

Peter Finigan  
PDI V – Ethnography  
9/24/12

In our recent trip to the Ark Community Charter School, I was in a group with my fellow classmates Julia Wright and Greg Wilson. We set out with the intention of making the children feel comfortable in order to help them divulge any and all information we could that would help us in our further interactions. In our questions to the children, we tried to learn their favorite activities, what makes them happy, important people in their lives and other such topics. We were successful in engaging the majority of the students with few very exceptions.

Our mode of engaging the children consisted of asking them to draw anything they wished. It could be their favorite thing to do, their least favorite thing, or something completely imaginary. Our intention was to accomplish two things with having them draw. We could learn directly from their drawings certain things about them. For instance, one boy drew a football and football uprights. From this and further questioning, we were able to confirm that his favorite sport was football and we learned what position he plays and how often he plays. Our second goal from having the children draw was to simply get them doing something they enjoy and have fun with while being completely unstructured. My group mates and I recalled that we had all enjoyed drawing as kids and hoped that despite all of the changes since we were the students' age, they too would enjoy drawing as much as we had. Our hopes were confirmed right away when the kids enthusiastically reached for the colored pencils and markers and began expressing their minds through art.

With the prevalence of technology in the lives of kids today, it came as no surprise that much of what the kids talked about related to technology. About eight or nine of the children, the majority being boys, said that playing video games was their favorite thing to do outside of school. The overwhelming favorite game was Call of Duty, a modern first person shooter game rated M for mature. The mature rating signifies a game that should be played by and can only be purchased by someone over the age of seventeen. What is significant about this rating is that the children we were talking to are in fifth grade, the average age being ten to eleven. This means that a parent, aunt or uncle, older brother or sister must have purchased the game for them. Whether the parents or guardian figure in the children's lives understand the content of the game and do not care or simply do not understand the content of the game is unbeknownst to me. Comparing this to my own childhood, I was never allowed to play mature video games unless my parents had a good understanding of what the game consisted of and deemed it allowable as long as I understood the implications of what was happening in the game. Unfortunately I did not get the opportunity to ask the kids if their parents knew what the games they play are about.

One boy, who did not participate in drawing but was very open in talking to us, talked almost exclusively about playing Call of Duty. He went into great detail of how he likes to play, what weapons he uses and how he "destroy everyone." He proceeded to ask me if I was familiar with the game and if I ever play it. I responded by saying I was familiar but do not own the game and he proceeded to tell me that if he played me, he would "dominate me." The boy continued to talk about other video games, one in particular about hunting beasts or something of that sort. He described how the game used to scare him but now he is good at it and when confronted by certain animals, he will "bash their skull in with the crowbar." My group mates and I were somewhat taken aback by the nonchalant manner in which he described this to us. Through observation of him and his interactions with the other students, it appeared to me that he might have simply been attempting to showboat and be cool in front of the other students and us. Some of the other students, one girl in particular, rolled her eyes when the boy was telling his story. From this, I suspect that he might have a history of doing this in class that is well known to the other students.

Two other students, one boy and one girl, expressed a great interest in dance. We asked the boy if he had played the game Dance Dance Revolution, a video game with a floor mat that you step on corresponding with what appears on the screen. His response was along the lines of, that game is old. I play better games now. He then listed Just Dance 1 through 5 and several other dance related video games as his favorites. The girl we talked to said that she loves taking dance lessons and takes classes for hip hop, jazz and ballet. She said that her uncle tried to teach her tap dance, but she found it too difficult to take up.

I began to speculate that these kids are very influenced by the environment they experience at home. One boy does not like to go shopping with his mom because she takes forever and can never decide what to get for herself. Another boy said he does not like shopping with his mom because she will not buy him something because it costs too much. He would rather go shopping with his dad because he will buy it if he asks regardless of the cost. I was both surprising and refreshing to hear that one boy was saving his money so that he could buy a set of walkie-talkies. In this day and age of instant gratification and young people not learning the value of saving money for a long term goal, I was very impressed by his responsibility. His intent for getting the walkie-talkies was to give one to his friend that had just moved further away from his house and they could talk when they wanted to.

We asked the kids about their schooling and what their favorite subjects were. The overwhelming majority said math was their favorite subject. When asked what their least favorite subject was, a good amount said science and social studies were their two least favorite. Their reason for not liking science was the current material that they were learning about: the brain. One of the students, the one saving up for the walkie-talkies, loves science and likes to draw and think of cool robots. I asked him, if he could design a robot to do absolutely anything in the world, even if it was considered impossible, what would it do? He responded, "Do my homework," an expected answer from someone of his age.

I was able to connect personally with one boy when he asked me what I like to do in my free time. Rather than feed into the video game talk that was already going on, I decided to answer with one of my hobbies and clubs I am involved in. I told him that I enjoy designing and building RC airplanes and other RC vehicles. His eyes opened wide and he exclaimed that he likes doing that too. He got out of his seat from across the table, walked over to me and began asking me all about the topic. Through this conversation I learned that he and his father make RC vehicles and he loves spending time with his dad playing with them. I was truly impressed and a little jealous when he told me that recently they had made a remote controlled military tank. From this point on, during every group switch, he would come over to me and strike up a conversation.

After meeting with the kids, our class talked with whom I believe to be the director of the school. Admittedly, I was a little late to the talk as I was finishing up my conversation with the boy interested in RC craft so I did not catch her name. She made a very convincing point about how the school strives to "deprogram" the tech generation. She commented how in all the video games the kids play, they can click continuously until they get the right answer or figure out the puzzle without any true penalty for the amount of clicking they do or choosing wrong. She described it perfectly as "kids just look to check off boxes" rather than thinking critically through the process. In one game that is used by the school, the game will detect if the students are clicking randomly and subsequently lower the volume, forcing the student to try harder to listen to the directions or question. If the student gets several questions in a row wrong or clicks randomly, the game might also set the student back a couple questions because it will realize that the student probably does not truly understand the material being asked.

Through our conversing with students and the director, I was gained a lot of valuable insight. I learned a lot about what these kids enjoy doing and what it would take to get them interested in certain activities. From the director, I gathered many facets of what and how the school tries to teach the kids.

This knowledge will be fundamental in developing our prototype for the students. I hope that we can grab their interest and hold it long enough to make a difference in their education. I believe that I have the knowledge and experience required to accomplish this feat.