

**Title: Doing Educational Research in Rural Settings: Methodological issues, International Perspectives and Practical Solutions**

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**Introduction:** This book is aimed broadly at educational researchers, and in particular graduate students, whose research interests are located outside metropolitan areas in places that are generically considered to be rural. This book is both timely and important as no other text currently takes up the key question of how to conduct educational research within and for *rural* communities or seeks from an inquiring stance to explore the impact of educational research in rural contexts in terms of the lasting 'good' of research to those being researched about. We believe that current interest in space and place as well as in urban education creates a novel and parallel opportunity to explore educational scholarship through a rural lens.

The authorship of our text is international bringing together researchers experienced in conducting educational inquiry in rural places from across European, Australian, American, and Canadian contexts discussing national and regional challenges and ways of working into conversation. It also draws from the research experiences of the most senior 'elders' in the field of rural educational research as well as those in their early career as they share their research methodological issues such as unpacking their own subjectivities; considering ethics of confidentiality/pseudonymity in places where often everyone is well known and identifiable; thinking about reciprocity and converging interests; and notions of identity and representation.

This book is uniquely written with an eye to practicality and applicability for a higher degree and doctoral research market and offers a compelling international comparative perspective addressing a key criticism that rural education research tends to be too locally-focused, nostalgic or insufficiently attuned to the effects of globalization.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Researching within and for a rural community: a research journey.**

#### **1. Introduction**

Whilst working as a community based tutor working in a rural area of South West England, I was aware of a group of young people from one particular local community who appeared to be separating from their secondary school. It was clear that once separated from school, the young people became disconnected from more than just the institution, with its collected resources and services, which I saw as an injustice, they also became disconnected from their wider community of peers. These observations lead to a research project which was about social justice, inclusion and schools.

The research was driven by a desire to develop an understanding of the way young people in rural areas like this make connections (or not) with school and to begin to develop understandings of how

schools can better serve their students. The research was a critical engagement with social justice and set out to investigate how injustices and inequalities are produced, reproduced and sustained in schools.

Allan (1999) would call this a Deleuzian project of 'becoming', the 'politics of desire'. Deleuze (1997) says the only possible way to undertake research promoting social justice, is to be attracted to change, to want it in the same way one wants a lover, in the flesh, so real it can be touched, embraced, nothing more, nothing less'. (p177). I recognized an insatiable desire for a greater understanding of the situation I had been observing which appeared to be leading to exclusion from school and injustice for a group of young people I cared about.

## **2. The geographical context**

The research took place in a rural locality in the South West of England focused on a small, isolated village community known as Morton. Morton is in a harsh geographical locality and isolated in UK terms; it's 'such a remote out place' (Jo, student from Morton,) and 'people are never meant to have lived here' (John Seccombe, Morton resident). It is clearly a 'community of place' (Delanty, 2003) being a large compact village, centred on a cross roads with a few outlying farms, nine miles away from the nearest town, Riversville. There is a small primary school (64 children on roll in 2012). Morton is no rural idyll (Bunce, 1994; Cloke, 2003) and many of its inhabitants' experience poor housing and socio-economic disadvantage; access to services is a particular problem. The community was undergoing 'Neighbourhood Renewal' at the time of the research, a programme of community regeneration coordinated by a group convened by the local government authority.

The young people of Morton go to secondary school (with students aged 11-18) in the market town of Riversville. Riversville College is identified as a community college serving an extensive rural area, with an almost entirely white, English speaking population. It is much larger than the average secondary school in the UK with a student population, (in 2012), of nearly 1800.

The rural, social and geographical context of this research, the secondary school, the market town of Riversville and the rural isolation and associated deprivation of Morton are not unique to this region, they are recorded across rural areas of the UK (Shucksmith, 2000) but are rarely acknowledged in contemporary UK education policy.

