
Storying schools: issues around attempts to create a sense of feel and place in narrative research writing

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ABSTRACT Narrative research writing often seeks to create a sense of feel and place. The aim is to convince an audience that the researcher has ‘been there’ and that they could have been there too. This article presents a story about a visit to a secondary special school for boys judged to have emotional and behavioural difficulties, and then goes on to discuss issues around ‘othering’ experienced by the author when writing it. The problems of first visits and the way in which personal identities influence perceptions of research settings are considered with reference to othering. The article concludes with the suggestion that, when the intention has been to work ‘*against Othering, for social justice*’ (Fine, 1994: 81), maybe one has to recognize that some concerns can probably not be relieved, and to ‘simply attempt to do the best [I] can’ (Smith and Deemer, 2000: 891).

KEYWORDS: *inclusion, narrative, ‘othering’, re-presentation, special educational needs, stories*

A visit

I’d never been in a sports car before. Low and green and shining, pulling up for me in front of the tube¹ station on a cold, wet Friday morning in December. It was the anniversary of my father’s death and here I was, feeling excitement as I snucked into the seat. What a contrast with that morning in the hospital, 11 years ago, holding Dad’s hand and waiting.

Jon accelerated down the high street, past the sari shops, the Asian grocers fronted with vegetable stalls, the Divali² lights on the lampposts. He drove fast, changing gear quickly, well over the speed limit. We turned into a council estate with speed bumps to fly over, traffic calming islands to weave round. He drives like this partly, I think, to get maximum exhilaration, partly to get back to

school as soon as possible. He doesn't want to be away, doesn't want to miss the action or to fail to deal with something that's his responsibility. He wants to get me there, to hear what I think. 'The police are coming in sometime this morning to get the security video of the incident I told you about when Zohab³ and his mates made the death threats to me and I'll probably need to have a word with them, but apart from that I'm doing nothing particular. What I thought was you'll just be around, talk with Harry, meet the kids, hang out. I do want you to see what it's like here 'cus I think it'll help when you're reading my stuff. At least you'll have a bit of a sense of the place and what I do that'll give you some sort of context to put it in. Is that OK?' 'It's fine.'

And I'm enjoying the ride, the closeness to the road, the sense of being in touch. 'That's our field.' To my right I see a green space: the size of three football pitches or so. We turn in a gate, down a hill. Pink blossom out on the trees lining the drive, 'I arranged that because you were coming. Welcome to Osbourne.'

I can sense he feels proprietorial and proud. I see a two-storey, seventies building. Flat roofs, big windows, coloured panels. Obviously a school. The grounds are neat, close cut grass, tidy borders. And those blossom trees. In December.

We go in through the lobby to the office window/reception hatch where I have to sign in for security purposes. Banter with the secretaries who call him Jonty. He tells them I'm from the university, that I'm his research supervisor, and that I've come to see the place that he's writing about for his dissertation. They say I must have my hands full.

The corridor where we are is bright, clean and carpeted. There's no graffiti on the walls, no scuffmarks on the skirting board, no litter on the floor. And it is very, very quiet. I comment on the quietness and Jon tells me it's not normally like this but today nearly half of the students are out, on work experience and college placements, and that some of the 'big players' incurred short term exclusions the previous day.

'Let me take you to meet the kids.' We turn into a corridor with classrooms off to either side, work displayed on the walls. A man comes out of a room.

'This is Pat.' I'm introduced to Harry, the principal. He's a big man, like Jon, but he's taller. They joke, slagging each other off, showing me their relationship. Harry tells Jon that while he was getting me the police rang to say that they'd just arrested Zohab, then says, 'You aren't going to like this but Peter's coming in later to check you're ok about the threats. The LEA's worried about you. They want to look after us so we have to let them.' He turns to me, 'See you later. What have you got on your face?' I get rid of the dirty smudge, feeling foolish, wondering how long I'd been walking around like that, wondering why Jon hadn't said anything.

