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Rebecca Webb

Abstract

This récit recounts the experience of the author in engaging with the idea of ‘who is the ethnographer’ to a whole-school assembly, before entering an English primary school to begin a year-long ethnographic study. Its purpose is three-fold. First, to re-visit the intentions, excitements and possibilities of the author, introducing herself to teachers and children alike in this forum as a creative performance. Second, to recount ‘what actually happened’ in the assembly through her re-engagement with an account she made of it immediately following the event. Third, in light of the somewhat unexpected (and certainly chaotic) occurrences, to consider just what this produced and enabled, ethnographically, that may not have otherwise become possible.



Figure 1: ‘Rebecca the Researcher’, by Lily Webb

Between 2011-2012, I was fortunate enough to spend almost a whole academic year in a ‘Rights Respecting’¹ primary school in England as part of my PhD research on Children’s Rights. The focus of this research was on the ways in which ideas of Children’s Rights got ‘done’ as part of the everyday milieu of the life of the institution. This meant that I was interested in the different ways in which any, or all, those connected with the life of the school – whether as child, parent, teacher, lunchtime and/or teaching assistant, head teacher, governor, or visitor – experienced and made sense of ideas of Children’s Rights. I was especially curious to find out who (and what) became rendered most visible and audible as a consequence of the discourse, and who (and what), perhaps less so, and to consider why this might be. What did the Children’s Rights discourse allow, and yet also, disable? The findings of this research are captured within my PhD thesis and subsequent publications².

This short account, however, focuses upon the trials and tribulations I experienced as I endeavoured to introduce myself as an ethnographer to the school community prior to beginning my research. I realise that throughout the ten month period of my fieldwork in this friendly school, I was haunted by the fear of revealing some former self that would infect a sense of an ‘authentic’ researcher-self untainted by previous identities. I had been, variously, throughout my working life, a primary school teacher, an EAL specialist and an advisor for local education authorities. I *yearned* for a consistent researcher identity such that I might be recognised as such and taken seriously in a (new for me)



ethnographic persona and not 'sniffed-out' as 'fake'. I was delighted, for example, when, towards the end of my research time in the school, a child pointed at me for the benefit of her parent (as I climbed onto my bicycle at the end of the day) and called out excitedly: 'There look there! *She's* our cycling searcher' [*she's* our cycling researcher].

I therefore invested much time and energy in considering how I could help myself to 'fix' a researcher identity that would be readily and comfortably identifiable for us all to manage. I decided to suggest conducting a school assembly to describe my role as an ethnographer to adults and children alike, in a way that would be consistent with the commitments to transparency I had made as part of university processes of ethical review and governance³. The head teacher agreed readily to my suggestion. I would deliver an assembly to the whole school community (which included almost five hundred children and over twenty staff) in a creative and engaging way to help them all appreciate the role of the school ethnographer. With hindsight, the head teacher must have thought that I had 'mug' written across my forehead.

And so, given the green light, I set about developing a public performance. It took me ages. I rehearsed at home and in front of my own grown up kids. I timed myself. This had to be slick. I had decided that I would 'dress up' in such a way that I would transform myself into various different social constructions of the ideal type of researcher in order to pose questions to the children which – I imagined – would lead them to be curious about me and my role. These various researcher guises would help me, I felt, begin to establish research relationships with the children, in ways that cohere and also challenge their previous understandings to enable them to respond. Although I would be up on the stage in the school hall, and the audience of children and adults would be below and in-front of me, my performance would allow me to develop rapport and some dialogue.

The purpose of my display was, therefore, two-fold. First, to sign post to adults that I was socially competent (enough) to have in school over a sustained period, and, sufficiently pedagogically engaged for them to feel comfortable about me being with their children in different spaces and places around the school. Second, to allow the children opportunities to begin to recognise me as 'Rebecca the Researcher': someone both increasingly familiar to them over time but with a remit different to other adults they might routinely come across within school on a day-to-day basis. When eating my lunch on my own outside at a playground bench later on in the day of the school assembly, a curious group of girls approached me coyly, with the question of, 'What is an *a-ne-oth-raf-ar*' again?' ['What is an ethnographer again?']. As it turned out this was – at least - some (small) validation for the lengths to which I had gone, to (inadvertently) thoroughly humiliate myself and to thwart my best efforts to gain some legitimacy to be taken seriously.

This is how I recorded the tale of Rebecca's performance of 'Who and What is the Ethnographic Researcher?' following the assembly:

*'How did it happen? How could I have managed to end up standing on the stage in [just] my bra and leggings? To think I got university ethical approval. I'd planned this so meticulously...It started okay...I took to the stage...dressing up in different costumes so the children could guess what type of researcher I might be...they interacted well...hands up...calling out politely...making great suggestions...seeming to 'get it'. I used a range of 'researcher' tropes (wigs, costumes, various artefacts) so that I appeared as an 'official' school inspector with suit and clipboard; naturalist in camouflage with binoculars around my neck; and then the surgeon in green scrubs and stethoscope. So far so good. And then I caused a *kafuffle* when I put on a green wig by way of adding some humour to the performance. It was like lighting a 'touch paper' – they [the children] all EXPLODED into life and I was in crisis. The children started shifting on their bottoms across the floor of the assembly hall, pointing and laughing and pushing and shoving into one another. And they laughed and laughed. What a Good Show!*

'Help', I thought, 'What is my role? Do I shift key into Stern Headmistress or do I carry on as though nothing untoward has occurred?' I carry on, heart thumping out of chest, back turned away from the audience,...fumbling. And, as I lift the surgeon's 'top' over my head, in order to change into my everyday clothes, I feel flesh, my tummy and chest flesh. I've managed to lift my 'T' shirt too, along with my green scrubs and it's too late to do anything about it. I'm standing in front of hundreds of children and their teachers on the stage in my underclothes.

