TELLING ALL ONE'S HEART: RESEARCH AS AN INTERVENTION IN CHILDREN'S LIVES

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I. INTRODUCTION

> *— and though the questions*
> *that have assailed us all day*
> *remain — not a single*
> *answer has been found —*
> *walking out now*
> *into the silence and the light*
> *under the trees,*
> *and through the fields,*
> *feels like one.*
>
> —Mary Oliver,
> ("First Snow" in *American Primitive*, 1978)

The capacity to raise new questions is one of the most essential for any researcher. Questioning entails looking at a phenomenon from a new angle, with fresh vision or perspective. Applied to any scene, conversation, or interaction, a questioning perspective implies a depth of seeing that goes beyond merely looking—that is, seeing as a way of understanding a particular phenomenon or reality. In this paper we raise several questions about our research, particularly regarding how the project functions as an intervention in children's lives that, in turn, affects the unfolding of a research design created to benefit the participants. In what ways does the research process in all its facets inform what we can and cannot know about children's lives? How does research about children's relationships, which involves individually interviewing children and working with small groups of children in continuing relationships, function as a developmental intervention? We raise these questions in the spirit of exploring our work as an intervention in one school and opening a conversation with our colleagues—rather than rushing toward answers.

We are currently conducting a three-year developmental research project designed as an intervention project, *"Telling all one's heart": A developmental study of children's relationships*. This research involves three strands: (1) a longitudinal study of children's relationships; (2) an after-school program in the arts—*The Kids' Art Connection*; and (3) an ethnography of the school and after-school program. Each of these components or strands of the research process functions as a potential intervention in

children's lives, and the nature of the interventions in turn affects the design
of the longitudinal research in progress. By conceptualizing this research
project as a form of intervention, it was our intention that each of its three
components would necessarily be dynamic and highly interactive and
interdependent.

As a team[1], we have now been working in an urban public elementary
school for the past three years. During the first year, we piloted our
interviews and after-school program, and negotiated new relationships.
During the last two years, we have been conducting the interview study and
after-school project. We begin by reflecting on our entry into the school and
initial relationships, then discuss each of the three strands of the project,
highlighting the influences they have had on children in the school, on
students involved in the research with us, and on particular aspects of the
research in progress.

II. BEGINNINGS: ENTERING RELATIONSHIPS

Reflecting on the early days of this project, our ability to navigate
successfully the countless twists and turns of gaining entry, of establishing
a research relationship with school administrators, teachers, and children,
has depended in large part on our perspectives as a group, and on our sense
of humor. The moments of doubt have been many; wondering if we would
ever really get established in the school, let alone worrying about whether
or not a single question would ever be answered.

One of the brightest lights we have discovered in our work has been our
relationship with Maria, the principal of the Wordsworth School.[2] Our
initial requests to bring our project into a local school were met with
resistance on the part of many school principals, despite the fact that our
proposed plans for the research had received full endorsement from the
superintendent's office. Maria was the only one who agreed, not only to
give us access to her school, but more importantly, she was the only one who
voiced support for the purpose of the research: to study a range of relation-
ships in children's lives, including positive relationships and potentially
damaging or even abusive relationships. Still, her belief in the purpose of
the project was not the determining factor in her decision to grant us entry.
Her primary concern was, and continues to be, how will this project benefit
the students in her school? Her question was not rhetorical; she wanted to
know concretely what difference our presence in the school could make in
the lives of her students—that is, other than simply interrupting the flow of
their days with interviews. What appealed most to Maria was the multi-
layered and longitudinal design of our project; she saw the connection
between the investigation (which would include interviews and observa-
tions) and the intervention (the after-school program). It was also clear that
we were making a long-term commitment to the school. For these reasons
we were invited to work in the Wordsworth School.

While Maria has been supportive since the project's inception, in no other facet of our research has her support been more visible or more strongly felt than around the issue of mandated reporting. Her willingness to take our concerns about any child with utmost seriousness, and to deal with our team as well as with parents, teachers and students, in a direct and honest way, makes possible the kind of intervention that we hoped for—one that creates a sense of safety for the children, particularly those who are struggling with unbearable realities.

