

# **Researching the Geography of Power in a Primary School**

Michael Gallagher

## **extract**

© The University of Edinburgh

### 3. Ethical issues

I experienced a range of ethical issues, but of these, one in particular merits detailed discussion here: my negotiation of consent with the children. At the start of my MSc fieldwork, I developed a system of consent based on stickers. I explained to the children that though I was observing the whole class, they each had the right not to participate if they didn't want to. I showed them two sets of stickers, red and blue, and had explained that I would give each of them a sticker at the start of each day. Red meant 'I don't want Mike to write about me', while blue meant 'I do want Mike to write about me'. They were to wear the stickers on their jumpers, so that I could easily see who had opted out. I explained that they were allowed to change sticker at any time, and stressed that I didn't mind if they didn't want to be part of the study, and that they wouldn't get into trouble either way.

The children made a range of responses to the stickers. Several wilfully imposed their own informal meanings upon them, and these usually had little to do with consent, more often being playful or amusing. One girl put her blue sticker on her shirt pocket and told me that I should write about the pocket, while a boy put his sticker on his backside, and joked, "now you can write about my butt!" For some children, the stickers became status symbols, and as such they tried to get as many of them as possible. I learned early on in my MSc that requests for second stickers had to be refused – once one child had two stickers, all of their friends wanted two stickers as well, and my sticker supplies would soon run out. But several of the children sought ways of circumventing my refusals, complaining that they had lost their stickers, or insisting that I had not given them one that morning. One child realised that the sure-fire way to get as many as he wanted was to profess a change of mind every few minutes, saying first that he wanted a blue sticker, then that he wanted a red one, and so on.

Other children responded to the stickers in different ways. Most of them took blue every day, and some found it amusing that I kept asking them what colour they wanted. They evidently thought my daily renegotiation of consent to be excessive. One child took exception to the limited range of possibilities afforded by two colours. One day, he asked for a blue sticker, but then later changed to a red. But he told me, "Mike, I want you to write a wee bit about me. Not very much – just a wee bit." I assented, and on several occasions afterwards we used this arrangement.

While the stickers performed a variety of interesting functions, I do not believe that they enabled the children to make an informed decision about whether to participate in my research or not. I felt that the consent the children gave was based on trust rather than comprehension. I tried on numerous occasions to explain to the children what my project was about, but communication on this issue was always

limited. For example, several children asked me why I could not use their real names in their study. I tried to explain that somebody could track them down and hurt them if I did so, but I did not feel comfortable expanding upon the full implications of child abuse. Consequently, they did not appear to understand what form this abuse might take, and laughed at the prospect that anything I did could put them in danger. Communication problems notwithstanding, my own understanding of my project changed considerably as the research progressed, and continued to change during the process of writing up. Informed consent was therefore impossible, with or without the stickers.

Above all, I felt that for the children, life within a compulsory, disciplinary institution meant that the voluntary nature of my research was difficult to grasp. They had not been consulted as to whether I would be coming to visit their class, and this was in line with their expectations. How could they be expected to believe me when I told them that refusing to participate would not get them into any kind of trouble? As it happened, the majority of the children chose blue stickers, with only the more assertive members of the class occasionally choosing red stickers. My suspicion is that the free choice which appeared to be guaranteed by the stickers was in fact illusory.