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The accomplishment of rights, obligations and other expectations: attending to the lived details of classroom order to consider the ethnographic grasp of elusive emotions

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the possibilities of an ethnomethodological sensitivity to ethnographic research in educational settings. The main argument is that focusing on the *lived details* of educational encounters as reportable phenomena of order allows for an analytical take on the challenge of ethnographically reporting possible 'elusive' emotions. The paper analyses a naturally occurring interaction in a primary school classroom in Wales, where a teacher fails to provide the classroom code needed to access and complete a digital assignment. The data, presented in the form of detailed ethnographic fieldnotes enhanced by the transcription of video and audio materials, enables the examination of an instance where classroom members encountered and resolved an instructional problem. Thus, exploring how an attention to classroom order – and the way it is ongoingly produced, challenged, and maintained by the participants – opens a window to consider the ethnographic grasp of 'elusive' emotions.

1. Introduction

The field of ethnography and emotions has primarily concentrated on the impact of researchers' emotions during fieldwork and how these emotions shape research practices and outcomes (e.g. Boncori 2018; Bondi 2005; Down, Garrety, and Badham 2006; Meloni 2020; Monchamp 2007; Zembylas 2007; among others). These researchers have been particularly acute at acknowledging the emotional complexities of fieldwork, including discomfort and identity work, which influence data collection and interpretation. Another focus is found on the role of emotions during the educational process (e.g. Fitzsimmons and Lanphar 2011; Gordon 2006; Zembylas 2005; among others). These scholars argue that by identifying and analysing emotions, ethnographers can uncover deeper insights into educational contexts and the unrecognised emotional norms and mechanisms maintaining 'affective economies' (Zembylas 2007b). However, what an ethnographic grasp of

emotions might entail has often been overlooked. By this, I mean the ethnographer's ability to describe the role emotions play in the unfolding of a classroom scene.

Researching emotions in naturally occurring scenarios has often been seen as a challenging task, even being accused of a lack of scientific rigour (Boncori 2018). Emotions are often regarded as psychological phenomena and associated with internal processes occurring 'inside' the head. By this logic, emotions are difficult to identify, document, and analyse. However, as Coulter's (2005) critique of cognitivism suggests, emotions are not private inner states, but phenomena made observable through the practices by which members[1] display, recognise, and respond to them. According to Rorty (2004), the difficulties in theorising emotion arise from misreading its *grammar*. That is, it is mistakenly treating the term 'emotion' as if it were the name of a singular inner phenomenon, rather than recognising it as an umbrella term that groups diverse actions and expressions.

The term 'emotion' is a *glossing device* (Sacks 1992), whose meaning lies in use, not essence. What is needed, then, is not a theory but a method for showing how emotions are made accountable in interaction and how they function in everyday life. Phenomena categorisable as 'emotions' are publicly available phenomena, made observable and recognisable through language, expressions, and practices. As Wittgenstein (1953, §381) observes, our grasp of emotions is inseparable from the language through which we identify them – whether explicitly named or tacitly oriented to in situated interaction. In this sense, emotions are symbolic phenomena, inseverable from the resources of language, even when not overtly verbalised.

This paper proposes that producing an ethnographic description of a scene, where this kind of phenomenon is suspected to be at play, requires a sensitivity towards the *lived details* (Garfinkel 1967, 2002) of such scenes, i.e. the concrete, observable actions, expressions, utterances, and arrangements members *orient to* and *make sense of* in real time.

This task requires attending to the way participants orient to the *accomplishment of classroom order*, as well as its ongoing production and negotiation. A systematic attention of this kind offers an empirical and rigorous approach to the documentation, description, and analysis of possible emotions, especially when these are seen as 'elusive' – or not obvious – at first glance. The premise sustaining this argument is: Although we cannot enter people's' heads and know with certainty what they are thinking or feeling – both entering people's minds and determining certainty being practically impossible – we can, however, see what social actions accomplish in context, i.e. who does what and when, and how these actions give a sense of what this scene might be *a case of* (Goffman 1974).

2. Classroom order and the definition of the educational situation

Since much of what happens in a classroom is *talk* educational, ethnographies have often focused on identifying the different discursive strategies both teachers and students implement in the classroom. For example, Delamont (1983, 115), '[t]he teacher's first strategy is to impose her definition of the situation by talking most of the time' (text originally in italics). Flanders (1970) reported how teachers commonly rely on strategies such as asking questions, lecturing, giving instructions, and evaluating pupils' (mis)behaviours

and contributions. Pupils' strategies, on the other hand, are reported to consist mostly of doing what they are told, e.g. responding to the teachers' questions, collaborating with their peers, and occasionally asking questions to the teacher or 'misbehaving' (cf. Putney and Frank 2008).

