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Hodgkin, K., Fleming, S., Beauchamp, G. & Bryant, A. (2016). "We thought you were undercover, here to inspect us" – Some of the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork in schools. *Wales Journal of Education*, 18(2), 105-109.

"*We thought you were undercover, here to inspect us*" – Some of the

challenges of ethnographic fieldwork in schools

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Word count:

Abstract - 75
Text – 5,631
References – 317
Total – 6,035

"*We thought you were undercover, here to inspect us*" – Some of the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork in schools

Abstract

This paper provides an insight into the challenges associated with conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a primary school and a secondary school in South Wales. Drawing on personal reflections and experiences, it provides an account of the lessons learnt. Themes include gaining access, role selection, establishing trust, developing relationships and role conflict. More specifically, the differences associated with conducting research in a primary and secondary school are identified, whilst highlighting the fragile nature of pupil-centred research.

Keywords: fieldwork; researcher roles; ethnography; school-based research; pupil-centred research.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present an account of the challenges associated with school-based ethnographic research, which was part of a successful PhD. The aim of the research was to examine critically pupils' expectations and experiences of the primary-secondary transition across the curriculum. Preliminary evidence had indicated that although there have been attempts to ensure continuity across the primary-secondary transition (Tobell, 2003), discontinuities remained and that there was a "hiatus in progression" (Galton *et al.,* 2000). For pupils the transition to secondary school is a time of change leaving their small familiar primary school and entering a large unfamiliar secondary school. Positive steps have been made to improve pastoral support during transition, yet only a few schools in Wales have embedded arrangements to facilitate transition effectively (Estyn, 2008).

Throughout the fieldwork process I (as the principal investigator and first author) kept a reflective log. It enabled me to reflect on my experiences in the field. This paper focuses specifically on the first phase of a two-phase project based at two schools. Situated in Metropolitan South Wales, Urban Primary School (a pseudonym) had pupils ranging from ages 3 to 11 years old and was a 'feeder' for City Comprehensive School (also a pseudonym), which included pupils from the ages of 11 to 18. Two six-week stages of fieldwork were conducted, first during the 'pre-transition' phase and then post-transition at City Comprehensive involving some of the same pupils. During the fieldwork process, observations, interviews, classroom activities and informal discussions were used to gather the views of the pupils themselves.

In the past, an ethnographic approach has been used extensively in the sociology of education, especially studies involving young people (Bergin and Cooks, 2002; Ball, 1981; Corrigan, 1979; Fleming, 1995; Lacey, 1970). Ethnographic research can engender feelings of vulnerability and insecurity for all parties (Pole and Morrison, 2009), and a number of issues required consideration before entering the field. First, awareness of risks to the pupils and the responsibilities that come with working in a school environment were required; this included child protection and the whistle blowing policy. Second, researchers can be party to 'guilty knowledge' and have 'dirty hands' about deviant groups or members of a school (Cohen *et al.,* 2007), which may place the researcher in a difficult position.

Prior to beginning the fieldwork, approval was sought from and provided by the university Research Ethics Sub-Committee. I also had an enhanced disclosure and barring service check and provided a careful explanation of the project to both the members of staff and the pupils. Ethical guidance from the British Educational Research Association (2011) was followed and consulted throughout the fieldwork period. Informed consent was sought from the teachers and parents of the pupils involved in the study. Participant observation was used as a data collection method within the research, and therefore it was important to gain parental/guardian consent for each of the pupils in the year six class. An important factor in the success of this approach was the role of the school in assisting with information sheets for the parents. Assent was also gained from the each of the pupils.

The fieldwork process

Implementing an ethnographic approach meant immersion in the two research settings, which resulted in a number of challenging situations. The following sections explore these in detail, particularly the process of fieldwork and the lessons learnt during this period. Organised thematically, challenges include gaining access, role selection, establishing trust, developing relationships and role conflict.

