Confessions of an inadequate researcher: space and supervision in research with learning disabled children

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ABSTRACT
Location is often at the fore of decision-making regarding fieldwork and choice of methods. However, little research has directly discussed the importance of the choice of site in the production of research data, particularly concerning the way that different relationships will manifest between researcher and participant in different spaces. Site may be particularly important in research with (learning disabled) children, as research location is intertwined with the level of caregiving required from the researcher, and the sorts of surveillance the research engagement may be subject to. This paper draws on research with learning disabled 6–16-year olds that took place in homes, schools and the outdoors, in a variety of microgeographical locations from bedrooms to nature reserves. This paper reflects on the challenges, including the very ‘worst’ research moments, occurring in the different research environments. Whilst the research was carried out with learning disabled children and young people, the discussion has implications for research with non-disabled children and ‘vulnerable’ participants more broadly.

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effectuée auprès d’enfants ayant des difficultés d’apprentissage et de jeunes gens, la discussion a des implications pour la recherche auprès d’enfants non handicapés et de participants « vulnérables » plus généralement.

Confesiones de un investigador inadecuado: espacio y supervisión en la investigación con niños con dificultades de aprendizaje

RESUMEN
La ubicación es a menudo uno de los factores principales en la toma de decisiones en relación con el trabajo de campo y la elección de métodos. Sin embargo, pocos estudios han examinado directamente la importancia de la elección del sitio en la producción de datos de investigación, en particular sobre la forma en que las diferentes relaciones se manifestarán entre el investigador y participante en diferentes espacios. El sitio puede ser particularmente importante en la investigación con niños (con dificultades de aprendizaje), ya que la ubicación de la investigación se entrelaza con el nivel de prestación de cuidados que se requiere por parte del investigador, y el tipo de vigilancia al que puede estar sujeto el compromiso de la investigación. Este documento se basa en la investigación con niños con dificultades de aprendizaje de entre 6 y 16 años que se llevó a cabo en hogares, escuelas y espacios abiertos, en una variedad de lugares micro-geográficos, desde habitaciones hasta reservas naturales. El documento sigue a Horton (2008. A ‘sense of failure’? Everydayness and research ethics. Children’s Geographies, 6, 4, 363-383.), entre otros investigadores en la geografía de los niños y geografías sociales, al reflexionar sobre los desafíos, incluyendo los ‘peores’ momentos de investigación, que se producen en diferentes entornos de investigación. Mientras que la investigación se llevó a cabo con niños y jóvenes con dificultades de aprendizaje, la discusión tiene implicaciones para la investigación con niños sin dificultades y los participantes ‘vulnerables’ en términos más generales.

Introduction
This paper examines the role of location in a recent study involving learning disabled children and young people as research participants, exploring perception and experiences of green spaces. Whilst research with this participant group throws up a wide variety of methodological, ethical and practical challenges, this paper focuses particularly on the spaces in which research was conducted, the negotiations that occurred over control of these spaces and although rarely explicit, over control of the participants in these spaces. Sites of research will be considered in terms of the way in which they define, or at least influence, the relationship between the researcher and the participant, particularly in the light of mediation, or involvement, from third-party gatekeepers. This approach builds on the burgeoning interest in research ethics, and their practical and methodological implications, evident throughout human geography publications of the last 20 years. These discussions have certainly been at the fore of children’s geography where the ethical implications of research are increasingly given as much concern as the empirical or theoretical outcomes (see e.g. Horton, 2001).
Whilst interest is growing, space in which qualitative research occurs, and the ethical and methodological implications over the characteristics of this environment, has not been discussed as rigorously as other aspects of conducting research (Jones, 2008). This paper considers the implications of the variety of spaces that were offered as potential research locations in participants’ homes, in school and when conducting research outdoors or in alternative venues. Each sort of space offered different opportunities and challenges, particularly in terms of avoiding both isolation and interference, requiring a different set of behaviours and practices from the researcher and resulting in a unique research relationship. This paper intends to present a frank discussion of the ethical and methodological implications of the choices and compromises over research space made by the author when researching with learning disabled children and young people, aged 6–16. This discussion is predicated upon three vignettes illustrating some of the ‘worst’ moments of my research experiences. These are moments in which my actions, or failure to act, led to harm for the participants – moments I am ashamed of, or at least confused about.

Focusing on negative research experiences is not a novel way to explore research ethics and methods. For example, Horton (2008) draws on Rose (1997) in considering moments of failure. Horton (2008) argues that this approach highlights the way in which the messiness of everyday life, acknowledged by recent developments in social and cultural geography, is reproduced in the research process. Moreover, he argues that acknowledging the messiness and unpredictability of the real world presents significant challenges to a traditional, static, approach to research ethics. This paper reflects on my own experiences of failure in order to produce a constructive response to the inadequacy I felt in those research moments; as Pyer (2008, p. 216) states: ‘it is not good enough to rationalise the unintended simply by saying it was unfortunate – ethical research depends on more than that’. In choosing failures as a topic of deliberation, this paper intends to highlight the power relations manifest in the spaces of research that might not have been so starkly illustrated, had the young people encountered a positive experience within the same networks of governance. This is to say that when research processes go to plan, embedded relationships of power may be invisible. When expectations are conflicted, or processes disrupted, previously unnoticed, or unspoken, hierarchies may be illuminated. As such, reflection on these embedded relationships may be sufficient to turn these ‘unfortunate’ events into useful learning experiences.