Ethnographers also suggest that teachers almost always know the answer to their questions (Barnes 1971; Bellack et al. 1966; McHoul 1978; Mehan 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; among others), and in this sense, often teachers' questions are not genuine questions but methods to *check* pupils' knowledge. Studies consistently report the use of *questions-with-known-answers* by teachers as a pervasive feature of educational settings. These kinds of questions are often seen as essential for childhood socialisation (French and MacLure 1981). In fact, the Socratic method substantially consists of asking such questions (Macbeth 2004).

Questions-with-known-answers can be identified by the way teachers produce an educationally trivial sequence of question-answer turns (Hull 1985). They are also known in the ethnomethodological literature as *question-answer-comment* (Q-A-C) (McHoul 1978) or as the *initiation-response-evaluation* (IRE) sequence (Mehan 1979). Typically, it is constituted by three turns: The teacher initiates with a question, followed by a student's response, and a teacher's remark on the adequacy or correctness of the student's response.[2] When these sequences are at play, students tend to actively participate by providing candidate answers to the teacher's questions and their answers provide 'contributions to the teacher's ongoing 'résumé-to-be' for the lesson' (Freebody and Freiberg 2000, 144). In this way, the teacher remains in control of such *résumé*, and in doing so, they set the parameters of what constitutes an adequate contribution and what the final and correct answer will be.

Thus, central to the control over the definition of the situation is, not only the control over pupils' behaviours – another well-documented feature of classroom interaction (Delamont 1983; Freebody and Freiberg 2000; Geer 1971; Greiffenhagen 2012; Hammersley 1976; Macbeth 1991; Paoletti and Fele 2004; Woods 1983, among others) – but the control over what constitutes knowledge and *accepted* reality (cf. Steffensen and Havgaard 2018). As Macbeth (1991, 281) noted: 'Managing the cohort to produce and sustain this speaking structure, and the distinctive asymmetry of the teacher's rights and privileges within it, is the overwhelming practical evidence and achievement of a teacher's authority in the room' (cf. ten Have 1991).

Since W. I. Thomas's famous dictum – 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas 1928) – the *definition of the situation* has been a classic problem for sociologists to work out for those interested in examining social reality from the actors' point of view. However, what it means and how it can be located or grasped have varied from sociologists to sociologists (Berger and Luckman 1966; Goffman 1963; Schütz 1973). In this paper, the definition of the situation is to be understood in relation to the ongoing production of a certain classroom scene by its members, whose recognition as such by the ethnographer is possible through their competence in mobilising *shared stocks of cultural and common-sense knowledge* to appropriately identify the *constitutive details* of an educational scene. Again, who does what and when, and how these actions give a sense of *what* this scene might be a case of.

Geer (1971) argues that, whereas in many social situations it is common to minimise the exercise of power or at least control its display, in school we may find the opposite.

Teachers ongoingly 'support and legitimate [their] authority in a number of ways' (Geer 1971, 6). Ethnomethodological and conversational analysts have also noted an asymmetrical distribution of conversational rights in which the teacher controls every aspect of the conversation, e.g. turn-taking, topic choice and duration, and definition of what has been said *for all practical purposes* (Paoletti and Fele 2004). However, for this group of scholars *control* and *authority* are seen as a practical accomplishment, and their pervasiveness cannot be taken for granted. They have noted that classroom interaction structures and distributions of knowledge, rights, and responsibilities are not fixed but practically accomplished from *within* the situation (Hester and Francis 2000). Interactional accomplishments[3] are *autochthonous* and *tendentious* (Liberman 2024).

Hence, despite the presumed teachers' authority and control over educational situations, scenarios might unfold in ways that challenge the idea that the right to initiate and structure activities is owned by the person seen as the 'teacher' (see Jimenez and Smith 2021). Instead, scenes may be *staffed* in multilayered (Moutinho 2019) forms of order that make possible seemingly *atypical* forms of interaction – as the scene described in the following sections demonstrates. This realisation invites us to take an analytical sensitivity to the production of educational order that fleshes out the local, collaborative, and negotiated nature of each situation. The following section expands on what this analytical sensitivity might look like.

