

The present study attempts to answer the following questions: *What are the processes underlying the construction of gender in primary schools? How do children 'read' these processes in relation to their understandings of gender through social experiences outside the school?* Following from the review of literature in the area, it is evident that there is considerable complexity associated with identity construction in social institutions such as schools. For understanding these processes, a methodology needs to be followed which allows for in-depth enquiry into the situated contexts of gender construction as well as the meanings assigned at the individual and collective levels to these contexts.

The present study used ethnographic methods to collect and analyse the data. The rationale for selection of this methodology, referred to in the discussion in Chapter 2, stems from the nature of data sought for addressing the research questions of the study. These data are intrinsically qualitative in nature, such as teachers' rationales for implementing gender divisions in school practices, their verbal and non-verbal communication patterns in the classroom, their belief-structures about the value of education and gender roles; children's responses to the contexts engendered by these practices in everyday school life, at the individual and collective levels. Ethnography enables an 'insider' or 'emic' view of these subjectivities, while allowing for systematic enquiry into the situated nature of school contexts within which they are constructed.

This chapter describes the methodology underlying the study. It discusses the various characteristics of ethnographic research, particularly in education, the design of the study, the ways in which data were collected, the sources of the data and the methods used to analyse the data. The nature of ethnographic research is such that first-level analyses accompany the collection of data; these steps are traced in this chapter.

The following section outlines the characteristics of ethnography as a method for data collection and analysis in education. It also discusses the rationale for using ethnographic methods in the present study.

### **3.1 Ethnography and educational research**

#### **3.1.1 The nature of ethnographic research**

Ethnography is characterised as an intensive study of social interactions where the researcher immerses herself in the culture being studied to understand the processes by which social actors make meaning of the culture. Although ethnography has for long been one of the principal methodologies in anthropological research, its induction into educational research was considerably later, in the studies of the Chicago School of sociology, and primarily by Howard Becker in his study of medical students (Becker et al: 1961).

Ethnography, in the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), is ‘thick description’, and is characterised by holism and contextualism. It involves many techniques or methods such as participant observation, interviews, mapping and charting, interaction analysis, document and historical analysis and use of demographic data. However, ethnography principally relies on participant observation of a society or culture through a complete cycle of events that ‘regularly occur as that society interacts with its environment’ (Lutz:1981:52).

There are distinctions in the application of ethnographic methods to educational research. One school, largely composed of ethnomethodologists, argue for a micro-ethnographic approach. These studies focus on specific, highly contextualised questions within small groups, and examine social interactions within the group. Macro-ethnography, on the other hand, refers to studies which use ethnographic methods to interrogate larger cultural issues, what in traditional anthropology used to be referred as ‘complex societies’. In both cases, however, there is a search for *meaning*. The task of the ethnographer is to provide a ‘thick description’ of the phenomenon being studied to permit analysis directed towards this search for meaning.

## Meaning and culture

The search for meaning in a culture involves distinguishing between the various forms of cultural expression, in terms of cultural behaviour, cultural knowledge and cultural artifacts (Spradley: 1980 ). A distinction needs to be made here between *explicit* culture and *hidden* culture. Explicit culture refers to experiences which shares a common register of meaning for social actors, which can be communicated with a degree of ease. However there are also tacit or hidden meanings which constitute a culture, comprising of 'cues' to which there are responses, but these are not as easily comprehensible nor communicable. Cultural 'knowledge' consists of both levels of meanings. These meanings do not correspond to a reality 'out there', but encompass a plurality of modes of understanding, depending on how one is positioned in specific cultural contexts. A school child belonging to an urban, upper-middle-class family is not likely to respond in the same manner to a child from a poor family, to a lesson in the same textbook. Each brings her/his own understanding of the social world to the reading of the text, her/his own cultural knowledge to the 'learning' situation.

