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## *Gazing with intent: ethnographic practice in classrooms*

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TUULA GORDON

University of Helsinki

JANET HOLLAND

London South Bank University

ELINA LAHELMA AND TARJA TOLONEN

University of Helsinki

**ABSTRACT** In this methodological article we discuss way in which researchers observe girls and boys in the classroom. The article is based on a comparative cross-cultural, collective ethnographic study 'Citizenship, Difference and Marginality in Schools: With Special Reference to Gender', which was conducted in secondary schools in Helsinki and London. When we analysed our own actions, we realized that educational researchers – like teachers – tend to concentrate on events taking place in the classroom, particularly visible and audible action. They are less likely to direct their gaze on stillness and silence. In most of the classes that we followed boys used more voice, time, space, and movement than girls, although there were also differences among girls and among boys. In the early stages of our study, noisy and physically active boys drew our attention. But in our practice as the research continued, and in this article, we turn our gaze onto non-events, and ask reflexive researchers to problematize their categories of active and passive. Drawing from our own observations, we discuss how activity, passivity and agency are conceptualized and gendered in educational research.

**KEYWORDS:** *cross-cultural, gender, methodology, reflexivity, school ethnography, UK/Finland*

### *Introduction*

The classroom is a web of multiple and intersecting gazes: teachers often turn a fixed and intent look on those students they consider to be talking or moving inappropriately; students turn their gaze on the teacher and on each other. Educational researchers in schools enter this web with their own dedicated gaze, and are in turn gazed upon. The researcher observes, and tries to do so unobtrusively, but also adopts a particular gaze and directs it in particular

ways. We argue that visible and audible action attract the gaze, while silence and stillness can go unobserved. This focus of the researcher's gaze has implications for the analysis of resistance and power. With it we are more likely to observe practices of power used by teachers and processes of resistance adopted by students, as earlier studies on resistant boys and silent girls suggest (e.g. Davies, 1979; Willis, 1977). Willis gazed at the 'ear'oles' through the eyes of the 'lads'. A range of modes of being and doing, as well as meanings attached to these modes, may remain invisible in this way.

In this article we turn a gaze onto our own research practices to demonstrate these points, indicating that our aim has been reflexivity at all stages of the research: before we went into schools, while in them, and throughout the analysis of the data we generated. We draw on our experiences in a cross-cultural, collective and comparative ethnographic study 'Citizenship, Difference and Marginality in Schools: With Special Reference to Gender'. The extensive data consist of observation, participant observation, interviews with school students and teachers and other material gathered in two secondary schools in Helsinki and two in London (see e.g. Gordon et al., 2000a; Tolonen, 2001).<sup>1</sup> By a comparative approach we mean that we compare and contrast processes in Britain and Finland; by a cross-cultural approach we refer to our interest in what constitutes 'a school', and in particular how space and embodiment are implicated there. Basing our analysis on schooling in two countries and four schools enables us to extract theoretical and analytical insights that are not completely context bound. We present an analysis of our fieldnotes of the ethnography and research diaries as evidence of our research practice. By fieldnotes we refer to recorded observations written in the classroom, with little commentary. By research diaries we refer to notes that were written after the day in the field, recording events and discussions during breaks, including commentary on our actions and emotions (cf. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2001).

### *Gazing with intent*

Ethnographic traditions, as the editors of the *Handbook of Ethnography* suggest, 'are grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social and cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation' (Atkinson et al., 2001: 4). Increasing emphasis has been paid to the writing of ethnographies following the debate on representation initiated by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) and Clifford Geertz (1973). Indeed Stephanie Taylor (2002: 1–2) suggests that nuanced and non-reductive writing is an important distinguishing feature of ethnographic research. At the heart of ethnographers' writing today is strong reflexivity and a recognition of the responsibility of the researcher (Spencer, 2001).

An ethnographer entering the field is preparing to gaze, record, interpret

and analyse, and complex sets of processes are involved here. Gazing can be an exercise of power, as Foucault has pointed out (Foucault, 1980: 155). Foucault's surveilling and controlling gaze is a technique of modern power, and the interiorization of surveillance leads to the production of 'docile and useful bodies' Foucault (1977). Discussion of ethnographic work needs to be broadened to take account of these complexities. For example Denzin describes the gaze as:

That gaze which each of us has interiorized. That gaze which has been institutionalised in contemporary, postmodern everyday life; the gaze which I may pay you to perform for me; that gaze which you may ask me to perform for you. This is the gaze of surveillance, the gaze of power, the gaze which unveils the private and makes it public. It is the ethnographer's and the fieldworker's gaze; the gaze which seeks to expose the social and reveal the hidden truths that lie therein. (Denzin, 1994: 2)

Denzin is drawing parallels here between the ethnographer and cinematic genres (reflexive voyeuristic films), which employ the gaze of the voyeur (detective, reporter) to reveal hidden truths. He criticizes the realist epistemology that suggests there are such singular truths to be revealed, and the reliance on visual and auditory perception to produce such knowledge.

