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**A Critical Ethnography: Young People's Perspectives on the  
Effects of the Impending Closure of their School on their  
Education**

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## Abstract

*.... the frank concession is that we live in troubled times, yet we are enabled with a sobering belief that a better way does exist (Rexhepi and Torres, 2011, p.683).*

Schools in England are in a constant state of change. This research is about change in one secondary school in particular. It is an investigation into what young people think and feel about the changes in their school as it moves towards closure in 2016 and the effects of this impending closure on their education. The research draws on the critical paradigm which examines the structure of education in England specifically at the secondary level of schooling, and how, in a bid to raise standards, these changes sometimes leave young people feeling anxious, disappointed and worried about their education and their future. The research recognises young people as individuals in their own right, deserving of spaces for their voices to be heard during times of change. The research champions 'voices' over 'voice' in recognition that young people experience change in different ways, and this should not be lumped together as 'student/pupil voice'.

Data gathering involved collaborating with ten young people from St Luke's Church of England High School over 15 months, from April 2014 through to July 2015, through open-ended, group and individual interviews, surveys and observation, whilst scrutinizing progress and achievement data from 2011/2012 when they were in Year 7, until 2014/2015 (Year 10).

Data analysis and presentation are guided by the interpretative framework of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space, grouping themes and sub-themes to form 10 stories. The research concludes that the phased closure of St Luke's had a profound impact on each of the young people.



The phased closure proved challenging for all the participants in different ways and could, at some point, impact negatively on all their future aspirations. The main conclusion of the research study is that subject options were being reduced and thus the young people's life chances were being curtailed in ways that they did not anticipate.

## Chapter 1 Background and Purpose of the Study

### Introduction to the research study

*Human beings are storytelling beings. We make sense of our lives and the things that happen to us through narratives which provide links, connections and coherence in ways that we find meaningful (Wellington, et al., 2011, p.19).*

This critical ethnographic research study defends the importance and value of listening to the individual voices of young people in their school at all times, but especially when their school is facing change such as a phased closure over four years. I agree with Gersch et al (1996, cited In Davie, Upton and Varma, p.27) that “there has been a growing interest in and acceptance of the value of increasing the active participation of children in decisions made about them and their school life”. It is also often true, however, that “claims to children’s participation are strong on rhetoric but weak in reality” (Hallett and Prout, 2003, p.2). The research, therefore, examines the wider education sector in England and structures in an urban secondary school that give rise to young people being alienated during a time of change.

The research also engages with what Anderson (1989, p.253) describes as ‘analytic categories’ because it is true that, “holistic theory provides schema for action and social change that address the entire nexus of relevant issues and problems” (Anyon et al, 2009, p.15). For the purpose of this research, some of these are ‘education’, ‘schooling’, ‘school closures’, ‘power’ and ‘voice’, amongst others. Anderson explained that “analytic categories [that are] not viewed holistically become ideological in that they lead to the reproduction of a particular set of social relationships” (1989, p.253). The aim of this research is not to reproduce this set of

relationships but to challenge them, using the perspectives of students as participants in the processes of change.

The research study is also what Bold (2012, p.10) calls “a personal narrative” of my professional experiences as a secondary school teacher, which served to heighten my interest in young people, their ‘voices’, schooling and how the decisions taken in schools, by professionals and external bodies affect them. My personal motivation for engaging in this research study stems from a strongly held belief that young people should be guided and supported through journeys of change in their school. In order to do that, young people should be consulted on matters that affect them, and their views should be taken into account, as a matter of principle (Whitty and Wisby, 2007, p.308). Having a ‘voice’, therefore signals “having a legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.362) throughout the journey of change leading up to the closure of their school in 2016.

Flutter and Ruddock (2004, p.135) are right in their assessment that “the pupil voice movement represents a new departure because it is based on the premise that schools should reflect the democratic structures in society at large”. This research will celebrate the advances made, both in research and practice, for the participation and engagement of young people as a starting point. What I am advocating, however, is a paradigm shift, in that I believe ‘voices’ entail much more than a simple reflection of the democratic structures in our society. Although there is acknowledgement of these structures in the pupil voice movement, in practice, “shaping children as the future labour force is seen as an increasingly important option” (Prout, 2003, p.17) and this continues to cause me some unease. The two

polemics present a dichotomy and will need to be more thoroughly explored and understood in order to make the case for change. It will be interesting to know what the young people think, and how they are feeling, about the changes in their closing school in light of this assessment.

## Context

According to Ball, Maguire and Braun, “only recently has there been a greater concern with examining the interplay of organisational practices with contextual variables” (2012, p.20). They go on to assert that context is, and ought to be, viewed as an “‘active’ force, it is not just a backdrop against which schools have to operate” (Ball et al., 2012, p.24). Context is also essential if one looks closely at the policy directives that a school might embark on, during a closure for example and, as Rizvi and Lingard remind us, like schools, “policies exist in context: they have a prior history, linked to earlier policies, particular individuals and agencies” (2010, p.15).

