

Doing Child-Centered Ethnography: Unravelling the Complexities of Reducing the Perceptions of Adult Male Power During Fieldwork

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Abstract

In this article, I engage the argument of getting around adult power in child-centered ethnographic research by presenting and discussing my experiences as a man researching with South African children in the early years of schooling. I present and discuss the different strategies I used in order to try and disassociate myself from the presumed position of adult male formal power and authority among children who were in my study. In *Gender Play*, Barrie Thorne coined the term “learning from the children” to describe a critical child-centered ethnographic approach which seeks to engage children as experts in their everyday social lives. However, Thorne acknowledged that when adults seek to learn from the children, the major challenge for the researcher is reducing the perceptions of adult formal power while establishing child-centered relations with the children. While Thorne discussed the issues of gender power in her relationships and interactions with boys and girls during her ethnographic research, this article considers a different perspective. It provides a male perspective on the relational issues and dynamics around adult–child power relations during child-centered ethnographic research on *Gender Play* in a South African primary school. The focus is on my attempts to reduce perceptions of adult male power so as to establish child-centered relations with young boys and girls in my research. I highlight the challenges encountered in my attempts to reduce these perceptions, given the children’s variegated expressions of agency that manifest by way of resistance—serving to reinforce adult–child power differentials. The article highlights how adult–child power relations operate in complex ways during fieldwork. It highlights how this complexity compelled the adult male researcher to acknowledge that power is not the sole preserve of adults. Rather, power is fluid and is constantly in flux between the adult male conducting the research and the young boys and girls who are actively participating in the research process.

Keywords

ethnographic fieldwork, child-centered relations, adult–child power relations, participant observation, critical self-reflexivity, least adult role, playground, play

What is already known?

The critical self-reflexive article is influenced by the ethnographic work of Thorne (1993) which utilized ethnographic methods of participant observations to explore gender dynamics in children’s play in the American schooling contexts. Thorne (1993, p. 11) used the term “learning from the children” to describe a critical child-centered ethnographic approach that seeks to reduce the common-sense, adult-centered adult–child power relationship in order to address childhood agency in research with children. However, at the same time, Thorne (1993) acknowledged that when adults seek to learn from the children, the major challenge for the adult

researcher is to reduce the adult-centered power differential between the adult doing the research and the young research participants (Thorne, 1993, p. 16). While Thorne (1993) reflected on her experiences of getting around adult power and authority as a woman doing critical child-centered ethnography

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in primary schools in the United States of America, my article adds a different dimension to the debates of power relationship between the adult researcher and young research participants.

What this paper adds?

In this article, I engage the argument of getting around adult power in child-centered ethnographic research by presenting and discussing my experiences as a man researching with South African children in the early years of schooling. I present and discuss the different strategies I used in order to try and disassociate myself from the presumed position of adult male formal power and authority among children who were in my study. As I document the strategies for “democratizing” the relationships I formed with the children, I demonstrate how complicated this was, given the powerful symbolic associations the South African children make with adulthood, which connected with the deferential ways they tended to present themselves to me as an adult male doing child-centered ethnographic research in the primary school. The reflections from the ethnographic study demonstrates that the children were not passive in the ethnographic research process, but they were active agents who constantly expressed their agential power such as through deciding when and under what circumstances to accommodate and resist my strategies for deconstructing the presumed position of formal adult male power and authority among the children during fieldwork.

Introduction

In this article, I engage in critical self-reflexivity (Bhana, 2002; Chaudhry, 2000; Mayeza, 2015; Ortlipp, 2008; Pillow, 2003; Thorne, 1993) to unravel the complexities of reducing the perceptions of adult male power during ethnographic fieldwork that focuses on gender in young children’s play on the school playground during break. The term *critical self-reflexivity*, as defined in this article, refers to a reflective process where, as a researcher, I place myself at the center of my research by rigorously examining the complexities of power relations that accompany an adult male conducting critical child-centered ethnographic research with young school children. Child-centered research shifts the focus from the dominant adult-centric perspective on childhood to “putting the children first” (Bhana, 2016, p. 14) by engaging children as the experts on their everyday social lives. Within the scope of a child-centered research, the main role of the researcher is to seek to learn about childhood issues from the children’s own points of view (Bhana, 2016; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003; Martin, 2011; Mayeza, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Pattman, 2013; Pattman & Bhana, 2017; Thorne, 1993).

