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**Inside exclusion: Learning from research relationships outside mainstream education**

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**Introduction**

As part of our work for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>1</sup>, we have been exploring the nature of relationships between children/young people who have been excluded from school and teachers. Through participant observation and interviews with children and young people we are trying to understand more about the causes and consequences of exclusion from school and the relationships between exclusion and poverty. Rather than present here an overview of the many different issues we are exploring, we focus here on some specifics about teacher/pupil relationships and Black young men<sup>2</sup>. We have been particularly interested in using our own research experience as a 'window' on how to understand better the complexities of school exclusion. It is our contention that challenges we have faced in the conduct of this research, including some methodological dilemmas, suggest important lessons for others working with these young people.

One of the issues we highlight here is that it is in the process of *setting up* a research project that many unanticipated and disarming occurrences are evident. We take the view that there is great potential here for learning about exclusion through reflexive consideration of these "discomforts" (Pillow, 2003). We wish to avoid the presumption that through careful planning and foresight we could perhaps avoid these discomforts on the way to developing research relationships with permanently excluded children and young people. We wish to underline that our approach underlines "the necessary failure of methodology's hope for certainty" (Stronach and MacLure, 1997:6). Instead we prefer Brenneis' (1996) construction of "telling troubles" where the 'troubles' that emerge in the course of this story are worth telling because they tell of the detail, the dilemmas, the tensions of working in and through relationships

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<sup>1</sup> Inside exclusion: Learning partnerships outside mainstream education, funded by Joseph Rowntree Foundation Jan – Dec 2006, School of Education, University of Manchester.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, we do not mean to imply here that Black young men are necessarily living in poverty. However, disproportionate numbers of Black young people and those experiencing poverty are permanently excluded every year (Save the Children, 2005). It was thus inevitable that we would work with more Black young people than White young people in this study. We are committed to listening carefully to their stories of exclusion from school, and the story we tell here grows out of those accounts. It is not a story in which poverty is the headline, or in which we report young people's direct accounts of poverty, per se. It is nevertheless an important part of a complex jigsaw we need to understand if we are to understand the connections between poverty and mainstream education, not least because being excluded from school may lead to other forms of exclusion, including poverty.

and of the challenge of beginning to understand something of this field. The nature of this challenge also became clearer to us in the troubles we had with the accounts we were given – data that was punctuated by silences, indirections, refusals and hesitations; as St Pierre (1997) describes it “data that escaped language” (179). The uncertainties we have experienced have been informative, then, in terms of thinking about the failure of method but they have also been informative in terms of the substantive issues we aim to explore. It is our contention that these discomforts and the silences we have tried to explore are highly relevant to work that other adults might do with those who have been excluded from school.

The paper focuses first on case study work with one young man – Lee – before proceeding to outline more general issues in the experience of school exclusion as reported in three group interviews. This is followed by discussion about how the case study work has allowed us new insight into these group interviews and how some Black young men experience school. In the concluding section we also return to issues of methodology and insights into how research in this area may be informed by our experience.

### **Working with Lee (1) Getting in: Containing the past**

**Our first meeting:** I had been waiting at St John’s for Lee from 4 pm and he was more than an hour late. I was reasonably annoyed and his bravado when he arrived did not make this any better. However, I soon began to see how much I was going to learn from him. When I started to explain what the research was about, his first question was, “who will read it?”

This was not the sort of question I heard from other young people in this study (legitimate, of course, as it is) and similar questions about the research remained a constant part of our conversations. For example, whenever I tried to make arrangements for further meetings he would repeat these questions, “where is it going”, “who will see it” and “what’s it for”. Initially, I thought this was about him seeking reassurance of positive representation in the study. However, I began to see other forms of caution about who knows what about him, and how he is portrayed, being played out. Initially at least he blocked my attempts to negotiate access to others’ versions of events surrounding his exclusion:

Deon: Ok so who can I talk to about you, can I go back to your old school –  
Lee: Naw they’re just going to tell you I’m a terrorist, that I terrorised them, anyway talk to me, anything you want to know, talk to me

Further into this meeting he tells me about his plans for going to college in London. He had not told the colleges he’d applied to about his exclusion from school because he felt this information was not relevant to them. The extract below is part of our conversation about his college options. Here he tells me that he was given an acceptance for Gladstone college in East London – his old neighbourhood – but this is not his first choice. He prefers Churchill College. However, they have raised questions about his school history.

Lee: I don’t want to go there and get up to the same old things. Churchill is like the best (*academically*), but they want to know why I was excluded, not even my school now wanted to know that, that’s like two years ago it’s in my past and two years later they want to know. Why do they want to know that, if they don’t give me a place, I have no choice but to go to Gladstone - see I’m trying to make wise choices.

On another occasion I ask if it would be ok to talk to his Mum:

Deon: Well, I'm sure there are lots of other things I don't know about your story, for example I would like to talk to your mother, is that likely?

Lee: No way, that's off limits, my mother knows what I do, she knows what I do, no way

Deon: I'm not going to tell your mother anything that you tell me, I couldn't do that, that's it about this research, I can't report anything you tell me to your mother

Lee: No way that's off limits, what do you want to talk to her about anyway?

Deon: Just how she feels about you and school and some of the things that happened, especially now that you're back into mainstream

Lee: Naw my mother is fine, she's fine now that I'm back in school

Other questions about his Mum were met with silence, or a change of subject. If he doesn't want to address a question, he pretends I haven't asked one. While he has shared parts of his personal life, including his relationship with young women, conversations about home were often 'off-limits' at this stage.

Much later, he is much more direct in his feelings about my 'pursuit' of his story:

Lee: Why do you want to go back into the past Deon, let the past be the past.

