

# Participant Observation in Educational Research

## Dynamics of Role Adjustment in a High School Setting

*School life, like army life, holds a nostalgia for most of us who experienced it, made all the more vivid by its remoteness from our present circumstances. Devoid of many comforts and freedoms that we now enjoy, it is nevertheless apt to be remembered with affection because of the very harshness with which the system worked. It is a singular sub-culture, and it shaped us (but we wouldn't go back). If research is to understand that shaping and that sub-culture, the need for reliable fact and insight requires that someone must go back who can take part, observe, and reflect. The ethnographic method applied to schools presents peculiar difficulties to the researcher in the role of "acting school child"; Ahola and Lucas discuss the influences brought to bear on this role by the attitudes of teachers, by the attitudes of a school's students, and by the school's physical environment, and they offer some procedural considerations not previously available in the literature.*

In recent years in educational research there has been growing interest in the ethnographic approach to the study of formal educational systems. This trend reflects not only the anthropologist's developing interest in this area of our culture, but also the educator's frustration with other more quantitatively based methodologies (e.g., Spindler, 1974; Iannaccone, 1973).

Participant observation, as a primary technique for ethnographically oriented studies, has been employed in research topics ranging from the role of school administrators to systems of university registration (Wolcott, 1973; Hendricks, 1975). As is to be expected, however, reports of findings typically focus on substantive issues arising from the research rather than on methodological issues emerging from the research process itself. Yet, as educational researchers hasten to adopt an ethnographic approach, substantive priorities may well lead to a glossing over of critical issues in applying this methodology.

The purpose of this paper is to examine various types of role adaptations by

a participant observer investigating high school student life. The basic premise guiding our investigation is the belief that the role of the participant observer is subject to two types of social force present in the setting, one stemming from pre-determined environmental factors, and a second created through social interaction.

The discussion will proceed in the following way. First, we will provide a brief definition of "participant observation" as we have employed it in this paper, and some necessary background information concerning the study to be referred to. Our discussion will then turn to the principal methodological issues encountered in our investigation. We will first examine how the role of the participant observer becomes redefined and modified by encounters with teachers. Then we will explore the impact that students may have on this developing role. Finally, we will examine the organizational factors of size and complexity as they influence the execution of the participant observation role.

## **A choice of role, and the setting**

An ethnographic approach typically encompasses a number of interrelated techniques. Each plays a fundamental role in the context of the complete research design. Generally, these include participant observation, informal interviewing, formal interviewing, and the collection of personal documents (e.g., Bogdan and Taylor, 1975).

Becker and Geer (1969) describe the first as follows:

By participant observation we mean that method in which the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some disguised role, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time. (p. 322)

The term and its definition imply participation on the one hand, and observation on the other. Many researchers have suggested various ways to conceptualize this participation-observation continuum. Lutz and Iannaccone (1969) provide a useful description of three roles of the participant observer: (1) the participant as an observer, (2) the observer as a limited participant, and (3) the observer as a non-participant.

In the first role — the participant as an observer — the observer is a natural member of the group being studied. This natural membership makes the researcher more apt to know about hidden motives and agendas. The role does, however, pose certain disadvantages: the researcher will undoubtedly share group biases; and he or she will undoubtedly be expected to devote considerable time to carrying out certain obligations as a member of the group. In the second role the observer as a limited participant is not a natural member of the group. In this case, the researcher interacts with members of the group for the stated

purpose of studying it scientifically. While the limited participant may be refused access to certain aspects of the society, he or she will have more freedom to move from group to group. In addition, since subjects know why the researcher is present, they may be more inclined to offer useful information. Finally, in the non-participant role, the researcher is able to remain detached from the society under study. At the same time, in placing the researcher out of bounds of the group, this research stance denies him or her opportunities to witness activities at which only group members are present.

In the study described in this paper, the role of observer as a limited participant was selected as the most appropriate role. It was felt that joining the student group for the stated purpose of studying it would be acceptable to the students, providing the researcher took extreme care to establish and maintain rapport with them, and hence to obtain a measure of genuine participant status.