To address children as experts requires the researcher to disrupt the common-sense adult-centered and adult-child power relations by developing and negotiating child-centered relationships with the children (Thorne, 1993). Child-centered relationships are particular kinds of relationships in which the researcher tries to challenge the common-

sense perceptions of adult power in order to encourage children to talk openly and relate to the researcher as if the researcher was another child and not an adult (Martin, 2011). Building such relationships requires the researcher to adopt a “least adult role” (Martin, 2011, p. 9) during fieldwork with the children. This is a kind of positioning in which the researcher tries to blend in with the children by developing less authoritative and more playful and friendly relations with the children. The aim is to encourage the children to identify and relate with the researcher as if the researcher was another child and not an adult with formal power and authority over the children. This article discusses the complexities of power relations that emanate from the strategies I employed as I sought to develop and negotiate child-centered relations with children during my ethnographic research exploring children’s constructions of gender identities through play in a South African primary school.

The methodological and epistemological orientation of this ethnography draws on Thorne’s (1993) seminal ethnography in which she utilized participant observation and qualitative interviewing methods to explore gender dynamics in children’s play in American schools. Thorne (1993, p. 11) used the term “learning from the children” to describe a critical child-centered ethnographic approach which challenges the taken-for-granted adult-child power relationships in order to address childhood agency in research with children. Among other things, addressing the agency of children in research implies a researcher’s commitment to taking children seriously and engaging them as the experts on their social behaviors, interactions, and relationships (Bhana, 2016; Martin, 2011; Mayeza, 2016a). However, Thorne (1993) acknowledged that when adults seek to learn from children, the major challenge for the adult researcher is to subvert the adult-centered power relationship between the adult doing the research and the young research participants (Thorne, 1993, p. 16).

While Thorne (1993) engaged in critical self-reflexivity in terms of her experiences, challenges, and achievements regarding the negotiation of child-centered relations with children in her school-based ethnographic research in the United States, this article presents a different dimension as it unpacks the issue of power relations in child-centered ethnographic research from a male perspective. Also, this research provides new knowledge in the South African context as there has not been much published in this context, with the majority of work coming from North American contexts. The aim of this article is to contribute a unique South African male perspective of and experience around the dynamics of power relations when researching young children’s constructions of gender identities through play during break at school. In other words, the article seeks to contribute new insights into the existing and mostly female authored literature (see Thorne, 1993; Martin, 2011; Bhana, 2002; Walkerdine, 1990; Bhana, 2016) by making more complex the current discussions and debates around power when adults seek to negotiate child-centered relations with boys and girls in child-centered ethnographic research.

I document my efforts at challenging the presumed adult male power and authority by demonstrating that it was difficult, given the children's existing expressions of their agency through the ways in which they related to me. The common thread that permeates the reflexive process is one which shows that the children were not passive in the power-based relational aspects of this ethnography. The reflections indicate that the children's expressions of agency manifest in the ways that they negotiate when and under what circumstances to accommodate or resist my strategies by challenging authoritative strategies as well as more child-centered relationships with them during fieldwork.

The methodological approach adopted for this study draws on what Prout and James (1997) termed the "New Sociology of Childhood" (NSC): a critical alternative perspective in academic ways of thinking about childhood, which focuses on children as active agents, rather than passive objects, in society and in social identity construction. This article adopted the precepts of the NSC to explore childhood gender identity construction through play from the children's own perspectives (Mayeza, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). Research on how children learn gender often presents a "top-down" process in which children are positioned simply as passive recipients of the gender norms of the societies they inhabit (Mayeza, 2017). In contrast, this ethnographic research took a critical child-centered stance so as to foreground children's agency and to explore gender as constructed and experienced by the children through play within a unique schooling context in South Africa. Departing from the common-sense socialization perspective in which children's social behaviors are understood from the perspectives of adults, the NSC takes a child-centered perspective and views children as active agents in society whose social lives, behaviors, interests, and relationships are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the adult perspective (Prout & James, 1997).

This study aimed to engage children's agency by adopting the critical child-centered ethnographic approach (Thorne, 1993) and entailed observing and interacting with the children while they played on the playground during the break. In conducting the observations, I was an observer as participant (Thorne, 1993). Observing and interacting with the children at play enabled me to document not only the children's behaviors and interactions but I was also able to engage with the children as agential beings by exploring the meanings they attached to the different forms of play they engaged in and how these games operated as sources of gendered identifications and dimensions of power (Mayeza, 2016a). To gain rich ethnographic insights into the children's constructions of gender identities through playground play during the break, it was important for me not only to observe the children at play but also to talk with them in order to learn from them about the particular meanings they attached to their social behaviors, relationships, and identifications as particular kinds of boys and girls. However, as Thorne (1993) stated that to be able to learn from the children:

... adults [doing the research] have to challenge the deep assumption that they already know what children are "like," both because, as former children, adults have been there, and because, as adults, they regard children as less complete versions of themselves... - When adults seek to learn about and from children, the challenge is to resist being treated as an adult with formal power and authority (Thorne, 1993, p. 16).

