

# **Researching young children in junior school: methodological approaches and the role of the ethnographer.**

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## **Introduction**

This paper describes the story of the research process in a 9-month long empirical study that was my doctoral thesis (Swain 2001). Specifically, it discusses the methods and methodology that were used to explore constructions of masculinity amongst 10-11 year old boys in three junior schools in the UK, and the role of the ethnographic researcher. The paper contains issues of writing fieldnotes, observation and conducting group interviews. The heart of the paper concerns my role as a novice researcher learning to carry out ethnographic research with young children. This includes developing and maintaining relationships throughout fieldwork; power relations; and the multiple positionings taken by myself as an ex-teacher and gendered adult with a growing awareness of his own masculine identity.

## **The sample**

The research was informed by recent feminist and feminist-inspired work on masculinities from a socio-cultural perspective (see, for example, Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Skelton 2001; Renold 2005). Although boys negotiate masculine identities in a range of social settings, I chose to focus on the context of the school. Schools are important sites in the formation of masculinities, and their organisation and policies provide boys with a number of different opportunities to construct different masculinities, drawing on the localised resources and strategies available (Connell 2000). All empirical research involves using a sample of some kind, and this involves using principles of selection which, of course, operate at all stages of the research project. I wanted to undertake a comparative study, that is to look for similarities and differences, but I needed to make sure that my sample was manageable (given the scale and scope of a PhD), in terms of time management, data collection and analysis. After a considerable amount of discussion and deliberation I decided to site my empirical work in three

schools, and to focus on one age group of 10-11 year olds, in one Year 6 class per school. This, I felt, would give me the opportunity to study the children and adults in sufficient depth. A key variable in my research design was social class, and I selected schools that were differentiated in terms of the social characteristics of their intake. Although I had chosen to concentrate on boys' masculine identities, I wanted the schools to be co-educational as relations of gender were an integral part of my study, and I was interested to see how each gender group interacted, and find out what they thought and said about each other.

The fieldwork took place between September 1998 and July 1999 and was set in three junior schools in or around Greater London (see Table 1).

#### TABLE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE

Whereas Highwoods and Petersfield had a mixture of ethnic minorities (the majority was Indian-Asian), Westmoor Abbey was almost exclusively white. Two of schools were LEA junior schools (with pupils aged between 7-11), the other was an independent, fee-paying junior school (with pupils aged between 7-13). Whereas the majority of pupils in Highwoods and Petersfield showed a good work ethic, this was not the case in Westmoor Abbey where, in general, the social relations were also considerably poorer. Initially, I found it difficult to access a co-educational independent (private) school, but finally negotiated entry into a school through a friend who knew the headteacher. The two Local Education Authority (LEA) schools (in different authorities) were also found through personal contact, by way of the LEA inspectorate, members of whom I knew from my days as a full-time primary school teacher. Moreover, the fact that I had worked in both LEAs meant (at that time) that I did not have to complete any kind of police check which might have delayed entry.

### *The time-frame*

Walford (cited in Jeffrey and Troman 2004) argues, time factors often make this type of long-term engagement more suitable to research students than to tenured academics. I had the benefit of spending nearly a year in the research setting but I did not want to spend the whole term in one school because I wanted to sample activities across the year in each school. Moreover, my own experience of teaching in junior school led me to believe that some boys might behave differently once the SATs [2] were over in early May, and where they were, in the case of the two LEA schools, waiting to leave their junior school to start secondary school in September. I therefore decided to follow a rolling programme of fieldwork spending about two or three days a week for a month in each term in each school, and in total I was in the schools for 91 days.

### **Methods of gathering data**

The descriptions and interpretations in the project were based on two major sources of data: observation and interview. For me, observation was a vital and fundamental method of trying to understand and explain events and interactions, and I found there was a dialogic relationship between my observations and the interviews. The observations guided me to some of the questions that I wanted to ask the children during the interviews, and the interviews helped me interpret the significance of what I was observing. Field research roles will range along a continuum from complete passive observer to complete active participant. Over the course of my fieldwork I actually took part in many different forms of participation such as watching, sharing, listening, learning, discussing, playing, collaborating and helping. While I did not pretend to be a boy, I also did not sit passively at the back of the class or always stand and observe from the edges of the playground. I am describing this as a form of *semi-participant observation*, and I will elaborate on this later.