3. Methods and materials

This paper is based on an ethnographic project that studied the early enactments of an element of the New Curriculum for Wales 2022 in a primary school. Concretely, the Digital Competence Framework. The data was gathered through participant observation, ethnographic fieldnotes, and video and audio recordings. The materials presented and analysed here correspond with three consecutive fieldnotes extracts enhanced by the transcription of video and audio recordings, i.e. although the data is not presented as annotated transcriptions, the language contained in the fieldnotes is *he language of the participants*, as it is also the details of the natural unfolding of the interaction.

Analytically speaking, this paper draws on ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodologists argue the world ethnographers aim to study, describe, and analyse are already a competently analysed world. This analysis is ongoingly accomplished by members of society as they go about living their lives and interacting with others. Members display methods for analysing their ordinary, mundane, everyday affairs. In this sense, members are the first analysts in the scene (Macbeth 2010). Moerman (1988) discusses this when analysing *understanding*, and Macbeth reformulates it in the following way:

> to speak next, whether at the dinner table or the classroom, is to evidence an understanding of the speaking just done, what action it produces, what horizon of relevant next actions it projects, and, of all things, where the ongoing turn might end, so that we might begin our own. To speak next is to analyse all the things, whose analyses are revealed in the production of an apt next turn, on time. (Macbeth 2010, 394)

This formulation respecifies how we might find methods of inquiry in a radical way. Ethnomethodologists suggest we can look at members' methods as *instructions* (Garfinkel 2002) to see the world from the participants' perspective, and we can *follow* these

instructions to provide adequate descriptions, where the criterion for its adequacy is its recognisability by members. These methods include looking at a scene *configurationally* (Sacks 1972). The assumption here is that when people observe scenes, 'they observe configurations of persons, activities, locations, objects and so forth' (Hester and Francis 2003, 41). Doing so 'configurationally' refers to Sacks's (1972) reinterpretation of the notion of *normal appearances* (Goffman 1971). In other words, the conceptual notion of these configurations 'constitute a background scheme of interpretation against which the unusual can be discerned' (Hester and Francis 2003, 41). That includes categories of people and their category-bound activities or predicates.[4]

A central idea in ethnomethodology is Garfinkel's (2002) *misreading* of Gurwitsch's phenomenological investigations of *context* and Merleau-Ponty's notion of *phenomenal field*, by which Garfinkel integrated into ethnomethodology a policy of *attention to* and *demonstration of* the 'figuration of [contextual] details' (Garfinkel 2002, 177). From this misreading emerged a particular notion of *context* where the items, elements, or given contextual features can be seen as salient from a background to form an identifiable pattern. The features of these contextual patterns are said to 'exist through each other […] within a system of functional significances' (Gurwitsch 1964, 134).

Context is thus *seeable* – by the culturally competent eye – as a patterned coherence (Garfinkel 2002), whose elements are reflexively related to one another, and where both the elements and the pattern are reciprocally constituting each other. If one item is taken away, its functional significance is transformed. Hence, the ethnomethodological *gestalt contexture* invokes a notion of context as *instanced* or *occasioned*, locally specific, and situationally constituted.[5] This does not mean that through this analytical approach we will find the *correct* view of what this is a case of – not in a transcendental sense of correctness. It means that by taking this approach we can see the *lived details* of that setting's work as interpretable, discoverable, accountable, and reportable phenomena of order and leave aside discussions about validity, reliability, and generalisation to embrace principles of possibility, plausibility, and recognisability.

The argument is: We can, as ethnographers, see a scene and produce a plausible and recognisable description based on members' orientation to the ongoing constitution of a scene and its *lived constitutive details*. Of course, ethnographic work might entail accounting for more than just a scene. The argument is, however, that to produce a faithful description of a scene, we need to look at those details. This is what this paper proposes the ethnomethodological contribution to the ethnographic study of elusive emotions *in-action* is.

In the production of an ethnographic description, the categorisation of a scene or the type of emotions one can infer from it is not in itself the relevant task of the ethnographer. Instead, it is the presentation of the *lived details* of an event, in its granular form, offered to the reader, as another member, as materials for making sense of what may be going on in the scene. Thus, I would like to encourage the reader to *recognise* the following sketches as instructions for reading the scene and – drawing from their stock of knowledge – *see* the tension emerging from the practical problem of finding a classroom code.

4. Analysis of a classroom encounter

The encounter occurs halfway through a morning session in which a Year 5 (9–10 years old) class has been divided into two groups: A group working with the teacher doing

math exercises on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom, and an independent learning group doing an ICT activity (a 'Birthday Party Spreadsheet' in Google Sheets) with the computers at the back.