## **3. The researcher**

Coffey (1999) asks that the researcher is positively present throughout the research and researchers must identify themselves as part of the world they know (Ballard, 1995). Ballard requires researchers to write stories about themselves as part of their reports so they become available for public scrutiny. This is particularly pertinent to researchers working in and around rural places where their presence as a researcher in the locality is probably very obvious (Anderson, 2012). I work and research in the localities in which I live. My work is a complex situation where I have a multitude of roles (Castells, 1997) professional and other which include that of a tutor working with young people out of school and lecturer working at a university. I have used the work of Henry Giroux to help conceptualise my life, work and research working as a 'border crosser' in the 'borderlands' (Giroux, 2005 p25). I work 'on the edge' of a number of professional jobs, existing at the boundaries of schools, families and communities. As a worker in the borderlands, there is a sense of being 'in-

between', a position embraced by post modernism (Armstrong, 2000; Griffiths, 1998; Mirza, 1995), which offers spaces in which to work and think. These spaces are between different groups of people, ideologies and practices and I find them very useful places to conceptualise my work. I can be both 'in' and 'out', both or neither. I can be both insider and outsider (Merton, 1972), avoiding binary positions like this and embracing a multitude of roles both professional and other.

#### **4. The research project**

This research was about a school and the daily lived experiences of a group of young people from a rural locality who attend the school. The study set out to investigate the role school plays in the lives of young people in an isolated rural community by exploring the motivations that the young people have to overcome exclusionary barriers and attend school. The study also set out to investigate the connections young people make with and within their school with the hope of furthering understanding of the inclusion and exclusion and how schools can be better places for young people to be.

Qualitative data were primarily used, with the researcher embedded in the school and study community. School attendance data were collected and analysed in the pilot phase of the research. Data were collected via interviews with young people from Morton, school staff and people in Morton together with a wide range of documentary and observational evidence collected in Morton and at the school with 'ephemeral' discourse regularly recorded in a research diary. The data was analysed primarily for content.

The 'pilot phase' of the project began at the Morton Youth Club where a 'youth empowerment programme' was being run by local youth workers for 13–18 year olds. The researcher was invited to a session where young people talked about their experiences at school. Some young people agreed to talk in more detail. These initial self-selected volunteers, Jo and Ivor (aged 16) and Marty (aged 17), were interviewed. Jo also opted to do an audio diary for a week which she recorded at home.

The initial volunteers recommended that some younger Morton young people were also interviewed as they thought it would be useful to have their different perspective. They suggested Lenny (aged 13) and Ali (aged 15) who both agreed to be involved and Lenny brought his friend Mike (aged 13). Some young people chose not to take part, including Robert and JR, whose silences were acknowledged. This 'snowball sampling', led to a total of 6 young people of being interviewed over a 2 year period. All the young people were regular school attendees, which was important as the research set out to find out the connections individuals had with school and why they went. A great deal was already known locally about why other young people from Morton did not go to school. The small size of this group (which although small represented a significant proportion of regular school attendees from this community aged 13–18) clearly limits the breadth of the information collected but offered the opportunity for sustained, deep engagement with the young people.

Young people came to interviews on their own, or in pairs. Each conversation generally began with the relating of a 'significant event' from that day or week in school. Generally the young people needed few prompts to report how things were going for them in school. Care was taken not to 'lead' the conversation but sometimes interventions were made to direct the conversation towards further development of the student's ideas and views on school issues. Meetings with the young people happened in school, acknowledging that this decision placed the young people and the

researcher in familiar roles with its inherent difficulties and complexities. It is also acknowledged that interviews are not 'neutral tools' (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997) and those involved have been involved in the collaboration and co-construction of the results (Fontana and Frey, 2005). No material incentives were offered, although the young people did get permission to be out of a lesson for the interview and did seem to enjoy the opportunity to talk. The young people proved to be very willing and illuminating contributors to the project and their stories provide great insight into their lived experiences of being in and getting to school. The interviews with the young people were transcribed directly and entirely without any 'tidying' so the transcripts appear incomplete and disjointed. The content of interview transcripts were coded, key themes developed iteratively and anomalies and silences noted.

The research approach was informed by grounded theory interpreted from a social justice perspective (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). The methodology was designed to 'turn up the volume' (Clough, 2002 p. 67) on quiet voices and so the research is based on empirical evidence in an effort to avoid being overwhelmed by the 'grand narrative'. My voice is heard throughout this report, relaying to the reader my construction of the case under study but I opted for a report in the third person, as an attempt to turn down the volume of my voice so that others may be heard more clearly.

### **Reflection 1- marginalisation and risk**

The young people central to this project can be considered to be marginalised, coming from a community isolated geographically, socially and economically. There are advantages, disadvantages and risks associated with research of marginalised groups. The margin 'offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds' (hooks, 2000. p207). Apple (1990) argues that seeing things from the standpoint of those with the least power can be beneficial to researchers looking to raise consciousness, offering a way to subvert traditional hierarchies (Foucault, 1988). Observations made at the margins of a social system, 'provides critical feedback to policy makers' (Glenny and Roaf, 2008 p. 2).

