

**‘Joe Sent Me’**  
**Some Personal Reflections on the Problems of Gaining Access**

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## **‘Joe Sent Me’**

### **Some Personal Reflections on the Problems of Gaining Access**

*‘If I say Joe sent me will you let me in behind the green door?’*

F. Vaughan

Moira Calveley and David Wray

Although ‘fieldwork’ is a necessary component of qualitative research and the gaining (and maintaining) of access to an organisation is often fraught with difficulties and anxieties, such issues are largely ignored by the research literature. This paper draws on the personal reflections of two researchers undertaking completely independent and separate projects. Despite the research settings being as diverse as a light engineering firm and a ‘failing’ school, the paper explores how the experiences of the researchers ‘in the field’ were inherently similar.

The rationale in writing the paper is the hope that it may generate a response, perhaps even a debate, on what are important, though largely ignored, aspects of qualitative research. With this in mind, the findings upon which this paper is based should not be seen as prescriptive, they are simply accounts of attempts to overcome problems encountered whilst undertaking social research.

The 'site' chosen for the qualitative research project can be likened to a building. One can enter through a number of entrances, though the preferred method is usually, though not necessarily, through the front door, as an invited guest of the owner. If that form of entry is denied, one can attempt to use a rear entrance with the assistance of someone on the inside. Once inside, whichever method of entry is used, further problems immediately manifest themselves. Like most buildings, there will be many rooms, each with its own door, access through which must be negotiated with the room's tenant. The difference between the building itself, and its internal rooms, is that internally there is usually only one entrance. This analogy can be taken down to the level of rooms with only one occupant. In this instance refusal tends to be final, with the secrets kept behind the door left only to be guessed at. This paper presents contrasting personal reflections on separate attempts to gain organisational access for the purposes of social research, and the subsequent problems faced, once access had been granted.

Perhaps the best starting point for these reflections should begin with an examination of the literature on negotiating access for the purposes of organisational research. However, little if any, information is available, (Buchanan et al 1988) and for anyone considering the qualitative route to social research there are cautionary voices to be listened to. Silverman (1985) tells us that published accounts of research are often at variance with the reality of the research practice involved, as what is offered as methodology is often a *reconstructed logic* of what will have been *a difficult and often fractured process*. This represents a recognition that social research does not take place in a vacuum – nor indeed is the researcher situated in a vacuum, somehow isolated from the researched (Sayer 1992). This re-constructive process is probably entered into as a protective measure, as researchers attempt to shield themselves from accusations of ethical impropriety and/or contaminated data. It does not, however, reveal the true nature of active research which is fraught with difficulties and anxieties.

The findings upon which this paper is based (delivered as separate case studies) come from two completely independent research projects. The paper developed out of discussions between the authors which discovered that although the research settings were vastly different, the problems associated with qualitative research were inherently

similar. These individual reflections should not be seen as prescriptive in any way. They are simply accounts of attempts to overcome what are increasingly difficult problems, and the reader should take from them what they can. The rationale in writing the paper is the hope that it may generate a response, perhaps even a debate, on what are important, though largely ignored, aspects of qualitative research. If the problems associated with this type of research are openly discussed the need for methodological re-construction will have been obviated. What should be acknowledged is that problems such as these are research findings in themselves.

The ‘buildings’ to which each of us sought access were a small, light engineering firm, Turnhay Engineering and Parkville<sup>1</sup>, a ‘failing’ school. In order to encapsulate the personal nature of qualitative research such as ours, the body of the paper will be written in the first person.

### **Case study 1: Turnhay Engineering.**

#### ***‘What should we do now?’***

Buchanan *et al* (1988) argue that a preoccupation with methodological concerns can frequently have a disabling effect on the research opportunities that often provide little or no time for the development of research methodologies. For them ... *the practice of field research is the art of the possible* ... and all opportunities for research should be exploited, where and when they present themselves. This is the road down which my research set out, a search for ‘buildings’ to which I could gain entrance.