### *Fieldnotes*

Describing what has been observed and noted during participant observation should be an integral part of ethnographic research, and the collection and maintenance of fieldnotes

constituted a central part of my data collection, and were compiled with as much care as possible. However, I feel that it is also important to recognise and acknowledge that only a tiny fraction of what we see is ever going to be written down, and that impressions and unrecorded recollections based on more unreliable fragments of memory will also, inevitably, intrude into the construction of the overall picture. Moreover, one of the main dilemmas for the ethnographer comes in selecting the material to use in the final account. It is important to realise that my thesis probably contains less than 1% of the material that I recorded in my field diary and on tape from the interviews, and that this is also probably less than 1% of every thing that I experienced (primarily saw and heard) over the 9 month research period in the three schools (Willis 2000).

Walford (2000) speculates that few researchers now actually use fieldnotes in their descriptive accounts because they no longer take time to write them up adequately. Moreover, it is only recently that researchers have begun to make the construction and maintenance of fieldnotes more open (see, for example, Epstein and Johnson 1998, Graue and Walsh 1998), and one consequence of this is that there are precious few models to follow or learn from. This is despite the fact that ethnography is the defining methodology of anthropology, and anthropologists provide examples as a matter of routine. Fieldnotes are an individual construction, to be developed to suit the person doing the research; there is no one 'best' or correct way, and I knew that I needed to find my own format and style. The test was whether or not I found them useful, and how often I went back to re-read them, or used them in my final descriptions. In fact, I found that sometimes even the briefest jotting or scribble was enough to trigger a memory and aid in the construction of a more detailed account. Of course analytical ideas and concepts change over the research period, and so what is included in the fieldnotes will also change. Like all research, it is important that they are seen as part of a reflexive process, that is subject to re-appraisal as conceptual understandings deepen.

One way of using fieldnotes is for them to give a voice to the children who do not appear very often in the interview transcripts. This may be due to a number of reasons: they may be reticent, introverted, less articulate, marginalised, uninterested and so on. Fieldnotes,

though, are a way of indicating their presence, their actions, their views and opinions, and, most importantly, making sure that they form part of the overall data collection on which findings are based.

I developed a system of fieldnote-taking whereby I ruled a margin approximately two-thirds of the way across the page and wrote my descriptions on the left, and the first stages of thematic analysis on the right (I have subsequently found out that May (1997) suggests something similar). The extract below is an example from my field diary taken from observations made on a whole-school assembly at Highwoods early on in my fieldwork. Like all observations, the page begins with a note of the time, date and context (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE

#### *Group interviews*

After observation, my second major method of data gathering was the ‘formal’ interview. I say ‘formal’ in the sense that I explicitly sat down with people with the intention to interview them, but during my fieldwork I also had countless other informal conversations with children and adults at various times and in various places, some of which (when relevant to my research question) were recorded in my fieldnotes, and which Burgess (1988:153) refers to as ‘conversations with a purpose’ (see, also, Graue and Walsh 1998).

During the research period I conducted a total of 109 ‘formal interviews’, and out of this total 5 were with adults and 104 were with pupils (62 with boys only; 39 with girls only; and 3 with mixed gender groups). Altogether, I interviewed 130 children (76 boys and 54 girls), although of course I spoke to many more. Many were interviewed twice, and a few were interviewed on three or four occasions. I decided on small group interviews from the very beginning of my research design. This has been a particularly effective method when used in research with younger children (see, for example, Connolly 1997,

1998, Skelton 1997, Adler and Adler 1998, Benjamin 1998, Epstein 1998, Renold 2001), for if meanings are generated through social interaction, group interviews seemed to be the most effective way of observing, capturing and exploring these interactions (see, for example, Kitzinger 1994, Denscombe 1995, Agar and MacDonald 1995). Kitzinger (1994:159) comments on the dynamic, interactive nature of group interviews and how they 'enable the researcher to examine people's different perspectives as they operate within a social network, and to explore how accounts are constructed, expressed, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction.' Connolly (1997) suggests that group interviews may have the tendency to reduce the salience of the researcher's presence, and of course, the interaction between the children was at least as important as the interaction between myself (as the interviewer) and the interviewees. Denscombe (1995:137) also points out how group interviews can produce data on 'shared perspectives' and can generate complex understandings and contradictions: there were times when events and/or experiences were introduced by one of the participants which sometimes resulted in the productive re-telling by other children involved and which Kitzinger (1994) has termed 'collective remembering'. Another productive result from the group interviews was that, in my research, stories told by one of the participants could be scrutinised and verified by others.