However there are also risks: risks that the research can lead to further marginalisation through 'otherising' or do damage in other ways (Bines, 1995) and that the researcher's actions can confirm or even promote separation between groups. There are also risks that 'the demand for narrative can become part of a renewal of colonizing power' (Allan, 1999 p. 113) and research becomes little more than voyeurism (Spivak, 1988) by dominant groups (Jones, 1988) and intellectual tourists.

Risk, however also gives the chance to break out of the cycle of certainty (Lather, 1994), in this case the certainty that these young people in this community will continue to face disadvantage unless risks are taken. Skrtic (1991) encourages brave thinking and action in order to emancipate one's self from the 'machine bureaucracy' and Fulcher (1995) asserts that research must be political if it is to counter dominant readings and so research which operates in social policy contexts such as this project, designed to bring about some kind of change is going to be political (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007)

### **Reflection 2 Ethical considerations**

In order to minimise the risks to people and places, there was very careful attention to research ethics throughout the project. The planning and implementing of the research was

informed by the British Education Research Association (BERA) 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (revised 2004). The principles underpinning the BERA guidelines are based on an ethic of respect for persons, knowledge, democratic values, quality of educational research and academic freedom. There are often conflicts between these and various positions are taken as to what is of most importance (Christians, 2005). Researchers involving young people must comply with articles 3 and 12 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child which require that the best interests of children (and young people) must be the primary consideration and that children who are capable of forming their own views should be able to express their views freely. This principle is at the core of this piece of research and is applied throughout.

Researchers must recognise the right to privacy for participants in research and this is problematic for case study work (Mahbub, 2008) particularly in small communities and places where it is difficult to guarantee anonymity for the case location and inhabitants. The reporting of data from this study had to be sensitively handled to minimise risk to the young people and the school. Dialogue with the school Principal was maintained throughout the project although a series of unfortunate events happened at the school during the period of the research, which put a great deal of extra pressure on the Principal. Pseudonyms were used throughout, for places and individuals (Delamont, 2002) and care was taken in placing the school and study community within the reporting. In his well-known study of an English secondary school, Ball (1981) paid very particular attention to removing all identifying geographical references to his study school and advocates the active misleading of the reader if necessary. As it was the relative geographical location of the school and study community that was important in my research, all details of the geographical locations were removed.

Meetings with the young people happened in school. This decision was made for a number of reasons. The roles of teacher and researcher could become blurred and it was decided that in school, the teacher/researcher role was more transparent. School was a safe and straightforward place to meet with young people although this decision did place the young people and the teacher/researcher in familiar roles (acknowledging that this has difficulties and complexities). The meetings were held in a room that was used by visitors to the school such as Link Tutors and counsellors. It did not feel like a classroom and it was hoped that conversations with the students did not feel like lessons. In addition to the written consent from the young people themselves, informed written consent was obtained from a parent or carer. No material incentives were offered, although the young people did get permission to be out of a lesson for the interview and did seem to enjoy the opportunity to talk.

Oliver (1992) asks researchers to consider whether it is ethical that researchers should benefit from the experience of the research, leaving the researched subjects just as they were before? Len Barton, in the context of disability research, argues that able bodied researchers should accept the power they have and exploit them whilst asking:

What responsibilities arise from the privileges I have as a result of my social position? How can I use my knowledge and skills to challenge, for example, the forms of oppression disabled people experience? Does my writing and speaking reproduce a system of domination or challenge that system? (in Barton and Clough, 1995 p. 144)

A similar argument is used in research on poverty, where the question is whether or not researchers who do not share the social and economic context of those they are researching, have a right to be there. Here there are demands for those in poverty to be heard directly, but acknowledgment that due to the 'collective weakness of people in poverty as a political constituency' 'there is a continued need for researchers and activists to continue to work as a 'poverty lobby' (Lister, 2002 p. 43).