The story/history and the sociology of St Luke’s are therefore important in adding ecological validity and context to the research process. Both are also explored in cathartic ways for me as the researcher, also experiencing change. Like Bathgate (2006, p.7), who researched the closure of her school, I will “avoid the politicisation of the study” and like Bathgate’s research, this research study “does not challenge the decision-making process which led to the closure of the school nor does it concentrate on the process of closure itself ....” Both of these issues, however, form part of the social and political underpinnings of St Luke’s leading up to where it is today. It is within this context, therefore, that a brief history of St Luke’s is constructed.

### A brief history of St Luke's

St Luke's is an urban Voluntary Aided Church of England high school, which was located on two sites within walking distance of each other prior to August 2013, when it became a single site school as part of a phased closure in 2016. The school is over 300 years old and is like many Church of England schools in having "deep roots in our education system" (Green, 1983, p.3). St Luke's was one of the first schools established by the Church of England to educate the children of the poor in maths, reading and the Bible. The school pre-dates state involvement in the mass education of children, which came in the late 1800s.

For years, the school stood as a beacon of good education and charitable involvement in the local community. It was one of the preferred schools for faith-based education in the area and was popular with parents from all faiths and non-religious parents. A poor Ofsted report in 2004, however, judged the school as failing in all areas and the school was immediately placed in Special Measures. An increasingly negative reputation in the community led to year-on-year decreases in admission, even after the school came out of Special Measures in 2006. In-year admissions held steady throughout this period as new arrivals joined the school from the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa.

A small number of the young people from St Luke's struggled to exist harmoniously, both with each other and with young people from nearby schools, which led to frequent arguments and physical fights on the roads in close vicinity of the school. These incidents did not provide a favourable image of the school in the local community. During conversations with staff, I found that the majority believed that St Luke's had been dealt with unfairly over the years by the borough's in year *Fair Access Panel* (responsible for placing challenging young people in schools across

the borough). They were convinced that the panel had placed disproportionately large numbers of the most challenging young people at St Luke's. They felt that sometimes these young people came with challenges that the school was simply unable to address and these were the very students who were most frequently embroiled in quarrels and fights in and outside of the school. They believed that St Luke's, represented by the head teacher at these meetings, was unable to challenge the decisions of the borough's in year *Fair Access Panel*. Another possibility was that other schools in the borough, some amongst the highest performing in the country, were able to steer the more challenging young people in the direction of St Luke's.

In spite of the difficulties, I believe that teachers and students worked zealously to regain favour in the local community. Some of us made bi-weekly visits to local primary schools to teach Mathematics and PE lessons and to conduct assemblies. On many occasions St Luke's provided transport for children (in years 5 and 6) from the local primary schools to conferences, concerts, drop-ins and lessons in History held at the school. From time to time parents from the primary schools visited St Luke's and they seemed impressed with the work that was being done by staff and students.

In 2008, St Luke's was successful in its bid to become a Humanities Specialist College with specialisms in History, RE and English. I wrote the RE section of the bid and I was excited for the young people, as this extra funding could have helped to improve the school. The status and added funding enabled the subject leaders of the specialisms to stage larger conferences for the young people at St Luke's and also for students from the local primary schools. We were able to purchase additional resources for groups of vulnerable students, such as the early learners of English, and the gifted and talented students. The RE department forged links with a Berlin

school for cultural exchange and from 2007 – 2011 young people from both schools visited each other. Subject leaders within the Specialism also led pedagogical Continuous Professional Developments (CPDs) in Literacy and Behaviour for Learning for the whole school. Lesson observations showed advancements in teaching and learning, with exam results improving year on year. Student surveys revealed that the young people enjoyed school, liked their lessons and overall were happy at St Luke's. Although these developments were very encouraging, staff often expressed exasperation at the fact the sterling efforts and achievements of the young people of St Luke's were going unnoticed in the wider community.

The school was earmarked for funding from the *Building Schools for the Future* (BSF) programme, set up under the Labour Government. BSF was a "state-funded infrastructure development programme" according to Ball (2007, p.48). He quoted the then *Partnership for Schools* (PfS) website as saying that the BSF programme was intended to "rebuild or renew facilities for all secondary pupils in England within 10-15 years from 2005-6" (Ball 2007, p.48). It was anticipated that BSF funding would transform the appearance and facilities of the school and would subsequently lead to the school becoming a popular choice again. Due to the change in the government administration in 2010, however, the *Building Schools for the Future* programme was rescinded by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. This was a setback for St Luke's because the school was scheduled for works towards the end of the BSF programme. Indeed, by this time most of the other schools in the borough had already been modernised. It was widely expressed by staff in the school that this was a notable contributory factor for St Luke's gradual loss of popularity with parents over the years.

Staff regularly voiced their concerns that St Luke's was in difficulty. Nevertheless, the commonly held views expressed in the staffroom were that, despite the set-backs, the school could be salvaged and regain its former high status in the community. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government had continued the Labour Government's policy of academies and the re-branding of what it considered to be 'failing schools'. St Luke's did not feel like a failing school to me, but when I talked to staff, including those who strongly opposed the academies programme for 'failing schools', they were generally favourable to considering this option if it was to prove necessary to save St Luke's.