Although a further advantage of group interviews is that they may also encourage children to participate who may be less confident in a one-to-one interview situation, there are also a number of disadvantages that have to be guarded against. I certainly needed to watch out for problems of domination (see, for example, Watts and Ebbutt 1987; Denscombe, 1995) in which the dominant and opinionated person can inhibit others into silence, either by simple volubility or by force of argument. It is also possible that some children may have been reluctant to talk about personal issues for fear of embarrassment or ridicule. Two or three people talking over each other sometimes also caused me transcription problems, and decisions had to be made of which voices to prioritise. Very occasionally, voices were simply unattributable.

The interviews were semi-structured, or loosely structured, around a series of around 20-30 questions or areas of interest (to me) which I used as a checklist, and were followed in no particular order; some questions were general and open, some more focused. All the interviews took place within the school day, mainly at breaktimes, and the vast majority were completed within one session. All interviews took place in areas where privacy was assured; they were tape recorded and most lasted between half an hour to an hour and a quarter, the average length being about 40 minutes.

Rather than actually 'interviewing' the children, I saw my main task as trying to establish, and facilitate, a free flowing discussion where I could collect a wide range of opinions, and I tried to make them as close as possible to the social encounters and interactions found in everyday life. However, I also used directive questioning in order to test out emerging theories, pursue and clarify points arising during the interview, and to cross-check data from other children. Although I tried to make the children feel relaxed and as natural as possible, the interviews were not intended to resemble a conversation in the strictest sense. In fact, Miller and Dingwall (1997:59) explicitly point out that an interview is not a conversation: 'it is a deliberately created opportunity to talk about something that the interviewer is interested in and that may or may not be of interest to the respondents.' Moreover, unlike in many conversations, what the interviewee says is not transitory, but is often recorded for analysis, and therefore, may be invested with significance at a later date.

### *Power relations*

Like Denzin and Lincoln (1994), I felt that gaining a rapport with the children was essential: by rapport, I mean that I tried to put them at ease and develop a mutual trust, trying to see the situation from their perspective and point of view, and making them feel that I valued what they had to say. However, I always felt the predicament of achieving the right balance between achieving rapport whilst still maintaining overall control. Viewing children as highly competent social beings, I also always tried to respect them, and my objective was to learn *from*, as much as *about* the children (Thorne, 1993): however, in many ways I deliberately wanted to maintain some distance between us,

which stems from my former professional role as a teacher. My belief (and although rooted in experience, it is still ultimately only a belief) was that my research needed a dialogic regard between both parties, and I felt that if I ever lost the children's respect the relationship would degenerate and have an adverse effect on the quality of the data. This was particularly apposite in interviews where I set the boundaries for behaviour: I did not let the children lean back on their chairs or put their feet up on the table, and I would also admonish them if they openly used swear words out of the context of their account. We should not try and fool ourselves, for although I adopted a less adult-centric stance, or less teacher-centric stance, I wanted to maintain the upper hand. Unlike Renold (2002:418) I did not allow the interviews to become an unstructured 'talking shop'. She gave the children the freedom to 'set the agenda and topic for discussion', but in my research, I was the one who wanted to remain in control, and although I tried to give the children a platform to talk freely on a range of subjects of their own choice, I would eventually bring them back to talk about *my* areas and *my* questions.

Unlike Epstein (1998) I also did not offer the children a choice of pseudonyms as I felt that although, in many ways, they *were* my research it would make little difference what they were called in it, and although I am telling a story of the time I spent with the children, it is still, ultimately, my story and not theirs.

