

‘Then we decided not to tell the adults’. Fieldwork among children in an international school

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Abstract

This article discusses ethnographic fieldwork among nine- and ten-year-old children in an international school in Finland. It elaborates on the myth of going native and on the researcher’s performance and negotiation of various roles, along with the improvisation this requires. Ethnographers cannot escape certain roles that are given to them but they can strategically use these and other roles to establish rapport and gain rich knowledge. When adults study children in an institutional setting, such as a school, they have to take into account the views and expectations of not only the children themselves but also the adults who work there. The article argues that reciprocity is an essential part of a successful ethnographic endeavour and analyses the significance of the researcher’s reciprocal involvement when conducting fieldwork among children in a school.

Keywords

ethnography, children, going native, the least adult role, school, reciprocity, fieldwork, roles

Since the 1990s, there has been an emphasis in the social sciences on seeing children as ‘worthy of studying on their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults’. Instead of children being viewed merely in terms of their becoming future adults, they are seen as active agents in their own lives (James and Prout, 1997: 8). Ethnographic methods are seen as particularly useful in reaching children’s own voice. A crucial

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question, then, is: how can an adult researcher reach an understanding of children's views and lifeworlds?

Ethnography is a question of constructing data together with the people being studied, rather than collecting already-existing data. Therefore, ethnography is a fundamentally intersubjective and collective practice, wherein researchers need to create useful and meaningful relationships with the people they are working with (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015; Clifford, 1980). An ethnographer needs to become socially involved in the field but this involvement is situational and contextual; an ethnographer, like anyone else, is constantly negotiating and navigating between multiple roles and identity positions (see also Erickson, 2008: 20). This, in turn, affects their relations in the field and eventually the data they obtain.

In this article, I first elaborate on the myth of going native and on the researcher's performance and negotiation of various roles during ethnographic fieldwork, along with the improvisation this requires. Secondly, I outline the concept of "the least adult role". Subsequently, I describe and discuss my ethnographic fieldwork among nine and ten-year-olds in an international school in Finland. I elaborate on my various roles in the field and the constant improvisation that was required. Even when I could not escape being an adult, I managed to become closely involved with the children. I argue that during my fieldwork I navigated shifting roles and engaged in a variety of reciprocal relationships with both children and teachers. On the one hand, I was given certain roles that it was not possible to escape; on the other hand, I strategically chose particular roles. To some extent, the different roles enabled me to gain different kinds of knowledge but, above all, they helped me to establish rapport and reciprocal relationships. I argue that my shifting roles and reciprocal relationships were essential in establishing the kinds of relationship that enabled collaborative knowledge production.

Fieldwork in perspective: Going native or performing roles?

Going native is an idea that has caused plenty of debate and misunderstanding among anthropologists. The infamous diaries of Bronislaw Malinowski (1989), in which he revealed his frustrations with his fieldwork on the Trobriand Islands, not only shocked people but also effectively broke the 'myth of the chameleon field worker, perfectly self-tuned to his exotic surroundings' (Geertz, 1974: 27). The initial debates on the theme of going native were closely related to colonial power structures and to their racial implications but, over the years, it has become clear that the dilemma also exists without such blatant power inequalities.

The aim of an anthropologist is to see things from the 'native's' point of view, but how can this be achieved? Clifford Geertz (1974: 29) points out that Malinowski's diaries demonstrate that you do not have to be a "native" to know one'. Geertz (1974: 30) argues that an 'ethnographer does not, and largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive' and, consequently, should not try to become the same as them; that is, he posits that 'going native' is impossible. However, this does not mean that ethnographers should remain outside observers; they need to become genuinely socially involved with the people they are studying, otherwise they cannot expect people to talk to them and share their

experiences and views (Geertz, 1974: 44–45). How, then, does the ethnographer find a suitable role?

The nature of participant observation varies greatly between different field contexts. The educational anthropologist Frederick Erickson has even argued that very often the so-called ‘participant observer’ does not actually participate all that much (Erickson, 2006: 240; see also Powell, 2006). All in all, an ethnographer should pay careful attention to what their participation actually means. Ethnographic research is definitely not a rigid practice. In fact, Liisa Malkki (2007) has referred to it as an improvisational practice, similar to jazz music. It is an array of ‘possible techniques in an open, flexible, highly context-dependent and time-sensitive repertory of possibilities’ (Malkki, 2007: 180). Fieldwork is a craft that requires flexibility and creativity. Ethnographers improvise their actions and behaviour with real people in real time; it is impossible for them to follow a rigid plan or to be prepared for everything they encounter (Malkki, 2007: 180–185). This becomes particularly visible when studying children, yet the improvisational character of fieldwork is definitely not limited to childhood research.