The study discussed here had its origins in a province-wide (Quebec) study of the quality of high school student life in different sizes of high school. It included a year-long participant observation of student life in two high schools, one relatively small, having an enrolment of 500, and the other relatively large, with an enrolment of just over 2000. A key purpose was to complement a broader and more traditional survey of students with intensive, on-site case studies which would, ideally, see the schools "through the eyes of the students" (a dimension which seemed to be lacking in the literature on high school student life). The specific research aims of the case studies were to generate hypotheses concerning student life which could be investigated in further studies.

The schools were chosen on the basis of similar characteristics apart from size. They were located in adjacent yet distinct middle-class suburbs; both were "neighbourhood" schools in the sense of being within walking distance for most of the student population; and both provided traditional educational programs (that is, as opposed to "alternative" approaches to secondary education, or to extensive provision for groups having special learning problems).

Because the study was officially sponsored by the school district, the entry procedures were for the most part predetermined. Once the research representatives of the local school board had gained "approval in principle" from each of the school principals involved, we arranged for separate information meetings with these principals. Both recommended to us that they should seek the approval of the teaching staff on our behalf. Staff cooperation was successfully gained, and, in addition, the principals agreed to arrange a meeting with the official representatives of the student body in each of the schools.

During her first encounter with these students, the fieldworker attempted to provide an honest and plausible explanation of the purpose of the study. She sought their approval, asked for their help, and tried to clarify the role she hoped to assume within the school.

Subsequently, her contacts with students broadened as the fieldworker followed a daily route to the lockers, the student lounge, the cafeteria, and classes (a total of 100 classes were observed during the study). Her time was spent, for the most part, with a particular group of students in each of the schools. They were older students who were involved in extracurricular activities and were successful in academic work. This “sampling” had not been fully anticipated, for it stemmed from factors that emerged as the study developed. That is, as she became a “quasi-member” of a specific set of students, there was a tendency for this affiliation to cut her off from contact with other groups. After consideration of the possible alternatives, she opted to remain with these present groups and to work toward a more in-depth understanding of school life from their perspectives.

During her daily observational sessions, the fieldworker recorded extensive descriptive notes, verbatim remarks (when possible), as well as her own behaviour, comments, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations. Data were also obtained from formal and informal interviews, and from documentary sources.

Generally speaking, the literature on participant observation provided us with substantial assistance in making some methodological decisions for the conduct of the study. It had provided a means for selecting the type of role which would best suit the needs and purposes of the study. The literature also provided major guidelines for the various phases of the study, namely, gaining entry, establishing rapport, collecting substantive data, and reporting.

Nevertheless, as the study progressed, it became increasingly evident that the literature had glossed over a complex and significant aspect of the fieldwork — the unfolding of the participant observer’s on-site role.\* Moreover, we came to believe that the daily experience of the fieldworker — as a special member of the participating organization — offered important information about the more subtle, and yet natural, schemes of human interaction that accompany the execution of this research role. What follows, then, is our attempt to organize and present this information.

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\* For example, Rosalie Wax’s conclusion that there isn’t much that “honest and experienced fieldworkers” could tell beginners about field relationships “. . . because each situation differs from every other” (1973:20) ignores the possibility of certain “types” of situations which might emerge during fieldwork in school settings. Nor did Cusick’s first-hand experience (1973) in a high school setting go beyond the relatively technical entry considerations such as adaptations in appearance and manner. Concerning student relationships, for example, he writes: “The issue of my acceptability to the group members and other students was much easier to accomplish than to plan . . . Taking off a former role of teacher-administrator and the suit, tie, official manner, and didactic communication pattern that went with it, and putting on and accepting group norms, behaviour, and dress, combined with an unthreatening manner, was really all that was needed.” (1973:7)

## The teacher as an agent in role adjustment

The teacher's sphere of influence lays down to a great extent the parameters of the fieldworker's movements and behaviour within the formally structured portion of the school day. The fact that the teacher can unilaterally make significant (and usually unsolicited) adjustments to the participant observer's role is due primarily to the organizational structure of the school, which is traditionally divided into periods during which the current teacher's influence over the setting is paramount and generally unchallenged.