Jon takes a bunch of keys out of his pocket and starts to open the door. I'm shocked and my words stop him. 'Why is it locked? What if there's a fire?' 'The doors only lock on the corridor side, they work from inside the room. We'd

have a problem if kids could get out of their class and then into others because the one kid absconding could set the whole school off in seconds.'

It's suddenly noisy. 'You fucking cunt. You bastard. Your mother is a whore, she's a whore. Fuck you.' 'Don't you say that about my mother. *Your* mother's a cunt. Fuck *her*.' There are two big boys, about 15 years old, I'd say, sitting either side of a hessian-covered room divider. They're shouting at each other and banging about, but they're still paying some attention to the workbooks on the tables in front of them. Each boy is sitting with a middle-aged adult, who in both cases is telling them to attend to their work, to take no notice of what's been said and to stop shouting. In the middle of all this, Jon simply introduces me as Dr Sikes, his teacher. I hold out my hand to every individual in the room and both boys stop their invective to take it and say hello. One asks me if it's really true that I'm Jon's teacher; the other, if he's a good student. I say yes. Then they go back to their cursing. Jon has some words to the effect that winding each other up is not a good idea, and it's quieter as we go out and cross the corridor to a classroom where three boys of 13 or so are sitting round a table with two young women. They're all cutting out snowflake shapes from white paper. Gratuitously I ask if they're making Christmas decorations and a fresh-faced child holds up a mile of paper chains they'd made the previous day. His pride and delight remind me of my son when he used to show me things he'd made with his nanny while I was at work. It's calm, relaxed and purposeful in that room. Easy, like it can be when kids are doing art or craftwork that they enjoy, in the company of teachers they like and trust.

It's not quite so comfortable in the next room. There, four lads are playing a word game with two adults – except one of the boys, Darren, who has headphones on, is listening to music and is emphatically distancing himself from everything and everyone else. Jon asks him to take the headphones off. The boy deliberately turns his back on him. Jon puts his hand on the boy's shoulder and has a quiet word. 'It's time for pizza', says one of the other kids and everyone gets up. As he slouches towards the door, Darren removes his 'phones.

Then, suddenly, the bangs start. The walls of the corridor are being thumped, hard, so that they shake. There seem to be lots of youth out there, lots of shouting, fucking this and fucking that. I confess I swear but I have never heard cussing like this. 'They get pizza now if they've been ok. Come along and have some.' A kid bumps into Jon, 'Watch where you're fucking going Jonty', 'Language, Sam', 'Sorry'.

The dining hall is in another building. Outside the door stand Jon and Harry. Each boy has to pass by them and something is said to everyone. There's lots of hugging too. I've never seen so much physical contact in a school, not even in a nursery. It's odd, remarkable, to see these males, lads and teachers, touching each other so much and so naturally. In a mainstream school I'm sure this would provoke homophobic accusation and abuse. Here, it's what they do.

After pizza Jon takes me to see the workshops and the music room. On our way, the Learning Mentor has a word about a lad who is sounding off and getting upset because he wants to go in the music room and he thinks that the member of staff who has to accompany him there isn't going to. Suddenly the boy himself appears. He's clearly very wound up and angry. He strides round the hall area we're in, bashing the walls and the doors, swearing and bad-mouthing the teacher he believes has let him down. Three or four kids come to their classroom doors, peer through the glass, then go back to whatever they were doing. I'm not sure what to do, where to go. This is outside my experience and truth to tell I'm apprehensive. Jon has started talking to the boy, telling him the teacher will be along shortly, that the music session will happen if he calms down. The boy walks round and round the area, faster and faster, banging away all the time. Jon speaks more, asking him to be reasonable, to remember positive things and suddenly it's all over as the lad says, 'I need a drink', and goes over to the drinking fountain and drinks deeply. He returns calm and ok, then, quick as a wink shins up above the door and sits in the heating pipes, waiting for his teacher. Jon tells me later that this is a major advance, that a couple of months ago the anger would have continued to increase until he finally blew totally out of control. Going to the drinking fountain was probably the kid's way of disrupting or diffusing the situation without losing face and could have been a strategy he'd been taught in the anger management sessions that were part of his programme.