The research that is the foundation of this discussion, occurred as part of a social geography investigation, but was situated in the context of an understanding of the social model of disability. The social model is a key, although not uncriticised, approach within Disability Studies and allied disciplines, with its roots in disability activism and disability rights dialogue. The social model states that people are disabled, not as a logical outcome of impairment, but through society’s inability to meet their individual needs (see e.g. Oliver, 2004). For this reason, the UK Disability Studies movement favours the use of the term ‘disabled person’, as it emphasises the fact that society has done the disabling, rather than ‘person with a disability’, which locates the ‘fault’ with the individual. In addition to the linguistic ramifications of this approach, my research with learning disabled children has also sought to reproduce some of the political discourse of the social model. This has involved attempts to maximise the agency of the child participants, adapting methods and approaches to draw on their strengths in communication and promoting an agenda of choice, with an ideal that the participants will become the key decision-makers in the research process. This approach is also very much in line with the participatory approaches at the fore of research in children’s
geography and across social geography (Abebe & Bessell, 2014; Alderson, 1995; Cope, 2008, amongst many others).

**Place in research with children**

Decisions about the location of research activities are often central to discussions in the research planning stage of the fieldwork process. Initial discussions concerning location tend to centre around the practicalities of accessing the intended participants in the chosen space – normally relating to the number of participants needed for the study, the duration and frequency of contact and the potential to engage the participants in the sorts of activities desired by the researcher. However, these early discussions may also consider an assessment of the risks involved, and the ‘ethical’ implications of conducting research in a particular site (Anderson & Jones, 2009; Bushin, 2007; Elwood & Martin, 2000; Valentine, 1999, amongst many others).

I emphasise ‘ethical’, in agreement with Halse and Honey (2007) and Allen (2009) regarding the gulf in understanding that might exist between ‘ethics’ as comprehended by an appointed institutional committee, and the ‘ethical’ imperative of a social science researcher aspiring to a participatory or emancipatory approach. By this I mean that a traditional approach to ethics, and the one that still appears to be the working paradigm for many ethics committees, is that ethical research should minimise harm (Halse & Honey, 2007). This is in terms of both physical and psychological harm, to both participants and researchers. However, a participatory approach to ethics suggests that our duty as researchers goes beyond preventing harm, to maximising agency amongst our participants (e.g. Cope, 2008) and/or maximising benefit to relevant communities (e.g. Mills, 2013). Unfortunately, the two approaches to ethics, an approach that prevents harm, and an approach that maximises benefit, may be, in children’s geographies at least, at odds with one another (Abebe & Bessell, 2014; Hammersley, 2009). The clearest example of this is in terms of consent to participate, where researchers are often duty bound by ethics committees to obtain parental consent, perceived as a way of minimising harm. Conversely, children’s geographers might argue that this simultaneously removes children’s agency in the process, and therefore contradicts participatory ethics (see Masson, 2000). The widespread institutional reticence to engage with concerns over children’s agency in research leads decisions over research venue to be viewed as a predominantly practical consideration, relating to ‘accessibility’ and ‘safety’, in their various forms, with little acknowledgement of any ontological implications (see also Dyer & Demeritt, 2009).

This paper intends to explore both the ‘ethical’ (relating to participant power in the research process) and the ontological significance of conducting research with children in a place. That is to say, the importance of recognising that research activities occur not only in a room, at a table, on some grass, but within a building or on land that has significance as being bounded by institutional or familial practices and norms. Elwood and Martin (2000, p. 649) identify the ‘microgeography’ of the interview site, arguing that decisions on the location of research can illustrate the social geographies of a place. In this paper, research sites will be reconstructed as research places with imbibed ways of being and ways of behaving that may have significant influence on the interactions between researcher and participant, and the sorts of knowledge that are produced through this relationship. Focusing on learning disabled children as research participants may provide a particularly acute example
of a working relationship that is a product of, or at least heavily influenced by, the place in which it occurs. This is due to the heightened social perception of the vulnerability and incapacity of learning disabled children, and the high levels of protection duly afforded to them (for a classic discussion of this issue, see Wolpert, 1980; and for more detail concerning my own participants, von Benzon, 2011). However, foregrounding discussion about the dynamics of researcher–participant interactions and the importance of the environment in which they occur have significant implications for research with all ‘vulnerable’ participants, and even those typically felt to have relative agency in the research process.

The growth in interest in methods and practice in research with children is part of a wider academic focus, since the 1990s, on the ethics of undertaking research with a population understood to be marginalised (Alderson, 1995; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Rose, 1997; Valentine, 1999; Winchester, 1996, amongst many others). The recognition of the unequal power relations present in social interaction, that manifest in a research relationship between an adult researcher and a child participant, is by no means novel. What is new, or at least, increasingly present, is the acceleration of discourse concerning the ethics of research with children relating to all facets of the research process. Particularly, this is in relation to the discussion of strategies to overcome ethical, methodological and practical challenges (e.g. Bushin, 2007), and honesty and reflexivity in the voice of the author (e.g. Horton, 2008). Despite the academic interest in the practicalities of carrying out research with children and young people, it is often difficult to tease out the importance of site in research with children. Even papers that focus in some detail on ethical and methodological aspects of research rarely devote space to discussion of the ontological importance of the research site. There are notable exceptions, of course (such as Elwood & Martin, 2000; Jones, 2008), which will be explored. The following section considers in turn literature relating to research in schools, in homes and in ‘alternative’ sites.

