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Locked out: researching destinations and outcomes for excluded pupils

You simply go out and shut the door
without thinking. And when you look back
at what you've done
it's too late. If this sounds
like the story of a life, okay.

Raymond Carver, 'Locking Yourself Out, Then Trying to Get Back In', *All of Us*, The Collected Poems, The Harvill Press, London, 1996

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to tell the story of a research project. It is a story about madness in method and method in madness, a story of frustration and disenchantment, breaking and entering, estrangement and minor epiphanies. In short, it is a minor motion picture about All of Us. It takes a look at what happens when a team of researchers (and young people who have been permanently excluded from school) casually lock themselves out, look back at what they have done and think ruefully that this sounds like the story of a life.

The problem with this apparently benign undertaking (telling the story of a research project) is that this is a story that cannot be told, at least not by following the conventions of educational research. This is because it evades the conventional epistemologies of social science, which imply that there is a stable reality out there, the contours of which will be clearly discernable to conscientious and diligent researchers. The article is also concerned with the central role played by metaphor and allegory in helping us to understand and describe complex social realities, particularly those relating to 'troubled and troublesome' young people (McCluskey *et al*, 2004).

The article will explore how the key phrases and assumptions embedded within the specification framed the study — and to some extent the researchers; and how what appeared to be logistical problems relating to the negotiation of access were in fact significant research 'findings'. It is located within a growing body of scholarly activity that has raised important questions about the epistemological bases of educational research, and about the representation of complex social realities (Smith, 2007; Law, 2003; 2004; Law and Singleton, 2002; Law and Hetherington, 1998; Griffiths and Macleod, 2008).

About the project

The aim of the project as set out in the research specification was 'to identify and explore the routes, destinations and outcomes of young people who have been permanently excluded from a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) or a special school for pupils with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD)'. It was commissioned in October 2006 by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families - DCSF) in response to a specific recommendation in the report of the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline [The Steer Report]

(DfESa, 2005). The report had raised serious concerns about the quality of educational provision for young people with BESD (DfESa, 2005, p 9). The report recognised that ‘there are occasions when it is necessary to exclude pupils from a PRU or a BESD special school (including residential schools)’, but questions were raised about ‘what alternative forms of education are available for these most vulnerable pupils, particularly in smaller authorities that may only have one PRU’ (DfESa, 2005, p 57).

Although the initial focus was on pupils with BESD, the research team renegotiated the terms of reference before the research began. It was agreed that the focus would be on a group of 30 young people who had been permanently excluded from *any* type of special school, not just those that provided specifically for young people described as having BESD. This was to ensure that no one was excluded from the study due to the vagaries of placement.

The project began in October 2006, and was conducted in three Government Office Regions (GORs): Inner and Outer London, the South East and the North West. These regions were selected on the basis of the number of permanent exclusions detailed in the latest available statistics.¹ The aim was to identify a group of thirty young people who had been permanently excluded from a PRU or special school during the school year 2005-06; and to track their trajectories over a three-year period, with a view to providing a detailed account of the types of provision they encountered post-exclusion, and determining the extent to which this provision was meeting their current needs. In order to achieve these aims (and indeed in order to secure the research contract in the first place), we employed the tried-and-tested methods of social research: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. We also worked to established protocols in respect of negotiating access through a third party (Social Research Association, 2003).

The research design comprised two main phases. During the first phase, permission to conduct the research was sought from the Directors of Children’s Services in the local authorities concerned. The Directors were also asked to provide details of the head of the Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) Service, who would act as an initial point of contact for the research team. Questionnaires were then sent to all special schools (634) and PRUs (183) in the three selected GORs. The Department provided the database of special schools and PRUs. Respondents (usually the head of the special school or PRU) were requested to provide some background information on any pupils permanently excluded during the reference period (school year 2005-06): namely, the date of birth of any young person permanently excluded in 2005-06; gender; ethnic background; English as an additional language (EAL); free school meal entitlement (FSME); postcode of main place of residence; any relevant diagnostic information, for example, whether they were considered to have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), or Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD); the date upon which the young person had first attended the provision; and, finally, the date on which

¹ Permanent and Fixed Period Exclusions from Schools and Exclusion Appeals in England, 2004-05.

they had been permanently excluded. Respondents were also asked to state briefly the reason for the young person's permanent exclusion from that facility.