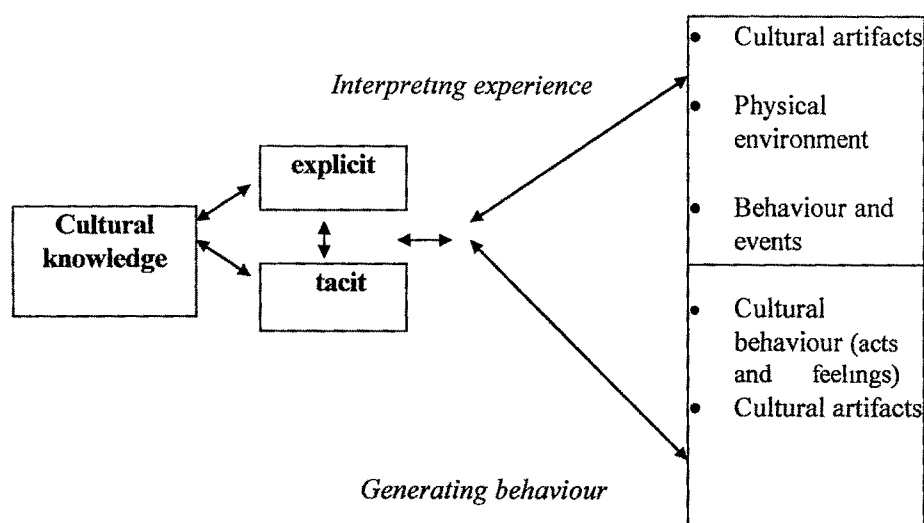
It is important to recognise that cultural knowledge is not merely an uncontested system of 'received structures'. There are complex interactions at the level of interpretation and action between cultural systems and the participants who 'create' it. An 'equilibrium' theory of culture would, as scholars working in 'newer' anthropological traditions, tend to minimise the 'agency' of participants, and legitimate dominant, and often regressive forms of cultural control (Bruner: 1986; Geertz: 1973; for a review of ethnography and social analysis see Rosaldo: 1989).

Figure 3.1, which is adapted from Spradley(1980), uses his schema for representing cultural knowledge, introduces two-way interaction between the different elements in recognition of the interplay between structure and agency.

Enquiry into the 'map of meanings' generated through social experiences within any culture rests on what Blumer identifies as the premises of social interactionist theory: 1) human beings acts towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; 2) the meanings of such things is derived from, or arise out of, the social interaction

that one has with one's fellows[sic]; and 3) meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretive process used by the person dealing with the thing he [sic] encounters. (Blumer: 1969: 2).

**Figure 3.1 'Cultural knowledge'**



### 3.2 The importance of data in ethnography

Ethnographic research and analysis is primarily data-driven. The data collected during school and classroom-based fieldwork generates conceptual and analytic categories which serve as a template for analysis and interpretation, and even theory-building. Unlike quantitative research—such as survey and experimental research—qualitative researchers do not (and make utmost attempts not to) impose pre-structured categories on their informants; neither do they make extrapolations from responses made in artificial settings. Qualitative research, on the contrary, aims to uncover the complex and often contradictory relationships between attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. It gives theoretical 'space' to individual cognition and social interaction of subjects in the symbolic constructions in everyday life.

Ethnographic methods are pluralistic in that they aim to collect data from as many sources in the natural setting as possible. Fieldnotes provide the basis for 'thick description' of the setting being studied. Although there are variations in the degree of participation, it

involves immersion in the culture, enabling the researcher to obtain, within limits, an insider's view of everyday reality. In this sense, participant observation is not 'a particular research technique but a mode of "being" in the world characteristic of researchers' (Atkinson and Hammersley:1994).

The above discussion points to the significance of *inference* in an ethnographic study. This brings up two vital issues: the first relates to the reliability and validity of data; the second crucial issue relates to the role of the researcher in the study. The following section discusses these issues.

### **3.2.1 Reliability and validity of ethnographic data**

Ethnographic research differs from the more widespread quantitative techniques in its reliance on subjectivity as a powerful tool to understand meaning. An important precondition for carrying out this research is related to the suspension of judgements about *how* a phenomenon occurs, although, as Malinowski had emphasised, there should be some sense of 'foreshadowed problems' arising from a knowledge of theory and research in the area. Discovery, rather than verification, is the objective of ethnographic research.

