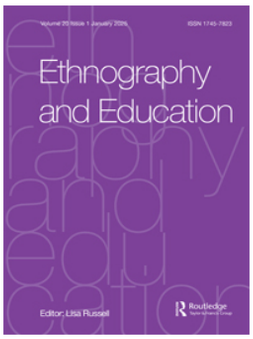

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The caring adult role: ethical reflections from an ethnographic study of school bullying

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we contribute to a discussion of ethics within school bullying research by reflecting on our own recent ethnographic study into the relations between school bullying and the institutional context of schooling conducted at three elementary schools and one lower-secondary school in Sweden. We argue for a reflexive, responsive, and flexible adult researcher role when conducting ethnographic research into school bullying; what we term the *caring adult role*. The caring adult role provides a means of ethically conducting research by helping to facilitate access, navigate power relations, provide a consistent starting point for deciding when to intervene in ethically questionable situations, and a way for adult researchers to differentiate themselves from those adults in schools who may be perceived by students as non-caring. We argue that this is an ethically sounder approach than one that suspends all adult-like characteristics and avoids directing or correcting the behaviour of children.

KEYWORDS

Ethics; reflexivity; school bullying; participant observations; interviewing

Introduction

There have been large numbers of studies conducted into the social phenomenon of school bullying, and the number of empirical research articles published has grown exponentially over the past few decades (Smith, Robinson, and Slonje 2021). However, while increasing numbers of studies have utilised qualitative methods, the proportion of qualitative studies in relation to quantitative studies has decreased (Horton and Lyng 2022; Smith, Robinson, and Slonje 2021). As Patton et al. (2017, 4) point out, this is surprising, 'since understanding this phenomenon requires a deeper insight into children's perspectives'. Ethnographic research is particularly well-suited to the investigation of children's perspectives, as it facilitates engagement with the behaviour, views, and ideas of children and thus helps the researcher gain a better understanding of how those children perceive their social worlds (James 2007). There have been a number of recent ethnographic studies of school bullying (e.g. Eriksen and Lyng 2018; Hakim 2021; Horton 2019; Juva, Holm, and Dovemark 2020; Strindberg 2023; Thornberg 2018).

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However, while there have certainly been discussions related to the ethics of ethnographic research, including those related to dilemmas about intervening in the field (e.g. Barbour 2010; Dennis 2009) and about the rights of children as research participants (e.g. Hill 2005; Romero and Walker 2010), there has been limited discussion of the ethics of ethnographically researching school bullying beyond the method sections of some ethnographic articles and monographs (e.g. Hakim 2021; Horton 2012; Thornberg 2018). In this article, we seek to contribute to a discussion of ethics within school bullying research by reflecting on our own recent ethnographic study into the relations between school bullying among students and the institutional context of schooling (see Forsberg, Hammar Horton, and Thornberg 2023; Horton, Forsberg, and Thornberg 2023a; 2023b for examples of findings from this study). In the project, we utilised Olweus' (1993, 9) definition of school bullying: 'A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students'.

Our study was based on ethnographic research conducted at three elementary schools and one lower-secondary school in Sweden. The research consisted of approximately eight months of fieldwork, which included participant observations focused on the daily lived school experiences of students, as well as semi-structured group, pair and individual interviews with members of the schools' student safety and student health teams, 26 teachers, and 139 students from preschool class (i.e. ages 5–6) up to grade eight (i.e. ages 14–15). The first author conducted the fieldwork at two of the elementary schools and the second author conducted the research at one of the elementary schools and the lower-secondary school. The third author was involved in the analysis and writing stages.

