KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHILD–RESEARCHER INTERACTION

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN
University of Southern Denmark, Department for the Study of Culture (Education), Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M., Denmark
e-mail: sindberg@sdu.dk

Peter HOBEL
University of Southern Denmark, Department for the Study of Culture (Education), Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M., Denmark
e-mail: peterhobel@sdu.dk

ABSTRACT

This article explores what it means, methodologically and epistemologically, for researchers to familiarise themselves with children through participant observation during child-centred migration research. The article argues against dichotomising researchers and children into outsiders and insiders. Instead, researcher–child interaction is the starting point for acquiring knowledge, generally, and about integration and migration, in particular. This article is informed by intersectionality and positioning theory, and uses an analysis of two 'key incidents' from child-centred fieldwork to demonstrate that a key incident is a suitable starting point for understanding the conditions of migrant children and youth. First, because the incidents may reveal how researchers, children and youth become familiar with one another through social interaction, and second, because dynamics and structures that prevail in the larger context of the school and society are crystallised in key incidents.

Keywords: Key incidents, child-centred approach, familiarising, positioning, intersectionality

EVENTI CHIAVE NELLA RICERCA SULLE MIGRAZIONI INCENTRATA SUL BAMBINO: ESPLORANDO LE IMPLICAZIONI METODOLOGICHE ED EPISTEMOLOGICHE DELL'INTERAZIONE TRA IL BAMBINO E IL RICERCATORE

SINTESI

L'articolo studia cosa significhi, metodologicamente ed epistemologicamente, per i ricercatori familiarizzare con i bambini attraverso l'osservazione partecipante durante la ricerca delle migrazioni incentrata sul bambino. L'articolo si oppone alla dicotomizzazione di ricercatori e bambini in "outsider" e "insider". Dunque, l'interazione tra il ricercatore e il bambino viene considerata come il punto di partenza che permette di acquisire il sapere, in generale, e la conoscenza sull'integrazione e sulla migrazione, in particolare. Il presente articolo si basa sulla teoria dell'intersezionalità e del posizionamento e, attraverso l'analisi di due "eventi chiave" tratti dalla ricerca sul campo incentrata sul bambino, cerca di dimostrare che un evento chiave è un punto idoneo di partenza per capire le condizioni di bambini e adolescenti migranti. Primo, perché gli eventi possono rivelare come i ricercatori, i bambini e gli adolescenti abbiano familiarizzato reciprocamente attraverso interazione sociale, e secondo, perché negli eventi chiave si cristallizzano le dinamiche e le strutture che prevalgono in un contesto più ampio della scuola e della società.

Parole chiave: eventi chiave, approccio incentrato sul bambino, familiarizzazione, posizionamento, intersezionalità

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

INTRODUCTION

In our research we adopt a 'child-centred approach to understanding integration challenges, migrant needs and their well-being' (MiCREATE, 2019b). Therefore, we see our study as part of the 'New Sociology of Childhood' paradigm (MiCREATE, 2019a), which means that children's epistemological status is prioritised (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2012). Extensive participant observation is central to the way that the child-centred approach is applied, and is considered a means of becoming familiar with children and youth, which, in turn, is a precondition for being able to interview them. The aim of this article is to explore what it means – methodologically and epistemologically – to us as researchers, to familiarise ourselves with children through participant observation.

Becoming familiar with children from migrant backgrounds poses particular challenges. They may feel insecure because they or their parents have experienced profound changes, making it necessary to seek stable points of reference in their lives, as their legal status may be uncertain, and because they are perceived as a challenge for their host societies. They struggle to construct a coherent identity that may form a basis for psychological and social functioning (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016).

The New Sociology of Childhood paradigm emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (MiCREATE, 2019a), and was powerfully formulated in James and Prout (1990), the third edition of which appeared in 2015. Over the years, studies from various fields of research have been united under the banner of child-centeredness, for example, urban sociology (Quiroz, Milam-Brooks & Adams-Romena, 2013), health studies (Carter & Ford, 2013; Jachyra, Atkinson, & Gibson, 2014; Mauthner, 1997), early childhood education (Harwood, 2010), primary education (Kustatscher, 2017) and migration (White, 2012).

Despite variations in the emphasis and scope of child-centred research, there has been widespread agreement that a fundamental methodological question to be addressed is how do we study the unique life worlds of children, while acknowledging their diversity? (James & Prout, 1990; MiCREATE, 2019a). Two tenets underlie the way this question is answered. First, there has been a strong tendency to emphasise the first part of the question, while downplaying or avoiding the latter part. Second, there has been a tendency to stress the importance of paying attention to the diversity among children.

Regarding the first of the foregoing tendencies, a wide range of methodological concerns has been identified as attention points that stem from the fact that children are involved in the research. These considerations revolve around issues such as recruitment of participants (Barker & Weller, 2003; Carter & Ford, 2013; Morgan et al., 2002), choice of research space (Barker & Weller, 2003; Mauthner, 1997), and parents' presence and role in the research process (Harden, Scott, Backett-Milburn & Jackson, 2000; Hillier & Aurini, 2018; Kustatscher, 2017; Mauthner, 1997). In particular, the child–researcher relationship has been considered a matter with great methodological importance, owing to the inequality of the adult–child power dynamic (Barker & Weller, 2003; Mauthner, 1997; Morgan et al., 2002). The tendency to focus on children as a unique group is connected to a widespread tendency to emphasise that, ultimately, the most important methodological constraint that calls for methodological consideration is the adult–child binary, and, consequently, children (and adults) are treated as homogeneous cohorts (Allison, 2007).

