Planning and undertaking a research project at Kingsway High School

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Abstract

In September 2010 I began an ESRC CASE Studentship in the School of Education, University of Manchester, and Kingswood High School (anonymised name). In this paper I intend to present a reflexive analysis of the first year of the studentship, with a particular emphasis on working as a “liquid researcher” (Thomson and Gunter 2011) both inside and outside of the university and school. I intend taking seriously the recognition that research is a “mess” (Law 2004) and that as a researcher it is integral to my project to challenge my own thinking and learning as the PhD is formed and begun. I intend asking the following questions: (a) what does it mean to be an ESRC funded PhD student in the University and the School? (b) how is research understood in the University and the School? and (c) how has my identity as researcher developed through institutional boundary crossing? I entered the UoM and Kingswood after the studentship had been won, and a formal application and appointment process had been completed. Kingswood is officially a successful school, had built a positive approach to research and had worked on developing a learning culture. I worked with my supervisor and school personnel to design and implement a baseline data collection process, and using this data I reported to the school on key findings to support policymaking and to begin negotiations on my PhD project. The baseline study shows how firstly, the school has developed a strong sense of a learning culture amongst members of the school community, and secondly the extent to which this culture differed amongst a significant minority of students, who had been identified as underachieving, with a segment of this group subsequently described as ‘disengaged’ from both the learning process and the cultural life of the school. I will use my research diary to provide a thematic account of the first year and to examine the research questions. Specifically I will examine both practical and philosophical issues regarding learning about my identity as a researcher who moves between similar and different institutions, professionals and organizational purposes. I intend to present a theorizing of what it means to be simultaneously in and out, and between, and what this means for the development of a coherent project that meets the requirements of the school, university and the social sciences.
Introduction

I have recently completed the first year of my doctorate in education. Whilst at once my identity as a student of the School of Education at the University has been established and reified by this process, I have simultaneously developed and managed a parallel identity as my work as a researcher in a secondary school in northwest England has evolved. I entered into the PhD as a researcher with little idea of how important it would be to develop a reflexive position regarding my identity. As the last year has progressed Thomson and Gunter’s conceptualisation of a ‘liquid researcher’ (2011) has provided a useful, if not fixed starting point for me to develop a descriptor for my identity as a researcher that traverses within and between two interconnected yet separate institutions. The management of these parallel and yet interconnected identities has formed a vital part of my engagement with the methodological positioning of myself within my research and reflects the messy and often contradictory nature of qualitative inquiry, in which multiple identities arise, retract and reform as the researcher grapples with complex processes of agency and structure within their research setting. This paper will draw together my experiences of both the practical and philosophical issues that have arisen over the first year, acknowledging the inherent complexity and duality of identity formation when crossing within and between different institutional boundaries as a ‘liquid’ researcher (Thomson and Gunter: 2011).

I will begin with a brief summarisation of the initial time I spent at school, conducting research to produce a baseline report and to contextualise the role of Kingswood High School in the development of a research agenda and the history of the school’s involvement in collaborating on such university led projects. I will discuss some of the findings in order to frame how my research project has since developed and highlight the research questions that I have since developed which form the basis of my research for the upcoming academic year. The themes that arose as a result of the baseline report and have as such informed the research questions focus around issues of marginalisation (geographical and educational) aspiration (student, parental and school) and achievement.

The second section of the paper will start to unpack the development of my role of researcher within the school using illustrative examples of how the data collection process highlighted the importance of agency amongst various participants in the research process (inside the case study organisation and outside in the university) and how these relationships and perceptions have since influenced the way in which I think about the ongoing development of the research project. This reflective account aims to draw together specific practical experience with broader philosophical inquiries and methodological approaches to try to make meaning of the multiplicity of roles that occur as a result of researcher identity operating within and across differing institutional boundaries in relation to the development of a research project.

The last section of the paper will discuss the importance of acknowledging the relationship between positionality, power and knowledge construction when considering one’s own identity in the research process and the effect of this on the data collection process. As mentioned the conception of the ‘liquid researcher’ has helped me to consider the differing and complex postionalities of being both inside and outside the case study organisation and the extent to which resultant complex power dynamics “are factors that bear on knowledge construction and representation in the research process” (Merriam et al: 2001: 416).