Amongst staff there seemed a willingness to do whatever it took to save the school. GCSE results were improving year on year, in excess of 50% of students were gaining A\*-C grades, whilst many sixth form students had been accepted to study at Russell Group Universities in England. St Luke's became part of a three school consortium, in which sixth form students travelled between schools for expert teaching in particular subjects at AS and A2 levels. The school entered and won the *Mathematics Challenge* in the borough (2009); year on year students made it to the top, or at least the top 3, position of the borough's *Speak Out Challenge*; students volunteered weekly at the local home for the elderly; the boys were football champions in the borough; the gifted and talented students taught Mathematics and PE in two local primary schools and this same group of students were fast-tracked and were doing AS studies in both Mathematics and English (2012). Some of the staff at St Luke's felt that these successes needed to be broadcasted. They held the opinion that this was a means of regaining the approval of parents and young children in the local area. Over time, however, staff could be heard lamenting how they felt more and more side-lined and excluded from decision-making by the Senior



Leadership Team and the governors. In the staffroom, some staff complained to each other that the school created very few outlets for engagement about the issues that were important to them. Others concluded that the absence of a union representative made them powerless to help the school to improve.

Amongst themselves, other staff expressed the necessity of rebranding the school to improve its image in the local community. Some also called for a revamping of the school's 'Behaviour for Learning' policy, which they believed to be the main reason the school was not favoured by primary school parents and children. Staff felt that this policy, more than any other, suffered from a lack of clarity and was reactive as opposed to proactive. Essentially, it was euphemistic when it needed to be forthright. Certain members of staff told me that they did not feel empowered to enforce the sanctions written within the policy document, because often sanctions were either adulterated or not followed through by senior staff once they were brought to their attention.

Whilst out on break-duty in the playground, many staff sympathised with the local residents who complained about poor and destructive behaviour by pupils at St Luke's. We witnessed first-hand such damaging actions by a minority of our students. Members of the community felt that their complaints and concerns about some students at St Luke's were never taken seriously. Despite all these problems, staff members were still hopeful that, with the backing of the diocesan board of schools, the local authority, the school governors and the head teacher, the school could be turned around and become one of the most successful schools in the country, as it was already an established school in the community.

I recall the head teacher informing staff that birth rates had been high and the projection across the borough indicated that St Luke's would be needed in the years to come. The school, however, had become undersubscribed. In 2011, less than 60 children sought a place in Year 7, which left 54% of Year 7 places vacant. To further exacerbate matters, over a third of these applicants had St Luke's as their second or third choice of secondary school.

It was a shock to many of us when, in February 2012, all stakeholders were informed of the intended closure of the school in August 2016. Stakeholders were told that St Luke's would not:

- admit Year 7 cohorts from September 2012
- remain on two sites from September 2013
- admit a Year 12 cohort from September 2015.

In the staffroom, some staff questioned the integrity of the local authority in awarding St Luke's 'The Most Improved School' in the borough only a few months before voting unanimously with the diocese, the school governors and the head teacher to close the school. Staff pointed to Ofsted's 2009 recognition of improvements in significant areas of the school, where they had noted students making good progress in the majority of lessons that they had seen during the inspection. In the photocopier room I overheard one staff member telling another that if St Luke's had the full support of the school governors, the diocesan board of schools and the local authority, the school would not close.

Others openly declared that the decision to close the school was proof of collusion between the school governors, the diocese and the local authority to take what they

saw as 'the easy way out'. This, they believed, was after months and even years of hard work by staff and students to make St Luke's a success again. The head teacher attempted to dispel all talk of collusion by explaining to staff that the school had long had a poor reputation in the local area, was undersubscribed and was now considered unviable. In response to what the head teacher said, one staff member told me that St Luke's had suffered the calamitousness of having decisions about the school made by two bodies who were never in synchrony, apart from this one time when they took the decision to close the school. These two bodies were the local authority and the diocese.

According to the head teacher, 'a big idea' was needed to ensure the presence of Christian education in the community. The 'big idea' was to support the expansion of the local Church of England primary school to create a new all-through (4 – 18 years) school. The policy direction taken by the diocesan board was that although there would be gap of two years (from 2012 to 2014), they would now be supporting the presence of an all-through school. This, they claimed, would restore the denominational option in this part of the borough at the secondary level from 2014 onwards. One colleague sought me out to say, "Ms G, [short for Miss Gordon, my maiden name] it wasn't even that they decided to close the school. They're closing the school to open a new one which suggests there's something wrong with us, that's why people are angry".

At first staff were told that there would be opportunities for collaboration between St Luke's and the primary school to help aid the transition from a primary to an all-through school. Staff understood this announcement to mean that their expertise would form part of the transition from St Luke's to the new all-through school. They also assumed that because of this intimate involvement, their jobs would be safe.