Fieldnote extract 1/3

> The pupils of the ICT group are not working on their assigned activity. They are walking to each other's computers and chatting among themselves. I approach them and see they cannot access their assignment. A few of them are trying to find a solution, discussing between them what to try next.

> A pupil walks towards the front of the classroom, where Ms Floyd is, sat on the floor surrounded by a group of pupils. He communicates having troubles with the assignment. She answers 'uh, who can help you?', and quickly returns her attention to her group. The child returns to the back of the classroom.

> Some of the ICT group continue working together, trying to find a solution. As their chat volume increases, the teacher calls them out, 'ICT group!', she shouts from the opposite side of the room. They fall silent, 'that's the level of noise I want', she adds.

> After a few more quiet exchanges among the ICT pupils, Will is assigned the task of reporting the problem to Ms Floyd. For this, he walks across the classroom to approach her, navigating between the pupils sat around the teacher. As Ms Floyd is engaged in the maths activity, she takes a few seconds to acknowledge his presence next to her, but then she greets him, 'Hi buddy'. Will, hands in his pockets, does not greet back. He seems to think for half a second how to express what he is about to say, 'uhm … ', and then goes straight to the point: 'We need the classroom code to access the class'.

> As she leans over to reach her laptop, Ms Floyd says 'uh, I got it' and Will initiates his return to the back of the classroom. Immediately after, Ms Floyd raises her voice and asks Sean (one of the ICT group pupils at the back of the room) 'where is your paper?'. 'Well done' she responds when he replies he's looking for it.

Here we have a scene in which a group of pupils, who are supposed to be working on an independent learning activity, are not. Their attempts to communicate their trouble of access are complicated by the fact that Ms Floyd is engaged in a different activity with another group of pupils. After a first attempt, reporting the problem becomes a request, produced by Will in the name of the ICT group. It is a request in the sense that it is soliciting an action from the teacher – identifying her as the relevant actor to address *the* missing piece of information needed to access their assigned activity.

Both the problem – access to the (virtual) class – and the solution – the (Google) classroom code – are built into such request, as well as the set of rights and obligations of the parties of the scene: Pupils ask for help and teachers provide it. In this sense, the request locates *responsibility* over the teacher to solve the problem. Responsibility that, as we will see, the teacher initially resists. After all, this is an *independent* learning activity, and the pupils ought to work on their own (Selwyn et al. 2017). The expectation seems to be that assistance can be provided from *within* the group, and we see this in the way the teacher first diverts help towards other members of the ICT group; 'who can help you?', she asks the first pupils who seek help.

Moreover, the concise format of Will's turn shows a sensitivity towards the situation in which it is being produced, i.e. Will is interrupting the teacher's main activity. He is orienting to the requirements of his interruption, firstly, by waiting to be greeted by

the teacher, whose category's predicate involves domain over the allocation of turns, and secondly, by taking the teacher's greeting not as a *usual* greeting – for which a greeting back would be the expected thing to do – but as permission to communicate a classroom-related issue.

Furthermore, Will reports the problem of access as a collective problem. He uses 'we' as gloss for the ICT group. By making the problem of access a group problem, the solution can reasonably be expected to come from outside the group. Moreover, 'we' can also be heard as 'we' the 'pupils', implicitly evoking the category pair pupils-teachers. Sacks (1972) called this kind of category pairs *standardised relational pairs*, referring to the fact that they are usually seen as *going together*. Sacks described these category pairs as *loci* for moral imputations because of how they work to organise talk and behaviour in interaction and the set expectations for next possible actions.

Will's and Ms Floyd's actions are *seeable* as activities commonly bounded to the category of 'pupil' and 'teacher' respectively, and thus, those categories are assumed unproblematically. They are seen unproblematically because these activities are known to get done in that setting by these categories of people, i.e. requesting and providing help in accomplishing classroom activities are category predicates of the parties to a classroom setting. Even though Will's requests seem to be taken as unexpected, and we can see this in the way the Ms Floyd reacts to the information facilitated – registering it as *news* with the token 'uh' – her response 'I got it' indicates a compliance with the request.