In order to address the children in my study as active agents in their everyday social lives and who attach specific gendered meanings to their behaviors in the playground during break at school, it was necessary to establish less formal or less authoritative but more playful, friendly, and most of all "child-centered relations" with the children (Mayeza, 2017). However, negotiating a less authoritative and more child-centered relationship that attempts to break down power relationships between researcher and researched was not without challenges. Accordingly, in this article, I present the various challenges I experienced as an adult male trying to shape and/or minimize the perceptions of adult power in order to learn from the learners about gender (Bhana, 2016; Pattman, 2013; Pattman & Bhana, 2017). I document these challenges as well as how I managed to effectively navigate them, with a view to providing some lessons that may be helpful to any future ethnographic research that is interested in gaining children's perspectives.

Drawing on existing research, the article will proceed with a conceptualization of the complexity of gender power relations in adult-child interactions during ethnographic research. This conceptualization informs the analyses of the relational issues of power and gender identity explored in this article.

Conceptualizing the Complexity of the Adult-Child Power Relationship in Child-Centered Research

The common-sense discourse on the power relationship between adults and young children suggests that adults have sovereign power over children (Mayeza, 2015). Notwithstanding a great deal of power held by the adult in parent-child relationships at home and outside the home environment, the manifestation of the taken for granted view of power as the domain of adults is particularly visible in all kinds of interactions between a teacher and a learner at school (Dixon, 2011). For example, in her study of social relationships and interactions in primary schools in South Africa, Dixon (2011) describes the classroom as a particular space of adult power and children's subordination which serves to (re)produce the adult-child power differential through forms of regulation and control which are embedded in the very identity of the adult formal authority figure of a teacher.

However, as Foucault (1982) argued, power is complex as it is always characterized by resistance by subordinated groups. The literature on gender and power relations in school settings (Bhana, 2002; Martin, 2011; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1990) influenced by Foucauldian conception of the complexity of power suggests that young research participants are not passive objects who are simply subservient to the (adult) researcher's

claims and exercises of power during the research processes. Such literature argues that children are active agents in the research process and this means that children actively negotiate and sometimes challenge and resist rather than simply conform to and accept the adult power and demands during research interactions (Walkerdine, 1990). Relations of power between adults as researchers and children as researched are complex, as they are not fixed as adult researching children but, children too, emerge as agential beings who are constantly engaged in acts of negotiation with and resistance to the researcher's ways of asserting the usual adult power over children during research (Martin, 2011).

In fieldwork practice involving young participants, the adult researcher often commands a great deal of power and control over the entire research process, but this power is not fixed or static. Rather, the literature suggests that the adult researcher generally has power throughout the different stages of the research process, but during fieldwork, that power can be challenged by the children (Walkerdine, 1990). This suggests that the adult-child power relationship is not a monolithic enterprise but rather power needs to be understood as a social force that is fluid and constantly shifting: a process that sees both the adult researcher and the young research participant as capable of holding, exercising, resisting, negotiating, and challenging certain discourses of power during fieldwork. For example, Walkerdine (1990) observes teacher-supervised and gender-mixed play at a nursery school in the United Kingdom and shows how this play session provided opportunities for particular kinds of gender-polarized performances among the children, where the boys sought to exercise masculine power through dominating and intimidating girls. However, Walkerdine (1990) also documents how some boys drew on the patriarchal and heterosexist discourses to disobey, resist, and undermine the formal power and authority of their female teacher who sought to exert the usual adult power and control by intervening to support the girls, while reprimanding the bullying practices of the young boys during play in the classroom. Walkerdine (1990, p. 4) presents ethnographic evidence to illuminate the particular ways in which the female teacher's attempts at exercising adult power and authority in the classroom was undermined by the young boys (4-year-olds) who sexually objectified the teacher in the classroom. The common adult-centered power relations between adults and children constrain and subordinate children (Davies, 2003; Dixon, 2011). However, Walkerdine's (1990) observations show the children are not passive objects of adult power and authority. The young boys' strategies against the female adult's power and authority in the classroom demonstrate children's power and agency which challenges the common-sense adult-centric form of power in which adults are simply seen as the sheer figures of power over passive, docile, and subservient children (Walkerdine, 1990). Indeed, Foucault (1982) argued that power relations between individuals or groups are far more complex than a common-sense dominant-subordinate binary. For example, he argued that:

a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that "the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up (Foucault, 1982, p. 789).

Power relations are complex as they are characterized by a series of oppositions such as the children's opposition to the power of the adult over children (Walkerdine, 1990). In this article, I unpack how the complexity of power is manifest in the interactions and relationships between the children and myself (adult male researcher) during my own ethnographic fieldwork. I reflect on how the different children expressed their agential power in their variegated reactions and responses to the playground strategy I employed in order to establish child-centered relationships with the young boys and girls. The different responses and reactions were characterized by different forms or strategies of resistance by the young children. I explore these responses and reactions with a view to illustrate the complexity of power relations in human interactions as articulated by Foucault (1982). I document and analyze how, as active agents (Prout & James, 1997), or free subjects (Foucault, 1982), the young children reacted with various strategies of resistance against my taken-for-granted expressions and exercises of adult male power.