They anticipated a merger of the primary school and St Luke's, especially because St Luke's formed part of the name of the new all-through school. Staff soon learnt, however, that the expansion of the primary school was to have no affiliation with St Luke's. The new all-through school was to be an entity all on its own, independent of St Luke's. This meant that there would be job losses and redundancies for both teaching and administrative staff as the school gradually reduced in size from 2012-2016. On occasion I would be stopped in the car park and told, "This is just the ultimate act of betrayal", or asked "How did we even get to this point?"; "Is this really a Christian school?"

The young people at St Luke's were promised the highest standard of education in 2012. There was also a commitment to parents that the school would continue to provide a broad curriculum appropriate to the needs of all students. It was becoming more apparent, however, that keeping the finances in order was the overarching determination of the leaders of the school. I have been told on more than one occasion, "We have to operate within budget". With two years still to go before closure, and as Year 9 students prepared to begin their KS4 studies, several subjects were removed from the options and were not taught from September 2014. Students had, however, already made their option choices in the early spring of 2014 when this was announced. The subjects removed included Design and Technology (Clothing and Textiles and Resistant Materials), Health and Social Care, Travel and Tourism, and ICT.

After much protestation by some students who felt they were being cajoled into changing their options, teachers were sourced for Food Technology, Art and Geography. Renegotiation with the music teacher, who received a redundancy letter

on the evening of the spring concert, resulted in a one year part-time contract from September 2014 – April 2015. The question has to be asked: Is this reduced curriculum offering the highest standard of education for the young people? My hypothesis is that with a reduced curriculum and other changes not fully explained to the young people, they will feel and believe that their schooling and education are being compromised. If the metaphor used by Rexhepi and Torres (2011, p.681) is correct, then it is only by “peeling away” the “well-manicured facades of modern society, [that] we can decipher levels of oppression and inequality that fail to mesh” with the rest of society. Examining the structures at St Luke’s will serve to explain and clarify the thoughts and feelings of the young people.

#### **How their experiences became my own**

My school has become a rich site for research at this changing time. This study could have focused on teachers’ responsiveness to the decision to close St Luke’s, the systems in place to support non-specialist teaching until 2016, policy levers and drivers in the decision to close the school, or the closure of St Luke’s as part of the global processes that are transforming education around the world in what Rizvi and Lingard term, “a range of complicated, complex, commensurate and contradictory ways” (2010, p.3). Indeed, these various research possibilities all suit my interest in critical research. Despite this, I hold a keener interest in the consumers of education, the young people at St Luke’s, and their views will form the basis of this critical research.

Since the decision was taken to close the school in 2012, for current staff at St Luke’s, the mantra ‘it’s business as usual’ still remains and was perpetuated through emails and staff meetings from the senior leadership team. Staff members, like myself, have therefore taken a cautionary line, refraining from engaging with the

young people about the changes in our school. In fact, we would not be disingenuous if we said we did not know what the future holds for St Luke's leading up to the closure. Conversations about the closure, however, always make their way into the staffroom. Some staff are adamant that St Luke's will close before the summer of 2016, whilst others, including myself, point to the legal obligation the school is under to see the young people through to August 2016.

So far there has been little or no engagement with the young people about the phased closure of our school, nor has there been any meaningful suggestion that the young people will be involved in this process. I firmly believe that this is wrong. As a consequence, very little is known about the young peoples' perspectives and the effect(s) (if any) that this decision, and the subsequent changes, might be having on them. These changes include a move to one site, the absence of established teachers, a reduction in GCSE subject options, change in peer groupings and play spaces that are now shared spaces. This study seeks to explore what effect issues such as the continued disruption of peer groups, friendships and relationships with staff are having on the young people.

### **My decision to remain at St Luke's**

I still believe in St Luke's, but more importantly, I believe in the young people at St Luke's. I do understand why many staff members have made the difficult decision to leave, but I feel a moral obligation to see each child through to their GCSEs. Many parents who are familiar with the English education system have either been successful at moving their children to a different school or are in the process of doing so. I feel I need to remain at St Luke's for those young people, mostly of non-English speaking immigrant parents, who are simply overjoyed that their children are safe

and are in school. I believe that by remaining at St Luke's, I can add to the wellbeing, happiness and academic success of the young people.

On several occasions some of the young people have asked me, with worrying looks on their faces, "Miss, are you leaving too?" I have given them my word that I will remain for as long as is possible, but that the choice to remain a teacher at St Luke's until closure in 2016 is subject to the staffing needs of the school. As the school reduces in size, the head teacher and the leadership team will have to assess which staff will be needed.

### **Purpose of the research study**

The purpose of the research is to provide deep understandings of the impact of a phased school closure in an urban secondary school. It is about understanding the lived experiences of 10 young people over 15 months and the impact of the closure on their education and wellbeing. My aim is to listen to each of the young people, by way of group and individual interviews, as they share their feelings and thoughts about the phased closure of their school. I will observe the young people at play and in their classrooms. I will observe the young people as a teacher working in their school. As a result I will occupy different spaces and perspectives throughout this research.