The general argument here is that qualitative researchers in the social sciences today confront a double crisis of representation and legitimation associated with the interpretive, linguistic and rhetorical turns in social theory (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The representational crisis questions whether qualitative researchers can capture lived experience in their texts, or whether they create it. The legitimation crisis involves a serious rethinking of terms like validity, generalizability and reliability, in the poststructural moment. In this moment the concept of the aloof researcher has been abandoned and the qualitative researcher is recognized as historically positioned, locally situated and a very human observer (Taylor, 2002).

The demands on the ethnographer are to engage with reflexive examination of their practice. It is important too not to lose entirely the history of ethnographic and other qualitative work, since there may be insights to be gained from a consideration of the shifting epistemological stances and paradigms which have played across the field, and the continuities and discontinuities in method, methodology and practice.

There are continuities and discontinuities between the gaze identified by Foucault, and elaborated by Denzin, and our gaze. When researchers backed by the authority of academia enter a school, they gaze with some power. However, the situation of 'looking at the others of the field' is more complex. Researchers become part of the social relations of the field and in their turn are gazed upon. They can experience a sense of dependency and lack of control, they may fear isolation and, at the same time, particularly at school, have to cope with never being left alone (cf. Pratt, 1986). Researchers have to create a balance between power and vulnerability, and the most concrete

point of vulnerability is embedded in embodiment. When we, women in our thirties, forties and fifties entered and positioned ourselves in classrooms full of 13–14 year olds to observe and to participate, there was no ready-made position available for us. Finding one's own space can be a daunting process. As we also wanted to talk to teachers, we were ambivalent borderliners in a space where institutional practices constitute 'teachers' and 'pupils' in different locations (Tolonen, 2001). If we veered too far in one direction, our movement in the other direction became more difficult. If teachers saw us as very close to students, they backed off and felt that our gaze was upon them. If the students thought we were close to teachers, they in turn felt that our gaze was directed at them (Epstein, 1998; Gordon et al., 1999).

Throughout the whole time we spent in school, we were constantly negotiating entry: can I come to this occasion; can I join in this special activity; will I be able to participate in this conversation; can I sit here? We were experienced as qualitative researchers, backed by our membership of our own institutions and disciplines. Our preparation for fieldwork had been thorough, and also included memory work on our own school days, and of ourselves as schoolgirls. Yet our complex positionality was characterized by a range of emotions in the negotiation of our place in the field (cf. Coffey, 1999).

Our research diaries include discussions and reflections on our emotions that are less evident in field notes. The diaries indicate another kind of positionality for the researcher in the classroom: she is a (silent) dramatization of an ideal (female) pupil. She absorbs information. She is quiet, she does not move, and is as unobtrusive as possible. The mode of this unobtrusiveness depends on the particular lesson and the activities involved, but she often works constantly, writing endless notes. In that sense the researcher is almost all gaze (and ears). She is an abstraction in the classroom, and the students become accustomed to her silent presence. She does not want to cause trouble, fearing exclusion from the classroom during subsequent lessons. She may not wish to influence the observed situation very much.

To address this, we also engaged in participant observation, sometimes doing the tasks given to students such as completing tests, drawing in art, trying to solve a problem in chemistry, and joining in physical education. Our aim was to have some experiential touch-point to being a student. But most of our participant observation took place outside the lessons – during breaks, while waiting to go into lessons, while walking to the next lesson, or in the changing rooms in physical education.

In the following sections we use examples from our analysis of field notes and diaries to illustrate the effort that is required, and which we have made, to redirect the researcher's gaze to stillness and silence. After the initial impact of visible and audible action was absorbed, we looked not only at events and eventfulness, but turned to observe silence and non-events, weaving them into our notes in a way that challenged commonplace conceptions of activity and passivity.

## *The researcher's gaze*

We prepared for our fieldwork carefully in order to be able to focus our researcher's gaze on relevant processes and patterns – with gender as central in our project. As an analytical tool we differentiated between the *official*, the *informal* and the *physical* school. Although intertwined in the everyday life of schools, these layers are analytically separable and were evoked in our observation, and later in analysis and writing.

We developed and used observation guidelines on the physical, official and the informal school. At the official layer we examine the curriculum, lesson contents, text books, teaching materials, school rules and other documents. At the informal layer we focus on interaction in all areas in the school, the application of school rules, and informal hierarchies. At the physical layer we focus on space and embodiment, school buildings, movement, sound, and time. (Gordon et al., 2000a).