The Context of the Study

This article is based on an ethnographic study conducted between 2012 and 2015 among 6- to 12-year-old boys and girls at play in a South African township primary school. The study employed ethnographic methods of participant observation and qualitative interviewing to explore how these young children construct their gender identities through play on the school playground during break. In developing an understanding of the relationship between play and childhood gender identity construction, the study was influenced by the works of Francis (1998), MacNaughton (2000), Davies (2003), Blaise (2005), Martin (2011), and Thorne (1993) who have applied the principles of the NSC to investigate children's constructions of gender identities through play within the diverse social and material contexts in the United States, Australia, and United Kingdom. I was influenced by this work in the sense that I drew on this work to develop my knowledge around the application of the NSC during fieldwork. This study aimed to further the scholarly debate around childhood gender identity construction through play by focusing on the relatively under-explored experiences and perspectives of young children in a black township primary school in South Africa. The primary school in this study is plagued by poverty due to insufficient and poor quality educational and recreational resources for its learners. For example, the school does not have its own sports grounds and depends on the nearby community sports grounds for organized sporting activities. Space for break-time play

activities is also very limited due to overcrowding of learners. During break time, the children used the paved schoolyard between the blocks of classrooms to play games, but boys often dominated this space. Therefore, in this article, the term playground refers not to a pitch or a field but to the paved schoolyard where I observed the young children at play during break time.

I adopted the “least adult role” (Martin, 2011, p. 9) in my interactions with the children on the playground during break by developing playful, friendly, and child-centered relations with them. These are the kinds of relations that I believed would enable the children to talk to me as if they were talking among themselves and not with an adult. Among other key findings, the ethnography revealed how the playground operates as a particular learning space, where the young children learned and performed context-specific gender norms and constantly policed each other’s gendered performances during break time. However, the aim of this article is not to discuss the ethnographic data, as this has been discussed in the previous articles (see Mayeza, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). Rather, in this article, I reflect on the relational dynamics that characterized the process of producing the ethnographic data. I unravel the complexities of reducing the perceptions of adult male power during ethnographic observations with the young children on the playground during break.

Establishing Child-Centered Relations With the Children Through Playground Play

My ethnographic research was motivated by a commitment to address researched children as the experts in their everyday social lives and learn from them about the meanings they attach to gender as they play. I proceeded to begin my fieldwork by trying to present myself in a way that the children could relate to me and not in the presumed position of adult male formal power and authority. My aim was to be identified by the children in a way that was less authoritative and unlike their teachers who exercise power over the children.

One of the ways in which I tried to reduce the perceptions of adult male power and establish child-centered relations with the children was by immersing myself into and participating in their play activities in the playground during break time. Understandably, an adult playing with children during break was not a common occurrence at the school. The other adults at the school, that is, the teachers, were strictly associated with the classroom and the usual formal adult authority (Dixon, 2011): an identity construct that is far removed from playground activities, especially during break time. The teachers’ presence and involvement in playground activities was restricted to periods of organized school sports, where they assumed positions of power as supervisors, coaches, instructors, or trainers of the children who were positioned as subordinate, novice, and dependent on adults for support and training. Although they were on the playground and interacting with the children, the teachers did not play *with* the children. They took a detached superordinate position that served to (re)produce the usual adult–child power differential (Dixon, 2011).

Unlike the teachers who were strongly invested in the usual adult authority and power that subordinated and silenced learners, my primary concern was to disassociate myself from the authoritative figure of a teacher by developing child-centered relationships with the children. However, the children did not simply accept my playful disposition in my attempts toward building child-centered relations with them. That is, the children expressed agency by simultaneously accommodating and resisting the “least adult role” that I adopted in the study.

I remember the occasions when I felt accommodated and accepted by the children. For instance, when I showed up on the playground during break, the boys who were playing football often encouraged me to join them. My positive response to their invitations was often followed by humor because the boys laughed at me every time they managed to kick the ball so that it passed through my legs. Within the South African context, an occurrence such as this where a ball is kicked and it passes through the legs of the opponent is humiliating, as it is seen as a display of poor skill in football on the part of the opponent. My lack of skill in football was met with much humor among both the boys whom I was playing with and also among the girls who watched the football games from the margins. The humor that emanated from the children while I was playing with them, especially when they believed that they were better than me, seemed to contribute significantly to my objective of reducing the perceptions of adult male power among children in this school. I managed to break through to these children by playing with them and intentionally allowing them to be better than me.