Deon: What does this mean to you - to let the pass be the pass?

Lee: Blotting out the past, just leave it alone Deon

I tell him this is one good reason to be involved in this project – schools need to understand how students feel about being excluded and the wider context of their lives. He doesn't look convinced.

With the help of the managers of St John's<sup>3</sup> a meeting was arranged with Lees' Mum - Mrs Seko. Lee was still resistant to the idea of me interviewing her (for example, he refused to give me her telephone number) but said it would be ok if he accompanied her to the meeting, acting as translator. I was puzzled by this as I know that Mrs Seko speaks English to the workers at St. John's. This was another occasion, then, on which Lee would exert control over the version of events I would hear.

Certainly, Lee's presence in the interview made getting at Mrs Seko's perspective difficult. His role also meant that I didn't really feel I was developing any rapport with her. As it turned out, the initial parts of the interview were conducted in English but the situation changed when I asked the question below:

Deon: When Fir Grove school told you what happened and the reason for Lee's exclusion, did you agree with them?

Mrs Seko: Oh yeah

Deon: Are you saying you thought he was capable of what they said he had done?

Mrs Seko: Emm, emm yeah (*she doesn't seem quite sure, she looked to her son, almost as if she was asking him for help*)

Lee: (*speaking to me*) You're speaking too fast, you need to slow down.

Deon: Ok, I'll slow down.

Lee translated the question and she responded (as translated by him)

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<sup>3</sup> St John's is a community centre where Lee used to have classes during the period he was excluded from school.

Mrs Seko: No, no it's not Lee's fault, it was not my son's fault. I say what happen to you, he tell me everything was bad.

From this point onwards in the interview all questions were filtered through Lee. Recently, Lee's Mum has also refused permission for me to talk to the school that excluded Lee. Mrs Seko did not say why.

Throughout this period, Lee continued to agree to meet with me, while often expressing reluctance about doing so. When we did meet he would tell me just enough for me to begin to understand something of the complexity of his life. At the same time, he would also suggest that as a novice in his world, it would be difficult for me to understand what is going on:

Lee: I can't go through 'Tower Gardens', the 'Electric boys' will try to rush me.

Deon: Why is that?

Lee: Long story, Deon

On another occasion I was at St John's, hoping that Lee might spend some time with me. He is on MSN but stops to chat to me. However, my line of questioning meets another form of 'containment' in relation to the story he'll tell.

Lee responds to the alert that there is a new message. I noticed a strange signature attached to each message, *'you might see me on a bike without no pedals'* – curiosity got the better of me and I asked him what it means – he says, "I'm from East London anything can happen, anything is possible". We spoke for a while about what it meant for him to live in East London. However, I wanted to understand more about the situation with the 'bike without pedals' – from his initial explanation, I understood this as symbolic of a lifestyle, so I asked "how can you ride a bike without pedals?" He said, "you don't ride it, you just move along – oh, you're not from there you don't understand". He's just a little exasperated with me now.

Right to the end, Lee was concerned about the portrayal of him in circulation. On one of the last occasions we spoke I asked him whether he'd read the case study I'd written. He said he didn't want to read it because – "it would be the same old thing Deon, you writing about me being kicked out of school" – I assure him that's not the case: "That's not the only thing I write about" I say defensively. Of course I have tried to 'let Lee speak' in my attempts at understanding more about his exclusion from school, but what I realise now is that I was trying to insist on him (and others) speaking to me about particular things. Instead he has consistently tried to speak to me of other things, maintained silences in relation to topics he wants to avoid, and told me how difficult I will find it to 'understand' anyway. Unlike the direct access to 'his story' of exclusion that I hoped I might hear, I was learning through a series of indirections, dead-ends, and 'failed' conversations that I was 'getting into' a different sort of story.

### **Working with Lee (2): Staying in/improvising the present**

It became obvious, then, that if I was to 'stay in' with Lee I was going to have to take a particular approach to the work. Just as he had established forms of control over his past (as illustrated in the previous section) he continued to establish forms of control over our research relationship. My approach, then, had to be reactive more than proactive; it required me to 'improvise' – to respond on the 'spur of the moment' to an agenda that Lee (largely) controlled. Fortunately, in improvising in this way, I began to build up a sense of the shifting and multiple versions of Lee that he was

happy for me to ‘access’. This section, then, outlines some of the unforeseen roles in which I was cast by Lee and some of the positions that he took up in the research.

I arrange to meet Lee at St John’s hoping to interview him.

I met Lee at St John’s, he was working on a history coursework project. As soon as I sat down talk to him, he pulled out two sheets of printed material – “read this for me”, he said. I took the papers and read the material; it seemed fairly detailed but needed additional work . . . . Half an hour later he came looking for me to re-read his paper. Again, I pointed out areas that needed further work and he worked diligently on the corrections, reading the sentences aloud to me, and asking me if they made sense and what kind of changes could he make. I helped him make the changes.

