

**Ethnographic research: a significant context for engaging young children in dialogues about adults' eriting**

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## **Ethnographic Research: A Significant Context for Engaging Young Children in Dialogues about Adults' Writing**

### **Abstract**

This paper brings together socio-cultural theorising about language and literacy learning as well as work which explores ethical issues associated with young children's participation in research in order to interrogate unplanned discussions between researchers and young children about research writing. The data discussed were derived from two separate ethnographic research projects conducted in English early childhood settings. We argue that dialogues between child participants and adult-researchers are replete with opportunities for learning about researchers' writing practices and constitute an important ethical research practice in itself. Our key areas of analysis focus on what children can learn about adults' research writing and what researchers can learn about children as research participants. By positioning such dialogues within broader considerations around ethical research practice and children's participation we add to the burgeoning literature in this area.

### **Keywords**

Writing, Ethics, Early childhood, Ethnography, Adult-child relationships (research)

### **Background**

We are both educational ethnographers, who undertake research in early childhood settings (children aged 0-5 years) and in schools: Ruth's interest is in children's negotiation of identities and Deb's interest is in food practices. What we share is a desire to engage *with* young children in the research that we do. Although the foci of our research do not relate to

literacy development per se and we were not educators in the settings where our fieldwork was undertaken, our data show a marked interest on the part of many young children in our research writing. The data we present here documents our responses to this interest in situ and we elaborate on this further in the paper with reflexive-discussion about these dialogues post data collection.

In documenting our conversations with children about the production of fieldnotes and the final outputs of our research, our intention here is to demonstrate that although ‘creative’ methods are often regarded as more ‘appropriate’ and ‘engaging’ for children (Punch, 2002) as well as ‘in tune with children’s ways of seeing and relating to their world’ (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998:337), more ‘traditional’ and ‘adult-centred’ modes of communication (writing) are of interest to some young children and provide a significant context for researcher-participant exchanges about writing alongside the research being undertaken. Following Punch (2002), when referring to ‘creative methods’ we are referring to methods which might be employed in research such as drawing or role play, involving children very directly, whereas by ‘traditional’ we are referring to more adult-centred research activity such as adults’ writing fieldnotes or conducting interviews. Our purpose in this paper, is to add to the burgeoning literature on children’s participation in research by positioning such dialogues within broader considerations around ethical research practice and children’s participation. What children can learn about adults’ research writing and what researchers can learn about children as research participants are the prime areas of analysis. This has been under-explored thus far in the literature.

## **Research writing and engaging with young children in research**

The writing of ethnographic fieldnotes is the stock-in-trade of ethnographers and is considered to be the bedrock upon which the final ethnographic product is based (Wolcott, 1999; Emerson et al, 2001). These fieldnotes are later re-fashioned and become the ‘products’ of our research endeavours: the various written publications and presentations we produce. Ethical issues pertaining to confidentiality, anonymity and representation are inextricable from the research writing process and product, in other words it is not a neutral act (Allred, 1998; Lather, 2009).

Traditionally, this writing activity has been viewed as the exclusive preserve of the researcher rather than a process of co-construction with participants (Barley, 2014). The adult-child dynamic of doing research with children adds an extra level of complexity to the relationship between researcher and participant in the writing process. However, recent shifts in thinking about children and childhood have provoked world-wide interest in and commitment to children’s rights and have precipitated researchers to consider children as competent and capable social actors, whose hitherto silenced voices need to be heard and valued as they hold important perspectives on social life (Schiller and Einarsdottir, 2009; Albon and Rosen, 2014; Rogers et al, 2016). This has prompted researchers globally to unsettle adult-centric frameworks that previously dominated childhood research in favour of adopting participatory approaches which elicit children’s own views of their social world(s) and to strive for research designs which involve children in the research process (Clark, 2011).

‘Participation’, we suggest, need not necessarily involve children directly in the production of their own written or multimodal material but might also involve dialogue between children and researchers *about* research writing. Children have been shown to indicate interest in the writing of (adult) researchers, although this is rarely the central focus of published work. By way of example, Barley (2014) examined children’s perceptions of ethnic identities (children aged from 4-11 years) and reports how they showed interest in the paraphernalia with which she recorded participant observational data and actively sought to review her fieldnotes. A substantive focus on children’s commentary on adults’ research writing is beyond the purview of her book.