The fluidity of identity

Research practice within schools can be a ‘messy’ process in which the researcher identity is not fixed and stable but rather part of a fluid process (Thomson and Gunter 2010; Sikes et al 1985; 2007; Law: 2004). A researcher who is also a member of the organisation under which their work is carried out may have the advantages of knowing intimately the systems and structures which guide the institution, and as such have a more thorough insight into the more subtle nuances of relationships and agency that may inform and affect the data collection process, however may
lack the much needed distance and perspective which which to critically appraise the events which they study. An outsider researcher on the other hand has the criticality of a fresh pair of eyes with which to cast over the machinery of the organisation, yet may also be charged with misinterpretation of events as the externality of their role may exclude them from (Thomson and Gunter: 2011: 18). Thomson and Gunter argue that whilst the fluidity of the notion of the insider/outsider binary is helpful in attempting to unravel researcher identity it has its limitations when applied to the role of university researchers conducting research in schools as often the researcher identity can be both in and out at the same time, as the process itself, within the dynamic, stable yet at times unpredictable environment of a school is a messy process, in which the researcher identity is constantly moving, retracting and responding to circumstances within the data collection process as they arise (Thomson and Gunter 2010; Merriam et al: 2001).

As such Thomson and Gunter argue that the binary notion of insider vs outsider researcher does not adequately address the flux and diversity of qualitative studies in schools, conducted by doctoral or university researchers. My experience to date concurs with this position and makes me feel nervous to assign a presumptive label to my identity, and I feel far more comfortable working towards the development of an identity which recognises the fluidity of my position as I cross between and within the institutional boundaries of the university and the school, yet also places me within the research context in a more site specific way than purely 'outsider' or university researcher' or 'doctoral student'. The process of undertaking an ESRC sponsored studentship at the University of Manchester, which involves working with a case school has provided some illustrative examples of how in the first year of the studentship I have started to develop a position as a liquid researcher, and has sharpened an understanding within me that the research process is a messy one, in which processes of data collection and the subsequent analysis and dissemination of findings to different stakeholders within both the school and the university needs to engage with the notions of being both in and out in order to ensure a robust, coherent and useful piece of research.

The Baseline Report
My studentship, sponsored by the ESRC and Kingswood High School, was cemented in September 2010 when a formal contract between the school, the university and myself was drawn and signed between all parties. A financial settlement was confirmed in which both the ESRC and the school took joint responsibility for the grant which would fund the research for the following three years. Imbued within this tri-partite agreement was an acknowledgement that the development of the research agenda had to address issues that engaged with conceptual frameworks and empirical inquiries redolent to the broader field of the sociology of education, whilst utilising the site-specific context in which Kingswood High School was currently operating in order to identify and subsequently engage with a project which would be of localised benefit to the school and its surrounding community. As such, the course of becoming a 'funded' PhD student very quickly established the agency of both the school and the ESRC in the development of my research project, and highlighted that the development of the project was not going to be a value free or neutral activity (Cheek: 2000: 387).

1 Towards the end of this academic year, a group within the school of education started to think of how to describe us, a group of PhD students conducting site specific studies in schools in the greater manchester area, influenced by the strong tradition of case study research in educational studies (Hargreaves, Ball, Corrigan, Lacey, Beynon etc) especially as grown and developed by researchers at Manchester since the 1960's (Lacey: in Ball: 1981: xii). The notion of 'embedded researcher' has been explored, influenced by the the description of the 'embedded journalists' working with the military in Afghanistan since 2003, and an embedded researcher network is currently in development between myself and colleagues in the school of education. The conceptualisation of this notion as applied to educational researchers
It was agreed that I would undertake an initial period at the school, in order to collect data that would form the basis of a baseline report and provide the foundations for developing a research project for the remainder of the doctorate. This process would also grant me the opportunity to start to establish myself as a researcher at the school, initiating the necessary social interactions with staff, students, parents and governors, as well as provide the school with a document from which I could illustrate tangible evidence of value for money.

