



*Citation for published version:*

Brown, C 2014, 'Context and implications document for researching children's schooling identities: Towards the development of an ethnographic methodology', *Review of Education*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 110-114.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3029>

*DOI:*

[10.1002/rev3.3029](https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3029)

*Publication date:*

2014

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Brown, C. (2014), Context and Implications Document for: Researching children's schooling identities: Towards the development of an ethnographic methodology. *Rev Educ*, 2: 110–114, which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3029>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

**University of Bath**

## **Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## **Context and Implications Document for:**

### **Researching children's schooling identities: Towards the development of an ethnographic methodology.**

Dr. Ceri Brown,

Department of Education, University of Bath, email: C.L.Brown@bath.ac.uk

This guide accompanies the following article:

Brown, C. 2014. 'Researching children's schooling identities: Towards the development of an ethnographic methodology', *Review of Education*,

---

#### **Author's Introduction**

Identity research has continued to assume a central focus in the sociology of education, as a means of understanding children's lives in school. This is because the way children think of themselves as students and learners may have a strong bearing on their motivation, aspirations and expectations of schooling. Despite the value of an identity approach, however, the issue of how complex identity theories inform a coherent methodological approach for identity research in schools remains a significant omission in the literature. Rather, qualitative identity researchers have tended to assume an intuitive connection between theory and data. This is problematic because if identity accounts are to have wider relevance then we might expect a degree of consistency in both how and why data have been collected relative to a preferred identity theory in different contexts. It is only under such conditions that we could expect theoretical developments. Failing to provide an account of how theory relates to the data prevents an evaluation of its merits and ultimately, interrupts the kind of theoretical development necessary to evaluate its worth as a lens on the social world. This paper advances an ethnographic approach to identity research, in reviewing the challenges, advances and limitations of the identity literature, in order to start to develop a methodology for identity construction.

#### **Implications for Policy**

The policy implications of this paper relate to the value of identity research in schools in illuminating the learning orientations and purpose of school-life for children and young people.

Engagement with the structural component of identity construction provokes consideration of the social categories represented in school composition and their value within the school and classroom context. This prompts policymakers to consider the compositional nature of school intakes, which is significant in a policy context where local authorities have less control over school admissions. It is important to recognise the bearing that different compositional intakes have upon children e.g. by economic status, attainment, gender, ethnicity, religion, and age, with respect to discourses of what it means to be a valued student (and what is not).

Constructions of appropriate learners in schools are not only mediated by social categories, but within neo-liberal/ neo conservative education policy they are measured by children's performance in narrowly prescribed learning outcomes, in the form of standardised testing. Policy discourses concerning academic performance are translated into school pedagogy through the narrative and performance elements of identity construction, with respect to the judgements and actions of teachers and students. For example, the grouping and resourcing of children by attainment has a direct bearing on the possibilities for identity making, most recently reflected in schools' individual rankings of pupils by attainment, a move applauded by the Education Secretary<sup>1</sup> yet distressing for children<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Gove Speech to OfQual Standards Summit, 24 November 2011. Available Online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-to-ofqual-standards-summit>.

Therefore, the role of educational policy in shaping student identity constructions concerns not only the allocation of children to schools but also the treatment they receive within them.

Lastly, considering school contexts as dynamic arenas of space and time, addresses the extent to which school spaces are governed by adult processes of control and regulation. Following the demise of the Building Schools for the Future programme<sup>3</sup>, future schooling building programmes would do well to recognise the importance of student autonomy in the construction and deployment of school spaces, as crucial in the development of valued student identities.

## **Resources for Teaching & Learning in Higher Education**

### *Author Recommends*

**Gee, J. P. 2001. Identity as an analytic lens for research in education, *Review of Research in Education*, 25: 99–125.**

Gee's work has three elements of note. Firstly his account emphasises the stability of identity construction because there is a core identity, which underlies multiple social identities that a person may exhibit. Secondly, we are recognized as being a certain "kind of person"(99) by others, some types of social recognition are reoccurring, others are not. Thirdly, the individual will mediate these forms of social recognition into a core self-identity that reflects a coherent narrative. This explains for its relative stability (111). Gee's paper reflects an implicit privileging of the performance element of identity construction as the data he presents is drawn only from participant observation.

**Hird, M. J. 1998. Fragmented: some implications for feminist critical pedagogy, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19:4,517-527.**

This paper dispels with of the notion of a consistent self-identity, in arguing they are "highly fractured, contradictory and shifting" (517). Rather than the 'core' or 'self' identity representing a kind of equalising and balancing function, as Gee (2001) implies, Hird argues that discourses of gender, social class, race and ethnicity "are not easily isolated from each other nor are they easily unified"(519). But in order to understand these interactions, it is necessary to consider the "prior conceptions of self" or "individual self-identities" which are often overlooked. Hird argues that dominant discourses often favour the homogenisation of identity parts, and the dominance of certain elements of identity over others. Hird's paper reflects an implicit privileging of the narrative element of identity construction, as interview is the only data source drawn upon.

