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Dilemmas and deliberations in reflexive ethnographic research

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This paper traces insights into the challenges and dilemmas experienced whilst researching students’ interpretations and understandings of the *Behaviour Management in Schools* policy in Western Australia. Journal records, supported by student transcripts are woven together in a reflexive ethnographic journey—from the beginning phase of searching formal approval; gaining access to the participants, and finally the challenge of ‘letting go’ of student voices. It is the reflexive process itself that illustrates and provides understanding, thereby creating spaces to not only confront but also work through to resolve research dilemmas. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide experiential insight and understanding of ethical deliberations when engaging in reflexivity that allow one to move forward in this form of research.

Keywords: ethical appraisal; challenges; reflexive ethnographic research; student voice.
Introduction

This article captures some of the tensions that arose during my research thesis on student interpretations and understandings of the *Behaviour Management in Schools* (BMiS) policy (DET 2001: DET 2008) and the realities encountered in entering the research site; a large secondary school. In sharing and discussing with others how one experiences ethnographic research when engaging in ethical challenges that present along the journey may also provide stamina and clarity to ‘how specific issues can be managed and overcome’ (Russell 2013, 58).

The most significant data in this research was drawn from participant interviews conducted in a West Australian government school with students aged 15-16 years who had volunteered to discuss their experiences of the impact of the policy. The intention was to unpack many of the contradictions between what the policy was claiming in terms of care, safety and responsibility, and what was actually happening for many of the young people forced to stay at school. Due to the nature of this plan, it will come as no surprise that from the beginning phases of attempting ethics approval from the university, through to data generation and representation of findings within the thesis, that an array of challenges and reflexive turning points were to be encountered. Gaining and then maintaining ethical approval was not always a comfortable experience:

> It is one that keeps you wriggling in the seat of your research, fumbling in your own pockets of certainly and tossing and turning in and out of slumber (Journal entry 22 February 2009).

Nevertheless, as Ferdinand et al. (2007, 535) state, ‘in order to do anything we have to make decisions’. For the remainder of this paper, therefore, I recount some of the
important decisions made during my research, because as Rossman and Rallis (2010, 379) argue, every decision has ‘moral dimensions’.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) have simplified ethics into procedural (seeking approval) and everyday issues that arise when doing the research (ethics in practice). Examples of both ethical components were experienced during this research and I outline three of these issues in this paper, even though many more were ‘saturating every stage’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, 274).

At times I have incorporated extracts and memories from my ethnographic journal to express the self-dialogue that helped make sense of an emerging issue. Other times student voices are included to elaborate methodological reflections. It may also be prudent at this point, to make the distinction between use of field notes and journal reflections. Whilst interviewing participants, field notes were limited to key points, ideas or incidents so as to remain more focused and engaged in conversation with participants. More detailed field notes were collated immediately or very soon after the interview to record whatever I observed or sensed to be important to record at the time. Journal notes, however, were my reflections. They recaptured the events that had happened and were my attempt at understanding their meaning. In them, I elaborate on detail as questions are posed and connections made between events, all allowing ideas to flow. These journal entries, in contrast to field notes, may have been days after the interview, even weeks, months or years later as a connection to what had occurred at the time was once again triggered in my memory of what needed to be understood and deciphered.

Using reflexive ethnography was paramount during my research as I was not only observing and recording during the process, but also playing an active role in revealing the position and situation of students as the marginalised and often voiceless
player within the policy enactment. I often relied on field notes and journal writing for security in dealing with all sorts of dilemma, especially in providing the opportunity to reflect and therefore understand some of the uncomfortable scenarios encountered. Field notes and jottings provided a sense of liberation and confidence because within their scrawling and scribbling, and pouring out of words, ideas, questions and concerns; pictures of possibility were moved forward, visualised and thus placed onto the one slate. Barbour (2010, 159) confirms that ‘we revert’ to this form of writing and lean on ‘the power of textual language’ in times of questioning as we ‘attempt to resolve any uncertainties we may have’.