I began the data collection process in earnest in October 2010, having received ethical approval from the university committee. Initially the timetable for data collection was to be three weeks, in which I would spend the time in school interviewing staff and students, as well as distributing questionnaires for staff, students and parents. I also planned to undertake a number of lesson and meeting observations as well as conduct an interview with the chair of governors (Table 1). I was looking to explore teaching and learning and by triangulating the data collection process in such a way that I covered lesson, student and teacher I felt confident that I would be able to start to draw an accurate portrayal of the processes and perceptions of teaching and learning at the school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection Method</th>
<th>Participant information</th>
<th>Return rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Students (1490)</td>
<td>260 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Teaching Staff (83)</td>
<td>27 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Parents/Carers (e. 1000)</td>
<td>190 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured Interview</td>
<td>15 staff</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured Interviews</td>
<td>23 students (year’s 8,9, 11, 13)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson Observations</td>
<td>6 lessons (year’s 8,9,11,13)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured Interviews</td>
<td>Chair of Governors</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interviews</td>
<td>2x Headteachers of feeder primary schools</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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The process of trying to identify a cross section of lessons, which had approval of the school leadership team, and a cross section of student abilities (the school is streamed in all subjects from the second half of the first term in year 7), of whom letters had to be sent to parents, and more importantly returned before data collection could commence, proved to take three weeks in itself. It was during this process that I began to realise that the dynamic organism of a secondary school, with its complex systems of organisation and time management was going to present a considerable challenge in delivering the baseline report to the agreed timescale with the school. I spent some time worrying about the implications of this delay in delivery, specifically in terms of the negative reflection it could have upon my professional capability to work to agreed timescales. After discussions with my supervisor I started to accept that the professional role that I had intended to adopt, influenced largely by my previous employment experience of working as an education officer for a Local Authority, in which deadlines on delivery were set within statutory lines, needed to become more flexible to the realities of the busy and complex structures within working in the field is as yet still in developmental infancy but we plan to hold a conference in the academic year 2011-12 to collaborate on cultivating a typology of embeddedness in relationship to case study research,
the school, particularly taking into account my role as liquid researcher which encompasses simultaneous identities of both insider and ‘outsider’. In this sense Law’s (2004) assertion that research is a “mess”, that the reality of conducting research in a dynamic setting such as a school throws up challenges of logistics as well as identity as the researcher searches for a way to address these challenges without having to overly compromise professional or personal integrity. The control which I had previously held as a result of my professional ‘insider’ role in the local Authority was very much diminished in my new new role as researcher at the school, and whilst I ensured I wore my new staff badge which legitimated my presence along the busy corridors of the school, quite lonely feelings of being an outsider accompanied the first few weeks of trying and failing to conduct data collection to the initial timescales.

I managed to complete the data collection in mid January 2011, which was roughly 2 months longer than I had planned. It was then a matter of writing up a report as a mark of comparison of charting developments and changes at the school since an initial baseline report was published on the school in 2004 (Gunter and Thomson 2004). The baseline report that I subsequently drafted was well received by the headteacher. He considered that I had managed a perceptive understanding of the issues that the school was engaging with and I felt pleased that despite the delay in delivering the report I had, at least in the eyes of the head teacher, validated my ‘researcher’ position in the school. The report also provided an opportunity to ‘badge’ my other sponsor – the Economic and Social Research Council, which I believe helped to legitimate the findings to the wider audience of the school leadership team, and as such points to the importance of the researcher’s awareness of the power of sponsors when writing for publication. The findings as presented in that the report indicated that:

“Kingswood High School is a friendly and welcoming school, where students appear happy and settled, staff are approachable and enthusiastic and parents seem positive and supportive of the school. The trends in the evidence show that the school is achieving a sense of a ‘Learning Culture’ amongst students. This Learning Culture has evolved through a number of planned changes that have occurred at a number of levels of school organisation and is apparent in the (majority) of the students’ engagement with teaching and learning, and their commitment to their membership of the school community at large. The development of a Learning Policy has formed the basis of thinking in terms of a ‘Learning Culture’, which is inextricably tied to the schools three-tiered approach of planned change. This connects achievement and improvement, expectation and innovation and personalised learning and choice as the benchmark of the school’s identity as a place for students to develop academically and personally into responsible and independent members of the school community” (Baseline Report: March 2011).

The report drew a positive portrait of the school, which was supported by the data that I used within the report. The purpose of developing the baseline report was to identify areas for further research. By spending the extended period of time visiting the school in order to complete the data collection process, and through talking to staff and students about the characteristics of their school I became interested in looking behind the perceived middle class affluence of the picture postcard town of Kingswood and resultant middle class intake of the students at the high school and to explore the head teacher’s perception that there was a ‘significant minority’ of students who were marginalised from both the school and the local community and who appeared to underachieve as a result. These students have been identified by the school as being mostly white males from low-income families. Some of these young people live on the large social housing estate on the edge of the town. This community is very much on the periphery of local society. Families from this area cannot afford to shop in the immediate locality of Kingswood town centre as goods and services are priced expensively to reflect the dominant affluence of the area. There is a high level of unemployment experienced by families living on the social housing estate, however these difficulties can be masked by the fact that these families live in a perceived locality of affluence. As a result of undertaking the baseline study I developed a set of research questions (Table 2). These questions are still in the process of development,
however they do illustrate the interest I have developed regarding marginalisation, aspiration and achievement.