Although he made no claim to have unequivocally demonstrated this in his paper, Griffiths (2008, pp.68-9) said that:

There are relatively strong empirical inferences that the educational achievement or progress of students present at schools during periods of closure proposal or other turbulent reorganisation proposals – is likely to be adversely affected by the process.

I will explore this further and in order to do so, part of the research study investigates the impact of the closure on the young people's progress and achievement versus their own perceptions of progress and achievement. I will be examining data from three core subjects, Maths, English and Religious Education (RE). The analysis will be done in collaboration with individual participants at intervals and will form part of their stories.

The resilience of young people during turbulent times, however, will also be considered when reviewing the literature and throughout the research. The leadership team will have access to the research in advance of the closure and could utilise it to support the experiences and transitions of the young people at St Luke's.

### **Research Questions**

The current Year 9 students (as at Spring 2014), were the last to be admitted into Year 7 in September 2011 and will be the last to leave in 2016. I believe that these young people will be most affected by the changes as the school roll declines. With these issues in mind, I have decided to engage these young people as the main participants in this research study. This decision is in no way intended to shy away from or downplay the anger, disappointment and upset that the announcement to close the school has caused to staff. In fact this research in part celebrates the work of staff, who have remained professional, dignified and dedicated to the young people throughout the restructuring. The research, upon completion, will be the young people's narrative. It will be their story: their thoughts, feelings, fears, motivation and method(s) of coping in a school going through a phased closure. The research in its entirety will show a real commitment to young people's 'voices' and the importance of these 'voices' in schools, especially during times of change.



Five research questions gave guidance to the main research title: Young People's Perspective on the Effects of the Impending Closure of their School on their Education. These questions were:

- 1) Do the young people know why their school is closing? How aware are they of the reasons for the changes?
- 2) What do young people think will be the main changes that will affect their education as the school nears closure?
- 3) How do the young people feel about any changes that might affect their education as the school nears closure?
- 4) What is the impact of the changes on student performance and progress?

### **Potential significance of the study**

Schools are fluid places where change is always taking place. Yet I accept Wallace and Pocklington's (2002, p.9) observation that, "much practical advice on managing change has not so far kept pace with the shift in the complexity of change itself". Changes in schools mirror the complex changes in education policy and practice in England.

Other schools facing a phased closure may find the research useful in understanding the emotional journey that young people go through when a school closes over a number of years. School leaders can learn from this research study that change, such as the phased closure of a school, can be a journey that includes the voices of all stakeholders. School leaders may begin to think about how they manage the change process and how their roles and responsibilities impact on each young person as they experience that journey in different ways. Schools may also prioritise the well-being of the young people through different forms of engagement, and gain

an understanding of how change affects them, through this having a genuine commitment to listening to, and understanding, students' voices during a time of change.

At a policy level, governments cannot legislate for everything such as listening to the voices of young people during times of change such as a school closure. However, "policy makers who draw on children's voice in looking at institutional change are to be supported" (Unterhalter, 2012, p.322) and school leaders too. School leaders, through government agencies such as the National College of Teaching and Learning, who work directly with schools to improve the quality of education in England, can work to raise awareness of school leaders, to provide guidance on how to ensure that the strategies adopted and the 'spirit' in which change is managed in schools, does not lead to a climate of fear, anxiety, uncertainty and feelings of alienation. As Mansfield argues, "leaders-in-training can learn first-hand how opening up spaces for students to express their concerns gives leaders additional information concerning contextual complexities to enable a more responsive approach to leadership practice" (Mansfield, 2014, p.425). As Whiting (1980, pp.2-3) rightly stresses, "A closing institution must be managed valiantly as a going concern or it will die many times before its death." This is an area where practical support can be given to school leaders to address these complexities.

Asking the young people themselves how they feel about their education and their schooling during this time of change may prove insightful for St. Luke's in its final year (2015-16). St Luke's will have the opportunity to use the findings of the research in the school's final year, to make changes, if necessary, to the importance given to students' voices. The hope is that the young people's voices, and their wellbeing, will form the basis of all decision-making in the final year, and in doing so, the young

people will leave St Luke's with a legacy of success after taking their GCSEs in the summer of 2016.

## **Organization of the research study**

Chapter 1 introduced the research study and outlined the background and context of the research. It also highlighted the research questions which form the basis of the research, possible significance of the study and gave a synopsis of what each chapter entails.

Chapter 2, (A review of the literature- Towards a Theoretical Perspective) addresses what Hart (2005, p.10) said must be the "two main features of academic work". These are "the central place that argument has... and ... the need to be open-minded when reading the work of other people". In the first instance, Chapter 2 highlights critical research as the theoretical framework underpinning the research. Secondly, Chapter 2 is a theoretical amalgamation of discourses surrounding the current state of education in England – 'education and schooling', 'school closures', 'power' and 'students' voices', the analytic categories, as a means of qualifying the need for this research.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design and methodology. I examine critical ethnography, the complexities of this design and how I mitigated any shortfalls that might have arisen by employing research methods such as surveys, open-ended group and individual interviews and observations in order to provide a rounded and holistic narrative of the young people's experiences. In answering the question, how can the voices of the 10 participants best be heard, narrative emerged as the appropriate approach to data analysis and presentation. Re-storying complemented critical ethnography to become its conduit as the principal means of deconstructing

the experiences, problematizing these experiences and, in particular, raising questions about their implications for the phased closure of St Luke's for the young people who remain at the school. I examine too, the limitations of the study. I also outline how I planned to use Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure framework to tell the stories of the young people.