Research in school

Schools provide the location for much research with children (e.g. Barker, Alldred, Watts, & Dodman, 2010; Davis, Watson, & Cunningham-Burley, 2000; Goodfellow, 2012; Holt, 2003; Jones, 2008, amongst many others). Once the researcher is granted entry, schools offer potential access to large numbers of children for long periods of time. Other than the practical advantages, there may be clear epistemological arguments for undertaking research within a school. School is children's work; children's lives tend to centre around school, with their friendships often revolving around their school-based social circles (Morris-Roberts, 2004). For many children, schools are the key space in which their intellect, sociability and physique are developed, and critiqued (Hemming, 2011; Holt, 2004); therefore, research that occurs in school might be argued to be better placed to catch sight of these moments in children's lives. It might also be argued that school-based research has greater potential socio-political impact, as school's policy and practices are heavily influenced, determined even, by outside agencies who may in turn be influenced by research outcomes in a way that family behaviours may not (e.g. Evans, Evans, & Rich, 2003).

The school as a research site might have particular significance for learning disabled children, whether attending a segregated specialist school, or a mainstream school. Either mode of education will result in the young person experiencing difference, whether through segregation from their peers in the local community, through part- or full-time use of a
specialist unit or as someone who receives additional support within a mainstream classroom (Goodfellow, 2012; Holt, 2003; McMaugh, 2011; Valentine & Skelton, 2003). Not only are young disabled people likely to be positioned as ‘other’ as a result of their immediate physical or intellectual differences, and the specific educational spaces they access, they are also likely to be differentiated by limited independence within school (Worth, 2013). Disabled young people are likely to be more reliant on support, from both technological aids and other people, than their non-disabled peers (Costley, 2000).

Many researchers would argue that a school is not simply a school. By which I mean that there is no single school environment as schools contain a vast array of microgeographies of different spaces demanding different sorts of behaviours and social relations (Elwood & Martin, 2000; Holt, 2004). For example, the lived experience of the playground will contrast to the classroom, the dining hall, the gym, the science lab or even the store cupboard (Jones, 2008; Pike, 2010), due to differences in behavioural norms in these different spaces. The specific location of research within a certain microenvironment has been shown to have influence on the sorts of contributions that children will offer (Anderson & Jones, 2009). For example, Jones (2008) found that participants were happy to open up to her and share the personal details of their life in the intimate space of the store cupboard, in a manner in which they did not appear confident doing in the classroom. Holt (2004) discusses microgeographies in a school in terms of spheres of power, with different teachers implementing school policies in different ways, allowing for different behaviours and relationships in different classrooms.

Whilst the microgeography of the location is important, the temporality of the location is also a key characteristic of the research engagement. Valentine (1999) suggests that in the school context, researchers can benefit from institutional norms where children are expected to comply with adult demands (see Horton, 2008). For example, Robson and Ansell (2000, p. 178) describe conducting research ‘during a lesson period when the usual teacher was absent … organised in a manner which conformed to students’ expectations of a lesson format.’ Children’s geographers are typically striving to promote the agency of participants, meanwhile undertaking research as part of a child’s mandatory lessons, all but removes this agency (Denscombe & Aubrook, 1992). In a research context ultimately focused on producing interesting research data, it takes a strong will for a children’s researcher not to attempt to make use of this environment of compliance to ensure research participation and data generation.

Research in the home

Whilst Anderson and Jones (2009) illustrate the variation in environment within schools, homes can also offer a wide range of spaces for research. Differences in the microenvironments of the home may be more limited than those in a large institution. However, spaces in the home afford variations in their levels of privacy, and in the sorts of behaviours expected in them. For example, Mauthner (1997) describes the way in which she was led by a child, away from the lounge which was ‘public’ and characterised by comings and goings, to their own bedroom, so that sensitive issues could be discussed privately. Similarly, Nilsen and Rogers (2005) discuss the demarcation of private and public spaces within the home. Parents didn’t show the researchers their bedrooms, despite freely offering tours of the rest of the house. Meanwhile, children used the research visits as a pretext to transgress boundaries and enter parents’ or siblings’ bedrooms. These microgeographies of the home have been
less extensively explored than the microgeographies of the school, reflective perhaps of a broader discrepancy between the quantity of research conducted in schools and in homes (Bushin, 2007; Nilsen & Rogers, 2005).

Most research in households focuses on research in the child's own home, within their family (e.g. Punch, 2007; Starkweather, 2012; Tyrrell & Harmer, 2015). Whilst the home might be normatively constructed as a space of comfort, security and familiarity, a number of children's geographers have conducted research in spaces that do not conform to this ideal. Some children's geography research, focused in the global South, has involved child residential domestic workers being interviewed in their employers’ homes (Klocker, 2012). Meanwhile, Dorrer, McIntosh, Punch, and Edmond (2010) conduct research in residential children’s homes exploring food practices. On the other hand, research apparently undertaken in a space that does not conform to the researcher’s ideas of home may provide that sense of safety or belonging to the participants. For example, Ursin (2011) found the young homeless Brazilians in his research use the term ‘home’ to refer to their sleeping space in the street. There may be further methodological and ethical questions arising when young people are interviewed in other’s homes (Tucker & Matthews, 2001), and in residential care settings (Winter, 2012).

The multiplicity of spaces that might be considered as ‘home,’ and the ‘like home’ relationships with space that may exist for participants make defining, and even categorising, research in the home, a complex discursive challenge (see Nilsen & Rogers, 2005). Despite this challenge, research in the home has been credited with offering children more agency than research in schools, as a site in which children are more likely to be involved in decision-making on a day-to-day basis (Bushin, 2007). As such, the clear conflict between the expectation that children follow adult instructions and the researcher’s desire to promote children’s agency that occurs within the school may be less apparent at home. However, the extent to which this is true is likely to vary between households and families, with more variation in practice likely between different households than between different schools (see Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996). One measure of children’s agency in their home might be the extent to which children are involved in decision-making regarding research participation in the research project itself (Lewis, 2009). For example, Bushin (2007) found that despite being told a child participant had agreed to take part, the child was in fact unaware of the planned research visit, an experienced mirror in my own research visits.