In the middle of this we had the following conversation:

Lee: How old do you have to be to get housing benefit?  
 Deon: I don’t know, over 16 I would guess. Why are you looking for housing?  
 Lee: Yeah, in London  
 Deon: Do you want to go back to London to live?  
 Lee: Yeah to go to college  
 Deon: Which college?  
 Lee: Gladstone sixth form.  
 Deon: Don’t you have family back in London?  
 Lee: Yeah but I want to live on my own, they said because I haven’t lived in the borough for the last two years, I’m not a part of the borough. I don’t want to go to the homeless because it’s too rough and a hostel is too...” [*Our conversation is interrupted by one of the volunteers*]

His question about housing benefit surprised and intrigued me. How many 16 year old boys know that there is such a thing as ‘housing benefit’ and that there are likely to be age restrictions on picking it up? How many sixteen year old boys are not just talking about living independently but are actively working through the different options (making himself ‘homeless’, going to a hostel) in order to make this happen? His question also somewhat ‘disarmed’ me – it came out of the blue, suggesting a very particular future agenda he had in mind. It made me realise how far apart our agendas were and shed new light on some teachers’ perspectives that I had heard. Mr Fox, for example, is always talking about how Cheryl<sup>4</sup> acts and looks a lot older than she is “but really she needs to understand that she is only 14”. But what does it mean to “be 14”? I suspect in Mr Fox’s mind this means accepting that she is still a child. Lee, at 16, has responsibilities and experiences that make childhood feel a long way off. I’m hoping to talk to Lee about being excluded from school, while he is talking about an independent ‘adult’ future in another city and starting a new life. A new research concern is also raised for me – do I know enough about what is relevant to Lee just now to make our relationship seem worthwhile to him?

On another occasion he tells me that he’s meeting with his Connexions Adviser and someone from the City Council to talk about housing options. He set this meeting up.

Deon: What happened at the interview yesterday?  
 Lee: After a while I just switched off, they were going on and on, telling me how difficult it’s going to be moving by myself – talking to me like I’m dumb.

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<sup>4</sup> We are also carrying out case study work with Cheryl.

Deon: So what was the outcome of the meeting are they going to sort a place for you?

Lee: They can't do that because this is Manchester innit and that's London.

Deon: I thought that was the point of the meeting.

Lee: They just wanted to tell me what my options are give me some advice.

Working with Lee also meant responding to his timetable. One day I was in the library expecting to hear from Lee about a meeting we'd arranged for later that day and I get a text message.

Lee: Yer Deon I'm in West Road now so if I don't hear from u very soon den I'm makin movements, Lee.

Deon: Where can I meet you?

Lee: McDonald's in Kirkland innit. How long till u get dere cos I aint driving right now so I'll walk dere

I rang to tell him it would be in 20 minutes. However, he said he was in a hurry he would only have 20 minutes to speak to me before his next appointment.

*Halfway to the location, he sent another text message:*

Lee: I'm dere already an im l8 How far r u –

Deon: I'm on my way

*A few minutes later, while I am still making my way to meet him, he sent another text:*

Lee: Im goin to da bus stop now if ma bus cums im getting on it

*After this, I called to reassure him that I was close by, on Queensway Road*

Lee: Where on Queensway, Queensway Road is a long road Deon.

When I got there he was standing in the bus shelter waiting for me:

Lee: You're making me late Deon – I told you I only have 20 minutes, I've got to get to my interview.

Lee has been for a number of job interviews since I met him, mostly for work in shops. He has been unsuccessful in his applications, reporting on one occasion to a worker at St John's that they told him he looked "scarey". On another occasion he tells me he turned up late for an interview and "couldn't be bothered to answer their questions".

I'm not surprised, given his description, that they didn't offer him a job. I want to tell him that he didn't do himself any favours. I feel increasingly drawn to intervening in this way – I want to be helpful – but I am also aware that this is parental type behaviour. As on a number of occasions, I contain my own feelings and keep quiet. Certainly, he is determined in his portrayal of himself as self reliant and not needing adult help:

Lee: I choose to make my own money. I'm not depending on my parents for money. I don't need my parents' money. (7.04.2006)

He says he needs money, partly because “girls don’t like boys without money, you know that’s true Deon.” I could only smile and nod at this comment. Once again I am silenced by him – I’m taken aback by his boldness and also trying to think about what I might ask in relation to this. I find myself ‘wrong footed’ again – not sure what is expected of me by him, by the research, or what I feel would be an appropriate response. He has already told me that he has to make his own money for clothes and shoes and that his Mum sometimes asks him for money. He also looks after the house and himself while his Mum is away. In these glimpses into Lee’s mind and life, I am often left floundering for a position to ‘take up’ from which to formulate a response or a question.

At another meeting Lee says he’s found other ways of making money, apart from getting a job, some of which are illegal. Nevertheless he calls these activities “work” as in “this is our work, Deon”. I find myself both pleased at his candour with me and concerned about the implications for him of engaging in illegal activities. What role am I expected to play now? Is this some sort of test of my loyalty to him? Does he know I feel uncomfortable with this knowledge and enjoy seeing me ‘struggle’? What about my own conscience if I don’t say something to him? And I feel ambivalent about talking about these things here – confirming representations of young Black men as ‘deviant’. One more example, then, of how working with Lee raised tensions and dilemmas for me that I did not expect to have to struggle with as a researcher.

### **Classroom relationships**

We move the focus now to the classroom and to a consideration of student/teacher relationships. We examine here data which lends insight into how relationships between some Black boys/young men and teachers become increasingly strained. Deon held two group discussions with young men still in mainstream education but regarded as “at risk”<sup>5</sup> of exclusion, and a further group discussion with three young men who had already been excluded from school. This is an account written from young people’s point of view and teachers could legitimately argue this is only one side of the story. We acknowledge this is the case *and* wish to emphasise the importance of taking advantage of understanding more about these young men’s representations of events. This is particularly important in a context where their experience of being a Black young man involves the negotiation of many stigmatising representations of what it means to be Black.