This brings up the question of reliability and validity of the data. What is the nature of data in such a study? In observation, the data consists of the researcher's lengthy fieldnotes. While based on data collected through different qualitative techniques, these notes also bear the imprimatur of the individual researcher.

Since the data of the ethnographer is not subject to public scrutiny, it becomes important to apply certain reliability checks throughout the course of the study. One of these is exposure to training in systematic observation. Secondly, there is a need to continuously evaluate the validity of the data in the field by setting up tentative hypotheses and testing these out before going ahead with further observations. The construction of 'operational models' based on *informants'* interpretations is crucial in these checks. These tentative models are then checked with the researchers' own interpretations of the phenomena during the study; *constant validity* checks are used. These checks are used to account for: 1) discrepancies and inconsistencies; 2) alternative explanations; 3) informants' interpretations against more

‘objective’ criteria like documents, etc; 4) fitting in extreme cases within the framework. (Bernard: 1994: 361-2).

Reliability of the data can thus be enhanced by longer exposure in the field, thereby allowing for cross-checking of data. *Triangulation*, involving multiple sources of data to obtain evidence on a particular phenomenon, can be used. In triangulation, observational data is checked with data from interviews, documents, biographies, etc. to be able to enhance understanding of particular events or informants’ interpretations of situations encountered in the study. Triangulation not only furnishes verification of cross-source data, but helps in categorising and classifying similarities and identifying sources of differences and discrepancies.

A related issue is that of *generalisability* of findings. In qualitative research, and particularly ethnographic research, no claims are made to generalise inferences from the data in particular settings to other similar settings. However, certain conclusions can be applied to these settings in the form of hypotheses, constituting a point of departure for other research in similar settings. According to Bruner (1986), it is *verisimilitude*, rather than generalisation, that such research can hope to achieve. By showing how meanings are created in certain educational settings, it is possible to generate theory on the basis of ‘likenesses’ – including differences and deviations – in others. Ethnographic research then generates ‘grounded theory’, as distinguished from and against universalised theory (Strauss and Corbin: 1994 ).

### 3.3 Situating the present study

The next section deals with the manner in which the present study was conceptualised and how the choice of methods flowed from the conceptual framework. The primary research concern underlying the present study was to examine the processes underlying the ‘learning’ of gender in primary school. The specific questions sought to be addressed were: *What are the processes underlying the construction of gender in primary schools? How do children ‘read’ these processes in relation to their understandings of gender through social experiences outside the school?* The rationale underlying these questions were informed by an understanding that

- 1) there have been few studies on school socialisation in India although schools were acknowledged as major sites of identity formation in children;
- 2) although gender has been examined in the case of adults ( within the area of women's studies), and in studies of child socialisation in communities, no systematic study has been done on gender and school children;
- 3) primary school children – and particularly those who belong to the category classified in the socialisation literature as 'late childhood' was an understudied area in India;
- 4) apart from studies on gender bias and stereotyping in school textbooks, it was not clear where and how the larger 'project' of education positioned children, particularly with respect to gender, and
- 5) it is important to understand how processes of primary socialisation into gender roles articulated with school-based processes.

To carry out a study based on these questions necessitated inquiring into the 'meaning-structures' of teachers and children. These meaning-structures expressed, at the cognitive and affective levels, responses to situations calling for normative judgements to be made about individual and collective identity. It was expected that more in-depth approaches, examining meanings within specific contexts, would enable a better 'capturing' of the complexity of school processes through which children 'learn' gender. Since an objective of the study was to understand the normative interpretations of children, it was necessary to select children of an age-group where these interpretations could be articulated in a somewhat reliable manner. Further, it was assumed that age was critical to the social construction of gender identity, and therefore children representing the phase of 'late childhood' or 'pre-puberty', i.e. before the regulated entrenchment of accepted gender roles, was of greater research interest. Children of Class 4, representing the age group of 9 to 12 years, were selected for the study.