Throughout this article, reflexive moments are recalled that related to what was witnessed and experienced in struggling though an ethical maze of gaining and maintaining research approval. In doing so, I also attempt to understand challenges that presented along the way and question what I may have over-reacted to or even ignored. Barbour (2010, 168-9), drawing on Applebaum’s work (1995), refers to these significant and determined moments of dilemma as ‘stops’ because one pauses to make decisions based on their own subjective judgement. Foley and Valenzuela (2008, 289) also validate these moments as ‘intense self-other interactions’. Before sharing significant turning points encountered, it is important to provide some background context of the research itself.

**Background**

I began my research at the end of 2006. The question that I was obsessed with was, ‘how do young people interpret, understand and experience the *behaviour management policy*’ (a 28 page legal document formally implemented 5 years beforehand into Western Australian government secondary schools). The many contradictions, misinterpretations and unjust social practices on young people that I had
witnessed whilst working full time myself within a large government secondary school under the umbrella of ‘behaviour management’, had been the impetus to base my research on the impact it was having on the young people it was supposed to be protecting.

I had worked full-time in the school for 10 years and this was a school identified as needing extra money because of a high truancy rate and disengagement of students, and low-socio economic status of parents. A sum of $64.5 million (AUD) was launched in 2001 to spend on programs, staffing and services that would fit the Behaviour Management in Schools (BMiS) strategy. I had volunteered to be a member of the committee within the school that would oversee the rolling out of funding because I wanted to observe first hand if any consideration would be targeted towards students’ and further if they would ever have any voice on the matter. My suspicions were confirmed when BMiS monies were only permitted to be used in servicing Professional Development for staff in ‘Behaviour Management’ courses and then only if conducted by a commercial team of consultants from Canada. This was under the authority of the ‘Classroom Management in Schools’ (CMiS) project launched by the WA Education Department and Training and the State School teachers Union of WA (SSTWA) (Bennett and Smilanich 1994). The main portfolio of this amalgamation was to train teachers and educators at all levels in techniques and strategies that minimised bad behaviour. The process consisted of individualised training whereby a teacher was to be assessed on specific codes of interactions with students. Data regarding misbehaviour was subsequently recorded and processed on Student Information Systems (SIS being a software licence). In all of this, my main argument was being re-enforced; that Behaviour Management in Schools policy was a tool of control by central and state
educations systems in what goes on and what is to be seen to be doing something to solve a youth out of control problem (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003, 578).

Throughout this research, I implemented dialectical connections between choice of critical theory and personal struggles in practice by asking troubling questions. This culminated in puncturing behaviour management discourses and illuminating the operation of power, knowledge and control whilst also engaging in praxis to open spaces for student voices to speak back to the policy. Common themes emerged; ‘disengagement’, ‘control’, ‘marginalisation’, ‘relationship’ and ‘powerlessness’. Drawing on student counter-narratives, the data was then constellated using themes of ‘belonging’, ‘community’, ‘negotiation’, ‘decision making’ ‘relationships’ and ‘respect’. One of these themes appears in field notes taken after interviewing a participant of my research, Beth, who even though often felt alienated at school, was nevertheless keen to reveal places and spaces where she could feel a sense of belonging:

As the other students had gone on excursion during my scheduled third visit, I was left with only one participant, Beth, who was not allowed to attend because she was ‘out of uniform’. I took this opportunity to get to know Beth more personally. She seemed pleased to be leading me around the school. I had the chance to see where she hangs out with her friends; by the canteen, where she does sport and also meet some of her friends and teachers who were in the library reading. The librarian and another of Beth’s teachers acknowledge us both and the conversation is relaxed and respectful. In showing me around, I was to experience a ‘less angry and withdrawn Beth’ within her place in the school culture. There was genuineness in how students were connecting, smiling and relating with her. The sharing of these social meeting pockets was in stark contrast to the otherwise cold and unfriendly feeling of the place. (Field notes 12 August 2007)

For the remainder of this paper, I will discuss the ethical challenges that I experienced during the research. To re-iterate; these ranged from seeking and finding approval for research to be done in a large government secondary school, through to
issues that arose during my time in the field and continue to challenge in further research work that I do. I will share the deliberation required that eventually led to ethical appraisal, plus I elaborate on how reflexive ethnography continued to be invaluable as a means to resolving further ethical dilemmas encountered after entry.