By playing with the children, I managed to reduce the perceptions of power and subsequently I became accessible to them. They were able to speak openly with me about different issues around gender which they said they had never discussed with their teachers. For instance, some of them said they were scared of talking with their teachers about certain issues around gender violence and homophobic bullying that they experienced on a daily basis on school grounds during break. The authoritative figure of a teacher scared the children and silenced them from talking openly about issues of concern to them. By playing with the children, I became accessible to them which is in marked contrast to the teachers who are associated with rigid classroom activities accompanied by the adult authoritarian disposition which reinforced the power differentials between children and adults. While there were times I felt accepted by the children, such as when they allowed me to play with them, there were times when I felt like an adult authority figure and an outsider. This was especially when, on many occasions, some boys referred to me as coach, a label they bestowed on me. This label is accompanied by the power and authority of an adult male whom they perceive to be as good in football and expected to teach them how to play.

How Boys Expressed Agency by Resisting My “Least Adult Role” in the Playground

While the children welcomed and accommodated me on their playground by inviting me to play with them, they also

perceived me as a coach. Such identification served to reposition me as an adult male formal authority figure who was more knowledgeable about football than them. For example, it was not uncommon for the boys who played football, such as Andile¹ [11 years old], to call me coach:

Hey, coach . . . it's time to play football now. Coach, please come and it's time to play football! You're the coach and you must teach us football. But the first thing is, please pick the players for the two teams. Coach, you must show us all your football skills . . . (Field notes, 8 March 2013).

Given that the label coach is generally associated with having expertise, skill, and being a leader, the boys in this study constructed me in a way that presumed I knew about football. I, however, was not altogether happy with the boys referring to me as coach because of the associated power that accompanies the label. My intention was to disrupt the power relationship while the coach label serves to reinforce it. I resisted the power-based identification as a coach and pretended to be a novice in football. Doing so enabled me to position the boys as the experts and whom I constantly requested assistance and guidance from. Allowing children the freedom and opportunity to lead me and treating them as the experts while we played proved effective in supporting the child-centered objectives of my ethnographic study. Affording the children a level of power, authority, and control during play allowed them to relate to me as a peer rather than an adult. When the presumed adult power was subverted on the playground, the children felt free to be themselves and to open up around me, and they were more comfortable and spoke freely later when I conducted informal interviews with them. For example, one of the boys who played football during break revealed in the interview that football is not a game that he enjoys:

Honestly, I don't like football but I only play it because I'm forced to play it. The other boys will tease me and call me gay if I tell them the truth that I don't enjoy playing football because football is rough. I want to play skipping rope. But, I can't do that because the other boys will call me gay if I skip, they say skipping is only for girls and the boys who skip are gay. (Thato, 11 years old)

What I found substantively regarding the construction of gender through play among the children is the "boundary" that exists between football and skipping. Football was constructed as a key symbolic marker of "normative" masculinity. Skipping, on the other hand, was associated with girls and femininity. This "boundary" was "policed" through various means including the teasing of boys who skipped through calling them gay and therefore "less masculine" (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Mayeza, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). I argue that subverting adult power was important in terms of encouraging the children to feel free around me and to open up to me about their fears, experiences, concerns, and anxieties around gender and play during break at school.

Another interesting observation is that, in the context of football, the label coach had gendered connotations. I came to learn that coach was typically associated with masculine qualities. When I asked one of the boys why they did not refer to the woman teacher who coached football as coach, he responded as follows:

All teachers here at school we call Miss, Miss Vezi is coaching our football but we don't call her coach. We call her Miss, we call her Miss all the time. She is not like you . . . she is not a man. You're a man, and that is why we call you coach. We don't call her coach because she is not a man. You are like us . . . you play football with us and you are a friend now! (Fana, 10 years old)

The boys constructed me in contradictory ways, that is, as a coach (a role which they associated with adult men) and as a friend. I experienced the two labels in different ways. That is, being related to as a friend signaled my success at building child-centered relationships with the children through play. But at the same time, the label coach reminded me of the inevitable power differential between adults and children and the associated challenges this differential posed to my research aim of exploring childhood agency in gender identity construction.

During my playground interactions with the children during break, I was able to relate to and identify more with boys, particularly those who played football regularly. Besides the general feeling of belonging among boys which was accentuated by the shared common interest in football, my tendency to interact with and focus more on boys than girls was also encouraged by the boys themselves, who made more playful approaches to me than the girls. For example, while boys approached me to play football with them, girls did not approach me to skip with them, although they did approach me when they needed my assistance. As I elaborate below, the sort of assistance they sought from me was protection from the gendered violence they faced while in the playground. The fact that girls often approached me to seek assistance rather than to invite me to participate in their games suggests that most girls in the study regarded me simply as an adult formal figure of authority on the playground rather than a playmate or friend.