The guidelines were constructed jointly so that the team in Finland had a shared understanding of the focus we would employ, and so were not merely lists used in the classroom, but had the purpose of sensitizing our gaze. We developed our observation practices by having up to three researchers in the same classroom. In this way we could divide the observation tasks, and one researcher did not have to concentrate on the whole situation. That gave us an opportunity to train ourselves to notice and to take notes. Comparing notes of researchers who had attended the same lesson provided us with an opportunity to reflect on our observations. It was also possible to focus on a particular aspect of a lesson in more detail.<sup>2</sup>

Our particular interest in the physical school – space and embodiment – did in fact direct our gaze to stillness and silence and to non-events. In the classrooms we would describe the spatial organization of the room, mapping the physical space, drawing seating plans, and charting the social use of the space. We were interested in how the routines of the classroom were established and maintained as well as negotiated and challenged. Some lessons have inbuilt movement – particularly physical education, and, depending on the task, technical and textile crafts – but in most lessons students are expected to sit at their desks (Gordon et al., 2000b). If the lesson includes 'official' movement, it is typically carefully prescribed – a few selected students may demonstrate some calculations during a Maths lesson for example, and students may be expected to collect and return equipment – usually in specified and approved ways taught to them from the first lesson, and so routinized. Because immobility is the most typical state in the classroom, gaze is easily drawn to movement. Use of voice is also typically prescribed; hence exceptions in the use of it – even frequent – are heard and noted.

Given these tendencies of events to draw the gaze, we turned our gaze towards our own practices by analysing how we had recorded visible and audible action and stillness and silence and non-events. We began the exercise

of problematizing gaze by analysing the notes of a Chemistry lesson with 13-year-old students, observed by Tuula Gordon and Tarja Tolonen. This was one of the groups we followed throughout the year and we were aware that they had particularly audible and visible active boys, and quiet girls who were less visible and less audible through the din and drama created by the boys – although below we question whether they were passive. Before this particular lesson Tarja had spent two weeks with the group; Tuula had met it for the first time the previous week.

For the first ten minutes in this double lesson both researchers observed the whole class, and both made more references to boys than girls in their lesson notes, then Tarja concentrated on observing girls and Tuula observed boys. When they divided the observation, Tarja's notes on girls increased considerably, but she still had a great number of observations on boys. Tuula's observations on boys increased and her observations on girls decreased. The noise of boys constantly diverts the researcher's ear and eye.

Many of the observations were on boys *doing* and *talking*. References to boys *doing* included for example the following: talks, asks, shouts, bangs, swings, fetches, washes, taps, sings, whispers, experiments. There were far fewer references to boys *being*: surprised, not ready yet, quiet for a while. Lots of boys' speech was quoted:

Can we play with fire?  
Did you fart?  
I don't understand  
Can we go and eat?  
Oh, oh, look, teacher!  
Hey teacher, see how red it is!

Observations on girls focused more on *being* and *looking*, for example: smiles, sits, reads, stays, blushes, looks confused, waits. There were observations on girls *doing* too, but they were different from observations noted on boys, for example: measures, turns, swings, cleans, writes, leaves, takes an exercise book, draws, fiddles, fetches.

Although gender difference is particularly clear in this group, it is nevertheless startling to realize how difficult it initially is for Tarja and Tuula to conduct observations on girls. We had been sensitized to remember quieter girls, and to pay attention to embodiment and use of space, not simply in terms of physically active signs, but also focusing on body language, by noting for example small movement such as fiddling with a pencil, and on facial expressions.<sup>3</sup> This is why we became interested in trying to understand how the researcher's gaze is drawn. We also wanted to divert our gaze to non-events, and to understand more about 'passivity'.

We decided to select further lesson notes to check how we had recorded being, doing, looking and talking, and in order to focus on gender difference. We conducted an in-depth content analysis on the observation notes of 14

lessons to analyse where the gaze of the researcher is directed. These were selected to represent a range of different types of lessons and teaching groups in our data, for example a group that included very quiet girls and seemingly active boys, and groups where girls' activity is visible and audible. Thus our aim is not to suggest that girls or boys are more active in the classroom, but to engage in a methodological discussion on gazing. In two of these lessons two researchers were present. We compare and contrast our practice in these 14 lessons with observations from other lessons and our research diaries.

We first consider the results of this exercise by discussing visible and audible action, and stillness and silence. We then problematize the categories of activepassive and notions of resistance.

We do not see gender as a simple dichotomous binary, but as contextual, processual and temporal. We focus on differences between girls and boys, differences among girls and among boys, and difference within a girl and a boy (Braidotti, 1991; Gordon and Lahelma, 1996). This adds a new dimension to the lesson we discussed above. Most of our early observations were on active boys, with less focus on girls. But not all boys were as visible and audible. One boy, Jorma, was referred to only three times in the notes.

Tommi turns round, takes Jorma's book.

Tommi to Jorma: 'You have a big spot there!' Jorma: 'So what?'

