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## ***An Unfinished Critical Ethnographic Journey: Collaborative Reframing and Repositioning of Relationships in the Field***

**Frances Giampapa**

e-mail: [Frances.Giampapa@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Frances.Giampapa@bristol.ac.uk)

*University of Bristol. UK*

**Abstract:** This paper explores my on-going collaborative research journey that began in 2009 with a critical ethnographic investigation into the ways one early years school in Bristol was working to advance a pedagogy of respect that drew on the multilingual and multiliterate out of school practices of children and their parents in order to open possibilities for in-school learning. The project was framed within a critical ethnographic approach that is underpinned by a philosophy of democratic and collaborative ways of working within the field; acknowledging identities, positionalities and relations of power as constructed within and across institutional settings. In this paper, I present the collaborative learning trajectories and relationships between myself, as researcher, and Lara, the Head Teacher, a key participant within this project. I situate this within a critical reading of researcher identities, collaboration and research-community partnerships within a scholarship that draws on arguments for the democratizing of knowledge production, the re-evaluation and transformation of field relationships through reflexive practice (Byrd-Clark & Dervin, 2014; Facer & Enright, 2016; Giampapa, 2011) and the intellectual and emotional commitment involved in shaping them. What evolved through this unfinished critical ethnographic journey is an understanding of the underlying «practical, personal and symbolic» reasons (Facer & Enright, 2016, p. 59) for field relationships as a starting point in order to build deeper forms of engagement. These deeper forms of engagement generate different ways of knowing that are co-created, ethically grounded, socially responsible and action oriented (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010). I stress the transformative power of these field conversations that were able to evolve and shape new ways of understanding as a result of the longevity of being in the field and working beyond it.

**Keywords:** Researcher identities; university-community partnerships; critical and linguistic ethnography.

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on a critical ethnographic journey that began in the autumn of 2009 to understand the ways in which Arco Nursery school in Bristol was finding innovative ways to provide an inclusive and socially just education for Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and English as an additional language (EAL) children and their families (see Section 3). Of particular interest to me was the way in which the school's inclusive ethos predicated on how the valuing of students' and their families' linguistic and cultural knowledge was drawn upon in everyday pedagogical practices in and outside the classroom.

The official data collection period at the time was from October/November 2009-July 2010. I was immersed into the weekly routines of the school with an intensified period of observation, which took place in one particular classroom known as G-room in 2010. I initially observed across the 5 classrooms at the time but then choose G-room as I was drawn to the way the practitioners in that room were working with the diverse linguistic and cultural resources of the students and their families. The data set also included a range of classroom videos, photographs, curricular documents, lesson plans and student work including learning diaries. I used field notes to document specific events, classroom routines and exchanges with children, parents, and teachers. I did a series of audio-recorded face to face semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers and nursery practitioners, who worked alongside teachers to deliver the curriculum, the head of the Arco Children's Centre, and the Head Teacher. I participated in teacher inset days that were focused on a variety of themes for professional development and I was also invited to attend an event around the school's education plan. In addition, I conducted face to face semi-structured interviews with 3 parent groups and one children's group. The data collection not only took place inside the classroom but also the school corridors, the community spaces of the Children's Centre during play sessions but also the outdoor spaces – the school garden, pond and climbing areas to name a few. These are all a crucial part of the learning spaces created by the setting. Within these spaces I attended special community events organized by the school and its parents.

In the process of this research journey, new relationships, identities and positionalities emerged that evolved into a more collaborative, mutually beneficial and transformative way of working that has continued beyond the time frame of the research itself. I became embedded into the life of the school community as my roles changed (e.g., researcher, school governor) and it was the growing relationship with Lara, the Head Teacher and the important learning outcomes from this research journey that is the focus of this paper. The discussion draws from a series of 4 face to face semi-structured interviews that were initiated in 2009 but continued to take place through 2015, 2017 and 2018. These were often triggered by different school events, changes in the early years educational landscape, the changes in leadership, the shifting role of the school within its community and the city. In addition, there were so many informal conversations in the corridors, community spaces, garden, and off the school site that contributed to the wealth of knowledge and understanding about the school. Together these experiences were embodied, drawing on the intellectual and emotional labor that all parties would bring to the research process. The desires,

agendas and negotiated goals formed an integral part of this research journey and as a result shifted the traditional power relationships and knowledge hierarchies.