Ms Floyd treats Will's request as something she should address yet immediately redirects it to Sean by asking about a paper presumed to contain the classroom code. This move shifts responsibility back to the pupils, suggesting the problem can be solved internally. In doing so, she performs 'teacher's work': Firstly, by redirecting the problem to Sean, an ICT-group pupil, whose efforts she ratifies with a brief 'well done', and secondly, in producing such ratification, she enacts the teacher's right to evaluate pupils' actions. Thus, although the pupils' requests position Ms Floyd as responsible for resolving the problem, she reasserts control by shifting the task back to them.

Fieldnote extract 2/3

> After a few seconds, Will approaches Ms Floyd again – who had resumed with the maths activity – with a paper in his hand. He displays it for her to see. To this action she replies, 'that's what you need, isn't it? And now you can go log into the classroom', whilst she points towards the ICT area. To this, Will answers, 'yeah, but this wouldn't let you into the classroom' and Ms Floyd immediately responds, 'you need a classroom code, as well?'. When he answers affirmatively, 'yes, the classroom code as well', Ms Floyd leans towards the laptop. What is projected on the screen changes from the maths exercise to the lyrics of a song they were practising earlier in the morning. Meanwhile, she questions him one more time, 'do you?', and once more he answers 'yes'. Then she replies, 'one second'.

Will's reply – 'yeah, but this wouldn't let you into the classroom' – politely rejects Ms Floyd's assumption that the paper contains the needed code, revealing her misunderstanding. His correction exposes a mismatch between her actions and what pupils *reasonably* expect from a teacher who assigns and manages online work. The exchange momentarily unsettles the usual alignment between teacher authority and epistemic competence. However, as Lynch (2020) warns us, *typical actions* ought to be contrasted with the flexibility of its understanding *in vivo*. They are situated and locally produced

accomplishments, i.e. categories and their predicates are not fixed even within an interaction.

The *categorial landscape* (Jimenez and Smith 2021) of any given activity is dynamic and shifting both in terms of its categorial relevancies and just how those categories organise the assembled production of the activity. Thus, when considering what is reasonably *expected* from a 'teacher' or a 'pupil', we must look at the local-sequential logic of the interaction and the way members orient to relevant categories moment-by-moment.

For the case at hand, let us start with examining how the problem between membership categories and their bounded predicates (e.g. who gets to determine what the problem and its solution are) emerges whilst participants show sensitivity to the category relationship 'pupil-teacher'. Will's utterance design is again significant in this regard. Although practically he is doing instructional repair by pointing at the persistence of the problem and the solution, he starts by agreeing with the teacher statement.

Will's actions demonstrate a preference to avoid challenging the teacher in a direct way. He then goes onto stating that whatever is in the paper would not let them into the classroom, but Will points at Ms Floyd's mistake by formulating a self-evident truth with the following logic: 'This' is not the classroom code, therefore, it would not let us into the classroom. It is also significant to consider Will's embodied actions; how he holds and shows the paper and points at it as evidence of her mistake. Using the paper – first invoked by Ms Floyd as the solution and a deviation of help towards Sean – as the evidence of the problem's persistence, shifts the challenging source from the pupil to the paper, and indirectly back to Ms Floyd.

We see that although Will has stated twice that what they need is a classroom code, Ms Floyd does not directly accept this correction, instead – with surprise and some confusion – she questions the truthfulness of Will's claim, 'you need a classroom code, as well?'. She does not insist that the classroom code is in the paper, but built in her answer is the possibility of another solution to the problem, which is the absence of it. In other words, she is proposing that perhaps they do not need the classroom code at all. We see this in the way she insists in challenging Will's claim about what they need.

Will responds to the teacher's question by recycling the elements of the utterance, adding a confirmation marker, 'yeah, the classroom code as well'. The teacher sceptically – and somehow inquisitively – asks again, 'do you?'. Will – now for the fourth time – confirms, 'yeah'. In structure, Will's turn could remind us of the way teachers usually respond to pupils' contributions by repeating what they have said. However, the utterance is toned with certain nervousness, more like a suspect being questioned, than a condescending comment.

Although simultaneous to this brief instance of questioning, the teacher grabs the laptop – presumably to initiate the search of a classroom code – she is still putting some work into sequentially organising a different output from this exchange. The work Ms Floyd puts in to produce a different output evidences a resistance to accept what the pupils diagnose as the problem, which involves not only the teacher's failure in producing complete and adequate instructions for the independent learning activity, but it also evidences her failure in diagnosing the situation correctly and providing an immediate effective solution.