Regarding the latter tendency, to emphasise the importance of paying attention to the diversity among children, attempts have been made to develop more refined ways of approaching children in child-centred research. For example, Fattore et al. (2012, 429) have noted:

> *For all the significant commonalities they share, children are not all the same. Factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, ability and disability, socioeconomic status, and geographic location shape experience for individual children and groups of children and should be accounted for in research design.*

Thus, it has been recognised that variables other than age must be considered when doing child-centred research, for example gender (Jachyra, Atkinson & Gibson, 2014; Mayeza, 2017), race (Mayeza, 2017) and class (Kustatscher, 2017). Importantly, this awareness of other relevant identity categories means that, methodologically speaking, the broader socio-political context of the research becomes immensely important (cf. e.g. Mayeza, 2017).

We recognise that research has come a long way in identifying and reflecting on the most important methodological matters involved when conducting child-centred research. In particular, emphasising the importance of treating identity categories broadly, and not overemphasising age as a category appears to be fruitful. However, the adult–child binary remains a challenge in child-centred research. Throughout the field there is a tendency to approach researcher–child relations with great caution, for example, emphasising that children possess 'emic, marginalised, knowledge' (Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2012, 427). But what does that imply? Does a child-centred approach imply that there is a fundamental

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

epistemological chasm between what is known within the 'community' of children, and what is known to adults as 'outsiders'? And, how can we become familiar with children?

Given the omissions of previous research in addressing such questions, we see a need to further explore the epistemological implications of researcher–child relations in child-centred research, and to unpack their methodological ramifications. We do this by considering two questions:

- What characterises researcher–child relations established through participatory observation?
- What epistemological challenges and opportunities does the researcher–child relationship entail?

We answer these questions in in three steps. First, we claim that we need to move beyond the researcher–child dichotomy by avoiding an understanding of the relationship as between researchers, who stand on the outside, attempting to understand what is going on inside the world of children, and children. Second, we argue for the integration of positioning and intersectionality theory as a promising way of conceptualising the research–child relationship. Thirdly, acknowledging that the best way of proving the utility of our conceptualisation is to employ it in the analysis of empirical exempla, we scrutinise researcher–child relations in two key incidents that occurred in our own field research with children and youth at Danish schools in the autumn of 2019.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Beyond the insider–outsider dichotomy

In order to move beyond the researcher–child dichotomy, we concur with Jeppe Sinding Jensen's arguments against the usefulness of the insider–outsider conceptualisation in field research (Jensen, 2011). To Jensen, the crucial question is: Does the insider (the child) have access to knowledge that is inaccessible to the outsider (the researcher)? If this question is answered in the affirmative, migrant children have privileged knowledge about what it means to be a migrant child. The researcher's task is to report the children's statements. Jensen asserts that this stance has ontological and epistemological consequences:

The necessary epistemological condition then seems to be that only people with a certain nature or essence (innate or acquired, ethnic or religious) may be or become the possessors of

whatever special information or knowledge is in question. This is where the idea of there being a deep qualitative abyss between insiders and outsiders begins to resemble a genuinely 'mystical' postulate. (Jensen, 2011, 31)

Jensen emphasises that this stance implies cultural essentialism. Insiders share world views and values, and have a privileged *mode* of access to experience and knowledge acquisition. Thus – in the context of this article – *being* a migrant child is a prerequisite for understanding what it means to be a migrant child. Being a migrant child equips you with a specific nature that gives access to specific experiences and knowledge

Jensen rejects the essentialist stance and, referring to the discursive and linguistic turns, he argues that it *is* possible for human beings to understand other people. Using a shared and public language, we can refer to the world and enter a dialogue about truth vs. falsehood, and right vs. wrong. Different cultures do exist, Jensen does not reject that, but they are frameworks for our understanding of the world. Thus, they have interpretive and not epistemic priority, and the ontology of the subjective is public, not solipsistic. Apparently, our mind mediates between our brain and the external world. '*Our cognition is not solely internal to the brain but also external and part of our socio-cultural practice*' (Jensen, 2011, 45).

In light of Jensen's discussion, it is clear that the communication – the interplay – between researchers and children is where the acquisition of knowledge about children's circumstances conditions begins. Thus, the researcher–child relationship is of utmost importance, methodologically speaking. According to Jensen, this relationship should not be conceptualised as one of insider versus outsider: But what, then, are we to make of the relationship? To answer this question, we turn to intersectionality and positioning theory.

Child/youth–researcher relations: a matter of positioning, identity and intersectionality

Turning from the insider–outsider dichotomy, we suggest a perspective on the researcher–child relationship that is informed by the theoretical concepts of positioning (cf. Khawaja & Mørck, 2009) and intersectionality.

