

Educational research and the literary imagination

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ABSTRACT

This article is intended as a contribution to the debate on the epistemology of educational research. It explores what 'seeing and thinking at the same time' means in the context of educational research. What might this look like if it were to borrow from the practices of literary criticism? What might happen if we were to treat a research project as a work of literature? The author attempts to capture the haphazard and unpredictable process through which research 'data' are gathered. This article is an invitation to explore what a research project 'knows'; to examine the contingent and unpredictable way in which it discloses itself; and to illustrate how this disclosure is mediated by the researcher's locus in an academic field. The article is part of a broader exploration of why literature matters for social science that can be traced back to the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

INTRODUCTION

'How is it possible to see an object according to an interpretation?' This is one of the questions that Ludwig Wittgenstein set out to address in the elaborate and sometimes opaque sequence of meditations that comprises *Philosophical Investigations*. The literary critic Michael Wood (2005: 6) re-formulated Wittgenstein's original question as follows: '... what happens when we seem to find ourselves seeing and thinking at the same time, as when we recognise the first and then the second aspect of an optical puzzle, or suddenly realise we know someone we hadn't at once remembered?'

The purpose of this article is to explore what 'seeing and thinking at the same time' might mean in the context of educational research, with reference to a specific project. What might educational research look like if it were to borrow from the practices of literary criticism? What might happen if we were to treat a project as a work of literature? The specific example upon which I shall draw is a government-funded study of young people permanently excluded from specialist provision in England (Pirrie *et al.*, 2011; Pirrie & Macleod 2010; Macleod & Pirrie 2010).

PERSPECTIVES ON THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

It is perhaps not surprising that a literary critic has used analogy to convey meaning, to represent knowledge. However, it appears that social scientists and philosophers are just as likely to resort to analogy. After all, Bourdieu refers to the '*divorce* of theory from research' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2002: 3) and Wittgenstein (1977) avers that beginning to think in a new way requires one to pull out a difficulty by the roots rather than grasp it at the surface. This may be taken as an indication that analogy is indeed at the core of cognition, as Hofstadter (2006) has suggested. I shall attempt to demonstrate that recourse to analogy helps us not only to *describe* knowledge and awareness, but also to *generate* knowledge and awareness, in terms that move beyond the traditional distinction between knowing how and knowing that. As Smith (2008) points out, 'knowing, in these sorts of terms, is only one of many relevant ways of relating to the world and of imagining [or experiencing] the connection between us and it' (p.184). Indeed different ways of knowing may be required if we are to move into 'new imaginative neighbourhoods of comprehension' (Griffiths 2008: 16). As we have seen, philosophers and social scientists use analogy in much the same way as novelists or poets. Yet Wood's playful prose ('the worry about the relation between literature and knowledge is a very old one, and it's not getting any younger') (Wood 2005: 2)

takes us beyond mere analogy and gives us a taste of the literary. It opens up a perspective on epistemological and ontological dimensions that are the very stuff of literature, but which, it might be argued, are all too rarely found in writing in the social sciences. Wood argues that literature transcends reports of what has happened and of what may happen and is itself 'a form of lived experience' (Walsh 1969: 9).

As I shall attempt to demonstrate below, a research project is also to be regarded as a form of lived experience, a human encounter rather than merely an artful or scientific arrangement of findings. My aim is to underline the primacy of 'context-specific, local [and] personal knowledge' (Griffiths 2008: 12) by trying to capture something about the haphazard and unpredictable process through which research 'data' are shifted and sorted, lost and found. My aim is to sketch out what an alternative way of proceeding might look like, and to reaffirm the centrality of 'epistemologies of the practical, unique and particular' in educational research (Griffiths 2008: 12).