### **Reflection 3 -From searching to listening**

The initial stages of the development of the methodology for this research were informed by Foucault's ideas of 'archaeology' and 'genealogy'. Here it was argued that a 'multi-methods approach' would be most appropriate to gather all kinds of data from as many of the elements of 'the case' as possible, in an attempt to understand what was going on with the young people in the case study community (which was deemed 'problematic') and their school. A Foucauldian genealogy begins with the premise that the problem is complex, which seemed very appropriate to the project. A Foucauldian genealogy 'requires patience and knowledge of details and depends on a vast accumulation of source material' (Foucault, 1984 p.76). In his work on 'archaeology' as method, Foucault asks that 'one ought to read everything, study everything, one must have at one's disposal the general archive of a period at a given moment' (Blacker, 1998 p. 263). This 'archive' should include statements from as wide a range of sources as possible – with no difference being made between official and private. As a natural collector and hoarder of information of all kinds, this approach resonated with the researcher's own perspectives on life and became a central tenet in the conceptual underpinning of the methodology and led to an intense period of data collection from a very diverse range of sources.

However, as the research got going, I became aware that there were a number of problems developing with this approach. The awareness which developed was as a result of an event (attending a meeting with research colleagues) which resulted in my 'stepping away' from the study community and reporting on progress of the project with 'interested others'. It took this moment of being 'out of the thick of it' to see what was happening. There are a number of similar 'stepping away' events recorded in my research diaries which show the importance of these opportunities to reflect on the progress of the research. The research diary entries show that these events are not recognised as key moments until later reflection.

Later reflection and consideration raised a number of questions about the framework underpinning the research. Firstly, even with a lifetime's worth of collecting, there cannot be a complete 'archive' required for Foucault's archaeological approaches. The researcher could not avoid making what is in the end, 'an arbitrary selection of historical materials' (Castel, 1994 p. 242) although 'consistency and rigour' in data collection may go some way to overcoming these difficulties (p. 242). It could also be argued that in this kind of study all discourses 'appear equally truthful' (Henriques et al., 1998 p. 109), which is also problematic. Secondly, it also became clear that there are obvious dangers in producing writing that confirms the view of the world by powerful groups such as the ones the researcher is associated with by default, providing yet more material for classification by the dominant culture in its own academic terms (Mirza, 1997). Mirza argues that explaining the research to others becomes an act of confirming the domination of the researcher.

As the research progressed, it became clear that it was being dominated by the researcher. The huge 'archive' of material and the 'grand narrative' of the Foucauldian methodology was turning up the volume of the researcher and the research project and overwhelming the voices the study had set out to listen to. The project was becoming a project about research and the researcher rather than about young people and their experiences of school. The project's role in consciousness raising was being lost as it became something too complex to share with colleagues, friends and others met during the research. It eventually became clear to the researcher that the political purpose of the research, the village of Morton, its young people and the issues they were dealing with, was being usurped by the research and the researcher.

It became necessary to re-position the research methodology and articulate a simpler approach. There needed to be a shift to a less complex methodological approach which attempted to allow quiet voices to be heard, whilst acknowledging the complexity of the study. This less complex approach was also important for effective communication of the important findings that were emerging from the data. A decision was made to use the conceptual framework of Foucault's 'ethical project' to underpin future decisions about the methodological approach. This conceptual underpinning ensured the researcher was constantly aware of the effects their practice and presence in the research had on any outcomes.

Foucault's framework of ethics focuses on 'the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, on the exercises by which he makes himself an object to be known and on the practices that enable him to have his own mode of being' (Foucault, 1987 p. 30). Ethical work as practice has a 'readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought ...a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental' (Foucault, 1988 p. 132). The ethical project does not have an emancipatory goal or promise of rescue to grounds of certainty (Stronach and Maclure, 1997), freedom or empowerment, so avoiding involvement in patronising emancipatory politics. Instead it offers individual researchers the chance to experience 'the self as agent' (Warren, 1988 p. 138).

Julie Allan translates the four elements to Foucault's ethical practice into a form we can use as 'method'. These four elements are:

1. Determination of the ethical substance: identification in one's self of the things that need to be worked on which encourages acknowledgement of the individual's role in creating exclusionary pressures (Allan 2005 p. 288).
2. The mode of subjection: the ways in which an individual lives within the 'rules'. The exclusionary nature of 'rules', structures and systems (Allan, 2005 p. 288) in and around a community and a school are scrutinised in this research.
3. Self-practice or ethical work: the way in which an individual can change the way they live. Key activities in ethical work are deconstruction, criticism and reflexivity (Allan, 2005). Deconstruction helps to subvert the 'ideology of expertism' (Troyna and Vincent, 1996 p.142) so offers 'ways to throw off familiar ways of thought'. Criticism should produce writing that creates openings rather than closures through certainty (Allan, 2005 p. 290). This research utilises an alternative perspective, to 'make strange' the familiar, to explore new ways of seeing and being.