Position theory holds that there are multiple answers over time to the question, 'who am I?'. In Davies and Harré's words:

An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives. (Davies & Harré, 1990, 46)

Who we are depends upon how we are positioned and position ourselves in social interactions. In the context of ethnographic fieldwork with children, the starting point for engaging with children is the proposition that who we are as researchers and who they are as children is dynamic, and subject to change in the course of, and as a result of, our engagement with them. For the sake of precision, it is helpful to differentiate between interactive and reflexive positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990, 48), which conceptualise the difference between whether one is being positioned by others or whether one positions oneself. Although often, practices may display elements of both possibilities, the distinction has great value in terms of analytical clarity. Also, the distinction emphasises that positioning includes elements of both submission and agency.

To fully grasp the complexities of interactions and relations between researchers and children or youth, we find it useful to integrate the perspective of intersectionality into the theoretical positioning framework. The concept of intersectionality stems from black feminism and critical race theory, and was initially introduced to capture black women's experiences of discrimination in the United States (see e.g. Crenshaw, 1991). In subsequent research, two trends have prevailed (Marfelt, 2015). One trend is for intersectionality to be confined, normatively, to the study of oppression (cf. Banks, 2019). The second trend is for intersectionality to be used more descriptively as a multidimensional perspective on identity formation and difference (Marfelt, 2015). In this article we draw on this concept for methodological and descriptive purposes. Thus, we employ intersectionality as an analytical tool to understand a multitude of identity categories, such as race, gender, class, religion and disability, which intersect in our encounters with children and youth during fieldwork.

As noted above, child-centred research needs to move beyond the child–adult dichotomy. Intersectionality enables us to do exactly that, as it calls on us to consider all relevant identity categories when attempting to grasp how to become familiar with children in a given context. Applying an intersectional framework to understand positioning between researchers and children or youth, allows

for a refined understanding of the complexity of positioning. Taking identity categories as a point of departure allows one to 'step back' and unpack how intersections of the various identity categories are shaped by the contexts of the school and of broader society.

But how do we capture intersectionally-determined positioning between researcher and children/youth? We suggest to paying attention to concrete situations in our field work where positioning occurs. To conceptualise such situations, we draw on the construct of the 'key incident'.

Key incidents

To analyse how researchers and immigrant children become familiar with one another, we use the 'key incident' as an analytical tool. According to Erickson (1977, 61), identifying 'key incidents' involves:

[…] *pulling out from field notes a key incident, linking to other incidents, phenomena, and theoretical constructs, and writing it up so others can see the generic in the particular, the universal in the concrete, the relation between part and whole.*

The key incident is exemplary and paradigmatic, and functions as an interpretive key to understanding the course of events documented in the entirety of participatory observation. With this approach to ethnographic work, the researcher can understand how social life functions in a particular context, how social relations play out and how social meaning-making is embedded in this context.

Our use of the construct of the key incident overlaps Paul Connolly's concept of the 'critical incident' (Connolly, 2017). Connolly's concept revolves around the researcher–child relationship and the dynamics of this relationship. Connolly's concept sharpens Erickson's idea of the key incident, so it applies specifically to situations where a researcher–child relationship is profoundly apparent.

The starting point for our analyses below will be the identification of key incidents in which our relationships with children were accentuated in some way. We suggest that the methodological procedure leading to the construction of a key incident may be roughly outlined in the following way: After ethnographic participatory observation at the school and in the classroom, and delivering a thick description (Geertz, 1973), one reflects on situations that may qualify as 'key incidents'. The field notes are searched for key incidents through careful reading and reflection. These particular incidents pave the way for a full understanding of

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

the context. Thus, the researcher gain insight into the context of the migrant children, with which he must become familiar.

Using this analytical tool to understand the encounters between researchers and children requires us to look beyond any essentialising understanding of the 'the migrant child' and the insider–outsider dichotomy. What is instead needed is a profound awareness of how two or more identity categories intersect and influence the behaviour and identity work of the children in their encounters with researchers, identity categories such as age, migration trajectory, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social class, abilities and disabilities. However, determining which categories appear and intersect in a given incident is a matter of interpretation. Also, the way in which relevant identity categories intersect in the key incidents calls for equal attention. This is an analytical approach that transcends a simple description and reproduction of the migrant children.

The analyses below reveal how we used the key incident as an analytical tool for understanding how we enter social interactions with the migrant children and become familiar with them.

We conducted field work at Belltown School[1] (6th year) and the Elderflower School (10th year) in autumn 2019.

Søren (researcher 1) visited Belltown School 11 times from October through December 2019, usually from 8 or 9 in the morning until 2 or 3 in the afternoon, and Peter (researcher 2) visited the Elderflower School 14 times from August to December 2019, usually from 8 in the morning until 2 or 3 in the afternoon.

The students were informed about our project, assured that it would be anonymised, and we explained that participation was voluntary, and they could stop any time, if they so wished. We are aware that migrant children are a vulnerable group.

The most important data from our field work are field notes – that is, thick descriptions of what was going on, including descriptions of interactions between students, students and teachers, and students and researchers. Summaries of conversations, including the vocabulary, words and phrases used by teachers, students and researchers, were included in the field notes. These notes were supplemented with personal, theoretical and methodological notes. Photographs of the classroom (including photos of material produced by the students) and interviews with teachers and principals are part of the data.