I shall say something about the contingent mechanisms through which, to paraphrase Wood, my co-researchers and I suddenly realised that we knew something that we hadn't at once remembered. The article is about building interpretation rather than theory: or rather it is about examining how these two activities, building theory and building interpretation, are inextricably linked. It may already be evident that the article owes as much to literature and to the literary imagination as it does to social science. It is important to emphasise that this is a journey of discovery. I am not in the business of telling travellers' tales to educational researchers in order that they might make similar journeys more efficiently and effectively. Through literature, Wood (2005) observes, 'we have the direct experience of words behaving and misbehaving. Our reading is an immediate event, liking tasting salt or coriander' (p. 9). The intention here is both to savour and to give flavour to social research. Wood (2005) cites Barthes (1978) who refers to 'the salt of words' and avers that 'it is the taste of words which makes knowledge profound, fecund' (p. 21). Barthes reminds us that the French words for knowledge (*savoir*) and taste or savour (*saveur*) have a common etymology. It is surely also no coincidence that Iris Murdoch is 'far better known as a novelist than as a philosopher' (Widdows 2005: 7). Moreover, Murdoch herself considered that art 'is far and away the most educational thing we have, far more so than its rivals, philosophy, theology and science' (Murdoch, 1997 [1976]: 461)

Simone Weil was attempting to bridge much the same gulf between thinking and seeing when she described 'attention' as a 'method of the exercise of intelligence which consists of looking' (Weil 1951: 96). Murdoch (1970) described the concept of attention as a 'just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality ... the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent' (p. 33). She attributed this use of the notion directly to Simone Weil. Wood (2005) has observed that 'the riddle for the philosopher is that he regards thinking as an action and seeing as a condition' (p.6). Wood does not go as far as to say that all philosophers speak in riddles (although one might be forgiven for thinking so). Anyone who has engaged with *Philosophical Investigations* may have formed the view that philosophers sometimes speak a different language. Moreover, they may have formed the view that this language sometimes lacks the immediacy of the taste of honey, or salt or coriander. Literature, according to Wood, may not have an answer to Wittgenstein's question (namely, 'how is it possible to see an object according to an interpretation?'). However, '[it enacts] the riddle constantly, offering what seem to be direct perceptions intricately entwined with often elaborate interpretations. It does this so constantly that we can hardly speak of a riddle any more' (Wood 2005: 6). This lucid description of the *modus operandi* of literature echoes one of the foundational principles of the approach to sociology taken by Pierre Bourdieu. This has been described as a 'non-Cartesian social ontology that refuses to split object and subject, intention and cause, materiality and symbolic representation' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 5).

Vir Heroicus Sublimis

Wood further illustrates his point with reference to the art historian Peter de Bolla's account of looking at a painting by Barnett Newman entitled *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As he stands before the enormous canvas painted in cadmium red, De Bolla tries out a series of conventional critical questions. 'What does this painting mean?' 'What is it trying to say?' However, he concludes that these are the wrong questions, so he tries some others. 'How does this painting determine my address to it?' 'How does it make me feel? What does it make me feel?' However, these don't work either. The question he finally arrives at is 'what does this painting *know*?' (De Bolla 2001: 31) (my emphasis). This article is an invitation to educational researchers (and the 'end users' of such research) to explore what a research project knows; to come to terms with the contingent and unpredictable way in which it discloses itself; and to investigate how these 'disclosures' are mediated by the researcher's locus in an academic field (or rather between academic fields). It is part of a broader exploration of why literature matters for social science that can be traced back to Bourdieu's extensive writing on literature and the literary, and on how literature relates to sociology (Bourdieu 1987a; 1987b; 1988; and Nisbet 1976).

Here are just some of the questions that come to mind when one tries to think about the relation between social science and literature. Why, so to speak, does social science not make a better job of making manifest rather than reporting? Why is so much of it barely readable? What is it about literature that enables us to make sense of the world around us? How can we bridge the gap between literature and social science (and, by extension, between art and social science)? How can we cross effortlessly from one to the other and back again? Or do we have to trade allegiances and move fields if we are to survive? Can literature help us to cultivate attention and to develop a sense of moral agency? How can we, as educational researchers, practitioners and policy-makers, fully understand what it means to see and to think at the same time? How can we, to paraphrase Wood, re-enact the riddle constantly, offering straightforward accounts of facts and direct perceptions intertwined with more elaborate interpretations? How can reading literature (or even reading literary criticism) enable us to understand what may elude even the most sublimely heroic educational researcher? How can it unsettle what we have come to think of as direct and immutable research 'findings'? This dizzying list of questions might be regarded as a testimony to the degree of frustration experienced by one particular researcher as she attempts to do the day-job. These are clearly more questions than can adequately be addressed in this short article. However, I shall attempt to explore at least some of them below, with particular attention to bridging the gap between literature and social science.