The account that follows sets out to try to include some sense of the dynamic of the tensions in student/teacher relationships with some sense of the interactions and reactions that develop over time. Inevitably, however, it is also a highly condensed account due to space restrictions. In the final section of the paper we draw together our analyses of the case study work and these group interviews to try to shed further light on the tensions evident in some classrooms.<sup>6</sup>

One common theme within the accounts was that these young men felt they had been singled out for unfair treatment; there was a perception of injustice on the basis that current behaviour seems to count for less than past (bad) behaviour. “If you’ve been bad before in Year 8 and 7 but when you come back to start fresh you’re still

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<sup>5</sup> Like Riele (2006) we regard the language of being “at risk” as a further marginalisation of the marginalised, but we use it here as a shorthand that is increasingly in common use in this area.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to reiterate that the account focuses only on those student/teacher relationships that are problematic. The same young men who were interviewed also talked of good relations with other teachers.

labelled. When everybody there's messing about in the class and you get kicked out. There are other people involved but your name gets called out." The sense of having a bad reputation that follows them is underlined when teachers they haven't met before seem to single them out. There was some speculation in the interviews that this behaviour could be the result of racism on the part of teachers. Two out of the three excluded young men interviewed felt that being 'picked on' was definitely the result of racism<sup>7</sup>.

The excluded young men in the sample also recounted stories of being *falsely* accused of particular misdemeanours, e.g. bullying or 'bunking off' or threatening someone with a weapon. In two of these cases, they regarded they had been excluded for "something that I didn't do." One of them also talked of 'jibes' the teachers made, such as: "If you brought in a new coat they'll just say: 'How did you get the money to buy that? Selling drugs on the street?' And they say it as a joke but I know they really meant it." The same boy talked of a sense of surveillance of Black kids that upset him: "They would watch all the Black kids get on the bus, people used to cause trouble on the bus, and they would watch all the Black kids get on the bus. When it's the next bus, like when all the White kids are going to Stockport and all that, no-one would watch that bus."

A sense of being singled out for particular treatment can be underlined by a sense of not being listened to by teachers. Young men described attempts to explain that they felt unfairly treated but felt these explanations fell on deaf ears. "They just have no time for you, just can't be bothered." Not surprisingly, all those who had been excluded felt unwelcome – "I'm not wanted" – in school by the time they were excluded. We believe the resentment, and sense of not being cared for, contributed to the difficulties we had in finding excluded young men willing to be interviewed. Even those who agreed would sometimes say very little in interviews, or refuse to talk about certain subjects. There was a real sense of disenchantment with 'the system' among the excluded young men that Deon met, coupled with fatalism and anger at the treatment they had received.

One possible reaction to perceived unfairness, of course, is to 'retaliate' – to 'fight back'. Given the value accorded to men 'standing up for themselves', it is perhaps not surprising that retaliation feels like the obvious reaction. "I've been good this year, because I've been bad last year, but I'm buckling up and as I come I sat down and the teacher started going on at me and I don't really like being shouted at for things that I haven't done so I retaliated . . ." This retaliation is quite likely to be interpreted as a further misdemeanour by the teacher involved, thus reinforcing the sense of 'problem student'. If that is the case, and the boy continues to feel 'picked on', there is likely to be a mounting sense of injustice and frustration at being labelled in this way. Certainly this boy's attempts to break the cycle by trying to explain his point of view were rejected again: "They don't want to hear what you've got to say."

Certainly, where young men perceive racism explains the behaviour of teachers, this provokes anger. The young man quoted above certainly acknowledges that he regularly "argued back". "I lose my temper really. I argue with them – why they are always talking to Black kids about drugs and all. They would say 'I'm just joking', but I know really they are not joking. It's all this 'What you been doing – robbing people in the streets, have you?' And one day I say 'Why you just watching this bus, why

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<sup>7</sup> In a survey, conducted for Cariocca Education Trust (Edwards-Kerr and Frankham, 2005) the majority of Black and dual heritage young people thought the explanation for being treated unfairly was racism.

you watching the nigger bus?’ And he goes ‘He can do what he wants – it’s his school.’”

These young men acknowledged that they were sometimes disruptive in class – arguing, fighting, throwing things and so on. In such a situation, of course, one of the teacher’s responsibilities is to try to maintain order. As many of these students perceive it, however, teachers *over-react* to their behaviour. They feel singled out by some teachers as a way of trying to establish order in the classroom. The three excluded students reported that if there was a White student and a Black student involved in a serious incident, the Black student would be given a harsher punishment than the White student. They also regarded that White students were given “a second chance” in a way that they were not. Again, this reinforced the sense of racism they perceived and the sense that they were not welcome in school. “It’s for White people really, because if you’re Black you don’t get a second chance. If you’re White you get more than a second chance.”

While acknowledging that they were disruptive in some classes, some of these boys also described how they would be ‘picked on’ even before a class began. “You can just come in a classroom and settle down on your own and the teacher just start shouting at you. ‘No – I don’t want you sat there because you’re bad next to them – I want you over here at the front’. And that just trigger you off, your intention was to just come in and sit down on your own and do you work and already you just being in trouble. ‘Move over there! I don’t want you there!’”

The excluded young men all felt they had been removed from school because of a disproportionate response to their behaviour. So, rather like the young man (above) who said he didn’t need to do anything in order to be told off, they felt that relatively trivial incidents were interpreted as much more serious than they really were. The clearest example of this involved what was interpreted as a young man threatening other young people with a weapon. Again, we cannot know what really happened in this case. Nevertheless, the young man’s perceptions are an important window on a growing sense of injustice. According to the young man concerned, the incident began when he was “cutting up cards after school (with a penknife)” and “messing around with other kids” who then went on to accuse him of “going into this room after school with knives and threatening people with them, waving them in their faces.” Unfortunately, this accusation came soon after the young man involved had returned to school after a temporary exclusion for fighting. He was then permanently excluded.