Finding approval

Investing in research that involves students is bound to be problematic for any ethics committee, especially when asking students questions about what they thought about behaviour management within their own school. Applying a critical inquiry approach into school life for 16 year olds, neither neutral nor passive, is also destined to come across challenges as questioning provokes and unsettles the status quo. In the original ethics application, I had submitted the following kinds of questions as examples of those I had intended to ask students: What is school like for you at the moment? What can you tell me about school rules? Have you ever been punished? What rule did you break and how did you feel? These examples were regarded by the education expedited ethics committee as far too complex and ‘sensitive’ to be considered a ‘normal educational activity’ for this age group (16 and 17 year olds). At this stage, subjective terms such as ‘normal’ became problematic and I began to question what the term meant in the context of an ethics application. I had argued in my application that the research was being ‘undertaken in the best interests of the children’ and was very clear and well versed about the ‘legal and ethical obligations to guarantee confidentiality to the subjects’; two of the checklist requirements on the form. I soon realised that this expedited ethics process, could not by its own limitations, involve any students from schools. The major contradiction in this process was that students were required to provide informed consent whilst still caught up within a legal situation of dependent relationships.
For many students, the daily experiences of school life are indeed sensitive, intrusive and personal and therefore possibly disempowering in terms of identity formation. The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) had insisted I declare intrusiveness as a component of my research. I had always aimed to be ethical in terms of student needs, understandings and perceptions of behaviour management. At the same time, I found myself forced to indicate that I would be encroaching on students’ personal lives because my research could initiate anxiety and cause restlessness. At this phase, I felt ‘caught’ because being instructed to declare my ‘impact’ on students and their respective families, implied that I may not guarantee confidentiality. My intention, however, had been to provide students with more freedom of expression about behaviour management policy and its control over them. This dilemma resulted in me having to construct a letter of consent that included informing consenting parents that it may not be possible for all data to be kept confidential. The reality of having to construct this letter was confusing, as it was never my intention to have ‘alarm bells’ aroused about situations that may occur due to asking questions about behaviour in schooling. A carefully constructed letter eventuated that fulfilled the ‘duty of care’ component and was respectful to all parties without compromising the essence, critical nature and intention of my research. This process eventuated in me asking for student volunteers only and obtaining student and parent/guardian consent that could be withdrawn at any time during the research. This letter and the ethics application form were reconstructed and presented to the committee on five separate attempts, each time incorporating feedback received and adjusting the form accordingly.

Alas, three months later, a decision was made that my research was not to be approved and once again was to be resubmitted addressing 13 different key points. One of these concerns was that it had not yet gained approval from the West Australian
Department of Education and Training (WADET), even though I had long before received approval from the school principal concerned. This stage of the ethics process became tangled between the two as it required the reciprocal approval of each institution; WADET (who required the University sight written evidence that ethics and methodology have been vetted) and the university HREC who still required the Government department approval. Both institutions had separate ethical procedures that required working in isolation, and yet each was dependent on the other for approval to be gained.

What followed was an onerous process of swinging to and fro between e-mails, phone calls and edited written proposals to have the research application considered ethical. This process lasted a full academic year. There were times when it would have been easier to give in and do away with researching student interpretations at all. Fortunately, this did not happen. Instead, by remaining doggedly persistent and patient, plus receiving the support and advice of others who had shared similar experiences, the design of the research method remained reasonably authentic to its original plan, making these procedural hurdles worth the challenge. In addition, the research interviews were conducted very soon after ethics approval was granted, fuelling further energy to actively continue.

During this year long formal ethics approval process, a major learning curve was not to assume that people would understand what it was that I was planning to do, just because I did! I had to learn to learn to be explicit in any decisions made and provide minute details about every action planned because of the number of times that I had to resubmit the application form. I learnt that sometimes it was better to say less than more such as not being too specific about the questions I would pose regarding school punishment or rules. Finding the space between being specific, yet at the same time
careful what I was specific about, resulted in me being forced to define my position as a researcher and continually refine the research project. From this experience I have learnt to search, not give in, maintain integrity and therefore discover new creative spaces to move forward within the constraints of formal ethics procedures.