It was while discussing my field research with my research supervisor who enquired about the gender of the research participants that I came to realize that I did interact more with boys than with girls, even though the study did not specify a focus on boys. My tendency to focus on boys is interesting for a post-structural feminist analysis of gender relations (Butler, 1990). That is, such a spontaneous focus illustrates the often taken-for-granted, context-specific gendered identifications and relations we make with others in our everyday social interactions (Butler, 1990; Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000; Martin, 2011; Pattman & Chege, 2003). Within the poststructural feminist framework, gender is conceptualized not as a fixed biological essence but as a social construct (Butler, 1990) with man/boy and woman/girl seen as particular kinds of polarized social identifications that are constructed and performed in relation or in opposition to each other (Davies, 2003; MacNaughton,

2000). However, the constructions and performances of gender are not static or fixed, but they are fluid as they are subject to change and modification depending on context (MacNaughton, 2000). Butler (1990) argued that gender identifications in societies where these are polarized are often taken for granted, and people come to see and define themselves as essentially male or female through routinized and repetitive gendered performances.

Following Butler's (1990) argument about the performance or the performativity of gender which becomes naturalized through repetition, my identification with the boys shows the significant impact the dominant discourse of polarized gender identities in our societies has on how we (as social researchers) conduct research or how we conduct ourselves socially during research. My identification with boys points to the internalization of gender norms and normalization which makes it difficult for the researcher to separate himself from the social processes that serve to perpetuate gender.

The way I identified with and interacted with boys compares with the work of Thorne (1993) who, using ethnography, shows different ways of identifying with boys and girls. As a female researcher, Thorne (1993) identified more directly with girls who awakened her childhood self as an unpopular but "average" girl at school. While her observations with girls allowed her to revisit her girlhood past through memory, boys did not remind her of these experiences; she related to the boys in a more detached and much less direct way and only as a mother. Thorne's (1993) direct identification with girls and my own strong identification with boys highlight the importance of social researchers being able to critically reflect on their own subjectivities, constructions, and experiences around gender. It also highlights the importance of researchers being able to analyze how their personal backgrounds may influence the kinds of identifications they make with different people in the research process.

Following my supervisor's comments regarding the attention I gave to boys and the neglect of girls, I made a conscious effort to engage more with girls. This enabled me to explore how gender influenced what people did and how they played and interacted on the playground during break. Furthermore, it enabled me to explore the children's investments in the very category boy and girl and the sorts of symbolic meanings they attached to these, with a particular focus on play. When I focused on girls and how they construct gender through play, it was evident that there were gendered differences in my forms of interactions with boys and girls. While my interactions with boys were spontaneous, it was different with girls. Interactions with girls required greater effort on my part and I struggled to get them to open up during the interviews. In contrast, the boys were proactive and approached me to be part of their playgroup activities, social circles, and conversations during break at school. Furthermore, my interactions with girls were more conversational in nature and involved minimal participation in their playground activities. For example, I interacted with boys on the playground by playing football with them. This did not happen with girls with whom I interacted on the playground.

Girls and Agency: Disrupting the Researcher's Power and Authority on the Playground

I spent time interacting with the children on the playground during break to reduce the perceptions of the adult-child power differentials between these primary school learners and myself. I was interested in assuming the "least adult role/position" by developing child-centered relations with both boys and girls. However, in some instances, the boys and girls in the study expressed agency as they were constructing me in ways that challenged my research aims. While the boys constructed me as a coach, the girls constructed me as a formal source of support. The kind of support the girls required was usually for me to protect them from forms of gendered violence they experienced on the playground as evidenced in the following field note:

I remember today in the playground, a girl who came to me crying and when I asked why she was crying, she said that there was another boy who refused to move off the swing known to be for girls, which she wanted to use. My role in this situation was to lend a sympathetic ear. After listening to what she had to say, I then suggested that she reports this boy's behaviour to her class teacher who would know how best to deal with the problem... (Field notes, 8 March 2013).

When the children approached me to report incidents of misbehavior or conflict of any kind in the playground, drawing on Thorne (1993), I referred them to their teachers. I did this not because I am uncaring but because I wanted to stay true to the "least adult role" I adopted in the study, as I did not want to be seen as an authority figure but rather preferred to "blend" in with the learners so that they would see me as one of them. My aim was to distance myself as far as possible from the usual adult formal position of power and authority that defines and disciplines misbehavior.

However, in certain instances, I did intervene or assisted in resolving conflict among children on the playground. For example, I did intervene when there was violence as evidenced in the numerous incidents observed in the playground in which some children (mostly girls) were teased, hit, excluded, pinched, intimidated, bullied, and pushed around during break. But I was always cautious not to assume the teacher position of power by disciplining or imposing punishment on learners. I limited my involvement to stopping violence when it occurred, and I left the teachers to decide on disciplinary matters.