Pinter and Zandian (2015) contribute much to the literature on participatory research with children in their paper on dialoguing between researchers and children (aged 10-11 years) about research writing post data collection. Their paper reports on a study which asked children what would be most helpful to them if they had to move to another country for a year. Rather than reporting the study’s findings, their paper focuses on children’s reflections on their participation in the research and demonstrates how they were enthusiastic discussants of the adults’ research writing. The children were curious as to what their words looked like when transcribed, they enjoyed seeing their presence in the written research: being interested in the researcher’s use of pseudonyms, and were able to reflect on complex topics such as representation. Sharing writing with children post data collection, Pinter and Zandian (2015) assert, opens up possibilities to discuss central ethical issues within research such as representation and anonymity.

Whilst Pinter and Zandian’s (2015) work focuses on 10-11 year olds post data collection, there is a paucity of work which has looked specifically and in detail at *younger* children’s

dialogues with researchers about their writing *throughout* the research process. We contend that, in the research methods canon, a major factor in this is the positioning of writing as something that adults or older children understand and do. Although a plethora of ‘creative’ methods are advocated, with facilitating younger children’s participation in mind (see e.g. Clark, 2011; Schiller and Einarsdottir, 2009), including drawing, photography, role play, engaging *young* children in discussion about research writing, in all its complexity, has remained relatively unexplored as a substantive topic for publication. Arguably, the ‘ ”tyranny” of developmental perspectives’ (Komulainen, 2007:21) impacts negatively on the construction of younger children as credible commentators on the writing of researchers. Attributing such ‘failings’ as inherent in *all* younger children dismisses children’s competencies in understanding the process of research (Robinson and Kellett, 2004).

Much can be learned, we suggest, from proponents of socio-cultural views of literacy, who advocate a range of different pedagogical styles which may be of use to early childhood researchers as well as educators. Dunphy (2012), for example, draws on Rogoff’s (1990) seminal contribution to our understanding of children’s learning - ‘guided participation’ - in which children collaborate with more skilled and experienced others to create meaning and generate new meanings. Crucial to this process is a view of the child as an active learner, cognisant of their own thinking and learning as well as appreciative of others’ thinking and understanding (Dunphy, 2012:291).

Socio-cultural theorising in relation to language learning is also useful for research as it starts from the premise that any spoken or written text is historically and culturally contingent. Thus, any ‘utterance’ – written or oral – addresses and anticipates another person or group (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986). This has led Dyson (1993:11) to assert that writing is ‘social work’ in

which children gradually learn to perform 'writing' according to particular discourse communities: a dialogic approach to thinking about children's language and literacy development which is a theme throughout her published work (see also e.g. Geneshi and Dyson, 2009).

Research writing is a very specific discourse community which is markedly different from the writing children generally do or see educators do. Unless engaged in practitioner-research, the writing a researcher does in an early childhood setting does not usually form part of a child's records unlike the writing of their educators. Nor does it link to assessment of their 'work' or the monitoring of attendance. The audience is different too, as the audience a researcher is writing for is generally an 'academic' and public audience who may or may not be known to the researcher. Thus, anonymity becomes especially important, unlike school records which are confidential, but a child is certainly 'recognisable' to staff and parents.

In summary, socio-cultural theorising in relation to language learning resonates strongly with shifts in thinking in the research literature about the status of children as research participants and the kinds of engagement researchers might have with young children in research. In both there is a focus on the child as an agentic meaning-maker collaborating alongside an attuned adult. Our joint discussions on young children's interest in our research writing have provided the impetus for the development of this paper in which we highlight how young children enthusiastically sought to participate in our two ethnographies through actively seeking out information about what we had written, producing their own fieldnotes, checking whether our written fieldnotes were 'correct' and where necessary amending them as well as asking about the final 'products' of our research.

## *Methodology*

This paper draws on data from two ethnographies: Ruth's study explored children's understandings of identity and Deb's sought to examine food events in early childhood settings. Ethnography was employed in both studies owing to its distinct focus on culture, the process of seeking to uncover emic (internal) perspectives, and its emphasis on narrative output (Wolcott, 1999). Crucially, ethnography enables the researcher to examine the commonplace in detail within the 'everyday' practices of a setting (Buchbinder et al, 2006).

Like Blaise (2005:106) our studies aimed for a collaborative relationship with the children as opposed to a 'unidirectional process' of extracting data from children. It is this spirit of researching in 'common cause' (Warming, 2005:53) which facilitated discussion with children about our writing as well as prompting children's own production of writing in the course of our respective research projects.

Ruth's research is part of a longitudinal ethnography conducted in a primary school in the north of England. The majority of children were from North and Sub-Saharan African countries. The central aim of this study was to provide a detailed understanding of how cultural minority children explore identity and social interaction in a multi-ethnic classroom. Data from two stages of Ruth's fieldwork are analysed in this paper when the children were in their Reception (aged 4-5 years) and in Year 4 (aged 8-9 years). Ruth spent three terms with the class during their Reception year and two terms with the class when they were in Year 4.