We go into the woodwork room. I'm suddenly very conscious of the hammers, chisels and saws. A boy is standing at a bench rhythmically stabbing away with a bradawl. Each time it goes further in until the handle hits the wood and he can't get it out. 'Fuck it. Stupid fucking thing.' 'What if somebody loses their temper in here?' I quietly ask the teacher, a man who's recently moved here from a mainstream school, 'Isn't it risky to have these tools out?' He shrugs, 'It's risky anywhere.' There's a knock at the door. Jon's needed to deal with a flare up in a PE lesson. That's what he spends all of his time doing, fire-fighting he calls it, calming kids down, managing behaviour, very occasionally restraining. I hear the shouting, the kicking and banging. This one takes a long time to defuse and by the time some understanding is reached it's lunchtime. Back to the dining hall and the hugs and the words to each boy before they go in.

Ross, a large lad with complicated braces on his teeth, is teased for never smiling. He stands close to Jon; I think he's seeking contact. 'Look, there's a policeman going into school. What's he here for?' Police visits could be bad news for most of the boys and Ross, I'm told, does and deals drugs big time. 'He's not a policeman, he's come to see to the photocopier.' 'He's a policeman. Look at his boots.' The man is, of course, the copper who has come to pick up the security video. All the school know about the threats and that there's a warrant out for the kids who made them. Jon goes off to talk to him.

While he's away, an obviously pregnant teacher comes and tells Harry that

David who is now in the dining room has pushed her. He's brought out and confronted with what he's done. There's some bravado but he ends up saying sorry and verbally, at least, acknowledging that he was in the wrong.

'Come in and eat, the food's really good here.' And it is. Ravioli, salad, ice cream, fresh fruit. Jon told me that they care about the food they serve because, as is so often the case these days, many of the kids live on junk. Everything is fresh and as far as possible they ensure that there are no additives or colourings because these can aggravate hyperactivity. As well as lunch and pizza, Harry and Jon come into school at 6.30 and make sure that breakfast is available for those who turn up. Without this there are those who would have nothing to eat in the morning and the number of kids who do not attend school until pizza is served at break time would probably increase.

I sit down next to a tall boy who sprawls round his chair and over the table. The staff sit around the room, some together, others with kids. There's a general and wide-ranging conversation going on that everyone seems free to participate in. The boy next to me shouts his contributions rather than speaks them. He appears to be getting excited and gets louder and louder. Suddenly there's a startling bang as a boy behind me knocks the table nearly right over. It teeters on two legs then crashes down, rocking back and forth a few times. All is momentarily silent and then: 'Hey Sally, hey Sally! Sally's got fuck me shoes on. Show us your shoes Sal.' Sally, who is about 25 and attractive and who teaches drama here and in Wandsworth Prison, laughs and gives back banter. It all seems well meant and harmless, a comment on the style of her footwear rather than anything else. Jon and Harry appear to think so too: at least they say nothing to stop it. In many schools, I know that such talk would be regarded as grounds for suspension.⁴

'Time to get back.' Harry signals the end of lunch and kids and staff slope off to lessons. The afternoon session is short: school ends at 2.30. Some don't even make it that far and, in any case, if they've done good they're often allowed to go early. Given the past attendance record of many of the boys, it's an event to have them come in at all.

It's time for me to hear the story of the school. We go to Harry's room, a large office, dominated by a picture of Cassius Clay before he was Mohammed Ali, triumphant having beaten Sonny Liston. Harry opens a drawer in his desk and invites me to look inside. There are a number of knives, razor blades fixed to various makeshift handles, a length of bicycle chain, a sharpened screw driver, and a couple of chisels. 'Look at this. These were all confiscated during my first few weeks here. I keep them to remind me not to get too cocky. Keep them in mind while I'm talking.' The story goes like this: in January 2001, Osbourne, a residential special school for 11–16-year-old boys with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), was put into 'Special Measures'⁵ following an Ofsted⁶ inspection. What the Inspectors had found and reported made such lurid reading that journalists on the tabloids seeking post-Christmas readers seized the opportunity for sensationalist headlines of the 'Is