Wood (2005) explains his claim that 'literature...make[s] very special calls on us' through his account of a colloquium on doubt in the human sciences, an event attended by anthropologists, political scientists, historians, literary scholars and others. All the participants were agreed that doubt played a key role in their various endeavours, that it was a 'necessary modesty of method'. However, they were all equally convinced that the doubting had to stop in order to deliver the knowledge that had been secured. Wood disagreed, although it is not clear from his account ('literature, I wanted to say, isn't like this') whether he was able to make his voice heard on this particular occasion. His initial response was that literature is the place where doubt never ends, but on reflection he revised his account as follows. As this passage is central to one of the arguments advanced in this article, it is worth quoting at some length. Wood manages to convey the very moment of realisation in his writing (or, to put it in terms more familiar to educational researchers, to be reflexive about reflexivity). He describes how he instinctively found himself at odds with the mood of the group:

But this isn't right. In fact, it's dangerously wrong. The entertainment of possibilities in literature — and literature, in one crucial aspect, just is the entertainment of possibilities — resembles doubting, and is probably a good school for informed doubt. But it is not doubt, precisely because, in literature, alternatives are in play but not in contention. We are interested not in the choices we are going to make but in the

choices we could make, and we can always go back on our interpretative decisions. Indeed, we shall be better readers if we do go back on them, and there is no equivalent in practical life for the sheer, disinterested attraction of this multiplication of chances. (pp. 4-5)

We might regard the constant interplay of alternatives and possibilities as the literary analogue of the 'recursive and spiraling mode of thinking', the 'internal dynamism', the '*movement* of ... scientific practice' that are the hallmarks of Bourdieu's approach to social inquiry (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 6) (emphasis in the original). However the bottom line is that Wood's prose simply tastes better, just as there is generally more to savour in works of literature than in most research reports in the social sciences. Wood (2005) is the first to acknowledge that 'in many applications of literature ... certain decisions are made which cannot be reversed and so form part of the life of the director or the actor' (p. 5). The example he gives is the particular intonation that a theatre director decides should be given to the word 'nothing' as uttered by Lear and Cordelia. The same, of course, applies to some — although by no means all — of the 'findings' of social research. In the project that I consider in some detail below and in a manner more familiar to social scientists, there is no going back on the attribution of particular labels e.g. autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) or social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) to individual young people with a history of exclusion from specialist provision. These are recorded facts that in this instance were painstakingly uncovered by researchers who diligently trawled through pupils' records and interviewed service providers. This is not to say that the attribution of these labels is uncontroversial, or that the labels themselves are entirely self-explanatory. Neither is it to discount the possibility that the practice of labelling may be symptomatic of a wider social malaise, or of a particular conception of the self that it is common in liberal democracies (Kristjánsson 2009). It is merely to say that these were notes in a minor key, and that there are various other scales to be explored. Determining what particular label had been attached to a particular young person was one of the aims of the research project described below, and the results constituted one of the 'findings' (although in retrospect not a particularly important one).

I shall attempt to demonstrate that in educational research just as in literary scholarship there is a multitude of possible readings. It appears that behind research 'findings' there are makings and leavings. After all, findings are not *objets trouvés*: rather, they emerge from a process of generating or making interpretations. Inevitably there are some interpretations that fall by the wayside and that get left behind in the rush to complete and 'deliver'. I take the view that these superseded and discarded interpretations should not be suppressed entirely, but should be set before the audience. I take the view that openness to oddity and particularity and a commitment to displaying the process of understanding (or to showing making) are the hallmarks of craftsmanship in both literature and social science. As I shall attempt to demonstrate with reference to a fictitious conversation with a real colleague, going back on earlier interpretative decisions or taking risks with new ones is good practice in educational research as well as in literature. Social scientists 'can find in literary works research clues and orientations that the censorship specific to the scientific field tend to forbid them or to hide from them' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 206).