My initial approach (with the intention of researching the employment relationship in the manufacturing sector) came from a ‘cold canvass’ questionnaire, distributed to all industrial organisations with more than 50 employees, located within a local labour market. These organisations were originally identified from a listing of all industrial organisations in the area, published by the local Industrial Development Agency. The questionnaire, which was simply a mechanism to identify organisations willing to participate in research, requested general information such as: the size of the workforce; how long the plant had operated in the area; was a trade union recognised for the purposes of collective bargaining; whether or not it was part of a larger organisation etc. The final,

and most important, question asked was .. *Would your organisation be willing to participate in a broader programme of research?* From the thirty or so questionnaires sent out, five firms answered this question positively, and this particular case study is based on my experiences in one of these organisations.

The first problem to be addressed by the researcher is one of tactics. If the overall strategy is to gain access to a particular organisation, the main problem is how best, tactically, to present the request? Following the advice of Bill Shankly<sup>2</sup>, to ‘get your retaliation in first’, I attempted to identify all the issues that could possibly be raised in objection. The obvious ones of confidentiality and anonymity can be relatively easily addressed by a rehearsal of the ethical requirements all social researchers must abide by, and through assurances that the researcher will personally maintain both with vigour. Whether or not these assurances are accepted will be dependent on the circumstances and individuals concerned. Objections about the possible time the research will take, and the subsequent cost and disruption to the organisation, will also depend on each individual case, though offering to conduct interviews in the respondents own time, and away from the organisation may go some way to allaying worries of this nature. The most difficult hurdles I had to overcome were the questions that remained un-stated, but were nevertheless there. What is the real purpose of the research? How will the findings be presented, and to whom? How will they reflect on the organisation and, perhaps more importantly, the individual granting access? What’s in it for the organisation/me? The answers to these questions were to have a defining influence on the result of the negotiation.

In this case the ‘tactic’ was to try and put an acceptable ‘spin’ on the request: I was lecturer in industrial sociology at a local university, undertaking research for the purpose of gaining a Ph.D., the topic of which was broadly ‘management style’. The main output would be the Ph.D. thesis, which would probably lie gathering dust on some library shelf somewhere, read only by the individuals who would assess it. Other outputs, if there were any, would be in academic journals, read only by people like myself, and I reinforced all the usual assurances about confidentiality and anonymity. A final report of the findings of the research was also suggested, a tactic widely offered as helpful in securing access (Crompton & James 1988). It was an attempt to appear as unthreatening as possible, a point reinforced by Buchanan et al who state

*Language such as 'interview' and 'publish' can have threatening and negative connotations. Use 'learn from your experience' and 'write an account' rather than 'research by interview leading to publication' (1988 pp57)*

My 'methodology' for negotiating what Burgess (1984) calls the *research bargain*, was often reactive to, and formed by, the responses I was getting from the particular 'gatekeeper' with whom I was negotiating at the time. This is a point reinforced by Beynon (1988) who points out that research, especially in industrial organisations, must be seen as a political, as well as a social, process. While this may appear to be contrived, even slightly devious, I was absolutely honest when asked to whom access was requested<sup>3</sup>. I took the position that '*shy bairns get nowt*' as we say in the north east, and requested access to anyone the research subsequently led me; to any organisational meetings/process/structure I thought applicable; and to any documentation that I thought might be useful. Access was finally granted on these terms.

This should not be seen as even a qualified success as, in reality, I had been pushing against an open door. The literature talks in terms of opportunistic research, advising researchers to take advantage of unsolicited access when and if it presents itself (Burgess 1984; Stevenson 1996). However, in this particular case, the individual taking advantage of an opportunity was the Human Resource Manager, who saw my request for access as an opportunity to advance his own agenda. In this organisation senior managers had recently initiated attempts to achieve a 'cultural change' within the organisation and an external, unbiased view was seen as a valuable resource in assessing the progress of these initiatives. It can be concluded from this experience that access can depend as much on the needs of the organisation (or 'gatekeeper' (Arber and Gilbert 1992; Burgess 1984)) as it does on the persuasive abilities of the researcher, and opportunism should be seen as a two-sided coin.