Gaining Access

One of the earliest considerations was entering the field and 'learning the language of the setting, the rules guiding social relationships and the cultural patterns and expectations' (Schensul *et al.* 1999, p.70). Access is fraught with difficulties and for ethnographic studies, it is a continuous process (Walford, 2001). Gaining access to Urban Primary School was relatively straightforward for two main reasons. First, the spatial arrangements of primary schools with a small plot of land meant that I fitted into the school with relative ease. Second, as the study was concerned with year 6 pupils (10 to 11 year olds), access to only one classroom was required. Following a meeting with the Headteacher of Urban Primary School and the year 6 teacher, this was arranged easily. From the outset the Headteacher took an interest in the relevance of the study and its emphasis on the pupils:

> Today I met with the Headteacher and Year 6 teacher of the school. The purpose of the meeting was to explain the aims and objectives of the study but also to emphasise my willingness to assist the year 6 teacher as much as possible around the classroom. After explaining the study I was anxious to hear their thoughts. To my relief they both seemed to value the study and its relevance to both primary and secondary schools. However, as expected they wanted to ensure that I could be of assistance too. I found this difficult to respond to at first but offered to assist around the classroom and with extra-curricular activities. Overall the meeting was successful

> and I was asked if I could start the following day to which I responded, 'of course' (Personal Reflection, Urban Primary).

A decisive factor in negotiating access to Urban Primary was explaining the benefit to the school itself and to the pupils if participating in the study. Specifically, it was the potential of the study for enhancing the transition arrangements to the secondary school. Transition arrangements were enhanced by providing voice to the population experiencing transition, the pupils. Whilst it is known that transition can alter the school experience profoundly, less is known about pupils' perceptions of transition (Hanewald, 2013). In contrast, gaining access to City Comprehensive was more complex.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) identifying the relevant gatekeepers is not always straightforward and indeed at the large and busy City Comprehensive school it proved impossible to speak to the Headteacher directly. Gaining access had to be achieved another way, for although this is achieved best through a face-to-face discussion (Walford, 2001), sometimes, as in this instance, it is not always possible. After further discussions with an advisor alongside my supervisory team (co-authors) I was introduced to a member of staff at City Comprehensive School through email. The details of the study were passed onto the Deputy Headteacher, Mrs Williams (another pseudonym). After regular early email exchanges, contact became sporadic and the process became frustrating. Part of the problem was that emails were the only way to contact Mrs Williams and I felt it was difficult to communicate my enthusiasm for the topic and commitment to the study. After several emails I was offered access to the City Comprehensive School for one day a week. It was necessary to then arrange a meeting with Mrs Williams to explain the study in detail and request a greater level of engagement:

> Today I went into school to meet Mrs Williams. I was anxious prior to the meeting as the emails I had been exchanging had been frustratingly slow.

In the previous email she emphasised that the school would not be able to accommodate me on a daily basis for a six-week period. However, I would be able to go in on a weekly basis. I was worried this would not be sufficient in order to gather data and immerse myself in the setting. However, I still wanted to get at least two days a week in the school maybe within a department. Although I won't get to see all aspects of the transition just being around the school would be beneficial.

I was aware that secondary school timetables are busy and the timing of the study meant that I needed to get into the school as soon after the transition as possible to observe a crucial part of the transition process. I arrived at the school for an eleven o'clock meeting and almost immediately recognised the importance of the meeting on the overall project. First I had to ensure access would be granted; and secondly it was important to secure a more regular arrangement. I wanted to emphasise the pupil-centred nature of the study to Mrs Williams.

Once in the meeting I explained the study and the progress made, immediately I got the feeling Mrs Williams was taking the study seriously. From that point I was confident I would be granted access to the school (Personal Reflection, Meeting at City Comprehensive).

The importance of social interaction in gaining access to school-based settings is illustrated here. Although emails are an effective way to initiate contact with a gatekeeper, it was the face-to-face meeting that secured the access. The value of the meeting should not be underestimated. It provided an opportunity for me to discuss initial findings from the primary school, and to explain the importance and value of the study.

The tone I set in this meeting was also very important. O'Reilly (2009) has argued that the best approach when gaining access is to appear both naïve and knowledgeable. Knowing too much can foreclose in depth conversations; knowing too little can appear rude and disinterested. I therefore attempted to show a detailed and extensive knowledge base (regarding transition), but also attempted to show openness to Mrs Williams's ideas. Once access was granted, the next step was to agree on duration and logistics (arrangements during the school day):

Mrs Williams suggested that the best tactic would be for me to track a form group throughout the day to get a feel of every subject and year 7 life. I realised this was a much better strategy for what I wanted to achieve and a 2/3 day a week visit would be fine. As my confidence grew I explained some of the pre-transition findings which seemed to intrigue Mrs Williams. After a long discussion, Mrs Williams asked what the school could gain from my presence. I was expecting this enquiry so I calmly offered my services for extracurricular activities, assistance within the classroom and a short report on my findings. She seemed to really value this and the meeting was generally a success. Mrs Williams agreed to look at timetables and get back to me with time and dates for the period of field work (Personal Reflection, Meeting at City Comprehensive).