Let turn to that account of a conversation that didn't happen, although in this case it was necessary to invent it. It might indeed have taken place, as the two protagonists (of which I am one) shared a grimy office in a northern university where they explored social issues and political controversies, each in their different way. This short extract from an unwritten kitchen sink drama will give us some insight into the day-to-day workings of a research project, as well as some clues as to research findings. There follows a brief outline of the same project, written in rather more conventional terms that will bring the reader back to reassuringly familiar territory. Those readers with a specific interest in a full account of the findings may prefer to read the full research report (Pirrie *et al.*, 2009).

SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

'A guy from Camden Social Services telephoned when you were out to lunch', said Jan-Jaap.

A *guy*? You mean Mrs Delaney, or maybe Monica Bell?

'No, no, it was a guy. He said his name was Martin ... Martin somebody or other. I didn't catch his second name.'

Christ, I thought. Chuzzlewit! He's so steeped in bloody F.R. Leavis that he can't even be relied upon to take a proper telephone message! 'Did he say what it was about?'

'Yeah, it was about a boy. He said it was about some boy who had been kicked out of school or something like that. He told me couldn't give me his name over the telephone.'

'When did he phone? Did he say to call back?'

'No, he said you should get in touch with Mike Power in some other department, something to do with youth offending. Does that make sense to you? Now I wrote his number down somewhere...'

This fictitious telephone conversation and its imaginary aftermath relate to a small-scale qualitative study of young people who had been permanently excluded from specialist provision. The research took place in the light of concerns expressed in the report of the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline [The Steer Report]. These related specifically to the quality of educational provision for young people described as having behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) ¹ (DfES 2005: 9). The research was commissioned because the Steer Report recognised that 'there are occasions when it is necessary to exclude pupils from a PRU [pupil referral unit] or a BESD special school (including residential schools)' and expressed concern about 'what alternative forms of education are available for these most vulnerable pupils, particularly in smaller authorities that may only have one PRU' (p. 57).

The research was commissioned against a background of growing public concern and mounting research evidence about the impact of exclusion from school on young people's lives. It followed on from previous research, also funded by the DfES, which had tracked over a two-year period 193 young people aged 13 to 16 who had been permanently excluded from mainstream provision (Daniels *et al.* 2003). There is substantial evidence that young people who have been permanently excluded from school are at greater risk of a variety of negative outcomes, including prolonged periods out of education and/or employment; poor mental and physical health; involvement in crime; and homelessness (Audit Commission 1996; Donovan 1998; Social Exclusion Unit 1998; Lyon *et al.* 2000; Berridge *et al.* 2001; Coles *et al.* 2002; Daniels *et al.* 2003; Ofsted 2004; Ofsted 2005). Only about half of the 141 young people tracked by Daniels *et al.* (2003) were in education, training or employment two years after their permanent exclusion from school; and exclusion from school only served to reinforce involvement in criminal activity for those with a history of offending. Visser *et al.* (2005) noted that pupils who have been permanently excluded from school 'feature prominently amongst the "missing"' [from education] (p. 46) (see also Daniels *et al.* 2003). It is not surprising that young people experience feelings of rejection and alienation post-exclusion (Munn *et al.* 2000; Osterman 2000) or that they find 'schooling irrelevant to their aspirations; experience teaching and learning at an inappropriate level of challenge' (Visser *et al.* 2005: 45); and that levels of attendance at subsequent provision are severely compromised (Vincent *et al.* 2007).

¹ The terms BESD and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) are used interchangeably in this article. BESD was the term used in the research specification. The author prefers the term SEBD, as this more accurately reflects the nature of the difficulties many young people experience. These often have their origins in the social situations in which young people find themselves, and are thus context-dependent and variable in terms of presentation and intensity. Daniels (2006) refers to 'a long tension ... between those who have adopted within-person and those who have adopted systemic accounts of causation which have in turn led to specific approaches to intervention' (p. 105).