The fact that the main internal source of (or support for) access was the Human Resource Managers is, I think, significant. He was the individual charged with the responsibility of facilitating the social relations involved in the organisational change, and was therefore the person most in need of accurate feedback from the shop floor. I believe the most

influential 'selling point' in gaining access was the offer of a final report, a report that would provide information very difficult to come by through internal structural methods: negative feedback from the shop floor. Bryman (1989) concludes that often access is achieved through a combination of hard work, strategic planning and dumb luck, points that my experiences would reinforce, with perhaps a greater emphasis on dumb luck.

Once access to the main building was achieved, the problem then became one of gaining access to all the internal rooms. Negotiations had to begin all over again with another set of 'gatekeepers'. The resultant 'research bargain' in these instances was dependent upon two separate, but interrelated, conditions: the level and extent of the initial access granted for reasons that will become apparent below; and the subsequent negotiations with the individuals concerned. The main obstacle to achieving secondary, and subsequent levels of access, is again largely contingent on the 'gatekeeper's' response to the approach. The climate within which the negotiation will take place will be influenced by a variation of the un-stated questions outlined above; what is the real purpose of the research? are you part of management? how will my responses reflect on me? what's in it for me? Again the answers to these questions had a defining influence on the result of the negotiation.

The most important of these issues, and often the most difficult to resolve, was whether or not I was associated in some way with management, a point highlighted by others (Bryman 1989). In gaining access through the 'front door' at the invitation of senior management, the individuals within the organisation, especially those on the shop floor, may see you as part of management, or perhaps a 'consultant' brought in by management for their own purposes. One answer to this problem may lie in the level of access initially granted.

In this organisation I was given almost carte blanche access and was able to use this freedom to overcome initial suspicion by spending considerable time with individuals from all levels of the organisation, sometimes working alongside them, in an unquestioning way. In the case of shop-floor workers I spent a lot of time as a participant observer working 'on the line' with them as part of the team. My introduction to the organisation was initially as someone *'from the university doing a Ph.D. on how managers organise things'* but quickly became known as *'the bloke who is writing the book'* and eventually as *'oh, that's just Davy, he works here sometimes'*.



My many years working in the mining industry stood me in good stead here, as I was 'tried out' by workers on the shop-floor. I was often the butt of jokes, both verbal and practical, and was able to respond in kind, responses which, I believe, were watched closely. Over time, as the above statements would suggest, I believe I became an accepted presence within this organisation. I became a fixture within the organisation, 'in it' though not part 'of it'; but most importantly not associated with management, and consequently, non-threatening.

When eventually asked if they were willing to be interviewed, the individuals to whom I had become familiar responded willingly, and the information offered was, I believe, of greater value than would have been elicited in different circumstances. It reached the stage where some individuals were asking me when I was going to interview them. There was only one instance where I had difficulty reassuring the interviewee about his concerns over confidentiality. All others were eager to offer their views and many stated that they did not care if management knew what they were saying. Indeed, in several instances the interviewees positively wanted me to inform management of their views, as they believed that management should know of the problems they were experiencing in their daily lives at work.

There is another valuable lesson to be taken from these experiences: the longer one is exposed to a situation as a social researcher, the more one is able to understand the underlying social and political undercurrents that exist in all organisations (May 1993). This is where the 'case study' comes into its own (despite the criticisms of this type of research from those who favour quantitative research methods). The time spent within this organisation allowed me to identify and understand the subtle nuances of social interaction that enabled me to gather data that would have been otherwise denied because of my ignorance of their existence.