Through her actions, Ms Floyd's incumbency of the category 'teacher' – as the one who holds authority over knowledge – is interactionally challenged. Thus, she is contributing to the production of a particular kind of classroom scene, one where the assumed epistemic asymmetry between teacher and pupil is being contested. One could argue that, if educational interactions in primary school classrooms are so heavily defined by the teacher's authority – even in within educational 'constructivist practices' (see Jimenez 2023) – losing such authority challenges the *classroom order*, and this is an interactional problem for the 'teacher' as much as for the 'pupils'.

The teacher's initial resistance to disturb her math class to find the code herself (embodied in her attempts to deviate help) is accentuated during these last moments when she briefly challenges the definition of the situation proposed by the pupils (that they need a classroom code, and this is beyond the ICT group's ability to obtain). This resistance is sustained until the turn sequence makes it *reasonably* possible, and leads to an inflection point in which Ms Floyd requests the pupil's assistance in finding the classroom code.

Fieldnote extract 3/3

It takes Ms Floyd less than a second to arrive to Google Classroom, as she already had the window open on her laptop. When she arrives to the page, she confirms to the pupils she has done so by stating 'this is the classroom'.

Ms Floyd then asks, 'what do I need, Will?'. A couple of pupils from the front group attempt to help. 'You just need ah … ', one pupil said, and another adds, 'the classroom code'.

Ms Floyd's gaze lifts towards Will, who is approaching from the back of the classroom, and asks him, 'what do I need?'. A few other pupils also look at Will whilst he stops, scratches the back of his head, and replies, 'go settings?'. He lifts his right hand and points at the place in the page where 'settings' is, visually represented in the shape of a cogwheel.

Ms Floyd does not go to settings, instead she goes to the 'Course Board' page. She positions the arrow over a sequence of letters and numbers figuring next to the words 'Class code', below the class title, and asks, 'is that it?'. A couple of pupils respond affirmatively, and another pupil replies, 'I think it's in the classroom code'.

When Ms Floyd clicks on a squared figure next to the code, a box emerges at the centre of the screen projecting the code on a bigger size font. Ms Floyd announces, 'there we are'. Then raising her voice, she shouts 'Sean? ar y sgrin, mae angen hyn'. A couple of children attempt to repeat the Welsh words, and one of them ask her for its meaning. 'Mae angen hyn … it means you need this', she explains.

In this last extract we see that after an initial struggle to agree on what the problem and its solution were, Ms Floyd surrenders to the pupils' definition of the situation and initiates her search for the classroom code.

In finding the code Ms Floyd requests the pupils' assistance, 'what do I need', she asks. Unlike much for the questions teachers produce in the classroom, this is not a *question-with-know-answer*. The question is, let us say, *genuine*. It is not a pedagogical strategy aimed at gathering pupils' contributions for the teacher's ongoing 'résumé-to-be' for a lesson. So far, the teacher has not shown effective control over such *résumé* and, therefore, the parameters of what constitutes an adequate contribution and what the final and correct answer should be, are not so clearly controlled by Ms Floyd's agenda.

Nonetheless, although some pupils provide an adequate answer ('the classroom code') for the question 'what do I need?', Ms Floyd displays control over the designation of a

next speaker by not addressing these turns as relevant contributions. This might be because she purposefully directed the question to Will, and she is sanctioning unsolicited contributions, but we can also see these pupils' answer as insufficient. We could assume the question Ms Floyd formulates is incomplete. We could hear the question as 'what do I need (to do next)?' – inviting an instruction rather than a factual answer. In this way, she simultaneously exercises her right to manage participation and defines the next relevant action, re-establishing her pedagogical control through the organisation of talk.

When Will answers, he seems to be thinking on his feet. His turn shows hesitation and doubt. We see this in the way he formulates the instruction as a question. Complying with the request, Will produces a valid directive – indeed, on 'settings' the teacher would have found two options to 'manage the invitation codes', either by 'showing the code to the class', or 'sharing an invitation link'. However, he behaves as a 'pupil' in front of a 'teacher', and his contribution is formulated as a possible candidate answer yielding ratification.

Thus, although the categories 'teacher' and 'pupil' seem to enter an apparent *liminal space* regarding their standard predicates (who tends to instruct and who tends to be instructed), the categorial shift – a teacher being instructed and a pupil instructing, in a genuine way – is not completed. In fact, despite the adequacy of Will's proposed next step, and the fact that the teacher instigated the production of such instruction, she does not follow it. Instead, the teacher – whether deliberately or not – shows a preference for following her own way to find the code.