Initially, I was granted access to the City Comprehensive School for three days a week, over a six-week period, tracking two different classes during the school day. However, once I had entered the school I was offered six full weeks of field work, tracking classes throughout the school day. By entering the school and making what I think must have been a good impression I was able to explore pupils' day-to-day experience of City Comprehensive School whilst assisting as much as possible in each classroom I visited. However, for Mrs Williams it was difficult to explain to every teacher why I was going to be in their classroom. This was due to the busy nature of the secondary school and the large number of teachers who would be affected by my presence in the school. I wanted to visit a variety of classes and therefore each teacher had to be made aware of the purpose of my study. Information sheets were provided, but Mrs Williams felt a personal visit to the classroom would be more beneficial for the teacher. There was a responsibility on me as the researcher to ensure I explained the purpose of my visit clearly to staff within the school. Although I had the implicit support of the school leadership, this did not guarantee willing acceptance by the teachers. In the same way, I offered something to the school as a whole, I also had to be able offer something to each teacher. In this respect the role I adopted in the classroom was significant.

Role Selection

Social research is best carried out where the researcher can fit into the institutions as unobtrusively as possible (Corrigan, 1979). Whilst it was essential to select a role that would provide sufficient access to the pupils, it was important to avoid disrupting the classroom environment. When engaged in ethnographic research that includes participant observation, the role adopted by the researcher takes on critical importance (Fleming, 1995). This is because the adopted role allows access to the population being studied, and can be a decisive factor in creating the relationships necessary to engage with a group over a prolonged period of time.

There were three criteria for role the choice of the role adopted: first, constant access to the pupils was required; second, a role had to be adopted that allowed interviews and classroom activities to be conducted; and third, the role had to be beneficial to the school. After lengthy discussions with the head teachers at both Urban Primary and City Comprehensive, it was decided that a classroom assistant-researcher role would best suit the needs of the schools and the research project. I was introduced at the start of the process by the classroom teacher as somebody who was exploring pupils' experiences of moving to secondary school whilst helping out in the classroom. From the school's perspectives the main benefits included unpaid help during a busy period for the year 6 and 7 teachers, an opportunity to gain an insight into pupils' feelings during the transition and finally assistance with extra-curricular activities and school trips.

O'Reilly (2009) offers a note of caution, claiming once the role of teacher is established, informal access to student groups can prove problematic. This was a major concern that I had before entering the field. Adopting the role of a classroom-assistant and therefore

an authority figure might have created a problematic relationship with the pupils. Fleming (1995: 138) illuminates the point:

> The role I adopted was that of a member of the PE department in the school, but this created two unavoidable sets of problematic social relations. First, the host-guest relation that the researcher has with the institution and its gatekeepers. Second, the implicit teacher-pupil relation that the researcher has with the subjects of the research.

I wanted to establish rapport with the pupils, but remain an authority figure throughout my time in school to ensure a positive working relationship with the staff. Was I in danger of sacrificing opportunities to develop rapport to maintain a responsible, professional attitude for the benefit of the staff?

The resolution of this dilemma became a balancing act; but the main focus of the project was the pupils and their attitude towards transition. Hence the relationships I had established with them were of paramount importance. Perhaps inevitably there were a few occasions when the selected role threatened to jeopardise this balance. One example was at Urban Primary School:

> Before lunchtime there was an argument between two pupils. At the time the teacher was by the door and unaware of what happened. So I took it upon myself to deal with the matter, I felt that I dealt with the situation in a mature manner. However, as the pupils were so grown up about the matter, they immediately apologised to me and after a discussion with me shook hands with each other. I felt a duty to remain tight lipped on the situation because of the trust they had placed in me. However, on the other hand I didn't want to go behind the teacher's back so I decided to mention it to him at the time. In the end this was the correct decision because in terms of my duty to the school I dealt with the matter in accordance with the school's policy and also maintained a positive relationship with the pupils. This incident boosted my confidence in being able to cope with difficult situations in school. Although I am not supposed to be left alone with the pupils it would inevitably happen and I coped with this situation well. This incident also made me feel that I was an important member of staff in the school, that I belonged. (Personal Reflection, Urban Primary).