Though we entered the school with Maria's support, the process of entry could best be described as a long and sometimes rocky courtship. Our plan for getting started was to identify three teachers, one for each grade level being targeted by the project, who would serve as liaisons between the research team and the school. These were to be stipend positions that would require the teachers to promote the project to students, help us make connections to potential participants for our study and assist in the scheduling of interviews. All in all, this system has worked more or less, depending on the level of commitment of each teacher liaison. Some were cautious about endorsing the project at first, because they were skeptical of our commitment to the school. One of the liabilities of being in such close proximity to a large research university such as Harvard is the potential for overusing the local schools as research sites. Earning the trust and support of the teachers has taken time, and we do not take their trust for granted.

III. THE INTERVIEW STUDY

Telling All One's Heart combines both a longitudinal and a cross-sectional dimension in its exploration of children's relationships. Our design involves interviewing three groups of children over a three-year period. We began with children from kindergarten, third, and sixth grades, whom we are currently interviewing as first, fourth and seventh graders. Each child is interviewed twice per year, with approximately one week between interviews. At the end of the study, within each group, we will have three years of longitudinal data, as well as cohort group data that spans the range of kindergarten through eighth grade. All students at the respective grade levels were invited to participate in the study, and approximately 35 students have been interviewed in each of the first two years. Although participation is voluntary, the groups reflect the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the school population, which includes about 80% of families living under economic hardship whose children are on the school lunch program. Approximately one-third of the children in the school speak Spanish as their primary language. These children are given a choice about being interviewed in Spanish or English.

The project is designed to explore the relational worlds of the children and to understand these worlds from the children's point of view, in the children's own words. In the context of a research interview relationship,

the interviewers seek to create the opportunity for the children to speak about a wide range of relationships. The first interview is an open-ended conversation and uses no protocol; its purpose is to establish a relationship between the child and the interviewer that permits the child to speak about his or her world: school, friends, family, neighborhood, interests, and activities, with particular interest in the range of relationships in which the child participates. The second interview follows a semi-structured proto-col, *The Children's Relational Resource Interview* (Rogers, Casey, Holland, & Nakkula, 1995), designed individually for each child on the basis of infor-mation provided in the open-ended interview. The questions are drawn from a series of suggested prompts focusing on a variety of topics intended to allow the children to speak about as full a range of relationships as possible. Although the interviews are confidential, we inform the children that this confidentiality is limited by concern for the child's safety and the obligation to report suspected child abuse. Information we learn in the interview sometimes leads to various forms of intervention by the school, including at times an invitation to participate in the project's afterschool program, *The Kids' Art Connection.* Other possibilities include making an official report to child protective authorities. In addition, we are aware that the interview itself serves as an intervention in the child's relational world by establishing a confiding relationship, by focusing attention on the child, and by focusing the child's attention on relational issues, including begin-ning and ending a relationship with an adult in a very short period. These considerations form an essential part of the interview training process.

The interviews are conducted by graduate students who meet twice weekly during the intensive three-month training period. All interviewers attend a weekly group meeting that addresses issues of the project goals, the research relationship, interviewing skills, children's development, ethical considerations, trauma in children's experience, and the potential and responsibility for reporting disclosures of child abuse. Preparation for these meetings includes reading prearranged articles on the topics to be covered, and our meetings consist of lectures, discussion, and role plays. In addition, the interviewers meet weekly in groups of six (called "pods") with one member of the research team as supervisor. These meetings provide additional opportunity for discussion of material, intensive role plays, and close study of the project protocols. Once the interviews begin, these meetings provide a forum for interviewers to raise concerns about inter-views that they have conducted and plan for future ones. They also provide a context in which interviewers can seek and obtain help in designing the second interview for each child. The intimacy of these groups permits each pod to serve as a support for its members, especially around sensitive issues, while maintaining the confidentiality of the relationships with the children.

The interviews are scheduled at the school during times that the students can be released from class. Whenever an interview is taking place, a second member of the interviewing group is present at the school to serve

as a support to the interviewer. In the event that a child becomes upset or makes a disclosure of possible abuse during the interview, the back-up interviewer is available to seek help from a school official or to help comfort the child while the interviewer seeks appropriate help. Supporting one another in this way forms a bond of trust and understanding within the group of interviewers. Each year, information in the interviews has been of sufficiently serious concern that some follow-up action has been taken. Interviewers first discuss any concerns or suspected abuse with their back-up; they then call the team member who supervises their pod; and when warranted, the principal investigator, Annie Rogers, is contacted. If a formal report is filed, the principal files after consulting with one of us, the child, the interviewer, and the parents. More typically, our concerns are raised at the weekly meeting of the Student Support Team[3] by a member of the research project, Victoria Nakkula, who serves on this team. Details from the interview are not discussed, but our concerns about a particular child can be expressed. In each case, the Student Support Team provided independent confirmation of the school's concern about the student. When appropriate, students about whom concerns have been raised are invited to participate in the after-school arts program as a way to provide them with opportunities for building positive relationships.