Once the practical problem of finding the classroom code has been solved, the teacher takes upon the task of claiming back her right over the definition of the situation, hereafter reaffirming teachers' control until the closure of the sequence. Symmetrically to the *opening* turn of this encounter – when Will states they 'need a classroom code' – in her *closing* turn, the teacher states, 'you need this'. Notably, she directs this claim to Sean, who is sitting at the back of the classroom with the rest of the ICT group. Thus, returning to Sean the responsibility of making the trouble resolvable *internally*.

Finally, the teacher makes obvious her capacity to, not only provide the information the pupils require, but to claim knowledge over what they *need*, and if it was not enough, she does so by exercising her area of expertise, the Welsh language. The instance of trouble and tension thus closes with the teacher competently instructing on what the expression '*mae angen hyn*' means. She is, in a symbolic but consequential way, back in control.

5. Reflections on the ethnographic grasp of 'elusive' emotions

Based on the description and analysis provided above and following principles of possibility, plausibility, and recognisability discussed in the methods section, we can now consider the ethnographic grasp of 'elusive' emotions.

The fieldnotes illustrated an instance in which a group of pupils reported to their teacher that they needed a classroom code – that had not been provided during an earlier instruction – to access their virtual classroom and complete their ICT activity. When the problem is communicated, a series of *interactional tensions* arises. The teacher is forced to 'come to terms' with the fact that she had not provided sufficient instruction, and this insufficiency reflected her own knowledge and control over the

situation. In this sense, one could say there was, for a moment, an *inverted* asymmetry of knowledge regarding the topic 'what pupils *need* to accomplish their tasks'.

The ethnographic description, focused on reconstructing the *lived details*, allowed us to observe the way the teacher produces non-standard classroom talk, for instance, genuinely asking questions and requesting instructions. However, we also observed parties of the scene orienting to the task of finding the code in a way that is sensitive to the asymmetrical nature of teacher-pupils' interactions. For example, Will, whilst confronted with the challenge of telling the teacher she was wrong, acts in such a way to avoid being seen as 'undoing authority' (Weitkämper 2024). For this purpose, he assembled and mobilised methods and evidence to assert the legitimacy of his claim and request.

The teacher, on the other hand, despite producing non-standard classroom talk, is the only participant sanctioning, ratifying contributions and initiating/closing the three-turns sequences Q-A-E (McHoul 1978). Pupils' talk, in contrast, is designed to avoid evaluation, even when their talk seems to be correcting the teacher's. Likewise, there are specific ways in which Ms Floyd, despite having to rely on pupils' help to identify the problem and the solution, formulated teacher's specific talk, e.g. she enacted her right to question the pupil's claim and finally *colonised* it (Delamont 1983). We saw this when Miss Floyd finally produces an instruction mirroring the pupils' initial request for the classroom code, enacting the teachers' right to conclude an activity.

Classroom order is both a means and an end for the managing of the scene; it is an accomplishment. Consequently, although turn-produced pair categories such as 'instructor-instructed' emerged in unusual ways, participants ongoingly accomplished the relevance of the pair teacher-students for organising the scene. In a way, this instance can be seen as one in which the teacher's control of the educational situation, as a pervasive feature of the setting, is shackled by the ability to display *standard* category-bounded predicates.

The key questions are whether emotions are relevant to the scene and, if so, in what way. In this case, members manage the situation by circumventing tension, possible embarrassment, and frustration, and the possibilities of these become interactionally consequential. Such orientations can be treated as plausible 'emotions', relevant to how participants organise their actions in sensible ways. Pupils' hesitations, their cautious appeals to the teacher, and the teacher's attempts to reassert authority are not simply neutral actions, but saturated with orientations to possible embarrassment, loss of face, and disruption of order.

These orientations give the interaction its tension, a quality that both pupils and teacher actively and dynamically 'manage' (cf. Lanas 2016), i.e. dealing with conflict necessitates the *affective management* of actions in context (Ahmed 2005; Hochschild 1983; Wetherell 2012). They are observable in the pupils' hesitations, delayed turns, and careful wording, and in Ms Floyd's displays of uncertainty as she negotiates responsibility and re-establishes control. These 'emotions' are not inner states to be inferred but shared orientations that organise what counts as an appropriate or sensible next action in the unfolding of the scene and observable as part of the *lived detail* of such scene; in the ways actions are delayed, questions are formulated, and troubles are delicately repaired.