The focus of this paper is threefold: 1) To explore the nature of the relationships in the field and rapport building that took place within my initial project as part of my positioning as a «university researcher». This starts with a discussion of the role and identities of the researcher as socially constructed and situated in the field. This is mutually constructed in relation to participants and embedded within a set of power relations. Across section 2.0, this discussion interweaves a critique of traditional approaches to research field relationships that is informed by critical/collaborative ethnographic ways of being in the field; 2) In exploring field relationships, I want to offer a more nuanced reading of the realities of fieldwork built around a relationship of trust, reciprocity and «fieldwork rapport» (Rampton, 2016)<sup>1</sup> that is collaborative and productive in its co-construction of researcher and participant(s) identities (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010). I offer this new reading of researcher and participant relationships across sections 3.0 and 4.0 as they demonstrate the core values and principles embedded in doing this work in a collaborative and co-constructed way; and 3) To demonstrate that the outcome of the re-shaping and re-imagining of field identities built over a decade can open up new ways of doing research through the co-production of knowledge, which offers a greater legacy of gains for participants/communities and researcher/university. The discussion also foregrounds the affective labor, personal investment, emotions and experiences that are attached to the research process and the need to engage, critique and position these processes firmly within the mainstream of research and not at its margins. This I discuss across section 4.0 and into section 5.0 the conclusion, which I see not as a conclusion but a continuation of the research conversation that lives beyond the pages of this publication.

## 2. Reframing research, knowledge, identities and field relationships

The backdrop to this discussion is the current UK academic research climate that has been shaped by social, political and economic forces underpinned by globalization and the marketization of education. Under these conditions, there continues to be debate and tension over the role of the university as a public institution and the value and social impact of research produced. Universities are called upon to be more engaged in tackling global and local agendas and in doing so be outward facing in their reach, reframing their work to not only include the agendas of local communities but to engage and co-produce research with them. The problematic lies also with understanding what counts as «engagement», how it is enacted and what the benefits are for universities and communities (Benneworth *et al.*, 2018).

The over-arching framing of research posited within the institutional architectures of universities and the academy can position researchers and their research (and

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<sup>1</sup> Rampton (2016) offers an important critique of «rapport» across diverse research approaches laying bare the underlying ideological work and the issues that it points to in the field. My interpretation of «rapport» acknowledges the ideological and political nature of the research process and the building of relationships in the field that are oftentimes messy in nature with each member bringing different knowledge sets and experiences.

the knowledge produced from it), in particular ways that can be exclusive. The reproduction of academic hierarchies that privilege particular types of research can in turn sideline collaborative forms of knowledge production that foreground the valuable knowledge and ways of being that community partners bring to the research partnership. It can also set up expectations and constructions of engagement with communities that highlight utilitarian approaches of engagement (e.g., the research to publication to the measuring of «impact»<sup>2</sup>. The latter, being framed in narrow ways and conceived as produced at the end of the research process) rather than encouraging sustainable relationships with a view of more meaningful and lasting legacies<sup>3</sup> (Enright & Facer, 2017). Facer & Enright (2016) add that we need to move away from the narrow view of the «public value» of research as «short term, instrumental partnerships» but as:

...creating substantive conversations between the different sets of expertise and experience that university and community partners offer, and in so doing, enabling the core questions that both are asking to be reframed and challenged. Such a set of relationships is far from the naïve economic model that would see the value of research judged by its immediate utility (p. 8).

They also suggest that oftentimes relationships of reciprocity and collaboration in the field are based on «practical, personal and symbolic» reasons. These are based on the different types of researcher and community roles and different types of partnership agendas. They show that on a practical level the reciprocity arrangement is based on different types of researcher roles that require the community partner in order to: 1) negotiate different relationships in the field; 2) feed into the design of the research; or 3) provide a historical backdrop to the context. From the community standpoint alignment with university research offers another way into documenting and reflecting on their own practice, build local research capacity and draw on researcher expertise on the production and understanding of data.

Symbolic reasons for a university-community partnership may simply lie within the prestige communities believe that they will gain in partnering with an institution, and the value that a university might gain in demonstrating that it has community links in order to fulfill its engagement agenda. Whereas on a personal level, the relationships between researcher and community partner can be borne out of friendships, personal connections and a need to develop a professional network. Acting as a «critical friend» is an important role that either partner can play at different points of the relationship (see Section 4).