There is, however, a price to pay for this level of access, a price that can raise serious ethical issues. In this organisation, the level of access granted was to any employee in any section of the organisation, (up to, and including the Managing Director) who were willing to talk to me, and to all meetings (up to Board Level) where 'non-sensitive' topics were being discussed. Part of the 'research bargain' negotiated at the outset, was

for periodic 'situation reports' to be provided to the Human Resource Manager and Production Manager, as well as a final report. The first report was presented to a committee of senior managers, on the 'situation' regarding the reaction of the workforce to the recently imposed new working practices. I informed this committee that the workforce had not engaged positively with the new systems, but were 'waiting to see if they would go away, if ignored'. Following the break-up of the meeting, that had gone on to discuss how best the commitment of the workforce could be achieved, I was taken aside by the Human Resource Manager and asked 'what should we do now'? This was a question that I had feared from the outset, and one that had to be dealt with immediately. My response was that firstly, it was not my role to offer advice, a point raised in the initial negotiations, and secondly, I was not qualified to do so. This response ended the conversation, though I was in little doubt that the issue of 'advice' would be raised again. The problem was not what they should do now, but what I should do in the future.

A consultation with colleagues experienced in researching organisations, resulted in the combined opinion that access as open as this should be preserved at all costs. Everyone involved in these discussions generally accepted that any advice, however anodyne, would compromise the research to a degree. In contrast, there was also an acknowledgement that if access were to be withdrawn then no research would be possible, other than through covert, 'back door' methods, methods that can present equally serious ethical problems (Garrahan & Stewart unpublished). The consensus of opinion was that all subsequent requests should be addressed in the same way, but that if pressed the main priority should be to protect access. Since the original report, no further formal reports were requested, however, feedback was given during regular and general conversations, mainly with the Human Resource Manager. During these conversations the major difficulties facing the management team were outlined, and the conversation tended to drift towards how such problems are dealt with elsewhere. These are murky waters indeed, as the information coming from these very informal conversations has been extremely productive. The reality of the situation is such that my relationship with this organisation can be likened to 'partnership research' with all its associated problems, (Harrington, Mcloughin & Riddell 1999). Management have continually pointed me in directions they think will be genuinely useful to my research, expecting in return my impressions of how things are going.

To further complicate matters, the research itself has become a factor in the internal political processes associated in the attempts to change the organisation's culture. The Human Resource Manager has suggested that I must have recognised that some of the actions of the Production Manager, in his dealings with the workforce, have been counter-productive to the initiatives they had jointly developed to achieve a cultural change. He felt that a 'conversation' between this person and myself might be interesting, especially if these points were raised, the implication being that if I questioned the Production Manager's actions he would be more willing to take the position held by the Human Resource Manager. Being more than aware of the dangers of being caught between two such powerful players within the organisation, has made me very sensitive to the political undertones that exist within all organisations, and of the minefield that they represent to the researcher. If it were ever to be doubted that research is a political, as well as social process, this situation reaffirms the point.

What can be made from these reflections? The level of access granted may also be reflected in the extent of the pressure applied to provide information and/or advice to the person or persons granting that access. This will certainly come from management. Never at any time, during the research outlined in this paper, was I asked for either information or advice from people on the shop-floor. When determining a response to such demands it should be borne in mind that the maintenance of access is crucial. It is also worth noting that the demands made for information and/or advice is a research finding in itself. These demands will tell the researcher what the person making the demands is concerned about; their level of confidence in how things are going; and may provide evidence of conflict between management and/or between management and the shop-floor. To be successful the researcher must constantly be aware of the political aspects of organisational reality and should be prepared to engage with those processes to further his or her research. Data to inform this engagement can often be gleaned from the questions that are asked *of* the researcher.

Once access has been granted, the problem becomes one of a continuing re-negotiation, and some contradictory, even confusing advice is offered in the literature. For example, Crompton & Jones (1988) tell us to be honest about all aspects of the research, while Bulmer (1988) argues that 'subterfuge' is an acceptable tactic to use in dealing with 'gatekeepers'. The answer properly lies between these two views; in order to successfully

undertake *and complete* a research project both will have to be used. The problem for the researcher is when to use which alternative, the solution of which will come from experience and common sense. This is not to say that I am advocating dishonesty, rather, I am saying that the researcher must be prepared to be (to use a well-worn phrase) economical with the truth.