Not surprisingly these young men talked of being most disruptive in classes where they did not feel the teacher could keep control and where they did not feel the teacher deserved their respect. For example: “She doesn’t control the class properly, she’s like a kid and ever since we’ve been in that class it’s just slip, it’s like she’s another pupil and no teacher is there.” Attempts at trying to regain control in such a situation also seemed random: “She blames me for everything that goes on in the class – oh the class is talking – oh you have a detention – get out of the class – you’ve caused uproar in the class – get out. Or where has my smartboard pen gone – right – get out. Not just to me but to a couple of others as well. She just blame people for no reason. That’s why I hated her.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the aforementioned survey (Edwards-Kerr and Frankham, 2005) 76% of students said that they had been given at least one detention in the previous month, with 88% of Black Caribbean boys and 81% of Black Caribbean girls having at least one detention in the previous month. Thirty per cent of Black Caribbean boys had had 3 to 5 detentions in the previous month, the highest amongst all the male sub-groups.

Other authority figures, such as police officers, have treated these young men in ways which add to their growing sense of discrimination: “The boys can’t really just walk the street with their hood up or anything. Like if it’s raining you’re walking on the street and you put your hood up, a police car will stop you and say you’re acting suspicious walking with your hood up. I want to search you. What am I gonna get arrested for? When you haven’t done anything.” This sort of incident was confirmed by other boys: “They stop you because you’re in black. That’s what they say when they stop you. The other day I was wearing a black coat. I got stopped for being on a bike.” And: “One time I was riding my bike with no lights on and they pulled up behind me and said ‘You don’t have lights on your bike – I’m going to have to tell you Mum that you have been knocked over by a drunken driver’.”

This sort of treatment makes them angry. What they see as disproportionate punishment also upsets them. As already described they often do not feel they are listened to, and in many cases, their frustration means they *express* their anger and, as above, “retaliate”. Whereas a teacher might hope that giving a punishment will result in the student ‘calming down’ and behaving well for the rest of the session, it can have the opposite effect . . . “When a teacher says detention, it’s like they expect you to say, oh all right, I’ve just got detention. I’m going to start being good. You start getting angry . . . “ It is likely that this anger provokes more anger on the part of the teacher who feels their authority is being further challenged. Certainly there seems to be evidence that this particular relationship has broken down in remarks that the teacher is claimed to have made to the student . . . “They say they don’t care, they just say they don’t care, ‘I get paid anyway, so I don’t care what you do’.” When a relationship has deteriorated, and attempts at control have failed, i.e. the student does not calm down, teachers may resort to statements like this. The unfortunate consequences are that these young men have *confirmed* for them that teachers do not care about them. Not surprising, either, that this may well develop into an analysis which includes some teachers not caring *for them* because of racism. The issue of care, of not being cared about or cared for was a theme that many of these young men returned to; the language they used to talk about how they *felt* was the language of relationships, of being “not wanted”, “not helped enough”, “like they didn’t care”.

## Discussion

There are two main points that we wish to draw out of the case study, our research experience and the account given in group interviews at this stage of our work. Firstly, it has become clear to us that those ‘at risk’ of exclusion or excluded from school have a very particular relationship to their past. This, we suggest, acts as a form of stigma (Goffman, 1968). As Goffman described, stigma is located in “relationships, not attributes” as people are labelled and defined according to the perceptions of others. These labels have particular social meanings both for those who have attracted those labels and others who are aware of them. Thus the fact of their exclusion from school acts to inform a particular “social identity” in Goffman’s terms and in this case a “spoiled identity”. This causes others to develop particular anticipations in terms of norms and expectations they have of the excluded pupil. The stigmatised, of course, know this and know that on the basis of past behaviour, forms of discrimination may take place. They also understand that once stigmatised, there is a tendency for others “to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one” to the discredited individual (Goffman, 1968:15). Another way in which stigma functions is to “engulf others’ impressions . . . such that it can become difficult for others to see beyond a stigma . . . In this sense, a stigma often plays the role of so-called ‘master-status trait’, since it is assumed to be central to the identity

of the individual and becomes their perceived defining feature” (Cusack et al, 2003: 295).

We see something of what it means to carry this stigma in Lee's account. Lee wants to control the version of events that Deon has through denying her access to other versions of events (e.g. his ex-school). He also hopes to control the picture his future college has of him by avoiding talking about his exclusion. He can continue to try to take control of the present by insisting on 'moving on' in his conversations with Deon and in his focus on future interests. He can avoid further upset for his Mum (and *from* his Mum) by denying Deon access to her or when Deon does get to speak to her, he can control versions of the past by translating for her. He is not interested in reading about his past either – that will be the 'same old story', focussing again on his exclusion from school. In response to Deon's requests to 'access' this past, then, Lee engages in active 'containment' of that past. Throughout the process he engages in multiple forms of agentic 'self work' – making and re-making himself in the present: “anything you want to know, talk to me”, and hoping and planning on keeping his future 'open': “I don't want to go there (Gladstone College) and get up to the same old things”. He's also aware that this is what he's doing: “See, I'm trying to make wise choices”.

From the group interviews we learnt that these boys' current experience at school is also pervaded by very particular versions of their past. There are at least three different sorts of 'baggage' they carry round with them. First, there is 'individual baggage' – past problems seem to follow them around and count for more than present good behaviour. This is true not just with teachers they know but with teachers they've never met before – their reputation precedes them. It also precedes them in the sense that a teacher might exercise forms of control even before a lesson has begun (“I don't want you sat there because you're bad next to them”). They also carry with them 'Black boy baggage' (“How did you get the money to buy that coat – been out selling drugs?”) Associations between being Black, taking/selling drugs, street crime and 'trouble' generally (watching the 'nigger bus') suggest a particular version of a collective past is inscribed on their Black bodies. They potentially carry family baggage too – Deon found out later that one reason Mrs Seko wasn't happy for Deon to go to Lee's old school was that her younger son is still at that school. Mrs Seko doesn't want the school to be reminded of that family 'baggage' by Deon's presence.