EXPLORING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT VULNERABILITY

I shall attempt to demonstrate that the way in which the young people were described (for example, as having ASD, BESD or being 'vulnerable') and the way in which the research specification was framed (namely, 'to identify and to explore the routes, destinations and outcomes of [a group of 30] young people who have been permanently excluded from a PRU or a special school for pupils with BESD') exposes a fundamental tension between an emphasis on young people's agency and a concern with protecting the vulnerable that was evident in the imaginary conversation above. In retrospect, it appears that the net effect of the focus on the 'trajectory' of individual young people (or on the perceptions of family members and service providers in relation to a young person's trajectory) has been to preclude a more thorough and reflective exploration of 'human possibilities squandered and slept through' (Wood 2009). This is one of the themes that this article attempts to address.

The behaviours that the young people in the study manifested included hyperactivity, deficiencies in attention, and obsessive, challenging and defiant behaviour. They had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Several young people had been ascribed the linguistically more anodyne label of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), the initial focus of the research brief. Moreover, several had moderate to severe underlying learning or communication difficulties, including in one case a severe hearing impairment. Some manifested a complex amalgam of many symptoms, of unknown aetiology. In these cases the researchers were unable to ascertain a definitive diagnosis of the young person's difficulties.

The research report submitted to the funders at the end of the project (Pirrie *et al.* 2009) contained a conventional synoptic overview of the young people who participated in the study. This was more concerned with documentation and audit than with analysis, and systematically underplayed the web of relationships in which the young people were involved, and through which it is likely that their construction of self was partly constituted. The focus of the study was determined by the research specification. This was largely on the (imputed) characteristics of the young people, and on their personal histories as defined by their often painful and fractured journeys through the education system. The research team painstakingly reconstructed these 'trajectories' by conducting interviews with service providers and family members at regular intervals.

As we saw from the above reference in The Steer Report to 'these most vulnerable pupils' (namely those excluded from specialist facilities), those who commissioned the study (and to a certain extent those who conducted it) assumed that the young people involved would be fundamentally different from those who had taken part in the earlier study conducted by Daniels *et al.* (2003), which focused on pupils permanently excluded from mainstream provision. The corollary of this was that the young people in the study in which I was involved were 'othered' even before the research began. This by virtue of the fact they were viewed as even more 'vulnerable', 'at risk', and therefore in need of 'protection' than young people with a history of exclusion from mainstream school. This had implications for the conduct of the research, in so far as the researchers encountered various degrees of readiness to disclose information about individual young people. This led me to revise my initial view of the inadequacies of my colleague's telephone manner, or rather 'to see an object in terms of an(other) interpretation'. In all probability my colleague had made every effort to provide a coherent telephone message, one that could be acted upon promptly by a hard-pressed and increasingly desperate researcher. It was his interlocutor who was reluctant to disclose even basic demographic information about a young person permanently excluded from school. That fictitious exchange was very similar indeed to many exchanges with service providers in which my co-researchers and I engaged as we attempted to fulfil the research brief. Unlike those in the study by Daniels *et al.* (2003), the young people in the study discussed here were generally perceived to be further along a continuum of need, and were thus rather more likely than their peers in 'mainstream' schools to have their difficulties 'conceptualised and interpreted through the prism of disease' (Kristjánsson 2009: 111).