this the worst school in England?' variety. The Ofsted report was immediately removed from the DfES⁷ web site as it soon began to register an unprecedented number of hits. Those who managed to get there before it was withdrawn learnt of incidents of boys gang-raping other boys on the school premises, of a hanging, of numerous woundings with weapons, of staff who were demoralized or complacent or incapable, of drug taking, of a school population where the majority of pupils had criminal records, and of an all pervasive macho, violent culture. This was an institution where the kids were in control and the teachers, through inexperience, fear, indifference or various reasons of invested interest, were making little or no mark.

Faced with this damning report, the LEA⁸ had decided to close down the school, sack most of the staff, and then re-open it in September 2002 minus the residential unit, under a new name, and with a new regime. Harry was moved from another school in order to lead this renaissance and Jon was appointed vice-principal.

When he got the job at Osbourne, Jon was in the second year of a professional doctoral (EdD) programme and at the point where he was required to design a research project to be carried out over two years and to be reported in a thesis of around 50,000 words. Thinking about the time, effort, energy and commitment his new job was likely to demand, he decided to undertake an autoethnographic study of his first year in post to be entitled *Restarting the 'Worst' School in the Country*, and I became his supervisor.

Autoethnography is, essentially, reflexive 'ethnographic writing which locates the self as central (*and in so doing*) gives analytical purchase to the autobiographical' (Coffey, 1999: 126). Autoethnographers put themselves into their text while also locating these texts in the literatures and traditions of the social sciences (see Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Lather and Smithies, 1997; Richardson, 2000). Jon felt that such research could be helpful to him in that it would encourage him to reflect critically and systematically on his work and, thereby, could potentially lead him to insights and understandings capable of informing his professional activities. In addition, it might even serve as a cathartic outlet for the tensions and stresses he was likely to face. One term into the research he found that it had lived up to its promise.

And one term after the start of the new school year, Harry and Jon felt that they were beginning to get somewhere.

In essence, their shared vision is to create a caring environment with a culture that provides certainty, constancy and security for boys who have 'severe and complex needs' (DfES, 2004), and who for various reasons do not behave in a way that mainstream schools, as they are presently organized and resourced, are able to accommodate. Many of the boys have learning difficulties; some have mental, emotional and psychological disorders, others are hyperactive and/or have attention deficit conditions 'managed' by drugs like Ritalin. Most of them come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, some have been involved in child prostitution, a few have parents who themselves

have learning difficulties and a large number have grown up with criminal activity – thieving, prostitution, violence, drug taking – as the norm. All are a potential threat to themselves and usually to other people. Their futures are not promising and, at the time of the Ofsted report, 80 percent of those on roll were involved with the youth justice system with a further 12 percent serving or awaiting custodial sentences.

These kids are a complex amalgam of power and vulnerability. In their immediate lives they have power, which they do use, to hurt and damage people and property. Within the wider world though, they are relatively powerless and most even lack the personal characteristics needed to be a ‘successful’ thug and criminal. As children, too, they are incredibly vulnerable, and a number of them are known to have been, or are suspected of being, exploited and abused sexually, physically and emotionally by their parents and/or other adults who should be caring for and protecting them. In some cases this vulnerability is heightened by the adoption, perhaps as a survival strategy, of a hard man persona that is manifested through their demeanour, their clothes, the music they make it known they listen to, and their language. Many parents who teach see their own children in the students they encounter (see Sikes, 1997). For staff at Osbourne who are also parents, this experience is particularly poignant.