There is reason to believe that lack of agency within the home may be a particular issue for disabled children. The majority of disabled children in Britain now live in the community, with their biological family (Contact A Family, n.d.). However, statistics show that disabled children's households score highly on a number of indicators for deprivation. For example, disabled children are significantly more likely to grow up in poverty than non-disabled children (Shahtahmasebi, Berridge, Lancaster, & Emerson, 2011), with 31% of UK families with disabled children without money to buy sufficient food (Contact A Family, n.d.). As such, families with disabled children can broadly be considered as particularly economically disadvantaged. This socio-economic disadvantage may combine with an overall lack of agency in the institutional service provision that surrounds their disabled child, creating a lived experience of powerlessness amongst families of disabled children.

Where families of disabled children are not more broadly disadvantaged, disabled children within these families may still experience restrictions in agency relative to their non-disabled peers. For example, older disabled children and teenagers may experience reduced
independent mobility in order for parents to minimise perceived risk (Jahonda, Wilson, & Stalker, 2010). However, lack of agency can also be brought about by social stigma and marginalisation that leads disabled children to choose to spend far more time at home, and alone, than their non-disabled siblings (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005; Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006; Solish, Perry, & Minnes, 2010). As such, the home may take on a different significance for disabled children, being at once a refuge, and a site of isolation. These factors have implications for researchers intending to enter the homes of disabled children and their families.

Alternative spaces

‘Alternative’ spaces, defined here as: the spaces that do not exist within the bounds of the school or the home, commonly appear in the literature in two ways: mobile interviews and interviews that are organised directly with young people, outside of institutions. The first approach includes methods such as ‘interviews-in-situ’ (Anderson & Jones, 2009), place-based interviewing (Holton & Riley, 2014), ‘the walk-around’ (Griffin, Lahman, & Opitz, 2014), ‘emplaced’ (Booth, 2015) and ‘Go-along’ (Bell, Phoenix, Lovell, & Wheeler, 2015). These approaches to data collection are commonly valued as means of ‘elighting’ and ‘enlivening’ research (Holton & Riley, 2014), being argued to facilitate depth of data production, as the embodied experience of the place encourages the elicitation of memories and ideas.

Another approach to defining ‘alternative’ spaces in research with children is to consider them as those places that are not accessed through negotiations with schools or families. Children’s research addressing non-institutional spaces, especially ‘the street’, is common in an international, particularly a majority world, context (Ursin, 2011; van Blerk, 2005) but not the norm in a North American or European context. This is due to a variety of reasons, most significantly perhaps due to the institutionalisation of childhood throughout the minority world, and the suspicion that falls on unregulated adult–child interactions (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Malone, 2007). Most researchers, and research institutions, would consider an adult researcher too vulnerable to misinterpretation or accusation if they were to directly approach children. A good illustration of this reticence is provided by Matthews, Limb, and Taylor (2000); to explore young people’s use of ‘the street’, they sought written permission from parents, and qualified as outreach youth workers, before young people were approached. More generally, research addressing young people’s use of public space, or independent, uninstitutionalised movements, tends to be embedded in a research relationship based within some sort of institution (e.g. Collins & Kearns, 2001; Robinson, 2009).

There is a particular absence of disabled young people in research in ‘alternative spaces’. This is both in terms of mobile research and research that occurs beyond institutional boundaries. The primary exceptions to this are work addressing mobility with mobility-impaired young people such as wheelchair users (Pyer and Tucker, 2014) and visually impaired teenagers (Worth, 2013). One significant barrier to mobile research with disabled young people may be ethics and risk assessment considering this too risky an endeavour. This was my own experience when planning to conduct research with learning disabled young people, as the ethics committee insisted on a second adult present in order to manage unruly or unpredictable behaviour form the young people. Similarly, gate keepers may consider researchers unqualified or inexperienced to adequately safeguard participants. The lack of disabled young people in research in ‘alternative’ spaces mirrors a broad lack of disabled young people
engaging in social activities outside the home and school (Solish et al., 2010). As such, researchers intending to undertake research with disabled children may find it difficult to recruit participants, or may come across difficulties in entering these unbounded spaces with research participants.

Fieldwork

The remainder of the discussion in this paper is based on research experience gleaned primarily from two projects involving fieldwork with learning disabled young people aged 6–16. The first of these projects was undertaken in Oxfordshire, involving 11 learning disabled young people, aged 6–16, and 3 non-disabled siblings. The project was based in the children’s homes and explored their usage and perceptions of green space. Participants took part in weekly activities, typically lasting from about 30–90 min, for approximately five weeks. During each session, participants were offered a choice from a range of activities devised by the researcher to facilitate discussion around experiences and perceptions of outdoor green spaces. Initial activities included things like drawing, collaging, reading stories, games and keeping diaries. Activities were designed to develop a trusting relationship between the researcher, participant and their families, and so included increasingly mobile activities like playing in the garden and tours of the neighbourhood. Most participants took part in a final activity consisting of a trip to a nearby ‘natural environment’ venue, such as a bird of prey centre, an indoor rainforest or a wildlife park.

