F2F Recursive Interview Nadia and Gabriel Woolf 09.10.2014

I drove to London to stay in Tufnell Park with friends, leaving my bag there and changing into a dress for the journey and interview. I travelled to Paddington to get the train to Bristol. There had been serious signalling problems on First Great Western so I was a bit anxious but it was ok, only trains to Wales had been cancelled. My train left a little late but at least it left. We arrived in Bristol about 15 minutes late so I rang from the line waiting for a taxi to say I was late. I got Kay on the phone, which I thought nothing about then. I had a very friendly chatty taxi driver who was asking what I was doing and we talked about the project. He’d been 12 years driving a taxi and was much happier than being an area manager which he’d been doing before.

I arrived at the house about 4.20pm and Gabriel let me in, looking very similar to when I’d last seen him in February, but a little bit taller. We went downstairs to the kitchen and lounge, where Kay was, who instantly made me a cup of tea. Then I asked if Nadia was here – ‘No’, said Kay, ‘Do you need her?’ ‘Yes’, I reply, ‘I’m doing the interview with her and Gabriel’. Kay became quite agitated about trying to get hold of Nadia, calling her mobile and commenting that she often doesn’t answer, and indeed she didn’t, so Kay went off looking for her. Fortunately they knew where she’d gone, which was to a local bike shop as they are getting a new bike for Ben (he wants a pink one, it’s his favourite colour). I felt rather bad about this, although I had explained things in my email. I chatted to Gabriel and set up the old laptop, and get out the audio equipment (Zoom) etc.

Luckily, Nadia returned quite soon, and ran down the stairs to greet me and apologise, saying she hadn’t really remembered what was in my email as it was a few weeks ago, and had assumed it was another meeting just with Gabriel. She got herself a cup of tea and we adjourned to the lounge upstairs as Kay was going to cook for the boys. Ben had come downstairs too and was already immersed in a book on the sofa. As usual, there seems to be time limits and Kay wanted to know how long we’re going to be as she was doing food for the boys. I said maybe about an hour, so she said, right – 5.30pm – it was about 4.40pm already so that was rather less than an hour and I was a bit concerned I’d have to hurry things along.

Upstairs I set up the laptop on the floor in front of the settee as there was no suitable table to put it on. We three sat on the settee, although Gabriel was on the floor a lot of the time, looking at the websites and trying to press things on the laptop with Nadia getting increasingly fed up with him doing and telling him to stop and leave it alone.

I had a bit if trouble with the Zoom. I was using the remote but at first it wouldn’t come on to show that it’s recording so I had to play around and turn it off and on and do a trial and then it seemed to be working OK. I was rather anxious as the playback doesn’t work on it so I can’t check the audio, but it said it was recording and the numbers go up so I just hoped it was. Because of this I didn’t turn it off at all during the interview, so all the narratives from the websites are on there, which the transcriber can skip over. (This was also the case with the other interview.)

I explained a bit about the project to Gabriel, saying that I’d come and talked to his mum when she was pregnant with him, and then again the following year. I told him that I’d also talked to Kay a few times and that another of our research team, Rachel, had talked with both his grannies. I asked him if he knew anything about his birth and he looked blank, but Nadia told him that he did know and that he’d been already told about it, that he wouldn’t come out easily so they had to do something special and someone had filmed it. I then read out some of a quote from Nadia’s 2nd interview about the birthing pool, which he didn’t know about. Then I read a quote from Kay in which she talks about her concern if he’d been a girl or a child that wanted a Barbie, and that she couldn’t cope with that. They laughed. Gabriel doesn’t speak very much, and Nadia tends to fill in a bit for him, or when I try to elicit an opinion from him he tends to agree with me rather than saying anything himself. I don’t know if he’d be more forthcoming if Nadia wasn’t there.

Then we go on to the 2008 Day in the Life and I put it up on the laptop and we watched it all together. Nadia hasn’t really seen this properly before because she said her computer wouldn’t load it. I said that it does need Adobe Flash but she thought she had that, so we don’t know why. She really liked this site and was reminiscing about the Baby Gym etc. I took the opportunity to explain to Gabriel about anonymisation and what it meant, and how we were protecting identities because this was going to be public. We also talked about pseudonyms and I told him he was ‘Gabriel’ which he was a bit nonplussed about, and Nadia told him that she was ‘Nadia’, and that Ema (what they call Kay) was called ‘Kay’. In the DIL Gabriel was asking who ‘Sally’ and her son were and Nadia explained that they were the (pseudonyms of the) people they met to go to baby Gym with. He didn’t seem to remember them at all which made me think that they no longer see each other. Gabriel sometimes seemed more concerned with moving the cursor around and moving the screen on than the actual content, whereas Nadia was totally involved and pointing out herself and him (back views) sitting in the Gym. I asked Gabriel if he liked it and he said he did. I asked how he thought he’d changed, and he just said that he’d got bigger, and he didn’t go to baby Gym anymore, but nothing more personal.