The nature of the traditional classroom structure may be termed stable in that the setting and the roles that most of the participants assume are established early in the year. In most situations, students are expected to assume the role of listener and occasional responder, while restricting their movements to a very well-defined and limited space. The teacher, the only adult, plays a more active role, walking among the desks, consciously moving towards individuals, attempting to elicit responses, permitting or refusing entry into the classroom, and, in general, establishing and maintaining limits to student interaction.

Carrying implications for the role adjustment of the fieldworker, two basic aspects of the teacher's classroom behaviour emerge, which may be characterized as the teacher as "gatekeeper," and the teacher as "initiator."

### *The teacher as "gatekeeper"*

The authority of the teacher to restrict entry to the classroom can obviously have a powerful effect on the role of the observer. As illustrated in this excerpt from the field notes, the teacher may choose to exercise this authority to the surprise of the student and to the dismay of the fieldworker:

I asked what course Lynn was having next and she said, "Physics, with Mr. Hemsley." She said she thought he wouldn't mind me observing. We went inside the class, I explained who I was, where I was from, and if I could possibly observe his class. He mumbled something about knowing about the project and that Mr. Stevenson (the principal) had a list of those who would or would not participate (in reality, no such list existed). I asked if I could stay, and he told me to check at the office, that he didn't "want anything to do with that stuff!" As I left, Lynn (the student) motioned to me and whispered, "Can you stay?" I said "No..."

Again, entry into the classroom, once granted by the teacher, did not become an established right of the observer. For example, in a classroom already visited, entry for the observer was subsequently prevented on one occasion because the teacher wanted to get the students "back into the routine" following a brief holiday.

Moreover, the teacher's right to restrict entry may be exercised *during* class, as in one instance when a very tense situation arose during a homework "check" by the teacher:

No one had done it. Mr. Prince (the teacher) started up the next row. Then he crossed the room towards me. (At this point I was getting nervous. I sensed that he was angry.) I whispered to Gill, "Did you do it?" She said, "Yeah, thank God!" (I was even afraid that he might ask me, forgetting who I was.) It was a very tense situation. Instead, Mr. Prince leaned toward me and whispered, "I think you should leave." "Oh sure," I said. I gathered up my books and crossed the full length of the room.

Interestingly, however, the anxiety and restriction of movement caused by the direct actions of a teacher exercising the "gatekeeper" role also on occasion acted as a catalyst in the fieldworker's relationship with students. Following the above incident, the fieldworker rejoined her subjects in the locker area, where she experienced a sense of belongingness that had previously not accompanied observations in that setting. In addition, a student who had never previously initiated an interaction with the fieldworker remarked that it was "quite a class" and continued to discuss at length what had happened. Thus, while the fieldworker's "classroom observer" role was aborted, rapport with the subjects was enhanced and "missed" information had been gathered through a willing informant. At the same time, where there had been the possibility that the teacher would interpret student-fieldworker interactions as a "joining of forces," care had to be taken to guard against role adjustments that might jeopardize relationships with the authorities in the organization.

### *The teacher as "initiator"*

The basic role of the classroom teacher as "initiator" may also create special problems for the fieldworker. Specifically, we found that the teacher during the course of a class period is in a more natural position to initiate verbal interactions involving the fieldworker.

Conversations initiated by the teacher and directed towards the fieldworker during a class period tended to focus on the research project, either demonstrating curiosity about the purpose of the study or asking about the progress of the research. We found, too, that these conversations afforded the opportunity to engage in behaviour which stimulated certain mutual adjustments to the participant observer's role. However, since these conversations occurred in the presence of students, the fieldworker's presentation of "self" to the teacher needed to be consistent with the presentation projected when interacting directly with students.