Our research recursively depends upon what worked and did not work well in the previous year that we conducted interviews. For instance, as a result of the first year of interviews, we made some important changes in the interview protocols for the second year. We chose to be more direct in our questions concerning possible areas of sensitivity and concern. We had found that children tended to respond to the level of knowledge and awareness reflected in our questions. Where little awareness of sensitive issues was indicated by the question, little information on sensitive issues was revealed. While we are not aware that any of the children interviewed have a history of abuse or neglect, our experience indicates that they have been exposed to instances of violence and fear by virtue of living in an urban setting. By trying to build relationships in which interviewers seemed aware of and knowledgeable about potentially sensitive issues, we sought to create an atmosphere in which children who had had or were aware of frightening experiences could speak about them. Without trying to make such experiences the sole purpose of the study, we felt that their absence from the data would undermine our ability to understand the full range of children's relationships. As a result, the training process addresses directly how interviewers can listen for hints and indications of such experiences, and how the interviewer can support the child in recounting them. We also address in pod meetings the difficulty that an interviewer can experience in hearing such stories and seek to provide preparation before the interviews and support following them that affirms the interviewer's experience as an integral part of the relationship. In all these ways, the study and the preparation of interviewers function as an intervention in children's lives.

IV. THE AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM

Our after–school program in the arts, called *The Kids' Art Connection,* is the second major component of our project. Our program serves: (1) children who have experienced difficulties in their relationships as a result of direct or indirect experiences of neglect, abuse or violence with peers or adults; and (2) children who demonstrate confidence and good relationship skills. The integration of children with a range of relational skills has proven to be a positive experience for all program participants— which suggests the effectiveness of this approach as a form of intervention.

The main goals of *The Kids' Art Connection* are: (1) to enrich children's experiences of artistic expression as a way to convey their experiences; and (2) to strengthen children's relationships for the purpose of preventing further violence and victimization in their lives. Program staff work on building supportive and confiding relationships between children as well as adults through a variety of artistic modalities such as the visual arts, improvisational theater, writing, poetry and video production. Children are supported in the artistic expression of their experience of relationships in an environment that is safe and familiar. To achieve this level of trust, group leaders emphasize safety and respect in groups that number no more than eight children.

Additionally, to foster an environment of familiarity for the children and initiate collegial relationships with the Wordsworth School staff, each year, prior to beginning the program, group leaders consult with the children's teachers on the art curriculum. This consultation informs teachers about the types of experiences that will be provided for their students, as well as gives teachers the opportunity to share their expertise with us. Communication between the teaching staff and our group facilitators has been beneficial; we have not only tailored our program to fit the needs and interests of the children we work with, but, in some cases, have coordinated our art curriculum with the educational curriculum being taught by the teachers.

Each group is led by two adults who are currently students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Group leaders bring to *The Kids' Art Connection* a wealth of professional experience; many have worked as regular education teachers, art teachers and in a variety of national and international programs aimed at enhancing children's appreciation of the arts. Included in their professional experiences are work with children from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as children with varied psychological histories.

These group leaders are supervised by Victoria Nakkula, an advanced doctoral student who is clinically trained and who has worked with children in regular and special education school settings. Supervision consists of weekly meetings and telephone contacts with group leaders; additionally, Vicky is on site when the program is in session to offer

guidance when appropriate, and professional consultation in the event of an emergency. The purpose of her presence is to provide support and feedback to the group leaders with respect to issues such as group process and concerns about individual children.

Responses to our efforts to conduct an after–school art program that highlights children's relational lives have been overwhelmingly positive. As well as obtaining referrals to the program through our interview process, we are becoming an established presence in the school and teachers are referring students to *The Kids' Art Connection.* Moreover, parents of the children who were involved in the program last year all wanted to see their children in the program again this year. Two parents, in particular, commented that their son and daughter needed this type of nonacademic, yet structured environment in which to work on their difficulties relating to other children. Last, but not least, the children themselves appear to be enjoying this experience and have, for the most part, made positive connections with their group leaders. One indication that they believe that *The Kids' Art Connection* is the place to be on Tuesday afternoons is that *they* have recruited new members into the groups through word of mouth. Some of the newer participants are children who have been "asked to join" by their classmates already in the program.