The "least adult role" that I adopted was significant in terms of helping to reduce the perceptions of adult power, thereby allowing the study to achieve its goal of understanding how the young children construct gender through play during break. However, the use of the camera to document gender among children on the playground posed other challenges to the "least adult role" of the child-centered relations I wanted to form and sustain during my fieldwork with the young children.

The Camera and Power Issues in the Adult–child Relationship During Fieldwork

The young children's constructions of gender identities during break on the playground were documented using a digital video camera to record activities, roles, and behaviors among the children. The literature (see Mitchell, Moletsane, Stuart, Buthelezi, & De Lange, 2005, Pink, 2001; Mitchell, Walsh, & Moletsane, 2006) on the use of a camera during fieldwork highlights a number of benefits. One of the major benefits is that the camera helps to capture richer visual data about the ethnographic setting, objects, people, behaviors, and activities than is often possible through the usual methods of observing the field and taking notes (Pink, 2001). Pictures and videos provide ethnographers with rich detail not only about the people and the nature of the social activities they engage in, but they also provide more information about the particular socio-cultural and material context within which the people live and experience every day social life (Pink, 2001).

However, using a camera during ethnographic fieldwork is not without problems and limitations. For example, Bhana (2002, p. 75) discusses some of the major problems she experienced as an ethnographer using a camera during fieldwork with young children in South Africa. She reflects on some of the problems as follows:

I made use of the video recorder . . . While this method was useful it was not particularly desirable for some children. The presence of a large video camera did distract the children. They were very curious about how the camera functioned. Many children had never seen a camera before. They became very self-conscious during taping sessions . . .

In my study, using the camera produced various relational issues of power between the young participants and myself. In particular, in the initial stages of my fieldwork, using the camera seemed to work against the child-centered stance that I wanted to adopt for the study. The children constructed the camera as a particular symbol of power, and, as such, it objectified me as a figure of formal authority, rather than as a child-centered ethnographer. For example, when I was on the playground carrying my hand-held digital video camera and started recording the children at play, they stopped playing and focused on me and the camera. Many of them were happy to pose for a photo shoot with some asking me to focus the camera on them and they were competing for the attention of the camera. Everyone wanted to be in the front line of the group photo. Therefore, using a camera to capture the dynamics of gender in children's play posed some problems, as it served to objectify me as an adult power figure among the children or just a cameraman or photographer rather than my actual role as a child-centered ethnographer interested in minimizing the perceptions of the adult male power during the research. I wanted to disassociate myself from the position of power associated with being an adult and a cameraman among the children and focus, instead, on maintaining the "least adult role" in my

relationships and interactions with the young children on the playground.

Although I discussed with the children the use of the camera before the fieldwork practice, this did not help to reduce the influence of the camera on the children's behaviors on the playground during break. Therefore, I thought it was necessary for me to discuss the camera for the second time during the fieldwork to remind them so as to make sure that they fully understand this method of documenting the field and reascertain their views and opinions. I reintroduced them to the camera and the purpose for its use. I explained how it worked, and all of its functions and parts. I explained to them why I needed to record their everyday playground activities and interactions during break. I emphasized that because I was taking them seriously, it was important for me to record them and what they do on the playground during break. Following this explanation, the children seemed less distracted by the camera and did not stop playing to request a photo shoot whenever I came to their play and social circles.

During the second round of the discussion about the camera, I gave the children more space to voice their thoughts. I also allowed them more time and opportunities to ask me questions. I was asked whether the participants would be shown the pictures and allowed an opportunity to watch the recordings. I assured the children that they would view all the pictures and video recordings. As they viewed the pictures and video clips, I encouraged further discussions about the themes that emerged from the recordings. In other words, the camera became more than just a device for documenting the children's playground behaviors. It also became a useful means of generating interesting discussions with the children in which I explored the meanings they attached to gendered play during break. For example, after showing the boys a video clip recording them playing football on the playground, I encouraged them to critically reflect on gender in their play activity as follows:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Researcher: | I wonder why girls are not in this football video, I wonder why girls are not playing football together with you? |
| Sboniso [9 years old]: | No, we don't play with girls. Girls don't play football, girls skip. |
| Sanele [10 years old]: | Girls skip, and we don't skip. We like football, that's our game. |
| Ntokozo [10 years old]: | Girls skip all the time. |
| Researcher: | Would you play football with girls if they wanted to? |
| Ntokozo: | Girls can't play football. |
| Researcher to Ntokozo: | And that's because . . . ? |
| Ntokozo: | Girls don't like football, they like skipping. |
| Sboniso: | Girls don't know how to play football right, they'll use hands on the ball [Laughs]. |
| Sanele: | Everyone knows, football is for boys, and is not for girls. |
| Researcher to Sanele: | Why is football for boys and not for girls? |

- Sanale: I don't know.
 Researcher to Sanele: Would you play football with girls?
 Sanele: No.
 Researcher to Sanele: Why not?
 Sanele: It's not their game. And they'd cry when hit by the ball [Mocks a girl's crying face].
 Sboniso and Ntokozo: [React with laughter and then further perform their own mocking of a girl's cry in which they use saliva to mark tears. There is more laughter and ridicule of girls, which shows their presumed inabilities in and unsuited qualities for a perceived masculine game of football].

