

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: A RESEARCH AND ASSESSMENT APPROACH FOR MULTIPLY DISABLED POPULATIONS

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ABSTRACT. This is an exploration into "re-inventing the wheel" in special education. The author discusses the education of multiply handicapped children, especially those with visual impairments. The article reviews some of the literature relative to previous studies in this area, but is devoted mostly to the use of participant observation (PO) as a suitable and useful means of assessing multiply disabled populations. The author provides a good basis for advocating qualitative measures instead of quantitative measures in research with the multiply disabled.

RÉSUMÉ. Cette étude vise en quelque sorte à «réinventer la roue» en éducation spécialisée. L'auteur y traite de l'éducation des enfants polyhandicapés, et particulièrement de ceux atteints de déficience visuelle. Il passe en revue certaines publications relatives à des études réalisées antérieurement dans ce domaine, mais traite avant tout de l'utilité de la technique d'observation participative pour évaluer les populations de polyhandicapés. En s'appuyant sur de solides arguments, il préconise l'utilisation de méthodes qualitatives plutôt que quantitatives pour la recherche sur les polyhandicapés.

Re-inventing the wheel does not mean ignoring existing relevant or other pertinent evidence but instead it allows teachers to construct for themselves applications to practice . . . through re-invention teachers development and in-depth understanding are enhanced; they are able to fine tune and use what they learn; they are able to adapt it to new situations and then teaching practices improve because a big part of teaching is making.
(Sergiovani, 1992, p.115)

A disability is defined as "any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being, generally taken to be at the level of the individual" (Ashman & Elkins, 1994, p. 5). Visual impairments are considered to

be one specific type of disability. Visual impairments can be defined on a continuum and includes three categories: (1) educationally blind (total lack of functional use of vision for learning), (2) partially sighted (after correction some functional vision is available for learning), and (3) visually limited (after correction normal functional vision exists for learning). According to Erin, Daugherty, Dignan, and Pearson (1990), the term multiply disabled includes "those children who are so limited that they cannot develop a normal language system, nor can they provide adequately for their own survival needs" (p.16). In this article, the term "multiply disabled" incorporates the three categories involved in a visual impairment, the definition provided, and could also include other accompanying disabilities, these being recognized disabilities which affect physical, affective, social, or cognitive functioning.

The impetus for this article stems from professional experience in the field of disabled education, specifically with multiply disabled students. Personal experience has convinced this author that quantitative research methodologies often do not provide practical suggestions for the educator of multiply disabled. In addition, students' individual processes and information on curriculum programming are not adequately addressed. Lastly, the literature on the issue of implementing qualitative research methodologies for this population is dated and scarce.

Hence, the purpose of this article is to illustrate to researchers, educators, parents, and administrators of multiply disabled individuals that qualitative research methodologies, specifically participant observation (PO), can make a significant contribution to a dated and limited literature base. Also, the "teacher-as-researcher" in PO is a viable alternative which should be explored. Finally, the use of PO as a supplementary assessment tool in the classroom (disabled students) may further contribute to our understanding of the needs and learning processes of this special population. It begins by analyzing methodological practices in qualitative research strategies, focusing on PO. This article will justify the need to implement PO as an alternative research perspective and as a supplemental assessment approach for multiply disabled populations. The objective is to illustrate that information gathered on multiply disabled students using PO could not have been effectively achieved with existing assessment tools and that supplemental approaches are required.

Historically, trends in educational research for disabled populations have indicated a broadening of perspective. This trend continues to emerge and can be summarized as follows:

Educational research is changing. Recent trends indicate a 'softening' towards strict adherence to quantitative methodology. Attention has begun to focus on the potential contributions that qualitative methodology can provide to educational inquiry. Special education will likely attempt to make more use of qualitative research methodology in the future in order to reap the potential benefits. Drawing qualitative research procedures into the current repertoire of procedures and the incorporation of qualitative research into special education most likely will be welcomed by teachers and researchers who have wished to explore more qualitative dimensions. (Stainback & Stainback, 1984, p. 406)