Table 2: Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>What are the different social and cultural practices in the school and the community in relation to the purposes of education?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the attitudes and aspirations in relation to the development of a learning culture in the school and the community?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the structures and the processes for developing a productive learning culture in the school and the community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do the different social and cultural practices in the school and community interact with and inform the learning culture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What recommendations can be made for creating an engaging learning culture in the school and the community?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process of experiencing the dual complexity of the insider/outsider dichotomy of a liquid researcher contributed to the development of a set of research questions that set out to explore the perceived marginalisation of a group of students within the learning community. The extent to which the duality of feeling simultaneously isolated (new, lonely), and connected (funded and legitimated through staff badge and email address) with the community at Kingswood High School is hard to quantify, however I do consider that the process of feeling both in and out of the school setting has drawn on an already existing interest to the marginalised and excluded. The language that has been used in the research questions is very much reflective of the academic side of my identity as a researcher. Whilst I am uncertain that certain phrases I have used will remain I do recognise that the research questions have been influenced by the thinking tools offered by Bourdieu (1973; 1977) (e.g. habitus, field, capital).

Interestingly the duality of using academic concepts and language to gain the legitimate credence necessary to continue with doctoral level study is at odds with the language and conceptualisation of the research project when communicating to the various stakeholders in the case study school. This variance was picked up and criticised by the upgrade panel as well as the ethics committee. The assembled academics at the upgrade panel were rightly concerned that I had too quickly and easily adopted the language and concepts of the school without questioning their meanings (for instance using the term ‘learning culture’ without recourse to the development of a conceptual understanding of what this might mean, outside of the official meaning assigned by the school themselves) and how this was indicative of the schools own position in the research process. My job was to question and problematize aspects of organisational policy and practice, and not to become a part of the mechanisms I was trying to critique. In this respect I had quietly slipped into the insider notion of the liquid researcher and this position was highlighted by my critics as in need of readjustment to be more outside and critical.

The ethics committee were also critical of the language I had used to frame the participant information sheet in order explain to the students and parents I planned to interview the purpose of the research project. They were concerned that I had used overtly negative labels when identifying participants, as I seemed to be implying a relationship between underachievement and socio economic status. The university committee requested that I consider revising the language, but were also mindful that in doing so I could be viewed as being deceitful about the request for participation. It was decided to avoid this I would simplify the language and highlight that student’s were being chosen based on a number of different factors which included but were not wholly dependent upon socio economic status and achievement.
The combination of the experience of attending both the upgrade panel and the ethics committee illustrated the complex dynamics of liquid research in which the researcher takes part in the act of institutional boundary crossing. On the one hand I had adopted the language and concepts of certain aspects of the school, as a result of my time spent within that organisation working with the community to identify a useful research area for exploration, whilst on the other hand the university were concerned that this had been to the detriment of academic integrity and ethical compromise. This was further highlighted by the process of dissemination of my initial findings from the baseline report. The way in which I presented the findings to the three stakeholder groups within Kingswood High School (School leadership, school parliament and Governors) varied considerably between groups, and again varied to how I presented my work within the university setting (to the upgrade panel, the ethics committee and a student led seminar on ‘embedded’ researchers). Preparing for and experiencing these various processes helped me to further reflect upon the fluidity of my role as a ‘liquid’ researcher, and realise that the way in which I engaged with the world of the academy would differ considerably at times with the way in which I engaged with the stakeholders within Kingswood High School about my research and that the notion that researcher identity can be simultaneously in and out at various times throughout the research process was an important point with which to engage.

Researching the identity of the researched

The process of conducting the research for the baseline report and subsequently developing a set of research questions to be critiqued at the university as well as disseminating the findings to the various stakeholders in the school also helped me to clarify that the school was not a static and homogenous entity in which the headteacher’s views and actions were the only and official representation of the ethos behind the institution and that my positionality of being both inside and outside extended to perceptions of participants within the school who had not been part of the process of my recruitment.