Research with the participants was organised by contacting the families directly. Following some years working for a charity providing recreational activities for learning disabled young people, I was able to advertise the research to users. Families wishing to participate were able to contact me directly and an initial informal discussion was arranged. In this manner, parents, and in the vast majority of cases, mothers, became the ‘gatekeepers’ to accessing the participants. Despite requesting parents discuss the project with their children prior to making contact, in most cases, parents had independently made the decision to involve their child in the project (cf. Bushin, 2007). Throughout the research process, parents continued to control the practicalities (cf. Nilsen & Rogers, 2005). It was with parents that I negotiated the timings of sessions, and also the sites in which the activities would occur. Research occurred in different spaces in different houses, often at the table in the dining room, or, more informally, on the floor in the sitting room. In one household, I was invited to use the kitchen table, and in another, we were sent to the child's bedroom.

The second project involved research engagement in a Special Educational Needs (SEN) secondary school in Greater Manchester for a few days each week, over the course of a year. Participants were approximately 100 young people aged 11–16 with mild–moderate learning disability. During the fieldwork period, I conducted ethnographic research, joining in with school activities on and off site, and devising some of my own outdoor activities for participants. I undertook active interviews with many of the pupils, making video diaries, running group games and class discussions and doing project work with older participants focusing on the development of an onsite nature area.

My presence as a researcher in school was negotiated initially with the deputy head teacher. In the first instance, I was invited into school to be interviewed, as a response to one of many ‘cold calling’ letters I had sent to SEN schools across Greater Manchester. As a researcher, I was then placed under the jurisdiction of a departmental head. I was quickly
given the freedom to make contact with any staff in the school I wished to work with, and to impinge on classes to run research activities. About three months into fieldwork, I was invited to attend the week-long residential camp for 11–14-year olds run by the school each year. The staff proposed ‘nature’ as the theme of the camp, and I was welcomed to plan activities that would support my own research. Throughout the project, research occurred in a variety of spaces including the classroom, a conference room, the onsite nature area, various off site spaces and even our own classroom store cupboard (cf. Jones, 2008)!

The two projects provided experience of conducting research with learning disabled children and young people in a variety of locations in and around the school and home, and in ‘alternative’ spaces. Research was undertaken in the presence of teachers and teaching assistants, parents, siblings and, in a not-inconsequential minority of cases, alone with the participant, or group of participants. The remainder of the paper seeks to explore the spaces of these research relationships, positioning them in relation to the institutional and familial contexts in which they occurred. The discussion focuses on reflection on three individual and unconnected moments in research and their spatial contexts, illustrated by extracts from research data. These are not three vignettes chosen at random; rather, these stories are illustrations of some of my worst experiences as a researcher. I have chosen to use unpleasant research experiences, following children’s geographers such as Horton (2008) and Pyer (2008), primarily for two reasons: firstly, as a means of highlighting the serious consequences of failure to address, or at least acknowledge, the significant imbalances of power that happen in research within institutions and family homes, and secondly, as a way of finding some ‘value’ in the mistakes I made. Throughout these reflections, children’s identities are changed, but the facts are delivered as accurately as possible.

The day James accused me

James, a young teenager at the time, had been a particularly enthusiastic participant. I had been visiting him at home, once a week, and we’d been completing research tasks in the sitting room and dining room of his house. We’d had five sessions at home, and in his neighbourhood, before I took him out on a day trip. James had seemed to enjoy talking to me and completing activities like drawing pictures and cutting and sticking. Throughout, James was polite and amiable, keen to please and happy to turn his attention to tasks that I suggested, or choosing from a selection which he’d like to do. At times I was slightly concerned that James appeared to be a little over-friendly, telling me he thought I was very pretty, and drawing pictures in which I featured as his ‘best friend’. However, I wasn’t particularly worried and lightly brushed off these comments. We’d mostly been given space to work one-to-one at home, in the dining room or on the living room floor. James has epilepsy, which, at the time of the research, was largely kept under control by medication. However, his mum was used to providing a high level of care for him, and was concerned about him being too far away from her.

Due to James’ mum’s concerns, I had discussions with her regarding the choice of venue for our end-of-research green space visit, rather than choosing with the participant themselves, which had been the case for the other families. James’ mum had dismissed many of the options I’d presented as being too far to travel, or being locations that risked triggering a fit. She recommended we visit a local nature reserve with a reservoir, woodland walks and a large play area. She was insistent that James loved it there, and would be delighted to go
with me. James was aware that a friend of his, Tom, was also participating in the research project and asked if Tom could accompany us. Both sets of parents agreed. Also present on the trip was our ‘chaperone’, Lucy. Lucy was a police-checked student, known to me as a volunteer of a charity that I had previously worked for.

The drive to the nature reserve was uneventful. I collected Lucy, James and Tom in the car, and the boys seemed excited about our half-day out. It was the school holidays, so they were animated, and keen to stretch their legs. However, when we arrived at the reserve, the atmosphere took a turn for the worse. Both boys voiced their disappointment when we arrived, claiming that they ‘came here all the time’ that it was ‘boring’ and that there was ‘nothing to do’. Lucy and I tried to jolly them along, setting out for a walk around the lake. The boys became increasingly excitable and began to fight, first verbally, and then hitting each other, throwing stones and sticks at each other, and at the ducks, and ignoring our pleas to ‘calm down’. Eventually Lucy and I decided we were probably best off calling it a day and heading home.

At this suggestion the boys lost their tempers, arguing that they wanted to visit the shop and the playground, and running off. Lucy and I were at a loss, having no choice but to follow them. We spent a further hour or so cajoling, begging and threatening the boys to get them to return to the car, but not before they’d bought things in the shop with their pocket money, and had a long play in the playground. The return car journey was also fraught. The boys fought in the back of the car, threw food out of the car window, and kicked the back of our seats. At one point I pulled on to the hard shoulder of the dual carriageway to wait for them to calm down, as it seemed too unsafe to drive.