Tommi uses his chair to bang Jorma's desk.

In all these observations Jorma is the object of Tommi's doing rather than a doer. Other lessons of this group that have been analysed continue this pattern – Jorma is even more consistently on the margins of the researchers' gaze than are girls in the class. The emerging picture of the girls shows them as acting competently, engaging with the teaching/learning content of lessons and differentiating into particular types of students.

It is important to note that we researchers were gazed upon as well as gazing. Teachers and particularly students observed what we were doing. At times they would do something to test whether we would write it down – this was evident in the way they looked at us, or in direct questions: 'did you write that down?' Students would also direct our gaze to situations, telling us to 'write this down'. Many students frequently asked what we had written, and wanted to see our notes. Although they were unable to decipher material written in haste, we made efforts to explain to them what kind of notes we were writing.

At least some of them had formulated a rather clear picture of our note taking – this became evident in a lesson with the group discussed above. One teacher often asked students 'to teach' by using the overhead projector and asking questions of the rest of the group. Some boys used this as an opportunity to add dramatization. In this incident a boy took the overhead transparency he had used, and continued scribbling on it after he had concluded his teaching task. He then rushed back to the projector in order to



display the overhead. The teacher first tried to stop him, but having checked the overhead, suggested that it should be shown to ‘our researcher’ Tuula who – subject to the gaze of the whole group – read the ‘lesson notes’ displayed. The following is a translation:

LESSON NOTES!

- JERE THREW A PIECE OF PAPER AT ISMO
- JUKKA RECEIVED OUR VISITOR IN AN UNPLEASANT WAY
- PETE HELPED THE TEACHER TO WRITE ON THE BLACKBOARD BECAUSE HER CAT HAD MAULED HER MIDDLE FINGER
- HEIKKI IS BAWLING (AS USUAL)
- THE GIRLS ARE SITTING QUIETLY AS IN ST PAUL’S CHURCH

These lesson notes cover official, informal and physical layers in the lesson. Visible and audible action as well as stillness and silence are recorded. The notes contain a comment on gender difference. They also demonstrate gaze directed at Tuula who had arrived, unusually, late and explained that some students had asked researchers to help them in their video recording. Jukka then had called out ‘why didn’t you stay there’. Tuula’s late arrival, indicating a potential temporary dismantling of the robe of the ideal student, was gazed upon and noted. In the following sections where we discuss visible action, audible action and stillness and silence we use these student lesson notes as our subheadings.

*Visible action: ‘Jere threw a piece of paper at Ismo’*

Among our notes on visible action there are references to the tasks of the official school: students write, read, draw, fetch, take exercise books, have their tasks done, put their hands up. In Science lessons they measure, in Home Economics lessons they clean the dishes, in Mathematics lessons they calculate. Below are some of the typical notes from this category<sup>4</sup>:

Sara goes to get equipment.

Eric and Philip appear to be doing the second experiment.

Tiina and Marjaana try to write in the meantime.

References to official tasks of learning are not many, considering that this is the ‘doing’ that is supposed to take place in the schools. Students who write or sit and listen are not very often recorded. During a Home Economics lesson, however, Elina’s notes included two comments on Santtu ‘sitting’. The implication is that he was not doing what he was supposed to do, but ‘just’ sitting.

Visible action within the official school is mentioned more often when the doing that is supposed to take place is concrete: such as measuring in Chemistry, cooking and cleaning in Home Economics. In this category of ‘official doing’ girls are mentioned fairly often, even in the groups where boys



are the majority. Sometimes we refer to visible action in the official school by mentioning that students work, or that they do not work: 'Girls are planning some work and being bent over their work, immersed in it, help others.' Our interpretation here of what is work coincides with the definition in the official school.

Our notes include many references to the informal school; students are trying to communicate with their friends through bodily movement, such as turning to each other, walking over to each other, handing out sweets. Girls are mentioned as combing each other's hair and massaging each other. Boys are more often mentioned as playfighting, throwing something or challenging each other physically. During the lessons where special equipment is used, we have numerous notes on boys using the equipment in ways not intended in the official school. Gender difference is at its most visible in our notes about the informal school.

There are many references to the physical school; students knock with and wave their foot, lie on their desks, hum and drum the back of a chair, stretch themselves, lean against the wall, walk, stand, blow their nose, yawn, smile, blush, look toward the window etc. Both boys and girls are mentioned in observations of these physical manifestations. In a lesson of a group consisting mainly of girls, Tuula has recorded varied embodied activities of girls, such as their embodiment and use of space and voice:

Heli and Heta come in hand in hand, and then proceed to wrestle arms. Heli's chair is back to front and she sits with her legs spread out, taking her space. Later Krista does the same. These activities take place while they are listening to a story on a tape recorder.