In order to comply with data protection legislation, respondents were requested not to disclose to the research team the names of any young people who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. According to the research protocol agreed with the Department, the young person's name would only be revealed when written opt-in consent had been received. In order to maintain confidentiality, it was agreed that access to the young person would be negotiated through a known and trusted third party, for example, a social worker, a member of the local Youth Offending Team (YOT) or a Connexions PA. Once the sample of young people had been identified, the research would move into the next phase, during which it was our intention to interview at regular intervals four or five people in relation to each young person (e.g. their parents or carers, the head of the provision they were currently attending, their social worker, etc). It was anticipated that the interviews would take place in three 'waves', at intervals of between six and eight months.

This is the kind of sanitised account of the research process that is common in accounts of empirical research projects in the social sciences. Law (2003) considers typical accounts of research method as a form of hygiene, an exhortation to 'eat your epistemological greens', an attempt to 'lead the good research life'. Our collaboration during this challenging research project has led us to the view that leading the good research life entails an honest appraisal of the difficulties in fulfilling the research brief and in dealing with differing expectations within the research team. Furthermore, we take the view that such difficulties do not merely attend the research findings, but partly constitute them. This is reflected in the manner in which the study is reported here, at the interface between documentation and allegory.

Coming to terms

Perhaps the most striking dimension of this area of enquiry is the great diversity evident across both the provision available for pupils with BESD, and the pupil population. Cooper (2001) notes that PRUs are better viewed as an administrative category than a type of provision, and that there are significant variations along a number of dimensions, such as location, full or part-time placements, size, links with FE sector, etc. It is important to bear in mind that PRUs provide for the diverse needs of a very diverse population. The government guidelines for local authorities (DfES, 2005b) acknowledge that 'there is a wide mix of age range, ability and reasons for being in the PRU'. Children admitted to a PRU will include those who have been absent from school due to persistent ill health; those who suffer from school phobia or anxiety; young parents, or others in a caring role; and young people in public care. Some young people will attend a PRU only for a short period, for example, until a place is found in a mainstream school. Others will be there for much longer. Some will attend only rarely: others will attend more regularly than at any time in their school career. Moreover, as Vincent *et al*, 2007 point out, changes in other parts of the system, such as schemes for managed moves in order to

reduce exclusions can ‘relieve pressure for places in the PRU’ (p 286). It is likely that such developments will also have an impact on the nature of the PRU population over time.

There is a similar lack of homogeneity about schools for pupils with BESD. Cole *et al* (1998) report the complex histories of many of these establishments, which represent many different approaches to working with young people who manifest a wide range of behaviour. In sum, there is likely to be great variation between pupils in these schools and units. Not all pupils in BESD special schools will have BESD as their primary need, as placement is sometimes on the basis of practical issues, such as where there are vacancies, and upon financial constraints (Cole *et al*, 1998).

There are very few generalisations that can be made about pupils with the label BESD (or its predecessors). This is a direct consequence of a ‘lack of consensus as to what [BESD] actually is’, and ‘broad agreement in the literature that the definition of [BESD] is problematic’ (Macleod and Munn 2004, p.171; see also Visser, 2003, 2006; Cole, 2006; O’Mahony, 2006; McNab *et al*, 2007; Vincent *et al*, 2007). In their study of admissions and exclusions of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) Wilkin *et al* (2005) report that there was ‘considerable debate as to whether “behaviour difficulties” were “special educational needs” and difficulty in distinguishing between “naughtiness” and an inability to behave appropriately. The change in nomenclature from EBD to BESD in England perhaps reflects a growing concern with the ‘uninhibited, aggressive and antisocial behaviours from the externalising end of the spectrum’ (O’Mahoney, 2006, p 168). This is perhaps not surprising, given that these present the greatest challenge to the school system. It is worth noting, however, that the Practitioners’ Group on School Behaviour and Discipline found that the ‘vast majority of [cases of unsatisfactory behaviour] involve low level disruption in lessons’ (DfESa, 2005, p 6; see also Munn *et al*, 2004; Wilkin *et al*, 2006). The recent guidance on the education of children and young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (DCSF, 2008)² devotes several paragraphs to exploring various definitions of BESD, and the interaction between BESD and learning and/or communication difficulties. Vincent *et al* (2007) cite research evidence of a reciprocal link between learning difficulties and behaviour problems (Hamill and Boyd, 2002; Wearmouth, 2004). In sum, challenging, disruptive behaviour has been described as a ‘positive adaptive response’ to a situation or an environment that places communication demands upon young people that they are unable to meet.³ The DCSF guidance cites the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (2001), which describes BESD as ‘a learning difficulty where children and young people demonstrate features of emotional and behavioural difficulties such as: being withdrawn or isolated, disruptive and disturbing; being hyperactive and lacking concentration; having immature social skills; or presenting challenging behaviours arising from other complex needs’ (DCSF, 2008, paragraph 49) and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995

² Available at <http://www.sebda.org/>

³ Growing up talking in the ASBO age: vulnerability and change in the development of children’s language. Queen Margaret Professorial Lecture, 22 November 2006.