Jon talks of ‘cutting off the balls and drawing the teeth’ of the monstrous culture that had come to characterize Osbourne before he and Harry arrived. Their mission is to show their students an alternate way of being to that which they have either been socialized into or have come to adopt (and a scary thing for any parent to know is that a couple of these boys do come from stable, prosperous, middle-class homes) and which was being reinforced in the school before Ofsted. For themselves, and for their students, this involves the acknowledgement of different types of personal and social power and vulnerability. It means listening to and hearing what the boys have to say about themselves, their lives, their relationships, their aspirations. It means providing unconditional love and a clear framework of ways of behaving based on respect for self and for other people. For many of the boys this is a novelty and they are having an experience that they haven’t had before, either at home or in schools they have attended. Hence the touching – an obvious demonstration that ‘I care about you’; hence the demand that kids – and staff – reflect on and acknowledge the impact of their actions on other people and themselves; hence the importance given to respect for self and others; hence the emphasis on corporate responsibility and the well-being of all people belonging to the school.

They think that it’s beginning to work. Kids have said things that indicate that they like coming to school and attendance levels are certainly up. When a teacher’s purse was stolen, Ross showed Jon where it had been dumped – in a dog shit bin! – because he ‘wanted to help these people and I like the school’. Louis cried and apologized for repeatedly pushing Jon against a door, winding

him and lifting him off his feet with each push; and, after Zohab made his threats against Jon (threats the police took seriously knowing the crowd he hung round with), a number of the kids came up afterwards to ask if Jon was OK.

But it isn't all success of course: Wayne, who stole the purse, and Zohab, who said he would kill Jon and get his family, are both pupils of the school. Truancy remains a problem. And, desperate and dreadful though the action is for boys who have nowhere else to go but prison, two permanent exclusions have been made. Nevertheless, Harry and Jon do seem to have begun to make a difference – and an interim report by LEA inspectors suggests that coming out of 'Special Measures' now seems a certainty, although not for another year.

'So what do you think of us then? What's your impression of Osbourne?' asked Harry. 'Nobody told me there were schools quite like this. If I hadn't been here I couldn't have imagined it.' 'I know what you mean,' said Jon. 'When I was at college and even when I was doing my Master's in Inclusion, I never came across anything in the academic literature that even began to describe what it can be like here. The most you get is something along the lines of "working in these institutions is demanding and requires resilience". There's nothing that I've seen that gives any sense of the feel of places like Osbourne and there ought to be accounts that do that rather than the stuff there is that either demonizes special schools per se, or focuses on the psychology of individuals, or presents a distanced and sanitized and so called objective picture. And I think there should be stories because, while everybody's got an idea of what ordinary schools are like, by and large most teachers don't have a clue about special schools because they've never been in one. They might have had a hand in directing kids to them but they've never been there themselves. It's as if we don't exist or we do exist but we're beyond the pale. It shouldn't be like this, especially since inclusion is so high on the agenda at the minute and particularly since we're always working towards getting our kids back into mainstream where that's feasible. It's so one sided. You do stories, Pat, why don't you write one?' 'I'll think about it,' I said.

Over the next few weeks I frequently found myself thinking about Osbourne: about the lives and experiences of the students I'd met, about the work and aims of Jon, Harry and their colleagues, about the ethos, culture and day-to-day happenings of the school. Although I had had some idea of what Osbourne was like from reading Jon's work, my visit had disturbed me, confronting and disrupting some of my understandings of, and knowledges about, schools. Inevitably too, perhaps, it had led me to difficult questions around the notion and practice of 'inclusion'.

I had begun to wonder whether the way to begin to make sense of my experiences and perceptions was to follow Jon's suggestion to write a story, since, like many other people, I find that writing can help order and give meaning to the things that happen to me (see Polkinghorne, 1988; Richardson, 1997: 26–9). I had also taken Jon's point that EBD schools and

their work, their students and staff have, generally, been neglected as a focus for sociological study (although see Molinari, 2003, and Phtiaka, 1996, for ethnographic descriptions of EBD schools and pupil referral units respectively⁹), and that the storied accounts there are have tended to focus on individuals (e.g. Clough, 2002). There would seem to be a gap, so, when I was asked to give a presentation at a conference, I decided to kill a number of birds with one stone and tell a story about my visit to Osbourne.¹⁰ It was that story which started this present article. I will now move on to reflect on worries around narrative re-presentation that I experienced having written it, under the headings of:

- Creating a sense of ‘feel’ and ‘place’,
- ‘Othering’,
- First encounters, and
- My place in all this.