In another group, where girls are usually very silent, observations on girls record them writing, doing exercises quietly. Below is an extract from this group in which Tuula has recorded bodily actions of a quiet and high achieving girl:

Taru sits facing the front of the class, with a hairband in front of her mouth. Now she eats chewing gum and looks around her. Looks at her watch. Fingers her nose.

Boys are mentioned to be opening windows, going for a drink, peeping into the corridor, going to the toilet, closing windows, pulling down blinds, fiddling with a lighter, swinging, tapping.

Our references to visible action in the physical school suggest that students are getting tired with the tight time-space paths and bodily restrictions (e.g. Gordon et al., 2000b). Notes on tapping, stretching and yawning tend to become more frequent towards the end of the day.

Science lessons and Home Economics lessons are full of different kinds of equipment that can be used in various ways. Students' inventiveness in this

arrests our attention. We give an example from a Science lesson with seven boys and 13 girls. It was, Janet noted, a 'boisterous, noisy lesson'. Prior to the lesson, while waiting in the yard onto which the classroom door opened, under a covered walkway, the girls (and the researcher) had waited quietly in line. In stark contrast, the boys had swung, jumped and played on the girders of the walkway. The notes included 36 remarks of one or more boys doing, and only 15 of one or more girls doing.

The girls' actions noted are mostly relevant for the tasks of the lesson; apart from activities appropriate in the official school there was only one mention of two girls playing with the tap and another of a girl finding a spring on the floor. Amongst the boys, however, one has made a catapult for his pen out of an elastic band provided for use in the lesson, shooting with it; they develop a game with the pieces of scientific equipment, using them as fake hands; they grip each other's arm; pick up a pen with a gripper; try to seize each other's nose with a gripper; compete as if in a sword fight; test their strength by pulling an elastic band; one puts a force meter on his ear as if it is an earring; they roll weights across the table and try to catch them in the gripper/hand.

During this lesson the girls were, however, doing some talking. With all this activity to record on the researcher's part, boys' talking was mentioned but twice. A general note recorded that boys were talking throughout this game, but no specific comments were made. Janet's reaction at the time was that the boys' game was developed to a large extent for the researcher's gaze, they were using her as an audience. One boy approached to check if she was recording his activities in the notes, and offered comments about himself to be included.

During this lesson the researcher's gaze focused on boys who were the innovative users of equipment. This was the case often, but not always. In one of the classes, a group of four girls are talkative and active. In the following we discuss Elina's notes on girls' activities during one Science and one Mathematics lesson that took place in a computer classroom.

In the Science lesson Elina had 13 references to one or more girls doing something, and eight remarks of boys doing. The instant notes after the lesson reported:

The group of girls was wild, they measured everything but what they were supposed to, for example Markku's foot. Markku was obviously irritated; a feeling of sexual harassment.

The observation notes about this lesson itself are not, however, as dramatic as the above comment leads us to assume. The unexpectedness of the girls' behaviour towards Markku was noted in the researcher's instant comments, recorded immediately after the lesson.

In the Mathematics lesson students were supposed to do a task on a computer, working in pairs. Most of the boys performed the task as expected and were not mentioned often. Girls were not as competent, and some of them played with the computer. In her instant comments after the lesson Elina

wrote: 'Henna and Saija restless, quarrelled by the machine, giggled'. The notes included the following remarks on those two doing:

Saija circulates, looking at the others, Henna tells her to return to work with their task.

Henna and Saija are arguing in a friendly manner, play punching each other.

Henna has written in a book that she has drawn on the computer 'Saija's Sex education'.

Other extracts note Saija and Henna circulating, combing hair, having disputes on how to work with the task. As in the example of the Science lesson above, the researcher's records on the doings of these girls were not particularly striking, when compared to our notes on several lessons when some of the boys have been visible. The instant reactions recorded, however, that some of the girls were active – that means active in comparison with other girls.

Gender patterns within different lessons and different groups vary considerably. Among the fieldnotes that we have analysed here we had, for example, one lesson where the observer mentioned a girl's name 85 times and a boy's name 12 times, and another with 204 notes on a boy and 76 on a girl. Boys' activities that we have registered are often controlling, abusive, embodied, spatial, competitive, sharing, dramatic, critical. When we talk about girls, we use the words share, observe, communicate quietly, act competently, turn inwards, smile, blush. During one lesson Tuula noted that when the researcher's gaze was turned to girls, she sees how girls write notes, send materials to each other, have already done the experiment, don't make mistakes, don't experiment (innovatively), have cleared up things ages ago, sit, wait and look at boys doing. Such references to detail increased as the researchers became more familiar with the everyday practices in school and paid less attention to the unfolding drama of the boys' activities.

### *Audible action: 'Heikki is bawling (as usual)'*

Audible action attracts the researcher's gaze in numerous ways including: chatting, arguing, negotiating, commenting, asking, yelling. It takes place between students and the teacher either informally, or when dealing with the official school and teaching. It also appears among students in the informal school.