In discussing the ethics of our ethnographic study, we focus specifically on the data related to students due to our focus on researching children. In doing so, we revisit the 'least-adult role', first coined by Mandell, who advocated it as a positional means to navigate field relations with children and to gain access to their social worlds by taking a 'completely involved membership role' (Mandell 1991, 39). While we agree with the necessity of being 'oriented towards children differently than other adults, in order to access what is often kept from them' (Garratt 2021, 1194), we do not agree that this necessitates suspending 'all adult-like characteristics except physical size' (Mandell 1991, 40). Rather, in line with Atkinson (2019), we are critical of the simplistic understanding of power relations underpinning such an approach as well as the inherent ethical implications of casting off adult responsibility by 'neither directing nor correcting children's actions' (Mandell 1991, 42). This does not mean that we advocate taking the role of 'honorary child' put forward by Atkinson (2019, 199), but rather that we believe a reflexive, responsive, and flexible adult researcher role – whereby the researcher is reflexive about their own characteristics, responds to the needs of children, and is flexible in their approach to situations – is called for when conducting ethnographic research into school bullying; what we term the *caring adult role*.

The article is organised into three sections followed by a discussion. We first discuss the ethical approval that underpinned our research and reflect upon the issue of informed consent. We then discuss the caring adult role in relation to the participant observations and interviews that were central to our study. In the discussion, we return to a more general discussion of the ethics of conducting ethnographic research into school bullying. Whenever we mention a specific participant, we refer to them with a pseudonym.

Ethical approval and informed consent

There has been a long history of discussions about the ethical implications of research, including, for example, those that resulted in the Nuremburg Code of the 1940s (Alderson and Morrow 2011; Hill 2005) and those that stemmed from controversies within anthropology during the 1960s (Agar 1996; Berreman 1991). Such discussions contributed to the establishment of numerous codes of ethics (Hammersley and Traianou 2012; Smith 2014) and to an increasing regulation of research ethics to ensure that research adheres to widely accepted ethical standards (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). In the Swedish context, The Ethical Review Act was issued in 2003 with the express purpose 'to protect individuals and human dignity when research is conducted' (Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs 2003, Section 1).

While not all research projects are required to undergo ethical review in Sweden, researchers are required to ensure that they obtain informed consent from participants, and the legal guardians of participants under 15, and that they conduct their research in such a way as to minimise potential harm (Swedish Research Council 2017). The ethical aspects of informed consent and the minimisation of harm relate to deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics and include the principles of self-determination, justice, non-maleficence, and beneficence (Murphy and Dingwall 2007). The deontological approach to ethics focuses on the inherent rights of participants to self-determination and has justice as a central guiding principle. This means that research participants have a right to be informed about the focus of the research and to give or withhold their consent on that basis (self-determination). They also have a right to be treated fairly and to have their perspectives properly considered (justice). The deontological approach also emphasises the *duty* of researchers to respect and uphold the rights of participants. The consequentialist approach to ethics, on the other hand, dictates that ethical assessment depends on the potential consequences of the research being undertaken and that researchers should seek to minimise harm (non-maleficence) and to produce identifiably beneficial results (beneficence) (Murphy and Dingwall 2007; Shafer-Landau 2013).

Prior to conducting our research, we submitted an ethics application (2018/284-31) to what was then a regional ethical review board but has since been subsumed within a national ethical review board. The application was approved after submission of requested complementary information, including an interview guide and a consent form for teachers. We then provided verbal and written information to the school principals, and to school staff, students and their legal guardians in the form of information letters and consent forms. The information provided made it clear that we were investigating how school factors can contribute to bullying situations and affect teachers' and students' reactions to bullying. The information also made it clear that the findings would be available to those interested and feedback was offered to the schools and presented to those that were interested.

Access to the field is not only a matter of gaining entry to the field but is rather something that is negotiated during fieldwork through everyday interactions with participants (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). The negotiation of access requires a responsive researcher role and the development of trusting field relations. This was an ongoing consideration during the research, with some students taking a longer time than others to return their consent forms and some students initially declining to participate only to

later change their minds and ask to be included. In these cases, the students were provided with new consent forms and included in the study once the signed consent was received. While some people may feel forced to consent to research because of expectations from others (Hill 2005; James 2007), some may be restricted from consenting. It is thus important to recognise that people do not 'exist in a social vacuum as sovereign individuals' (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). During our fieldwork, for example, some students who stated that they wished to be included in the research and to give their perspectives were unable to, either because their guardians declined to give their consent, or because their parents were not on speaking terms or were not easily accessible because they were separated and living in different places.