This episode highlights the potentially fragile nature of this kind of school-based research. Dealing with this situation inappropriately might have had severe personal implications whilst placing the study at risk. It also emphasises the importance of establishing and maintaining a role within the context of the research.

Once access was granted and a role selected, the process of establishing trust began. Whilst trust is a normal part of human relations, the intrusive nature of ethnographic research meant the initial stages of Urban Primary and City Comprehensive had to be handled with care.

Establishing Trust

According to O'Reilly (2009) researchers earn trust over time, by being there day-in-day-out, by empathising with people in their actions, and by demonstrating that there is a genuine interest in them and a commitment to their causes. Gaining the trust of the pupils was relatively straightforward, through listening to their problems, assisting them in the classroom and having a joke or two when it was appropriate.

Gaining the trust of the members of staff, however, proved more challenging. In both Urban Primary and City Comprehensive, the teachers exhibited caution in the preliminary stages of the fieldwork. My initial feeling was because I was new within the school. However, towards the final stages of fieldwork, one teacher revealed, "…at the start we all thought you were undercover, here to inspect us." In addition, teachers would always ask, "…so why can't you just interview the pupils over a week or so, why do you have to be in school for six weeks?" Field researchers are frequently suspected, initially at least, of being spies, inspectors, or belonging to some other group that may be perceived as

undesirable (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). My response to these enquiries centred on both depth and commitment. By spending a relatively prolonged period of time at the school, I highlighted that I was trying to develop a more nuanced understanding of pupils' experiences of the transition that would not have been possible in a 'one-off' interview alone.

I was made aware of the trust in me through a number of important milestones. One case was my introduction to the staffroom:

> At the beginning of my time in school I felt very much like an outsider, which was exemplified by signing the visitors' book, whereas now I feel like part of the school community. A fitting example of this is my introduction into the staffroom. I was apprehensive about going into the staffroom at lunchtime as I wasn't sure if I belonged or whether I would fit in. However, as time has gone on I have built up the courage and confidence to go in and socialise with the staff (Personal Reflection, Urban Primary School).

Gaining the trust of the Headteacher and the year 6 teacher was particularly important. As the gatekeeper to the school the Headteacher provided access to the year 6 class. Yet, gaining the trust of the year 6 teacher led to access being granted to the pupils, including interviews, and classroom activities. I began by disclosing in detail the purpose of the study and my academic, personal biography. But the simplest and most effective method of gaining the trust of the year 6 teacher was to take an interest in the pupils.

In terms of trust, an important consideration was the process of field notes. From the outset I was wary that the teachers in both schools might be resistant to the idea of note taking. Therefore, it was necessary to justify this approach and to again emphasise the centrality of the pupils to the study. Notes were taken during 'quiet' periods during the

school day (i.e. lunch times or break times). The majority of these notes were then expanded on later on in the day to form personal reflections.

By the time I started at City Comprehensive my familiarity with some the pupils was already established from my time at Urban Primary. However, once again gaining the trust of the members of staff proved difficult. I came into contact with a number of teachers on a daily basis and found myself repeatedly emphasising the aim of the study and the focus on the pupils (although information sheets were provided and the study was explained). Not to do so would, I thought, have made it difficult to gain the trust of the staff. In turn, this may have had a negative impact on the quality and richness of the data. Once this was communicated to the staff, trust slowly started to be developed and I participated in a number of in-depth discussions regarding the primary-secondary transition.

Gradually developing trust enabled me to collect a wide variety of data, including documents from the schools. Later, developing relationships with participants became even more important for the purpose of data collection (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Developing Relationships

One advantage of implementing an ethnographic approach was to allow for the investment of time necessary to develop relationships with the participants (O'Reilly, 2009). This was particularly important during the present study, because the focus on the primary-secondary transition represented a potentially sensitive issue for some pupils, due to the social and academic upheaval which accompanies the move (Ashton, 2008).

In *Schooling the Smash Street Kids*, Corrigan (1979) suggested that it was better to concentrate on getting to know the social relationships involved in the school before conducting any sort of interviews with pupils. It was an approach I adopted during the initial periods of fieldwork. Creating a positive first impression not only conveyed a professional attitude but, more importantly, helped to establish a positive working relationship with the pupils (Christensen, 2010). My aim during the first few weeks of Urban Primary was concerned with getting to know the pupils as well as establishing and developing rapport.