Harrington *et al* (1999) in their paper on ‘partnership research’ make the point that the research project may have a natural life span, after which the research becomes invalid. The rationale they offer in explanation is that in this type of research relationship, the process of research becomes part of the organisation itself, and increasingly subject to management controls. I would argue that the type of research described in this paper is also entropic, though for different reasons. By spending large periods of time with people from all sections of the organisation, being immersed in their lived experiences at work, I am finding it increasingly difficult to maintain objectivity. It may soon be time to move on, though I will be reluctant to do so.

## **Case study 2: Parkville**

### ***‘Carrying the egg’***

The research for this case study was characterised by coincidence and chance, later combined with sheer grit and determination fuelled by the fear of losing access. Access was initially negotiated through a distant acquaintance, a governor in an inner-city comprehensive school which had been classified by Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) of schools as ‘failing’<sup>4</sup>. This governor felt that it would be good for the ‘story’ of Parkville to be told and with this in mind offered to approach the headteacher on my behalf with a view to my interviewing him and the teaching staff in the school. As suggested in the introduction to the paper, it is preferable to have access via the ‘front door’ and this was my front door. As chance had it the headteacher, being from the same northern city as myself, was more than willing to help another ex-patriate and consequently I was invited into Parkville through the front door.

Time and context are both important elements of research and both were particularly significant in the process of my gaining access to the teachers. For ten years teachers had

been severely scrutinised and criticised by the Government and press; this research began only months after Tony Blair made his now famous promise to put ‘education, education, education’ (1996) at the forefront of New Labour’s political agenda, once again placing teachers in the public limelight. Only days before my first visit to the school it was decided by the Local Education Authority (LEA), with the agreement of David Blunkett, Minister for Education and Employment, that the school would be closed down and re-opened under the Government’s ‘Fresh-Start’ policy<sup>5</sup>; this was against the wishes of most of the staff in the school and many of the parents. The staff were all being made redundant but had the opportunity of re-applying for their jobs in the new school. Alongside this Parkville’s teachers were being stigmatised by the local and national press for being responsible for the ‘failing’ of the school. Such was the macro context of the school. At this stage I was unaware of the micro-politics (Ball 1987) within the school.

Although the headteacher was quite eager for me to speak with the teachers they appeared, for some reason, to be reluctant to speak with me. Having circulated an outline of my research to the teachers, the headteacher twice approached them on my behalf but received no response. I saw an article in the press and wrote to the teacher quoted in it but again got no response.

It was abundantly plain that I was getting only one view of the situation in the school, that of the headteacher, and I desperately needed to speak with the teachers. Burgess (1984), writing on researching in schools, suggests that researchers should *consider the extent they rely on a headteacher for initial sponsorship within the school* and that one has to question *the extent to which a headteacher can grant access to the whole of a school site*. It was apparent that there was more than one level of access at Parkville; I had been allowed in to the school through the front door, but gaining access to the inner rooms was by no means straightforward.

I decided to try a direct targeting approach and wrote to twenty randomly selected teachers from a list provided by the headteacher. Success! Two teachers responded and asked me to ring them at school to arrange a time to meet. A sub-finding of my research is that schools are the singularly most difficult institution in which to contact someone by telephone! I had little success in contacting them.

Finally, I agreed with the headteacher that I should address the teachers personally during a staff meeting. Within minutes of entering Parkville's staffroom for the first time it became apparent that there was an extremely hostile atmosphere between management and staff. Although the headteacher had provided me with front door access, I was now realising the drawbacks of this. As Burgess (1984) points out, gaining access via *someone higher in the [school] hierarchy ... raises questions about the trust teachers might put in a researcher who enters the school via the headteacher*. I had found a gate-keeper but standing in front of the teachers that morning I began to realise that he, and therefore I, were on the wrong side of a gate that was firmly closed. Burgess (1984) suggests that *the negotiation of access can reveal to the researcher the pattern of social relationships at a site* and on reflection, this was the case with Parkville as the micro-politics (Ball 1987) of the school began to unfold.