4. The ultimate goal of ethical work, Foucault calls the telos. In this context, the telos is social justice, for those subject to the exclusionary forces in and around Morton and their secondary school.

With a simpler approach, it soon became clear that the data derived from interviews with the young people from Morton were of primary importance and would be considered the 'key' data. The research strategy of this 'ethical project' from this moment then set out to 'turn up the volume' of the voices of the young people and focussed on listening. It was here, through 'a readiness to find out what surrounds us strange and odd' (Foucault, 1988 p132) that lay insights into the way the young people were making connections (or not) with school.

#### **Reflection 4-Voice, participation and a space to listen**

This research work began with an aim for it to be 'participatory' and it was acknowledged that this is complex and problematic territory. The initial aim was for the young people to be involved in every element: a way to foreground the perspectives of the 'marginalised youth' and to identify and challenge the exclusion they were facing (Alderson, 2000, Cahill, 2004). It has been argued that participatory methods are more ethically acceptable and offer epistemological advantages (Pain, 2004). There has been a rapid popularisation of the idea of 'voice' and 'participation' with young people in schools, communities and public policy more generally (but it is rarely acknowledged in policy that this is complex territory). For example the Neighbourhood Renewal programme Morton was undergoing, promotes the participation of community 'stakeholders' so their voice is heard in the planning of community development projects (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2005). There were problems with this and Chairperson of the Local Strategic Partnership declared the 'stakeholders' had been 'consulted to death' which seemed to have alienated many local residents, who were now refusing to be involved in what one resident referred to as the 'social engineering project' (John Seccombe, Morton Resident). Ruddock and Fielding (2006) track the development of the idea of student voice in schools. They have both been long time promoters of the value of 'student voice' but are suspicious of recent growth in government support and see 'perils in the popularity'. They argue that 'despite rhetoric of agency the reality is that students remain objects of elite adult plans' (Gunter and Thompson, 2007 p. 181).

As the research project entered its pilot phase it was clear to me that a truly participatory project was unachievable. Although I consulted the young people in various ways throughout the project, I accepted that the young people had little scope for what I would consider real participation in the project. It was clear that in reality I would be controlling the data collection, analysis and the presentation). Some writers argue participatory techniques can reinforce rather than challenge hierarchical power relations (e.g. Cooke and Kothari, 2001). There are also some inherent risks with the consultation of young people in their schools. For example school systems advantage students who have the recognised forms of cultural and linguistic capital (Bernstein, 1977, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), those that can articulate their thoughts and speak confidently. There is therefore a very real danger that 'uncritical adoption of student voice initiatives may reinforce existing hierarchies' (Noyes, 2005 p. 537). It could be argued in this study, for example, that the attempt to include young people in the study further alienated them and reinforced their position as 'different'. There is also the complication of power relations among groups of young people involved in 'research' which might constitute new forms of domination (Schafer and Yarwood, 2008). What the



research did offer the young people was a space to really listen and take seriously (Giroux) what they had to say about their experiences of school.

This study ended up not being a work 'voice' in the sense that those involved are 'subjects' actively involved in development of the project (Gunter and Thompson, 2007). It became a work of listening. Veck (2009) argues that 'it is in and through listening that we emerge as unique individuals with unique contributions to make to the spaces we share' (Veck, 2009.p5). By listening, the researcher attempted to minimise the indignity of speaking for others and the imposition of meaning on their words (Lather, 1991), whilst acknowledging that it is ultimately the researcher's interpretation that is recorded.

## **5. What the study heard.**

As an implicit purpose of the research reported here was 'consciousness raising', not reporting the findings of the project in this chapter would deny the opportunity to listen to a group of young people who are rarely heard.

To illustrate the interview process and to hear from one of the young people, here is part of the transcript of the first interview with Lenny. This interview happened after the 'pilot phase' so was less structured than the first ones. Lenny began talking about what people in Morton say about secondary school.