We also see in this data that (as these boys perceive it) others' versions of events count for more than their own. Relatively trivial events, as they saw them, were interpreted as much more serious than they really were. It is as if their reputation, in relation to past events, is a sort of lens through which teachers look to see the 'truth' of current events, and the latter is tainted by the former. Goffman (ibid) describes different types of stigma that are relevant here – that associated with perceived “blemishes of individual character” and “the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family” (p.14) “. . . an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us” (p.15). This may help to explain these young men's sense of disproportionate reaction to their behaviour. Their troubled past, and how that 'sticks' to them is also evident in their description of not being given a “second chance”. They felt they were not given the opportunity, as it were, to 'start again' and rewrite their history. In this respect they regarded there was a clear difference between Black and White students who “get more than a second chance.”

This is a story, then, of a lack of agency that the young men in the groups felt they had. They tell of past versions of 'who they are' being re-played in what they see as unfair treatment in the present, and over which they seem to have little control. Past individual misdemeanours seem to travel with them (being raised even by teachers who do not know them). Associations with 'trouble' also travel with them in their bodies – their ethnicity is not in their control. And they are not given a chance to 're-write' a troubled past through being given a 'second chance'. One of the responses available to them, of course, is to actively engage with teachers who behave towards them in this way. Their descriptions of what happens when they do this, is also indicative of their sense of powerlessness – teachers 'have no time for you' 'they don't want to hear what you have to say'. Their attempts at intervening and re-writing versions of who they are seems to fall on deaf ears. In this silence, the message is that the behaviour of teachers towards them is quite justified and Goffman is again helpful in this respect. He says of those who resist the stigma attached to them: ". . . we may perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect, and then see defect and response as just retribution for something he or his parents or tribe did, and hence a justification of the way we treat him" (p.16). More active forms of engagement and resistance to these 'histories' are discussed further, below.

Our second point is that by working ethnographically with Lee, and having to improvise her responses to him, Deon continues to learn about Lee's *negotiations* of the present. In this relationship Lee can write and rewrite the present, trying different versions of himself on 'for size'. As she 'follows' him (rather than the other way round) she gets to see the shifting and multiple positions he takes up as he continues to control the research agenda and Deon's understandings (or lack of understanding) of who he 'is'. As she 'improvises' around his 'dance' through many different positions she, understandably, becomes somewhat disorientated. What 'steps' will be required next?

Deon's improvisations are responses to various different 'calls' from Lee. He is happy to ask her for help with his coursework and from observing him at St John's it is clear he is capable of being a 'model student'. He goes there most days after school and at weekends, spends considerable time on his coursework, and willingly accepts and responds to help from workers there and from Deon. In this sense, then, he is willing to be treated (if not as a child), as a learner, as a student, as a novice. At the same time, Lee is planning his exit from home, school and Manchester and wants advice on how to do this. In this respect he is willing, again, to acknowledge that he doesn't know everything and needs to consult others. What he does not accept however, is that in asking for advice, he hasn't himself thought through the implications of his decision. ("They treated me as if I was dumb".) In respect of this aspect of his life, he very much resents being treated as a child. At home, he is anything but a child – looking after himself and the house for three weeks while his Mum is away, earning his own money, giving his Mum money, and so on. In respect of his friendships, he behaves very affectionately and playfully to his 'other half', who he later dismisses as 'foolish'. This is a guy who is in the same gang as Lee. Perhaps we see here an aspect of youth culture which seems to require shows of strength in order to dispel appearances of weakness. We also see this ambivalence in Lee's claims to be 'dangerous' which break down when it's clear he's unwilling to walk through parts of the city because of the fear of being attacked. Perhaps some of his highly assertive behaviour with Deon is also related to this idea? He wants to continue to perform the 'tough guy' but participating in a research project doesn't really fit the image. However, if he is the one 'calling the shots' (meet me when I say so, respond to my changes in plan, respect my silences) then he can 'reconcile' the two.

Contrast this with the group interviews, beginning with the group of three permanently excluded young men. The group who Deon interviewed were reluctant to be interviewed (only agreeing because one of the workers at St John's persuaded them into it) and were reticent when Deon did meet them. Many questions were met with one word answers, sometimes with silence, and sometimes they straightforwardly said they did not want to talk about the past. They also expressed a good deal of fatalism and anger about their situation when asked why they did not want to speak of it "There is nothing I can do." Their reticence and silence may have been partly a result of having their stigmatised identity reaffirmed for them through Deon asking questions about it. Unlike the unemployed men and women that Letkemann (2002) interviewed, these young men did not have a choice over whether to tell or not to tell of their stigma – they had already had their status as 'discredited' conferred by St John's. In such circumstances, however, they can still maintain control over the *story* of those events – this still 'belongs' to them. It is also the case that the stigmatised often experience a new form of stigma in being asked about their status. Goffman describes how people who are discredited feel as if they have become 'public property' who are regularly exposed to invasions of their privacy. They are asked to explain, justify, account for what has happened to those who approach them. In this respect, this research, however benignly meant, is another example of this sort of 'invasion of privacy'. The implication is that those who have been excluded from school can be approached by researchers "providing they are sympathetic to the plight of persons of his kind" (p.28).