In our constant search for key incidents, we conducted participant observation. We participated in the classes' learning and social activities to become familiar with the school culture, the classes and the students, and to give the students the opportunity to become familiar with us as researchers and as fellow humans. We were looking for key incidents for acquiring an understanding of how the students position themselves with respect to the school, the teachers, their peers and us as researchers, how they perform identity work and how integration processes proceed. Thus, we and the students became familiar with each other. This familiarisation was the of point departure for the further acquisition of knowledge concerning the conditions of migrant children, which, in our study, took place through interviews with the students. However, the results of the interviews will not be reported in this article, as this article builds on data gathered prior to the interviews.

Analysis

Next, we analyse two occurrences as key incidents. These incidents were arbitrarily selected, that is they are no more important than other, similar events. These two analyses are included to illustrate the use of the 'key incident' as an analytical tool.

Key incident 1: Test day at Belltown school (Søren, researcher 1)

Belltown School is a public elementary school (years 0–9) in a large Danish city, serving children and youth from an urban area that is officially categorised as a ghetto, a highly-contested term used by the Danish government authorities for areas with high levels of crime, unemployment, low incomes and first- or second-generation immigrant residents among the inhabitants. The school is nationally and linguistically diverse, because many of its students and/or their parents have family ties outside the European Union (Onses-Segarra et al., 2020). In the 6th-year class in which I did fieldwork there were about 20 students, for most of whom Danish was their second language.

The following incident is recorded in my field notes on my third visit in the class. My colleague, Gro Hellesdatter Jacobsen, accompanied me that day on my field visit. During a Danish lesson the teacher had scheduled what he refers to as a voluntary national test. The class is not obligated to take the actual test until spring but, according to the teacher, the students may try the test as a way of familiarising themselves with it. Gro and I did not know that the class was going to take the test that day until we came to the class. Introducing the test,

---

1 The names of schools, students, and teachers have been anonymised.

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

the teacher allows the students to ask questions during the test. The test consists of multiple-choice questions and other kinds of questions that should enable students to demonstrate their vocabulary, for instance. As the students start to take the test, it soon becomes clear to the teacher – who did not know the test content beforehand – that the test is very difficult, and that, in his view, the students cannot take the test without help, although the test was designed to be self-explanatory. After about 10 minutes, the teacher says in front of the whole class and addressing Gro and me: 'I'm 41 [years old] and it is difficult when I don't know [the answers]. We work with Danish as a second language' (from my field notes).

During the test, Gro and I agreed to assist the children to determine the correct answers, as more and more children asked for help. We leave our seats at the back of the room, and begins to walk about the room, pausing to answer the students' questions. In my field notes I wrote: 'There are several words [in the test] that we cannot give an answer to [regarding their meaning]. We have a conversation with the teacher about how difficult the test is.'

The foregoing is a key incident for two reasons. First, because my engagement with the children and the teacher crystallised the general dynamic and conditions. Second, because our position as researchers is at stake. How Gro and I positioned ourselves might have great consequences for my relationship to the class as a whole, not least individual students, in the long run.

Regarding an understanding of the dynamics and conditions in and around the class, the incident pave the way for an understanding of the children's situation as Danish as a second language students in the context of the Danish school system. This is not the place for an elaborate treatment of this point. However, the incident illustrated how alienated migrant students or students with Danish as a second language may feel when facing the Danish school system as represented by the ministry test system. Not so much because the test was difficult, but because the test was likely to remind them of their minority status, because of the gap between what the test considered mainstream Danish and the students' actual vocabulary. Put differently, the difficulty of what was supposed to be a test of standard vocabulary emphatically positioned the students as Danish as a second language students.

In terms of researcher positioning, being called on to assist the students as they went through the test presented opportunities and potential pitfalls. If the students and/or the teacher were left with the impression that I was in some way responsible for the test or endorsed it, it might constrain my oppor-

tunities to build trust-based ties with the children, if they feared me as part of a system that wished to expose their weaknesses. This scenario was likely to unfold, given that the teacher distanced himself from the test. We, as researchers, and the test, were clearly foreign to the class. Our opportunities for reflexive positioning (cf. Davies & Harré, 1990) were constrained by how our identities as adults, researchers and experts intersected with our identity as ethnic majority Danes. In light of this intersection of identity categories, the students' minority identity in terms of ethnicity, language and age, became paramount. Because of this, our status of researchers, and hence as representatives of the university and the academic world more broadly, may have reinforced the awareness of science and 'testing' inherent in the incident.

Given the forgoing preconditions, I sensed that I needed to be careful not be subject to – in Davies and Harré's terminology – interactive positioning as 'a test expert', as the children might have misinterpreted me as a representative of the ministry test system. The teacher was aware that I was not, but my impression was that he did not know exactly how my field of expertise related to what was being tested. At that time, at the beginning my fieldwork, he thought that I was a specialist in Danish as second language. This explains why, in the incident, he emphasised that he worked with Danish as a second language (although he still found the test difficult), as though he wanted to indicate that we shared the same professional platform of expertise. For the children, anyway, the line between where I came from and where the test came from was probably blurred, at best.

