Introduction.

In the busy daily life of a Head of Year there is often little time to reflect upon incidents that have taken place in a detailed manner. Details are recorded and a note is taken of the action undertaken but this brevity hides the rich tapestry of the interactions between the participants. In this paper the author will describe a vignette taken from an incident that happened recently in his professional life. He will then describe it in detail and then analyse the incident in terms of:

- the context;
- the social world;
- power;
- judgements;
- resolution of uncertainty;
- time and consequences.
The length of this paper is insufficient to describe in detail the author’s view of the social world, power and research methodology but the vignette will give the reader a clearer idea of his position on these issues.

The following approach to research has been adopted

“Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials-case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts-that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand.” (Denzin and Lincoln 1998:3).

Creswell’s definition is similar:

“Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.” (1998:15)

The last two definitions make explicit reference to a “naturalistic” approach to the problem. The vignette that will be presented is placed in a natural setting and is concerned with a problem in which both students were involved. It will be examined in the “naturalistic” tradition.

It should be emphasised that this is not the only method of enquiry that the author will use in his Doctorate thesis.

The view of the social world taken is similar to one expressed by social constructivists. Goodman notes
“Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking.” (1978:6)

The last quote has considered the idea that there is not one objective reality: rather an incident will be interpreted differently according to the experiences, attitudes and values of the participants. An extreme position, which some social constructivist take, is that each incident will be perceived differently (Denzin 1998). A less extreme view is that the general incident will be perceived in much the same way by observers and that fine details may well be missed.

A pragmatic view would seem to be that there will be some differences in the way a particular incident in viewed, but, there should be broad agreement on the generalities of the event. This can be observed in the vignette.

The author is using an ethnographic approach in a similar fashion to Hammersley and Atkinson. They define it

“in a liberal way, not worrying much about what does and does not count as examples of it. We see the term referring primarily to a particular method or set of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are able to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.” (1997:1)

Chapter 1 Context of the Field Setting.

The author is a Head of Year (HoY) at a large mixed comprehensive school in the south east of England. As such he is a member of the middle management group of the school called “The Executive”. He is responsible for a year group of 246 students and a panel of eight tutors, and five other teachers who are assigned to his Panel. In the main his responsibilities are concerned with behaviour and academic progress of the students in the year group. He is also responsible for the pastoral curriculum and its delivery within the classroom. In terms of boundary management he has regular
contact with various parents and external agencies. By definition with behaviour he deals with the unpredictable and has to resolve issues of conflict between different stakeholders e.g. between:

- different students;
- different teachers;
- students and teachers;
- parents and teachers;
- students, parents and teachers.

His teaching commitment is 33 periods out of a 40 period week. There are various meetings that have to be attended after school which deal with a wide range of different issues.

Chapter 2 Vignettes.

Miles and Huberman give a quite precise definition of a vignette:

“A vignette is a focussed, description of a series of events taken to be representative, typical, or emblematic in the case you are doing. It has a narrative, storylike structure that preserves chronological flow and that normally is limited to a brief time span, to one or a few key actors, to a bounded space, or, to all three.” (1984:81)

Whereas Holly, writing five years later, has broadened the definition to:

“a short sketch or picture. It can be of people, events, or personal experiences. Vignettes reflect the many voices of the writer.” (Holly 1989:104)

The vignette is a focussed, concrete story that can be vivid, compelling, and persuasive. The vignette can give rich, thick descriptions of events within the field setting. This, in turn, will allow the readers to make their own decisions regarding the event.
The criticism of this form of data collection is that it does not represent the original event, as it is an abstraction that highlights the author’s interpretative perspective. As such its verification cannot be demonstrated within the vignette. Researchers also suffer from this problem as they have to use written language to communicate their findings to a wider audience.

Multiple vignettes of rich, representative, meaningful, data carefully analysed can be helpful in formulating and informing professional practice. They also offer the opportunity for the researcher to be reflexive and learn from the vignettes.

Chapter 3 The Vignette.

The vignette written below is taken from an incident the author dealt with in the last academic year.