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<sup>2</sup> The AHRC, as other funding bodies such as the ESRC, see impact as «the «influence» of research or its «effect on» an individual, a community, the development of policy, or the creation of a new product or service. It relates to the effects of research on our economic, social and cultural lives» (AHRC, p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> The AHRC Connected Community Report on «Creating Living Knowledge» Facer & Enright (2016, p. 5) offer insights into the reframing of impact as it stands from «a linear model ...that runs from «paper» to real world «application». Instead...more sustainable, embodied and transformative legacies are produced through ongoing interactions between publics and universities throughout the development of projects and partnerships».

The important critique that Facer & Enright (2016) offer is the need to move away from tokenistic and superficial arrangements of reciprocity and collaboration. That is, to move away from seeing the community as merely an access to the real world and as instrumental for gaining a research site and mining data from participants. They suggest, «the personal, embodied and emotional reasons for collaboration are a powerful driver for both the creation of new partnerships as well as for the maintenance of long-term projects» (p. 60). Again, within this process of reciprocity the «long term» partnership working is highlighted and there grows the potential for a different set of commitments to be crafted that are future facing.

I frame this unfinished critical ethnographic journey as part of this call for re-conceptualizing and expanding an understanding of the university-community/researcher(s) and participants field relationships. I believe this can be done through opening a discussion on field relationships and positionalities in terms of: 1) how the researcher and community/participants are situated within the field and how the field itself is re-conceptualised; 2) how collaboration and partnerships are framed in order to move beyond traditional ways of positioning researchers in relation to the field, to the communities in which they research, and to the university (see Section 2).

The importance of a collaborative partnership that re-imagines roles within the research and moves beyond its instrumental value was key to my working relationship with Arco Nursery and its Head Teacher, Lara. The inception of the research and the brokering of the initial conversations with Lara and others began through Anna, one of the teachers working in the setting at that time. It was through a mutual university link that I became aware of Arco Nursery and the work of the nursery in building inclusive practice underpinned by a commitment to issues of diversity and social justice that were drawn from a Reggio Emilian approach (see Section 3). What unfolded through these initial conversations was a shared commitment and educational approach to challenging the power structures and inequalities embedded within the system that marginalized the most vulnerable children and families in the school. From the onset, it was clear to me that the sharing of knowledge and expertise within the context of relationship building takes time. These initial conversations with Anna were also about establishing a shared understanding of educational practice and ways of working in the field that would prepare for other conversations with the Head Teacher, Lara, and Deputy Head Teacher, Susana.

As I have indicated in previous writing (Giampapa, 2011; Giampapa & Lamoureux, 2011), understanding the field as co-constructed with participants and as changeable across time and space (Huot, 2018) can re-align researcher and participant identities and roles as a result of shifting relations of power. England (1994) indicates that

«the field» is constantly changing and that researchers may find that they have to maneuver around unexpected circumstances... This, in turn, ignites the need for a broader, less rigid conception of the «appropriate» method that allows the researcher the flexibility to be more open to the challenges of fieldwork (p. 81).

I believe field relationships and experiences shape the research process offering wider perspectives of understanding and knowledge production and a greater potential for impact and change that is mutually beneficial (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014; Lather, 1986; Ortega, 2004). Therefore, these field experiences should not be cast within the liminal perimeters of fieldwork but are central to it as part of the reflexive practices emerging from working «on, for and with» (Cameron *et al.*, 1992) communities.

As a critical ethnographer, I draw also from a long history of collaborative and critical ethnographic research (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010) and Participatory Action Research (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Wakeford & Sanchez Rodriguez, 2018) that challenges systems of power and privilege. This is done through the re-imagining of research roles as part of the research collaboration, co-production and the co-construction of knowledge that comes from the evolving research process. Such research is underpinned by approaches that are theoretically informed by critical theory, critical pedagogy, and post-modern approaches to collaboration (Lassiter, 2005). In reference to their collaborative ethnography, Campbell & Lassiter (2010) purport that collaboration is also shaped by the «context of a very specific history (of both place and participants)» and in reference to a «specific framework of moral and ethical commitments negotiated between and among a specific, albeit evolving, group of project participants...» (p. 373). This highlights the importance of drawing together social, historical, political processes involved in situating the shared experiences and values of participants and researchers in the field.

