

Case Study as a Method of Choice for Child Study

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Natalia and I are pleased to be in Prague, meeting friends from EECERA and Step by Step. This week, Prague is even more a community of practice, even more a community of energy, for we all are here.

It is you, together and individually, brought by your experience with a diversity of children—an experience ever-growing, ever-changing. These are children of transnational spaces, and we meet to discuss ways of merging further into common family—and still to maintain our separate truths.

We capture the ways of children in our embrace and in our memory, and pass them along with stories and pictures and quotations. We have experiential knowledge. Some of us look to the discipline of case study to record and to seek the deeper meanings of children's stretch toward maturity and their inventions of insight.

When I say discipline of case study, I mean it. Much of case study is an extension of care giving, an ordinary response to the charm and exasperation of caring for children. Whether we are full time researchers or occasional researchers, the discipline compels us to see more clearly, to interpret other meanings than the easy ones, and to find better language for reporting to others. In intuitive and traditional ways, we know children, but we understand them even better, and find new puzzlements, when we join together in disciplined inquiry. Consider this vignette:

Ana and Issam. Eighteen children are working and playing around the kindergarten room. Marja, a short woman in her forties is a kindergarten teacher with child-care experience. Working with her today is Luci, a young trainee. Both Marja and Luci are well aware of ethnic split among the children, but Luci has little experience with diversity in the classroom.

Ana seizes Issam's black brush and starts to paint with it. Issam cries. Luci says, "Ana, give the brush back to Issam." Ana looks at Luci, then at Issam. She takes the cup of black paint and pours it on Issam's hand. "He's black!" she says.

Ana has spilled black paint on Issam. She knows it is offensive to call him black this way. She has challenged the teacher. What are we going to do about it? What should be said to persons like Luci preparing to be kindergarten teachers? Should we say, "Think about it. Is Ana declaring Issam inferior? Is she declaring that he does not have the same right to

the brushes?" Is it enough to restore them to happy play or is it time to talk about how diversity can be a virtue?

I think we need to capture more episodes like this, capture them in case studies, to challenge our own thinking, and to help teach the next generation of early childhood educators.

Case Study. Case studies are mirrors in which we see our work, its beauty and its blemishes. But, three-dimensional mirrors also, in which we see anew the depth of our responsibility and the depth of our plight. Each year, we reach into more corners and the children slip away at increasing speeds and become cell phone sellers, and psychologists, and murderers, and people withdrawn into apathy. We need good mirrors, not only for the realities they capture, but for an assault on "simplistic perception," for assault on slogans.

How can case studies help us assault superficiality and weaknesses in organizational responsibility? By peering inside. By digging deeper. What is the discipline of case studies? I will offer four points. The discipline of case study is based on

- Developing good research questions
- Careful observations, of content and context
- Triangulation and Multiple interpretations
- Personal empathy

In a few minutes, Natalia will describe a case study of Ukrainian Step by Step that followed this discipline. She and her colleague, Svitlana Efimova, focused on the integration of a child with disability into a regular first grade. Their issue: Diversity and Assimilation.

Natalia and Svitlana took subjective, personal observations in that classroom, and in the boy's home, at the teacher training sites, at the Ministry, and in other locations. They made personal interviews. They probed meanings. Through repetition and with mixed methods, they triangulated to assure accuracy of their descriptions. Theirs was the discipline of case studies.

Promotional Research. It is always tempting to gravitate toward the interpretation that agrees with our own theories and practices. The ethical researcher needs to build in opposition--challenges to our own advocacies.

Sometimes you are too stressed to take any more bad news. You cannot look dispassionately for weaknesses in your counsel and practice. At that time you are little able to participate in

research other than that that will give relief, that that will promote your point of view. Research can be designed so that it only looks for the good things, not the bad. But many researchers think it unethical to claim that a study found support for the program if it had not been allowed to find anything bad. Case study research is expected to dig deeper into the complexity of the phenomena, to come to better understand the role of context in the work of teachers and care givers.

Whether you do formal case study or not, you will be doing case study, informal case study, as you have all your lives. You have tried to understand the cases that mean most to you, your parents, your siblings, your teachers, your spouses, your children. You do the same with your organizations, your communities of practice. There is no way you can stop being a case researcher. But it is possible to do it with more discipline and less advocacy, working to upgrade your experiential knowledge. And now to hear of an outstanding case study by Natalia and Svitlana.