The most effective way of developing relationships lay in topical discussion with the pupils. This meant chatting about for example, football and rugby with the boys, and *X Factor* and *Big Brother* with the girls. These informal discussions proved invaluable, for though they had little to do with transition to secondary school, there were three direct benefits. First, they provided an effective method of building rapport with the pupils. Second, they allowed the pupils to become familiar with me and to feel comfortable conversing with me in an informal manner. Third, they helped to minimise social distance. My very first encounter at Urban Primary is illustrative:

> Today was my first day in the school and swimming was the first activity.
> This was a perfect opportunity to get to know the pupils. At first I spoke
> with the boys, we talked about our favourite football teams and the game
> last night. However, the girls were more reluctant to participate in these
> kinds of discussions. So on the way back I made an effort to get to know
> the girls by talking about subjects such as *Britain's Got Talent* which led
> to a heated debate regarding our favourite musicians (Personal Reflection,
> Urban Primary).

The importance of being able to communicate effectively with the pupils, about their interests is highlighted here. Interestingly, yet predictably, it was clear from the open and friendly way that they interacted with me that the boys accepted me (as a male researcher)

almost immediately. In contrast, developing initial rapport with the girls took longer. There may have been a more natural tendency for the boys to want to engage with a male teacher; but it was not until later that I began to suspect that this early rapport with the boys might have created a negative impression amongst the girls.

Forming positive working relationships with members of staff in both Urban Primary and City Comprehensive meant creating a positive impression from the outset. This included how I spoke, my enthusiasm, and most importantly the way I presented myself (Hammersely and Atkinson, 2007). School-based ethnographies require certain attire to ensure that professionalism is maintained. As a classroom assistant, wearing a shirt and tie and demonstrating a professional attitude were necessary to maintain positive relationships with members of staff. Indeed, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) maintain that even when the research is not overt, the researcher's appearance can be an important factor in shaping relationships with people in the field. In my research reflections in August 2011, I noted:

> Forming a positive relationship with the year 6 teacher had a direct impact on building rapport with the pupils and the overall quality of ethnography. At first, the year 6 teacher displayed caution towards my presence in the classroom. However, as the days passed a positive working relationship was struck. In the classroom it was my responsibility to assist wherever possible and when it came to distributing consent forms the year 6 teacher ensured that the importance of returning the forms was communicated effectively to the pupils. Common interests, such as sport and television programmes, added to the rapport that I had established with the year 6 teacher (Personal Reflection, Urban Primary).

Ethnography provides an opportunity to create positive working relationships with participants, and also actors who may not be the focus of the research but impact upon the study (i.e. the teachers). It is crucial, then, that ethnographers build mutually trusting relationships, both for ethical reasons as well to ensure the quality of the ethnography

(O'Reilly, 2009). In Urban Primary, a relationship that had a direct impact on the study was with the year 6 teacher. Fortunately, we shared a number of common interests including sport, which made the process of developing rapport relatively unproblematic. However, as indicated already the most effective strategy to develop rapport was to display commitment to the pupils. At City Comprehensive, however, building and managing relationships proved more demanding:

> The layout of the school meant that, unlike in primary school I was moving around the school constantly, meeting a number of teachers and had little opportunity to develop rapport. However, I struck an immediate relationship with two members of the PE department and decided this would be my base during lunch times and break times. This allowed me to build rapport with the staff and made me feel that I 'belonged'. Although it was difficult to build rapport with some members of staff, the more I helped in the classroom, the more interest the staff took in the project. One relationship which was crucial was with the various form tutors. The majority allowed me to take the pupils to the library during registration periods to conduct interviews. Much like in primary school, I found that building rapport was eased through displaying a professional attitude around the school but more importantly ensuring that I was interacting and helping the pupils wherever possible (Personal Reflection, City Comprehensive).

One major difference between the schools was in the operational management and structure of the school day. There was little time to establish relationships with teachers at City Comprehensive because of the limited time spent with an individual teacher during the school day. Whereas, at Urban Primary with fewer members of staff and a smaller and more intimate working environment, developing relationships with pupils and staff was relatively simple. There were occasions during my own fieldwork, however, when I felt my role was misinterpreted, leading to potential for role conflict.

Role Conflict

At Urban Primary this was during the initial stages of fieldwork, and concerned the amount of 'time' spent in the role of classroom assistant and researcher. On one occasion I noted:

> Although I am glad to be involved in the assembly, the conflict between collecting data and maintaining the role of classroom assistant is apparent. I have spent three weeks in school helping in the classroom I feel that I need to concentrate on conducting interviews. However, I still want to help as much as I can with the class (Personal Reflection, Urban Primary).