What comes into analytical focus is a scene assembled as *configurations* of *lived details*. These are reconstructions of the details available to the members, who analyse them *in situ* to both make sense of the scene and produce next relevant actions. In a classroom

scene of frustrated instructional attempts, the sense we find in both teacher's and pupils' actions is both shaped by *what everyone knows* happens in a classroom, as much as what we see ongoingly unfolding, moment-by-moment, turn-by-turn. Thus, although there is no explicit vocalisation of emotions, the analysis demonstrates how detailed examination of the sequential and categorial organisation of the classroom encounter helps track the unfolding of this stuttered interaction and provides a window to deal ethnographically with 'elusive' emotions, perhaps graspable just via the detailed reconstruction of the scene.

The main challenge for this approach is that emotions often appear tacitly, emerging in hesitation, avoidance, or repair rather than in overt displays. This, however, is not a shortcoming of the method but a feature of the phenomenon itself: Emotions are accomplished in ways that can remain delicate and difficult to pin down. In this sense, the analysis shows that by attending to lived details – such as those observed in the sequential and categorial organisation – of a scene, ethnographers can document these elusive orientations without importing readings from outside.

While the approach does not, on its own, provide a grand account of emotions in relation to power structures, it offers a way of empirical grounding theorising of the kind. In this way, an ethnomethodological sensitivity to ethnographic descriptions of educational scenes can complement broader critical perspectives, anchoring them in members' lived activities and providing descriptions that make phenomena observable as it unfolds. It encourages the ethnographer to locate their analytical starting point in, as Garfinkel (2002, 211) would put it, 'the midst of [members'] lived activities and under those auspices to proceed to disclose, to elucidate, to illuminate and to make instructably observable […] just what they are doing that is inspectably so'.

6. Conclusion

This paper contributes to a conversation in rethinking the analysis of emotions in educational ethnography by drawing upon ethnomethodological sensitivity to the study of classroom interaction. It proposes that one way to approach such a topic is to pay attention to the available details of a scene and to ask how it is that the members are orienting to them, in which way they are doing so, and what are the implications to the unfolding of the scene.

In the case analysed here, the ethnographic description showed a scene where categories and their predicates emerge in slightly 'unusual' ways. We saw the teacher doing non-standard classroom talk, asking genuine questions, and requesting instructions. We also saw the pupils doing a lot of work for the teacher, to get her to produce a repair of her own instructions. These actions bring to the surface a texture of categorial possibilities with practical and moral, implications that are interactionally and affectively managed. Emotions here are not treated then as playing a role in shaping what counts as an appropriate or sensible next action in the unfolding of a scene.

The contribution is both analytical and methodological, it shows a way of producing descriptions grounded in empirical detail that allows the interrogation of a scene through an attention to the figuration of such details. Thus, the ethnographic *graspability* of 'elusive' emotions can be available for analysis through the reconstruction of lived details of a scene.

Notes

1. Drawing from the phenomenology of Alfred Schütz, the term 'member' has a special connotation in ethnomethodology. It is not used to refer to persons or individuals as such. Instead, it refers to capacities or competencies people have as members of society, as they are displayed in practice (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970). These are competence to speak, to know, to understand, to act in ways that are sensible in the situations in which they find themselves in (see Ten Haven 2005). Thus, 'membership' refers to the observable, accountable capacities by which persons orient to and sustain the intelligibility of their activities *in the course of* such activities.
2. Of course, the three-turns sequence is not external to the pedagogical activity but *endogenously* produced. Consequently, 'it is no surprise to find variations, adaptations, partial completions, and activities that do not produce the IRE at all' (Jimenez and Smith 2021, 178).
3. 'Accomplishments' here does not simply refer to the details of an interactional exchange. 'It refers to the production of a *gestalt contexture* – a mutually elaborated perceptual and moral scene in which actions and expressions become recognisable as accountable moves' (Hutchinson *forthcoming*).
4. The notion of category is used to emphasise the idea that classroom order, rather than static, is a sequentially negotiated order, ongoingly configured and accomplished by interactional layers of categorial relevance (Fitzgerald 2021), some of them setting-specific other turn-related.
5. This resonates with Wieder's (1974) analysis in *Telling the Convict Code*, where he emphasises that *context* is not a fixed backdrop but emerges from participants' interactions, continually shaped and reshaped through their actions and orientations. While Wieder does not use the term 'gestalt contexture', his account of interactionally produced, emergent context conceptually complements the idea of *perceiving* context as an emerging, coherent, and interrelated whole.

Ethical approval

This project received ethical clearance by School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University (approval number SREC/3378).

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