**Renold, E. 2001. Learning the 'Hard' Way: boys, hegemonic masculinity and the negotiation of learner identities in the primary school' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22, vol3: 369 – 385.**

Consistent with Hird (1998), Renold too observes identity to be "relational, multiple and diverse" (373) and like Gee (2001) she believes that identities do not pre-exist their enactment in the social world, but are rather constructed through a "complex web of social interaction" (373). However, Renold draws attention to the "series of performances and repetitive acts" (373) underlining the importance of considering which aspects may change over time, and which others are stable. Yet, while she considers children as "active subjects" (371) in their

---

<sup>2</sup> Women's hour BBC School Report by students from John Cleveland College in Hinckley, Leicestershire, on exam pressure: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03ynf5c>

<sup>3</sup> See BBC report for Education Secretary, Michael Gove's account of why the programme was axed. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10514113>

social interactions with others, she argues that they are also subject to the “(discursive) forces of hegemonic masculinity which legitimate certain ways of ‘being’ male through the subordination of alternative masculine and feminine subject positions” (373). Renold’s paper places the possibility of agency within a dominant discourse of masculinity. However, this is only possible due to the longitudinal nature her research. Her data sources are also multiple, including interview excerpts, participant observation notes and reflections upon habitual practices.

**Youdell, D. 2003. Identity Traps or How Black Students Fail: The interactions between biographical, sub-cultural, and learner identities, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24, vol.1, 3-20.**

Youdell (2003) employs a Foucauldian perspective on discursive practice in order to explore the educational failure of Black students. Whereas Gee sees discourse identities as one of four perspectives, for Youdell, all identities are discursively produced. This follows Butler’s (1997) account of performativity which refers to any discursive practice that “enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler 1993; 130). These performances are structurally mediated in that 1) all performances require citation in order to be intelligible: the type of identity being performed must be of a recognisable form that others have previously encountered in the social world; and 2) being named is a prerequisite for recognition, thus the individual must be readily identifiable as being that ‘type of person’. While all discourses are to an extent pre-existing, they are neither fixed nor wholly open in that their meanings shift and are always open to alternative interpretations. Youdell defines discursive practice as either ‘bodily’ or ‘linguistic’ (7) and reflecting this she analysed vignette examples of student peer- group interviews, and descriptive accounts of pertinent ‘moments’ in participant observation.

**Sfard, A. and Prusak, A. 2005 Telling Identities: In Search of an Analytic Tool for Investigating Learning as a Culturally Shaped Activity, *Educational Researcher*, 34, vol. 4: 14-22.**

In developing an account of ‘narrative defined identity’ that can be operationalised by the educational researcher, Sfard and Prusak (2005) argue that identity is not extra-discursive but rather emerges from the act of communication (17), notably self-dialogues proclaiming the narratives we tell ourselves of who we are (Gee 2001). It is these stories of self, according to Sfard and Prusak (2005), which are the most important stories we can tell. It is useful to distinguish between the stories we tell ourselves of who we are from those we tell to others, because these stories may motivate or explain different types of performances. Sfard and Prusak’s most significant contribution is in providing a coherent formula for distinguishing between the different stories of self, according to the subject and object of the narrator.

**Holloway, S. L and Valentine, G. 2000. ‘Spatiality and the New Social Studies of Childhood’ *Sociology*, 34,(4) 763-783.**

This paper is a clear account of the spatial dimension to children's schooling identities. Within adult governed school spaces, Holloway and Valentine (1998) show that children are active in challenging the spatial rules of the classroom. Through negotiations with adults over spatial politics, children contribute to the creation of new school spaces. They can be seen to challenge adult defined boundaries as they seek to legitimate the performances that spaces contain, and influence the narratives that make sense of them. School spaces are not bounded, but are rather porous and constituted by webs of social connections and therefore need to be considered in context.

#### ***Further references***

- Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: on the discursive limits of ‘sex’* London: Routledge.

- Butler, J. 1997. *Excitable Speech: a politics of the performative*, London: Routledge.

### ***Focus Questions***

*Why is it important to research children's schooling identities?*

*To what extent is our identity stable over time and across different school contexts? (and to what extent does it change?)*

*a) To what extent are we the free agents in the creation of our schooling identities?*

*b) What aspects of our identities are pre-determined, in preceding or outdating us, in being to some extent separate from us as individuals?*

*In what ways are our identities connected to our personal relationships with others, through choice or otherwise (friends, seat/group-mates, teachers, family)?*

*How do we go about researching children's identities in school?*

### ***Seminar/Project Idea***

Research question: To what extent does school attainment affect children's schooling identities?

You would like to explore the above research question through an ethnographic study. Using this framework as a guide, devise a plan to carry out an ethnographic research study into the schooling identities of four children, two high attaining and two low attaining. Please refer to Table 2 in the paper [A model for researching schooling identity in qualitative case studies] and consider the following questions in your research proposal:

- 1) How will you measure attainment?
- 2) How will you select your children?
- 3) Where will you situate your research? (one school, more than one? which parts of school?)
- 4) How will you consider school context?
- 5) What different data methods will you use to study; structural forces, performances, narratives and dynamic arenas of space and time, in terms of their impact on identity construction?
- 6) How will you analyse the different data sources?
- 7) Over what time frame will you carry out your research? Why?