It was generally assumed by service providers, policy makers and indeed researchers that it was the severity and/or complexity of some of these young people's needs that had led to their placement in a specialist facility, if not initially then at some point in their school career. The reality, it transpired, was rather more contingent and messy than we had anticipated, or than was implied by the terms of the research specification. This confirms one of the main findings from the study conducted by Daniels *et al* (2003): namely that 'the provision attended by the young people after their exclusion tended to be determined by the vacancies available in local provision rather than a careful matching of a young person's needs to appropriate provision' (p. vi). In the event, the profile of need of many of the young people in the study referred to here did not differ substantially from that of the young people included in the study conducted by Daniels *et al* (2003). Nor was there substantial variation in the reasons for their exclusion. Physical assault on an adult was usually the catalyst for but rarely the sole cause of a young person's permanent exclusion (see also Daniels *et al*. 2003: 137). This finding is broadly in line with the statistical evidence on the causes of exclusion from school. The four most commonly reported reasons appear to be physical assault against a pupil; physical assault against an adult; persistent disruptive behaviour, and in the secondary sector 'other' (Hayden & Dunne 2001; Harris *et al*. 2006, SFR 14/2008 DCSF 2008).² The findings from the current study also accord with the variations between secondary schools and special schools in respect of the reasons given for exclusion.³ Daniels *et al* (2003) report that 'permanent exclusion usually followed a long history of behavioural challenges by the young person to the excluding school' (p. 15; see also p. 25). This certainly applies to the study reported here. Moreover, in both the current study and the one conducted by Daniels *et al* (2003), 'those who offended prior to exclusion usually continued to offend post-exclusion and others started to offend' (p. vi).

The vagaries of placement and the contingent nature of the attribution of needs and the ascription of labels were an early intimation that the degree of intentionality inherent in the choice of words such as 'route' and 'destination' did not match the reality of individual young people's experiences (or indeed those of service providers). Nor were they consonant with the policy rubric of rational choice, 'the child at the centre' and 'every child having the chance to develop their potential'.⁴ It became apparent that the use of the word 'outcome' downplayed the nature of life as a work in progress, as a series of messy and contingent encounters.

Paradoxically, the focus on the 'trajectories' of individual young people made a critical appraisal of the complex interrelationship between agency and structure more rather than less difficult to achieve. The obsessive pursuit of 'respondents' in the form of service providers (teachers, social workers, members of youth offending teams, etc.) who could fill in the blanks in a young person's history seems in retrospect to have obscured rather than revealed the full humanity of the young people themselves.

LIKE A CLOCK SOMEONE HAD FORGOTTEN TO WIND

It would be misleading and ingenuous to attribute all the deficiencies in the research project to the terms in which the specification was framed; or, indeed to the manifold logistical challenges facing any research team conducting government-funded social research within a particular timeframe and at a geographical distance (Macleod & Pirrie 2010). In retrospect it appears that there was something about the very process of conducting the research, including the difficulties in identifying and securing interviews with

² Twelve categories of reasons for exclusion are reported in SFR 14/2008. Our focus here is on the most commonly reported reasons.

³ DCSF Permanent and Fixed Period Exclusions from Schools in England 2006–7 Amended. Table 9. Available at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000793/index.shtml>

⁴ 'Nothing is more important to the future of our whole country than that, with the best schooling, services and financial support, every child has the chance to develop their potential.' Gordon Brown, Chancellor, 10 December 2003 (Guardian, 2003: 19).

busy service providers, that created a sense of 'flatness, repetition and invasion' (Wood 2009) in respect of the young people who were supposed to be at the core of the study. This dimension of the research suddenly came to life for me many months after the fieldwork had been completed and the final report submitted. It happened in a manner that was entirely contingent and unpredictable, in the manner of De Bolla's moment of epiphany in front of the painting by Barnett Newman. The experience vividly recalled the sensation described by Wood (2005) as 'what happens when ... we suddenly realise we know someone we hadn't at once remembered' (p. 6). The trigger for this moment of realisation was reading a review of a new translation of Ivan Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*, in which Wood describes the impact of the description of the incessant stream of visitors to the eponymous hero's flat in St Petersburg.