I dropped Tom off home with an exchange of pleasantries with him and his mum, and only a hint that his behaviour had been difficult to manage. When I dropped James off, I spent longer chatting to his dad, who was friendly and asked lots of questions about our afternoon out. Again, I didn’t detail the problems of the afternoon but suggested that James had been fairly ‘excitable’, and that I didn’t think the boys had liked the choice of venue.

As I turned to leave, James exclaimed, ‘and Nadia hit me’. I was shocked at the accusation, and desperately worried that I would get in terrible trouble, despite never having laid a hand on either of the boys. James’ dad looked surprised and concerned and told James that he didn’t think that was true, and that James should think very carefully before making horrible accusations like that. He apologised to me for James’ behaviour and I left, somewhat relieved, but still shaken. I spent the next few hours feeling rather sick, worried about the conversation that would take place in their house when James’ mum got home.

Early that evening I received a call from James’ mum. She was very apologetic, both about James’ accusation, and his behaviour during the trip, which James had apparently told her about in detail. She said it wasn’t the first time James had accused someone of hitting him when he felt embarrassed about his behaviour, as a way of deflecting blame. Despite my protestations, she was insistent that James was in a lot of trouble at home as a result of his behaviour that day, and that he would apologise further himself. A few days later I received a hand-made card from James thanking me for doing fun activities with him, and apologising for behaving badly on our trip out.

This episode in the research project throws up a variety of mistakes that I made as a researcher, highlighting the importance of site in research, particularly in terms of the way that location can change the research relationship. In the first instance, the visit represented a loss of control over the research process for James. Whilst he had been in control over
decisions about activities at home, unlike other participants, James did not participate in decision-making over the venue for our trip out. He then reacted badly to realising we were in a place he considered ‘boring’. The dynamics of our research relationship was also changed by the introduction of new people. This too was to some extent a function of the site, with the ethics committee requiring I have an additional adult to supervise. I had worried that two adults would be rather uncomfortable in a research visit with one child, so arranging to take two participants at once had seemed like a logical step. Unfortunately, as the dynamic changed from one-to-one research to a visit with two adults and two children, James seemed to see this as a move from a friendly working relationship to one in which our roles as ‘adult’ and ‘child’ were highly differentiated. This was compounded when James began to behave in a dangerous manner, and I felt compelled to intervene as a responsible adult.

This is not an entirely uncommon experience of children’s geographers (see e.g. Punch, 2007; Morris-Roberts, 2001) who struggle in maintaining a ‘least adult role’ (Mandell, 1988) whilst managing difficult behaviour. Perhaps James’ erratic and aggressive behaviour as a result of loss of control might have been pre-empted by more explicit discussion before the visit, about the way in which our research relationship might change in the new space. Similarly, we might have spoken in more detail about the activities that would happen on the visit, and James could have decided for himself the order in which activities would occur. I also think it was a mistake to have been guided so directly by James’ mother over choice of venue. Perhaps a more comfortable decision-making process would have been to allow James’ mother to choose two or three venues that she was happy with, and allowed James to have the final choice over site. In this way, he might have felt that he was retaining some control over the activity.

**Ryan was forced to take part**

As part of the school-based research project, I had arranged to do some small group work with 12–13 year old participants. I had suggested working with a group of four students over a period of four weeks, doing different activities. The science coordinator was keen on this idea, seeing it as a chance to develop social skills amongst the students who struggled most to engage in class and with each other. Wary that I was taking participants out of their regular class, I agreed to work initially with students chosen by the teacher. Four students were invited, whilst I was present in the classroom, and they all readily agreed. Other students were eager to have a turn as well, apparently seeing our research session as ‘fun’ and a chance to escape the normal lesson. The first session went well, and all four participants told me they were keen to do the same the following week.

However, the next week, three of the participants approached me, before class had begun, keen to get going. The fourth, Ryan, asked if he could miss the session this week and remain in class instead. I assured him that was no problem at all. The teacher arrived and I checked with her it was ok to leave, as per the previous week, with the participants. She noticed that Ryan was missing from the group, and asked him to join the research group. He and I both explained that he didn’t feel like joining in this week, and that I had agreed it was absolutely fine for him to stay in class.

To my surprise, the teacher was insistent that Ryan join us. She said that he’d made a commitment to take part in the research, and that it wasn’t fair on me, or the others, for him to pull out at this point. She insisted that he needed to learn to be responsible, and do things
that he’d said he would. Ryan reluctantly left the room with us. In the school conference room in which research activities occurred, I apologised to Ryan and said that he was very welcome to sit to one side. He was keen to use the computers in the room, but I didn’t risk letting him, as we didn’t have permission. After a while, Ryan began to choose to join in with the research activities, as there really wasn’t anything else for him to do in the room. Eventually he asked if he could go back to the classroom. I said that was fine, and he could tell his teacher that he’d finished the research activity early, and that I’d sent him back.

At the end of class, I returned with the other three students and found Ryan sitting separately from the rest of the class, at the back of the room. His teacher asked me if he had been naughty, and said that she was planning on keeping him in during lunch time. I assured her that he hadn’t been behaving badly, and told her he’d just finished the activity early. She did let Ryan go off to lunch, but not before reiterating to him how important it was for him to do as he’d agreed. The next week Ryan left with us enthusiastically, and appeared to enjoy the session. Once the run of four sessions was complete, I chose not to repeat this method with other participants.