### *Ethical considerations*

Avoiding the full details of the research project, (which Fine and Glassner (1979) refer to as 'shallow cover'), I always began the interview by reminding the children that I was interested in finding out what it was like being a boy (or a girl) at their particular school. I asked if they minded the interview being taped (no-one did) and I stressed that the interviews were completely confidential, that no information would be disclosed, and that no-one else (such as a peer, or their teacher) would ever hear what they said. Although one of my main objectives was to facilitate a free flowing conversation, my questions were generally concerned with events and situations and I tried to discourage the children from talking about other individuals. Only a very few children (certainly less than 15 out of the 130 or so that I actually interviewed) ever asked me what I was intending to do



with their conversations, but when they did I generally answered by saying that I was hoping to write a book about the life of the children at school, but that I would change their individual names, and the name of the school. Although I would agree with Epstein (1998) that the children do not possess the experience or the framework for understanding who I was, and what I represented as a researcher, and although the notion of informed consent may be flawed and the children's capacity to understand the full concept necessarily limited, I regarded the children as being competent social beings (James et al 1998) and felt that I had at least tried to ensure that their consent was as informed as best I practicably could.

### **The role of the ethnographic researcher**

This was an ethnographic study, and although the term 'ethnography' carries a number of meanings, I understand it to mean the qualitative, empirical interpretation of the practices of a specific culture in their 'natural' setting over a sustained period. I went about trying to understand the messy complexities of life around me, and trying to find a language to explain what was happening, or what was going on, for as Clifford and Marcus (1986) say, the task of the ethnographer is to make the behaviour of a different way of life comprehensible. When in the field, the ethnographer needs to possess a range of skills and attributes in the areas of planning, organisation, observation, writing (including quick note-taking), listening, empathy, reacting, reflexivity and not least of all, energy and stamina. Skills of negotiation are also important and I always seemed to be negotiating with teachers and the pupils: 'Can I come to this lesson?'; 'Can I participate in this particular conversation?'; 'Can I sit here?'

Although ethnography involves a long-term commitment, it is still also full of many fleeting, half-moments and the researcher has to guard against making false assumptions and misinterpreting events and situations. This was brought home to me by the following incident which happened in my very last week of fieldwork.

Fieldnotes: Petersfield: school hall ( 20.7.99)

*[Year 6 are rehearsing their school play which they are going to show to the parents. It is a musical about the 1960s and involves a re-enactment of the 1966 World Cup Final]*

...There's lots of shouting and cheering; DF [*Mrs Flowers, the headteacher*] comes over to the lady sitting next to me and says, 'That's as close as you'll ever get to any competitive sport in this school'. The lady sitting next to me at the back smiles – I've followed her into the hall. She's rather untidy, slightly scruffy looking, wearing a long cardigan over a bright flowery dress. She looks rather poor. I'm making comparisons with some of the parents that I have seen at Westmoor Abbey. She sings along with some of the songs; she's got a nice voice. At the end of the performance, DF has come over again and engages the lady in conversation. I wonder why; does she know her? I begin to suspect. It turns out that she is actually the infant school headteacher! [*The word 'Warning!' was scribbled in the margin.*]

### *Relationships*

Good relationships are an essential feature of any productive ethnography, and the letter-writing, telephone calls and visits to each school were a vital prerequisite before my official fieldwork began. Relationships with the children and the staff were developed and nurtured gradually, and I found my status as a fellow teacher helped in my relations with the staff in each school who felt that I had more of an informed and sympathetic understanding of what was going on. Before I began interviewing the children, the first two or three weeks in each school were spent in observing and getting to know them in an effort to gain their trust and confidence: this involved talking to them, having lunch with them, helping them with their class-work, and generally 'hanging around'. As I only visited each school for about a month each term, there were long gaps between each period of fieldwork, and relationships were maintained by sending the children and their teachers Christmas cards, letters and various mathematical puzzles for the class to work on and return to me.

It is well known that respondents' interpretations of us are profoundly influenced by our own interactional cues (Walford 2002). Reciprocal areas of interest and conversation, appearance (exemplified by age, gender, ethnicity and clothing), and accent, tone, posture and other non-verbal signals are all variables that need to be taken into consideration. Researchers working in the role of participating in children's cultures therefore need to take serious account of how the children view and respond to them. However, another issue for researchers is how to approach and manage the conventional adult-child relationship, which in turn is affected by the way in which researchers perceive the conception of childhood and the status of the child. In her discussion on 'the least adult' role Mandell (1988:435) contends that 'the researcher [can] suspend all adult-like characteristics except size', and Goode, (1986) and Waksler, (1986) also maintain that full adult participation is possible, and that all aspects of adult superiority can be ignored except the physical. However, Corsaro (1985) argues that signifiers of adult age and authority mean that adult participation in children's cultures can only ever be partial. Some researchers like Davies (1989) appear to try and actually become a child but this was not my intention: I never attempted to try and be 'like one of them' for of course I could not: simply being an adult meant an unequal, dichotomous distribution of power, and I knew, and they knew, that I was different and apart.