Another significant initiating behaviour on the part of teachers concerned invitations to the fieldworker to participate in classroom discussion. While such invitations could be regarded as opportunities to experience classroom life more directly, "through the eyes of the student," they posed a dilemma for the researcher, first because direct involvement in an activity could produce "tunnel vision" as far as the total situation was concerned; and second because interaction with the teacher could jeopardize relationships already established with students, as the following excerpt clearly demonstrates:

“Students cannot explain themselves concisely. You’re pampered kids,” said the teacher to the class. He then posed a hypothetical question (along this general theme) and turned *directly* to me, and paused, as if to say, “Isn’t that so?” I said “Huh?” and gave him a look which meant to imply, “Oh, you called on me?” But I didn’t answer. (I wanted to discourage him from using me for his benefit as an adult who shared his opinion about high school students.) A few of the kids laughed...

The participant observer was forced in such instances to oppose (hopefully in a tactful manner) the role adjustment behaviour initiated by the teacher.

In summary, the presence of two adults in the classroom, one the visiting observer and the other the resident authority, is a source of latent and sometimes manifest tension. Though there was evidence in the study that repeated observations in the same classroom tended to reduce this tension, the prominence of the teacher’s role as both “gatekeeper” and “initiator”, and the proximity and intensity of relationships in the classroom demanded constant alertness on the part of the researcher.

### **The student as an agent in role adjustment**

While the fieldworker’s contact with teachers took place largely in “their” classrooms, her contacts with students involved a variety of settings and circumstances. Furthermore, since the goal of the study was to participate in and observe the daily school activities of students, relationships with students were necessarily intense and broad in scope.

Because of the absence of a built-in status hierarchy, it was found to be easier to establish a working relationship with students outside the classroom. The researcher could properly enlist the help of students in adjusting to her new surroundings and friends. She could help her new friends deal with her role by answering their queries, avoiding judgmental remarks, and by generally going along with their actions and moods. Within the classroom, on the other hand, she had to accept a much more marginal role. The fieldworker was a kind of “student,” but at the same time an adult; she was a kind of “friend” vis-à-vis students, but at the same time an “educator” of sorts.

Both situations, however, were dynamic in the sense of posing continuous demands for role adjustment on the part of the observer. To summarize a large amount of data, this discussion will outline a number of student-related situations which influenced the unfolding of the researcher’s role, including those associated with entry, role clarification, age and classroom life. It should be noted that these situations were generally applicable in both schools studied.

#### *Gaining Entry*

A participant observation study which focuses on student life attempts to approach the student culture as closely as will be tolerated by the participants.

But how does one gain entry to that culture? The ethnographic literature speaks of the “informant” in a culture under study, and in the case of this study the same approach was found necessary in both school settings. Specifically, the administrators of the two schools suggested student sponsors who were closely involved in school activities, and these sponsors subsequently provided a basis for developing wider and wider contacts.

Particularly during the early days of the fieldwork, the bond which developed between the fieldworker and these student sponsors was based upon the obvious but nevertheless significant need for her orientation to the school. One of the indirect advantages of her entry experiences, too, was that the participant observer could determine to some extent whether or not the student sponsor had a perception of the fieldworker’s role that was congruent with the basic objectives of the study.

### *Clarifying the Role*

As with teachers, students in both schools sometimes expressed apprehension about the fieldworker’s role, either openly, or cautiously, as the following two excerpts suggest:

We were standing at the cafeteria table where the girls were sitting. Someone must have told Robert what I was doing, because he asked me, “You’re doing a thesis or something?” I said something like “Yeah, what it’s like to be a student.” He said, “You mean you were sitting over there, watching what was going on, and you’re going to include that? You know, we were just messin’ around, trying to unwind after functions class;” I laughed and said not to feel uneasy, that I would be “hanging around for several months to see what life was like, that’s all.” I tried to imply that what they were doing was no big deal.

The girl next to me asked if I was a student teacher. I said “Oh no, I’m just doing research on what it’s like to be a student.” She said that when she’d seen me in their chem study exam (3 weeks ago), she thought maybe I was there to catch cheaters. I laughed; I explained that I was just working on my homework (which was the current journal entries within that setting).

In such instances, the observer would actively try to dispel apprehension, and record the incident as an indicator of the way her role vis-à-vis these students was developing.