This was a frustrating period as I felt like my role was taken advantage of by the year 6 teacher. My role in the first two weeks was to simply hand out books, move around the classroom assisting where necessary. I was torn - did I emphasise that although I was there as a classroom assistant I also wanted to conduct interviews and group activities before it were too late? To do so might have risked jeopardising the relationship I had established with the year 6 teacher or the Headteacher by voicing my concern. With the benefit of hindsight, I now see my naivety in ethnographic research. I was unaware of the benefit of these initial stages of fieldwork. The commitment to my role as classroom assistant in Urban Primary ensured the year 6 teacher valued my presence and had a positive impact the remainder of my time in the school. This was an important lesson learnt throughout the fieldwork process. Once I had established relationships within the field the depth and richness of the data gathered increased.

At City Comprehensive, my role as a classroom assistant-researcher was predominantly as a researcher rather than a classroom assistant. The structure of secondary school classrooms meant there was less time to interact with the pupils (although when the opportunity arose I took it):

> Today was my second week in school, whilst in primary school it was easy to interact with the pupils due to the seating plan, and the informal activities; in secondary school there are fewer opportunities to interact due

to a more structured seating plan and style of teaching. In primary school at times I felt like a classroom assistant rather than a researcher, however here my identity feels in line with a researcher rather than a classroom assistant (Personal Reflection, City Comprehensive).

There was clearly a distinction between the selection of a role and the adoption of that particular role. In Urban Primary the concern was that I was sacrificing research opportunities to assist in the classroom, however at City Comprehensive I was used solely as a researcher assisting at different stages in the school day.

Towards the end of my fieldwork in Urban Primary, there was an acute episode:

> After arriving in school this morning, I was met by the year 6 teacher. After a long discussion, it had been decided that I would be taking the year 6 children on a transition morning to their secondary school. This revelation took me by surprise, as I had only been with the class for six weeks, was this enough for me to take a large group of them to their secondary school? I felt angry that I had been put in this position, but at the same time it was a backhanded compliment, that the school would trust me with their pupils. In the past when I thought my role was being confused or disorientated I was hesitant to make my feelings known. However, in this case I let the year 6 teacher know that I didn't feel comfortable with the situation. This fuelled thoughts as to whether it is possible to become too immersed, too close to the teachers that as a researcher you can become too sympathetic? So much so, that you put yourself at risk. I declined in this instance because I felt it was well beyond my responsibility. However, are we as ethnographers so concerned with developing rapport that we will do most things to 'help out' to ensure that we can get on well with anyone that has an impact on the research? This dilemma exemplified the importance of balance within ethnographic research, that imbalance can potentially hinder the quality of the research but more importantly has the potential to put the researcher at risk (Personal Reflection, Urban Primary).

I had become so immersed in the culture of Urban Primary that I had lost the ability to step back and make a rational decision – more naivety perhaps? I was so concerned with 'helping out' that I failed to comprehend the seriousness of the situation, and became part of the community rather than a researcher.

Ethnographic research is also demanding activity. It requires diverse skills, including the ability to make decisions in conditions of considerable uncertainty (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). These decisions are what shape the quality of ethnographies. In this instance a decision had to be made as to whether I was placing the research project and myself at risk by solely taking the pupils on a transition day. This dilemma was fuelled by the amount of 'time' I had spent in the primary school. This culminated in becoming very much part of the community with added responsibilities and as this example proves an increased risk of over-rapport.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected upon the challenges associated with negotiating a period of ethnographic fieldwork in schools. It outlines my unique experiences within the field and the challenges and dilemmas that have accompanied this approach.

There are two key sets of themes. First, there are differences in the way researchers 'fit' into particular research settings. At Urban Primary access was easy and relationships were straightforward due to the communal nature of the school. However, access to City Comprehensive was fraught with difficulties caused by the scale and hustle and bustle of secondary school life. Second, establishing and developing relationships with staff proved a significant challenge, and the time constraints within which I was working led to conflict.

The researcher is the most important tool in any qualitative or ethnographic research. It is the ethnographer's conduct in the field, the skills and the craft of the research that is crucial for the capture of rich and meaningful data (Christensen, 2010). However, researchers must be willing to confront their own naivety in conducting research and learn

on the job in many respects. The focus of the study may have surrounded the pupils (i.e. the primary-secondary transition), but this paper illustrates the researcher's role as central to the process of investigation.

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