Context:

Both of the students had a history of “not getting along” with one another. Generally this took the form of name calling and then relating this back to previous incidents that may well have happened some time ago ~ not necessarily at this school. As a result of previous incidents a clear procedure had been established to deal with further incidents.
Both girls (Anne and Jackie) were seen by myself in my office at 12:00 p.m. because of a report from their form tutor that Anne had been kicked by Jackie for no reason. Anne was visibly agitated when she entered the office ~ her arms were crossed, shirt not tucked in and she was wearing a lot of jewellery (this is against the school rules). She could not keep still and was shifting from foot to foot. Her body posture was erect and radiated anger. She avoided looking at me and concentrated her attention on the surfing pictures at the end of my office with her head tilted backwards. Moments later Jackie entered the office. She painted a different picture: eyes downcast, hands by her sides, neatly presented and her shoulders rounded and slumped ~ a “victim” posture. Jackie stood at least 2m away from Anne and faced me.

Under the rules of engagement previously agreed with both girls Anne talked first and gave her side of the story. She spoke quickly, loudly and in a jumbled way, she bought up incidents that had happened in the past which were not related to this incident. When I clarified parts of her story she became further agitated “You’re always going to believe her. Everyone always does!” was the tone of her response. She kept glancing sideways at Jackie who refused to look at her.

Jackie gave me the impression that she had shut Anne out totally from her world and was not interested in Anne’s side of the story.

When I asked Jackie for her account of what had happened she spoke so quietly that I had to ask her to speak up. Her story was very detailed and precise together with witnesses I could call to verify her account of what had happened. Her tone and delivery was measured and rational “This happened because ....” was a frequent statement.

It was clear that there was very little in common between both stories. We then moved onto the next agreed stage of the procedure. I gave both girls paper and they
were told to “In their own words write down exactly what had happened.” I took Anne to a classroom down the corridor where she sat down and wrote her account. Jackie wrote her account outside my office.

After about ten minutes I collected Anne and bought her to my office to join Jackie. I then went through their statements searching for areas of common ground. I marked their sheets where I felt such ground occurred. The next step in the procedure was for me to write down sections of their stories that agreed. I folded the paper lengthways in half and on the left side I wrote ‘agreed’ and on the other half ‘not agreed’. By this stage Anne was less agitated and was looking at Jackie. Both girls were standing, through their own personal choice, nearer to one another. Anne’s posture was less aggressive, and Jackie was standing more upright.

I went through each of their statements word by word and clarified points I felt were not clear. When I was going through Anne’s statement she began to move from foot to foot and became more agitated – she did not like this type of questioning. Jackie however seemed to enjoy this type of questioning and was quite eloquent in her explanations. She did not become annoyed. After 30 minutes there was an agreed time sequence of events. Where they were not prepared to change their story and there was still a conflict in the story then the relevant section of the not agreed (right hand) column was completed. Both girls agreed with the statements I had written in the left hand column.

When I asked who was at fault both agreed that they had been at fault: Anne for name-calling and Jackie for kicking Anne. Anne was prepared to apologise to Jackie but Jackie was not prepared to apologise. No apologies were made. When I asked the girls what they had learnt from this incident they concentrated on the specifics of the incident. Both felt “past history” had given them no choice in their responses. Both disliked the process I had taken them through but felt that it was fair. They had no wish to repeat the process in the future and felt that one of them would be able to break the downward spiral of behaviour that had lead to this situation. I told them to tell their parents that there had been an incident and that I was very happy to speak to
them. *By this stage both girls were more relaxed to one another and I let them go for lunch. The resolution of this incident had taken over an hour.*

**Chapter 4. The Analysis of the Vignette.**

In reading the vignette there are several themes that are clear. The first is the girls have remembered how the incident happened in different ways. They have concentrated on the “wrongs” that were done to them rather than on their part in the escalating series of events. The evidence they have given supports the constructivist viewpoint that the social world is not seen ‘through the same glasses’ by the participants. There was, however, broad agreement on the essential elements of the incident.

The analysis of this vignette will be concerned with central issues of:
- context;
- the social world;
- power;
- judgements;
- resolution of uncertainty;
- time and consequences.

The Context.
The context of the incident together with the previous history of the participants was a critical factor in the resolution of this incident. Another factor was the influence other students may have had on the proceedings. Without witnesses the girls may have reacted differently and the situation may not have escalated. The HoY was aware through previous dealing he had had with each girl individually, as part of a larger group and in other interactions with colleagues, that they tended to believe themselves innocent of whatever had happened. Alternatively they responded to a pattern of behaviour from the other girl that was deliberate and pre-planned. To this extent a procedure had already been discussed, and agreed with both girls and their parents that would be used in any further incidents between the girls.

The Social World.