This raises questions about the rights of children in relation to the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was included into Swedish law in 2020, and about whether research should require active or passive consent from guardians. In the UNCRC, for example, it is stated that a 'child who is capable of forming his or her own views' shall be assured 'the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child' (United Nations 1989, Article 12: 1). Such rights became salient in our research, for example, in cases where participating students talked about students who were not able to participate and were thus not able to give their perspectives on the matters raised. They also became salient during interactions with students who did not have consent to participate. While we did not focus our observations on those students whose guardians had not given consent, this did not stop them from seeking us out and engaging with us. While we did not record these interactions or conversations, such situations raised ethical dilemmas in terms of navigating how to spend the time to listen and engage, while at the same time focusing our participant observations on the activities of the participating students. In navigating these dilemmas, we adopted a caring adult role, whereby we listened and demonstrated care for their well-being but also explained why we were more focused on some of the other students.

While the importance of informed consent is widely accepted, it is also important not to reduce ethical discussions to one of informed consent. Consent forms are no guarantee of ethical research practice (Hammersley and Traianou 2012; Murphy and Dingwall 2007), particularly in ethnographic research that is exploratory in nature and has an abductive, iterative, and recursive logic (Agar 2006). Data collection and analysis are not distinct phases in ethnographic research. Rather, the focus of ethnographic research develops in relation to ongoing fieldwork and the identification of 'rich points' (Agar 2006) or 'punctuation points' (Rhodes 2015, 273); that is, things that are perhaps unclear or surprising, which spark curiosity and call for the use of ethnographic imagination to understand them. These points can provide important insights and help to illuminate a 'blind field' (Rhodes 2015, 275) of interest that the researcher had previously been unaware or only partially aware of. Care thus needs to be taken to not only remind participants that they are involved in research but also to keep them informed about the focus. We argue that taking a caring adult role while conducting research can help facilitate this.

Participant observations

The majority of school bullying research has been conducted using quantitative methods, with substantially less use of qualitative or mixed methods (Horton and Lyng 2022;

Smith, Robinson, and Slonje 2021). While quantitative questionnaires provide a time – and cost-efficient means of researching the phenomenon (Tapper and Boulton 2002), over-reliance on questionnaire data limits understanding of the complexity of bullying processes and how these relate to the contexts of bullying (Hong and Espelage 2012; Patton et al. 2017). The institutional contexts of the schools where we conducted our fieldwork were not contexts with which we were immediately familiar. Participant observations thus provided an opportunity for us to become familiar with the contexts and the relationships within them (Davies 2008) by spending time in various spaces (e.g. classrooms, corridors, cafeterias, and playgrounds), participating in activities, and observing the relations between students, and between students and teachers. In interviews, information may be left out because the interviewee is not aware of it, has forgotten it, has decided that it is not relevant, or has decided to leave out or stress certain aspects (Agar 1996). In our research, we utilised participant observations not only as a means of data collection through the writing of fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011) but also as a means of informing the interviews and assessing the accuracy or completeness of the interview data (Agar 1996; Davies 2008; Tudge and Hogan 2005). While interviews were central to our study, as we were interested in the perspectives of the participants, we used participant observations in conjunction with interviews as a means to juxtapose those perspectives with our own perceptions of events (La Fontaine 1985).

Deontologically, the participant observations allowed us to experience the social and institutional contexts of school bullying and to gain insights into contributing factors that were not otherwise obvious and which the participants may not have voiced because they were not the focus of interview questions. An example of this was when we began considering the importance of the physical materiality of the schools' concrete football pitches and how this could impact social interactions (Forsberg, Horton, and Thornberg 2023). It was first after we had observed the physical size and material construction of the concrete and gravel football pitches that it was possible to ask questions about how such materiality could impact relations between students. As Tudge and Hogan (2005, 116) have noted, while participant observations may not give participants a voice in the same way as interviews, they nevertheless provide 'a means of conveying a description of their lives and how they live them'.