My values as a researcher – the beliefs, biases, positionalities and ways of thinking reflexively – are part of the process of research, which begins in the crafting of questions and ideas about an issue (Giampapa, 2011). This points to an understanding that the researcher is socially, politically and historically embedded within a complexity of discourses within the academy that shape and frame the practice of doing research. Our researcher identities are informed by our own social and linguistic forms of capital, gender, sexuality, ethnicities *inter alia* and the ways in which we are positioned by our participants in the field. The politics of field identities and power relationships need to be explored in a reflexive discussion around the process and politics of research that is ethically driven and attentive to the democratizing of knowledge production (England, 1994). As Guillemin & Gilliam (2004) state the shape of «a reflexive research process» entails

...a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation, not just in relation to the research methods and the data but also to the researcher, participants, and the research context (p. 275).

As I have noted in previous writing (Giampapa, 2011), the reflexive process and the tensions it might raise in the field are productive «methodological rich points» (Hornberger, 2006, p. 220) that allow for possibilities to produce and read research from different perspectives [See also Copland & Creese (2015); Creese, Takhi & Blackledge (2017)].

Understanding the tensions alongside the positive outcomes of working with participants requires as Goffman (1989, p. 130) calls a «deep familiarity» within the

field. As I have noted, relationship building begins at the very early stages of the research. In order to build relationships of trust one needs to be open to the competing agendas within the research-community partnership (as framed within the discourse of the university and funding councils). This includes: 1) the different understandings of «research» and its outcomes; 2) the tackling of thorny subjects that might relate to participants' experiences of research and how they are represented within it (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010); and 3) the potential for new roles, identities and relationships that come from initial, as well as continued encounters in the field that live oftentimes beyond the confined research timeline. What might start on the level of the practical, personal and symbolic evolves over time into a much deeper level of engagement as a result of getting into the messiness of collaborative ethnographic research. As Campbell & Lassiter (2010) note «collaborative engagements have the potential to extend the purposes and processes of collaboratively based researches into collaboratively based actions or activism» (p. 377).

Within this research journey, my identities as «the university researcher» moved in and out of diverse roles as I became progressively embedded in the setting. This sits together with Lara's own shifting beliefs and positioning in relation to research and the researcher role in the field (see Section 4). As such, my identities shifted between, for example, «expert», «enabler» «critical friend» to name a few. A different set of relationships emerged as I also became involved in the governance of this setting as a Community Governor (and later as a «Co-opted Member») of the School Governing board<sup>4</sup>. This was a critical moment in the research as this role changed my perspective and brought me closer to the operational side of the school. This meant engaging in wider conversations with other community members (e.g., parents) and external school members (e.g., social workers, speech therapists, city council agents, education inspectors, other Head Teachers and governing boards) who were engaged in a range of school issues that were also politically charged. As Marcus (1999) notes:

Having to shift personal positions in relation to one's subjects and other active discourses in fields that overlap with one's own generates a sense of doing more than just traditional ethnography, and it provides a sense of being an activist in even the most «apolitical» fieldworker (p. 17-18).

In the following section, I trace my first entry into Arco Nursery School as part of the field research that initially took place in 2009. The ethnographic data that I draw from includes interlocking sets of interviews, and fieldnote narratives that offer insights into this ongoing and changing relationship alongside and within Arco Nursery (see also Section 4). It also includes reflections on the informal conversations that I had at the time. While these were not recorded as interviews or written up as fully-fledged observational notes, they are nevertheless significant in the building of

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<sup>4</sup> School Governors play a strategic role in supporting and challenging the running of the school by the Head Teacher and Senior Leadership Team. They work to discuss and set the aims and objectives of the school and ensure these are achieved. They monitor and evaluate progress, review policies, attend meetings and become involved in the life of the school.



an understanding of the practices and meanings that were made from the actions within the context (Bezemer, 2015).

### 3. «Getting in»: Entering the field and opening the dialogue

It was a crisp November day and I arrive at Arco Nursery around 9am. It is a setting located within an inner city suburb, there are rows of Victorian houses and council housing along the main street. I can hear the whistling of a train make its way across the tracks nearby. The first striking image that captures my gaze is the gate at the threshold of this setting. Its royal blue ironwork scrolls around in a snail formation in the centre of the gate. There is a large WELCOME on the top with another sign beneath that is written in 4 different languages. I push forward and enter down a left winding path, flanked on either side by lawn, bushes and plants that are waiting for the next spring to come alive. I arrive at the entrance of the building. This time I'm greeted by a multicolored stain class paneled sliding door that has sketches of children's drawings across the panels with the word «welcome» again in different languages across it (Fieldnote narrative, 2009).