Deb's research focused on examining the meanings children and educators ascribe to food and drink practices in early childhood settings including how these are constructed and maintained. It also examined how power is exercised in the area of food/drink in the context of early childhood practice. She observed real and pretend 'food events' within the context of the everyday practices of each setting. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in four early childhood settings across three local authorities (children aged from 6 months-5 years): a private day nursery in West London; a community nursery on the outskirts of South West London; a nursery class attached to a primary school in West London; and a private day nursery (part of a chain) in inner London. Approximately two terms were spent in each setting.

In both studies we spent a day a week in the class/room with the children and educators. This level of 'immersion' in the field, as is typical in ethnographic research (Wolcott, 1999), enabled us to form relationships with the children and educators which we argue contributed to the quality of data produced. Part of this 'familiarisation' process (Barley and Bath, 2014) between children and us - as researchers - involved getting to know how data was to be collected and what would happen to it. In accordance with protocols relating to ongoing informed consent, participants in the studies had been informed about the research prior to data collection, but it was during the process of the research, conducted over time, that this became more concrete and elicited the children's writing and responses to writing to which we will be referring in this paper. As is typical in ethnography, both studies involved participant observations and the writing of extensive fieldnotes (Emerson et al, 2001) which were produced in close spatial and temporal proximity to the field of study (Bain et al., 2015). Later, both studies included use of qualitative interviewing. Additionally, in the case of Ruth's study, a range of participatory visual methods were used, such as making a book

with the children (using text and pictures) depicting ‘Where I am from...’ and using Lego and other building materials to build models of places that were important to them (see Barley, 2014 for more details).

Children involved themselves in writing in our research projects in a number of ways. When we were writing fieldnotes, some of the children became interested in our written accounts of them in terms of the tools we used for writing (*cf* Punch, 2002), what and who we were writing about, and what would happen to the writing later on. In addition, some children contributed their own fieldnotes spontaneously. We did not set out a priori to encourage child participants to write fieldnotes or comment on our own writing, this emerged in the process of developing relationships with children over-time (*cf* Eldén, 2012) and responding in situ to those children who showed particular interest in this area.

Our reflexive discussions on how children actively involved themselves in our separate research projects became the catalyst for bringing our projects together in this paper. As our expertise is in research ethics, not literacy, our reflections focus on issues of access, consent, representation and developing research relationships with young children.

At this point, before examining some of our data, it is important to contextualise further the research writing we will be referring to. We both used a notepad with a ring-binder and a ball point pen to make notes and we noted things down in situ as we observed the children. Thus, children saw writing in process as well as the resulting scribbled jottings. We both also showed interested children what our writing looked like once formed into a published output. The process of writing, scribbled notes and more polished (published) texts were visible to

the children albeit we did not leave our notebooks lying around: they were with us at all times.

At times children voluntarily contributed their own notes alongside our fieldnotes appropriating our ball point pens to do so, but at other times they found their own materials and contributed writing. We are mindful that writing, in the context of an early childhood or school setting, may have connotations of ‘work’ to many children, especially as children get older and become more subject to curricula imperatives related to writing (Hatzinikolaou and Mitakidou’s, 2005). Moreover, we also recognise that young children’s writing is subject to intense analysis in terms of what it ‘reveals’ about a child’s literacy development. And this needs to be viewed within a discursive context relating to ‘school readiness’ in early childhood education (Yoon, 2015) as well as cultural expectations around adult authority, and the power associated with it; notably in institutional contexts such as schools (Spryou, 2011).

Our own positions as researchers in the research settings bore some similarity to the educators in that we shared status as ‘adults’ and concomitant power associated with this in early childhood and school contexts. Whilst we shared a commitment to ensuring children’s safety, as is usual in research practice with ‘vulnerable’ participants, crucially, we did not share responsibility with the educators for the curricula, pedagogy and assessment of the children in the settings. Thus, we never ‘corrected’ children’s spontaneous writing as an educator might have done or commented to other adults on a child’s ‘progress’ or ‘achievement’ as we did not have a pedagogic role in the research settings (*cf* Albon and Rosen, 2014).