Finally, ethical considerations are deliberated upon in Chapter 3. As an insider researcher I had the benefit of access to the young people, their data and knowledge of the school, but I had to treat the familiar as strange in order to accurately reflect the lived experiences of the young people whilst upholding the rigours of academic scrutiny. So this chapter justifies the decisions that I took to preserve the ethical integrity of the research study.

In Chapter 4 (Young people's stories of their closing school), the individual stories of the 10 young people are re-storied using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure. The young people's responses to the research questions are also recorded.

Chapter 5 (Discussion of findings, analysis and links to literature). This is a discussion of my findings, which focuses on 'information', since this is what the young people said they wanted the most from senior leaders.

In Chapter 6, I describe the context and culture of St Luke's during the data collection phase. I was previously reluctant to include my own voice but then subsequently decided to; I share my experiences of both the best and worst aspects of St Luke's in this chapter.

In Chapter 7, Conclusions, I examine the complexities of school closures, voice, and power as analytic categories worth researching holistically. I do this by asking two main questions from a philosophical perspective: a) What should schooling be? b) What preparation is to be given to the young so as to enable a society to sustain itself? Limitations of the research are also explored, and being true to students' voices, the young people and I make recommendations for St Luke's, other schools going through change and education research.

## Chapter 2 A review of the literature - Towards a Theoretical Perspective

### Introduction

Taking us back to the:

*“Theoretical foundations that underpin both advocacy and the emerging realities....” (Fielding, 2004, p.295).*

Creswell (2003, p.30) proposes that the literature review:

... provides a useful backdrop for the problem or issue that has led to the need for the study, such as who has been writing about it, who has studied it, and who has indicated the importance of studying the issue.

For the critical researcher, however, the literature review is more than an opportunity to join in the academic conversations surrounding the who, why, how, what and where of the research, although in fairness, these work in tandem to give importance to the area of research. Torres asserts that the literature review is a chance for critical intellectuals to “highlight the role of education as enlightenment, empowerment, and ... [help] achieve higher levels of freedom” (1999, In Popkewitz and Fendler, pp.109-110).

Carr’s (1998, p.335) theory on education closely mirrors my own theoretical perspective of the subject. He believes:

The primary aim of democratic education is to develop in pupils ‘the habit of intelligence’- the habit of confronting and resolving problems through reflective enquiry, collective deliberation and rational debate.

This highlights my theory of situating education within a democracy. In this way, when a theoretical understanding of a democratic education is juxtaposed with the

current structures at St Luke's, one is able to see that this "habit of intelligence" that Carr speaks of is absent, or at best blurred. This is because there is:

- little or no involvement or engagement with young people about the phased closure of their school
- a marked reduction in curriculum provision at GCSE, due to non-specialist teachers and supply teachers being given the remit to prepare the young people for GCSE in 2016, as part of a cost saving exercise.

The point of contestation is not whether St Luke's should be closing in 2016, but whether those who are guiding the school into closure are doing all that they can to make this process as tolerable as possible for the young people involved. The actions and inactions of those in charge must be scrutinised and called into question in order for there to be holistic understandings of the impact of closure on the young people. The broader questions that will need answering are:

- Do the young people feel that there are platforms and provisions for their voices, fears, anxieties and concerns to be heard and acted upon?
- Will the young people be offered the curriculum leading up to 2016 that will provide for them not just "schooling", which currently maintains the status quo power relations in society (Shujaa, 1993, p.338), but the "democratic education" about which Carr speaks?

The answer to these questions will emerge through a coherent narrative of their experiences over time. This narrative will be gained by asking each of the

participants what they think and how they feel about the changes in their school and how these changes might affect their education. This process, along with a close examination of the relevant literature, will ensure that the young people's voices are heard and understood.

In order to understand the impact of the school closure on social relations, there is a need for engagement with other dominant discourses and critical theoretical underpinnings. The identification of common themes in the 'pupil voice' debate for example, will play a crucial role in helping me reveal the transformational potential of incorporating 'students' voices'. Critical theory, therefore, has an important role to play in this research.

### **Critical Research and conceptions of power**

The decision to employ aspects of this theoretical framework to underpin this research study emanates from Carr's invitation to research /teacher practitioners like myself to be bold and confident in acknowledging the mutual interdependence of educational theory and educational practice (1995, p.51). According to Carr, research/ teacher practitioners should engage in 'ideology-critique'. This he says is "recovering self-reflection as a valid category of knowledge". I interpret this to mean that, I reflect throughout the research, on the social, cultural and historical forces that are shaping my interpretations (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.127). "The critical approach," Carr continues, "interprets theory and practice as mutually constitutive and dialectically related domains" (1995, p.50). These three elements of self-reflection and of the dialectics of theory and practice have been central to my choice of theoretical framework.