As Goffman (1989) notes there is a way of entering the field that subjects your whole being to the ecological contours of a particular setting and the meaning making that takes place in relation to it. He suggests that it is about paying attention to the «particular», the «minor grunts and moans» that «tune[s] your body» (p. 125) in a way to note the visual, gestural and bodily responses. The account above highlights the first «official» data collection point into the research setting in 2009, but more importantly it begins to frame the first reading of signs and meaning, in order to understand the complex situated everyday practices of the field (Rampton *et al.*, 2004). However, as noted earlier the brokering process for entering the field took place before I arrived at the school gate. This also included opening conversations around agendas and shared ways of working as well as being attentive to the concerns and issues that come from working in a highly diverse inner-city nursery.

The nursery comprised of BAME/EAL students and families from diverse social and economic backgrounds, and diverse linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. At the time of the research, the recorded majority languages were English, Somali, Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Polish and German. At the time of doing fieldwork there were 5 classrooms (4 classrooms for 3 and 4 year old children and one classroom for under 3 year old children) and a Children's Centre, which offered a number of activities to families and their children within the wider community. The diversity of 49 staff members cuts across language, ethnicity, race and religion, thus mirroring to a degree the community (e.g., a mix of Afro-Caribbean, South/East Asian, Somali, Polish and white British to name a few) in which the nursery existed.

As entry into Arco nursery was facilitated through Anna, I was able to transition into this dynamic and busy setting quite easily. Both, the Head Teacher, Lara and Deputy Head teacher, Susana were keen to hear my ideas for researching with them in their setting. This negotiation for entering the field was aligned with the setting's interests in inclusion, diversity and English as an additional language. These early

discussions with them were an important part of the next phase of brokering access to the setting but also establishing a connection that would generate mutually beneficial and co-constructed understandings of researcher and community roles (see also Section 4).

Drawing from my previous research (Giampapa, 2010), my focus was on the multilingual and multiliterate pedagogical and assessment practices within the school and how these practices in the classroom were informed by the children's and their families' linguistic and cultural «funds of knowledge» (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). I was interested in the ideological underpinnings of the types of pedagogical practices in the nursery and the ways in which these were also manifested multimodally in the field. That is, through the visual, audible, textual, and artefactual ways of meaning making that are situated within the context of the school. All of these worked together to build the detail and the particularity that drew my attention in those early fieldwork days. I spent time across the school setting engaging with staff in the staff room, observing teachers, early years practitioners and children across the different classrooms, as well as engaging in activities and events across the school (see also Introduction).

What became apparent very quickly was the way in which the development of pedagogical practices were embedded within a Reggio Emilian approach (Cagliari, Castagnetti, Rinaldi, Vecchi & Moss, 2016). From this approach a range of principles were built that framed ways of being and constructing knowledge in the school. These principles included: 1) Listening to students' ideas in order to expand creative techniques to support students' work; 2) Parental partnerships and their engagement in student learning and the life of the school; 3) Assessment as a tool for representing students' learning trajectories; 4) Greater community involvement in order to create a community of care; 5) Using more practitioners to support students and staff in art, science and ICT; and 6) The environment as «third teacher», that is, seeing the outdoor spaces as integral to student learning (e.g., the school garden, pond area, music garden, climbing area; activity areas for children outside each classroom). Together these form the ideological underpinnings for practice that create transformative spaces for learning.

The values, principles and practices that were embedded across the setting around multilingualism and multiliteracies were also part of the schools ongoing engagement with the wider community and the city. Through our collaboration, this engagement took shape in ways that were empowering and powerful for Arco Nursery as a process for authoring their own narrative as a school community. The crossing in and out of university spaces was shaped collaboratively in the form of diverse contributions to Education Festivals, seminars and conferences, which showcased their educational values through the powerful work of the children and their families within the setting. This played an important role in opening possibilities for knowledge exchange for both the participants/community and the researcher. It also helped to reshape the traditional understanding of the researcher as the «expert» and the community partner as adding «authenticity» or legitimacy to the research process. Rather it built on a collaborative generation of knowledge of what counted as learning within a multilingual setting such as Arco nursery and how this was shaped with the researcher (see Section 4).

The following section explores the building of relationships of reciprocity and the shifting roles played within the field that were productive in shaping new possibilities for knowledge exchange and for the ongoing relationship that has emerged.