Stainback & Stainback (1984) suggest that for most of the twentieth century quantitative research has been the predominant methodology used to expand this knowledge base. There appears to be a growing recognition of the limitations of quantitative research. Thus, many researchers have begun to advocate qualitative research methodologies in an attempt to broaden the research perspective in special education. For example, these same researchers indicate that "it may be beneficial to give more attention to qualitative research methodologies. Incorporating qualitative methodology into special education research could enhance our research capabilities and the future progress of special education" (p. 403). Qualitative research has traditionally been viewed as a method of providing theory that can then be approved or disclaimed by more quantitative research methodologies. In contrast, this author proposes that qualitative research not only provides philosophical questions but it can be the "vehicle" used to attempt to answer them.

This state of change continues with regards to currently used assessment approaches. Educational assessment is in a constant evolution. Educational practitioners and academic researchers are examining various assessment approaches for the disabled because they are dissatisfied with the current structure or tools of assessment. There is the trend towards more humanistic assessment approaches which are individual oriented (Bolduc, Gresset, Sanschagrín, & Thibodeau, 1993; Edgerton, 1984; Erin et al., 1990; Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; Haywood & Tzuril, 1992; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997; Stainback & Stainback, 1984, 1985).

What is needed in the education of visually disabled is the addition of supplemental assessment approaches. Erin and Koenig (1997) and Haywood and Tzuril (1992) advocate the use of supplemental assess-

ment approaches for individuals with severe visual disabilities. They state that there are difficulties with standardized assessment approaches when they are used with students with visual disabilities, and alternative strategies should constitute the major approach to assessment. Haywood and Tzuriel (1992) indicate that the use of criterion- and curriculum-based instruments have a distinct advantage of providing information on a student achievement within a given curriculum. Perhaps one of the most overlooked approaches to assessment is diagnostic teaching. This technique allows the teacher to interweave the process of assessment and instruction. Each instructional session is used as an opportunity to collect quality assessment information in real-life contexts. Observations and interviews offer this type of meaningful assessment information. Observational techniques are becoming more popular as an assessment approach in special education. Recently observational assessment approaches have been attempted or discussed for disabled and non-disabled populations with some success (Bersani & Mesaros, 1986; Bolduc et al., 1993; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997; Haywood & Tzuriel, 1992; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1988).

For the purposes of clarity, the discussion of PO in this article is divided into the following sub-categories: (1) PO as a qualitative methodology; (2) adaptation of PO for visually disabled populations; (3) use of PO as a supplemental assessment approach in the visually disabled classroom; (4) limitations of PO as a methodology and as an assessment approach; and (5) implications for future research.

Participant observation as a qualitative research methodology

PO has long served as the basic data-collection strategy for anthropologists concerned with understanding cultures around the world. Later, "participant observation was adopted by other social sciences, particularly sociology, and is now a standard method of study in many of the behavioral sciences" (Edgerton, 1984, pp. 498-9). PO as a qualitative research methodology has been defined by Edgerton (1984), as the following:

Participant Observation calls for "an investigator to enter the lives of the persons being studied as fully and naturally as possible. It requires long-term involvement with these people so that the investigator's presence becomes more or less natural. The participant observer listens to what people say, observes what they do, asks questions when it is appropriate to do so, and participates in activities when that is acceptable. In time – usually at least a year and at times much longer – the Participant Observer is usually able to

Participant Observation

describe most aspects of people's life activities, including some that occur rarely or are ordinarily hidden from view, and will be able to provide some sense of how these people think and feel about their lives. (p.498)

In simple terms, "participant observation means what it says. It is distinguished by active participation as a means of observing the setting or individuals under study. The observer's personal involvement in the research setting is always a central means to understanding it. Rather than using a research instrument the participant observer becomes one" (Fry, 1986, p. 2). There are primarily three prerequisite conditions which are necessary for the appropriate use of PO. Once these prerequisite conditions are satisfied then the foundation for beginning research is justifiably present. The conditions are summarized as follows:

1. First, the settings or topics about which little or nothing is already known require preliminary PO for definition of appropriate measures for existing concepts as well as discovery of new questions.
2. The second issue is related to the sensitivity of topics or respondents. Some topics may be seen as inappropriate when raised through direct questions, either because of their substance or because of attributes of the person doing the asking. In addition, some respondents may be unable or unwilling to cooperate with the researchers using more explicit techniques.
3. Informants' inability or unwillingness to report accurately.

