brings about *other* perspectives to the understanding of children. Observations thus hold the potential to maintain the focus on, not only what is going on between adults and professionals, but also on what is going on among children. The mere interest in what children are doing in their lives moves attention to other places – for instance the school-yard, the playgrounds, the breaks or elsewhere. My claim is that observations in this way can generate knowledge about and from a children's perspective.

### **Does the coin have another side?**

With the above-listed potentials in observations, the intriguing question becomes: why do we see this apparent reluctance to make use of observational methods among educational psychologists? In the following I will discuss some of the answers to this question, and discuss some of the challenges related to observing in educational psychology practice.

#### **1. Observations are time-consuming**

It is often objected that classroom observations are too time-consuming. In order to avoid complexity-reducing conclusions the observer has to spend a great deal of time in the field to gain a detailed insight into the complexity of everyday life in schools. However, with a fairly tight working agenda for most educational psychologists, it can be troublesome to meet up with the standards for good observational practice. Moreover, many educational psychologists report that when they observe, either, nothing spectacular happens, or, their observations simply confirm what they already knew about a student or a specific problematic. On this basis, observations can sometimes even be considered waste of time.

First of all, I will argue that most observations are full of information. Being a good observer is about keeping one's ears to the ground and being observant about patterns, discontinuities, a students' attempt to tell something or other relevant information.

Secondly, I agree that observations can be time-consuming. Yet, ignorance and lack of insight into the complexity of children's everyday life is also time-consuming. Often, too much time is spent on trying to understand children's lives without knowing much about them. And talking about time, WISC-testing is also very time-consuming, and how often does an intelligence-test actually generate new knowledge or new perspectives about a tested student?

Thirdly, I will argue that understanding a students' or a child's perspective does not necessarily involve observing 'the spectacular' (as defined by teachers or psychologists). Observations of mundane every day interactions in schools can move the focus from the 'spectacular' and to how a student's difficulties most often are related to mundane everyday life practice in school.

## **2. Different perspectives on 'the same thing'**

I previously mentioned that I made a three-month field-work in an educational psychology service center, and in that period not a single psychologist conducted any classroom observations. Subsequently, I interviewed two of the psychologists and asked them about their (lacking) observational practices. The first psychologist explained that she only conducted class room observations if a teacher had asked her to do it, and if the teacher had a pre-defined problem or issue that she wanted the psychologist to observe. The other psychologist said that she did not observe and that she instead talked with or tested students or relied on teachers' and parents' descriptions of students. These concerns lead me to another central discussion point in relation to observations: do educational psychologists have to witness or in person observe the cases they are dealing with? Does the educational psychologist have to observe the unruly child in order to know that he is unruly? Can't we just rely on teachers' or parents' descriptions of the child? In many cases I would agree that the educational psychologist can rely on parents' or teachers' description of a child or a problem. However, and it might seem trivial to mention, reality is observer dependent. A teacher's perception of a situation tells us something and is definitely a very valuable source of information. Yet, a school psychologist's observations provide other information and are literally undertaken from another perspective. These observations hold the potential to either cement, challenge or add something new to teacher's perceptions of a problem area. From this perspective, observations are not judgments. Instead, they are inquiries into different perspectives.

## **3. We only observe to make teachers happy**

Hansen (2002) argues that many teachers want educational psychologists to come and observe their problematic students. In this sense, observations potentially become an anti-inclusive instrument where the conducted observations are used to justify a referral of students to special needs education. I previously argued that observations are suitable for grasping the socially distributed character of children and student everyday life. However, a context-sensitive perspective is by no means guaranteed by observing students in classrooms or other setting. Observations can be



conducted by focusing narrowly on one problematic student. One of the answers to this challenge could be to focus on the development and continuing training in how to conduct context-sensitive observations – both in universities and educational psychology service centers.

#### **4. Observations are blurred and have poor legitimacy**

Frequently, observational methods are considered “merely” descriptive, implying that description is either an unimportant or an atheoretical enterprise. Experiments or tests, by contrast are portrayed as more scientific and explanatory (Pellegrini et al., 2013). But good descriptions are neither atheoretical nor less scientific than approaches offering more causal explanations. However, it seems that they often are considered this way in educational psychology practice. As part of our research project on educational psychology practice, we examined and coded 125 psychological reports written by educational psychologists. As mentioned, observations had been conducted by the psychologists in 22 % of the cases. But interestingly, the descriptions of the observations in the psychological reports were very brief and anecdotal. In general an entire page was devoted to describe test-results whereas only a quarter of a page resumed the conducted observations.

I think we see this tendency for a series of reasons.

Firstly, educational psychologists do not have as uniform or standardised ways of reporting observations as is for example the case with tests.

Secondly, field observational “data” are not considered as scientific, legitimate or valid as other kinds of “data”. Kampwith & Powers for example describe observations in this way:

“Most observations conducted by consultants are anecdotal, descriptive or narrative, which fail to meet psychometric and legal standards (Kampwith & Powers, 2012: 182)

From my perspective, this kind of reservation disregards the benefits of good descriptions of practice. However, I do agree that good descriptions do not emerge out of nowhere. Good descriptions meet both criteria of being valid and reliable and they are most often the result of a systematic approach in which the observer remains sceptical towards his/her conclusions.

Thirdly, educational psychologists are often required to IQ-test a child by parents, teachers or by a child psychiatrist. Hence, educational psychologists are more or less dictated to work in specific ways.

## **Concluding remarks**

So, can educational psychology practice be characterized as an outdoor psychology? Probably not entirely. If we look at the history of educational psychology practice, it would maybe even be more appropriate to term it an indoor psychology. However, the consultative approach calls for new outdoor methodologies and in this presentation, I have tried to argue for the potentials related to observations in educational psychology practice.

Accordingly, the interesting question becomes: how do we develop and refine observational methods that both are informed by the rich observational tradition in (ethnographic) research while the working conditions of an educational psychologist are still taken into account?

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