While conducting our fieldwork, we were reflexive about our own presence (Davies 2008) in terms of not only how we positioned ourselves in certain spaces such as classrooms, or our degree of participation in certain activities, but also in terms of our 'material practices of ethnographic presence', such as how we dressed and our use of equipment (Laube 2021, 57). While we dressed casually, just as many teachers do in Swedish schools, we did not actively seek to dress younger than normal and did not seek to 'pass' as school children (Mandell 1991, 43). During interviews, we ensured that the recording device was openly visible, and used the beginning of interviews to reiterate the ethics of the research and the function of the device. During observations, unless actively participating in games or play, fieldnotes were taken overtly and field notebooks thus served as a means of reminding students that their interactions were being studied. As exemplified in the following fieldnote from a fifth-grade Swedish lesson, students were aware of our position as researchers and regularly drew our attention to goings-on:

> Max slapped Hugo and Hugo told me to write it down. Max then said, 'write down that the lessons are too long'. Hugo then said, 'that has nothing to do with bullying', to which Max replied, 'the maths lesson is too long, it's torture for us kids, so it's like bullying'.

Max and Hugo's interaction with the researcher highlights the overt positioning of the researcher. Max's argument about maths lessons being torture and thus akin to bullying also highlights his awareness of the focus of our research, including the connections between school bullying and the institutional context, and suggests that he believed we cared about the students' situation.

In line with descriptions of the least-adult role (e.g. Atkinson 2019; Epstein 1998; Garratt 2021; Mandell 1991), we distanced ourselves from the activities and responsibilities of teachers and actively participated in the daily activities of the students. This included sitting in lessons together with them, participating in physical education (PE) classes, eating at the school cafeteria, going to the theatre, going on teacher-organised 'power-walks', going to the local library, playing table tennis, building huts, sledding down snow-covered banks, doing puzzles, playing with building blocks, watching the Eurovision song contest, competing in running races, swinging on swings, and participating in games of football, basketball, floor ball, and dodge ball. However, in contrast to the least-adult role described by Mandell (1991), we did not refrain from helping students when they needed or requested it, for example by helping younger students tie their shoes or put their winter clothing on, helping students up who had fallen, or helping a distraught preschool class child look for the BB-8 Star Wars figure he had lost on the playground during a break. Not helping in such situations would most likely have been perceived as strange because we had developed friendly relations with the students and helping them was something that a friend *should* do (Epstein 1998).

As Barbour notes (2010, 168), 'The conditions that ethnography investigates are not always those conducive to moral behaviour', and it is thus important to be reflexive about one's own role during interactions that raise questions of 'whether, where, and how to intervene' (Atkinson 2019, 192). Simplistically conceptualising power in terms of the relative power positions of adults and children fails to account for the ways in which children also regularly exercise power in schools (Barker and Smith 2001). This can, for example, take the form of resistance towards teachers, but can also take more oppressive forms, such as the bullying of peers, and even teachers (Teemu and Pörhöla 2012). We argue that directing and correcting children's actions (Mandell 1991) is sometimes necessary to uphold the consequentialist principle of minimising harm, as not intervening is not only ethically problematic in terms of observing what is occurring, but also in terms of signalling that certain behaviour can continue to be engaged in despite the presence of adult researchers in the future. As Dennis (2009, 132) points out, the decision of whether to intervene 'is an ethical one', and this is why the least-adult role should be eschewed for a caring adult one.

As several bullying researchers utilising the least-adult role (e.g. Hakim 2021; Thornberg 2018) have also noted, it may be impossible to stay true to the least-adult role when conducting ethnographic research into bullying. Indeed, while researchers may make efforts to minimise their adult authority and adopt a non-judgmental learner role in order to gain closer access to children's social worlds, they need to constantly and critically reflect upon their role in a flexible manner and intervene when ethically necessary (Thornberg

2022). A researcher who stands by and observes bullying but does nothing to stop it can be accused of being a 'bystander'. Within discussions of the participant roles involved in school bullying, bystanders have been conceptualised in various ways depending on their degree of participation (e.g. Forsberg, Samuelsson, and Thornberg 2014; Salmivalli et al. 1996). Questions about intervening centre around the issue of when a researcher is ethically obliged to shift from being a 'bystander' to an 'upstander' (or 'defender'), who rather than standing by, intervenes and stands up for those being bullied.