But any research with children is embedded within a context of unequal power relations in which adults hold more power than children in identifying and articulating ideas about childhood (Aldred, 1998; Spyrou, 2011). Additionally, many of the children in our studies came from ethnic minority, working class backgrounds and from multilingual homes whereas we are both White, relatively middle-class researchers and lecturers (albeit from working class families). We recognise that the idea that we might ‘give voice’ to these children, then understand and interpret what they tell us can be viewed as a colonising project (*cf* Saavedra, 2011) and that ‘voices’ are situated in particular contexts which needs far greater acknowledgement than has generally been noted by researchers (Khoja, 2016). With this in mind we hope to give a sense of situatedness in the fieldnotes and commentaries on the fieldnotes we will discuss.

Our central interest in this paper lies in our dialogues with children about our research writing and what this tells us about attending to children as research participants. The following sections present data from our two distinct studies that we have synthesised using meta-ethnography, as developed by Noblit and Hare (1988), as an inductive approach to synthesising learning from separate ethnographies with the aim of uncovering new interpretations that were not apparent in the original analyses. Our approach to conducting this meta-ethnography is based on Noblit and Hare’s (1988) seven phase process. Our initial conversation about this project took place at the Oxford Ethnography and Education Conference after we had both attended each other’s presentations. During this discussion, we started to compare examples from our own datasets relating to children’s interest in researcher’s writing. This initial conversation relates to Phase 1 of Noblit and Hare’s (1988) process. As we left the conference we had identified an area of interest that we wished to pursue and had assessed that both of our studies had numerous examples that were relevant to

this (Phase 2). We then separately read our data (Phase 3) with this initial interest in mind and collated examples which we shared with each other to determine how our studies were related (Phase 4). In doing this we looked for analogous patterns across the two studies (Phase 5) before synthesising these (Phase 6) and presenting them in the following analysis (Phase 7). Our meta-ethnographic analysis unearthed new insights relating to how the children directed and contributed to fieldnotes, checked our etic (external) interpretations, facilitated their own representation and reflected on final written research outputs.

### **Dialoguing with children about research writing**

Whilst we had numerous examples of dialogues with children about our research writing as well as numerous examples of their own contributions, the choices for inclusion in this paper are illustrative examples that demonstrate the range of research writing-related topics which we engaged in with children and provoked intense discussion between us as part of the meta-ethnographic process that we engaged in. Where examples of children's own writing are included, the children's permission was sought and given (*cf* Docket and Perry, 2007). Most of the examples we refer to are of multilingual children, which is representative of the children and families who attended the settings within which our research was undertaken as opposed to indicating an especial interest of multilingual children in writing. In Deb's research the exemplars come from the older children in the study aged 3 to 5 years.

#### ***'Write about me'***

Inevitably, writing fieldnotes involves selection as the researcher selects who and what to write about (Emerson et al, 2001) and this, in part, has been viewed as indicative of the power differential between (adult) researcher and (child) participants (Khoja, 2016). In both our

studies we found that some children actively sought our attention and asked that we write about them: they were far from passive in this process. Ruth often heard phrases such as ‘write that’ or ‘write this down’ after a child dictated a sentence to her, such as Mubarak (a Somali boy, aged 4 years) who insisted: ‘*Can you see my little beard? I’ve a Muslim beard. Write it in your book*’ (Ruth’s fieldnote: Reception Indoor play area). In this instance two boys Mubarak and Daud (a Somali boy, aged 4 years) were drawing pictures of their friends with Ruth when the conversation turned to a discussion about ‘Muslim beards.’

Often, after instructing Ruth to write down a phrase, the children would ask to read (or for Ruth to read) the phrase to check that it had been recorded ‘correctly.’ This reviewing of fieldnotes became an important part of Ruth’s data collection process as it created a framework through which children could negotiate their ongoing informed consent to participate in the study. As a consequence of this it influenced the process of data collection as it allowed children to voice their emic interpretation of Ruth’s data, enriching and providing a more detailed final output.

Similarly, Deb was often asked who and what she was writing about. After some months in Deb’s first research setting (a nursery class attached to a school), Samira (a British/Somali girl, aged 3 years) recognised her own name in Deb’s notes. At this point in the fieldwork, Deb had become a familiar fixture with her notebook and pen and Samira was keen that Deb write more about her even when, on one particular occasion, Deb’s attention was drawn to another piece of action relevant to her study as a group of children in the home corner started playing ‘shopping for and cooking food’. As seen in Figure 1, Samira found her own paper and drew lines on it so it looked like Deb’s own lined paper and wrote ‘*I’m cooking*’ (the

letters are from her real name as is typical in very young children's writing [Whitehead, 2010] but anonymity is preserved here).