I spin away, hurriedly putting on 'my own clothes' and turn back. I say boldly, extending my arms expansively, 'This Is The Sort Of Researcher I Am– 'REBECCA THE RESEARCHER' '...I suggest they call me 'Rebecca' and I tell them I'm doing research that's different to the other sorts of researchers I've dressed up as...I tell them I will be in school for some time in all sorts of places (and try get them to suggest where...) and that I'm an E-TH-NO-GRAPH-ER...I try to explain that the job of an ethnographer is to watch, listen, to have conversations, and join in and that I'll be doing a lot of writing and will need their help (I think I try to ask them to suggest how...). I inform them that research like this is important because it helps us to see and think about all sorts of things a bit differently in ways we might otherwise miss.



Towards the end of the assembly, I ask some older children to come up onto the stage to spell out 'E-TH-NO-GRAPH-ER' using large laminated letters I've prepared in advance. As if, for my final ignominy, the activity is too difficult...it takes AGES and there develops a riot immediately beneath the stage in front of me as the youngest children roll and squawk. I just want the stage to open under me and for me to disappear into a deep, dark, quiet hole for a loong time. I've lost my knack...the only thing I can think as I creep out of the hall is: crap researcher, crap teacher – how will I ever be able to face those adults again?

Rebecca's notes, September 2011

Not only did I feel an immediate searing sense of shame in my 'mis' performance (and wonder what this would mean for my future as an ethnographic researcher in this institution) but I subsequently reflected on the carelessness with which I had played 'fast and loose' with the social construction and illusory power of the 'actor' on the stage. After all, my 'Rebecca the Researcher' act had presumed a chumminess to be fostered with children that would be easily and straightforwardly won and maintained. Some controlled connection had been achieved for as long as the children had been able to recognise the apparent guessing game of 'I dress like this' and 'You guess like that'. As soon as I altered the script, however, and placed the green wig upon my head, I confounded the recognisability of our respective roles and the attendant expectations we might have of one another in this performance. The children, quite legitimately, read my shift in behaviour as I put on the wig as a signalling for them to do 'otherwise'. This was a Funny Show (apparently). And as mayhem broke out in the assembly hall, I had instantly to decide whether I had an ethical 'duty of care' to assert some control in the role of authoritative school adult, or whether I could 'pass' and expect a member of staff to step in to crowd control (whilst I tried to continue the performance of 'Rebecca the Researcher'). I resisted being the authoritative figure of control (not that I'm sure I could have actually done it) but it felt that it came at an emotionally high price for me. Formerly, in all my years as a teacher and local authority advisor, I'd never behaved like this in school before. Understandably, it was not clear to the other adults in the assembly hall, what it was that was expected of them in the circumstances. They did not automatically step in to assume command as pandemonium broke loose. After all, this was not 'their' obvious responsibility.

After the assembly was over, I retreated into the playground on my own but along with the children as the teachers went into the staffroom for their mid-morning break. I managed to keep a low profile for the remainder of the school day. As my deep sense of humiliation abated gradually over forthcoming days, I did begin to meet and pass familiar and less familiar adults within classrooms and corridors. Needless to say, for many/most, my pain and anguish was not theirs: they had phones to answer, lessons to plan, classes to teach, parents to see and policies to be reviewed. My wounded ego was not their primary concern. Nonetheless, out of my precarity, exposure, and early



induction into the messiness of ethnographic research, the unexpected happened: bridges were built between me and many adults I came across around the school. Over subsequent days and weeks generous sparks seemed to be created between us, as adults I met identified me as the 'woman who took her clothes off on the stage'. This could never have been planned for. Looking back now, there was clearly something about the 'live' (and perhaps rather too 'alive') ethnographic method and multimodal form of my introduction. Relying on props, performance and audience participation, it seemed to produce feelings of good-will and warm engaged rapport as the days and weeks unfolded. Ironically, the 'undoing' of my carefully orchestrated ethnographer guise on the stage seemed to ignite relationships that had palpable effects that may have been much more difficult to achieve had I relied on mere pen and paper explanations of my study to different constituent groups in my introductory rounds of the school. Whether my intended presentation of the self would have produced similar visceral connections had it all gone according to plan, is unknowable. However, I have certainly reflected subsequently, that despite the 'riskiness' of what I had undertaken, there is something significant and humbling in the reminder of the power of displays of human vulnerability. This is a lesson I am loathe to forget in the contingent and privileged space of ethnographic research.

Notes

[1]The Rights Respecting Schools Award is an UNICEF UK initiative designed to put children's rights at the heart of school policies and practices. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/>

[2] See <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/74949/research>

[3] As part of my Ethical Review, I had gone to various lengths to alert all those within the school community of my presence and my role: this had included the display of posters (around the school); the sending out of flyers to parents/carers; delivery of letters to parents/carers of children with whom I would come into direct contact; and regular and updated information in school newsletters.

[Rebecca Webb](#) is an education lecturer at the University of Sussex. Her qualitative research is predominantly ethnographic and related to the everyday sense making of educational environments by multiple stakeholders including children, their families, teachers, leaders and those who work in them. She is also interested in researching pedagogies and practices within educational institutions, including at HE and she runs a writing space (<https://writingintomeaning.wordpress.com/>) with two colleagues to promote and explore creative approaches to doctoral writing.'