Some lessons are strongly directed by the teacher, and s/he may use much of the voice and space in the classroom. In other lessons students work in groups and talk with each other as well as with the teacher. Often we register communication in the classroom between the teacher and those boys who shout answers at the same time, competing with each other for the teacher's attention. Although both boys and girls ignore the 'hands-up' rule and teachers can be variable in their enforcement of it, or use different question-

and-answer techniques, it is largely boys who call out without their hand up when it is required.

We also endeavoured to hear more multiple voices and paid attention to gendered conflicts in order to get beyond the surface noise. Sometimes boys compete with and challenge the noisier girls. This may lead to gendered conflict between boys and girls. Even if boys often succeed in gaining the teacher's attention, they are sometimes ignored, like Juuso in the following extract:

Juuso calls the teacher, says: 'Why do you help Markku and not me?' Teacher does not react. . . Juuso calls the teacher again.

Recorded audible action consists mostly of informal interaction among boys. During a lesson when some boys' audible action draws the main attention of all others in the classroom, there were some girls who took care that the lesson continued along the lines appropriate to the official school. The following extracts are from observations that concentrated on girls, recording audible and also some visible action, as well as silence and stillness.

Sonja answers a question teacher has asked.

Girls are quiet all the time. Some of them look in front of them, some look around them.

Sonja puts up her hand and teacher asks her to answer a question twice. Teacher asks her one more question. Milla puts up her hand and teacher asks her to answer a question.

Milla goes to the teacher at the end of the lesson.

Usually the girls' voices are connected to learning, specifying the task or answering the teacher's questions. In one lesson girls kept on chatting with each other, and no one interrupted them, as long as they did not bother others.

Outi and Anu and Anna are writing, also Eevi. Taru and Jutta are talking, also Jaana and Leena.

Boys may be critical and boisterous, and at the same time they can be seen to be fishing for teacher's attention. But when girls are boisterous, they are interpreted as resisting the teacher – like Jaana and Leena who dominate the group and also the audible space. Boisterous boys are often seen as active and individualistic students, but boisterous girls are not (see e.g. Lahelma and Öhrn, 2003).

The following extract is an example of a teacher noticing talkative girls. This is from Janet's notes from the Science lesson already quoted above:

The girls are a bit punchy today, lively, talkative, especially on the far table (from where I am sitting). I later discovered that there was a change in friendship line-up going on. The teacher of this class also reported the whole class, but especially the girls, for being misbehaved.

Girls' voices may be interrupted if they are interpreted as displaying a critical attitude on the lesson, as in the next example:

Jatta hums and drums the back of a chair quietly. Jatta waves her feet. Teacher: 'Jatta, That is disruptive!' Jatta stops humming and drumming with her fingers. She waves her feet.

Critical girls, and girls who participate in classroom discussion, are also sometimes granted space in official school situations, as in Tuula's summary of a discussion of a Mother tongue lesson in a group where girls are in the majority. This lesson is teacher centred:

When the story finishes, there is a lively discussion, and I did my best to record it, including lots of quotations of girls' talk. Girls criticise corporal punishment and the mother. Others point out that the mother did not want to punish the daughter in such a way. Lotta notes the historical period, and refers to the idea that children won't learn without punishment. Salli notes that the mother felt under social pressure to conform to contemporary customs. Noora keeps criticising the mother, saying that a child who is hit becomes withdrawn. Asta notes that the girl was a dreamer. Heli notes that she did not get a lot of opportunity for playing. The discussion is complex, with many different strands – it is initiated by Asta, who starts talking immediately the tape finishes, without waiting for the teacher to indicate what should be done next, or how the discussion should proceed.

When informal interaction catches the researcher's attention, it is often loud boys who draw it. These actions may be part of teaching and the official school, but are often allowed by the teacher even when they are not. Girls' audible action is interrupted more easily, and it is usually redirected to the official school. Girls' resistance as audible action is noticed more easily since it is more rare. Michelle Fine (1992) suggests that girls pay the price for their silencing in school, but they also engage in practices of resistance, but Valerie Walkerdine (1985) emphasizes the difficulties of such resistance. Deborah Cameron (1995) argues that 'verbal hygiene' is expected of women, and taught to them through interruptions of their talk.

### *Stillness and silence: 'the girls are sitting quietly as in St Paul's Church'*

Stillness and silence are not often quoted as action in our notes. We might note that 'he just sits there' if we mention a quiet student at all – like the quiet boy, Jorma. Some boys may sense this focus on action and they might test it by

going to sharpen their pen in a quiet lesson, and then looking at the researcher to see if she's writing it down.

In our notes stillness and silence mean that students write and sit still, or they do the tasks as expected.