Reflecting on the situation that same day, when making my initial notes, I recorded the following:

> *When I wander about and answer questions during the Danish class from the students regarding the voluntary national test, I emphasise that it is difficult, and I indicate that I have nothing to do with the test. I do that to maintain an adult position, which is non-teacher.*

It is clear from this reflection that I recognised this as a key incident, given that my position in the field, and hence my relationship with the students, was highlighted, as it was likely to reinforce the essential difference between me and the children. Back then, I saw it as way of distancing myself from the school by establishing an adult position who was not a teacher. On further reflection, as stated above, I've come to the conclusion that, more specifically, what was at stake had to do with finding the correct position as a researcher. As I stated, I negotiated my dilemma by explaining to the children that I found the test dif-

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

ficult and that I had nothing to do with it. But instead of refusing to help, I assisted some of the students. In theoretical terms, this was a case of reflexive positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990), where I established an assisting-yet-I'm-not-an-expert-position, which I found quite comfortable. In my field notes I assess the advantages of the situation:

The conversations offer the advantage that I'm getting closer to the students, I can chat with them a little and show them kindness. I have the role of someone who helps when things are difficult. At the same time, I can distance myself from the system.

As it turned out, the incident presented an opportunity to approach the children, talk with them, give them something that they needed (answers to the test), and indicate a shared goal of interest – their well-being – in a difficult situation. It was important for me to position myself in the most optimal way. Clearly, I aligned myself with the children, not by lying (I did find the test difficult), but by clearly explaining that I had nothing to do with the test. My assessment is that establishing this position was helpful to me on later occasions, when I was called on to assist the students with school work during their lessons. Here, I could draw on and foster my established position as a helpful adult who was neither a teacher nor an official expert.

Key incident 2: 'I am Danish' (Peter, researcher 2)

The second key incident we discuss occurred at the Elderflower School. This school is a lower secondary school in a large town with only a year 10 and a reception class. Year 10 is an optional year for students uncertain of what upper secondary education programme to choose. The school has about 170 students, 20 per cent of which were born abroad. Most students are 15 or 16 years old.

My first day of observation at the Elderflower School was at the beginning of September 2019. My gatekeeper was the vice principal, and she introduced me to 'my' 10th year. Afterwards, I introduced myself and MiCREATE.

During my first day with the class, I noted only one student with a migrant background. Later, it turned out that there were two other migrant children in this class of approximately 18 students.

The chain of events reported below turned out to be a key incident. In my field notes I wrote:

Apparently, Hassan is the only student in the class with a migrant or migrant family background. He looks at me very sceptically during the first lesson. At least, this is how I perceive

it. During the second lesson, I sit alone at a table. Hassan comes in and sits down beside me.

Hassan did not participate actively in schoolwork, nor did he perform off task-activities.

During the third lesson this day, the students had to take a reading test. The teacher handed out booklets. The students read the text and filled in the answers to questions.

'The students are explicitly instructed to do the test individually', I note.

As far as I can see, most of the students work individually. Two girls talk together for a while. Two groups of girls seem to work together. Many of the students have opened a dictionary on their computers; they are allowed to use this tool. Hassan sits beside a boy of ethnic majority background, and copies his answers. I sit beside Hassan and the boy, while Hassan systematically copies. Suddenly, he stops writing and flicks through the pages of the booklet. Finally, he closes the booklet and puts it down. Two of the girls have put down their booklets, too. I cannot see how much of the work they have done. Forty-five minutes have passed. Another boy is copying from the student sitting beside him.

During the break I am approached by Hassan. After the break, I note in my field notes: 'Hassan tells me, "I was born and raised in Denmark, and I speak Danish."

During the last lesson I note:

Apparently, Hassan has not handed in his reading test (…) At the end of the lesson Hassan stands and walk through the room. He sits down beside me. 'All the members of my family were born in Denmark', he states.

During the day, a special relationship is built between Hassan as a student and me as a researcher. He knows that my interest as a researcher is in the integration of migrant children, and as the only descendant or migrant student in the class on this day, he knows that I am focusing on him. He contacts me several times, and emphasises, 'I was born in Denmark and I am Danish'. In this way, Hassan positions himself reflexively (cf. Davies & Harré, 1990), as a 'good student'. Hassan's reactions to me may be explained by the identity categories implicit in this incident. In this encounter, the intersection of Hassan's migrant family background, his languages (Danish and Arabic) and academic deficiencies are paramount, in light of the way my identity as a powerful and privileged researcher intersects with my identity as an elderly, ethnic Dane. Under these circumstances, he reflexively positions himself as a 'good student' and a 'Danish student'. Therefore,

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

I, the privileged academic present in the class to keep an eye on academically weak, ethnic minority students, need not have concern myself with him. Hassan does not want the school system to expose him, and he regards me as a part of that system.

Hassan has grown up in a 'parallel society', his Danish teacher tells me. According to the teacher, he speaks 'street Danish' and lacks a standard vocabulary and standard knowledge. He has 'learning difficulties', he ought to attend a special class, she emphasises. She sees the problem as an 'ethnic problem'.

During the autumn it becomes clear that this key incident paves the way for an understanding of Hassan's case in its entirety. Becoming familiar with Hassan is possible only if a more symmetrical relationship is established between us. Explicitly, I must position 'the researcher' as a non-school-system man, thus establishing a foundation of trust with Hassan. I greet him every time I meet him in the classroom, in the school yard in the street outside the school. When I ask about his everyday life and tell him about mine, he responds, and we often talk together.

During lessons Hassan continues to fly under the radar. If a teacher asks him a question, he repeat an answer given by another student. Thus, he seems uninterested in the lesson content. He does not comment on the theme of 'Youth and Identity' in the Danish lesson, nor on the theme of 'culture clashes' (the troubles in Northern Ireland) in the English lesson. Hassan is in a process of nonlearning. He builds up a learning defence. He rejects learning because he is cognitively overloaded (Illeris, 2004).