When I was awarded the ESRC CASE studentship I already knew that the school had a history of taking part in university led research projects. In fact in the original baseline report (Gunter and Thomson: 2004) there was a clear statement that the school acknowledged an identity as a ‘researching school’. The school has a history of taking part in university funded and led research projects which aim to identify and explore the role of teaching and learning in a setting which had been deemed as successful and innovative by the then DfES, on the basis of the current headteacher’s leadership in navigating the school from very low levels of attainment in 1997 when he joined, to the existing level of attainment that the school currently achieves (Gunter and Thomson: 2007, 2008; Thomson and Gunter: 2006, 2007, 2008). As a result of a relatively rapid increase in results as Key Stage 4 the University of Manchester and the school were awarded funding to analyse the processes which had contributed to the influx of students achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE level (Hollins, Thomson and Gunter: 2006). Entering into a context in which the process of external research is established and recognised to be of benefit to the school community meant that I carried certain assumptions that my role as researcher would be met with a certain level of acceptance by the school community and therefore access. Whilst this was true to an extent, I also experienced resistance to and confusion over my role, from teaching staff as well as parents, and an indifference to the data collection process, which was particularly evident in the low numbers of completed questionnaires, particularly from the teaching staff (32%). This figure was only achieved after agreeing to significantly reduce the size of the questionnaire as the first round of responses had totalled less than 10% and the headteacher considered that the longer the questionnaire the less likely staff were to complete it owing to the constraints of their busy schedules. I yielded to this request however the process of doing so meant that I started to question what the whole school attitude to the idea of a ‘researching school’ was, and the extent to which this was actually the case, as opposed to the individual position held by the headteacher.
Whilst I held identity badges that legitimised my role in both the school and the university, my external persona remained under a certain amount of scrutiny by school staff especially. This is of course a common feature for researchers who have undertaken ethnographic studies within schools (Hargreaves: 1967; Beynon: 1983; Corrigan: 1979). In one of the first interviews I undertook with a staff member, a very helpful and enthusiastic history teacher who was also head of the 6th form, as I pressed record on the digital recorder, she said to me suddenly, “who exactly are you working for?” and “where will this data go?” These seemingly straightforward questions appeared to throw me as I struggled to articulate a coherent answer. In retrospect I think that I was keen to explain that my role was supposed to be neutral, that of an observer. However I also realised that from the perspective of the ‘legitimate’ staff members in this institution, my role could not really be that of neutral observer. I had been bought into this institution as a result of collaboration between the headteacher and my supervisor, who had been involved in designing and delivering research projects at the school for over 5 years. I had been introduced to staff during the induction day in September 2010 by the headteacher, and the subsequent requests for staff and student participation with the data collection process for the baseline report had been via emails sent from the head teacher’s PA. This was particularly pertinent when the email was sent with the revised and shortened staff questionnaire, with a personalised note from the headteacher specifically requesting staff to take the time to fill it in. I realised as I explained to this teacher my neutrality that it was very plausible that most staff would align me directly with the headteacher, and if this was the case the neutrality of my role was unlikely to be accepted as a given by the staff with whom I hoped to build trusting relationships in which some level of honest analysis of the school structures might take place.

From this perspective it seemed that my role was very much to be seen as that of an outsider, I would have the critical benefit of being an arms length away from the action, however I was also aware that I was likely to be excluded from the more subtle nuances of day to day relationship and lives within the school and that this could also effect the accuracy of any portrait I subsequently drew. It is interesting to reflect that my response to these feelings of being the outsider led me to develop a set of research questions that explore notions of marginalisation, and that the language I have used to express the development of the research project to the university was viewed as being too uncritical of the concepts adopted by the school, thus highlighting an element of ‘insider-ness’ that needed to be rectified in order for academic approval.

**Perceptions of the data collection process**

As the baseline data collection grew, so did the multiplicity of my identities through the kaleidoscope of eyes from teaching staff, school leadership, students, parents, the headteacher and my supervisor. The differing perceptions of my role from these different stakeholders will not necessarily remain static, but will change as relationships change and develop and as such highlights the fluidity of the researcher’s identity and how the researcher chooses to act and react to such perceptions and how differing perceptions of one’s own identity may have important consequences for further data collection and analysis.