(DDA), which includes anyone with ‘a mental or physical impairment that has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities [memory or ability to concentrate, learn or understand]’ among those described as having a disability (DCSF, 2008, paragraph 51). Paragraph 54 makes explicit reference to ‘conduct disorders and hyperkinetic disorders (including attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD)’ and to ‘children and young people whose behavioural difficulties may be less obvious, for example, those with anxiety, who self-harm, have school phobia or depression, and those whose behaviour or emotional well-being are said to be deteriorating.’ It is implicit in this last extract that BESD can shade into mental illness, although the precise nature of the articulation between these two concepts is difficult to define (McNab *et al*, 2007). Whether a child or young person is considered to have BESD ‘depends on a range of factors, including the nature, frequency, persistence, severity and abnormality of the difficulties’ (paragraph 55). These terms are themselves open to interpretation, and thus represent an infinite regression of fractured meanings and unclear boundaries. The links between troubled and troublesome behaviour and incipient or established mental illness are of particular interest in the current policy context. Christine Davies, director of the recently established Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services has voiced renewed concern that ‘children’s mental health is really one of our challenges as a nation’.⁴

Locked out . . .

Coming to terms with complexity is a process that involves more than mapping a terminological quagmire. It has implications for the research process itself, and it is to these that we now turn.

The poet and short-story writer Raymond Carver also understood that the world is not clean and neat. Indeed he knew all too well that much of it is dank and unfamiliar, sudden, unpredictable and unreliable. However, as the sociologist John Law (2004) has observed, social science tends to make rather a mess of describing things that are ‘complex, diffuse and messy’, ‘things that slip and slide, or appear and disappear, change shape or don’t have much form at all’ (p 2).

In a study that is of particular relevance to the one reported above, Law and Singleton (2002) attempt to determine what happens to patients with alcoholic liver disease (ALD) and to ‘map the trajectories of typical patients’, thereby exploring the ‘cartographic’ dimensions of social research. The project was also commissioned because concern had been expressed about poor outcomes, only in this case it was for patients with ALD, and with what the medical profession refers to as ‘revolving door’ cases. These are patients who are discharged from hospital only to return time after time with the same set of symptoms. The more often the patient is re-admitted to hospital, the poorer the likely treatment outcome. In the case of the study reported here, the concern was with the poor outcomes experienced by young people who had been permanently excluded from a special school or a PRU. As with the patients with ALD, the more frequent the

⁴ *The Guardian* Society, Changes for the better? Wednesday, 22 October 2008, p 4.

experience of exclusion (fixed-term or permanent), the poorer the likely outcome for the young people concerned (Audit Commission, 1996; Ofsted, 2004). Law and Singleton (2002) documented substantial difficulties in ‘charting traffic flows’, and in tracking the movements of an individual through the health care system. These resonated with us, as they were very similar to the difficulties that we encountered in the initial stages of the research study reported here. We were dealing with an even more complex interface, in which education featured alongside health and social care.

Law and Singleton (2002) also discovered that ALD was ‘a slippery non-object’ rather than a stable category or disease type. They describe how they would start out by discussing ALD with clinicians only to discover that they were talking about a wide range of related phenomena: for example, liver disease in general; alcoholic cirrhosis; alcohol abuse; and alcoholism. Moreover, the more complex the object of study turned out to be, the greater the range of clinicians and other professionals it was necessary to interview: GPs, consultant gastro-enterologists, nurses (including specialist nurses in liver failure and cardiology), histologists, pathologists, cardiologists, social workers, psychiatrists, medical receptionists, counsellors and support workers working in the voluntary sector, etc. Law and Singleton concluded that what they were dealing with was ‘a language of compartments, and the communication between different compartments’. The ward sister would start to tell the researchers about patients’ trajectories, but at the same time about organisational and architectural divisions. By the same token we found ourselves interviewing — or gathering information on a less formal basis via email and telephone— a far broader range of respondents than we had originally anticipated. We spoke to Connexions PAs, YOT workers, headteachers, attendance officers, educational welfare officers, child psychologists, psychiatrists, college placement officers, voluntary sector providers, prison officers, school and college administrators, student counsellors, etc.