Ethnographers, like anyone else, are embodied subjects that act in a particular space, time and social context and are embedded in various subject positions and power relations. Moreover, people’s roles and identities are always fluid and situational, depending on with whom they are interacting and where (Doan and Portillo, 2017: 238). Researchers may become particularly aware of this when negotiating their place within a fieldwork context; they are active agents but that agency is produced within a social context and its social structures. Hence, ethnographers have to find a feasible and meaningful role in the specific context and in particular situations; certain roles and positions are available while others are not. Institutions in particular produce expectations and assumptions about behaviour and agency while simultaneously discouraging other ways of behaving (Husso, 2016; Skeggs, 1997).

While ethnographers are, at least to some extent, limited to the roles and positions that the social context provides, at the same time they can try to strategically utilize these roles and positions in order to get involved and gain rich knowledge. However, it is not simply a question of an instrumentalist approach to gaining knowledge; above all, it is a question of being socially involved in meaningful relationships, an ethical practice *per se*.

As outsiders, or even intruders, researchers may be allowed more flexibility in terms of roles and behaviour than insiders – the ‘natives’. In fact, ethnographers sometimes learn from their mistakes, from situations in which they act inappropriately, and, in spite of not behaving properly, they are not necessarily excluded from such situations. In other words, ethnographers have (some) power to negotiate, contest and transgress the available roles. However, although at times an ethnographer is in a position of power in relation to the people they are studying, at other times those being studied exercise power over the researcher (Erickson, 2008). Moreover, ethnographers cannot simply strategically use particular subject positions in order to gain knowledge, but rather need to take into account the ongoing relationships and the social context within which they gather the data; reciprocity is, in fact, an essential part of a successful ethnographic endeavour.

James Clifford (1980) has, indeed, argued that fieldwork is an ongoing reciprocal process. Ethnographers are always in indebted relationships with those they are studying,

and they need to give something back in order to maintain these social relationships (see also [Campbell and Lassiter, 2015: 533](#)). Since reciprocity plays such a central role in fieldwork encounters, it is important to elaborate on one's dependencies and reciprocal relationships during the fieldwork ([Gosovic, 2019: 69–71](#)). In fact, instead of participant observation, some scholars have used the term *observant participation*, referring to the fact that an ethnographer has to observe not only what happens but also the experience of being in the field itself, that is, the social relations and roles in which the researcher gets involved, as these necessarily affect their position in the field and the knowledge gained ([Campbell and Lassiter, 2015: 564](#)).

Fieldwork among children: Aiming for ‘the least adult role’?

For over two decades, there has been a strong ethos in the anthropology of childhood and in childhood studies in general of emphasizing that children are the best experts on their own lives, and the best source of information about matters that concern them ([Kellet and Ding, 2004: 165](#)). This approach has also been criticized; for example, [Gallacher and Gallagher \(2008: 502\)](#) have questioned the idea of people, including children, always being ‘transparently knowable to themselves’. Nevertheless, childhood researchers widely agree that children need to be studied as active agents instead of as objects of adult interventions or ‘in terms of what they reflect about adult behaviour and thinking’ ([Hardman, 2001: 503–504](#)). Ethnographic methods have been seen as particularly suitable tools for reaching children's views and experiences. Using ethnography in childhood research is, however, not a straightforward practice.

Three decades ago, sociologist Nancy [Mandell \(1988\)](#) introduced the term ‘the least adult role’, which has become popular among childhood researchers. It refers to a researcher positionality that attempts to cast aside all adult signifiers except physical size in order to be allowed entry into children's worlds as an ‘active, fully participating member’ ([Mandell, 1988: 433](#)). Mandell's idea seems to align with the notion of ‘going native’, of trying to become the same as the people under study. However, Catherine [Atkinson \(2019\)](#), among others, argues that Mandell's approach is problematic and includes several challenges. Although ‘the least adult role’ enables the development of informal, non-authoritative relationships with children, which is useful for the ethnographer, the approach has many pitfalls ([Atkinson, 2019: 189](#)). For example, some children may exploit the researcher's powerlessness or act in oppressive ways towards other children when they know the researcher has promised not to discipline them ([Atkinson, 2019: 191](#)). Based on her fieldwork experiences in a British school, Atkinson argues that the least adult role is a highly vulnerable one and creates both ethical and practical challenges. Above all, researchers studying children are necessarily in a contradictory role even if they try to be ‘the least adult’. In fact, Atkinson ends up using the term ‘unavoidable adulthood’ because, according to her, resisting the adult role is impossible in practice ([Atkinson, 2019: 194–199](#)).