#### **4. Relationships of reciprocity: ongoing researcher-community relationship**

This section explores the themes that have emerged from the on-going partnership with Arco nursery and, in particular, the ongoing conversations that I have had and continue to have with Lara, the Head Teacher. While these can be shaped along practical, personal and symbolic reasons for the partnership, they evolved into deeper modes of engagement that were underpinned by a framework of care, commitment, respect and trust. This underpinned the transformation of our mutually negotiated identities and roles in the field.

As I have indicated in previous sections, my researcher identities were both socially situated and constructed within the emerging field site. Within the field I had entered as the «researcher» and in the early days of fieldwork I was positioned not only by Lara but by the other teachers in the school as the «expert». As Lara reflects back she notes:

I saw you in an exciting way, like «what partnership could we forge»? , how could we link?...we have diversity which is your area of expertise so why wouldn't I not try and get you to be part of what we are doing because you brought to us additionality... (Lara, Interview 3).

The potential of the partnership as framed by Lara was predicated on the alignment of our shared interests and «expertise» on diversity. In this way, as the «expert» in a particular field of work there was a view of what could be an additive process to the teaching and learning within the school setting. In this respect the practical and symbolic function of the relationship came into play. From the early conversations there was a need to think about what areas of «expertise» and knowledge exchange could be mutually beneficial for the nursery as the «community partner» and myself as the university researcher. In fact in one of the earliest fieldwork encounters I was invited to participate in a staff workshop as part of a staff professional development day. I recall my entry into the day:

On a normal day Arco is filled with the noises of 3 and 4-year olds moving in and out of classrooms, parents doing pickups and groups entering the Children's Centre. Today is different. There are no sounds of children but the bustle of staff moving across classrooms engaging with aspects of their work. I enter G-Room, the designated area for my discussion on multilingualism and pedagogy. In every corner of this room there are different learning activities from the play area made of loosely arranged colourful fabrics that move and glitter in the light to the multi-coloured glass bottles arranged on the windowsill. There is also a reading corner with books in different languages and also mark marking areas where different scripts are visible. This is a space where linguistic diversity is visible

and I imagine audible as well. We sit arranged around small tables, perched on the children's chairs thinking through what it means to be multilingual and whether teachers need to have other languages themselves in order to engage with their diverse students. I remember presenting my work and providing reading as part of this discussion. Teachers talked about their commitment to the values of inclusion in the school but also their feeling of insecurity regarding the linguistic complexities in the setting. One teacher reflected on the fact that she was monolingual and how that made her contribution different to others (Fieldnote reflections, 2009/10).

I was drawn upon to «give back» very quickly within the early stages of my fieldwork. I found this an important way of engaging with the different teachers in the classroom, the Children's Centre lead and the leadership team in the school. The learning from professional development days offered opportunities for me to act as a «critical friend» and also provide what the school saw as «legitimate knowledge» and expertise that could be drawn upon to inform their own teaching and research practices. This is framed by Lara as «confidence building» to support the school and its teachers to think about research within the setting and the diverse ways of building knowledge. She states:

In terms of my view of what I thought of research at the time, you gave me permission, you sort of said «this is research, you are doing research»...you gave confidence. «You are doing this and this is what you're doing»... you talked about writing it up in a more structured document. We have got research going on in smaller pockets...you challenged me to formalize that into what research means in this school (Lara, Interview 3).

Our discussions around research and how it is framed within the school led to a new understanding of «research» for the school as driven by the school itself. Our discussions challenged the narrow view of research and legitimate knowledge produced within the academy. These discussions opened up the importance and value of practice-oriented research and the valuable knowledge and expertise that already lived within Arco Nursery. What emerged from these discussions was also the multiple ways that the school could be intellectually engaged, supported and legitimized through our conversations, thus leading to collaborative and democratic ways of building knowledge.

Research was also taken out of the school and placed within the spaces of the university through engagement activities that led to students and families inhabiting the corridors of a university Education Department. This became part of the process for democratizing knowledge and shifting the assigned identities of researcher and community – that is, the researcher as the knowledge producer and the community as knowledge receiver. Lara discusses the importance of having the school present at the university and participating in education related activities. She frames this also within the reciprocal partnership that was created between us, and the significance of this deeper level of engagement. She states:

...if you just track through the opportunities you've got us involved in from hosting our students to some of your students coming to our school, training to the exhibition, having the art work hanging in the university...parents had never been in that building... your partnership with us here opened that to them... opening a window to a community that doesn't get to HE [Higher Education]... giving that legitimate platform within the university...to talk about what was my understanding of research, research that has direct impact on our most vulnerable children has to be rooted in practice... (Lara, Interview 4).