At the same time, we found that the participant observer’s role may undergo natural shifts as students subtly or openly encourage manipulations of the role which may run counter to immediate research aims. Depending on the circumstances, the participant observer may feel that there is little choice but to try to accept the manipulation quietly and use the occasion for unexpected, yet



potentially fruitful data collecting. Thus, when the fieldworker had attempted to arrange an informal interview session with a group of students who openly expressed a desire to count chocolate bar money rather than to play the research role of "student informant," the researcher felt compelled to abandon her original plans (which had taken considerable time and effort to arrange) and to assume the role of a rather passive money counter. Her unexpected perspective as "observer" nevertheless provided extensive data on informal relationships among members of the student group.

### *Age Discrepancy*

The most obvious status discrepancy for a participant observer in a school is age. While the researcher may try to downplay this as much as possible (for example, by dressing in a manner similar to the students), reminders continue to occur. Our field researcher, who was 28 at the time, looked considerably younger than her years, and her typical style of dress was very casual. Nevertheless, there was a tendency for some students to seek for her a legitimating label which would approximate an existing adult role within the institutional structure, such as student teacher or chaperone at a social function.

Our experience indicated, too, that age discrepancy can encourage potentially dysfunctional perceptions of the participant observer's role, especially when the research role has not been adequately clarified in the eyes of a student. When the researcher attempted to arrange an informal interview session with a group of boys who had not been closely involved with her on an informal basis, she asked one member if she might talk with the group over lunch. While the encounter with the group did take place, joking remarks made by the boy suggested that he was sceptical of the researcher's intentions: "You're not a spy for the school board, are you?" "Check the purse. No tape recorder there?" One wonders if this scepticism would have been less pronounced had the subject been an adult, or the researcher a teenager.

It is interesting to note that in the larger school the age discrepancy between the fieldworker and the students was sometimes overlooked. Not only did secretaries and librarians in the larger school tend occasionally to relate to the fieldworker as a student, but also some students who had had no prior contact with the fieldworker appeared, at least, to be unsure about the fieldworker's status in this regard.

### *Adjusting to Classroom Life*

Student behaviour patterns in the classroom placed other demands on the participant observer's role. Basically, the schools included two types of classroom environment: the traditional classroom with its stable seating arrangement and its teacher-centred atmosphere; and the action-oriented classroom (for

example, art, drama, home economics) with its more flexible seating arrangement and student-centred atmosphere.

In both types of classroom, student interactions which engaged the fieldworker would sometimes create feelings of tension for her, mainly because of her marginal role. Situations would often arise posing basic methodological questions. How should the researcher react to a covert appeal to interact with a subject? To what extent does her presence and her role affect the situation? If given a choice, is it more advantageous to sit apart from friends, and therefore avoid, for the most part, covert participation, but at the same time reduce significantly the chances for hearing and observing these covert interactions? Or is it more advantageous to sit closer to subjects in order to observe their behaviour better at the risk of increasing role-conflict?

Considering first the traditional classroom, a notable feature was the seating arrangement, which appeared to have been unconsciously and ritualistically stabilized by the students themselves.

I sat down behind Jill. She turned to me and said that that was so and so's seat. I said, "Oh," and quickly moved back one, asking her if this seat was unclaimed. She asked a girl nearby. It was empty . . .

In these circumstances, the choice of vantage points for observation can be scarce for the observer who arrives once the setting has been clearly established. Thus, the fieldworker found herself sometimes cut off from the members of a friendship group she knew. Student sponsors usually refrained from upsetting the balance. On occasion, however, the student sponsor did attempt to make changes in the seating arrangement, with those involved sometimes openly reacting against an unexpected shift.

When the participant observer was permitted to sit close to at least one member of the group she knew well, verbal and non-verbal interactions directed towards the fieldworker were almost inevitable, as the following illustrates:

Joanne said something to Jean, who turned around to face Joanne. She smiled at me, too, as if to say, "Hi." Joanne said to me, "We got our class rings, you know... See!" and she held out her hand to show the ring. She told me (without my asking) that the stone was her birthstone. She said that you could buy one with the school colors. "Jean did." At that point Jean turned her hand and head in my direction and held out her hand to let me see the ring (obviously, she had been listening to Joanne). Would Joanne have offered to show her ring to another classmate? (It's interesting to note that entire conversations can go on for some time, apparently without the teacher's knowledge.)