However, deciding when to intervene may be complicated by several students needing care at the same time, the subtleness of the situation, and the ability of students to deal with the disputes and conflicts themselves. One way of demonstrating care in such complicated situations is to monitor the situation and listen to the perspectives of students. This is illustrated in the following fieldnote:

> During class, two girls, Emma and Sarah, are playing a board game together when Emma approaches me and tells me that Sarah has called her 'devil in the head'. Sarah then approaches me to tell me that Emma broke the rules by running indoors. They keep on coming up to me telling me who did what. Emma tells me how Sarah is playing 'bullying'. I ask them what that means, and Emma says it is 'teasing and hitting but hitting very softly'. Our conversation is ended when we have to gather the whole class. I notice how they are later playing with each other again.

As none of the reported behaviours were observed, a caring role was manifested by listening to both girls and asking them questions, but not correcting any of their reported behaviours. Instead, their interactions were monitored during the following days.

It is also important to recognise that intervening may not necessarily improve the situation and may instead serve to exacerbate it (Yuile et al. 2006), for example by placing extra focus on a situation and making other students aware of it. In our research, we sought to strike a balance between minimising harm (non-maleficence) and obtaining findings of importance for improving the lived experiences of students (beneficence). This entailed that, particularly when teachers were also present, we often did not intervene to stop teasing or name-calling but intervened in situations where a student was visibly upset or was at risk of physical harm (Horton 2012; Thornberg 2018). These situations varied in severity, but can be exemplified by the following fieldnote written during outdoor afterschool activities involving a preschool class student:

> I noticed that Jonas and two of the other preschool class boys were pushing against the fence that separated the playground from the football pitch on the other side. Two older boys were throwing themselves at the fence from the other side, trying to knock the smaller boys over. One of the older boys tilted his head back in a confident manner and looked somewhat threateningly at Jonas. He and the other boy then started running around the fence after Jonas, who was running away. I walked towards the playground, just in case. By the time I got there, the two boys had grabbed hold of Jonas, who is much smaller than them, and the boy who had appeared to threaten Jonas told him to 'run!' As Jonas ran, the boy kicked Jonas' foot out from underneath him. I reacted before anything else might happen by shouting 'No!' at the boy and rushing to help Jonas to his feet. Jonas was crying and angry. I checked to see that he was ok and helped clean off his glasses. A teacher came over as the boy was apologising to Jonas.

While it is unclear whether a teacher had observed what was happening prior to the researcher's intervention, once the risk of physical and emotional harm became clear,

neither directing nor correcting the actions of the older boy in this situation would have been ethically untenable. By directing the boy to stop, helping Jonas to his feet, helping him clean his glasses, and checking that he was ok, the researcher demonstrated their concern for Jonas, as a caring adult should. While the researcher left any direct correcting to the teacher who came over, the intervention itself also served to correct the older boy's actions, as suggested by his apology to Jonas and by fieldnotes about Jonas playing football with the same boy later that day, where it was noted that 'the boy appeared to be taking it easier with Jonas'.

Interviews

As Forsey (2010, 567) points out, conducting research with an '*ethnographic imaginary*, aimed at revealing the cultural context of individual lives' often entails more than participant observation. It also often entails 'engaged listening' and the use of various kinds of interviews (Forsey 2010, 569). Indeed, interviewing was a key part of our ethnographic 'logic' (Agar 2006) and was used as fuel for our ethnographic imagination (Rhodes 2015; Willis 2000). We conducted the student interviews in friendship groups or pairs depending on the particular friendship constellations, although one boy was interviewed individually because he decided quite late that he would like to be interviewed and his friends had already been interviewed. The friendship groups were constructed based on the participant observations and after checking them with a teacher. The importance of checking the groups was made clear on a few occasions when teachers expressed concern about a student being included in a particular group.