Atkinson focuses on the negotiations of power between the adult researcher and the children being studied. In addition to such issues of power, I want to emphasize the institutional setting in which the adult researcher gets involved with children when the

fieldwork takes place in a school. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a school means working in a setting where the researcher has to take into account the institutional structures and the available roles within them. The roles and positions given to adults and children are rather rigid in such a setting. In my view, an adult cannot 'go native' and become a child in this situation but there is still scope to find suitable roles and spaces via which they can get to know children's views and experiences. Moreover, there are also adult actors in the school setting who affect both the fieldwork situation and the researcher's roles there; ethnographers need to negotiate their role among not only the children but also the adults, gatekeepers in particular. In this article, I will argue that aside from my having to convince the gatekeepers about my research at the very start in order to gain permission to enter the field, their presence and views affected my entire fieldwork. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork with children (or adults for that matter) is not only about gaining access to the field but also about earning one's place in it, and about occupying and negotiating various roles and positions on a daily basis.

The case: Ethnographic fieldwork among nine and ten-year-olds in an international school

Temporary labour migration among highly educated professionals is increasing in various parts of the world. These experts, sometimes called career expatriates or corporate elites, are often accompanied by their children, but very little is known about these children. In my ongoing research project, I study children with international backgrounds who currently live in Finland because of their parents' careers. I ask what kinds of life they lead, and how they experience their transnational mobility and negotiate their identities and belonging. The research is ethnographic, and includes interviews, participant observation and participatory photography projects.

In September 2019, I started fieldwork among nine and ten-year-olds (third graders) in an international school in a Finnish town.¹ I was mainly present in one particular class of about 20 children, but occasionally visited other classes too. I participated in everyday classroom activities, school events, excursions and after-school activities, and accompanied some of the children to the nearby library in the afternoons. I interviewed children and gave them digital cameras, with the task of taking photos of important things in their everyday lives. Afterwards, I talked about the photos with the child who had taken them. I also visited the homes of some of the children, joining them on their way to or from school. I went to school for between two and five days a week for about six months until schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, after which I participated in online lessons; in total, the fieldwork lasted for about nine months. My aim was not to study the school or education per se; rather, I was interested in the children's views and experiences of their transnational lives and the school merely provided me with a route via which to get to know children.

The study was approved by the ethics board of my home university, and research permits were obtained from both the school principal and the municipal school administration. Information sheets were sent out to all the children and consent forms were collected from parents whose children participated. In addition, I explained the research to

the children several times, and they asked me questions about it on a number of occasions. The participating children also gave me oral consent for their participation, typically several times during the project.

Entering the field – convincing the gatekeepers

When I received positive news about the funding, I contacted the principal of an international school to ask for permission to conduct ethnographic fieldwork there. He listened to me politely and agreed that my topic was important, although he did not seem very familiar with ethnographic methods. The school receives several research requests each year and as a state-funded institution it is expected to welcome state-funded researchers, yet the principal wanted to make sure that my fieldwork would not disturb either teachers or children. Eventually, he gave me permission to apply for a research permit from the municipality, with him as a contact person, and after I had taken care of all the paperwork, he gave me the contact details of a teacher he had convinced to allow me into her class.

The teacher was welcoming but she later told me that she had been a little concerned about a ‘serious professor with a briefcase’ coming to observe her work. She also wanted to make sure that my presence in the classroom would not create extra work for her, which is obviously understandable. I tried my best to convince her that I would attempt to be helpful rather than a burden. As I will argue later in this article, this approach affected my fieldwork in fundamental ways. The children were used to having occasional assistants or other adult visitors in the classroom and, as a consequence, did not make a fuss of me. From their point of view, I was unavoidably an adult, yet I turned out to be quite different from the adults they generally came across in school.

What is she? Contradictory roles

“Good morning Miss Sandra, and everybody, and Mari.”

This greeting was spoken out loud, in unison, each morning I was in the classroom. “Miss Sandra” was the teacher, “everybody” referred to the pupils, and then there was “Mari”, not a teacher (Miss) but not a pupil (everybody) either. This role of being relevant and recognized yet without a clear and permanent role followed me throughout the 9 months of fieldwork. During this time, I ended up in various different roles and I negotiated between these roles on a daily basis. First and foremost I was a researcher but at times I was a school assistant; at other times I was almost like a teacher, yet often I was almost like a child and definitely not like a teacher. Sometimes I was given these roles by others and at other times I strategically actively performed particular roles in order to get involved. In what follows, I describe these positions in more detail.

Characteristics: Who is she?

My personal characteristics, background and life history obviously affected how the children and teachers viewed me. In many ways, I was similar to the majority of teachers in the school: I was female, middle-aged, white and Finnish (and consequently a native Finnish speaker). In addition, I was a mother. This did not become visible at first but every now and then I mentioned my children to some of the teachers and children, and motherhood was considered a suitable role for a woman of my age. In addition, I often told the children about my own experiences of living abroad. I used this technique in particular in my interactions with Indian children as I had lived in India for a few years, and the children became excited by my knowledge of Indian places and practices. However, although my characteristics and background certainly affected the way in which children and teachers viewed me, this was only the beginning; during the fieldwork I got involved with various roles and positions that were specific to the field context and to my ongoing relationships there.