### **3.4 Design of the study**

The rationale underlying the design of the study stemmed from three interrelated needs: 1) to provide exposure to the techniques of ethnographic research through review of the literature; 2) acquaintance with ethnographic methods of participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured and unstructured interviews; and 3) continuous analysis through the

course of the study so as to refine categories of analysis. The study primarily owes its design to the nature of data, where and in what form the data could be 'accessed', and how it could be used to provide a 'thick description' of events.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the data of the present study are primarily qualitative in nature, discerning patterns of practices within the school which maintain gender divisions (the gender 'code'), rationales (both explicit and implicit) for maintenance of these practices and their relation to prevailing gender ideologies, teachers' verbal and non-verbal patterns of communication with children, and children's responses to the contexts engendered by all of the above, as well as their own subjective 'readings' of these contexts. The data, therefore, were to be found in everyday school practices and communication among social actors in the school situation, namely, teachers and students. To arrive at a thick description of events necessitated looking at 'surface structures' of school contexts, such as organisational arrangements and work assignment to children, as well as the 'deep structures' – the rationales for creation of such contexts and their articulation with contexts outside of the school setting. Subjectivity comes into play here and hence the need for exploring processes of individual and collective understanding in relation to the wider contexts of the construction of gender in Indian society. Built into the design of the study was verification and cross-checking of data at all stages so as to maintain systematicity in terms of identification, collection, analysis and reporting, in the interest of thick description.

### **Exploratory Phase (Phase I)**

Prior to the actual study, a month was spent in a private primary school. Although this school had initially been selected as the field-site, it was clear within the first few days of observation that, given constraints of space and changes in school leadership, the school would not be a feasible site for the entire study. The period in this school was treated as a 'pilot' or exploratory phase, in which observational skills were honed, and preliminary categories of observation were explored.

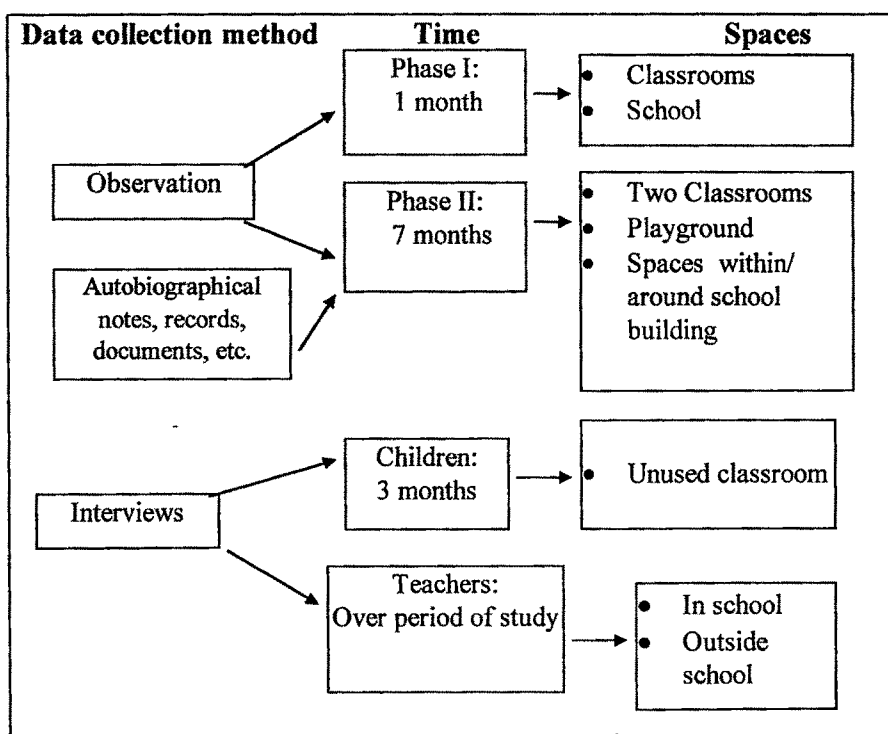
Details relating to this phase of the research are given in Chapter 4 (Section 4.1.1). This stage of the research enabled an understanding of preliminary categories of observation.