## **INSERT AREA ONE**

Figure 1: Samira's writing produced in a West London nursery class attached to a primary school in Deb's research

What is significant is that Samira had recognised the theme of Deb's writing having had numerous conversations with Deb about her research as well as seeing her researching 'in action' and had recognised that Deb's research centred on food and food practices. Samira's own writing puts her centre-stage of the action.

In Deb's example (Samira) the importance of the child's name, as written, was significant. As Hanay (2002:104) argues, 'name writing is perhaps the earliest experience a child has with print and certainly one of the most meaningful' with young children often expressing a key interest in writing their name at every opportunity that they get. Kirk and Clark (2005) build on this by arguing that young children, as Samira did, also learn to search for their name in a given text and place great emphasis on finding it. While these authors agree that the significance of name seeking and writing both play an important part in the development of early literacy skills the significance of these aspects in opening up a transformative space for children and adults in a research context, facilitating participation, is yet to be systematically explored. In the context of our research, many children delighted in being able to find their own names in our fieldnotes as it seemed to pay testimony to the importance we placed on them as individuals and their actions.

In another example, Tyrone (a Black British boy, aged 3 years) excitedly noted ‘*You’re writing about me*’ whenever he saw a ‘T’ in Deb’s fieldnotes, whether she was writing about him or not. Of course, sometimes the ‘T’ in question referred to something else (and not necessarily a person) which was of interest to Tyrone, albeit he seemed saddened that Deb was not writing about him. As Kirk and Clark (2005) have found recognition of a first letter of their name plays an important role in a child’s ongoing relationship with the written word. Although Tyrone’s interest indicates a lack of passivity on the part of this child in relation to fieldnote-writing, it also highlights how the subject matter which was afforded *more detail* in fieldnotes was generally the preserve of us: the researchers (see also Albon and Rosen, 2014). While Tyrone’s actions here could be interpreted as an indirect attempt to influence the direction of Deb’s fieldnote-taking, as Mubarak directly did in Ruth’s study (above), another interpretation could be that Tyrone’s actions were motivated by a desire to spend time with Deb. If this was the case fieldnote-writing can also be viewed as a vehicle for the development of research relationships in the field with particular children.

As Ruth’s time in the field progressed and the children in her study began to recognise each other’s names, as well as their own, Ruth had to reflect on when and how to share her fieldnotes with the children in her study. While, as has been stated above, allowing children to have access to written fieldnotes can enable them to direct observations and cement a research relationship this can also have ramifications for protecting children’s anonymity from their peers. To minimise this, Ruth developed her own form of shorthand and would turn over the page in her fieldnote book or cover up a section about another child when showing children what she had written about them. This use of shorthand proved to be a useful tool particularly as some children began to directly contribute to Ruth’s fieldnotes



through mark makings, drawings and writing and could potentially turn the page to read what had previously been written while doing so.

### ***‘What does that say?’***

In both studies we found that some children were interested in us reading back what had been written about them. Indeed, in a similar way to Pinter and Zandian (2015), we also found that children were surprised at the degree to which we attended to noting what they said and did in as much detail as we could.

In Deb’s study, in Setting Three (a community nursery) Avleen (British Asian girl, aged 4 years) was particularly interested in Deb’s fieldnote-writing. Between playing with her peers and participating in adult-led activities she would come over to Deb spontaneously to look at what she was doing and ask questions relating to her fieldnote-writing. On this ‘typical’ occasion, Deb was writing fieldnotes about the home corner play she was observing in which children were pretending to cook dinner. Avleen temporarily removed herself from participating in this play and came over, asking:

*‘What does that say?’ (pointing to fieldnotes). I tell her: ‘That says ‘Avleen is cooking dinner’ (she was in the home corner) but she replies ‘that’s not my name’ (and writes it for me in capital letters). I explain that I am using her initials as a ‘shorthand’ so I can write more quickly (she has a lot of letters in her real name and there are two ‘Avleens’ in the group). She agrees it is hard to write her full name quickly but does not seem convinced I will remember that I am writing about her.*

Deb's fieldnote: Setting three (near home corner)

This conversation demonstrates a keen sense some children convey in ensuring we – as researchers – get things ‘right’. As in the previous section, children in our studies were especially keen that we represented them and their actions as they would wish. In terms of adult-child relations in early childhood research it is all too easy – by virtue of our power as adults – to ride rough-shod over such moments. By this we mean glossing over quickly a child’s interest or viewing such encounters as ‘cute’ examples of children’s behaviours, not worthy of further reflection and discussion. As Jipson and Jipson (2005:42) have argued, researchers’ understandings of children are shaped by their interactions with children and ‘children’s understanding and subjectivity are shaped through their interactions with us’. In this instance, Avleen also learnt that it was permissible to question an adult about her writing in an institutional context in which children are often written about in the form of observations and assessments, with all the power this engenders (see Albon and Rosen, 2014). Moreover, Avleen furthered her understanding that writing comes in many forms for many purposes, including shorthand writing. As noted earlier, neither Deb nor Ruth set out to ‘teach’ children about literacy conventions, nevertheless we do think that these interactions provided opportunities for children to learn, as we learnt from them, in the course of our dialoguing about research writing.