On the other hand, when the fieldworker was separated from her student friends, the data she could collect concerning their behaviour tended to focus heavily on the non-verbal interactions among these students. The reason for this was the tendency for student interactions to be covert or at least quiet, and to in-

clude individuals situated in adjoining seats. An example of the type of interaction data collected under these circumstances is presented below:

Su-Ann writes a note and passes it to Kim, at her lap level. Kim reads it, writes something, and passes it to Su-Ann while watching the teacher (who is directing an exercise on run-on sentences). Su-Anne reads it, writes something and passes it back to Kim again, under the level of the desk top. Kim reads it and writes something and then passes it back again to Su-Ann. They are relatively expressionless except for a slight smile on their faces. Su-Ann turns the paper over. She reaches in the desk and tears a piece from a paper inside the desk (evidently, there is no more room on the first sheet). She writes something and passes it back to Kim.

Occasionally, distant student friends did interact with the fieldworker during the class period, but these interactions tended to be brief and non-verbal.

In contrast, the action-oriented classroom permitted students to leave their immediate work area without fear of immediate reprisal from the teacher. Hence a freer style of interaction was encouraged,

As we sat in art class: Donna said to me that Peter does "some good stuff." She said she'd show me ( I hadn't asked), and then she went to the drawer which contained the folders of some of the students. I walked over to her, and she began pulling out and discussing various works. She also showed me a cartoon, handed it to me, and asked if I thought it was funny. Back at the table, she showed me some of the drawings she had done, and explained that she likes to draw television personalities.

Again, this freedom could increase role-conflict for the participant observer, since covert interactions could evolve into potentially embarrassing confrontations upon their detection by the teacher. The following scene in a cooking class illustrates the fieldworker's sensitivity to this potential problem:

Donna tells me, "You can't believe what we steal in here. There's crackers, cheese . . . see that refrigerator over there . . ." Back at worktable of our group, she asks if they need more milk, repeating her question several times (hinting that she wanted an excuse to go into the refrigerator). One of the girls says yes . . . Donna steps into the large refrigerator and tells me to step in, too. Lorie says she'll close the door part way to keep the cold in. Donna remarks about all the "luscious" food . . . she peeks at several dishes, then snitches a small amount, implying that there was lots to snitch. I remember thinking how embarrassed I'd feel if the teacher walked in at that moment, and I was relieved when Donna led me out . . .

In the classroom, the marginality of the participant observer's role becomes particularly troublesome. How can the researcher resolve his or her role-conflict as adult on the one hand (who therefore may be expected to act like an adult authority) and as a friend and quasi-student on the other (who therefore may be expected to react like a friend and student)?

## **School size and complexity as a factor in role adjustment**

Our experiences led us to believe that factors associated with school size and complexity also influenced the role of the participant observer. Two specific areas of difference will be discussed: the complexity of the physical layout of the building, and, relatedly, the movement patterns of students through the building.

### *The Physical Layout*

The smaller school was perceived by a number of student contacts as having an uncomplicated layout, as the following illustrates:

She (a student) took me for a short tour of the building during the remainder of the break. She said, "The school is really easy to get around in."

Conversely, student sponsors in the larger school indicated that a newcomer could easily get lost:

I asked, "Which way to the administration area?" She (a student) said that she'd show me (rather than tell me).

In particular, there was evidence that the cafeteria setting of the larger school was perceived by students to be confusing for the newcomer, as the following illustrates:

(Having previously explained that I had to leave, I got up from the lunchroom table.) Joanne offered to show me the way. I told her to stay with the others; that I'd find my way. I left, headed in the opposite direction to throw my lunch paper away. Joanne thought I was heading wrong and called to me.

In the early stages of entry, this type of complexity may well foster a kind of helping relationship between the student and fieldworker. Similar incidents occurred during the first few days in each of the schools. However, in the case of the larger school, as the following illustrates, this same type of behaviour was still evident after more than a month had passed:

As I was walking out of the office, Jean was walking in. She asked me if I was looking for a meeting to go to. She said that John was holding a meeting in the auditorium. "Do you know where it is?" she asked. "Oh yeah, to the right out there, eh? Thanks."