We then moved on to the F2F Project, and the Favourites site. Nadia couldn’t believe that it was nearly a year since this had been done. She really liked this one too, and Gabriel was involved in this, moving the cursor around (it’s a panoramic shot of the downstairs lounge) and clicking on his toys and listening to his words. There’s rather a lot of dialogue going on in several of these (e.g. where he explains in detail how to play a game etc.) so we left out a couple of toys and truncated another. Gabriel said he was happy with his voice, it was not a problem listening to himself, he just thought it was a bit funny to hear it (check this). I asked him if he still played with the same toys and he thought and said he did. I asked if he had gone on to also use anything like an iPad or something digital and he said ‘Not allowed’, and looked meaningfully at Nadia, who remembered that I’d asked the same thing at the DIL in February and got the same answer. Nadia was intrigued by the different tablecloths featuring on the living room table in the various interviews. It was yellow way back, then check for the first 2 of this part, and now there’s a new spotted one that they brought back from France this summer. So tablecloths are documenting the passing of time for her!

Then we went on to the 2014 Day in the Life, which Nadia was very interested in as she said that parents don’t get to see what the school day is like. She said she had managed to get this website up but hadn’t really been through it, but she recognised the big clock in the centre. We went through all of this, and Nadia spotted some errors, for example I had said that the boy next door went to school with us, whereas it was in fact a girl (but with her hood up I had mistaken her for a boy), also that I had said that Kay unusually was coming to school, whereas she does it regularly.

During the DIL Nadia was shocked that the children were watching cartoons during wet play, and again during the wet lunchtime. Gabriel expressed surprise at some of the times. E.g. the afternoon time of2.30 but I think they are correct. Maybe his sense of time is not the same as real time? We wondered if we would need any permission from Mr D the teacher, as his voice comes over on several occasions. Nadia thought possibly not as he was an easy-going person, and I think I did ask him when I was there. I asked about the DIL showing differences in time, pace and noise over the school day but Gabriel wasn’t forthcoming and just agreed with what I said. I think it’s a bit hard for him to form opinions on this.

I explained about the Mass Observation Archive at Sussex University (‘Curating Childhoods’) and they are happy to be involved. Nadia was enthusiastic about the possibility of a workshop in Brighton. Gabriel asked if he could come too and I said I certainly thought so as it’s about childhood, and also the Department doing this research is involved with children and youth.

I left the consent form for all the F2F interviews and website with Nadia to fill in and send back to me.

I asked them how it felt to be in the Motherhood project for all these years, and had Gabriel felt special at all. He didn’t really think so but Nadia was very enthusiastic and said that she talked to friends about it when interviews were coming up and how nice it was to have this record of everything. She also pointed out to me and Gabriel the photo that the professional photographer had taken of them for the Photo Exhibition when Gabriel was a baby. It sits on the mantelpiece in a silver frame.

I gave them the vouchers in a thank you card, and also gave a bag of chocolate coins to Gabriel, which he was told to share with Ben. I then took a few photos of all four of them for myself. I left my home address and contact numbers for them to send back the consent form, and also for any future communications. We said that we may not see each other again, but they said if I was ever in Bristol, to come for coffee or even to stay, and I said they must contact me if they were ever going to be in Suffolk. Gabriel and I had a hug goodbye, also Nadia and me, but not saying goodbye as we are sure we will see each other again at some point. She had very sweetly made me a cheese sandwich to take on the train.

Kay kindly gave me a lift to the station. She’s not working at the moment, and enjoying this, although she is on the lookout for a suitable job. I asked after her mother and she said she is going strong at 86, they had been for a week together in Sorrento recently, and she’s soon off to Spain for a month, and then Tenerife, so travelling as much as ever. Nadia’s parents are also well, and retired now, doing ‘academic things’ like learning Italian. I asked her about the boys’ biological father, and she said that they do see him (his father lives in Bristol) and that he was here at the moment, touring with a famous band (Jools Holland), so they will be seeing him and he takes them out etc. They call him by his name (Richard) and they know that ‘he helped Mummy have a baby’.

At the station I’d just missed the 6.30 train but instead of waiting for the 7.30pm one, I got on a train to Bristol Parkway and picked up the Paddington train from there, so I was in London at 8.45pm instead of 9.15pm, and from there back to Tufnell Park.

In retrospect I wonder if there would have been any difference if I had shown Gabriel the websites and talked to him on his own. Although Nadia certainly doesn’t inhibit him, as she’s so gentle and encouraging, he did look to her sometimes when I was asking him things, and tended to force me to put words to him which he could then simply agree with, so I didn’t really know if that’s what he thought. He was so talkative about his favourite toys and how they all worked, but I know it’s harder if we’re asking his opinions on other things.