**Getting into the school**

The next challenge was to be ‘allowed in’ by the gatekeepers of the school site. This school had very similar demographics to the school that I had previously worked in. It was a large school consisting of more than 1,000 students and over 100 staff members and also located within a low socio economic area. The truancy rate and incidents leading to suspensions from school were both significantly high. The school was also built in the 1970’s for a much smaller population, under-resourced and thus in desperate need of repair. There were also the typical demountable classrooms enclosed by security fencing and locked gates that closely resembled a prison. These gates were only every allowed to be opened for students to be dropped off and then exited at the end of each day. Like my own school experience, there was the usual ‘sign-in-and-out’ separate hub for anyone entering or leaving the school (including visitors like myself).

Typically, it was with the principal of the school who held the power to grant me permission to conduct research within the school. Thereafter, the principal was adept in delegation of anything to do with my research. The next person in the bureaucratic layer of administration was the deputy principal. On my first meeting with the deputy in early 2007, it was suggested that the school use their behaviour record system to pick out a sample of troublesome students for me to interview:

Finally, I am escorted into the deputy principal’s office. Introductions and pleasantries abound. He is continually interrupted with incoming calls, forms to be signed and budget decisions that urgently need endorsement. The deputy does
manage to give me a copy of the school’s ‘Behaviour Management Plan’ and states that the school has received $100,000 dollars towards behaviour management. He then asks me what I wanted the school to do towards my research project and offers on behalf of the administration team to ‘pick out some pointy edge kids’ for ‘my sample’ to save me time and effort. I politely decline the offer and explain that I would prefer to speak and invite all Year 10 students. The deputy expresses concern over my decision as he states it is ‘a too high ordered task’ for many of the students and ‘warns’ that there will be much ‘apathy’ when it comes to dealing with the consent forms. (Field notes 10 March 2007)

Hereafter, in adopting a purposeful reflective position, I took the consequential action of persisting with the intention of my own research design. It was important to me that the theory and the data were reciprocal and therefore to interview students’ one-on-one in purposeful conversations (Burgess, 1988) to find out what they had experienced. I had never intended to use survey techniques or have a ‘sample’. The deputy and school services group had immediately ‘assumed’ that I was going to engage in a scientific study where I would find a sample of students, survey them and then go away with the data and filter into software sorting mechanisms for the results. It was more important to me that even though I may not have been granted the time to interview all the students, that I at least I would have the chance to ‘invite’ them and make it clear to all of them that there was to be no sorting or selection process based on deficit labelling such as ‘misfits’, ‘at risk’ or ‘behavior problems’.

I had asked that I could present my research to the entire Year 10 group (15-16 years of age), as this was an age group that I had witnessed most contradictions occurring in the school that I had formally worked in and it was also the year group that was the most homogeneous before being divided into academic and vocational streams. It took quite a few months of correspondence and persistence on my side to convince the school that I wanted to retain this mode of inviting students.
A month after meeting the deputy principal, I attended a regular staff meeting to inform all staff of the school of my research. This decision was met with very little discussion or apparent enthusiasm by the staff. Next, I attended the monthly Student Services Department meeting to inform them about my research. This group consisted of a manager, assistant manager, nurse, chaplain, psychologist and administration officer.

The manager commented to me that ‘sometimes it feels like our job is to mop up the mess’. The assistant manager appeared apprehensive and despondent to have me present my idea to the team; his agitated body language and tone, being uncomfortable in his seat and curt and blunt responses to any discussion about the research. I had the impression that the nurse and psychologist were keen to have more discussion but ‘silenced’ by the assistant manager’s dominant position in the meeting. He spoke on behalf of the group (after very little time for discussion about my research plan) and concluded that his team would generate a list of 45 students who had been identified as ‘at risk’ from their Student Information System (SIS). (Field notes 3 July 2007)

Once again, this decision went totally in the face of what my intentions were and I was prepared to take the research elsewhere rather than deny all students’ the opportunity to participate and hear from me first hand why they were being interviewed. Max, one of the participants of my research, reveals below that he is not used to being listened to or cared for by Student Services as his actions and behaviours are often misunderstood:

Some teachers help you when they know things are happening at home and stuff; others don’t take account of that at all. Like here they say, ‘yeah’, we have Student Services to help you, but they don’t notice things. They wait for your parents to call the school. Like last year I used to ‘go off’ at my teachers and that was because my Mum was trying to kill herself. It happened three times. My parents were splitting up as well. I didn’t know what was happening and I used to take it out on my teachers at school. No-one seemed to notice.
After the struggle to ‘get into’ the school through the barricade of formal ethical procedures, I was not keen to take the path that the Student Service assistant manager had suggested, so I took a deep breath and reflected on how I could find a way to work through the issue. I tried to remain calm at this point and stated that this plan would not be conducive to my research design. I then kept quiet for a while. I was relieved that I had the principal’s prior approval for the research and this fact provided some stamina and patience while waiting for the school to come around to granting permission to speak to the students.

After the meeting with Student Services, I persisted in asking the deputy and manager (via phone calls and emails) when their next assembly would be, so that I could introduce my research to the student cohort and their staff. This assembly had been postponed several times. I had re-assured the school services and management that my address would be short and succinct just as I had done at the full staff meeting.

I am also learning to persist with reminders – send more calls and e-mails to keep my research ‘alive’. Finally after one of those calls late in the school day, I learn that the Year 10 assembly will be at 8:30am the next morning. I am looking at problems as the beginning of solutions so going along to the assembly with greater determination and confidence. (Journal entry 30 July 2007)

I was finally able to present an invitation to the student cohort intended at an end of semester assembly in July 2007. My presentation was the third listed item after exam preparation techniques and the latest vocational training packages students needed to consider if they did not pass their entry into academic upper school. I regretted that I was unable to stay in the school and collect the consent forms as the school insisted it was their responsibility:

I could hear the mumblings, mutterings and gasps from some of the teachers and administrators as I was briefing the students on what I was planning. It felt as if I
was trying to establish a secret code and that my work should be treated with
scepticism and suspicion. There were no nods of acknowledgement, no reassuring
thanks or smiles, only diverted glances away and lots of whisperings. The students
seemed in contrast, 100% attentive (all 250 of them) to what I had to present. I was
then instructed by the heads to place the consent forms at the back of the hall. I felt
frustrated having to leave them there as I was not sure if students would be in a
position to collect them after I had gone. I also asked that forms be left at the
Student Services office. They were abruptly snatched away, out of sight, so I knew
then that students would have to ask for them. It was as if the predictions of the
sceptic administrators were being confirmed; the chants of 'no students will just
take them. Let us pick the students for you', echoed in my mind. At least I had a
chance to speak to the cohort. Maybe even if I follow the school’s method of
distribution, then at least there is an awareness of my study. Sometimes I just need
to feel strong in all of this and know where my intentions lie and where and when
to ask for support. I should be prepared for this scepticism and cynicism. I am
rocking some solid foundations of what is normally asked and how students are
approached—so I should be brazen and confident enough when some of these
predicted resistances emerge. (Field notes of the Year 10 Assembly at Anchorage
High, 31 July 2007)

One of the main frustrations during this stage of the research is that I was always
considered an outsider by the staff. The responses I received and the closed faculty
doors and power dynamics experienced in the staff room, however, all reminded me of
the same behaviours I had witnessed when working at my previous high school; many
of the staff making silly jokes about students in the staff room, judging students as
‘losers’ or ‘bad’ and treating teachers like myself who questioned these labels as ‘soft’,
‘not toeing the line’ or not ‘drawing a tough line in the sand’.

Two months went by after the assembly before I heard anything from the school.
I continued to send reminder emails, phoned and left messages that were not returned
and felt exasperated that I could not enter the school, be around the corridors of the
student cohort, make myself more familiar and begin collecting consent forms. I felt
locked out and had a sense of urgency that I work through this feeling so that I could
interview students. I decided to try to search some support as revealed in this journal
debrief:

Talking it over with other researchers; seeing the soft vulnerable spaces as
opportunities rather than ‘wounds’. Trying to take part in the community rather
than seen as suspicious outsider. I am considering the range of reasons that I felt
like this, this experience of loneliness. Instead, looking for gaps, spaces and trying
to understand the culture of resistance. Teasing out the deliberate from the
imagined…visioning. Some of those resistances may be the only way to stay sane
in an institution. Maybe these policies provide structure/instructions/simplistic
answers as schools struggle to function. Instead, I will try to build relationships.
Consider walls of resistance, not as bricks but plastic strips. I will try to allow for
people’s subjectivities—I seem to be listening and reacting to the dominant voices,
not necessarily the ones that will assist. There is some urgency that I try to work
through this and interview now, whilst this still feels to be an authentic and well-
intended study. Maybe I should search some supportive Year 10 teachers. (Journal
entry 23 August 2007)