Silence may also be a way of expressing the impossibility of telling stories that might communicate something of the complexities of what they'd experienced. Another way of 'reading' this silence then is to connect it to research methodology as, indirectly, Houston (2003) does in a study about 'looked after' children. He describes the stigmatising effects of contact with social services staff who would work in a 'bureaucratic frame' with children "concerned with getting the job done through the most expedient, and often, impersonal means" (p.60). This often resulted in "feelings of disqualification" (p.67) in the children and contributed to a breakdown in communication between the workers and children. This, he says, can only be alleviated by paying attention to the relational qualities of social workers. He argues for the 'face' to be put back into direct work with children, so that social workers can spend sufficient time to develop what the children saw as "understanding" and "care" (p.60). In methodological terms, this confirms for us the necessity of spending sufficient time with individuals if we are to communicate something to them of our own attempts to understand and to care. These are stories, of course, which are not straightforward to tell, particularly in relation to the sense of being 'out of place' if an exclusion has taken place that the boy feels is unjustified. We get a sense of this complexity of telling a story from a *position* that is unstable in the following exchange:

Deon: "How do you feel about being out of school?"

Ray: "I hate it, the process, everything, *I ain't myself any more.*"

Deon: "Why do you say that?"

Ray: "I was kicked out for something I didn't do."

Goffman talks about some of the challenges associated with taking on a stigma (like a disability) later in life and we would argue this is analogous to being 'labelled' through an exclusion from school. Goffman describes how this is experienced as taking on a disguise – i.e. not being oneself – while also having to come to terms with the fact that this is a disguise you cannot take off. Ray's difficulties with telling Deon the story of his exclusion suggest a form of silence associated with a *misplaced* disguise. This is not a silence associated with not having the capacity to tell the

story; it is not a silence associated with not having the vocabulary or being unable to 'put things into words'. Neither is this particular silence, we think, about how "hegemonic or normative discourse serve[s] to silence and reframe [those] oppositional stances so that they are silently articulated for fear of the repercussions" (Mazzei, 2003: 362). It is not helpful then in such a context to talk of facilitating the 'voice' of young people, as if the problem was associated with having the opportunity or conditions to speak. Rather, the predicament these young men find themselves in terms of telling their stories is the result of very real exclusions experienced in other parts of their lives. Ray is being asked, as it were, to tell the story of a life which he doesn't feel is his, since (in his analysis) he did not do what he was accused of and which, in some ways, now defines him. As Medina (2004) says, the 'reformist view' associated with 'giving voice' "misses the radical discursive exclusions that are built into the normative structure of our *practices* and the silencing processes that are constitutive of the way in which our language games are played" (365) (our emphasis).

In terms of more active engagement and resistance to the histories that they 'carry' with them, the young men in the groups talk of retaliation, anger and verbal challenge. The word retaliation is interesting here as it implies responding to an 'attack' – perhaps an attack on their own sense of self, on their reputation, or on their capacity to stand up for themselves. It perhaps reflects the depth of resentment they feel, and the anger that adults on the 'receiving end' of this retaliation report. We interpret part of this retaliation as a form of resistance to a particular history and to being 'stuck' with that history. Looking more closely at a couple of examples now, we see some patterns that suggest a further diminishment of respect that these boys feel they get from teachers. One boy describes his anger at teachers who watch the Black kids getting on the bus. Here we have an example of how past behaviour is used by teachers to prefigure what they predict will happen in the future. To this boy, however, this is blatant racism – the teachers don't watch the White kids getting on the other bus – they are not labelled 'problem' (either past or future). The challenge he makes to one of the teachers is directly related to this differential treatment "why you just watching this bus, why you watching the nigger bus?" The teacher's response constitutes another form of exclusion, in a sense. "He goes: he can do what he wants - it's his school". Thus he is demarcating whose truth counts and whose school this is. This perhaps helps to explain the comment: "It's [school] for White people really . . ."

Other 'truths' that these young men contest include the assumption that they are using/selling drugs, are involved in street crime and so on. This form of challenge is met with a counter challenge and one which leaves the young man concerned 'failing' again. To say in response to the challenge "Why are you always talking to Black kids about drugs and all", that it is a joke is, in one sense, to 'take it back'; in one sense the teacher is saying 'I didn't mean it'. However, in not acknowledging the seriousness of what he has said as far as this young person is concerned, he displaces the 'problem' back onto that person. The implication is that it is *his* problem for taking the 'joke' to heart and getting angry about it. The young man concerned is left continuing to feel the 'slight', and confirmed in his belief that these teachers are racist: "I know they really meant it". "I know really they are not joking."

This account, then, suggests (at least) the following three issues need further exploration and development in relation to policy recommendations: Firstly, we see evidence of an absence of provisionality, fluidity or willingness to engage in negotiation with these young men on the part of some teachers. The position seems to be one of 'knowingness' – teachers know who (and what) they are – they are 'trouble' – and they are 'stuck' with this version of themselves. This then informs the

present and future behaviour of some adults who work with them. One of our most important understandings, developed over time, through working with Lee was just how *little* we know about him and how hard it is to describe him, let alone categorise him.

We also hope this account helps to shed light on the troubling question of racism in schools. It is impossible for us to know, in any definitive sense, whether the racism these boys described was real or perceived. We regard this, however, as not the most important question to ask in relation to this account. As far as these boys are concerned, their experiences are partly the result of racism and, for as long as they understand it in this way, we would argue that the institutions within which they are educated need to attend to *issues of racism* (as compared to *individual incidences of racism*, although this may also be required).