Researcher. Since the reason for my presence in the school was my research, I obviously had the role of a researcher there. Sometimes, this was explicit. I was visibly a researcher when I told children about my research (this happened a few times, not only on the first day) and when I gave out information sheets and consent forms and received the forms back. A crucial characteristic of my forms and requests was that participating in my research was voluntary; in contrast, participating in tasks assigned by teachers was not. I was also clearly a researcher when I lent out digital cameras and conducted interviews.

Moreover, most of the time I was seen with a pen, scribbling in a notebook. This was obviously very helpful to me later at home when writing in my field diary but it also functioned as a good reminder to everyone of my researcher role: I was visibly a researcher because I was writing notes. This conscious strategy to make my researcher role visible on a daily basis worked reasonably well, and children often asked me questions about my work. It was, however, not always effective. Classroom work among children is so hectic that a researcher's note-writing can go unnoticed:

One afternoon, I was sitting at the back of a Finnish class² where the teacher was introducing the students to an old Finnish poem. I was not paying much attention to the teaching as I was writing notes on something that had happened in the corridor before the lesson. Suddenly, the teacher said, "Mari, you speak such beautiful English, can you please translate this?" I felt embarrassed at not having followed the teaching, and almost panicked at the request to translate some old poetic Finnish on the spot. Nevertheless, I managed to come up with some sort of translation, and I paid more attention to the teaching for the rest of the lesson. (Field diary, January 2020)

This anecdote illustrates how I was not able to remain in the researcher role the whole time but had to also engage in various other roles in the everyday life of the school. Being an outside observer was not a feasible role; an adult present in the classroom was expected to get involved in classroom work and this required some improvisation skills from me

when I was not prepared for active involvement. In addition to the teachers, the children also took my involvement for granted, frequently asking me for help and expecting me to know the correct answers and procedures.

Teaching assistant. “Mari, what is *jyrkänne* in English?”

In the everyday classroom context, I was in the role of teaching assistant most of the time. I gave out papers, pens and other equipment, helped children when they had trouble with their assignments, hung their artwork on the classroom walls, searched for lost gloves and hats and so on. Often, I ended up being a translator because some of the teaching materials were in Finnish even though not all the children knew the language well. The quotation above illustrates this: the orienteering maps were in Finnish and not everyone knew that *jyrkänne* meant escarpment. It is important, however, to be aware of such places in the forest.

One of the highlights of the year for the children was an overnight trip to a nearby village, organized by the local Christian congregation. Since an extra adult was very welcome and I had visited all the third grades in the beginning of my fieldwork, I ended up going on the excursion with four different classes. These camps offered me a great opportunity to chat and play with the children, and I gained plenty of insightful research material. However, I was also in the role of an assistant there. Together with the classroom teachers, I worked as a simultaneous translator, since Finnish was the language of tuition. In addition, I helped many children to make their beds and clean their rooms and made sure that they were dressed warmly enough for the outdoor activities.

The third graders also went on many other excursions. During PE lessons we went to the nearby sports field or to the forest, and we also went to concerts and exhibitions and took part in other activities organized for the children around the town. On these trips, the teacher was always at the front of the line and I brought up the rear. Walking with the children provided me with a great opportunity to chat with them, and I became a popular walking partner but, at the same time, as an adult I kept an eye on road safety and made sure that no one was left behind or got lost. Similarly, in an after-school cookery club I chatted and joked with the children, but at the same time, as an adult, I supervised safety, which in turn was greatly appreciated by the teacher.

I must admit that although the role of assistant enabled my meaningful participation, it did not really contribute to my gaining insights into the children’s views. Moreover, although the role of teaching assistant was a very suitable one in the school context, it was definitely an adult role – far from the ideal of ‘the least adult’. I believe, however, that this role was a necessary one for me. Gaining entry into the field is not limited to research permits and initially convincing gatekeepers, such as principals and teachers; fieldworkers need to earn their place on a daily basis. I felt that, in order to be reciprocal towards both the teachers who allowed me into their classrooms and the children I was studying, it was my duty to be helpful instead of merely observing or trying to act in the same way as the children. In fact, this was not only my duty or a strategy to gain knowledge, it was embedded in the process of creating and maintaining meaningful and functional social relations.