I was excavating the culture of the school in search of an open free space. Not
too long after this entry above, I was eventually invited to interview students by the
teacher co-coordinator of the group of students I intended to question. I sensed that the
school realised that I was not going to ‘go away’ or ‘be out of sight’. The students for
my research were gathered by the co-ordinator from a cross section of the year cohort to
volunteer their community service time to talk to me. It may have been co-incidental or
it may have been in good faith, I will never know the real reason that I was allowed ‘in’.
What I do know and will never forget, is that after all the struggles with ethics approval
for my research, and blockages experienced trying to gain access into the reception of
the school, this invitation by the year co-coordinator was ‘a jewel’, a huge breath of
fresh hope and a major cause for celebration!

The year co-ordinator emailed and then phoned to inform me that she had rallied
together a group of 30 students who had returned their consent forms and a day and
time was planned when I could begin interviewing them. These students had been randomly selected by the school across all eight classes from the same year group. I heard later from the students that more participants wanted to attend but they did not bring their forms in on the day that they were called up. This was also frustrating for me to hear (as I thought of all those lost opportunities to gather more participants) but as an outside researcher, I had at least now the opportunity to come ‘into’ the school and do what I had long awaited—to hear the voices of the students themselves.

**Interviewing the students**

I interviewed the 30 student participants three times. Each time they were taken out of their regular class (60 minutes in duration) and came to see me in a quiet meeting place in the school in groups of four. The original plan was that I would interview each student individually for 15 minutes; the students, however, asked if they could attend in pairs or small groups. They were more comfortable with this arrangement because in the previous three years they had been in the same class. This familiarity meant that the conversations were interactive, respectful and cohesive as they spoke together, enthusiastically over top of one another, generating ideas and other recollections.

The interviews were semi-structured and ‘invitational’ in approach, professional yet friendly, as I tried to make the students feel relaxed and create a safe space for them to talk. Their stories were often connected to issues around their experiences of school; their frustrations with the school’s ‘code of conduct’ and how their lives outside of school had impacted on their performance and acceptance by the school ethos. I wanted to ask socially worthwhile questions (Thompson, 1999) that could shift the focus to underlying causes of behavioural problems. My hypothesis was that schooling may be part of the problem rather than the solution. Rather than research done ‘on’ or ‘to’ I was consciously attempting research ‘with’ the students. Quite often they would share
experiences that triggered off memories and experiences that related to one other. For example, it became apparent to ‘Jen’ and to ‘Shane’ (two of the participants) that their respective mothers’ had been in the same prison at the same time:

  Jen – I have pictures of my Mum when she was in gaol. We have so much in common [talking to Shane].
  Shane – yeah, my Mum was in prison for a year – her sentence was for two, but one year was probation [good behaviour]. That was in 2003.
  Me – how was that for you?
  Shane – bad…like she was in prison for my birthday, Christmas and everything.
  Me – What about you Jen?
  Jen – yeah, my Mum went in various times for a lot of different things.
  Me – how was that for you?
  Jen – I was six years old, so I was allowed to stay overnight with her.
  Shane – Yeah, the same.
  Jen – there were these houses and playgrounds; I think it was Corridale Prison.
  Shane – Yeah, did it have a fence with no barbwire?
  Jen [becoming very excited] YEAH
  Shane – that was so good…OH MY GOD, our Mums went to the same prison! It had actual little houses, little kitchens,
  Jen – yeah, they had TV and everything,
  Shane – they had their own rooms and about four people under one roof. I remember that because we had roast chicken and gravy for tea.
  Jen – yeah, I remember when I stayed over, they had face painting and were taking pictures and stuff of all the people in the house. They were professional photographers. That day I remember because I was supposed to see my Dad. I had not seen him since I was like two months old. But Mum did not know that he had died three years before and she only just found out that day. I hated my Mum. I did not like my Mum because she lied to me. She said that I would get to meet my Dad. I got really excited, but he didn’t come.