Issues of power permeate this research in many different ways and on multiple levels. The critical paradigm calls for an exploration and interrogation into the notions of power and “a recognition of the multiplicity of power relations in any given context” (Apple, Au and Gandin, 2009, p.13). In this study there are numerous significant power relationships, both external and internal to the school. The overarching power of government policy opened the door to the process of closure, as a result of the Ofsted inspection (noted in Chapter 1) and the subsequent drop in the school roll. Some parents made their choices accordingly, exercising what power they had in these circumstances. The local authority with responsibility for schooling and place planning in the borough were under pressure to address the situation. The Diocese, with over-sight of voluntary aided church schools, also had a function in determining the future of St Luke’s. This was laid at the table for the school’s governing body who, in light of the cases presented, were persuaded to go for a phased school closure. Then within the school context the head teacher was charged with the duty of managing the closure within set financial parameters. She discharged this responsibility deploying the leadership team. Lower in this hierarchy were the teachers and then the young people. Thus, in practice, power was in the hands of various stakeholders at different levels but not always in a linear fashion, though it was evident that the young people had least power throughout the process.

For Apple, (2008, p.257) the ‘act of repositioning’ “forces us to see the world through the eyes of [the] dispossessed and marginalized”. He contends that the “best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power” (p.244).

The critical paradigm also acknowledges that there are “inequalities present in all forms of social life, including research activities where these inequalities are framed in terms of power-based relationships between the researcher and the researched” (Merriam et al, 2010, p.412). In this study, power is essentially conceived as “taking small steps towards changing oppressive practices” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.365) such as students’ disengagement and lack of voice in St Luke’s, and involves a continual questioning of my motives and practices in taking these steps (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.365) for it is often the case that “those in power fail to see the privileges that stem from their more powerful positions” (Eder and Corsaro, 1999, p.526). Merriam et al advise therefore that power is to be viewed as “something to not only be aware of, but to negotiate in the research process” (2010, p.413). These two power dimensions stem from my acceptance that “inquiry into meaning making is always also an exploration into power” and, hence, the critical paradigm according to Rogers (2011, p.1) “provides the tools for addressing the complexities of [power] movement across educational sites, practices and systems”.

Critical theory also provides a foundation to focus “on problems of inequality and injustice produced through the practices of schooling” (Popkewitz, 1999, In Popkewitz and Fendler, p.3), whilst also highlighting how “schools are likely at various times to be the focus of political struggle” (Harnett and Naish, 1990; cited in Entwistle, p.14) and to a great extent, change. To this end, the critical approach taken in this research allows for my own self-reflection whilst simultaneously facilitating the investigation of various assumptions concerning young people, school closures and student voice. These assumptions loosely, include the notions that young people are removed from what happens in their school, or are not interested in their schooling and education. There is a further assumption that listening to

young people and reporting their views as a homogenous group is sufficient for justice to be done to recent interests in student/pupil voice. This study presents students as a homogenous group in that they are all experiencing the closure of their school, but acknowledge that they may experience this in different ways. Fairclough (2010, p.8) highlights a strength of critical research, arguing that it can “produce interpretations and explanations of areas of social life which both identify the causes of social wrongs and produce knowledge which could (in the right conditions) contribute to righting or mitigating them”.

Critical research, however, is not without its critics. It is often castigated as a framework of negativity. Like Rexhepi and Torres (2011, p.690), however, I believe that by engaging in this research and by adopting the critical approach as highlighted above, I am offering “a mirror to the critical aspects that need to be considered in dealing with mechanisms of sociability, production, and political exchanges”. In this research critical theory details what Torres (1999, cited In Popkewitz and Fendler, p.108) calls a ‘political sociology of education’. “This notion” he says, “aims to study power and relations to authority in education, and the political underpinnings and implications of educational policies” and practices.

This study of the phased closure of St Luke’s is placed within the wider education sector in England. “The logical and analytical perspectives of theory and empirical research”, which in this study equates to the voices of the young people, could contribute to “improving the practice of policy-makers, policy-brokers, and policy constituencies, as well as the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of the process of teaching and learning” (Rexhepi and Torres, 2011, pp.689-690) for young people who are going through change. Adopting this critical stance from the outset means that in the process of “listening to pupils’ perspectives” there can also be the

development of “a clearer understanding of pupils’ responses to schooling” (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.133), i.e. what schooling should be - and what it can be - when young people’s voices are listened to.

Another criticism of critical research is that there are no universal definitions of critical theory itself and that there are also many variants and offshoots. I argue, however, that this is part of its appeal. Critical theory, Rexhepi and Torres insist (2011, p.684), “can herald a liberatory education that empowers stakeholders, fosters curiosity and critical thinking, and provides a means for crucial successful bottom-up, top-down engagement in the political arena”.

One of the seminal issues facing education today, according Dewey (2008) is that:

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in education comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school (p.75).