Since the school catered to lower-middle-class and poor students, it was possible to discern distinct relationships between social class and gender as expressed through teachers' verbal and non-verbal communication patterns in the classroom. The period of observation in this school also revealed the central position of 'discipline' as a category of analysis and its relationship to the structuring of patterns of gender division and separation. Normative discourses relating to 'proper' conduct for girls and boys in the school, as well as the 'value' attached to formal education, its relationship to the social class and gender of students were also seen to be a critical constituent of the 'hidden curriculum'.

The design of the study is represented schematically in Figure 3.2.

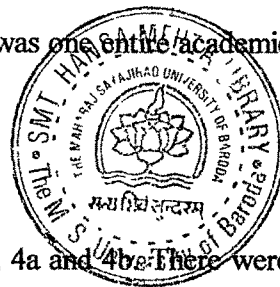
**Figure 3.2 Design of the study**



### 3.5 Collection of data

The data for the study were collected using ethnographic methods. These included observations, interviews, children's biographical notes and artifacts like records of tests,

and notes written by children in the class. The period of the study was one entire academic year in a municipal primary school of Baroda city.



### 3.5.1 Observation

This was done principally in two sections of Class 4 of the school, 4a and 4b. There were 123 children in both these classes. These classes were observed over one academic year, from July 1994 to May 1995. In addition to observing classroom processes, observations were also done in other 'social spaces' of the school like the playground, corridors, principal's office, and teachers' recess-time and other interactions. There was constant interaction with the children, as well as with the teachers, of 4a and 4b throughout the period of study. Interactions with teachers also took place in social interactions outside the school; as we got to know each other better, there were more such occasions for interaction.

Notes were taken during observation in the school every day, and these were elaborated on the same day. At this stage, there was fleshing out of the events by including nuance and texture which time did not permit during note-taking in the school. Periodically, with the passing of time, analytic memos and marginal notes were added to the fieldnotes. There are simultaneous events occurring in everyday school life, and often these events are relational and conditional. To facilitate analysis, it was necessary to classify these events in some sequential order. Each day's observation was therefore broken down into a series of *episodes*; each episode relating to a distinct theme in the total observation for the day.

From observational fieldnotes, certain preliminary themes emerged. These were then coded thematically. Attention was paid to

- 1) the *context of interaction*: social space within which interaction took place (classroom, playground, corridor); subject period; whether the teacher was present or not; what was the ambience within the social space (precedents and antecedents of the event); *where* interaction occurred (back/front of classroom; which part of playground);
- 2) the *referents of interaction*: classroom discipline, examination-related, curriculum-centred;

- 3) the *social actors* involved in the interaction: student-student (same/opposite gender); student-teacher (same/opposite gender); teacher-teacher;
- 4) the *nature of interaction*: formal/informal; normative and evaluative statements; labelling and stereotyping (social and gender); verbal/non-verbal; curricular (relating to specific subjects); examination-centred.

Description of the observational phase of the study is given in Chapter 4.

### 3.5.2 Interviews

Since the number of children in the classes was large, it took the first two months of being in the school before I could remember them by their names. Once this had been achieved, the observations became more meaningful since the children were no longer anonymous 'social actors'. Interviews were conducted towards the end of the study, between February 1995 and May 1995. Conducting the interviews at this time meant that the children and I could share some common understanding of the events that had occurred over the preceding months. The interviews were done individually, and were loosely structured around a few key themes. These broadly related to:

- 1) their '*backgrounds*' : how many members in the family, how many siblings, where they came from (state, village), their experience of school in the village; what their fathers and mothers 'did' (occupational background); where they lived, what their daily routines were, neighbourhood life (friends, games, etc.)
- 2) *experience of school*: which subjects they liked, who their friends were, what games they liked to play, which teachers they liked.
- 3) *experience of classroom life*: their friends, the teacher, their comments on specific episodes in 'lessons' or relating to the behaviours of classmates, their duties and responsibilities, examinations.
- 4) *personal aspirations*: what they wanted to be, their reasons, reactions in the family.