(Almost) a teacher. For a week, the third graders did not have their regular lessons but took part in different project activities on the theme “Finland”. By chance, I attended the teachers’ planning meeting and was assigned to give a 40-minute session on the Finnish lake district to about 90 children. The teachers wanted my input because having an extra teacher meant that there would be six groups instead of the usual five, which made each group smaller and thus more manageable. Even though I am not an expert in biology or geography, I managed to put together a lesson and teach it successfully six times. (Field diary, November 2019)

Since I have practised astanga yoga for two decades, I offered to run a yoga session in a PE class for the third graders, and eventually ended up doing it a few times for different groups of children. (Field diary, February 2020)

The examples above illustrate how, at times, I ended up in an active teaching role, which is definitely an adult role. However, even when on these occasions I was in the role of teacher, I was not the same as the classroom teachers. My lake district sessions took place in the corridor because I did not have a classroom of my own. Consequently, I ended up losing my voice since the acoustics were not as good as they would have been in a normal classroom. My role as a teacher was not straightforward in the yoga lessons either. Many children were really interested in yoga, but some found it boring and the postures too difficult. Therefore, instead of following my instructions they joked and giggled with their friends and I was clearly not in the role of disciplining them – nobody paid any attention to my efforts to quiet them down. In other words, I did not hold the same position of authority as teachers did.³

The role of teacher was given to me; it was not a role I actively sought. However, once in the role, I knew how to perform it, having been a university lecturer for many years. I enjoyed the teaching and could strategically use it as a tool to gain access to school activities. It was also definitely a question of me playing my part in the reciprocity; as a teacher, I made myself useful in the school context. Since I was visibly an adult and from the university, my acting as a teacher did not surprise the children but it was definitely not a role of ‘the least adult’. Therefore, instead of helping me to gain insights into the children’s points of view, my occasional teaching roles complicated my role in the field. These moments were, however, important opportunities for me to play my part in reciprocal relations with the teachers (and children).

Not a teacher. Although I was often in the role of teaching assistant or even teacher, I also stepped out of these roles on a daily basis and behaved explicitly not like a teacher. In PE lessons, I often did the exercises that the children were required to do and, consequently, was different from the teachers who were either leading the class or supervising safety. Participating was a matter not only of my doing a particular task but also of proving myself capable and willing to do physical exercise. For example, on one occasion I joined a group of children during an orienteering lesson. They agreed to my joining them but one of them stated, ‘If you come with us, you will have to run’. He was subsequently pleasantly surprised when I was actually able and willing to run with them. The teachers did not run during orienteering lessons because they had to stay in a particular place so as

to be available to anyone who needed help, and I thus proved myself different from them. In other words, I was consciously performing a different role from the teachers, and this was my active choice as I wanted to be close to the children. Yet, although on these occasions I aimed for the 'least adult role', I was definitely not a child; I chose to do orienteering or to run whereas the children were told to do so. Moreover, the role of not being a teacher was not always available to me; it depended on the context and the situation. Sometimes, there was no need for an extra adult and I could behave more similarly to the children but, at other times, a responsible adult was needed. This required constant improvisation.

Nevertheless, during the fieldwork I tried to consciously make it clear that I was not a teacher. This became manifest in particular in the fact that I did not have the keys to the classrooms and had to wait with the children in the corridor for the teacher to arrive and open the door. I also went outside during breaks whereas teachers did so only when they were on yard duty. From the very beginning, I made the choice to not get involved in solving children's arguments with one another, always directing them towards the teachers. These were my active choices; I wanted to distinguish myself from teachers and other adults in the school in order to be more similar to the children, to be the 'least adult'.

This role of mine as not a teacher was not, however, always recognized. On several occasions, I felt somewhat uncomfortable because some of the teachers, and at times also some of the children, expected me to take on a disciplinary role and were disappointed in me for not being stricter. This shows how the choices I made were not necessarily clear to everyone. I could occasionally behave differently from the teachers and get more involved with the children, yet I was still unavoidably an adult, which placed certain expectations on me. I was not simply choosing or performing roles but actively socializing and being viewed within a particular social environment. Moreover, it was not only me who negotiated my roles; the children and staff also defined me differently in different situations.

(Almost) a child. At times, I was clearly behaving similarly to the children and differently from the teachers. I acted like the children on an everyday basis when I left my shoes and coat outside the classroom while the teachers used the staff cloakroom. However, I was not the same as the children as I did not have my own hook and had to put my shoes and outdoor clothes wherever there was space.

In addition, when I accompanied the class during a swimming lesson, I showered and went into the sauna with the girls and then went into the pool with all the children. On those occasions, the teacher always kept her clothes on and supervised from the side of the pool while the swimming instructors run the lessons without getting into the water themselves either. Yet, there I was, in the water doing the same exercises as the children. However, I was not exactly the same as the children because I ended up helping those who needed assistance. Since I was an extra person, a sort of anomaly in the situation, I could take on a different role from the teachers and instructors and get into the pool. Teachers must supervise from the side of the pool for safety reasons but I had no such official obligation. Many teachers also do not want to appear naked in front of their pupils, in order to maintain their authority, whereas I did not have any such concerns.⁴

Similarly during a wall-climbing lesson, I climbed with the children, whereas the teacher did not, and during an ice-skating lesson, I was the only adult wearing skates, that is, I was different from the teachers, who did not skate themselves. However, again, I was not exactly like the children either because before putting on my own skates I helped, along with the teachers, to tie dozens of others and, once on the ice, I helped those children who did not know how to skate. Visibly performing a different role from that of the teachers was, again, my active choice; I decided to put on the climbing gear and to bring my skates to the PE lesson.