Thirdly, this work has also highlighted for us key issues in what it would mean to give young people a 'second chance' in the real sense of the term. One important element of our continuing analyses will concern how adults might respond to the challenges involved. We feel we have begun to learn the importance of avoiding fixing the subjectivities of the people we are working with and that this is not just an important lesson for researchers but also for practitioners. Similarly, in becoming more aware of the silences and hesitations in the accounts given to us, we have become much more aware of how these silences – and the *silencings* they echo – are central to young people's experiences of exclusion.

## Endpoints

This research has confirmed for us the necessity of ethnography in this area. We believe we need projects that open up a conversation about the "essential disjunction between any imagining of our condition and social life as a fabrication of divergences and of events quite unforeseen" (Strathern, 2002:312). This uncertainty is important in respect of understanding Lee's life and in respect of us thinking carefully about what we can learn from our own experience. Related to this, we hope this is an account worth telling because such tales are *not* usually told. If, as others have said there is no 'blueprint' for making relationships in research, what accounts of the process might illuminate something of what happens? And how might we relate this to the challenge of other adults 'making' relationships with children and young people 'at risk' of exclusion? We suspect that the relative absence of such tales may relate to challenges we experienced in gathering data for this account – postponed meetings, refusals for permission to interview 'significant others', silences – where were we to find the 'rich and illuminating' data we knew we needed? We have tried here to work with those absences and silences and see them as a resource, to "turn our gaze onto non-events, and . . . problematise . . . categories of active and passive" (Gordon et al, 2005). As Mazzei (2003) says, ". . . we as researchers need to be carefully attentive to what is not spoken, not discussed, not answered, for in those absences is where the very fat and rich information is yet to be known and understood. This fat material requires our listening differently and to begin recognising the richness in our own and others's silences" (358)<sup>9</sup>. Alongside this, there is a good deal of anxiety associated with not knowing what stories we might be able to tell, or what endings these stories might have. This is, of course, the experience of gathering ethnographic data, which Strathern (2002) says will "become a resource only from some vantage point in the future" (p.309). Part of that resource

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<sup>9</sup> One of many silences in this text relates to the ethnicity of the researchers, and their thinking about how this relates to the work they do. They intend to write about this silence in the future.

is the story we tell here – it is a story about exclusion, but it is also a story of not understanding exclusion. Little did we know that when Lee said to Deon that he didn't want to read the case study ("it would be the same old story – me being kicked out of school") how much he was teaching us in telling us that this is not a story he is interested in. This – as he perceived it – would be a story which speaks of a singular truth about his life – the fact of his exclusion. Lee teaches us, but indirectly, that what we have to learn is how far away we are from understanding that life. What we come to know instead is our 'unknowingness'.

This approach to research is, of course, increasingly regarded as a 'luxury' rather than the norm. Ethnography is resource intensive and its outcomes cannot be predicted in advance. We have referred to the anxiety this provoked, but at the same time it also spurred our desire to write this account. It was developed in a context where educational researchers are consistently engaged in telling themselves and others a very different set of 'tales'. These are tales associated with the audit culture, tales which Strathern (ibid) says are exemplified by the metaphor 'loop'. "As a descriptive practice, audit cannot afford to tolerate loose ends, unpredictability, or disconnections. It carves out its own domain of what is going to count as description. (. . .) Itself a system, audit elicits a view of an institution or organisation as a system – as system, not as a 'society'."(p.309) We wanted to begin to tell a different sort of story – with the emphasis on the unpredictable in social relationships and showing the potential of disconnections or gaps as productive spaces for change and learning. This methodological approach foregrounds a reflexivity of discomfort which Pillow (2003) challenges us to think of as a tool which is "interruptive of practices of gathering data as 'truths' into existing 'folds of the known' to practices which 'interrogate the truthfulness of the tale and provide multiple answers' (Trinh, 1991: 12), and to what I suggest are unfamiliar – and likely – uncomfortable tellings" (192).

This is in contrast to Hargreaves' (1996) call for educational research to produce findings that offer "conclusive demonstrations" of what will make a difference to the quality of teaching and learning in schools. This is a call for 'comfortable tellings', for neat solutions, in a context which is neither amenable to the 'quick fix' nor served well by educational pundits who suggest this is the case. This call was fortunately *not* echoed in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation specifications for this research. We were afforded the luxury of carrying out case study work with six young people and having the time to try to engage seriously with those young people, and with the complexities of carrying out such research. That work has allowed us much greater insight into the relatively superficial 'one-off' interviews we have conducted. On the basis of this experience, we would like to emphasise to those who commission educational research that there are no quick fix solutions to the problem of exclusions from school and no 'quick and dirty' ways of understanding what needs to change if we are seriously to address the complexities involved. Instead, we want to talk of learning from what we *don't understand*, a sort of "negotiation with complexity" (Lather, 2006:1) that we have tried to engage with here. This involves trying to enact a methodology which respects the dynamism of the situation that is being researched and then learns from the effects of 'improvising' in the spaces – unforeseeable and unsettling – that open up in the process of doing that. This is something of what Lather (ibid) means by an "iterative productivity" (1), we hope. We like her idea of trying to work towards a more "generous critical practice, a practice that is more about love than suspicion and that draws on rich phenomenological accounts of embodied experiences, feeling and intimacy" (2). Love is a big word, of course, and intimacy suggests a very particular sort of 'letting in' to a life. What we take from this, however, is the importance of working with the strong feelings that were expressed and repressed in the accounts we were given and that evoked in us emotional responses to the people concerned - uncertainty, discomfort and worry. It is in these

emotions that we came to 'care', if you like. In observing our own responses, and in close analysis of the data we had generated, we also came to see connections between our attempts at showing 'care' in a research relationship and a perceived lack of care in some young people's accounts of school.

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