

# The UKZN Griot

...of Research and Babies



## Keyan G Tomaselli\*

CCMS and children are synonymous. One six year old, having quietly sat with his father through a complex two-hour Honours seminar on social theory in the early 1990s, was the only member of the class who responded to: 'Any questions?' Jethro's hand shot up: 'Can I go to the toilet now?' We've also married off a number of CCMS students to each other, and have hosted numerous sets of twins as students. A young post-doctoral father currently brings his new baby to work and seminars to allow his wife, also a student, to catch up her sleep. Our current audit environment, however, institutionalises "no children allowed".

Being an academic is tough. Being a parent in academia is tougher. Meeting one's performance management (PM) with babies in both arms is a real challenge, especially if both parents are academics. PM does not mean premenstrual, but it may mean post-mortem, where academic parents are held to institutional productivity units irrespective of their being in the family way. In the field, PM means parental managing of the kids while managing the students who are managing the research subjects and sites.

These thoughts occurred to me while on a field trip where a husband-and-wife team, with two toddlers and a group of students in tow, sought to meet their institutional "output" obligations. Research continued as normal, but at personal expense to the family and a real strain on the household budget. University budgets do not allow for childcare or transport of the children to be covered through research funds.

I and my wife Ruth, also an academic, once took our toddler to a massive jamboree in Botswana. This mob of noisy, anti-apartheid and thoroughly disorganised cultural workers had nowhere for children to play while we adults were developing our cultural weapons of rolling mass action. Children's and parents needs were similarly not recognised by the resistance movement. Back home we foolishly supported making the country ungovernable. What we now know from the South African rape, domestic abuse and crime stats is that a key social weapon is the stability of the family, socialisation enabled by intensive parenting, and being there for our offspring.

Later, from the age of 13 my daughter accompanied CCMS teams deep into the Kalahari where she over a 10-year period literally set the place alight research-wise. Researcher-researched encounters change dramatically

when teams include unconventional members who behave unconventionally. Publications, thesis chapters and videos resulted, adding to the body of knowledge relating to guest-host relations.

Boring factor analysis comes alive, regression analysis moves off the axis, and the variables can be manipulated to cause often surprising, even scientifically unexplainable, occurrences.

These new “findings” (observations) expose flaws in old certainties, and predictable bureaucratic-led categorical ways of doing things. The ways that researchers manage their families while doing research have been discussed by only a few anthropologists. So I suggested to the parents on the recent excursion that they might address the issue in a paper for a methodology journal, SAPSE accredited, of course.

The question is how to accommodate young parents who want to do research in the field, or away from home. How to justify the expense of children travelling and the re-organisation of the working day/night, is enough to give any honest auditor a real headache. The spreadsheet economy will revolt, and how to ensure that the costs incurred by travelling academics with regard to their children are legitimate may become a contentious issue for a postgraduate course in auditing.

I am also working with an Australian child psychologist on over-imitation and technical problem-solving amongst Aboriginal, San and urban preschoolers in the two countries. What we have learned is that historically, indigenous children are treated as adults by their parents, learning through apprenticeship rather than via formal educational strategies that separate them from each other for most of the day. The latter is the Cartesian, industrial way. But our own conditions of service do not recognise the implications of this, even if babies are sometimes in the CCMS classrooms along with their parents and other adults.

The young parent-academic referred to above suggests that being a parent has made him into a better, more productive researcher and mentor. He’s now more engaged with his research, more empathetic to students, and a better manager of time. His students, he says, are desperate for work/life balance role models. Being there for your child is a good thing.

Responses to my September column, *Of Bulls and Bears*, speak also indirectly to the issue of where and how children learn. One parent wrote of his son doing electrical engineering elsewhere: ‘Don’t be surprised when engineers shock themselves to death.’ Professors in one medical school ask: ‘Would you knowingly consult a surgeon with a condoned pass?’ Intimidation of staff for failing students is taking its toll on some campuses, and I personally have refused to approve PhDs which arrive on my desk looking like badly formatted incoherent technical reports that lack research questions. But they are passed by their home institutions anyway because, I am told, the other examiners’ assessments were positive. The bar for entry requirements is often set so low for both staff and students that promotion of students to the next level is the only way to meet the unrealistic “targets” set by management as they try to leverage state subsidy. Unlike the children of traditional indigenous communities who learn on the job, many students simply learn how to buck the system, irrespective of adult guidance.

So, why not start as young Jethro did at Honours level at the age of six, instead of wasting 12 grades and 12 years and three years of a Bachelors? This youngster was the only one who had a question and a clear objective. And, he was polite, fun and a real treat to have in class. He intimidated no-one and I did not need a safe escort off campus after the seminar. He’s now a high-end web designer.

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*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.*