On some occasions children checked our fieldnotes and corrected them. An example of this was Nasra's (White Somali girl [her definition], aged 5 years) correction of Ruth's observation of a group of girls playing at the water area:

*As she is drawing next to me Nasra asks if I saw the older girls playing in the water area earlier in the day. She asks me what game I think they were playing. I tell her that I saw the girls playing with the water wheel showing her where I had written it in my fieldnote book. Nasra agrees that that was part of what they were doing but whispers to me that really they were doing something else. 'What were you really doing?' I ask. 'We said, who's the lightest? Who's the darkest?' she replies, 'And we said Deka's the darkest... then Fariido's a brownny and then... Fariido and Aniso and Annakiya and Deka are the same skin. And we said me and Fazia are together.' 'So you have a different skin colour?' I ask. 'Yeah' Nasra replies 'My skin's lighter like Fazia's... [but] do you know, we're all friends.' Nasra goes back to her drawing and then whispers to me 'Don't tell Miss but write it in your book so you have it.'*

Ruth's fieldnote: Reception Indoor play area

As this extract shows Nasra was assertive in 'correcting' Ruth's interpretation of what had occurred at the water area and dictated for Ruth her account of what had happened explicitly telling her to write it in her fieldnotes while also making reference to the confidential nature of this research conversation. This conversation helped Ruth to gain a clearer understanding of Nasra's emic perspective in addition to Ruth's etic interpretation of what she had observed in the outdoor play area. This example highlights how Nasra was able to participate in Ruth's research by directing her focus and being assertive to 'correct' Ruth's interpretation. In doing this Ruth made clear in her written publications the distinction between the emic and etic to emphasise where a participant did not agree with Ruth's original fieldnote.

Conversations like this do not occur in a vacuum. Albon and Rosen (2014:93) question whether in the neoliberal context of early childhood education ‘sharing observations of individual children subjects them to further categorisation, development assessment, surveillance, and ‘overcivilisation’?’ While unable to answer this question, Ruth shares this unease of sharing observations with children or adults who had not been involved in the event. Consequently, Ruth did not share data other than with the children involved unless she thought that there was a safeguarding reason to do so in line with her university’s ethics’ policy. She made this clear to the children at the start of her study and we suggest that this approach created a relationship of trust where the children felt able to confide in her (Barley, 2014).

### ***‘That’s not how you write about me’***

Deb’s research also noted examples of children correcting fieldnotes. In the following example Furqan (a British/Pakistani boy aged 4 years) challenges Deb’s use of written English to represent him. At the time, Deb was observing home-corner play on a food-related theme but was seated near to the writing area which was situated nearby (the home-corner was in a converted cupboard). Furqan corrected Deb’s writing about him after asking her what she was writing about, suggesting ‘*that’s not how you write about me*’. After Deb handed over some paper and a pen, Furqan proceeded to write in an ‘Urdu-like’ script resembling his Pakistani heritage, see Figure 2. This writing was unlike other writing Deb had seen of his, produced in activities such as learning how to write his name [in English].

**INSERT AREA 2**

Figure 2: Furqan's writing about himself produced in a West London nursery class attached to a primary school in Deb's research

Deb's fieldnotes at the time state:

*Furqan wants to be written about in a language that represents him and his community language; not the English writing I have produced. I was concerned at first as he seemed cross, but I think he is really keen that I learn from him, otherwise he'd have dismissed my offer of pen and paper to show me how to write. He spent ages on his writing and was really keen I have it to take away.*

Deb's fieldnote. Setting one (home corner)

This incident highlights how some children are keen to be represented in ways that reflect their language and identity: indeed language and identity are often regarded as intertwined (Barley, 2016). This was a setting where all the educators were White and monolingual (in English) and perhaps Furqan's frustration was directed more widely at the school he attended but it is difficult to say with complete confidence what his motivations were at this time (*cf* Jipson and Jipson, 2005). Although Deb explained to Furqan that her final written piece would need to be written in English as those who would read it would expect to read it in English, this provoked her to further reflect on the dominance of written English in academia. In the setting, Deb discussed what had happened with the educators, which prompted them to ensure there were greater examples of Urdu script available in various parts of the classroom. In this sense, Furqan's actions may not have shifted the dominance of English in academia, but it did shift the practice in the setting quite significantly as the visibility of a range of community languages had been less evident previously.