When I stood up to address the teachers I felt as if I had walked straight in to the lions' den. The methodology literature fails to prepare the researcher for such a situation, but working on the similar viewpoint of '*shy bairns get nowt*' I realised that this was my big chance, it was now or never. I had to sell myself and my research and persuade these teachers, who were being scrutinised by HMI and criticised by the press, to talk to me. I made my pitch. At the end of the meeting only one teacher came forward and offered to speak with me. I felt as if I had gained very little from a mammoth amount of effort. Although I finished the day by having interviewed two teachers and a deputy head, access then dried up again. No more teachers came forward for interview.

Clearly, I had to get back into the school; I began to realise that access involves *negotiation and renegotiation* (Burgess 1984). This time it was the deputy head with whom I spoke and he agreed for me to visit the school for a day and access was resumed. The teachers were clearly reluctant to offer themselves for interview, however, it became apparent that if I asked them during the course of a conversation they tended to say yes; it was from this that I devised my research strategy. From that day on whenever I went to the school to interview a teacher I undertook to enlist another for interview on another day. I was beginning to be seen around the school and, more importantly, I had got through one of the 'interior doors' and into the staffroom – I had to keep that door open.

The headteacher was happy with my coming and going in the school and made it clear that I did not have to seek his permission; nevertheless, he was always aware of my presence. In line with Fieldings (1993) view *that access-givers ... may have ulterior motives in cooperating* and in a similar vein to the Human Resource manager in the previous case, the headteacher did ask whether I had ‘discovered’ anything which might make it a ‘little easier’ with the staff over the next twelve months. Burgess (1984) warns that in relying on a headteacher for access consideration must be given to *the extent to which the researcher may become a consultant to the school and to the headteacher*. This was not my intention and I realised that I had to tread very carefully. I suddenly felt as if I was carrying an egg around with me, one false move and I could drop it, it would break and be gone; the gatekeeper must not close the gate.

Key events play an important role in the shaping of research and there were a number of these for me during my time at Parkville. A major happening was when I arrived at the school one day to find that with a full academic year to go before the school closed the headteacher, my gate-keeper, had resigned his post. My initial concern was that I would no longer have access, the gate would close. However, the senior deputy took over as acting head and my fears were quickly alleviated. Another ex-patriate from my home town, he suggested that I come in the following term and act as classroom assistant. It was soon apparent to me that the acting head was not held in the same disdain with the staff as the headteacher and my new gate-keeper was on the right side of the gate.

It was in undertaking the participative research and being ‘Miss’ that I gained access to the staffroom in my own right and consequently greater access to the teachers. However, I still had difficulty in gaining access to one group of teachers. Fielding (1993) suggests that *most organisations contain factions* and this was certainly the case within Parkville’s staffroom with teachers affiliated to different groups. One of these groups gathered in what I termed the ‘inner-sanctum’ a small kitchen area which was the ‘smokers room’; here they not only smoked, but they also discussed school issues and gossiped. My problem was how to get through this door – should I take up smoking?

This room had a gate-keeper of its own, a teacher who was hostile to my presence in the school; for some reason unknown to me he refused to talk to me and even ignored my presence in the school. If I entered the room to make a coffee when he was there then the

conversation stopped. Eventually, I solved access by interviewing two teachers whilst they had a ‘smoke’, thus being ‘invited’ into this room with the restricted access; the conversation no longer stopped when I walked in, but the teacher who disliked me often walked out.

There was one particular teacher with whom it was imperative that I speak. This teacher was both a political and trade union activist, he was the person quoted by the press, as mentioned above. He was a ‘key player’ in events at Parkville as his political beliefs were seen to influence other teachers in the school; he was publicly vocal in his criticism of the management and closure of the school. This teacher was particularly elusive when it came to interviewing him and although (following the resignation of the headteacher) he did talk to me once, he was extremely careful about what he said. Although his ‘door’ was not completely closed, the secrets inside his ‘room’ were firmly locked away - that is until I attended a multi-cultural event which took place at the school one dark and dismal Friday evening.