Creating a sense of ‘feel’ and ‘place’

When I sat down to write, I was especially concerned to create a sense of feel and place because that was what Jon had said was missing in the literature. Since I was drawing, primarily, on my perceptions and experiences of Osbourne during the very few hours of the day that I was there, this was very specifically located and contextualized snap-shot type writing, and I had no desire to suggest that it was possible to extrapolate from my words to make definitive generalizations about other EBD schools. I was, however, interested in knowing whether I had been successful in evoking and communicating a picture that people familiar with special schools of this kind could recognize. In seeking such people’s opinions on the story, I wasn’t checking for ‘verisimilitude’ (Bruner, 1986), not least because the concept is fundamentally problematic (see Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 50): I simply wanted to know how effective my writing had been. And I wanted to have some confidence that people coming to the paper who had no previous experience of EBD schools would not get an exaggerated or erroneous narrative. The first people I showed the paper to all had experience of working in EBD institutions.

‘It took me back. That’s just like it was – especially the dining room. That could have happened in my school. You really evoked the atmosphere.’ (Maureen – verbal communication)

‘It brought back some (lots!!) of painful/funny/embarrassing/scary memories from my stint in an EBD school. . . For me it was an accurate representation: police visit, swearing and all: my nickname was ‘cockeyed cunt’ and the kids (mostly) liked me!’ (Andrew – written communication)

‘Oh yes, you’d done the business there. You could almost smell the place. And I have to tell you that as I was reading it I remembered names that I hadn’t

thought of for years. I had a kid who could have been that one making the chains. Angelic, beautiful looking lad. Could be sweet and gentle and caring and like a lamb but he would snap over nothing it would seem and there was no controlling him. I wonder what happened to him.' (Doreen – verbal communication)

'Day on day it was like that. Firefighting outbreaks, that's what the guy said and that's how it was. The changes in atmosphere, the ever so tough but ever so vulnerable youngsters. I couldn't do it any more. I burnt out and your bloody paper was too close to the bone.' (Richard – verbal communication)

'You got it. That was it. Absolutely spot on. I actually showed that paper to my mum and dad and said 'Read this. This is where I work.' They said they'd never realized just what it was like but that, if it was like that, they understood some things about me better – whatever that was supposed to mean.' (Jon Clark – written communication)

'Othering'

These comments suggested that I had done what I'd set out to do. I'd conjured up, I'd fabricated (MacLure, 2003: 80–104) a 'persuasive' (Baronne, 1995: 64–5) account that conveyed a realistic impression, a 'feel' of an EBD school. Through my writing, through the discourse, the words and constructions I'd used, I felt that I'd managed to meet Clifford Geertz's (1988) challenge to convince an audience that I'd 'been there' and that they could have been there too. Initially I was quite satisfied by my literary and textual achievement, but then reading through the paper and considering how I was going to present it at the conference, I began to worry about what Maggie MacLure describes as 'the pervasive concern in contemporary research' (2003: 3): namely, the concern of 'othering' the people I had written about (see Fine, 1994, for a discussion of 'othering', but essentially here I am using it to mean creating a distance and imputing negative difference between me/us and others/them). Ironically, my worries were grounded in my 'achievement', in the 'realism' of my writing and, specifically, in the accounts I had given of the boys, of their behaviour and of the things they'd said.