The evolution of the partnership would mean a shift in power relations that saw the school bringing their knowledge and expertise into the university and also contributing to the intellectual growth of university students who were entering their setting. That is, the reciprocal relationships unfolded opportunities for international graduate students from the university to enter the school in order to learn from them. Lara re-positioned my identity away from her view of the «archetypal university lecturer» (Lara, Interview 3) to someone that would become an «enabler» and «challenger» as part of this process of knowledge building:

...you weren't that archetypal university lecturer...you have really good social skills and good ability to make, to give you confidence and make you feel on the same level. You enable and encourage and that is still how you make me feel as a leader. You are an enabler and yet you still challenge on the academic side and yet you come in and enable (Lara, Interview 3).

The positioning of the researcher as the traditional expert disassociated from the realities on the ground still holds currency within the minds of partners like Lara. The shift in my positioning opened up new possibilities for support that would fit the needs of the setting. On a practical level, this support could take the shape of different types of collaborative engagement and reflection on practice or simply creating spaces to challenge and push thinking around specific pieces of work – such as the setting's engagement with multilingualism. In this respect, my positioning as an enabler evolved into, for example, a critical friend to challenge practice, pedagogy and in-house research. These research conversations led to changes in understanding how research is defined and valued within the setting. In fact, Lara describes how the simple shift in using the term «multilingual» within the setting across practice and policy to refer to the ways the school works with its children and families came out of access to scholarly expertise but also how this aligned with the established school principles and values. She notes:

...your area of expertise is around culture, multilingualism so you're coming and interested in something that may be frowned upon and in my experience as an Ofsted<sup>5</sup> inspector going into primary schools often is seen as an irritation... whereas YOU came in and actually gave significance to, our language has changed, I don't say English as an additional language really anymore...we use

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<sup>5</sup> The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.

multilingual that's come from you. Multilingual is the term now, everywhere in all the documents. It might be a small thing but we BOTH know language isn't a small thing... (Lara, Interview 3).

In this instance, the positive impact and legacy of the partnership between the school and myself as the researcher is highlighted by Lara. As Facer & Enright (2016) suggest there needs to be a model of research impact that is «...more sustainable, embodied and transformative...through ongoing interactions...» (p. 5).

It is the knowledge exchange, personal conversations and ways of working that emerged over a longer period of time that was key in establishing this on-going relationship. The legacy of prior relationships in the field, however, had built a picture for Lara around the types of engagement that researchers would claim – a process of mining research for a specific agenda where knowledge produced is «gifted» in a sense to the researcher from participants without any commitment to exchange different kinds of support.

Lara discusses the practicalities in establishing a research relationship that offers a collaborative process for exchange as opposed to having research «done to you» (Lara, Interview 4). She states:

C was saying to me she got rid of those types of people...you don't want research done to you, you want to be part of the research. That stayed with me. We've had all these requests...in the beginning I thought «oh that's interesting»... but they want to use you for something and it was quite hard work...and what do we get in the end? What difference apart from my staff articulate their views... and they felt quite important that someone wanted to know about their work but apart from that... (Lara, Interview 4).

The excerpt is telling of the experiences of some participants and communities that invest emotionally and intellectually in the research process. It raises the importance of having initial and on-going conversations around the roles, expectations and engagement commitments of all people involved in it. This includes an acknowledgement of the expertise and the knowledge coming from the research involvement.

Instead our research was negotiated over a much longer period of time than the «slash and grab» attitude that Lara describes from other research experiences. Our relationship has grown over a sustained period of 10 years and has evolved into a different type of relationship that is marked by my «commitment, regularity and longevity» (Interview 4) of contact with the school. This is a direct result of Lara inviting me to be a governor for the school. She explains:

I could see that to have you as part of our governing board was a natural progression...that takes the partnership on a stage further in terms of the structure of the school because you're coming in with a clear role and remit as a governor (Lara, Interview 3).

The mutually beneficial role that emerged facilitated conversations and interactions to build capacity and allowed us to move beyond the traditional roles of the researcher and community participant. As Facer & Enright (2016) note, interdisciplinary and collaborative projects require project teams to take on new roles that leave far behind the old binaries of «community partner» or «university partner» (p. 75).