Although I am sympathetic to Mandell's (1988) and Epstein's (1998) idea of the 'least adult role', I was conscious that I was still (very obviously) an adult with my age, height, deeper voice, my clothes and, indeed, Epstein herself points up the impossibility of maintaining such a position beyond a certain point. My intention was to mix in with the informal pupil culture: I did not want to pretend to be like the children by dressing or acting like the children, but nor did I want to position myself outside and (sometimes) against their culture by emulating the dress and/or the behaviour of the teachers. I generally wore casual but smart clothing although I very rarely wore a tie, unlike the male teachers in Highwoods and Petersfield. I did not overly concern myself with how the children addressed me, as long as it was polite and not too deferential. For instance, at Highwoods, a few children called me 'Sir', and I was rather uncomfortable with this with its connotations of deference. However, as they were used to calling the male teachers by

this term, I found it difficult to change their habit and after a few attempts I generally let it go. There have been some researchers (such as Epstein, 1998 and Renold, 1999), who have asked the children to call them by their first names, but I left this decision to the children and they usually called me 'Jon' or 'Mr Swain'.

### *The least-teacher role*

As we have already seen, I sometimes found it quite difficult to shake off the role of ex-teacher for, like Epstein (1998:29), I had spent a large proportion of my adult years in the classroom and had invested considerable amounts of psychic, emotional and social energy in 'becoming' and 'being' a teacher. By the nature of the job, a teacher has to maintain a certain distance between her/himself and the children/pupils, and we have already seen how this influenced the position I adopted during the interviews. I always felt a little uncomfortable if the teacher left the classroom for any length of time: it was noticeable that some children would immediately look around to see what others were doing and gauge how I was going to react if they got up out of their seats, and if I felt that the some children were going to seriously distract others I would change into teacher-mode. After all, I was indebted to the teachers for allowing me into their classrooms, and I did not want to let them down by letting the class to degenerate into chaos while they had 'popped out' for a few moments. Although I tried hard to avoid any teaching scenarios there were a few times when I was asked to help out by taking the class, or part of the class. For example, one day at Westmoor Abbey one of the Year 6 teachers had to go home at lunchtime and the other two Year 6 teachers asked me if I would 'help out' by taking Year 6 games that afternoon. It was not an ideal situation but I felt that I could not turn them down. Golde (cited in Skeggs, 1994) suggests that all fieldwork should involve some form of reciprocity, and that researchers should offer some favour in return for the disruption of other people's lives. The school had welcomed me and given me access to their world; I needed them more than they needed me and I felt that I owed it to them. During the games lesson I reverted to teacher-mode but the children expected me to do this. My contention is that as competent social actors (James et al 1998), or 'skilled and knowledgeable agents' (Giddens 1984) children have a greater ability to make adequate judgements than they are often given credit for, and the majority are often able to

understand that adults perform a variety of different roles, and appreciate that I could change from being a ‘friend’ to a ‘teacher’ and back again in a matter of seconds.

At different times during my fieldwork I also found myself switching between the roles of being ‘more like a pupil/peer’ or ‘more like a teacher’. Obviously I was not a pupil/peer but the children also knew that I was not employed at the school in an official teaching capacity. The vast majority of the children in all the schools asked me what I was and wanted to know what I did, and I told them that I had worked as a teacher in another school. In some ways I tried to spend most of my time in *the least teacher role*.