The interviews were conducted on an individual basis, in an unused classroom opposite the classrooms of 4a and 4b. They were recorded as notes and elaborated upon on the same day. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes to 1 hour.

The total number of observations and interviews are presented in Tables 3.1 and 3.2.

**Table 3.1 No. of observations (group)**

	4a	4b	Playground	Other social spaces
No. of observations	25	34	7	20

**Total: 86**

**Table 3.2 Interviews with children (individual)**

	Girls	Boys	Total
4a	30	25	55
4b	31	26	57
Total	61	51	112

### **3.5.3 Biographical notes and test records**

In the initial design of the study, children's biographical notes were intended to be used more thoroughly in understanding children's subjective interpretations of gender. As it turned out, however, gathering of these 'biographies' in both classrooms only served to function as an interactional context set up by me as a researcher which provided for informal interactions with the children. Since these sessions were held in the early stages of the study, it was possible to establish a relationship with the children outside of my status as an 'observer'. Further, these notes permitted an understanding of the 'homogenous' class as made up of distinct individuals, with their own distinctive subjectivities. Problems with the notes themselves are outlined in Section 3.7. Nonetheless, the exercise of attempting to gather them was useful, in terms of the discussions in the classroom.

Test records were also gathered, largely to cross-check data gathered from observations and interviews. They were not primary to the analysis. However, they served a useful function in terms of checking the justification for teachers' evaluative statements

regarding academic achievement of children and gender stereotyping of aptitude in certain subject areas (such as : ‘All the girls are weak in Mathematics’). Since the study covered the period of one academic year, knowledge of how the children were doing in the tests and examinations lent a credibility to judgements about the validity of teachers’ academic labelling, as well as the children’s judgements of themselves and others about ‘studies’.

### **3.6 Coding the data**

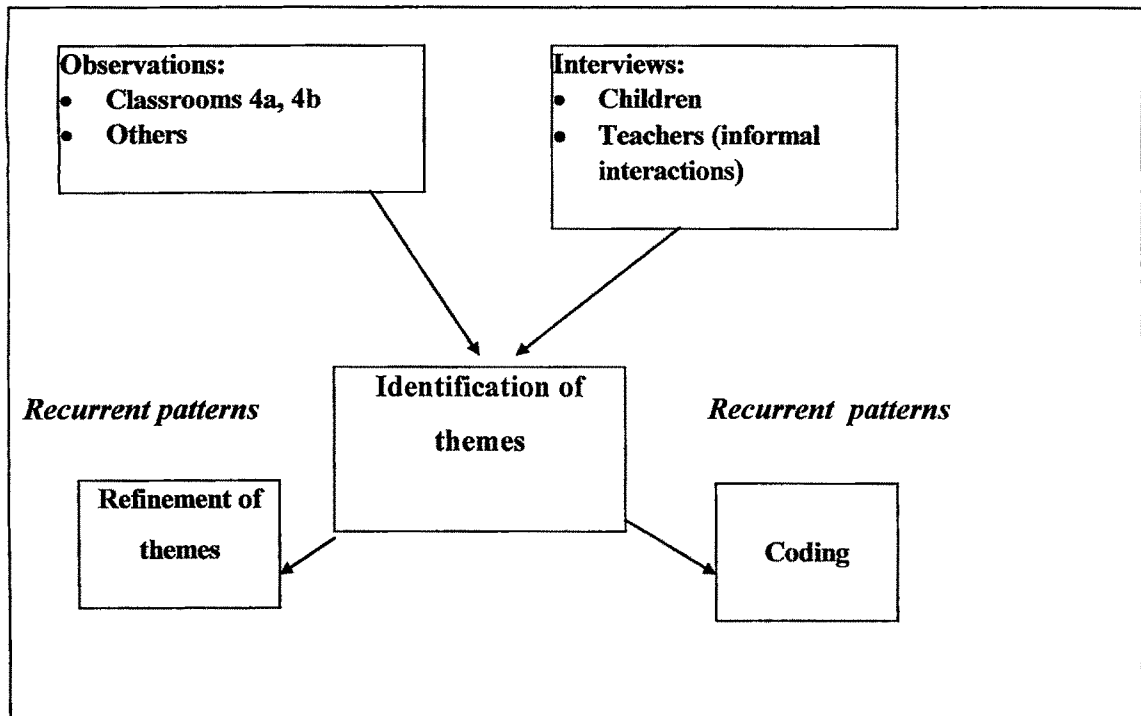
Over the duration of the study, data from all sources were coded using preliminary coding categories developed during the course of fieldwork. After the study was over, and considerable time had been spent reading related literature to understand and interpret the data meaningfully, data from different sources were triangulated to understand how these preliminary categories could be grouped and simplified. Recurrent patterns in the data were identified which appeared to 1) represent commonality across the sources and 2) represent differences. The data were then re-examined using these patterns as a ‘filter’. The final coding of the data was based on the themes identified.