Ruth's data also highlighted the ways in which some children navigated language, identity and writing. This was particularly marked for the Arabic-speaking children in her study who encouraged each other to '*do Arabic writing*' when representing their names on their classroom drawings (Barley 2016). Some of these children also produced their own fieldnotes in Arabic depicting their name and the Arabic letters that they were learning at Koranic school. When doing this they took great pride in showing Ruth how to write in Arabic from right to left and compared the Arabic letters to English letters to teach Ruth how to pronounce them.

### ***Who will see this?***

Of course, fieldnotes do not remain as notes: they get transformed into the written texts which comprise research outputs. This too was an area of interest for some of the children in our studies.

In Ruth's study near the end of her first phase of fieldwork while the children were in their Reception year the children started to ask questions about what Ruth would do with their stories and who would read them. Ruth explained that she would write a book for her university teachers (i.e. her PhD thesis) and that she would come back the following year while the children were in Year 1 with a special book for the children focusing on what she had learnt from them. When Ruth revisited the school the next year and gave the class their book the children asked who Ruth would talk to next about them. Ruth explained that she was writing another book (which turned into Barley, 2014) and that she would come back to the class with a copy, which she did at the start of another phase of her fieldwork when the

children were in Year 4. On seeing Ruth's book the children were interested to find their own stories in it and to discuss the children's drawings that had been used on the front cover. On the same day some children purposefully sought Ruth out at the start of break time and demonstrated an ability to reflect on the research conversations that they had had with her while they were in Reception, which she had written about in her book:

*I follow the children outside to the Year 4 – 6 playground at break time. Kareem (Libyan boy, aged 8 years) runs up to me shouting 'Do you remember me?' 'Yes,' I reply smiling. 'When we were in Reception you asked us what we wanted to be when we were older,' he tells me breathlessly, 'I've changed my mind! Now I want to be a famous footballer. Will you write about that?' I tell him that I will.*

Ruth's fieldnote: Year 4 – 6 playground

In this extract we can see that Kareem has remembered a research conversation from his Reception class 4 years earlier and reflected on what he said at the time demonstrating an understanding of identity as changing. This instance highlights that thinking about children's language and literacy development should be viewed as dialogic, as Geneshi and Dyson (2009) advocate, where children are supported to engage with written texts as an ongoing process that allows for multiple interpretations.

We also contend that seeing the final written research output and having an opportunity to reflect on their research stories at a later date gave these children a deeper understanding of the research process and where their data went to after they had shared them with a researcher. As Pinter and Zandian (2015) advocate, Ruth's fieldnotes show that having this

deeper understanding helped to facilitate ongoing informed consent during subsequent stages of Ruth's fieldwork:

*It starts to rain heavily just before the end of break time so we quickly go back inside. As we get to the classroom Fariido (Somali girl, aged 8 years) comes up to me as I finish writing up some fieldnotes and asks me 'Do you write everything you see?' 'Yes' I reply restating that I am interested in finding out about who the children in the class are and who they are friends with. 'What will you do with it?' Fariido enquires. 'I will write a book, like after Reception,' I tell her. 'Is it OK if I write about you in my book?' 'Yes!' she says excitedly, 'I'm going to be in Xxx's next book! she tells Daud (Somali boy, aged 8 years [mentioned above in the 'write about me' section when he was 4 years old]), who is standing nearby. Daud asks me, 'will I be in it too? Can I read it?' 'Yes,' I tell him, 'I will come back next year and tell you what I'm writing about and then bring you the book when it's finished.' 'How long will it take?' Daud asks. I explain to him the process of writing up fieldnotes, finding a publisher and writing a book draft and then a final version. Daud is surprised at the length of time involved.*

Ruth's fieldnote: Year 4 classroom

As can be seen here the children's interest in a final written research output did not just relate to the first stage of Ruth's fieldwork but continued throughout her study. Additionally, Ruth's discussion with Daud prompted a conversation on the nature of writing as a long process where writing is viewed as a work in progress that needs to be polished and revised based on feedback from others or in other words as a dialogic process. We assert that this conversation about writing in a research context (unintentionally) provided an opportunity for learning in addition to helping Daud understand more specifically what had happened to his research



data (as was Ruth's intention). The longitudinal nature of Ruth's study gave her the opportunity to share written research outputs with her participants at the different stages of her fieldwork and use these as a way to negotiate ongoing informed consent. We contend that this enabled children to continue to dialogue with the research, facilitated by Ruth's on-going and close relationship with the children participating in the study.