Nevertheless, even when I was doing the same activities as the children I was still unavoidably an adult, and I was expected to help those who needed assistance rather than focussing merely on my own actions, which was what most of the children were doing. Simply rushing onto the ice to skate or swimming excitedly around the pool without helping those who did not know how to skate or swim would have been socially awkward, and it would have broken the unspoken understanding of reciprocity between me, the teachers and the children. Nevertheless, actively engaging in children's activities enabled me to gain insights into their lives. This required some improvisation from me at times but it definitely provided me with a different perspective from that of the teachers.

Anomaly in the system and reciprocal solutions. Not having a clear role in the school system caused practical problems at times. Since I was neither a parent nor a pupil, I did not receive the online messages sent to the families. But as I was not a staff member either, I did not receive the messages sent to teachers and teaching assistants. This meant that, on several occasions, I was not aware of events that were coming up. For this type of information I relied on the classroom teacher, the same person to whom I had initially promised I would not cause any extra work. This made me feel uncomfortable, even though the teacher assured me that she did not mind forwarding the messages. Here, my reciprocal role as a teaching assistant was crucial. Even though I must admit that my presence did create extra work for the teacher, I can comfort myself with knowing that it also helped her on several occasions, and I managed to make myself useful in the classroom. In fact, our relationship ended up being mutually beneficial, and also enjoyable for both of us. Sandra quickly realized that I was not 'a serious professor with a briefcase' but rather, in her words, 'a relaxed and helpful person'. My relationship with some of the other teachers, however, remained more distant, as I spent less time with them. Although with Sandra I developed a mutually beneficial reciprocal relationship, with the other teachers there was not enough time for ongoing reciprocity.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork is always a question of human interactions; I had to behave in ways that contributed to my having positive relationships with both the children I was studying and the adults working in the school. Negotiating and navigating different roles during the course of fieldwork is necessary and requires various improvisation skills from ethnographers (Malkki, 2007). Elaborating on their different roles helps ethnographers to not only situate the knowledge gained but also to see more clearly the complexity of social worlds. Navigating different roles is intense and requires a great deal of improvisation but it can result in insightful knowledge and memorable moments. As an outsider to the institution and the social setting, I was able to choose and occupy

various different roles and I strategically used these in order to become involved in the field. Sometimes, I chose a particular role and, at other times, I ended up in one. While acting in shifting roles, I had to take into account the reciprocal relationships with which I became involved. It was not only about *me* gaining useful research data but about *us* – me, the children and the adults working in the school – living our functioning everyday lives and forming meaningful relationships together. All this, then, resulted in collaborative knowledge production.

Encountering one's limitations: An ethnographer's failures

Ethnographic fieldwork always requires time and patience. An ethnographer needs to engage in the field on a long-term basis, including on routine days when 'nothing special happens'. Usually a lot does, in fact, happen on those days too but they are important regardless in the process of creating and maintaining trusting reciprocal relationships, and gaining knowledge of mundane activities.

The importance of building trusting relationships during long-term participatory fieldwork became explicit when I went into classrooms where I had not spent much time to ask for volunteers for my interviews and photo projects. Very few children from these classes wanted to take part in my research whereas the majority of the children in the class where I spent most of my time eagerly participated. Similarly, my attempts to join older children's class excursions failed; the teachers did not want me to go along because neither they, nor the children, knew me. It was not possible to simply join in with a class trip without having established the necessary relationships beforehand, even when I tried to convince them how useful an assistant I could be. The reciprocal relationships were simply not there; such relationships require ongoing actions in real-life situations.

As has become clear, I was a very eager participant during my fieldwork. Ethnographers cannot, however, be prepared for everything they encounter during participant observation. In the midst of hectic school life, and in spite of my eager efforts, I sometimes failed to improvise and succeed, and consequently both I and the children involved encountered my limitations:

"Mari, what is *punatulkkku* in English?"

Even though I am fluent in both Finnish and English, I am not a native English speaker and my vocabulary in biology, for example, is not very wide. When a child asked me to translate "*punatulkkku*" (bullfinch) into English, I failed to give her an answer and had to direct her to Google Translate or to ask the classroom teacher. Similarly, on another occasion I helped a child with his English assignment, only to later find out that the task had been to write in the past tense and I had instructed him in the present.

An even more embarrassing incident happened during an art class when I was so enthusiastically clearing the desks that I ended up tearing a pupil's artwork in two and throwing it in the recycling bin. Such moments made me painfully aware of the fact that I indeed had adult power in the field, in spite of my efforts to diminish it. The child whose artwork I tore up did not seem to mind too much and I did fix it for him. But afterwards I

wondered whether, since I was an adult and he was a child, he would have actually considered himself in a position to criticize my actions.