I was very conscious that, compared with everyday life in most mainstream secondary comprehensives, what I'd seen and heard and re-presented was extreme, even though by Jon and Harry's reckoning the day I spent in Osbourne was considered to have been a 'quiet one' with nothing exceptional or out of the ordinary occurring and no 'great story' (Fine et al., 2000: 117) to report. I hadn't exaggerated anything but I was, nevertheless, conscious that what I had written could – and probably did – make Osbourne, its students and its staff seem distinct and different in a negative sense, from other schools, teachers and pupils. I certainly didn't want to do this. Conversely, in fact, I wanted to share how my experience of being at Osbourne had brought home to me the way in which, as Mark Neumann puts it, the tension over 'othering' is confounded 'when we acknowledge how much 'out

there' looks like 'in here' (1996: 182). But I began to question if I should have written such a piece at all. Or having written it and got it out of my system as it were, perhaps I should leave it there, not put it out into the public domain, and quickly do something else to meet my conference commitment. But then one of the reasons why I'd written the story was exactly because life in EBD schools has tended to be ignored, marginalized, hidden away and not described (maybe partly because of the difficulties involved in writing about and re-presenting it!). If I didn't go ahead with the piece, I would be failing Jon and the other people who said there was a need for greater awareness, not least in the interests of any movement towards inclusion, be that in conceptual or practical terms (see Slee, 2001).

I wondered whether an explicitly fictionalized approach (see, for example, Banks and Banks, 1998; Clough, 2002; Sparkes, 1995) might not be better because of the anonymizing and distancing effect it could have. On reflection though, I came to the opinion that, in this case, and for me personally, fictionalizing would have been deceptive because I only had limited observations and knowledge on which to base a story; anything else would have been imagination. It seemed more authentic and entirely appropriate to try and tell it as it was for me, re-presented and crafted of course, and with names changed, but without invention. A fictionalized story would, I felt, have made me even more open to charges of 'othering' and even demonizing, given the sort of situation I was writing about (see Roorbach, 2001: 5–6, on invention and intention).

First encounters

Then there was the issue around the fact that this was my first encounter with Osbourne. One's first visit to anywhere is, almost by definition, strange. We don't know who or what we will see or what will happen next. In order to make sense of novel experiences we tend to compare them with what we know and, in a way, we almost inevitably 'other' just through this process of comparison. Knowing this, I was conscious of its potential influence on what I wrote and this was largely why I showed the story to Jon and experienced EBD teachers before I did anything else with it. Their comments did a lot to reassure me.

They also put my mind at rest around concerns that I had to do with the snap-shot nature of the piece. These focused on the way in which I was very much an 'outsider' to Osbourne, albeit one who knew some of the context and background from Jon. My story was primarily intended to raise awareness which could then be followed up. The much longer story that Jon will tell through his autoethnography will be written with insider knowledge and involvement, and will take an in-depth and long-term look at relationships and developments at the school. Our purposes are different: his thrust is analytical, mine is descriptive, and I believe that, given the paucity of research of this kind in this field, this is an appropriate aim.

My place in all this

Writing about the way in which qualitative research has tended to reproduce 'a colonizing discourse of the "Other"', Michelle Fine has stressed the importance of examining 'the hyphen at which Self-Other join in the politics of everyday life, that is, the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others' (1994: 70). In a similar vein, MacLure remarks, the concern over 'othering' that researchers may feel 'is intimately connected with anxiety about the space between self and other, researcher and researched, and the desire to dissolve, or at least ethically regulate it' (2003: 3). Researchers' personal identities and the perspectives, understandings and knowledges, the beliefs and values that go with them shape all aspects of the research process (see Sikes and Goodson, 2003). I went to Osbourne with all of my identities (obviously!). Although there is not space in this article to interrogate the hyphens between my identities and my limited perceptions and experiences of the boys and staff of Osbourne, I suspect those which had the most influence upon what I subsequently wrote were my identities as Jon's doctoral supervisor, as a researcher who favours auto/ biographical and narrative approaches, as an academic with a commitment to social justice, as the mother of a girl and a boy in mainstream schools, as a school governor, as a lecturer who has been involved in initial and in-service teacher education, as a sociologist, and as the director of a professional doctoral programme that has a substantial number of students with jobs in the field of special education. As Denzin reminds us, 'writing is not an innocent practice (*and*) in the social sciences there is only interpretation' (2000: 898): in noting this I am making yet another plea for researchers to acknowledging their place in what they do for and the way in which stories tell us as much about their authors as they do about their subjects.