Two short anecdotes gathered from the data collection process illustrate the multiple perceptions and judgement of my role as researcher and the relationships within the research process between power and identity, one from a parent and one from a teacher. Part of the data collection was to ask parents to fill in a questionnaire and send the completed form back to me at school, as part of this process the parents were also sent a participant information sheet which I believed set out clearly that there was no obligation to filling in this form. One parent returned the envelope with a scribbled note on the front pleading that I did not give her son a detention as she had not managed to complete the questionnaire as it was taking too long – longer than the children’s homework in fact – and when I opened the envelope she was obviously so frustrated by that questionnaire that she had ripped it to shreds, but had popped the shredded remains back in the envelope for me to keep. It was a bizarre experience; here was a parent who
believed I had the power to disrupt her son’s education through non-completion of a voluntary activity.

On another occasion I had sent out the questionnaires for the students to complete during their tutor periods. Only those students from whose parents a permission slip had been received were allowed to complete the questionnaire – and as such I did my best to send the right amount of questionnaires to each form group. Of course, this did not go as smoothly as I had hoped, and several form tutors returned the envelope full with the same blank questionnaires. I am not sure what happened in these cases, but felt it was likely due to the all too precious 20 minutes allocated for official school business being sucked up leaving no time for the questionnaire. However one teacher had scribbled on the envelope full of uncompleted questionnaires – “how many more trees need to be harmed in the name of your research??” This particular comment struck a nerve with me, although admittedly a relatively tame remark it still served to represent the fallibility of expecting a research project to receive encouragement and support from the participants within the researched institution.

Together these anecdotes illustrate the complexity of structural and spatial locations of power and perceptions within the research process and the constant need of the researcher to reposition herself at various times throughout the research process (Giampapa: 2011) thus adding to the strength of fluidity attached to the identity of a liquid researcher. In the first anecdote the parent seemingly imbues me with the power associated with being an ‘insider’ at the school. This parent does not draw any distinction between my request for completed questionnaires as part of a voluntary data collection process and that of a member of teaching staff requesting completed homework from a student. The response made me question the extent to which I had been clear about the purpose of the questionnaire and the participants rights that this was a wholly voluntary activity which would have no bearing on their child’s educational experience. It reflected the later concerns of the ethics committee that the language in the participant information sheets needed to be amended, and it worried me that there was a perception (admittedly by one individual) that located my role with the values of the school and that my role was therefore integral to the school’s power to ‘punish’ incomplete work. In this respect I felt very uncomfortable with the ‘insider’ position afforded to me by this parent’s perception of my research. The experience also illustrated the effect that the data collection process can have on the data collected and that the relationship between positionality, power and knowledge construction needed to be taken very seriously when analysing any future data. The second anecdote from the teacher pushed me out of this insider role to firmly locate me and ‘my’ research as separate and distinct from the work of the teacher within the school. Although my role as researcher was legitimated by my staff identification card, this symbol of belonging in this case is me rely just that, and the teacher’s remarks served to reinforce a power dynamic that I was a visitor in this school, an outsider, whose project was literally a ‘waste of paper’.

**Conclusion**

The process of becoming a ‘liquid researcher’ at Kingswood High School has helped me to consider the differing and complex postionalities of being both inside and outside the case study organisation and the extent to which resultant complex power dynamics “are factors that bear on knowledge construction and representation in the research process” (Merriam et al: 2001: 416). I have traversed between multiple identities throughout the year, sometimes as an outsider and sometimes as an insider and often something less tangible and more fluid as I conducted the data collection process for the baseline report and disseminated the findings to various stakeholders in the school and profiled the work for the university upgrade panel and ethics committee. These experiences have contributed to my understanding that power and identity within the research process are slippery, messy, often contradictory and important notions with which to engage. Conducting research into the lives of perceived marginalised young people and their families add an even more urgent necessity to engage with these notions as I start to
conduct the main body of data collection in the upcoming academic year. How I am perceived, by parents, teachers and students will bring to bear important and complex implications on the way I approach the data collection process and the way I analyse the findings and bring the lives and experiences of the research participants back into the domain of the university. Varying labels (such as researcher, teacher, parent and student) bring about the issue of identity; Purposes of each of these roles within the research process (data collection and thesis development; teaching and learning; parenting) illustrate the power of agency within the organisation of the school and highlight the relatively fleeting interruption of my role in their lives as I attempt to draw an ontological and epistemological narrative about the relationship between marginalisation, aspirations and achievement. Through the crossing of the institutional boundaries between the school and the university, and within the school between parent, teacher and student, I hope the identity that I have currently assigned myself as liquid researcher will enable me to reflexively engage with issues of power and knowledge construction in order to create a piece of work that will be of use to the school in its ongoing policy development on student engagement and to the wider academic community interested in issues of marginalisation within the education system.

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