## **Discussion**

We argue that children's interest in research writing can facilitate a responsive approach to dealing with ethical considerations within the research process as well as providing a context for learning about adults' research writing. The dialogic process of writing fieldnotes that we both engaged in created an environment where, like Dockett and Perry (2007), we attempted to co-construct interpretations of our research *with* young children. These ongoing research dialogues are an important part of 'doing' ethnography where the researcher and participants learn from each other as part of an ongoing process. Consequently, a researcher does not arrive at being an ethnographer but continually engages in ongoing dialogue and negotiation with their participants. We contend that when approaching research with young children in this way young children are able to give (and withdraw) their ongoing informed consent to take part in a study rather than purely assent to take part as some have previously argued. Within both of our studies consent emerged through continual negotiations and dialogues with the children. We also recognise that these interpretations may well change over time, not least as children get older as demonstrated in the later stages of Ruth's longitudinal study. We suggest that this would be the case when researching with older children and adults too and should not be attributed to a lack of trustworthiness on the part of young children (*ibid*).

Representation has become a vexed issue in ethnographic research as some have sought to problematise attempts at writing the voices of others as an act of appropriation: ‘a too-easy, too-familiar eating of the other’ (Lather, 2009:23). As we have noted in this paper, power differentials infuse research with young children in early childhood settings, not least as ‘writing’ is an activity replete with connotations of adult-directed ‘work’ and the dominance of written English in academia. However, we challenge the idea that younger children are passive in the research process with regards to the research writing produced by researchers. The data we have discussed in this paper show children asking about, checking, adding to and at times even challenging the fieldnotes we had made as well as reflecting on final written outputs.

To correct the writing and interpretations of actions (in writing) of an (adult) researcher takes a degree of assuredness on the part of a young child and is perhaps indicative of the time we had already spent in the field prior to these exchanges as well as the care taken to explain to children that our research sought to understand *their* views and *their* experiences. Time spent in the field facilitated a deepening of our relationships with particular groups of children. Indeed Eldén (2012) has similarly asserted that data collection needs to be viewed within a frame of social encounters.

We suggest that over time, the children came to realise we had a different status and associated level of power in the setting(s) as non-educators (or ‘least-educators’ – see Albon and Rosen, 2014). We also suggest that this unique research relationship provided the context for children to engage with the dialogic nature of research writing. It is important to highlight though, that the final decision of which fieldnotes to adapt still lay with the adult researcher and therefore power differentials are still at play within these interactions albeit in a different

way to the educators' relationships with the children. As noted previously, we did not attempt to teach children to write in any explicit way nor did we report to their parents on 'progress'. Thus, our encounters were conducted in the spirit of learning from and alongside the children. This is not a criticism per se of the educators in those settings but recognition that as researchers we often had time to wallow in dialogues with children about the intricacies of fieldnote-writing in ways which would have been difficult had we had pedagogic responsibility for the group as a whole (*cf* Roser et al, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

In offering our insights into young children's participation in fieldnote-writing in our two research projects we are not suggesting that *all* children will show an interest in the fieldnotes of researchers or volunteer their own contributions. To assert this would be to characterise children as synonymous, with identical preferences and competencies (Punch, 2002).

Warming (2005) offers a salutary reminder that children want and need different levels of information about research: one size does not fit all. The key, it would seem, is that what matters is what is 'real' to the participants in the research (Pinter and Zandian, 2015).

Providing space for dialogue about research writing between young children and adult-researchers— be it commenting on our fieldnotes or more 'polished' writing and/or adding their own fieldnotes – can enable children to negotiate their participation and representation in research. Thus, we hope our paper stimulates further thinking about the ways in which we think of children *as research participants* as opposed to suggesting that all early childhood researchers should encourage child participants to comment on research writing or add their own writing to a research project. Furthermore, our reflections on children's participation in fieldnote-writing could be extended to how other literacies, such as sketches and iPad notes,

can be collaboratively used to enable children's participation and representation in research *as research participants*.

To conclude, ethnographic research involves *extensive* writing and these acts of research writing are underscored by an entanglement of ethical issues relating to consent, confidentiality, anonymity and representation – to name but a few. We assert that engaging in dialogues with researchers about their research writing offers a very concrete opportunity for young children to begin to explore such complex issues. For researchers, such dialoguing should be seen as integral to a broader ethics of attending to young children's perspectives and interests in early childhood research.

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