*Lenny: yeah I mean normally when I come back from the bus around the bus stop there's a whole load of people and I say why weren't you in school today and they say I just don't want to go and I ask them why and they say because they just don't like it there. I don't know why but maybe they are nervous or rather like-they- some people say they get treated unfairly by teachers:*

*C: right, so what do you think?*

*Lenny: One or two teachers maybe – but I mean most people don't like it because they are like- you miss one day and you'll be behind for the rest of the term that's why they don't come*

*C: so once you've missed one...*

*Lenny: you've got behind with your work and get found out*

*C: so they tend to be around the bus stop when you get home?*

*Lenny: yeah I mean it's a small village so if you do get a bit off you'll be alright that's why they wait at the bus stop – I was trying to get on the bus the other day and this guy came up to me don't go to school today and I said what do you mean? – come and have a day off with me and I said I can't because of my education and I want a good life but he went don't mind I'll get someone else and I saw him at the bus stop where he gets on and I asked him what did you do and he said nothing so I said why didn't you go to school because it's just normal.*

*C: do you think there are a lot of people doing that?*

*Lenny: well I think people – what they want to do, they walk to the bus and get in Morton or they go on the bus walk into school and then walk straight out.*

*C: really?*

*Lenny: and then go around the town, that's what happens.*

*(Lenny 16<sup>th</sup> May)*

The issues that arise in this excerpt, truanting from school, poor relationships with teachers and the school bus, are recurrent throughout the data. It also illustrates the flow of conversation begun by the young people and developed with responses, questions and contributions by the researcher.

This excerpt illustrates the approach to verbal questions and prompts taken by the interviewer. The researcher initiates conversations if necessary, with questions and responds to the student's contributions with interest and further careful questions, behaving and responding as an 'active listener', at all times. I sensed that the quest for data had a powerful effect on me in interviews and there was a need to consciously remind myself of the need to listen, really listen.

The overwhelming sense gained from listening to the students is that school is seen as primarily a social place, a place where they make friends and enemies, meet with friends and deal with disagreements. For the small group of young people from Morton, social opportunities in their home community are limited by amongst other things, small numbers of young people and lack of provision of suitable 'meeting spaces'. Similar situations are recorded across rural areas of the UK (Fabes et al., 1983; Shucksmith, 2000; The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2005). In all the interviews with young people, the social aspect of their school experience dominates the conversation. School was seen as a place for connections and relationships. Jo would 'rather come to school than sit at home on my own'. The importance of the secondary school as a place to make connections with peers is clear. It is also important to acknowledge these connections may not always be beneficial. Lenny, Mike, Ali and Jo were all in trouble at school for their behaviour. It is interesting that teachers were not mentioned as important at all (Nurmi, 2007).

It emerged that one of the 'barriers' to attending school for some Morton young people, was the journey to school and 'the school bus'. This important finding emerges as a key issue for the young people of Morton and may well have been missed without a research approach which was adapted and refocused on listening. For some, the school bus is seen as a facilitator to 'getting out of Morton'. For others the bus is a barrier. There was also a link made with young people not going to school on the bus and the significant difficulties in Morton with young people causing criminal damage and general rowdiness. The increased risk to young people, of poor school attendance is well documented (eg Feinstein, Budge et al., 2008) with poor school attendance being linked to increased risk of difficulties with employment and involvement with crime.

The transition to secondary school is a time of great change for young people and is well documented by researchers (eg Weller, 2007). Evidence from this study concurs with that of Weller (2007) who argues that transition arrangements should have an emphasis on the social, as well as on the 'technicalities' of space and place. For young people from rural

communities, moving to secondary school offers opportunities for many new encounters and connections but is also a time for disconnection from primary school teachers and friends and of course a journey to school by bus. The student's conversations reveal that the bus journey is a key part of their day and that the poor behaviour and 'trouble' on the buses is a daily problem for many.

Acknowledgement of the central significance of the school as a social place is not recorded in data collected from interviews with school managers and from the reading of school policy documents. The discourse there is soaked in the language of the 'standards agenda' and concerns about attendance and behaviour. The importance of school as a social place is only acknowledged in this study by the support staff at the school, from their perspective 'in between' teachers and students.

There is acknowledgement by the Morton students both explicitly and implicitly that they see school as a place for learning and qualifications and some express anger and frustrations about what they perceive to be teachers' lack of control, fairness and poor classroom management. There is clearly an overlap in the aspirations of the Morton students and the teachers here. The school's vision statement identifies academic achievement as a priority and the teachers and students share the desire for school as a place for learning. What seems to be missing for the students interviewed in this study is communication with their teachers about this shared aspiration.