Law and Singleton (2002) use a cartographic image to represent the impact of this dual focus on trajectories and compartments:

It’s like a map of a country that highlights the regions and their boundaries, in addition to the roads, which as a result suddenly become less prominent, even though they may still be there. (p 7)

This illustrates the extent to which the notion of trajectory — and indeed the trajectory itself — become less clear and sets the researchers on a collision course. As we saw above, some of the concepts that were central to our research also turned out not to have a definite form, and to slip away from us every time we thought we had them in our grasp. For example, the ‘boundaries’ between ASD, ADHD and BESD turned out to be fluid. Many of the young people in our small sample had complex and multiple difficulties, only some of which came to the fore at a particular point in their histories. Other terms, such as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘permanent exclusion’ also turned out to be less self-evident than we had expected.

The view from the cutting room floor

We begin by considering in some detail the language used to frame the research enterprise. The choice of words here is significant, for one of the definitions of enterprise is ‘a design of which the execution is attempted’. The term also refers to the ‘disposition to engage in undertakings of difficulty, risk or danger.’ This should alert the reader to the fact that any attempt to provide an exhaustive account of what happens to a group of young people post-exclusion is likely to present particular challenges.

We begin by exploring the implications of the use of terms such as ‘routes, destinations and outcomes’ in the research specification. We shall attempt this on two levels, as the use of such language implies a particular conception of the research process as well as about a complex social world. In respect of the latter, the implication contained within the research specification is that there is a clearly identifiable route (say the M8, M1 or B9136⁵), a point of arrival (Sunnyside Newtown or HM Young Offender Institution) and a particular ‘outcome’. This latter term, i.e. what follows as a result or consequence of a particular course of action or series of interventions, is perhaps the most treacherous and slippery of all high roads. In the context of the study under consideration here, it can be taken to refer to the rehabilitation of a young offender; the reintegration of a young person into a ‘mainstream’ school; the offer of a college place; or, more often than not, a lengthy period spent at home with minimal educational provision until a suitable placement is identified and access negotiated. In sum, it is assumed that there is a clear route map that will take us from A to B. The implication is that all of us, researchers and young people alike, travel along a road with junctions that are clearly sign-posted, and that we make clear, rational and predictable choices. In short, the research specification implies a defined trajectory, whereas the reality is messy and contingent, and the road to travel rough and rocky.

Negotiating access

We shall now take a closer look at the process of negotiating access and the assumptions upon which the research design was based. Imagine an arrow running across a page from left to right. The left-hand side the bold black arrow represents the start of a particular kind of trajectory — the process of negotiating access to the young people. This is the point at which the Directors of Children’s Services in each of the 65 local authorities were asked to identify the head to the EOTAS service in their authority. If we were to plot the position of this individual on our arrow, it would be somewhere further along the arrow, say at around the mid-point. The research design envisaged that the EOTAS would be able (and indeed willing) to identify a particular young person permanently excluded from a special school or a PRU in their authority from the biographical information that we were able to provide from the census of all PRUs and special schools (date of birth, gender, date of permanent exclusion, diagnostic information, EAL, FSME

⁵ The infamous B9136 Cockbridge to Tomintoul in the highlands of Scotland is frequently closed when the first winter snows arrive. It is thus an appropriate metaphor for an *impasse* of a rather different order.

status, etc). Moreover, we assumed that the lead contact in the EOTAS service would have further information on the young person's 'trajectory' since their permanent exclusion. We also assumed that they would provide us with the name and full contact details of the child's 'key worker', namely the service provider who was currently working with the young person, and was thus personally acquainted with them. These trusted intermediaries would then invite the young person to participate in the study and secure written opt-in consent on behalf of the research team. This is the point at which the head of the arrow hits the target. The key worker makes contact with the young person and either negotiates their consent, or conveys the young person's reluctance to participate to the research team.