During my fieldwork in the school, my failures clearly established my role as different from that of teachers and my mistakes also helped to take away the potential glory of my being defined as a 'wise researcher from the university'. Nevertheless, when I failed, I was always unavoidably an adult, that is, making mistakes did not make me look like a child but like an adult who had failed at something she was expected to know. Moreover, on such occasions, I failed to fulfil my part in the reciprocal relationships.

Ethnographers do not have to be the same as the 'natives', but they need to get into close and meaningful interaction with them. In this process, it is human to want to appear in a positive light, yet occasional painful moments of failure are an integral part of an ethnographic fieldwork experience. Moments of failure also tangibly remind researchers how the personal and professional are entangled during an ethnographic project; they are collecting research data by using their own body and personality as tools. Consequently, fieldwork is also an embodied (Okely, 1992: 3), and often also an emotional (Behar, 1996), endeavour. This, in turn, shows again that even when researchers engage in various roles during fieldwork it is not simply a question of performing or acting, of being someone else – a native even – but a question of being personally engaged.

Being an insider among the children: Fun, excitement and secrets

I have argued above that when adults conduct fieldwork with children they should not even try to aim for the 'least adult role' on every occasion but rather acknowledge their unavoidable adulthood and act accordingly. This does not, however, mean that access to children's worlds will be closed off.

It was not easy for me to escape the adult assistant/teacher role in the classroom but there were plenty of opportunities for this outside the classroom context, for example in the cafeteria, in the schoolyard and away from the school altogether. Among other things, meeting children at the bus stop or on buses and chatting with them there turned out to be an important part of my fieldwork.

As time went by and the children got to know me, many of them sought my company and told me they enjoyed talking to me. During breaks, I actively participated in the children's activities. I chatted with them, built snowmen, and played tag, hide and seek, football, basketball and so on. I was definitely not talented at these games but participating brought me closer to the children in an informal manner and helped me not only to gain information about their activities but also to establish trusting relationships. Moreover, it was not only that I *observed* what the children were doing; I *felt* it in my body too. Such an embodied knowledge (see Okely, 1992: 3) is particularly important when studying children, who tend to be physically more active than adults, and who, in the Finnish school context, must spend a lot of time outside every day regardless of the weather.

This kind of participation requires a great deal of flexibility and improvisation; I had to step outside my comfort zone numerous times, for example when I was participating in ballgames. Yet, although this active participation sometimes felt intense and demanding, in general I very much enjoyed the fieldwork. In fact, I want to emphasize this:

ethnographers often elaborate on the challenges and hardships they encounter during their fieldwork but fieldwork can also be fun and enjoyable.

My active participation also paid off:

I was skiing with my friend, and we went to the woods although our parents had forbidden it. I fell there, but fortunately, nothing happened to me. Then we decided not to tell the adults! Because if we told them, they would have forbidden us to go skiing alone again. (Jack⁵, 9 years old)

Jack told me the above story while we were eating lunch in the school cafeteria. The fact that he revealed this secret to me illustrates how closely I was involved with many of the children during my fieldwork. They obviously told similar stories to teachers as well but they soon seemed to realize that I was not as busy as the teachers and had much more time available to chat with them. The story also shows how, at times, it was the children, rather than me, who were in a position of power; Jack could decide what to say and what to leave unsaid, and I was on the receiving end of the interaction. Other important illustrations of trust were those situations in which children told me about having played video games even when a parent had forbidden them.

In addition, the participating children seemed to truly enjoy my research activities:

Your Christmas present will come too late! (Harry, 9 years old)

Harry made this comment when in early December I told the class about the interviews and the photo projects. My intention was to begin them after the Christmas break, but the children were so impatient that I had to draw up the consent forms and information letters immediately. In other words, I had to adjust my research schedule to the fact that the children were very excited about the proposed activities.

The photo projects were my conscious attempt to give children power and agency in the research process (see [Thomas and O’Kane, 1998: 337](#)). I lent the children digital cameras and asked them to take pictures of important things in their lives and, afterwards, I talked about the pictures with them. When I bought the cameras, both the university administration and some teachers in the school were convinced that some of them would get lost or broken. This did not, however, happen. The children took very good care of the cameras, which in my view illustrates that the project was significant to them. Therefore, I managed both to make the children active participants in the research project and to offer them enjoyable activities. Yet, I should not glorify their active participation. The children enjoyed themselves but I was the one who decided that photography would be a research tool in the project; the children were collaborating with me but it was still clear that I was studying them rather than their being my co-researchers (see [Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008](#)).