The teachers, who had put a lot of effort into the event, were pleased with both my presence at the occasion and in my obvious appreciation of their (and the children’s) work; they finally believed that I had a genuine interest in them and their school. The key player made a point of thanking me for coming and from then on was far more willing to talk to me. Again, a key event influenced and shaped my access in the school.

A low point for me during the research was when, not long after I first went into the school, I asked whether I might sit in on a union meeting at which the teachers were considering what actions they should take in defence of their jobs. I was told to turn up at the room at the appointed time and a decision would be made. I was left waiting outside the room for ten minutes only to be told that the issues were too sensitive for me to be there. Not only was this a minor blow to my research, it was a major blow to my pride. It did help me to realise, however, that all that happens at the research site is relevant research. When I took time to consider the teachers’ decision, I realised that they were fearful for their own positions and wary of any ‘strangers’ who might divulge information of a sensitive nature to management. It made me aware of the delicate path I was walking.



One thing that a researcher soon learns is that knocking on doors and asking for entry is not easy. At the start of my research I found it was mainly women teachers I was talking to. I think there are possibly two reasons for this; one is that I simply found it easier to approach a woman in the staffroom, in the playground or in the dining hall and ask whether she would be interviewed. I found it far more difficult to approach the men. Similarly to Finch (1993) I also felt that the women were quite happy to talk to me, as another woman and this also made it easier to approach them. It was apparent that I was knocking on the doors which I expected entry to be 'easier' and this was something I quickly had to remedy.

The teachers' general reluctance to talk with me stemmed from the political situation both within and outside the school, indeed, the only teacher who refused to be tape recorded told me 'I don't know who you are or what you will do with the information you gather'. However, once they began to trust me and realised that I was not a management 'spy', they wanted to talk to me. Like Finch (1993), I '*claim no special qualities which make it easy for me to get people to talk*' but once the teachers started talking they did not want to stop and my role took on a new dimension. These teachers who were being partly blamed (by the LEA and the local and national media) for the closure of the school wanted me to hear their views on the situation at Parkville. At the end of my time in the school the acting head said that he believed it had been good for the teachers to have someone from outside to talk to. Indeed, a number of teachers told me they had enjoyed talking with me and on the last day as I thanked a teacher she responded by saying 'no, thank-you, you've done a good job'. Thus, the researcher role became part counsellor.

In undertaking research, one wonders how one is viewed by the subjects of the research. An interesting perception of my role in the school is that of two teachers who talked to me whenever I was in the staffroom and invited me to join them at breaktime and lunchtime. Towards the end of my research I thanked them and said how they had eased the 'pain' of my research. They both laughed and explained to me that like themselves, I was an 'outsider'; for me, it was my research role that made me thus, for them it was because they were both black. Being 'inside the outsiders' gained me access to a different room and another source of information; these teachers were always willing to impart the latest news, and their views, about what was happening in the school. This does, however, raise the delicate issue of the ethics of research of this nature; as Fielding (1993) suggests

*short of wearing a sign, ethnographers cannot signal when they are or are not collecting data.* Although the teachers were both aware of who I was and what I was doing there, when collecting data through chatting ‘informally’ with them it could be argued that *overt and covert approaches* to research shaded into each other (Fielding 1993).

At times I also had to consider my physical safety. Early on in the research the headteacher rang and asked me to postpone a visit to the school as it had been a ‘bad week’. Due to the fact that the school was ‘failing’ pupils from other schools had been coming to taunt the students of Parkville<sup>6</sup> and there had been fighting outside the school gates with students carrying machetes and knives; indeed the headteacher and deputy head showed me evidence of some of the ‘weapons’ which had been confiscated from children in the school – a vicious looking knife and a heavy carpenters file, however, I was not to worry about these because they were not for use inside the school only outside! Another time, when I was helping out in a classroom a group of youths barged into the room and were quite offensive and threatening. My instinctive reaction was for the wellbeing of the children who were partly in my care, particularly as they were year 7 (11-12 year olds) and I jumped up to help usher the boys out. I later discovered that the ‘ring leader’ had been permanently excluded from Parkville (and most other schools in the area) as he was too difficult to control in the classroom. The latter are examples of the reality of active research, again, as Sayer (1992) suggests, research does not take place in a vacuum, the researcher becomes part of the research.