Niko, Eevi and Anu talk a little, then they do the task.

Some of the girls are getting on with their task, but Jane and Mary are talking.

The boys are not doing much work, teacher tells them to calm down and do some work.

During periods when 'nothing really happens' – when there is stillness and silence in the classroom – we often used our time making notes about the classroom space and about the embodiment of the teacher and the students.

On closer examination there is a wide range of audible and visible activities in the classroom veering towards stillness and silence, such as sitting still and dreaming, listening, watching; sitting still and writing; sitting still and chatting; sitting still and doing massage; sitting still and asking, commenting ironically, teasing; moving around, sitting on a desk, hitting each other with a book, drumming the desk, leaving the classroom and throwing a paperball.

At times when the researchers concentrated particularly on girls, stillness and silence were recorded. The extracts below are from notes on a lesson with the group including quiet girls, referred to above. The teacher interacts mainly with boys, joking with them, giving them commands, appealing to them. Notes on girls include following observations:

Nelli and Taru exchange a few words.

Nelli answers.

Milla sits. She fiddles with her pen.

Milla smiles.

Heini helps Soila.

Taru asks something from Milla, about the exercise, I assume. Hille asks for Milla's advice. Milla says she has calculated it in her head. 'You won't be able to do it anyway.'

Milla seems to be ready. She looks toward the window. She fingers her nose. She looks at her exercise book. She rubs something out. Taru turns to her and asks something.

Nelli asks Milla if she is done. Nelli asks how she got the answer. Milla explains.

Milla is knocking her foot on the floor.

Milla asks [the teacher] something. Hille asks for an exercise book.

These observations on girls reveal aspects of their internal dynamics. Everybody turns to Milla, a quiet, able girl. She is helpful, and girls seem to get more individual advice from her than from the teacher. But she will not help Hille and responds in a belittling way to her request; girls' relations to each other do not necessarily create a girlfriendly nirvana (Hey, 1997: 126; see also Gordon et al., 2000c).

Observations on 'being' and on 'stillness and silence' increase in our notes as time progresses. While we generally make an effort to record non-events, when a lesson is eventful, observations of visible and audible action increase, as well as observations on boys. Stillness and silence and non-events are more present in our diaries than in classroom observations. This demonstrates our determination as researchers to gaze with intent and to engage with quietness.

We have discussed how activity has been recorded and interpreted in the researcher's gaze. It is important to add that we do not equate silence with passivity. The opposite to visible and audible activity is stillness and silence, but such stillness and silence is not necessarily a sign of passivity. Being active, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, carries meanings such as *being in the habit of doing things, lively, or having an effect*. The process of *doing* in schools includes not only visible and audible action, but also quiet thinking and contemplation; the Dictionary gives 'an active brain' as an example. This can be demonstrated by Tuula's fieldnotes, where she turned her gaze on Elina who was a co-observer in the same lesson. Despite her quiet and peaceful demeanour, Elina is engaged in intense observation and a process of recording as comprehensive notes as possible, while at the same time necessarily being engaged in a process of selection, as recording is necessarily selective.

Elina looks around with a faint, friendly smile on her face. Now she looks pensive. She looks at the time. She writes.

Elina turns her face towards the other side of the classroom. She gazes somewhat enquiringly. She seems very concentrated.

Under her veneer of stillness and silence Elina is engaged in an active, absorbing, intensive process of gazing with intent as well as quietly recording her observations.

In school research activity is often related to the physical (visible and audible) signs of it. Although European social thought emphasizes the importance of mind over body, reason over emotions, nevertheless the possibility that a bodily 'passive' student is active in her mind is ignored. We as ethnographers shared these difficulties in recording stillness and silence in the early stages of our observation. However, we developed ways to overcome them. We practiced directing our gaze and included observation of non-events in our fieldnotes. Rachel Sharp and Anthony Green (1975) used the term 'bedrock of busyness' to refer to pupils who quietly and industriously carried on with their work, enabling the teacher to pay special attention to those pupils who were noisy and mobile, or who needed extra help with their work. Our analysis suggests that there is also a layer of stillness and silence, of thinking and dreaming, and that visible and audible action is constructed in interaction with this apparent lack of activity.



## *Conclusions*

We have offered this analysis in the spirit and practice of reflexivity rather than the genre of the anti-hero confessional in ethnography (Atkinson, 1996; Wolcott, 2002; see also, Bell 2004). We have turned the ethnographers gaze upon researchers and asked questions about ourselves as positioned and positioning in multiple discourses. These include the discourses of our disciplines – sociology, the sociology of education, and feminist research. From within these discourses, both our practice of observation and our interpretation of what we see and hear are contoured by particular conceptions of power and resistance. The practice of ethnography in schools, we argue, privileges the visible and audible. Though we have problematized ‘power’ and ‘resistance’, our reflection on our observations reveals how difficult it was to turn the researchers’ gaze onto silence and stillness. But we also demonstrate the practice of broadening our observational field and of gazing with intent at stillness and silence. We argue that this increased the reflexivity of our gaze.