Unlike the closed-ended questions often employed in questionnaire studies, we used semi-structured interviews, which allow for more flexibility in terms of the direction of the interview and encourage longer, more elaborative accounts that are not restricted by the researcher's pre-conceived ideas about what is important and relevant (Davies 2008; James 2007). While the interviews were clearly 'framed' (Walford 2007, 154) with questions related specifically to aspects of interest such as seating arrangements, the physical school space, bullying, and safe and unsafe spaces, flexibility was promoted by following up answers through the use of prompts such as 'why?', 'how?', 'what do you mean?' and 'can you explain?'

We used group interviews because they provide the opportunity for participants to direct the interviews to a greater extent, as participants respond to the responses of others and thus bring to light issues not otherwise likely to be considered. This is illustrated in the following example, where a fifth-grade boy, Hugo, followed up a comment by another boy by stating that he felt like he was 'out of prison' when going to physical education (PE) lessons at the adjoining PE hall. When prompted to explain what he meant, he pointed to the ways in which students' daily lives are controlled in school:

> When you're here, you're locked in for lessons. You can't go to the toilet, you have to sit, and when you've done that, then you have to finish another thing and do another thing. Maybe it's normal schoolwork, but for us it's a pain in the ass to sit and concentrate for several hours straight like this. Then it's lunch, a disgusting lunch, then break, and then when you go in, then it feels like you're locked in again.

In the interview, Hugo made a passing comment about prison, which he was then asked to elaborate. In doing so, he pointed to some of the factors that were of particular interest

to us in our research, including the compulsory and controlling nature of schooling, and signalled that he recognised that these were issues that we cared about.

The interview with Hugo and his friends was conducted in the school's empty library during lesson time, and we conducted all the interviews in rooms where privacy could be ensured, to help make the participants feel comfortable and safe (Davies 2008; Hill 2005). As Renold (2001, 372) argues, friendship groups also 'help create a non-threatening, trusting and comfortable atmosphere' where students may feel freer to voice their thoughts and direct the interviews to a greater extent as the participants respond to the responses of their friends. However, while friendship group interviews also thus provide an opportunity for observing the interactions of peers (Davies 2008), such interactions may require the careful intervention of the interviewer if they take the form of 'oppressive behaviours' (Atkinson 2019, 191). In our study, we were prepared to stop the interviews if necessary, and we provided information to the interviewed students about the availability of their school's student safety and/or student health teams and provided them with information cards from a Swedish child helpline (BRIS). As Atkinson (2019, 191) points out, the potential need for such intervention raises questions 'about some of the limits of least adulthood', and about whether the use of group interviews is compatible with a least-adult role where the researcher seeks to suspend their adultness by not redirecting the focus of the interview and/or challenging oppressive behaviours. Like ethnographic fieldwork in general, interviewing students requires a reflexive, responsive, and flexible researcher approach that is sensitive to ongoing social processes and complex power dynamics.

As several other researchers (e.g. Hennessy and Heary 2005; Phoenix, Frosh, and Pattman 2003) note, it is more difficult to ensure confidentiality in group interviews and group interviews may not be the best option for asking about sensitive topics. While we were interested in school bullying, our focus was on the relations between school bullying and the institutional school setting, and we did not explicitly ask students to tell us about their own personal experiences of bullying. However, the potential of group interviews to negatively impact social relations outside of the interview setting was still highlighted. In one group interview with four fifth-grade girls, for example, some of the girls were very outspoken about their views on schooling and teachers, so much so that all but one of the girls, Greta, who had not said much during the first part of the interview, wanted to extend the interview. The three remaining girls appeared to enjoy being interviewed, as highlighted in the following fieldnote:

> We used up both the maths and English lessons. I still wasn't finished with the interview and suggested that I may even want to interview them again. The three girls were all keen to talk again. They seemed to really appreciate the chance to talk, and Bianca came up to me in class later and said, 'I don't think I've ever talked so much!' Stella also came up and said, 'just let us know if you want another interview'.