### **Reflection 5-Reporting the findings**

Disseminating the reporting of consciousness raising research activity raises certain ethical dilemmas and these are heightened in places such as small rural communities where anonymity maybe impossible. An ethical project promotes the individual researcher as agent but also demands attention to the effects of the actions of individuals on others. In a search for justice for some, injustices should not be meted out to others. The researcher was acutely aware of the risks of presenting some elements of the data collected from individuals, aware that respect for all persons must be maintained at all times. It is argued here that it is the relationship and interaction between what is said by individuals, the contingency, that is important. For example, the setting of the students' words against those of the senior managers at the school, illustrates the separation between their two perspectives. Exactly who these individuals are is of less importance. Great care was taken throughout the study to use pseudonyms for geographical and professional labels, so that the study could be located in a secondary school in a rural area of the UK. Precisely where is not important.

Reporting the findings locally brought with it great challenge. This was helped in my case by a number of significant events, some managed consciously by the researcher and others more serendipitously. The main data collection period required extensive amounts of time being spent in Morton and the school. Once the majority of the data was collected, the researcher consciously withdrew from the school and community. This withdrawal was assisted by changes in teaching commitments which meant time needed to be spent elsewhere. The following period away from the locality, allowed time for reflection and analysis of the data by the researcher and time for those involved in the research to move on. This period covered more than one academic year which has meant a great deal of change happened particularly at the school. These changes included the departure from school of the four senior staff interviewed and two cohorts of. A further cohort, including the youngest students interviewed in this study, departed before the report of the case

study was disseminated. There were changes in Morton too. The funding for the Neighbourhood Renewal programme with its Local Strategic Partnership came to an end and sadly both youth workers left as their funding ceased too. With all these local changes in personnel, the data can be seen to document the past and the findings to inform the future. This present space, between the past and the future could be envisioned as offering 'spaces in between' (Stronach, 1996) for mutual engagement in change.

### **Final Reflections on the research approach**

Allan (2008) among others (e.g. Barton, 2003; Slee, 2003) argues that inclusion and research about inclusion such as this project, should be undertaken as a political project, 'a disturbing and challenging activity essential of the struggle for change' (Barton, 2003 p. 13). Slee (2001) argues that if inclusion is seen in terms of 'cultural politics' rather than as a technical problem, it can then be seen to be about rights of citizenship for all rather the solution for a few. Barton (2005) argues that 'hope is central to the struggle for inclusion' and 'involves an informed recognition of the offensive nature of current conditions and relations and the belief that the possibilities for change are not foreclosed' (p. 23). Certainly, there is 'no advantage is derived through a calculus of emiseration' (Slee, 2001 p.174) but a sustained examination of what was clearly a miserable situation for the students who contributed to this study, needed the maintenance of hope. The oxygen of fresh hope helps find the energy (Brighouse, 2009) to continue with the struggle.

As a place to begin, Slee (2001) invites us to 'explore our own knowledge...and to examine the implications of the kinds of beliefs we hold' (p. 169). Allan (2008) suggests a way to do this exploration is to use the framework of the 'ethical project' offered by Foucault, in which 'oneself and one's capacity to act is considered part of the material on which work has to be done' (Allan, 2008 p.158). If everyone were to engage in ethical work on themselves, with the resulting increased awareness of how our beliefs, actions and language have the potential to oppress others, 'oppression would be reduced' (Allan, 2008 p.116). Seeing research in this way, as an examination of oneself, gives agency to individual researchers and offers the opportunity to see possibilities for change at the individual level. It also offers the possibility of this personal (and then shared) consciousness raising activity spreading across groups of individuals and organisations. This research began fuelled by a deep sense of injustice but by using the 'ethical project' framework, no attempts to be emancipatory were made.

All the young people were surprised at the interest of the researcher in what they had to say and seemed to welcome the opportunity to talk about their experiences in school. Their talk was 'full of oscillations, uncertainties and ambivalences' (Allan, 2008 p.1) which disturb clear conclusions. They revealed a deep sense of injustice as to what was happening to them in school and their community, but also their own exclusionary, labelled views of others.

It was the young people that provided new insights into the dividing practices in and around a school, including their school transport and confirmed the importance of listening to voices which make the familiar strange. The young people in Morton, showed a growing awareness of 'self as agent', which resonated with the researcher's own experiences during the research. This work draws to a close, hopeful that it has demonstrated that this kind of ethical project is possible for any

individual, and that if we all embarked on this kind of work on ourselves, oppression in all its forms, would be reduced (Allan, 2008).