As with James, the problems for Ryan arose around lack of agency. Here, rather than the participants’ mother controlling the situation, both the participant and the researcher became powerless in the face of the class teacher, who had authority in the institutional context. Ultimate control over the participants, as pupils in school, was expected by both the class teacher and the young people themselves, who are used to, and accepting of, a very high level of control over their bodies and behaviours within the classroom (Harden, 2012). However, whilst an adult, a professional and a peer, the researcher is also subject to the authority of the classroom teacher, who has the power to terminate the research project, in much the same way as a parent might ask you to leave their home (Davis et al., 2000). As such, a researcher within a school walks a difficult line between an ethical duty to support and respect children as independent social agents (Morris-Roberts, 2001), and satisfy class teachers that they are working within the ethos of the institution. The potentially uncomfortable power dynamic that exists between teacher and researcher is not one that is rigorously discussed in the literature.

**Dan got sent home from camp**

The residential science camp took place in May, about six months after I’d started working in school. Planning for the trip had begun a few months earlier, and I was approached in around March, by the camp co-ordinator, to participate. I was delighted, seeing it as a fantastic opportunity to produce some interesting research data with participants in situ. This enthusiasm increased further when the staff suggested in our initial camp prep meeting, that the theme of the trip should be ‘nature’ to fit with my research. I was to be allowed considerable freedom to organise research activities in addition to the variety of trips to ‘nature-based’ locations I’d be able to observe. The catch, that I was informed of a few weeks in to the planning, was that the deputy head had said I was only allowed to go if I officially took on a staff role during the trip, taking equal responsibility for the welfare of the participants.

The particular incident that precipitated Dan’s removal from camp occurred when the students were playing in the outdoor ‘pool’ at our ‘campsite’. We were staying in scout huts not far from Greater Manchester, and the site had an outdoor pool of sorts, more closely
resembling a rectangular, concrete, pond. Dan was splashing about in the waist-deep water, and turned to me, smiling, and did an impression of someone being dragged under water by a shark. Standing on the bank, I laughed, and reached for my video camera. ‘That was funny, do it again Dan, so I can get it on video’ I called. Just as he began, two teachers saw him and began shouting at him to stop. I’m not sure whether he was too caught up in the moment, or whether he didn’t hear them as he was splashing and shouting, but he continued, ignoring them. As soon as he had quietened down the teachers ordered him out of the pool, shouting that his behaviour was incredibly dangerous. I apologised, saying that I had asked him to do it. I was ignored, on the grounds that he had a long list of misdemeanours to his name. That evening Dan was sent home, the senior staff on the camp deciding he was a danger to himself and to others.

To some extent, the embedded power hierarchies of the classroom were blurred a little on camp. This was reflected through a change in titles, with teachers referred to by animal names, rather than their titles and surnames. Pupils wore their own clothes, rather than school uniforms throughout the week, and plenty of treats like hot chocolate, camp fires and ice creams added to creating an atmosphere that was different to that within school. Nevertheless, the desire to manage bodies that was embedded within the institutional boundaries of the school, and expected within the enclosed spaces of classrooms and hallways, spilled over into the less bounded and somewhat liminal spaces of camp. There had been no immediate danger to anyone from Dan’s behaviour, he was well away from other students, and standing in water that wasn’t more than waste deep, and yet Dan was excluded on the basis of failure to conform to the sort of normative bodily practices expected in the school environment, whilst in the outdoors (cf. von Benzon, 2011).

**Reflections**

In the institutional context of the school hierarchy, with teachers as decision-makers, pupils can choose whether to comply, or behave subversively, but have no real power to change the structures within which they are behaving (Barker et al., 2010). The children’s researcher, in a school as a visitor, and on the goodwill of the school’s management committee, finds themselves in a none-too-dissimilar position. An academic researcher occupies an uneasy position within the school hierarchy, particularly when they are in the school at their own behest, and conducting research that is negotiated directly with the school, and not explicitly supported by the Local Education Authority. Whilst researchers may be viewed by the children as ‘responsible adults’ and similarly expected to behave in a responsible manner by school staff, the researcher has little control over what occurs in the school environment, outside of the immediate research relationship or activity they are producing. The vignettes presented in this paper suggest that even then, control over their own research agendas may be fragile.

The researcher and the school staff are likely to have different desired outcomes from their interactions with the young people. The distinction between viewing the children as ‘pupils’ or as ‘participants’ can have significant implications for methods and ethics. However, the breadth of the gulf in perception of the children is likely to vary enormously dependent on the ethos and approach of the school and the researcher. Whilst school staff’s primary motivation is to provide educational opportunities, typically child researchers are more concerned with the rights of the child participant (e.g. Cope, 2008). In an institutional context,
actions that best support the goals of the institution will take priority over those that promote the ethos of the research. As such, maintaining an approach that promoted the agency of the participants proved impossible in some circumstances in both the school context, and also in research in the home.

In retrospect, the difference in the approaches, and the resulting unpleasant experience in the classroom for Ryan, might have been avoided by a more honest discussion of my approach to research with gatekeepers. In the particular case of Ryan being ‘forced’ to participate, I think the class teacher took my acquiescence to Ryan’s request to miss the session as being too ‘soft’ or too laissez-faire. A more direct conversation at the outset, in which I explained the importance to the research of ongoing informed consent, and the reason I intended to conduct research in this manner, might have avoided the situation. Differences arising later on might have been discussed in the light of this early conversation. Similarly, in the situation of Dan, who was removed from the school camp, whilst I tried to advocate for him at the time, I didn’t discuss the incident again later on. My reticence to have these, potentially difficult, conversations related to my ongoing awareness of being a ‘guest’ at the school’s pleasure or in parents’ homes (following Davis et al., 2000; Nilsen & Rogers, 2005). In relation to the school, I had approached over 20 institutions that I could commute to from my home, and Broadheath High was the only school that had responded positively to use the school as a base for research. Similarly, in terms of the research in family homes, I had sent information to around 80 families, of which only 12 had positively responded. As such, I suppose I felt an ongoing debt to the school, and the participant families and a wariness of the fragility of the whole of my PhD project resting on a successful outcome of research within this one particular school, and these few families.