Our work with the children in *The Kids' Art Connection* is designed to inform what we are learning about children's relational lives through their interviews. What children tell us in their interviews can be looked at, in practice, as they each bring their own histories and understandings of relationships to the friendships they are forming in the after–school program—particularly as we record their interactions through the third major strand of our intervention, the ethnographic study.

V. THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE WORDSWORTH SCHOOL AND THE KIDS' ART CONNECTION

The purpose of the ethnographic component of our study is to provide a deeper understanding of the school and the after-school program as particular kinds of relational contexts. In our training of the ethnographers we have emphasized the importance of staying tuned to the way their presence is taken in by the children they are observing, but to do so with as little obvious participation as possible. Any participation on the part of the ethnographers must be called for by the children themselves. By placing the emphasis on observation rather than on participation, we have the opportunity to see how the children respond to someone who is present but not directing or intervening in their activities. In the intimate context of the after-school program the ethnographer has played a much greater role in the relational dynamics of the group than we ever expected. In some cases, the ethnographer, as the outsider in the group, has been able to make deeper connections with particular children than the group leaders. In the first year

of the after-school program, for instance, there was a young Latino girl, Anita, who was referred to the Kindergarten class in the after-school program because she was having difficulty relating to other students. She spoke very little; in fact, the children were so used to her not speaking that they had started to speak for her, interpreting her looks and communicating for her when an adult asked her a question. At their first meeting the ethnographer, Gladys, was introduced to the five kindergarten students as a person who would be taking notes on this new program. Over the course of the program Anita more or less hung back from the group leaders and tended not to participate very much in the activities with the other children. During this time, however, she grew closer and closer to Patricia, seeking her out, sitting closer to her in the room while she did her work, and making more and more eye contact with her. She still did not speak, but by the end she was nodding and answering questions with smiles and gestures where before there had been only stares. Clearly, in this case the relationship between Anita and the ethnographer served as a key intervention in Anita's life at school.

One of the key questions guiding our work in the ethnography is how it, in and of itself, might lead us to a more coherent understanding of what children need and want in their relationships, and in turn inform how we conduct our interviews and continue to design the after-school program.

VII. CONCLUSION

The idea that research is not "neutral" but invariably affects the participants is not new. A self-conscious choice to design research as an intervention, however, requires continual reflection on the process and influence of the research. Traditional research methods and assumptions about the necessity for distance between researchers and participants do not easily accommodate these concerns. However, scholars are now writing stunning accounts of the ways research affects researchers, as well as the people researchers study, with recommendations for a reflective practice (Behar, 1992; Borland, 1991; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Other researchers focus on the explication of interactive psychological processes between researchers and participants in research (Bakhtin, 1981; Mishler, 1986). Increasingly, and particularly among feminist researchers, methods of data analysis require the researcher to voice her or his own perspective and biases (Krieger, 1991), to understand what is "not said" in different accounts (Rogers, 1992), and to create accounts that are useful to research participants, as well as researchers (Martin-Baro, 1994). Additionally, researchers have begun to explore new ecological methods that specify the particularities of different contexts of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) as vital alternatives to studying development as if growth took place in an isolated individual within no particular social context.

We see our work as part of this lively and complex conversation about research relationships and research methodologies. Our question regarding the recursive and interdependent influences the various components of our research may have on children's development is crucial for us as research psychologists concerned with children's well being. Now, midstream and two years into our project, we find ourselves lingering over this rather large question as we listen to the stories children have told us of their lives—stories rich with the colors of their living and growth. We have found, if not an answer, certainly a reflective practice that sheds some light on what we are doing as we attempt to understand and intervene in these children's relational worlds.

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[1] Annie Rogers is the Principal Investigator of this project, Victoria Nakkula directs the *Kids' Art Connection*, and Mary Casey and Jim Holland direct the ethnography associated with the project.

[2] The names created for the principal, the school, and any children are all pseudonyms.

[3] The Student Support Team is a group of representatives of the community and school, including teachers, a parent liaison, a mediation specialist, a community social worker, a school psychologist, and the vice-principal. It is designed to support children the school is particularly concerned about.