The photo projects were an important part of my ethnographic fieldwork in many ways other than merely that they provided me with visual research material. I visited the homes of some of the children in order to discuss their photos and the visits turned out to be significant occasions. I got the chance to see where and how the children lived and many

of them gave me tours of their homes. More important though was the fact that, for the children, these visits were special occasions. During these visits, I was clearly the guest of the children, not the parents, which shows that I had managed to create meaningful relationships with them. My visits took place either after school or in the mornings before lessons began. Consequently, I joined the children on their way to or from school. In addition to having a chance to chat with them while we walked or travelled by bus, I got a glimpse of their everyday lifeworlds and habits: for example, Mike always runs to school and Jill takes a shortcut along a 'secret path' behind the trees instead of simply walking along the pavement. Therefore, being an adult did not prevent me from getting close to the children and their lives. Following Geertz's words, I did not have to become a 'native' – in this case a child – to know one, that is, to understand their views and lifeworlds. My understanding is partial, since I am clearly not a nine-year-old, but I nevertheless gained valuable insights into the children's lives and views. Such knowledge would not have been attainable without my long-term ethnographic fieldwork and the reciprocal relationships that it entailed.

Rather than simply trying to act like the children I was studying, I tried to create various meaningful ways in which to interact with them. With children, adult researchers often become particularly aware of their own roles, the contradictions between those roles, and the limitations of their own abilities. These issues, however, are also present in research with adults, and reflecting upon them is important to any researcher, not just those who study children.

'Going native' is a long-standing misunderstanding in anthropology; yet, the flexibility of ethnographic research, and of the researcher to engage in different roles, is at the core of ethnography and creates potential for rich and insightful data. Ethnography is not about following a rigid plan but about adjusting to social realities – and improvising in them – on an ongoing basis. Moreover, since reciprocity is an essential part of functioning long-term relationships between individuals, it is an essential part of ethnographic encounters as well.

Conclusion

Ethnography is about collaborative knowledge production, which requires functioning social relationships. It is not enough to simply establish relationships; they need to be maintained in meaningful ways, and rather than the number of relationships it is their quality that matters. In this article, I have shown that ethnographic research with children requires time, reciprocity and improvisation. Adult researchers need to navigate various, at times contradictory, roles and most likely have to step outside their comfort zone on occasion. However, ethnographic fieldwork with children can be great fun and provide an active researcher with various routes to meaningful relationships that help them gain insights into the children's lives. I have also argued that it is important for an ethnographer to elaborate on their shifting roles during fieldwork; observing their participatory roles, and the reciprocal entanglements these entail, helps them to reflect on the process of collaborative knowledge production.

Improvisation is an integral part of fieldwork; both the ethnographer's involvement and the nature of participant observation are flexible and context-dependent. Like a musician, an ethnographer has a repertoire of techniques and roles but their use depends on real-life encounters in the field. This becomes particularly visible with children because adults are seldom as actively involved in children's activities as researchers who do ethnographic research with them.

In this article, I have argued that childhood ethnographers cannot escape being unavoidably adults, yet they can still engage with children in meaningful ways. An adult studying children in a school is a particularly complicated position because roles in this setting tend to be rigid. Even when I was aware of the importance of 'the least adult role' during my fieldwork, it became clear that this role was not always feasible. Instead, I improvised and navigated between different roles, some of them clearly adult roles, others closer to those of the children. Moreover, in addition to establishing roles and creating meaningful relationships with the children, it was necessary to create meaningful and reciprocal roles for myself among the adults who worked in the school. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that it is not always enough to find a suitable role among one's research participants – there may be others who also need to be taken into account in the field context.

Going native is not feasible when an adult studies children but, in most cases, it is not feasible with adults either. Ethnographic fieldwork is not about becoming someone else or about acting or performing; it is about engaging. Consequently, reciprocity is an essential part of a successful ethnographic endeavour because it is an essential part of any long-lasting social relation. Therefore, reflecting on their reciprocal relations during fieldwork is crucial when an ethnographer wants to reflect on collaborative knowledge production. In addition, although an ethnographer's shifting roles and positionalities, and the reciprocities these involve, contribute to knowledge production, they should be seen – rather than merely as a research strategy, as tools to gain knowledge – as ways of establishing rapport and being socially involved in an ethically sound manner.

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Notes

1. There are a few private international schools in Finland, but the majority of international schools are regular municipal ones: they are free to attend and they follow the regular Finnish curriculum,

but the language of tuition is English. My field site was this kind of municipal international school.

2. Since the school follows the Finnish curriculum, all the children had five hours of Finnish lessons each week.
3. Teacher–pupil relations are relaxed in Finland. For example, pupils call their teachers by their first names and the atmosphere during lessons is easy-going. In spite of this, teachers do take on a disciplinary role when needed.
4. At pools in Finland swimming costumes are not allowed in the showers or the sauna.
5. The interlocutors' names have been changed.

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