The following day on the playground, however, Stella said that she was annoyed with Greta because, despite having been informed about the confidential nature of the interview, she had been telling another girl that Stella had said only negative things about school and teachers. Rather than not attempting to correct Greta's behaviour, and be least-adult, the researcher instead expressed care for Stella and Greta's friendship by offering to speak to Greta. While Stella declined the offer, the researcher continued to

monitor the situation, noting the following day: 'Greta and Stella seem to be friends again now and are standing together at the edge of the football pitch'. While the researcher did not direct or correct Greta's actions, having been asked not to by Stella, they were still able to demonstrate care about the potential consequences of the research through continued observation and monitoring of the situation.

By taking a caring adult role, researchers can orient towards children in such a way as to distinguish themselves from those adults who are perceived as non-caring without trying to pass as children. While some of the teachers at the schools were perceived as caring, others were not perceived as caring by some of the students. As one fifth-grade boy, Max, put it, 'there are teachers who really care about you, but there are teachers who just don't give a shit about you'. Bianca, a fifth-grade girl, said that some teachers did not care about the students and were like children:

> Some teachers are like us children. I mean, they don't care, like our PE teacher for example. You haven't seen it when you've been there, but when someone in the class is injured, he just says 'Get up, get up! You can-' But if you've injured yourself, the teachers should care, but he just stands there and looks as if nothing has happened. He doesn't care. The same with bullying, it's not good.

Bianca's critique of some teachers behaving like children is somewhat unfair to those children who care for their peers, as evidenced by examples of students defending their friends in our study. However, her critique points to an important distinction between the least-adult role and the caring adult role and suggests that students do not want yet another adult to refrain from helping and to distance themselves from the responsibility of care. As Bianca argued, teachers, and we argue adult researchers, 'should care' and not just stand by 'as if nothing has happened'.

Bianca was not alone in connecting some teachers' inaction to the issue of bullying. Martin and Linda, second graders at another school, for example, talked about their time at the school's preschool and their experiences of teachers who 'don't actually care so much about the children'. As Martin exemplified:

> When I went there, there was a guy there who was really mean and hit me and my cousin all the time, and the teacher didn't even care when he hit us. She was a really mean teacher. I don't understand why she didn't care.

The preschool teacher was perceived by Martin as 'really mean' because of the teacher's failure to demonstrate care by intervening. As some other students pointed out, perceived lack of caring affected their willingness to tell them about bullying. For example, Michael, a fifth grader, suggested that he and his friends did not bother to tell teachers about bullying because they did not perceive the teachers to actually care about what was happening:

> The teachers don't usually help much because they usually just take it up when it happens, but they don't usually care when it happens again and again and again. They usually just take it up again if they say anything.

In a similar way, Hugo said that he and his friends did not tell teachers because they found it uncomfortable to do so when it seemed like 'they don't even care'. Jessica, a fifth grader at another school, also explained that she tried to deal with situations herself because of earlier experiences of teachers not seeming to care:

> For example, at my previous school, if I told anyone, they didn't care so much, so I have sort of got the feeling that I should try to manage on my own, because I won't get help anyway.

These students' comments are reflective of studies that highlight the reluctancy of students to tell teachers about bullying because they do not trust that the teachers will care enough to do anything about it (Bjereld 2018; Forsberg, Hammar Chiriac, and Thornberg 2023). They also point to the potentially negative implications of embracing a least-adult role, as a researcher who takes a least-adult role and refrains from intervening in bullying situations, may be positioned as 'mean' and not worth telling things to. This is important, as interviews provide a key means of demonstrating that the researcher cares about the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants. Indeed, while interviews dealing with sensitive topics such as bullying may evoke painful memories and emotions, they may also be experienced positively if they provide an opportunity for participants to talk about their experiences in a safe environment with an adult who cares (Heyl 2007; Hollway and Jefferson 2000). This was illustrated by Charlie, a fifth grader who was regularly pointed out as a victim of bullying and who had earlier had meetings with the school safety team, when he stated at the end of an interview, 'I feel better after talking to the school safety team and with you'. In a similar way, Adam, in the same interview, expressed, 'yeah, I feel better after talking about it too'.