The longevity of the conversations and embedded nature of the research I conducted opened up other spaces of opportunity for me as a researcher. My roles shifted to enable much greater understanding of the life cycle of the school, its staff, the children and families that it serves. Researcher identities and relationships in the field can be reshaped in ways that are mutually productive along practical, personal and symbolic levels that move to offer deeper conversations and relationships for engagement and knowledge building. These can have powerful outcomes for all partners involved in the research.

## 5. Conclusion: the story continues

Engaging with the complexities of field relationships can offer productive opportunities for different kinds of conversations which can yield richer insights into the life worlds of all those involved. These conversations can lead to the re-imagining of researcher and participant positionalities that can produce shared ways of knowing and understanding in the field.

This paper has attempted to shift an understanding of field relationships further in thinking about researcher/university-participant community collaborations that stretch beyond traditional and instrumental ways of working. Underpinned by a critical ethnographic approach that has at its core a drive for equity and social justice, I have demonstrated the powerful learning that comes from extended research conversations in and beyond the field. This sits firmly within a mutually constructed way of being in the field that agitates asymmetrical relations of power and knowledge production.

I entered the field as a critical ethnographer with an understanding of the changing nature of the «field» itself and the centrality of working reflexively alongside knowing and engaged participants whose own agendas, knowledge and experiences contribute to changing the field and what takes place within it (Giampapa, 2011). My work draws from an understanding that as individuals we are shaped and positioned by social, historical and political processes. Thus we speak, act, imagine, feel and know from these identities and positionalities and these are important embodied experiences. My values construct my researcher identities and the ways in which I self-position in the field and more broadly within the academy. For participants, their agendas, experiences with research and understandings of their own worlds are brought to the research process with equal importance.

I have demonstrated the value of nurturing relationships that start before entering the field. The pre-field conversations with Lara, the Head Teacher, was brokered by Anna and it was even in these early conversations that we put forward our shared understanding of diversity and the importance of developing pedagogies of care and respect that can directly challenge educational inequalities. These early

conversations were important in negotiating trust and building reciprocity, which can take different forms as the research progresses but I believe needs to remain as a constant through the changing relationships in the field.

As I have shown, my shifting roles and identities were shaped by the changing relationships with Lara, the Head Teacher and produced new ways of understanding expertise, knowledge exchange and research. My identities shifted between expert, enabler and critical friend. I entered the field as the university researcher but progressively became a governor in the school, thus bringing me closer to the inner workings of the setting and allowing me into other types of conversations with a wider educational audience. This was initiated and was also empowered by Lara, who positioned me as a different type of researcher, that is, one would be bring additional expertise to the school and someone who would share, challenge and enable opportunities for collaborative knowledge production.

This meant working together to subvert traditional power relationships as «researcher/researched» to more collaborative forms of power that empowered and enabled each of us. For example, for Lara, it was about seeing with confidence their work as valuable research-engaged practice and to be able to bring their work with BAME/EAL children and families to the university spaces. For me, being embedded in the school community over an extended period time and being able to move freely within this setting both as a collaborative researcher and governor provided insights into the ebb and flow of this setting that wouldn't have been possible under other conditions. It was the co-learning that was produced from our relationship that made it possible to challenge and re-think our roles and allow for the continuing flow of knowledge produced through our conversations and actions.

These research conversations and engagements have outlived the time frame of the original research and have continued to shape my understanding of the pedagogical practices within the setting. These conversations have also been shaped by the macro level changes in the early year's educational landscape, not only on a national and regional level, but also by the changes in contemporary academic work. The important learning that has come from this relationship rests on the importance of «time» as a factor. As Facer & Enright (2016, p. 147) suggest:

...collaborative research requires time. The development of personal relationships trust and exchange of expertise and knowledge...Time to talk informally, time to exchange ideas that may not lead anywhere immediately, time to really get to know each others' institutions, expertise, hidden passions, problems and histories. Time is what enables the slow development of understanding that creates the exchanges that enable the production of living knowledge.

Our relationship of mutual and equal trust, care and responsibility, as well as the building of «living knowledge» continues to evolve over time and needs to be nurtured through intellectual and emotional engagement. The re-definition of roles and identities in the field also facilitated a different way of exchanging ideas, co-constructing knowledge that Lara and I have built over the last ten years. This offers a potential entry point for a deeper level of understanding of the life of a community



setting and also the potential that can be unlocked in relationships that lead to new ways of thinking about research, about the roles of the university and what it means to do engaged and collaboratively driven research.

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