However, there is a grey shadow behind this bold unidirectional arrow that tells a rather different story. This is one that is frequently suppressed in conventional accounts of empirical research in the social sciences, although there are some exceptions (McNab *et al*, 2007). One of the false assumptions that underpinned the research design was that the Directors of Children's Services would respond with alacrity to the research agenda. However, we achieved a modest 60 per cent response rate, even after extensive and time-consuming telephone follow-up. Moreover, we had also assumed that Directors of Children's Services would be able to identify *one* person responsible for EOTAS in their authority, and, furthermore, that this person would have a clear overview of the destinations of the very small minority of pupils permanently excluded from special schools or PRUs in that authority. We also assumed, rather naively as it transpired, that the EOTAS would be able to identify one key contact for the young person. In the event, none of these assumptions turned out to be well founded. In fact, there was considerable variation in both the range and the degree of specificity of the designations of the local authority contacts provided. We were initially directed to inclusion service managers, exclusion managers, alternative education services, heads of departments of special educational needs, behaviour/pupil support services, school attendance officers and education welfare personnel. These individuals were located at different points in professional hierarchies, and the degree to which they had an overview of the trajectories of individual young people varied substantially. They were also extremely reluctant to disclose information about the current whereabouts of young people who met the inclusion criteria for the study, even to professional researchers conducting a government-funded research project. Moreover, it appeared that responsibility for a particular case moved from one department to another during the post-exclusion period. For example, an officer in the exclusions or school attendance department might have been able to access some information about the young person who had been permanently excluded (for example, their date of birth, gender, home post code, etc), but have no information on that young person's current whereabouts. This presented us with major challenges in recruiting the sample and in meeting the terms of the research contract.

If the original research design can be conceptualised as a series of bold black arrows running across a page from left to right, the reality was more like Harry Beck's iconic map of the London Underground. Each station on that map represents a telephone call, an

email or a letter, made or sent in an attempt to locate the current whereabouts of a group of twenty young people. Critics of Beck's 1931 map have pointed out that it can be misleading as it distorts geographical distances. In *Notes from a Small Island*, Bill Bryson (1995) describes how a stranger to the city would travel from Bank to Mansion House using Beck's map. He would take the Central Line to Liverpool Street, change to the Circle Line for another five stops to Mansion House. He would then emerge from the lower depths only to find himself 200 yards down the street from his starting point. Our experience in the initial stages of this project was not dissimilar.

Experiences of the type set out in the brief extract from Researcher A's diary (see Annex 1) and in Vignette 1 resulted in some tense discussions amongst the research team and in occasional bouts of self-moralising. Were we really such shoddy, ineffective researchers? After all, was it not a relatively simple matter to determine what was on a young person's statement of special educational needs (SEN)? Were we asking the wrong people? Why did we rarely find ourselves talking to anyone who had actually *read* a particular child's statement, or even one who knew where it was located? Were we simply not being persistent enough? However much we persisted, we still found ourselves unable to answer apparently simple questions relating to a young person's 'trajectory' post-exclusion. What was the date of their permanent exclusion? How many fixed-term exclusions had they had prior to the permanent exclusion that was the criterion for inclusion in the study? When was their statement issued? There was some divergence of opinion within the research team as to how much time could (or should) be spent attempting to answer some of these questions. All the young people we interviewed had had numerous fixed-term exclusions. Did it really matter how many? However, there were some more important questions that we had great difficulty in answering. When had a particular young person been placed on the child protection register? When (and even more importantly, why) had he deregistered? Why had deregistration coincided with his permanent exclusion from alternative provision, when he would be spending more time at home. There was once instance when our failure to get the full picture prior to embarking on a field visit had a negative impact on the quality of the data we were able to gather. For example, a researcher travelled a great distance to a BESD special school to interview a young man described as having ADHD only to discover that he also had a hearing impairment. The young person's speech was poorly intelligible and no interpretative support was provided; the 'interview' was conducted in a locked, windowless room, partly during the morning interval when the levels of ambient noise rose substantially. The researcher quickly realised that it would be unwise to persist in repeating questions, as the young person was becoming increasingly frustrated at not being understood. The placement of this young man in a BESD special school illustrates the point made by Cole *et al* (1998) about the contingent nature of placement decisions.

Conclusion

What does all this mean? In retrospect it appears that we were locked in by the research specification. We found ourselves straining to provide a narrative coherence that was just not there in the field. We were working within the financial constraints imposed by

external research funding and found ourselves perpetually *à la recherche du temps perdu*. Garland (2001) describes the kind of landscape outlined in Annex 1 and Vignette 1 as follows:

Socially situated, imperfectly knowledgeable actors stumble upon ways of doing things that seem to work, and seem to fit with their other concerns. Authorities patch together workable solutions to problems that they can see and can get to grips with. Agencies struggle to cope with their workload, and do the best job that they can in the circumstances. (p 26)

This also reflects our own experiences, as we emerge from a lengthy period of self-doubt. We now take the view that our inability to find the answers to some rather straightforward questions is data rather than lack of data. It is self-evident that these data are not 'givens' in the sense that they pre-exist the research project. Nor are they independent of the actions and the differing responses of the individual members of the research team. Rather, these are data that are discursively produced by the attempt to describe a complex, shape-shifting social reality.

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