An aspect of undertaking research which is often not commented upon is the physical and emotional effort required. Every time I went into the school I was concerned that it might be the last time. Participant observation also involves the additional challenge of remaining constantly aware of what is taking place around you; one has to be continually alert but at the same time not look like a researcher! I usually left the school feeling emotionally and physically drained. It was only towards the very end that I started to relax and believed that nothing would go wrong.

By the end of the research, I had gained valuable information about workplace industrial relations in a failing school. Due to luck, determination and some key events, doors which had been closed, bolted and barred at the outset of the case study had finally opened much wider than I had initially anticipated; I had gone quite some way to being accepted by the

Parkville teachers (and pupils). I had spoken with all the people I needed to and was there at the end when, at a very emotional and tearful ceremony, the school finally closed. The egg did not even crack!

## **Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction, the above are personal reflections of undertaking qualitative research, and as such it is not suggested that generalisations can be drawn from these. Nonetheless, although the research environments for the two case studies were vastly different, the problems associated with gaining and keeping access, and gaining the trust and confidence of the research 'subjects', were not dis-similar. What is clear from both is that there are many doors within a research 'site' and that access to each one has to be negotiated and re-negotiated separately. On entering the site, the researcher may be quite unaware of firstly, why they have been invited in and secondly, the inter-relationship between the various occupants of that building. These two factors are extremely important in shaping the way in which the research will develop.

Both case studies demonstrate how workplace micro-political tensions, perhaps unbeknown to the researcher at the time, can affect access to the research subjects. By gaining access through a front door opened by management the researcher may find the occupants of the internal rooms, whether they are 'blue-collar, shop-floor' workers or 'white-collar professionals', reluctant to talk with them. Once inside the main building, the researcher has to continually negotiate access to the other doors within it. As the case studies show, significant episodes or events can help the researcher to find the right key to these doors. Further, once the researcher is able to move in and out of the rooms without invitation they become part occupiers, thus gaining an insight into the political and social interactions which may not be available to mere 'visitors'. It is this that makes in-depth participative research valuable as a social research method.

The case studies also demonstrate how social researchers should knock on as many doors as possible, and use any tactic available (apart from dishonesty) to gain access, once the knock has been answered. Once inside the building, they should spend as much time as possible with the occupants, and be ready to become involved in the social and political discourses within the organisation in order to inform their research. The ice upon which

the social researcher skates may be very, very thin at times but the journey is well worth the risk of getting wet.

In taking an honest and open approach to describing the research activity, both studies attempt to show how active research is fraught with difficulties and anxieties. Whilst this is the case, however, it is also important to note how these are challenges which once recognised can be overcome, thus making the overall process an interesting and informative one. A valuable insight gained from such research is how instances which appear to be a hindrance to the research are research findings in themselves.

Finally, researchers should be prepared to write accurate, honest and unsanitised accounts of the research process in order to provide others with the benefit of their experiences in the hidden abode of the workplace. This is what we have attempted to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Both names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Manager, Liverpool Football Club 1959 – 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Deviousness, subterfuge and honesty are offered as legitimate tactics in a number of studies. For example see Crompton & Jones (1998) and Bulmer (1988).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Failing’ schools are those which are viewed by government inspectors as failing to provide an adequate standard of education.

<sup>5</sup> The ‘Fresh Start’ initiative for schools was introduced by New Labour in their White Paper ‘Excellence in Schools’, July 1997. Schools under this programme may either be taken over by another ‘successful’ school in the area or be closed and re-opened with a new name and usually a new headteacher. Change has to be ‘more than superficial’ in order for the school to improve (Blunkett 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Sadly, this is a situation not unique to Parkville; Dean reports on primary school children being bullied.