There are also three stages to PO. It is important to understand that these three stages are not mutually exclusive. The structure, research, and concepts derived from the previous stage play an integral role in the development and success of the ensuing stages. These stages are summarized and generalized from the anthropological approach to PO. The three stages for PO are summarized as follows:

STAGE 1: INTRODUCTION. This stage generally involves integration in all domains, physical and social, into a suitable community or population of interest in which PO is to occur. The initial procedures involve detailed general field notes on the individuals under investigation, and categories of activities, routines, and anything else the researcher finds important or of interest. In a sense the researcher is the instrument for data collection. The second major goal is to establish an appropriate and consistent role that facilitates a relationship between the researcher and the community members under observation.

STAGE 2: FOCUSED RESEARCH. The transition between the first stage and the second stage is a difficult one because the researcher is never satisfied that enough initial information has been collected. At this point the onus shifts from general mapping procedures to investigation of specific issues. The activities of this stage are more focused, directed to collection of information to measure specific concepts and to refine the hypotheses.

STAGE 3: EVALUATION OF HYPOTHESES. In this stage the major focus is on hypotheses testing. The hypotheses must be clearly identified in order to collect appropriate data for evaluation. With hypotheses stated and with an inventory of measures appropriate to the setting, it is possible to construct various research instruments. Either natural or constructed experiments may be carried out in the field. That is why multiple measures are always the preferred strategy. This stage also involves formal presentation of the results and analysis of the results in connection with the hypotheses. (Adapted and modified from Fry, 1986, pp. 2-7)

Adaptation of participant observation for multiply disabled populations

PO is an extremely flexible research methodology. This flexibility is essential when attempting to administer PO to multiply disabled populations. Biklen and Moseley (1988) conducted a study of severely disabled individuals using PO. They confirm that if the "researchers plan to study the world of the disabled informant then traditional participant observation guidelines are useful. But when the researcher wants to communicate with the severely disabled informant, then some modifications and adaptations need to be made" (p.155). Once these changes and adaptations are made, data can be gathered more efficiently and effectively.

The six modifications which must be considered when using PO for the multiply disabled include: need to build trust and rapport; absence of effective communication skills; problems with open-ended questioning; the same-answer problem; pleasing the interviewer; and the use of significant others to gather information (Biklen & Moseley, 1988).

It is suggested that building a "trusting relationship" may be increasingly difficult with individuals who possess severe disabilities (Edgerton, 1984), specifically when outside researchers attempt to integrate themselves into a disabled population. It is recommended that the teacher become the researcher. Teacher-as-researcher for PO would help alle-

viate difficulties associated with building this required rapport and trust in multiply disabled populations. Bailey and Hess (1997) state that "the culture of schools is such that teachers are expected to teach, not to research their own or others' practice. While this has been deplored as shortsighted for some time, it is still the case that teachers who are actively involved in research are more the exception than the rule" (p. 83). The authors ask the question, "is it just too hard to be a teacher-researcher?" Their experiences suggest that several factors such as workload, time constraints, lack of systemic cooperation from administration and colleagues, and opposing views by educational organizations are significant obstacles. They explained, that despite these difficulties, the teacher-as-researcher offers valuable insight when these obstacles are minimized.