Finally

David Silverman writes:

All we sociologists have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, what sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to intelligent use in theorising about social life. (1998: 111)

And we also need to think about how the stories that come from us (be 'we' sociologists, educational researchers, psychologists, anthropologists, or whatever) and which we use in various ways to make sense of social life, impact upon the people and the institutions they are about.

As was noted earlier, when the tabloid press picked up on Ofsted's report on Osbourne and translated its official language into lurid journalese,

considerable interest was provoked. People wanted to know the gory details and, while it is clearly impossible to know what exactly aroused curiosity, prurience and voyeurism provoked by the monstrous, freak show style presentation of the school is likely to have motivated some readers to seek out the full account on the internet. It does seem that, because EBD schools and other institutions, such as prisons, mental hospitals and boarding schools, are outside of most people's day-to-day experience, they are more at risk of having highly-coloured myths developed and told about them. Conscious of this, I wanted my story to tell what an EBD school could be like in order to counter tales based in and on ignorance. At the same time, I didn't want to fuel such accounts through my story or to 'other' the students, staff and the institution generally. Since I am not convinced by arguments that stories used in social science should, essentially, be left to speak for themselves (e.g. Clough, 2002), I had no intention for mine to stand alone without any commentary or contextual description or discussion. Thus, in my conference presentation, I did explicitly address my concerns in relation to my particular story and also offer an explanation of how and where and why it had been produced, thus stating my intent and providing a context.

The field of special education is one full of controversy and disagreement with various debates about the social construction of disability and special need and around the ideologies, theories and the practice of inclusion going on in the UK, Europe, the Antipodes, North America and elsewhere (see Slee, 2001, for an overview). With regard to students who are considered to have emotional and behavioural difficulties, the controversy is particularly acute with considerable argument around the way in which EBD can be used as a convenient diagnosis for young people whose behaviour is 'simply' challenging. Although in recent years and in the UK, more attention has been given to the way in which institutional structures and systems may cause or aggravate troublesome behaviour, 'there resolutely continues a powerful sub-text that the real causes of difficult behaviour lie in deficit and deviance in the child' (Thomas and Loxley, 2001: 46–7). This is not the place, and I am not the person, to advance this discussion except insofar as, in talking and writing about Osbourne, I did want to do something, in however limited a manner, to alert more people to a hidden area of schooling. I am not so naïve as to believe that awareness leads to change in attitude or practice, but I do think that ignorance certainly does not.

However grandiose it might sound, in telling this story and in sharing my difficulties, my intention has been, to borrow from Michelle Fine, to work '*against Othering, for social justice* (1994: 81, original emphases), to recognize that some of my concerns can probably not be relieved, and to 'simply attempt to do the best [I] can' (Smith and Deemer, 2000: 891).

NOTES

1. The 'tube' is the popular name for the underground train system in London.
2. Divali is the Hindu festival of light. In parts of the UK where there are substantial Hindu populations, it has become common for joint Divali/Christmas decorations to be put up in the streets between October and January.
3. All names, with the exception of Pat Sikes and Jon Clark, have been changed.
4. In an ethnographic study of a pupil referral unit, Vivien Molinari (2003) observes that the swearing that characterized student to student and student to teacher conversation would have resulted in suspension in all other schools in the borough.
5. Schools which are inspected by the Office For Standards in Education (Ofsted) and deemed to be failing according to specific criteria are placed in 'Special Measures', required to produce a timetabled plan of action for improvement, closely monitored for two years and reinspected. If they fail to achieve an acceptable standard, they can be closed.
6. Ofsted – the Office For Standards in Education – is the non-ministerial government department, headed by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools which has responsibility for inspecting schools.
7. DfES – the Department for Education and Skills.
8. LEA – Local Education Authority
9. See also Thomas and Loxley (2001) for a discussion of the problematic nature and status of EBD as a concept and category for educational provision.
10. The conference was the Second International Conference on *Discourse, Power and Resistance*, University of Plymouth, April 2003, and the paper I gave, in collaboration with Jon Clark, was entitled 'Nobody Told Me There Were Schools Like These'.

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