Giving children a voice and listening to what they say was significant in terms of maximizing the role and function of the camera during the fieldwork. I encouraged gender-focused conversations through constantly reviewing the pictures and video recordings with the children. Conversations that emanated as a result of recordings built on themes about gender which I captured on camera and further explored by engaging the children in order to explore the particular meanings they attach to the taken-for-granted gendered patterns which marked their play behaviors on the playground during break time.

Concluding Notes: Lessons Novice or Experienced Child-centered Researchers can Learn From My Experiences

I have reflected on the difficulties in reducing the perceptions of adult male power during the child-centered ethnographic research on young children's constructions of gender identities through play in a South African schooling context. The critical reflections discussed in this article provide new insights from a South African male perspective around how gender and power relations play out in child-centered ethnographic fieldwork. Here, I outline what I consider to be some of the key lessons emanating from the discussions throughout the article which I think would be pertinent for other male or female researchers concerned about addressing children as the experts in order to gain their perspectives on aspects of childhood. The main aim here is to provide novice or seasoned researchers with some insights from a male perspective on issues to consider when planning or conducting child-centered ethnographic fieldwork.

Addressing Children as Active Agents in Research

Addressing children as active agents in research requires the researcher to actively and constantly work toward negotiating and establishing friendly and child-centered relationships with children. Future researchers working within the framework of the New Sociology of Childhood can adopt the "least adult role" I employed in my interactions with primary schoolchildren on the playground during break. While the strategy of

reducing the perceptions of adult power by playing with the children and positioning them as the experts can contribute toward encouraging the children to begin to see and relate to the researcher not as an adult formal figure of authority but as a potential friend or another child, it is difficult to invert the adult-child power differential. Among other reasons, it is difficult because children are active agents in their own right. The idea of children's agency can manifest in different ways. The children in this study exercised their agential power not by simply accepting the child-centered and least adult role I adopted in the field but by actively resisting this positioning in ways that made me realize the complexity of adult-child power relations during research.

Addressing Critical Self-Reflexivity in Ethnographic Research

Critical self-reflexivity should form an integral part of any ethnographic research reporting. In this article, I have reflected on myself not just as an adult but also as a man researching young boys and girls and trying to establish child-centered relations with them. I show in this article that as an adult male, the boys and girls constructed me differently. I have discussed the sorts of gendered identifications between myself and the young children. I have shown how and why the boys constructed me as a friendly adult male, and at the same time, as a coach. Although playing football with the boys enabled them to relate to me more as a friend or peer than an adult authority figure, they referred to me as coach in ways that suggested they viewed me as an adult male who supposedly is an expert in football.

I had a rather different relationship with girls in the setting, and it was much more difficult for me to befriend girls and immerse myself into their social worlds as compared to boys. What is to be learnt here is that as young as they are, they are able to attach specific meanings to gender. They relate to and react differently to the adult researcher because gender is one of the key factors that shape the relational dynamics between the adult male researcher and girls and boys. As social researchers, we are not immune to the processes that serve to (re)produce the polarized gender stereotypes. I inadvertently identified and interacted more with boys than with girls. This compels researchers to be critically self-reflexive throughout the research process and to reflect on the kinds of relationships we form with the different people we research.

Addressing the Fluidity, Flexibility, and Unpredictability of Ethnographic Research With Young Children

Ethnographic research is unpredictable, and this unpredictability is the main reason why ethnographers have to "go with the flow" (Madden, 2010, p. 75). Such unpredictability, however, is more significant as a feature of the research process when the research involves young children as participants (Mayeza, 2015). For example, this study intended to use a camera to document evidence relating to the dynamics of gender among

children during their playground play. But, in the process of doing the field research, the camera became more than just a tool to document the evidence. It also became a powerful resource for stimulating rich gender-focused discussions with the young children. However, at the same time, the use of the camera raised a number of issues around power relations and subjectivities that I had not anticipated before embarking on the fieldwork. Future child-centered ethnographers should approach the field with an open mind and view the camera as a useful resource but also bear in mind that it has the potential to pose problems and issues that relate to power. Some of the potential challenges can be circumvented by drawing on my experiences discussed in the article.

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1. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the participants.

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