Whilst the differing approach to the children as ‘participants’ and ‘sons or daughters’ might not be as far removed as the participant/pupil binary, there are likely to be some conflicts in the approach between researcher and parents. For example, households usually have rules that place boundaries on acceptable behaviour. These rules, whether stipulated or unspoken, may involve the ways in which it is appropriate to use your body, interact with others or dictate expected family practices such as mealtimes (e.g. Curtis, James, & Ellis, 2010). They are likely to involve some degree of awareness of a hierarchy of power in which children do as they are told by their parents, and by extension are expected to be polite and mindful of other adults. This was well illustrated through James’ mother’s decision-making regarding our trip, and her horror when she heard how James had challenged my authority during the visit. As in the school, these patterns of behaviours, or cultural norms of the household, may conflict with the desired approach of the researcher who may seek to unsettle the ingrained power hierarchy and promote the children’s own agency allowing children to refuse to participate or communicate in their preferred manner.

A further complication, as discussed in the story of Dan’s expulsion from camp, was my constantly shifting position as a researcher, as I temporarily accepted alternative responsibilities, in part as a result of the liminal nature of my position. Whilst on camp, I had agreed to undertake the role of a member of staff and students were therefore expecting to follow orders I gave. In the moment that I watched Dan messing around, and reached for the camera, I was acting as researcher, keen to get some fun footage to add to the participants’ video diaries and use for discussion later. The changing of my role was, I believe, also a contributing factor to the unpleasant situation with James. Working one-to-one with James in a safe and private environment, we’d have been able to focus on activities that were fun. He could be
silly and relaxed, but was polite and communicative. I think the fact that I began to take an increasingly authoritarian, rather than fun and friendly, role on our daytrip, as James became increasingly excitable was a surprise and a concern to him.

Whilst the incidents with Dan and Ryan highlighted the vulnerability of a researcher working within the institutional bounds of the school, James' story illustrates the vulnerability inherent from the increased responsibility associated with research that occurs outside institutional boundaries. On the one hand, working directly with families provided greater freedom and control over the research process. However, it also required a high degree of responsibility for the welfare of the participants. Part of this responsibility was the need to directly address unacceptable behaviour, primarily for practical and safety reasons (cf. Punch, 2007). Within the context of the school, unruly behaviour was not my responsibility to deal with. The contrasting isolation in the research trip also led to the potential for a high degree of vulnerability when I was accused by James of assault. I was lucky that James’ parents didn’t believe him. However, I was also lucky that I had a second adult present. Had James’ parents believed his story, Lucy might have proved an invaluable witness.

The analysis of these events places a heavy emphasis on unidirectional power relations, which risk reinforcing the constructions of adult–child relations that lead to these concerning incidents in my research. To a large degree, this is intentional; the incidents arose in situations in which adults were exerting control over the young people. Further, my research with learning disabled children in school, and in their homes, found a high level of control over their day-to-day lives, suggested by other authors to be far more pervasive than for non-disabled children (Morris, 1997). However, it is important to also recognise the incidences of subversion in which the children used their own agency to rebel against adult control, demonstrating that learning disabled children may not always conform to their expected roles as compliant in the acceptance of adult control over their bodies, minds and behaviours (Davis et al., 2000). Indeed, the three incidents presented in the vignettes, all became moments of discomfort because the young people chose to exercise their own agency, whether through ignoring instructions, requesting to withdraw consent or ‘messing around’.

The difference place makes

The three vignettes describe research experiences in schools, at home and in ‘alternative’ locations: on camp and at a nature reserve. The stories serve to highlight the importance of the institutional context of the research, and the fact that the role of the institution can complicate the microgeography of the research encounter. For example, the small group session that Ryan participated in took place in a separate classroom where I was allowed to conduct sessions as I chose. However, ultimate control remained in the hands of the classroom teacher who oversaw the research and decided who should be given the opportunity to take part, meanwhile limiting participants’ rights to opt out. Similarly, Dan’s actions, shouting and messing about in the pool, were not inappropriate in the space in which they occurred, an outdoor pool during leisure time. However, they were labelled as inappropriate as a result of the institutional context surrounding the event. Just as Maillet et al. (2016) describe state borders as geographical boundaries that move with asylum seekers, ensuring that they are always kept outside the territorial zone, institution boundaries also moved with the staff and pupils and with a research relationship established through school. In this way, the residential camp still might be argued to have occurred within the boundaries of school,
whilst being geographically situated many miles from the physical school site. Despite the microgeography of the research encounter, in these cases, the institutional context was the overall determinant of the research relationship.

This paper has sought to provide an honest reflection on the experiences of conducting research within schools and families, particularly focusing on the importance of the site in which the research occurs. The use of three vignettes provides an embarrassing window into some of my most difficult experiences as a researcher. However, the subsequent reflection seeks to put these incidents into context of the conflict between the motivations of the researcher and school staff and parents, in relationships and specific interactions between adults and children. Whilst I don’t claim to have the ‘solution’ to the potential difficulties of these relationships, I would advocate for clear, direct and honest communication between the researcher and the children’s ‘gatekeepers’ over the intentions of the research relationship, even if this risks the viability of the research placement.

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