Discussion

Despite a vast amount of school bullying research, there have been relatively few ethnographic studies into the issue and only limited discussions of the ethics of conducting ethnographic research into school bullying. In this article, we have sought to contribute to such discussions by reflecting on our own ethnographic research in Swedish schools and critically revisiting the least-adult role. While we agree with the necessity of orienting towards children in a different way than other adults (Garratt 2021), we do not agree that this requires casting off adult-like characteristics and attempting to pass as a child (Mandell 1991). Rather, we argue that this can be done by taking a caring adult role and thereby distinguishing one's position from those adults who are perceived by students as not caring.

Adopting a caring adult role requires reflexivity about one's own role and the ongoing negotiation of access and consent. It also necessitates openness about one's position as an adult researcher, something which can be facilitated by the open use of field notebooks and recording devices and refraining from attempting to pass as a child (Laube 2021). While it is important to recognise that intervening may not necessarily always be the best course of action consequentially, and that the need for intervention may be difficult to judge in certain situations, a caring adult role demands a caring starting point and responsiveness and flexibility in terms of intervening in those situations where it is deemed necessary to minimise harm. Indeed, we argue that directing and correcting children's actions is sometimes necessary, and not intervening can be not only directly ethically problematic in terms of 'bystanding' but may also serve to signal that certain behaviour is acceptable and thus contribute to causing harm in future situations.

As we have argued, it is also important to recognise that ethnography is about more than observing (Forsey 2010). Carefully managed interviews offer a means of demonstrating care by providing participants with a safe space to give their perspectives and to be listened to. When conducting group interviews with students, a caring adult role

helps to reduce the confusion that may occur when interviews become 'sites for the enactment of oppressive behaviours' (Atkinson 2019, 191). A caring adult role allows the researcher to challenge oppressive behaviour in caring ways, by drawing not on a teacher authority (Mandell 1991), but a caring adult researcher authority. Rather than adopting a simplistic conceptualisation of power relations whereby children are positioned as powerless and adults as powerful, a caring adult role recognises the 'fluid, negotiable and unpredictable' relations between the researcher and the researched students (Barker and Smith 2001, 146) and allows for the exercise of power as something productive and anti-oppressive (Gallagher 2008).

As we have illustrated, while some of the students in our study expressed that teachers demonstrated care towards them, others unfortunately perceived some of their teachers as uncaring. The examples provided by students in our study point to various aspects of non-caring, including not helping students, not adequately listening to them, and not intervening in or helping to prevent bullying situations. The caring adult role provides not only a means of ethically conducting research but also a means for adult researchers to differentiate themselves from those adults in schools perceived as non-caring by students by engaging reflexively, responsively and flexibly in the field. We argue that this is an ethically sounder approach than one that seeks to suspend all adult-like characteristics and avoid directing or correcting the behaviour of children (Mandell 1991).

The ethics of research are central to the quality of research and should 'constitute a universal end goal of qualitative quality' (Tracy 2010, 846). Ethics are not only procedural but also situational and relational, and researchers thus need to be ethically reflexive and 'mindful of their character, actions, and consequences on others' (Tracy 2010, 847). A caring adult role provides a means of taking seriously the deontological principles of self-determination, in terms of caring enough to be open about the research, and justice, in terms of treating participants with care. It also helps researchers to adhere to the consequentialist principles of non-maleficence, in terms of intervening with care when necessary, and beneficence, in terms of caring about students' perspectives and experiences and thus contributing important knowledge about a problem negatively affecting the lives of school-aged children around the world.

Despite having now left the students' school contexts, we continue to adopt a caring adult role by highlighting the students' perspectives and emphasising the need for adults, teachers, and researchers to demonstrate care for students in schools.

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