Figures 3.3 and 3.4 represent the stages described in this section. Coding of the data was followed by grouping the emergent themes, which were then analysed. The analysis of the data is presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

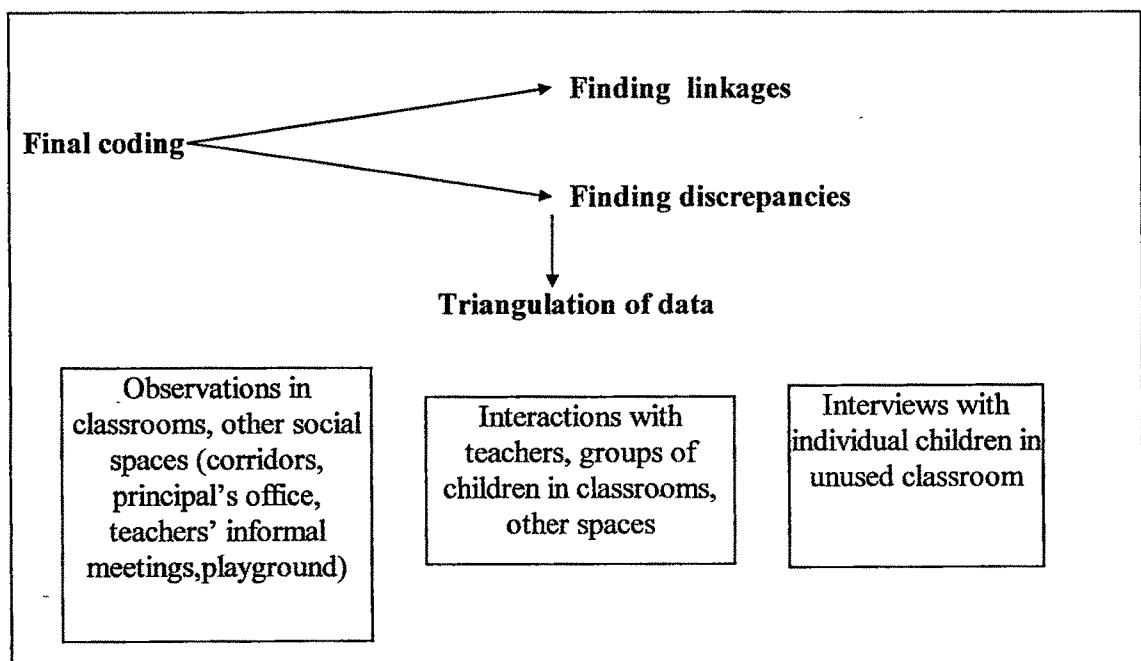
### **3.7 Challenges of ethnographic fieldwork in school settings**

The primary aim of ethnographic research and analysis is to arrive at a *holistic* understanding of the context within which the reality attempted to be examined is shaped. Its essentially interpretative framework and ‘circles within circles’ methodology makes ethnography both exciting and challenging as a research method to study classroom processes. Participant observation of classrooms offers valuable insights into the nature of social interactions between teachers and children, both in the direct context of curricular transaction and the embedded contexts of social learning of children. Although I was not strictly a ‘participant’ in the process –being neither a teacher nor a student (this ambiguous