In the breaks Hassan spends his time with other Arab-speaking boys. They position themselves as those controlling the situation in the break. When I meet Hassan in the schoolyard during the break, I greet him, and he starts to greet me too, and one day he starts to call me 'bro'.[2] He even invites me to join their conversation. I am no longer a threat to him, but an outside friend. He keeps the system at arm's length, but I am no longer part of the system. I am a 'bro', an ally.

Students in the 10th year write a mandatory, self-selected project on their future work life and career. Hassan wants to be an estate agent, and one day he waylays me in the schoolyard, and urges me to be his supervisor. Apparently, he wants me to be his ally, and help him in his struggle with the system. The system may prevent him from reaching his goal if his learning disabilities are exposed, or simply because of his ethnicity. I tell him I cannot be his supervisor. 'But thanks anyway', I add.

Hassan still positions himself and the teachers as he did on the first day I observed him in his class. He wants to keep the system and its power at arm's length. But he wants a supervisor and an ally, and he wants to position me in that role. He has moved me away of the centre of power, and suddenly it is possible to build a trust-based relationship between us in the context of the school. Becoming familiar in this context is now an option, and I am offered a role in Hassan's search for a foundation on which to construct his identity.

Hassan and I did not become friendly and familiar that very first day. Time was needed. Initially, Hassan regarded me as a threat, and I regarded Hassan as more or less unreliable.

The incident on the first day turned out to be a key incident. It made me reflect on how Hassan reflexively positioned himself, how I position him and how we can mutually acknowledge one another. Evidently, Hassan has reflected on my position too.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the previous section, we analysed two incidents that occurred during our social interaction with children and youth in our field work on two classes at the school where we were doing our research. The schools differ in terms of the students' ages and backgrounds. In Søren's (researcher 1) case study, the students varied widely in terms of linguistic and national background, although only a few students have gone through transnational migration themselves. Peter's (researcher 2) case study focuses on a child of immigrants in a class with very few with a migrant background. Bearing these differences in mind, we are able to make some important points based on cross-case comparisons.

First, in both incidents, positioning and intersecting identity categories played a principal role in our endeavours to familiarise ourselves with the children in our respective fieldwork. Yet, as the analyses have highlighted, positioning may take many forms and play many different roles. In key incident 1, we saw that the balance of various considerations was very much involved in Søren's efforts to position himself in the field, in order to foster a good relationship with the children. On the one hand, the national test offered an opportunity to help the 6th years and thereby to get close to them, talk with them and engage with them. On the other hand, stepping in as an assistant on an occasion when the class was taking a test that was imposed on them from the outside, Søren, a university researcher, ran the risk of being associated with the test regime. Similarly, in key

---

2 Urbandictionary.com: 'bro' means 'friend' and is commonly used in greetings. The derogatory sense of the word is 'Alpha Male Idiot'. Hassan uses the word in the first sense.

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

incident 2, Peter found that his presence provoked a certain reaction from the student, Hassan, which we interpret as closely connected to Peter's apparent position as someone with official authority. Hassan's understanding of Peter as an authority initially prevented them from becoming familiar.

Power and privilege, too, is a matter of great importance, in both cases presented here. Both incidents remind us that power and authority inevitably cling to us, as adult researchers. However, the context and the conditions that make paramount the question of authority may differ, and our understanding of these conditions is crucial for us to able to address the question. In key incident 2, the fact that Peter initially came across as an authority figure created a situation where the student felt a need to defend himself, which, in turn, may have to do with his experience of being doubly minoritised and marginalised, with an immigrant family background, and being academically challenged. Peter's reasonable solution was to do whatever he could to position himself as something other than an authority figure. In incident 1, the situation was more difficult. On the one hand, it was an advantage for Søren to be called in and asked to assist the students – to be an authority figure – as it made his involvement with the students relevant. On the other hand, the source of Søren's authority was crucial; it was important for Søren to not be seen as a representative of the governmentally installed test regime, and to instead be seen as someone with academic authority that stemmed from somewhere else.

Time is also a category that is important to take into account when reflecting on key incidents and how researchers position themselves with respect to children. In a key incident, certain aspects of evolving familiarisation between researcher and child may, in retrospect, crystallise. We saw this in key incident 2, where Peter's initial encounter with Hassan had some qualities that suggested their future familiarity with one another, when that day's field notes were compared with field notes on later visits. For instance, Peter was aware of Hassan's reservations about speaking openly with Peter, something that changed as Hassan got a better sense of Peter's role and intentions. In incident 1, time played a different role. Temporally, the incident was more condensed, leaving a limited amount of time to find a suitable way to position oneself as researcher. If Søren and Gro had assisted the students in a very expert manner, an impression of their being test persons might have been fostered, with dire consequences for Søren's opportunity to become familiar with the children.

The key incident has proven to be a useful analytical tool for unpacking methodological questions pertaining to researcher–child relations. Its utility lies in that it may offer a vantage point for

reflecting on how researchers familiarise themselves with children. Our familiarisation with children was a precondition for conducting child-centred interviews with migrant children and local children (i.e. children born in Denmark). Thus, in light of the analysis and discussion, we arrive at the following definition of 'familiarisation': mutual understanding as a precondition for communication.