The implication of this continuing need for orientation in the larger school was that the fieldworker could, in good faith, use the complexity of the layout of the building as a means for developing informal relationships with students.

### *Student Movement Patterns*

In each school, student movement patterns — where they walked, with whom they walked, and how long it would take to arrive at a destination — affected the participant observer's role in distinct ways. Frequently, in the smaller school, students had nearby lockers, used the same washrooms, were assigned to classrooms in the same part of the building, had similar schedules, and generally restricted their travel to the same wing of the school as their friends. Together, these features of small-school life promoted intense, intimate relationships among friendship group members as students traveled from one setting to another. Moreover, these same conditions encouraged friendship groups to remain at least partially intact throughout the school day; and they encouraged students to travel "en groupe" as opposed to solo. Conversations among students as they traveled from one setting to another tended to focus on incidents and informal discussions which had begun within the previous setting or which could be anticipated in the next. For the observer, the relatively private nature of these conversations — begun in one place and continued in the next — as well as the intensity of the interactions which emerged as a result of being with "good" friends, sometimes restricted her opportunities for interaction with students during these times.

While at the lockers and moving toward math class, Kim seems to be accusing Su-Ann of telling something to someone, yet she's smiling, so it can't be too serious. I ask Su-Ann, "Am I allowed to ask what the big secret is — Kim seems to be excited about something." I smile. SuAnn says, half smiling, "No, can't talk about it to anyone..."

Features associated with the large school promoted a different movement pattern among students, and this pattern in turn affected the participant observer's role. While it was common for many students to have from one to three classes with a friend or friends, individual schedules did not as readily coincide with those of a friend. Decentralized washrooms, classrooms and lockers further restricted opportunities for students to meet and travel through the building with "good" friends. When friends did meet, which was not at all uncommon, the interactions were brief or extended depending on whether or not they were headed in the same direction to the next class. For the participant observer, this relatively loosely organized movement routine provided opportunities to solicit invitations to a variety of classes, with a variety of students from the same friendship group, without having to break into an intense interactive moment among group members. Not infrequently, the participant observer would find herself on the way to or coming from the classroom setting in the company of only one student for several minutes, thus providing a greater possibility of more intimate discussions, which could expand and strengthen the role relationship of the two parties and clarify substantive questions through informal interviewing.

Indeed, at the time of the observation in the larger school, the observer was puzzled by what appeared to be a more open and accepting atmosphere than in

the smaller school. In general, invitations seemed to be more readily extended, and somewhat less difficulty was experienced in easing from individual to individual and from group to group. In contrast, it had seemed almost necessary at times in the smaller school to petition for attention and involvement. Again, as opposed to the greater number and variety of groups in the larger school, the smaller school was characterized by a core friendship and activity group which was highly visible and preeminent in student affairs. On the basis of only one case study of a small school, it would be highly speculative to suggest that this group structure resulted in a "closed" society and that the structure in turn was related to the size of the school; but our experience suggests at least that contextual factors of size and complexity must be taken into consideration in assessing the role of the participant observer in school settings.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine methodological issues associated with participant observation of students in the high school setting. Our perspective has been limited to the process of development of the participant observer's role as it is influenced by teachers, by students, and by some of the settings they inhabit. We have attempted to move beyond the guideline approach and into the realm of everyday encounters, where the actual unfolding of the role is negotiated.

Our experience using participant observation has convinced us that increased attention must be given to understanding the conditions under which substantive data are collected by the researcher. With this focus will come a better understanding of the role itself, and of the development and progress of relationships with important subjects. Most importantly, this focus will add a critical dimension to the researcher's perspective and thus provide substantive data which could be brought to bear on the study as a whole.

If educational researchers really wish to explore the viability of the participant observation technique of data collection, they must respect the technique in terms of its theoretical origins. They must not gloss over the premise that the participant observer, no less than other participants, consciously and unconsciously reacts to organizational structures and engages in a continuing struggle to create, construct, and revise a social reality through interactions with others.

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