Most of them are introduced, in this new translation, by the phrase 'in walked', which creates a wonderful sense of flatness, repetition and invasion. All but one of the visitors are busy in some way or other, full of talk of the world, parties, work, the latest literary news. They are going somewhere, they have a life ... The very descriptions of these people make us tired, setting us up for a largely (although not entirely) disreputable identification with the book's slothful hero. (Wood, 2009)

The arresting point about this passage is the flickering sense of recognition that it generated in this particular reader, a nomad occupying an uncertain territory between literary studies and social science. The service providers we interviewed were busy too, although parties and the latest literary news did not feature in their accounts, nor, I suspect, did they play a great role in our lives. Rather, the service providers we interviewed presented as busy professionals with large caseloads, so much so that it sometimes took us many weeks or even months to arrange an interview. It was evident that these service providers had the best interests of the young people at heart. They came across as committed and dedicated professionals who had stumbled upon ways of doing things that seemed to work, placements that seemed appropriate and that were broadly in line with the general direction of public policy in relation to services for 'vulnerable' children and young people. However, the net effect of this orchestrated busyness and of our diligent attempts to track down service providers was a) to make us tired, emotional and occasionally dispirited; and b), rather less self-evidently, to create a fleeting identification with some of the young people, particularly those who seemed most resistant to 'placement'. These young people seemed to remain in some barely explored liminal state, forever betwixt and between. In retrospect, the research design seemed 'better suited to express things rather than relations, states than processes' (Bourdieu 1982a: 35). It took many months of painstaking investigation to determine where some young people were and what they were doing; why they had been permanently excluded from school; and where they had attended school previously. The quality of the young people's relationships, and the texture of their day-to-day experience were much more difficult to explore in a conventional research project based on interview data and document analysis. What we were left with as we contemplated the ashes of our findings was 'the story of a series of stances and occasions, human possibilities squandered and slept through' (Wood 2009) rather than a vivid and illuminating account of the impact of exclusion from school on young people's lives. The literary critic Michael Wood describes the story of the non-life and real death of Oblomov, the slothful hero of the eponymous novel in terms of 'stances and occasions' and the squandering of human possibilities. Oblomov, he tells us, 'is lying down even when he is sitting up'. He is 'not exactly a person, and this is only partly a psychological novel ... He dies 'without pain or suffering, like a clock someone had forgotten to wind.'

It would be professional suicide to put too much emphasis on what Wood considers one of the novel's more polemical proposals: namely, that 'squandering and sleeping are better, in many cases, than what we call work and achievement' (Wood 2009). Nevertheless, it did lead this particular researcher to question whether a hastily-arranged placement is necessarily better than no placement at all; and whether the achievement of policy goals such as mitigating the impact of permanent exclusion from school or reducing the

percentage of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) necessarily impacts favourably upon the quality of life of individual young people.

CONCLUSION

The experience of conducting the research project described above raises questions about the limitations of conventional educational research methodology. There is not scope fully to address these here. The next step would be to begin to imagine how we might conceptualise a research project that is better suited to express relations rather than things, processes rather than states. How might we conceptualise a research approach that serves to reveal rather than to obscure the full humanity of *all* the participants in the research process? Perhaps we need to move beyond straightforward accounts of facts and direct perceptions, even those that are intertwined with more elaborate interpretations, towards a new form of social research that enacts rather than records, and foregrounds textures and the quality of lived experience rather than attempt to 'map' 'trajectories'. Perhaps we need to work with space, movement, colour and shape and to embrace contingency and unpredictability if we are to avoid the flatness, repetition and invasion that are associated with purely text-based approaches to social research. Exploring the potential of new media and the processes of collaboration between artists, academics and young people might just enable us to see and to think at the same time. This might also allow for a more profound exploration of assumptions about vulnerability than was possible in the project described above. It might enable the researchers in this field to capture the liminal state of young people in the lengthy periods when they were not attending any form of educational provision. Such an approach might be a more radical way of exploring what a research project knows, and open up the prospect of a disinterested attraction of [a] multiplication of chances.

At eighteen feet long and eight feet high, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* was Newman's largest painting at the time of its completion. When the painting was first exhibited in the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York in 1951, Newman attached to the wall beside it the following notice: 'There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.' He likened the experience to a human encounter:

It's no different, really, from meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also, there's a metaphysical thing, and if a meeting of people is meaningful, it affects both their lives.⁵

⁵ http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79250

If we were able to nail a message to the wall, it might echo the one posted by Morwenna Griffiths (2008) in the pages of this journal, namely that *'the unique and the particular*, the individual human being at the centre of webs of social relations, is... at the core of our concerns as researchers' (p. 20)

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