**Participant Observation in the Context of Education**

**Learning to labour**

Learning to Labour by Paul Willis (1977) is an ethnographic study of twelve working class ‘lads’ from a school in Birmingham conducted between 1972 and 1975. He spent a total of 18 months observing the lads in school and then a further 6 months following them into work. The study aimed to uncover the question of how and why “working class kids get working class jobs” (1977: 1) using a wide range of qualitative research methodologies from interviews, group discussions to participant observation, aiming to understand participants’ actions from the participants’ point of view in everyday contexts.

**Sampling**

Willis concentrated on a particular boy’s group in a non-selective secondary school in the Midlands, who called themselves ‘lads’. They were all white, although the school also contained many pupils from West Indian and Asian backgrounds. The school population was approximately 600, and the school was predominantly working class in intake. He states that the main reasons why he selected this school was because it was the typical type of school attended by working class pupils.

**Data Collection**

Willis attended all school classes, options (leisure activities) and career classes which took place at various times. He also spoke to parents of the 12 ‘lads’, senior masters of the school, and main junior teachers as well as careers officers in contact with the concerned ‘lads’. He also followed these 12 ‘lads’ into work for 6 months. He also made extensive use of [unstructured interviews](https://revisesociology.com/2016/01/23/interviews-in-social-research-advantages-and-disadvantages/). Participant observation allowed Willis to immerse himself into the social settings of the lads and gave him the opportunity to ask the lads (typically open) questions about their behaviour that day or the night before, encouraging them to explain themselves in their own words…which included detailed accounts of the lads fighting, getting into trouble with teachers, bunking lessons, setting off fire extinguishers for fun and vandalising a coach on a school trip.

**Findings**

One of Willis’ most important findings was that the lads were completely uninterested in school – they saw the whole point of school as ‘having a laff’ rather than trying to get qualifications. Their approach to school was to survive it, to do as little work as possible, and to have as much fun as possible by pushing the boundaries of authority and bunking as much as they could. The reason they didn’t value education is because they anticipated getting factory jobs which didn’t require any formal qualifications. They saw school as a ‘bit cissy’ and for middle class kids. Willis does not include an account of how he approached the ‘lads’ and built rapport with them. However considering the responses of the ‘lads’ during discussions and interviews, seeing that the ‘lads’ openly talk about their views and experiences and allow access to work at a later stage of the research, Willis seems to have built rapport effectively.

**Practical Issues with Learning to Labour**

* The research was very time consuming – 2 years of research and then a further 2 years to write up the results.
* It would be very difficult to repeat this research today given that it would be harder to gain access to schools (also see reliability)
* Funding would also probably be out of the question today given the time taken and small sample size.

**Ethical Issues with Learning to Labour**

* An ethical strength of the research is that it is giving the lads a voice – these are lads who are normally ‘talked about’ as problems, and don’t effectively have a voice.
* An ethical weakness is that Willis witnessed the lads getting into fights, their Racism and Homophobia, as well as them vandalising school property but did nothing about it.
* A second ethical weakness is the issue of confidentiality – with such a small sample size, it would be relatively easy for people who knew them to guess which lads Willis had been focusing on.

**Theoretical Issues with Learning to Labour**

* Validity is widely regarded as being excellent because of the unstructured, open ended nature of the research allowing Willis to sensitively push the lads into giving in-depth explanations of their world view.
* Critics have tried to argue that the fact he was obviously a researcher, and an adult, may have meant the lads played up, but he counters this by saying that no one can put on act for 2 years, at some point you have to relax and be yourself.
* Something which may undermined the validity is Willis’ interpretation of the data – he could have selected aspects of the immense amount of data he had to support his biased opinion of the boys.
* Representativeness is poor – because the sample size is only 12, and they are only white boys.
* Reliability is low – It is very difficult to repeat this research for the reasons mentioned under practical factors.

https://revisesociology.com/2016/01/25/learning-to-labour-by-paul-willis-summary-and-evaluation-of-research-methods/