In sharing their stories, these young people have also discovered a junction of understanding and compassion and reveal what is relevant for them in contrast to the absurdness of rigid school rules used to enforce punctuality and conformity to uniform.
They find solace and acceptance in their discussions and interactions with peers who on many occasions were experiencing similar alienation and frustrations.

This first interview phase was one of reconnaissance and framing, as together the participants like Jen, Shane and myself ‘checked one other out’ and ‘found our feet’ in the orientation of the research project. The first question posed was ‘how is school for you at the moment?’ At the second round of interviews, held a fortnight later, the stories became richer and more personal because students were more familiar and therefore volunteered further information around the topic. My role evolved as a facilitator of equal time distribution and recording of flowing conversations. Any questions posed became more nuanced and specifically related to questions about issues that had emerged from the first round of interviews. These included those related to the ‘code of conduct’, experiences of ‘detention’ and the greater impact of what was going on for students outside of school. My role way not truly a participant one, and yet more involved than merely being an observer. The students treated me as an adult who was willing to listen rather than as a teacher in a position of authority. I tried to capture and understand this ethnographic position within my journal:

The process of first ‘finding’ the students, then ‘getting to know’ them as I chatted, had coffee, listened, joked, cried and laughed; well then yes a certain relationship is formed. This is not a relationship that you have with family or friends. It is not one that you can define as collegiate or supervisory or even the one you would have as a teacher. It is a unique relationship that you build as an outside researcher, an unknown adult, not really a teacher, not a parent, not a friend, not even an acquaintance. (Journal entry 25 August 2007)

Brown (2004, 308), explains that rather than trying to over-analyse this position, instead I should view it as one of ‘interpenetration…doubly sheathed in the experience of the ethnographer and in the lived reality of the participant’.
Invigorated with this understanding of collaborative cultural action (Brown 2004, 308), I tried to return to the school for the third interview. Once again, I was met with some resistance. The deputy and year leader who had been the delegated personnel of my research did not respond to my calls or emails. I persisted and eventually had to write to the principal of the school with a request that I could attend to finalise my work in checking transcripts with students. The permission letter I had received a year earlier to conduct my research in the school proved persuasive at this stage. I was informed that I should send the transcripts to the year coordinator in place of attending the school site. I had concerns regarding this decision because of confidentiality (for students), plus I really wanted to meet the participants a final time. It appeared that the school, had as far as they were concerned, met their obligations to allow me to enter the site and would rather me ‘out of the way’. As Rist (1981, 267) warns, ‘a researcher not only must secure access but must also negotiate permission to stay’. I discovered that the students had not been well informed that they could be interviewed by me a third time and even then only a small minority were available as many were off campus on an excursion. Fortunately, I had a third chance to interview these few participants. The parental consent approval was still valid and students able to add their interview time towards completing community service hours; a commitment they had toward their final year graduation.

When finally writing up the data, I used techniques of layering and triangulating participant transactions, field notes, journal reflections together with behaviour management policy discourse, genealogical tracing of policy and critical social theory. This choice of methodology developed as my way of capturing the realities of what the students were revealing to create research spaces for their versions to be exposed and foregrounded. Some students were so eager to have their say in anticipation of
improving the situation for other students, that they did not want an alias shadowing the power of speaking out. An example was Max (pseudonym) who often seemed to speak on behalf of many other students of the injustices they experienced:

> It is not just us noisy ones who believe this, even the quiet ones who come in, sit down and shut up. They will tell you this is the same for them. It is not like we are getting yelled at for doing something really wrong. If you incite it, you are the one who gets into trouble. You can’t really complain because if the teacher feels like making a deal then the other teachers will believe that story, not the students’ version.

Nora, another student, supports Max’s stance;

> Some of the rules are really stupid so no-one follows them because they are so silly, so there is no point. Like that uniform rule, not eating in class, having to always ask to go to the toilet.