It is clear from the vignette that the girls concerned viewed the same incident in a different way from each other. Their view of what happened was closely linked to their own ‘innocence’ and the fact that they responded to the other girl. The role of the HoY was to find an agreed version of events in order to help defuse the conflict. The techniques used were to verbally question each girl, to ask them to write an account of the incident (which included previous history of incidents between the girls and names of students who had witnessed the incident), to go through each statement, question the appropriate girl and then see if there were any areas of broad agreement. The context of the incident, the participants and previous history of dealings with the girls seemed to be important factors in the process of conflict resolution.

Power.

Taking the resource dependency view of power (Pfeffer 1984) the HoY was the person who had the power to resolve the conflict. This was because of his place within the hierarchy of the school, the context of the incident (it was out of lessons and clearly a ‘pastoral’ matter) and that this was a major part of his role within his job. There is also an expectation within the school that the HoYs are good at this type of work and that an early resolution of conflict can avoid other colleagues and students having their lessons disrupted because the incident had not been resolved.
There is a clear acknowledgement of the power of the HoY over the girls in the way they respond to requests made of them. Whilst they did not necessarily like the request they still complied because it was in their interests to do so. If, for example, one had refused to write their version of events then this would have had an effect on the way the HoY approached the girl.

Each girl also had their power: they could have refused to co-operate in any aspect of the investigation, or lied to cover up their own part in it. Both girls participated but the precise reasons are unclear. At an obvious level they wanted to blame the other person for what had happened and get them into trouble. At a deeper level perhaps they participated because they wanted the incident to be finished: they did not relish other students ‘stirring,’ taking sides and prolonging the incident.

Power was also evident as the HoY did not have to ask for anyone’s permission to remove these girls from their lessons. This was an accepted practice within the school and the only other people apart from HoY who can do this are the Deputy Headteachers and the Headteacher.

The HoY also used his power in controlling the exchanges, giving the investigation structure, and ensuring that the agreed ‘rules’ were followed by all the participants, making judgements, and coming to a final decision.

Judgements.

Throughout the investigation the HoY made judgements: some intuitive some explicit. In part these judgements were based on his professional knowledge, skills and practice of interviewing students over many years. Other contributory influences were professional courses he had gone on (both pastoral and counselling) and his own experiences. Intuitive judgements were based on non-verbal communication (NVC) of the participants and experience of previous similar incidents in his professional life.

Argyle has sub-divided the main non-verbal signals used by man (sic):
- bodily contact;
proximity;
orientation;
appearance;
posture;
head-nods;
facial expression;
gestures;
looking;
non-verbal aspects of speech.

Argyle says

“NVC in man is used to manage the immediate social situation, to support verbal communication and to replace verbal communication.” (1972:251)

He quotes Abercrombie who says

“We speak with our vocal organs, but we converse with our whole body.” (1987:37)

The non-verbal clues the HoY used in this situation were a result of his experiences but the major ones used were: orientation, proximity and gestures. The complex decoding of the non-verbal communication from both girls happens subconsciously and the information was then added to the on-going verbal investigation of the incident.

Within the verbal exchanges the HoY made judgements based on accuracy, consistency and the likelihood of such an event happening. Both girls were given adequate chance to defend or change their stories without further punishment being incurred. All this information was then added to the ‘big picture’ of the event. The experience of incidents the HoY had previously dealt with, the history of the students, their non-verbal communication, fairness and the consistency of the stories was then linked and the HoY made a judgement. Rather than an explicit set of standard steps
that were mechanistically applied a significant portion of the HoY’s judgement was made on information that had been gathered sub-consciously.

Resolution of Uncertainty.

The HoY had two differing accounts of an incident and one of the jobs he had to do was to reduce the uncertainty (or inconsistency) between the accounts. It was only after this had been done that a reasonably fair judgement could be made. Other colleagues heard that there was an incident and may have been told different stories. The resolution of the incident could only take place if the inconsistencies surrounding the incident had been made less. This resolution had two levels: an internal level to the HoY and a public level where the action taken and judgement of the HoY would be recorded in the girl’s files.

The HoY had to be relatively certain in his own mind of the “truth” of the accounts before he made his decision. Only after this had been done could the next stage be taken ~ that of making the decision public to the girls and the wider audience. In pragmatic terms this process had to occur within a time frame of one and a half hours. Beyond this point the girls would have had to have their lunch, they could have talked to their friends and then the situation may well have become even more uncertain.