In the context of the enforced immobility of students in the classroom, the gaze is drawn to movement and sound. Even with a feminist consciousness of the different modes of behaviour of girls and boys in relation to movement and sound (based on our own and considerable prior research), the gaze, as recorded in our notes turned more frequently to boys. We have argued that these emphases tend to support a particular conceptualization of power and resistance, and perhaps mask other meanings of both the observed, and the frequently much less observed patterns of behaviour (Gordon et al., 2000a). Our emphasis on spatial relations and gendered embodiment has led us to observations on silence and stillness, and to analysis of what lies in the mental space behind the still and quiet face.

The ethnographer at school occupies a contradictory and vulnerable position. She is required to have sensitivity and methodological, positional awareness of herself and her actions in the field. The ethnographer highlights ‘the complex in the routine’ and ‘the routine in the complex’, as Vicki Smith (2001) suggests. They have to listen to silence as well as to sound and must see stillness as well as activity.

We have touched too on the mode of our observation appearing to reflect that of the ideal female pupil, quiet, industrious, observant, diligent, writing copious notes. But from whence does this simulacrum emerge? Is it the playing out of our own experiences of school, do we swing, propelled by unconscious forces into a set of anterior motives? Or is it the voyeur, donning the (gendered) mantle of the insider to divert awareness of our outsider status? These layers of meaning have implications for our observations and the interpretation we make of them. Sensitivity and methodological, positional self-awareness is required by an ethnographer occupying an ambivalent, contradictory and vulnerable position in the school. There is a range of practices within contours of the power relations in school; these

include negotiation, ritualistic display, dramatization, and accommodation. Taking account of these requires the deployment of the shifting, unstable and multi-layered concept of resistance. Judith Stacey (1990) discusses her experiences of doing feminist ethnographic work, and notes the difficulties and complexities in the interaction between the researcher and the researched. In her book *Brave New Families* one of her research subjects comments on what has been written about her by saying that she can never be 'pinned down' by a researcher. Stacey calls for rigorously self-aware feminist cultural accounts, humble about the partiality of their vision (Stacey, 1988).

#### NOTES

1. The research team in Helsinki include also Pirkko Hynninen, Tuija Metso and Tarja Palmu in University of Helsinki. Janet Holland undertook the research in London, with the assistance of Nicole Vitellone in 1995 and Kay Parkinson in 1996.
2. The guides used in the study were developed by the Finnish team, and discussed with Janet Holland before her observations began. Although she worked with another researcher in each school (with whom she discussed the guides and their use in observation in detail) each researcher observed a different class in each school, and they did not observe any lessons together. Discussions and interpretations of events in the observations were continuous between the researchers throughout the observation period.
3. Tuula had also written in her instant comments: 'time, voice, body'
4. We do not differentiate between extracts from the London and Helsinki schools here.

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TUULA GORDON is a docent and a fellow of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. Her research interests include education, young people's transitions, citizenship and nationality, constructions of gender and methodology (such as ethnography and lifehistory approaches). She has published in all these areas, for example Gordon, Holland and Lahelma, *Making Spaces: Citizenship and Difference in Schools* (Palgrave and New York University Press, 2000); Beach, Dennis, Gordon and Lahelma (eds) *Democratic Education: Ethnographic Challenges* (Tufnell Press, 2003).  
Address: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, PO Box 4, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. [email: Tuula.Gordon@helsinki.fi]

JANET HOLLAND is Professor of Social Research and Co-director of the Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group at London South Bank University. Her research interests centre around youth, education, gender, sexuality and family life. She is also interested in feminist theory and methodology. She has published widely in all these areas of interest, most recently (with Jeffrey Weeks and Matthew Waites (eds) *Sexualities and Society* (Polity Press, 2003), and (with Caroline Ramazanoglu) *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (Sage, 2003).  
Address: Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, London South Bank University, London SE1 0AA, UK. [email: hollanj@lsbu.ac.uk]

ELINA LAHELMA is Professor at the Department of Education, University of Helsinki, Finland. She has worked, conducted research and published widely in the field of gender and education. Her studies centre around curriculum, school education and young people's transitions. Her publications include, among others, the books mentioned in Gordon's bibliography.  
Address: Department of Education, PO Box 39, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. [email: elina.lahelma@helsinki.fi]

TARJA TOLONEN is a Postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Helsinki, Finland. She has conducted research on gender, youth cultures and education. Her current research interests include young people's transitions, constructions of gender and sociology of education.  
Address: Department of Sociology, PO Box 35 (Vironkatu 1), 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. [email: tatolone@mappi.helsinki.fi]