**Figure 3.3 Coding the data**



**Figure 3. 4 Process of final coding for analysis**



position is shared by many researchers engaged in classroom-based observation), my observational experience helped me to contextualise classroom learning within a broad canvas covering the tacit and explicit cultural knowledge shared by teachers and students in the school. Interviews and biographies helped to uncover personal motivations and orientation towards learning and education. Documents like attendance records and teacher reports on student performance were used to validate inferences made from the observations. Since the period of fieldwork was fairly long, there was ample scope for triangulating data.

However, there were certain challenges encountered in data collection, which need mention in a methodology chapter of the thesis, since they are related to the face validity of the data. These problems appear to relate to the social context within which formalised teaching and learning take place in Indian schools. They also relate to the role of the researcher in the school, and nature of field relations.

## **Teachers**

### **1 *On curriculum and curricular practice***

A major problem with teacher's responses on curriculum-related issues was their inadequate and often inarticulate reflection on individual curricular practice. Curriculum transaction followed the invariant sequential formula of lesson introduction, followed by reading aloud the lesson (for languages and environment science), writing questions and answers on the board and correction of books. There was no deviation from this scheme, perhaps because there is no institutional mechanism to deal with deviations: the 'lesson plan diary' is designed to solely give a time-frame within which lessons are to be completed, and mirrored the teaching 'format'.

### **2 *On students' evaluation***

Teachers' perceptions of students were coloured by their individual 'profiles' of in/discipline in the classrooms, good handwriting, neat presentation and attempts to 'do better'. Diagnosis of individual learning interests and difficulties of students was found to be problematic for teachers. This could be related to their expectation of unique 'right answers' as given in the textbooks.

### 3 *On their 'role'*

By and large the teachers felt satisfied by their work. Teachers' perceptions of this 'work' focussed on completion of the 'prescribed' course and maintenance of classroom discipline. As government school teachers, they were expected to carry out a range of 'non-school' duties (such as census-related work, voters' list preparation, centralised book distribution, etc.) , which they viewed as distractions. Significantly, the in-service courses held periodically by the School Board were also perceived by them as such.

#### **Children**

The lack of true literacy skills made collection of written biographies exceedingly difficult. Children were unable to give full rein to self-expression through writing. The biographical notes collected mirrored teacher and 'official curriculum' expectations: without exception they were based on a lesson from the language textbook. This lesson was used by the teachers to frame a 'story-skeleton' which the children were expected to use as a basis for an essay on 'my family'. All the children ended the biographical notes submitted to me with the line: A small family is a happy family (!).

Apart from the overriding presence of the official curriculum which curtailed individual self-expression, most children (around 100 out of 123) were severely handicapped by the inability to write itself. Basic literacy skills, it appears, are blunted by the emphasis on copying from the blackboard and textbooks. Several children told me they could write from the board but not from the 'mind'.

The official curriculum of textbooks looms large over children's perceptions of their individual learning and education in general. Questions about career aspirations, for instance, revealed a hesitation to break away from the rhetoric of textbook language: teachers help illiterates learn, doctors minister to the poor, and engineers build machines and factories. The gender coding of textbooks is also reflected in children's responses. It was only with close interaction and continuous reflection of how questions were posed to children that they were able to express non-stereotypical views on their student life, future aspirations and difficulties in specific subjects.



The marginal position of educational research and researchers to actual everyday school practice and their presuppositions about the 'ideals' of this practice make 'entrée' for the ethnographic researcher difficult in the school and classroom setting. Teachers are wary of being 'watched' by an adult observer, and expect critical evaluation as in 'supervision'. A preliminary task in gaining the trust of teachers during the fieldwork was to rupture this skewed power relationship. However it still remained a difficult exercise to obtain teachers' perceptions on their practices in the classroom, all of which had to be inferred and cross-checked with their behaviour in the classroom and their other interactions with me.