Communication with multiply disabled populations may be difficult when PO is the research methodology. PO usually involves interviews as one method of data collection and there are inherent difficulties with this method. Biklen and Moseley (1988) offer the possibility that interviews are very dependent on language and effective articulation of thoughts and ideas, and disabled individuals often have difficulty in this capacity. Educators of the disabled individual generally have a better capacity to understand the utterances and gestures because of experience and exposure. "Interviewers' difficulties tend to center on their inability to understand the actual language of the informant, while the interviewee may have a difficult time with the concepts of the interviewer" (Biklen & Moseley, 1988, p.157). Teachers often possess the skills necessary to get around these communication deficiencies. The researcher must understand that a visual impairment will further decrease the ability to communicate effectively. Possible solutions could utilize students' other senses for effectively communicating questions and understanding responses. These include kinesthetic approaches (e.g., Braille), auditory, olfactory, or taste abilities as effective means of communicating with the visually disabled. Technological advancements such as computer software programs may further enhance communication capabilities. Communication deficits may be present as a result of researchers asking open-ended questions. "Most qualitative researchers are trained to ask open-ended questions in order to allow respondents to frame answers from their own perspectives. When interviewing persons with severe disabilities, these questions can be more confusing than clarifying. Again the suggestion is to break the requests for information into parts and ask questions separately" (Biklen & Moseley, 1988, p.158). Teachers are generally very good at doing this

because it is required daily for functional communication in the disabled classroom.

The "same answer" problem refers to the informant repeating the same response to different questions. "As an interviewer you can use these repetitions as signals that respondents may not know the answer to your question, that you may not be asking the question they find important, or that they may not understand the question" (Biklen & Moseley, 1988, p.159). These cues can be used by the researcher to restructure or simplify the question to attain a meaningful response.

Pleasing the interviewer is another methodological problem. It is suggested that "when interviewing persons with severe disabilities, this typical methodological problem may be heightened by the informant's institutional experiences" (Biklen & Moseley, 1988, p.159). For example, continued institutionalization often causes the multiply disabled individual to acquire acceptance by repeating answers and responding to please others. Through exposure, the disabled individual will eventually become desensitized and offer sincere responses and reactions to various situations and questions. Teachers are exposed to these students on a regular basis and do not require habituation to elicit sincere responses to questions and situations. Repeating responses and answering to please is often helpful in addressing reliability issues in qualitative research studies, and could be an effective cue for the researcher.

The use of significant others such as parents, friends, and the proposed teacher-as-researcher has advantages to overcoming language and communication barriers. The use of a significant other usually implies that an individual has spent considerable time with the disabled subject, and therefore has a better understanding of his or her individual communication styles. These significant others can also provide another source of information for verification of thoughts or ideas given by the severely disabled subject (Biklen & Moseley, 1988).

Use of participant observation as a supplemental assessment tool

Standardized testing procedures are not effective for accurately assessing ability levels, progress, or outcomes in multiply disabled populations. Erin and Koenig (1997) state that "the use of standardized tests with students who have visual disabilities is fraught with complex problems. Even with adaptation, such tests alone rarely provide sufficient information for making important decisions about students with visual impairments" (p. 311). Traditional assessment measures include checklists and testing procedures offer little in the way of meaningful feed-

back for the visually disabled student, educator, parent, or guardian. What is needed is the addition of supplemental assessment approaches which address the processes of learning and not exclusively the product. Erin et al. (1997) also advocate the use of alternative strategies of assessment for individuals with visual disabilities by stating that:

Given the inherent difficulties of using standardized tests with students with visual disabilities, alternative strategies should constitute the major approach to assessment. Most questions that teachers and parents have about children can be answered through non-standardized, and more often meaningful assessment tools. Criterion and curriculum based instruments have the distinct advantage of providing information on a student's achievement within a given curriculum. Perhaps one of the most overlooked approaches to assessment is diagnostic teaching. This technique allows the teacher to interweave the process of assessment and instruction. Each instructional session is used as an opportunity to collect quality assessment information in real life-contexts. Observations and interviews offer this type of meaningful assessment information. (Erin & Koenig, 1997, pp. 313-4)

The need for PO as a supplemental assessment approach in multiply disabled classrooms is based on three theories: grounded theory development, social validation theory, and the holistic view of educational concerns. These can be summarized as follows:

Grounded theory development is built on the premise that 'theory provides guidance and direction for much educational inquiry. When theory is built on a wide variety of data gathered in natural settings, the probability of it being relevant and functional to educational practice is enhanced. Unfortunately, to date, many theories generated in special education have not been grounded in field data'. Social validation refers to the idea that 'in recent years a growing number of educational researchers have become concerned with the study of subjective values; that is, how people such as teachers and students think and feel about educational matters. This concern has resulted from the recognition that it is the subjective values of people regarding educational matters that often influence what occurs in educational settings'. Finally, there is a holistic concern for educating the disabled. 'Sometimes it is necessary for researchers and educators to determine how a program or procedure operates or is perceived as a whole in natural settings. A total or holistic view is desired'. (Adapted from Stainback & Stainback, 1984, pp. 403-405)

Outcome based assessment fails to describe the learning processes and daily activities or routines of the classroom which may be significant but are not captured by traditional forms of assessment. Educators should incorporate technology for PO data collection in the classroom.

These include individual weekly video and audio reports, and photographs as well as detailed anecdotal incidents to supplement traditional strategies. Incorporating PO as a curriculum based assessment approach would also offer valuable feedback. This approach would illustrate the learning processes involved when acquiring concepts and skills, development of curriculum, and would highlight teaching techniques and procedures that can be incorporated in continued educational programs whether in the home or formal educational setting. This could have long-term benefits including reducing skill and ability regression.

Limitations of participant observation as a research methodology and supplementary assessment tool

The major criticisms of PO as either a research methodology or supplementary assessment approach are related to classroom implementation. The difficulties were explained above. Edgerton (1984) summarizes some of the other major difficulties and limitations of PO in severely disabled populations by stating that:

Participant Observation has problems. Because it requires such long periods of contact between field researcher personnel and the persons being studied, it is quite costly. The data that result are massive, complex, and sometimes contradictory; the process of sorting through this material for meaningful analysis is painstaking and difficult. There are problems as well, such as needing to avoid bias and subjectivity in a research process during which the investigator and investigated interact. But, there is no perfect technique for the study of human beings. (p. 503)

In regard to quantitative research the question that is addressed here is not whether the research methodologies administered are inappropriate and thus cause the findings to be generalized and extrapolated unjustifiably, but that the results of this type of research would not be **directly** generalizable to the non-disabled classrooms. Yet, this validity issue should not be a concern because the emphasis is on the appropriateness for multiply disabled populations with visually impaired students only.

Implications for future research

There is the need for longitudinal qualitative research to address the feasibility and effectiveness of PO as a supplementary assessment approach in multiply disabled classrooms. Longitudinal studies, such as action-based methodologies, which assess the effects of this type of assessment approach on students could offer insight into the processes of learning and the most effective feedback methods. The information gathered from this research would provide baseline information on problems related to classroom application.

Also, it would be beneficial to conduct research on the reactions of stakeholders to implementing PO as a supplemental assessment approach. These stakeholders include parents, educators, specialists, administrators, and students.

If PO is an effective assessment option for multiply disabled populations then the possibility of using this approach to non-disabled classrooms could be examined further as attempted in the past by Amidon and Flanders (1969) and Flanders (1970).

Research conducted on the effectiveness of PO as a supplemental assessment approach could be further explored by combining qualitative and quantitative research perspectives. Combining research perspectives includes triangulation of research which involves using other PO recording methods such as video and checklists to support or not support concepts and hypotheses.

Conclusion

The education of the multiply disabled is constantly evolving because of research, social conditions, and individual insight. It is an educator's responsibility to critically analyze current and prospective teaching practices, educational materials, curriculum, and assessment strategies.

The concept of broadening the research perspective for multiply disabled populations was introduced, specifically, incorporating qualitative methodologies such as PO; also, that teacher-as-researcher for PO is an option that has not been addressed in research but may be a viable solution to overcome possible methodological and implementation issues. In addition, this author proposes that PO be introduced as a supplemental assessment approach to complement existing methods for multiply disabled populations. Clearly, this article has provided support for further inquiry into implementing PO as research methodology and as a supplemental assessment approach for multiply disabled populations.

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