During my role as *semi-participant observer*, I spent most of my time in the playground talking to the children and watching their games, without ever taking part. In the classroom I sat next to the children, joined in with the lesson, helped them with their work, and sometimes took part in their activities in the form of musical compositions, painting, spelling tests, shared reading activities and so on, and this brought me closer to them. I tried to be as friendly as possible without ever trying to become one of their intimate friends, although I must admit that I still liked to be popular. I worked at gaining their trust but sometimes my role involved a delicate balance, especially in class, for although I was reluctant to point out their misdemeanours to the teacher, I also felt uncomfortable undermining the teacher’s authority. At Highwoods the Year 6-8 pupils followed a timetable of nine separate 35 minute lessons organised on a typical secondary school day, and this gave me the opportunity of observing the pupils’ attitudes and behaviour with different teachers in different times and spaces. Sometimes I observed a class of pupils transform from being seemingly passive and compliant with one teacher, to being truculent and recalcitrant with another within a few minutes. One time, in Latin, I recall sitting with a group of boys in the back row of the classroom, and as the lesson progressed more and more of them began to lean back on their chairs against the wall until the only person in the entire row who was sitting in the ‘normal’ position was myself.

### *Multiple positionings*

However, it is a great deal more complicated than simply choosing between the roles of an adult or child and teacher or peer/pupil. During my fieldwork I actually found that I needed to develop and maintain a series of multiple positionings towards the children: I was someone who was an adult, a researcher, a teacher, a friend, pupil/peer (or at least a fellow learner) but also someone who was male, middle class and white. I find it difficult to say how much my ethnicity and class affected my relations with the children. Although I am sure that my accent went some way to betraying my class origins, class is obviously much more than this; a set of dispositions and more of a way of life, and I was not conscious of having any easier or more difficult relations with any child based on these two variables. Along with my age, the greatest influence on the research was almost certainly my gender. Measor (1985) argues, convincingly, that during her research into adolescence she would have been unlikely to have elicited data from girls about puberty and menstruation had she been male, and I would have no doubt found it more difficult to obtain information from the boys on, say football, had I either little personal interest, or more importantly, knowledge to sustain the conversation and guide me to the type of questions I should ask. Of course women can know just as much about football as men, but in some ways it was more involved than this; it was the whole familiar and practised way of talking about football with other males that comes from playing, watching, and reading about the game whilst being in their company since a young boy.

### *My own masculine identity*

During my fieldwork I was aware that I was an inexperienced researcher learning how to become an ethnographer (Hey, 1997); I also felt that I was learning to become an academic, and learning how to write academic papers. However, it was more than this for, just as the boys in my study were, in many ways, learning to become men, I was also beginning to have a growing awareness of my own masculine identity. Like any researcher, it is impossible to ever escape one's histo-biographical background. Being in a school setting invariably takes one back to their own school days and I could not help comparing the way of life in each school with the distant, and no doubt malleable and partial, memories of my own school days, shaped by my later experiences (Thorne 1993).

All the theoretical readings about the different types of masculinities I was observing and analysing caused me to think about the kind of masculinity I most identified with and felt the strongest affiliation to. I would keep recognising resonant or fragments of myself in some of the boys and tried to recall what type of boy I was at the age of ten; what type of masculinity had I displayed and performed? My memories of myself at school was of someone who was quiet, different and rather shy, although still capable of playing the role of the 'class clown' and getting into trouble; one who not particularly good at sport but also one who was neither studious or in the least bit academic. I felt so unlike some the boys, particular those who formed the dominant type of masculinity on show; they seemed so voluble, confident and at ease with themselves, even though I came to realise that some of them were often far less assured than they made out. Although I now got on well with these leading/dominant boys I was conscious of the fact that I would not have been able to emulate them, or would probably have been in their friendship group as a boy. The fact that I enjoyed good relations with them now was probably due to my status and the power relations ascribed in me by being an adult and a researcher who was an interesting diversion from the routines of school life, and also, possibly, because of my improved confidence and inter-personal skills. Nevertheless, as an adult, I still found myself being drawn into their way of life: for instance, at Westmoor Abbey, one or two of the children made personal comments about my hairstyle, and were keen to know the make of my trainers which I had at home. I found myself becoming more aware of my own appearance, and began to take more time to decide which clothes to wear before I left the house each morning for school.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has charted the methods and methodology that I used in my doctoral thesis. Space has prevented me from discussing other issues involved in the process such as researchers' responsibilities, triangulation, contamination/reactivity, validity, analysis, and writing up (making sense of findings). My intention has also been to tell the story of an inexperienced PhD student learning to conduct ethnographic research with young children, a process that is invariably messy, and certainly one that is far from being