Key incidents also draw our attention to the general dynamics and structures entailed of a case, which are crystallised in social interactions between researchers and children.

Regarding our two initial research questions, we are able to offer tentative answers. To repeat:

- What characterises researcher–child relations established through participatory observation?
- What epistemological challenges and opportunities does the researcher-child relationship entail?

Beginning with the former question, relations between children and researchers are not a matter of insiders versus outsiders. As researchers, we do not gain access to the inside world of children participating in a research project and acquire knowledge about that world by inheriting the language and knowledge the children possess. Instead, knowledge about migration, integration and so on is acquired in complex ways through our interaction with the children, in an interplay between our mutual positioning of one another, and shaped by intersecting identity categories such as age, ability ethnicity. Certainly, the point to be made is by no means that we should ignore the children's voices. Instead, the point is that children's (and other's) voices are shaped by the intersecting identity categories and the mutual positioning that occurs in human interaction. Therefore, an important precondition for hearing children's voices and understanding their situation is for researchers to understand the fluid dynamics of our engagement with children and youth.

Thus, in keeping with the theoretical framework that we adopt in this article, we mutually position each other and familiarise with each other in social interaction, a positioning process that is highlighted and shaped by intersecting identity categories such as age, language, ethnicity, and (dis)abilities. Studying migrant children in a theoretical framework that integrates positioning and intersectionality theory is a way to prevent oneself from perceiving children and youth as homogeneous.

Moving on to the second question, the positioning processes may present many challenges and pitfalls. Our efforts to familiarise ourselves with children may be constrained by the positions that the intersecting identity categories in a given

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

incident permit us and if we position students, interactively, as 'the Others'. However, our engagement with children also offers the opportunity to gain insights into migrant children's conditions, because our engagement – our positioning – relative to children reveals something important about migrant children in the given context. Therefore, it is safe to suggest that establishing relationships with children through participatory observation is not only a means for establishing a basis for obtaining knowledge about migrant children's integration during interviews. As the analysis of the two key incidents has shown, researchers' involvement with children may itself be the locus for enriching our understanding of how children understand themselves, in the dialectic between children's identity work and the larger context of the school and society.

Importantly, our analysis shows that the most important aspect of the key incident as an analytical tool is the opportunity for reflection that it offers. It is through this reflection that we become aware of the pitfalls and challenges that we face in the context of our specific field research. The knowledge that we draw from this reflection is, in turn, crucial for realising the potential of participant observation as a means of familiarising ourselves with migrant children and youth.

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

KLJUČNI DOGODKI V OTROKOSREDIŠČNIH RAZISKAVAH MIGRACIJ: METODOLOŠKE IN EPISTEMOLOŠKE POSLEDICE INTERAKCIJE MED OTROKOM IN RAZISKOVALCEM

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN
Univerza južne Danske, Oddelek za študij kulture (pedagogiko), Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M., Danska
e-mail: sindberg@sdu.dk

Peter HOBEL
Univerza južne Danske, Oddelek za študij kulture (pedagogiko), Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M., Danska
e-mail: peterhobel@sdu.dk

POVZETEK

V članku obravnavamo metodološke in epistemološke vidike otrokosrediščnih raziskav, pri katerih se razisko-valec v postopku opazovanja z udeležbo seznani z otrokom. Pri tem smo si zastavili dve raziskovalni vprašanji: a) kaj je značilno za odnos med raziskovalcem in otrokom, ki se vzpostavi pri opazovanju z udeležbo, in b) katere epistemološke izzive in priložnosti prinaša odnos med raziskovalcem in otrokom? V članku utemeljimo, zakaj tega odnosa ne bi smeli dojemati v smislu dihotomije med udeleženimi posamezniki z osebnim vpo-gledom v to, kaj pomeni biti otrok priseljenec, in zunanjimi opazovalci (raziskovalci). Nasprotno, stik med raziskovalcem in otrokom je ob uporabi teoretskega okvira, ki združuje teoriji pozicionalnosti in intersekci-onalnosti, pravzaprav izhodišče za pridobivanje znanja o procesih integracije. V tem pogledu je pomembno preučiti, kako so udeleženci intersekcionalno umeščeni in kako se umeščajo sami ter kako dinamično razvijajo in spreminjajo svojo identiteto. Kot analitično orodje za preučevanje pozicionalnosti in intersekcionalnosti v medosebni interakciji med raziskovalcem in otrokom uporabljamo ključni dogodek. Ključni dogodek je po naravi tipičen in paradigmatski ter pomeni interpretativni ključ do razumevanja poteka dogodkov, dokumen-tiranih od začetka do konca postopka opazovanja z udeležbo. V raziskavi analiziramo dva ključna dogodka, Preizkus na šoli Belltown in Danec sem, s čimer prikažemo, kako ključni dogodek deluje kot analitično orodje. V članku pokažemo, da je lahko razmislek o ključnih dogodkih, ki vključuje interakcijo med raziskovalcem in otrokom, izhodišče za razumevanje položaja otrok in mladih iz priseljenskih okolij. Ključni dogodki namreč lahko razkrijejo, kako se raziskovalci ter otroci in mladi prek družbene dejavnosti medsebojno seznanijo. Poleg tega pa se v ključnem dogodku ter v pozicionalnosti in intersekcionalnosti, povezanih z njim, zrcalijo dinamika in strukture, ki prevladujejo tudi v širšem kontekstu šole in družbe.