Time and Consequences.

Given the nature of the problem, previous parental contact and the potential disruption to the classes education if this incident was not dealt with in a fair, effective and efficient manner the HoY made a decision to resolve this incident as quickly as possible. A fortunate set of circumstances meant that he had a non-contact period immediately available to him. Although this time had been allocated to marking a set of books a decision had to be made as to the most effective use of the HoY’s time. The decision was taken to investigate the incident immediately because of the potential disruption to the rest of the class, the fact that with extended contact with friends the original incident may have become more confused (and therefore more
difficult to resolve) and consequently the HoY would have had to spend more time resolving the incident.

The vignette has been analysed using concepts that are relevant to the role of HoY in conflict resolution. The way the HoY used the information and the judgements he made have been described. It is possible that the reader may consider some of the methodology used to make the decision intuitive and falling short of the cannons of ‘the scientific method’. The swamp of day-to-day professional practice of the HoY is messy. There are numerous influences acting upon any given situation, which cannot be separated out. Sanger states that

“people being people, are not very reliable as subjects of attempts to achieve validity. They change their stories. They lie. They refuse to talk. They forget. They move on and become impossible to trace. They can have a lot to lose.” (1996:40)

This vignette has shown a real situation experienced by the author together with the actions he took to resolve it. As such it offers a rich, thick description of an incident, which the reader can make their own informed judgements over. A series of these vignettes that involve different parts of the HoY’s role would provide an insight into the various demands on a HoY in the field.

Chapter 5 Personal Reflections.

This paper has been concerned with practical, ‘bread and butter’ issues of the Head of Year’s role. On reflection the analysis of the vignette was a useful and illuminating exercise. It made me think more deeply regarding issues of power and communication than I had done for some time and this in turn informed my professional practice. This was due in part to the act of writing the vignette but also because I was applying various theories in a practical sense. Reviewing the vignette led me to consider the number of times teachers reflect on incidents in this detailed manner.

Within the context of the everyday life of a teacher the time available for reflection within the school day has become more limited because of the increasing demands on
teachers. Unless the teacher is being observed when there is an incident then it is more unlikely that they will be given quite precise advice regarding issues of body language, personal space and general feedback on how they managed the situation. It is more likely that the teacher was teaching alone and that there would not be any independent observation on how they managed the situation. If an incident report is completed then it is written in a factual style that does not necessarily take account of the individual’s feelings. By writing vignettes the teachers will revisit the incident and re-examine some of the actions they took. The act of writing

“fixes the dynamics of thought and meaning; it provides the basis for holding these dynamics steady and making them available for contemplation and interrogation; it makes them tangible in a way that simply keeping them ‘in the head’ can never do (unless one has a prodigious, non-visual memory), and nor can speech, for similar reasons.” Green (1993:5)

It is this iterative process that can inform and improve professional practice throughout a teacher’s career. Thus, I feel that it would be a useful exercise for teachers to record vignettes throughout their teaching career and then share their data in a ‘no blame discussion’ with other colleagues. In this way incidents would be discussed openly and a variety of different views given that would enrich the professional expertise of all those involved.

Post Script - The Value of Reflective Practice in Professional Doctorate Programmes  Dr Steven Wilkinson

The methods used by the HoY in this paper are reflective. Alongside observational and reflective writing skills the researcher is required to develop a sense of detachment. A desire to see oneself differently or perhaps as others would see them. It is when this point is reached that more layers of understanding can be pulled back.

Taking the discussion above as an example, the writer has revealed some ‘theories in action’. Take the decision made prioritising use of time. Further interrogation of the analysis of the vignette throws up searching questions, such as ’Does the calming of
the protagonists in the vignette constitute conflict resolution?’ and ‘What are the espoused theories in play here?’ (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

The development of a professional practice is regarded as being akin to ‘cultural change’. It is a microcosm of the same theories. What is occurring is in fact a series of ripples of change linked by cause and effect. As one conscious decision is made, based on what is learned from reflection, the general ‘climate’ of an individual’s professional practise changes. Ideally, over time significant change can occur and higher levels of professionalism can be realised.

The author of this paper is undertaking a Professional Doctorate by research, however, he makes a significant point about the opportunities provided to teachers to engage in reflective practice. Case sharing or peer review has over time been de-emphasised in favour of quantitative accountability. Higher education programmes may provide one of the few remaining opportunities for teachers to develop a reflective practice.
References.


