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An Informal Interview with Barbel Inhelder on Planning a Research Study

by Beverly Brekke

Beverly Brekke: What procedures have you developed for assessing conservers and identifying transitional conservers?

Barbel Inhelder: The most important thing is to have good pre-tests in order to know exactly where the child stands and to look for the child's possibilities. For this, in general, you need more than one test as a pre-test. We are trying to test the children with one, two, or three different kinds of conservation tasks, also seriation and class inclusion tasks to have a greater variety. If a child is in one of the many little substages, then he is focusing on one dimension. Perhaps he has all kinds of oscillations between different centration or decenterations and still is not able to have a firm judgement of conservation. Therefore, I think that it is important to know where the children are in the beginning, and relatively few people do.

Brekke: So you would identify the level through a series of at least three tests of different kinds of conservation. Would you scale these tests in any way?

Inhelder: Yes, we look mostly at the arguments the children are giving and at the oscillations; if the children are going from a lower level to a higher level, or if they have real oscillations going on both sides, or if they are regressing, or if they have some obstacles. So it's much more this kind of indication that is helpful to us for the first pre-test.

Inhelder, a collaborator with Piaget in developmental psychology, talks about methodology pertaining to a study of conservation and beginning reading with a visiting American researcher in Geneva.

Brekke: I see. You mentioned the pre-test would have at least three different types of conservation tasks. Would these be given at one time or would you give them over a period of time?

Inhelder: For the pre-test it is better to have one at a time.

Brekke: So you would have several tasks?

Inhelder: Yes, and then having not only conservation but also a task of class inclusion or a task of seriation. However, we have to know about the nature of connections between these different tasks. In a study finally published in English on learning, we found that when we trained the children in conservation, and if we looked at their generalization to class inclusion problems, there was a slight effect. If we trained them in class inclusion with all kinds of problems of strict logic but not conservation, then they had a very high effect of generalization to conservation. So it is not a completely reciprocal relationship. The child is always learning something--expanding. I don't want to call this transfer, but expanding in other fields. It is not always a completely reciprocal relationship. Of course, for this, too, you have to know about the connections between different tasks.

Brekke: Do you have some descriptions of these relationships?

Inhelder: Yes, just a very first attempt because our book is not out and still not completely finished on learning.

Brekke: Now that I've observed the Piagetian clinical interview technique, I don't know whether this could be used in a study that I might undertake. How would you advise me to plan to use this interview and to become proficient enough to do this in a way that would be valid?

Inhelder: Yes, it depends so much on the questions you are asking. If you want to standardize the procedures, then you have to have a quite rigid procedure, make your statistics, and then the right correlation of whatever you want to use as methods. In the learning procedures we have to be also relatively strict in giving all the children the same weight of information or the same quality of information. However, if you want to make a kind of diagnostic procedure after the experiment, then I think you have to be very flexible, and to look at whether you are able to bring out the child's potentialities. There are some variations. I think that it really depends on the question you are interested in researching.

Brekke: Yes, and the question I will be posing is: is there a relationship between a child's performance on tasks of conservation of substance and the child's readiness for reading as predicted by the Gates Reading Readiness Test and the child's subsequent progress in reading as measured by the Gates Primary Reading Test? There probably would be a need to have some way of scaling this for a statistical correlation.

Inhelder: Yes, then you have to be relatively strict with your procedures.

Brekke: Have you developed any standardized procedure that you have used in your studies?

Inhelder: Oh, yes, they are available for reference. Perhaps, to help at this time for planning, I could give you some of our materials from the learning studies. For the statistical part the scaling has mostly been done by Vinh-Bang. I think he has been working on this for 15 years, and he wants to finish and publish this alone. I have just a few indications but not enough about his work from a Montreal conference.

Brekke: We talked about the pre-test and the conser-

vation tasks. Would you have any suggestions for an effective training procedure?

Inhelder: Yes, training procedure--that is mostly the point with our own research problems. We never do the training in the conservation situation. We think of other kinds of situations where the child has to construct equalities, inequalities, to do things, to bring out differences and identities, and to make all kinds of transformations, but not doing exactly the same experiments that are in the pre-test and posttest.

Brekke: The situations are always different from the training and from the pre-test.

Inhelder: Yes, from the pre-test. The posttest and the pre-test have to be the same, of course. Also it is important to know if the children are able to go beyond their own context of learning.

Brekke: Then in the posttest do you allow for an upper limit to get the full range of the children's conservation?

Inhelder: Yes.

Brekke: Do you have a lower limit in the pre-test as well?

Inhelder: Yes, you have to have both limits. In fact, we are now trying to have a lower limit, but we don't have enough criteria. If there are non-conservers, we want to know which kinds of functional relationship they are able to establish within the lower and upper limits.

Brekke: I would like to ask you about the control group for the study. Would you match the children by mental age for the control and experimental groups?

Inhelder: Why not?

Brekke: As far as I understand, conservation is related to mental age; reading readiness is also related to mental age but I don't think anyone has done a study relating these two together.

Inhelder: Doing the transitivity in between? Yes, it is curious, isn't it?

Brekke: What about the size of the sample? I am thinking of about 15 children in each group. Do you think this would be enough?

Inhelder: Yes that would probably be right.

Brekke: Perhaps we should discuss the training time. Would two twenty-minute periods a week for three weeks be adequate?

Inhelder: Yes, I think that's good.

Brekke: And the three weeks of training would be short enough so there would be no problem in transference?

Inhelder: That's the problem all the time. Of course, you'd still have your control group to check out but it's not enough.

Brekke: Now do you think that September would be a reasonable time to undertake this study of first grade children because most of them have to be six years of age by the end of October to be in the first grade?

Inhelder: I see.

Brekke: Do you know if anyone else has been working on this problem of relating conservation to readiness for progress in reading?

Inhelder: I haven't seen it but I would have to check. We have our archives where we ask all our friends to send us materials with studies inspired by Piaget.

Brekke: I would like to discuss another question regarding reading readiness. The beginning age for reading has been a point of controversy in the United States and many other countries. Scandinavian children are given reading instruction at the age of seven years, whereas in England and Scotland some children begin to read at the ages of four to five years. What is your opinion regarding the appropriate time?

Inhelder: I have no real opinion about the beginning age. It depends so much on the child's developmental age. You know, we have large variations between five and seven.

Brekke: It would fall in that range.

Inhelder: Oh, yes in any case. We sometimes have the impression that the French are pushing too much in the sense of starting this very early and that the German part of Switzerland waits longer, not being too afraid about slowness.

Brekke: Would you have any preference for the reading approach to teaching reading?

Inhelder: You think much more in global or analytical terms, or the way to teach them?

Brekke: The way to teach them.

Inhelder: Starting with the word and then to do the decomposition or starting with the letters and making composition--do you think in this sense?

Brekke: Yes.

Inhelder: We have so many changes here, mostly for political reasons and not for scientific reasons. First it was thought a more natural thing to start with the whole word and then make the partial decomposition. The French have problems with their orthography while the Germans have a more phonetic language, and didn't have problems.

Brekke: It would depend on the language, perhaps?

Inhelder: Probably true, yes. I still have some unscientific feelings about the whole reading approach. It is really such a terrible problem and has become a question that everybody is involved in to some extent. It is quite a heretic question because in Geneva there are problems with slow readers and parents becoming alarmed.

Brekke: Is there any way to relate your findings to help in this area? I think this is the purpose of my study--another way of saying the child is ready.

Inhelder: Probably with the memory studies because there is more of a relationship to the figural aspects of thought. There are all kinds of images and of course we have to have a mode of decomposition. I haven't worked in that field.