straightforward. In particular, I have concentrated on the role of the ethnographer, the relationships that this entails, and the multiple positionings that it requires. In doing so I have introduced two terms, *semi-participant observation* and the *least-teacher role*: the former is used relatively rarely [3], and the latter is, as far as I am aware, new to the ethnographic research lexicon. The paper has also suggested how the research is inextricably linked to biography, and that my professional past as a teacher, although difficult to shake off, also contributed to the research in a positive way, for instance, by making access to the schools, and my relationship with the staff, easier. However, my present embodiment as a white, middle class male was also an important factor and my growing awareness of my own masculinity caused me to reflect and reappraise my own identity both in the past and the present.

## Notes

[1] To protect anonymity, all names of places and people have been changed, and in order to further disguise each school's identity the number of pupils on roll has been rounded to the nearest 25.

[2] SATs are Standard Assessment Tasks (Tests) which pupils take at the ages of 7, 11, and 14 in English, Mathematics and Science.

[3] Examples of other researchers who use this phrase are Norris (1986), Parker (2000) and Punch (2003).

Approximately 5,800 words, excluding notes, references and figures/tables

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<b>Name of school</b>	<b>Type of school</b>	<b>No. on roll [1]</b>	<b>Social characteristics of intake</b>
Highwoods Independent	Private, fee-paying	350	Upper-middle class
Petersfield Junior	LEA	425	Middle class
Westmoor Abbey Junior	LEA	300	Working class

Table 1: School type, size, and the social characteristics of their intake

*Highwoods Assembly, Monday morning, 9.25. (21.9.98)*  
*In gym.* Whole school assembly [the only time in the week that the whole the school comes together]

I follow the class in. The entrance by the pupils is quite noisy, there is a lot of chatting. We're the last class in. The teachers are already there, they sit at the front and down one side of the hall. On show, watching the pupils. Hall/gym looks rather old, made of wood, a bit dilapidated. The deputy head [*Mr Hudson*] stands up and gives three short claps. The children stop pretty much at once –almost instant control. The children sit in long rows with in their classes and age groups; youngest at the front, eldest in back row (as usual). All girls and all boys sit together in single sex groups – I can't see any on their own. All in perfect uniform. Assembly taken by deputy head. Begins with sports reports. Teachers stand up, one at a time and deliver their reports. All men wear suits or jackets with ties. PE teachers are in tracksuits. In order, they go netball A's, netball B's, rugby A's, rugby B's etc. There's quite a few of them. The reports are often highly individualised, referring to pupils by name who have performed particularly well. (Themes of effort, individual/collective skill).The pupils seem to listen attentively. Very little fidgeting.

SURVEILLANCE

DISCIPLINE  
CONTROL  
DIFFERENTIATION BY  
AGE/GENDER

UNIFORMITY  
REGULATION  
SPORT

SPORT/PRAISE  
STATUS  
PHYSICALITY/  
ATHLETICISM  
PERFORMANCE  
COMPETITIVENESS

Figure 1: An example from my field notes at Highwoods school

## **Researching young children in junior school: methodological approaches and the role of the ethnographer.**

### **Abstract**

This paper describes the methods and methodology used in a 9-month long empirical study, exploring the constructions of masculinity amongst 10-11 year old boys in three junior schools in the UK. It considers issues arising around sampling and the principal methods of data collection used, which were small group interviews and semi-participant observation. Approaches to writing fieldnotes are also discussed. The second part of the paper looks at the role of the researcher learning to carry out ethnography, and the tensions and dilemmas that occur when working with a young age group in a school setting. Some of the issues that are examined are maintaining relationships, power relations, and the multiple positionings taken by the researcher as an ex-teacher and gendered adult with a growing awareness of his own masculine identity.



## **Biographical note**

Jon Swain spent 18 years as a primary school teacher before leaving to take a PhD at the London Institute of Education, which he completed in 2001. He has published several journal articles on the construction of masculinities in the school setting. He is currently working at King's College London as a research fellow on two projects about adult numeracy.

**Researching young children in junior school: methodological approaches and the role of the ethnographer.**

5, 900 words, excluding notes, references and figures/tables

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