Ključne besede: ključni dogodki, otrokosrediščni pristop, seznanjanje, pozicionalnost, intersekcionalnost

ANNALES · Ser. hist. sociol. · 30 · 2020 · 4

Søren SINDBERG JENSEN & Peter HOBEL: KEY INCIDENTS IN CHILD-CENTRED MIGRATION RESEARCH: EXPLORING METHODOLOGICAL AND ..., 575–586

SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allison, J. (2007): Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials. American Anthropologist, 109, 2, 261–272.

Banks, J. A. (2019): An Introduction to Multicultural Education (Sixth ed.). New York, Pearson.

Barker, J. & S. Weller (2003): "Is it Fun?" Developing Children Centred Research Methods. International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 23, 1, 33–58.

Carter, B. & K. Ford (2013): Researching Children's Health Experiences: The Place for Participatory, Child-centered, Arts-based Approaches. Research in Nursing & Health, 36, 1, 95–107.

Connolly, P. (2017): Race, Gender and Critical Reflexivity in Research with Young Children. In: Christensen, P. & A. James (Eds.): Research with Children. Oxon, Routledge, 104–120.

Crenshaw, K. (1991): Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. Stanford Law Review, 43, 6, 1241–1299.

Davies, B. & R. Harré (1990): Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves. Journal for the 'Theory Of Social Behauiour, 20, 1, 43–63.

Erickson, F. (1977): Some Approaches To Inquiry In School-Community Ethnography. Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 8, 2, 58–69.

Fattore, T., Mason, J. & E. Watson (2012): Locating the Child Centrally as Subject in Research: Towards a Child Interpretation of Well-Being. Child Indicators Research, 5, 3, 423–435.

Geertz, C. (1973): The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays. New York, Basic Books.

Grzymala-Kazlowska, A. (2016): Social Anchoring: Immigrant Identity, Security and Integration Reconnected? Sociology, 50, 6, 1123–1139.

Harden, J., Scott, S., Backett-Milburn, K. & S. Jackson (2000): 'Can't Talk, Won't Talk?': Methodological Issues in Researching Children. Sociological Research Online, 5, 2, 104–115.

Harwood, D. (2010): Finding a Voice for Child Participants within Doctoral Research: Experiences from the Field. Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 35, 4, 4–13.

Hillier, C. & J. Aurini (2018): What Role does the 'Parent-effect' Play in Child Centered Research? The Case of Photo-interviews of Children's Home Reading Practices. Qualitative Research, 18, 4, 492–509.

Illeris, K. (2004): Transformative Learning in the Perspective of a Comprehensive Learning Theory. Journal of Transformative Education, 2, 2, 79–89.

Jachyra, P., Atkinson, M. & B. E. Gibson (2014): Gender Performativity during Interviews with Adolescent Boys. Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 6, 4, 568–582.

James, A. & A. Prout (1990): Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood. New York, Falmer Press.

Jensen, J. S. (2011): Revisiting the Insider-Outsider Debate: Dismantling a Pseudo-problem in the Study of Religion. Method and Theory in the Study of Religion, 23, 29–47.

Khawaja, I. & L. L. Mørck (2009): Researcher Positioning: Muslim "Otherness" and Beyond. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 6, 1-2, 28–45.

Kustatscher, M. (2017): Young Children's Social Class Identities in Everyday Life at Primary School: The Importance of Naming and Challenging Complex Inequalities. Childhood, 24, 3, 381–395.

Marfelt, M. M. (2015): Grounded Intersectionality: Key Tensions, a Methodological Framework, and Implications for Diversity Research. Emerald Insight, 35, 1, 31–47.

Mauthner, M. (1997): Methodological Aspects of Collecting Data from Children: Lessons from Three Research Projects. Children & Society, 11, 1, 16–28.

Mayeza, E. (2017): Doing Child-Centered Ethnography: Unravelling the Complexities of Reducing the Perceptions of Adult Male Power During Fieldwork. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16, 1–10.

MiCREATE (2019a): Child-centred approach across disciplines. Available at: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/822664/results (last access: 07. 12. 2020)

MiCREATE (2019b). Available at: http://www.micreate.eu/ (last access: 07. 12. 2020).

Morgan, M., Gibbs, S., Maxwell, K. & N. Britten (2002): Hearing Children's Voices: Methodological Issues in Conducting Focus Groups with Children aged 7-11 Years. Qualitative Research, 2, 1, 5–20.

Onses-Segarra, J., Estalayo-Bielsa, P., Lozano-Mulet, P., Riera-Retamero, M., Stuardo-Concha, M., Hernández-Hernández, F. & J. M. Sancho-Gil (2020): Comparative Report: Educational Community Members and School Systems. (Available at: http://www.micreate.eu/index.php/reports/ (last access 07. 12. 2020).

Quiroz, P. A., Milam-Brooks, K. & D. Adams-Romena (2013): School as Solution to the Problem of Urban Place: Student Migration, Perceptions of Safety, and Children's Concept of Community. Childhood, 21, 2, 207–225.

White, A. (2012): 'Every Wednesday I Am Happy': Childhoods in an Irish Asylum Centre. Population, Space and Place, 18, 314–326.