Max explains that it is more important for students in their identity formation to maintain strong bonds and relationships with their peers than conform to rules that make little sense to them:

> Student services pounce on you, get on your case, they are like breathing down your throat. They try to suspend you as well, like if you don’t tell them what they want to hear, they say you are withholding information and stuff. But you can’t always do that because that is like ‘dobbing’ on a friend.

When combining student transcripts with observational notes, I then began to map and organise common themes for further discussion. By turning students subjective understandings in to more objectified perspectives, I was able to find alternative stories that counteracted the dominant discourse of these young people being seen as problematic, and at risk of failing school.
Letting ‘go’

The third interview was a visit to fill in gaps, sort and clarify, and a final check of the transcripts by the participants to edit anything they wanted to add or change. I also wanted to formally thank the students in person. I must admit I found this farewell to be both difficult and contrived as I believed these young people deserved more in time and attention. It may also have had something to do with my desire to establish longer lasting working relationships with them yet denied that licence by the school and the limitations of my own research:

The voices of my subjects linger in my head, and yet there is a void. The interviews are finished, so I can no longer share or communicate with them. I am left instead with a recording and a collection of their words on my paper that I tinker and toil over (Journal entry, 14 September 2007).

Smith (2005, 137) confirms that this journal entry acts as ‘second dialogue’ that ‘supervenes’ in the path of a reflexive ethnographer as one ‘rediscover(s) what was said or observed’. This experience at times had me feeling lost and was more than I had bargained for, especially as I was no longer entitled to have contact with the participants. This sentiment was especially obvious during the transcribing and developing of narrative portraits when I became uneasy and self-conscious about representing student lives and found myself asking if indeed it was at all possible:

Being an ethnographer has many complications about power and relationships. It is difficult to know how much to allow yourself to represent the other and how much to allow yourself to feel knowing that you are going to have to (un)feel again and continue on with further research and other work which may or may not involve ‘those’ particular participants. (Journal entry, 2 February 2008)

The notion of creating space for the students I had interviewed in which they ‘can act and speak’ (Lather 1991, 137) was reassuring for me at this point and began to be more
significant than my uneasiness about not being able to continue with interviewing. I also began to appreciate the power of the text I was creating after listening to their stories and used Lather’s (2003) argument of ‘textuality as praxis’ as revealed in my journal:

Now I am using these ‘scripts’/ ‘voices’ 10 months later and feel a sense of something – I don’t know what words to use, but it is an acknowledgement, an awareness, that I probably will never see these people again and yet, they have provided so much insight from these three interviews into their worlds. In creating this script, reliving the actual event, is like being able to step inside again, being privy to their sacred spaces; their combined interactive knowledge’s and shared experience. (Journal entry April 2008)

I began to understand that I could locate myself as an educational researcher in the action doing research on and with the voices of the students that I interviewed and also when transcribing and organising their stories into selective pieces of discourse. I found there was enough data to keep creating new stories, not only unmasking them but also interweaving them into the research story itself (Lather 2003, 260). With this reflexive understanding, my field notes and journal entries began to reveal more clear understandings of a growing awareness of the ethical dimensions of being a researcher and attending to the realities of students own dialogue. As Brown and Dobrin (2004) explain, this reflexive approach involves:

…redirecting the critical gaze of ethnography away from science and toward politics, away from the interests of the ethnographic Self and toward a concern for altering the material conditions that determine the lived reality of the Other. (3)

Conclusion

Collecting the voices of young people who have been invited to share their experience of codes of conduct in their school brings with it many challenges, but also many insights which for the ethnographer are real and substantive. They are our data,
those words uttered, those subtle body movements, those responses to our questions posed. Yet our actions bring many ethical dilemmas and responsibilities that at times require cross examination.

In this paper, I have shared some of the ethical experiences that had initially hindered me in my research role whilst engaging in reflexive ethnography in educational research. These experiences began with procedural issues such as seeking institutional approval to do research in the field of a large government secondary school and continued to arise throughout the research process–from data generation through to letting go of my participants and their stories.

Most importantly throughout this paper, I have been able to share how I was able to work through some of these ethical challenges as I describe the negotiation processes and reflexive actions that occurred to eventually recover the voices of student participants. Ethical commitments in this ethnographic work compels one to be more creative and collaborative, thereby sharing experiences that can transform and clear a path for future educational research to continue into the future.

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