“That”, he continued, “is the isolation of the school – its isolation from life” (p.75). Critical theory is used as a lens through which to understand these young people’s experiences both contextually and in the broader education sector. By engaging in a “constant questioning and building up of theory and interpretations through repeated ongoing analysis... a [more] coherent alternative reconstruction of the account is created” (Shacklock and Smith, 1998, p.4) so that alternative discourses can be revealed and considered.

It will be interesting to see if the young people actively demand change at any point during this process, or passively accept the changes that are imposed upon them. It will also be interesting to see the effects that this particular political struggle has on

the lives of the young people. Locating this research within the critical paradigm evidences my concern with “unmasking dominant social constructions and the interests they represent ... with a goal of transforming it” (Anderson, 1989, p.254).

## Education and schooling in England

The phased closure of St Luke’s can be seen as a consequence of wider government policies which exposes the current state of education in England, where for example, there is a drive for world-class standards of education which fosters a climate of competition. There is an increasing need for school places, and freedoms for new schools to be set up by Department for Education (DFE) approved sponsors. Popular schools are able to expand and parents are empowered to indicate preferences for the school of their choice. Subsequently, in some local situations market forces lead to some ‘less successful’ schools closing. It is therefore no surprise that Coffey views education in England as a three dimensional ‘market place’ of:

State craft - ...in which education has been increasingly been utilized by government as a mechanism for electioneering and securing the support of the electorate.

Consumption – Education is now firmly established within the realms of consumption; schools are supplied and consumed.

Certification - ...a concern with credentialization has forced the state to address the ability of schools to (re)produce a credentialized society (Coffey, 2001, pp.26-27).

The marketization of education therefore raises questions about education and schooling because “education does not exist in isolation from the larger society” (Apple, 2002, p.85) and accordingly, “its means and ends and the daily events of

curriculum, teaching, and evaluation in schools are all connected to patterns of differential economic, political, and cultural power”. Schooling and education therefore:

- a) sometimes overlap in complementary and contradictory ways
- b) raise questions about how, in an attempt to raise standards, these policies often produce decisions and events which, conversely, isolate and disenfranchise the young people they are meant to be helping and
- c) do not always reflect the values within a democratic society.

Politicians of different parties, and indeed within the same party, are seldom in full agreement with each other on the shape that education in England should take. Successive Secretaries of State for education have taken the opportunity to implement policy in their beliefs that they can fix what they see as flaws in the education system, and improve England’s ratings in the world standard Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tables. Education in England as a result, has over many years, and still is, going through considerable change. Teachers, unions and educational researchers also take varying views, but consistently warn against the pace, number of changes and work-load for teachers. However, driven by a strengthened perspective that educational standards have an impact on the country’s economic prospects, politicians press ahead with wide ranging reforms that have for instance: altered the curriculum and the way it is examined and is reported in league tables; shifted authority from local councils to governing bodies and multi-academy trusts; empowered parental choice; and strengthened the role of Ofsted.

Following a period of prolonged change, further new education policies fuel an already unsettled situation in which schools are required to adapt practices and repeatedly re-write teaching materials to deliver evolving government objectives. Over the past decade as policies have become more aligned to neo-liberal ideologies, the purpose or emphasis of schooling in England has also evolved: “intimate relationship to economic policy as well as a stretching to a global field of performance comparison” (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, p.18).

Education has subsequently become “a key site” for neo-liberalist agendas, where “educators and students are managed, monitored, compared and held accountable; and where normative understandings of schooling and its subjects are sedimented” (Youdell, 2011, p.7). These policies are pursued to the point where if schools do not adequately meet the educational standards or fail to attract sufficient learners they face closure or take-over as is the situation for St Luke’s School.

Although successive Secretaries of State for Education may differ in how the goals might be achieved the policies implemented underline what contribution they want from schools, specifically “the role education must play to meet the needs of the global economy and to ensure the competitiveness of the national economy” (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, p.3). To this end, Apple (2010: 1) argues that:

It has become ever more clear that education cannot be understood without recognising that nearly all educational policies and practices are strongly influenced by an increasingly integrated international economy that is the subject of severe crises, that reforms and crises in one country have significant effects on others.

Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education from 2010-2014, sums up what he considers to be a current urgency for change in education by the fact that, according

to the PISA ratings, “we are falling further and further behind other nations”. “In the last ten years,” he adds, “we have plummeted in the world rankings from 4th to 16th for science, 7th to 25th for literacy and 8th to 28th for maths” (Gove, 2012). Gove’s education reform was portrayed as a quest to achieve a ‘world class’ education system through a process of identifying and adopting the practices of those systems whose pupils perform best in league tables of achievement. He justified the publication of the White Paper 2010, which included his plans to improve educational standards, by saying that it “was deliberately designed to bring together - indeed, to shamelessly plunder from - policies that have worked in other high-performing nations.” (Gove, 2012). Ball (1998) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that this approach is “the marketization of education”. As a direct result of these policies, greater numbers of long-established schools in urban areas are closing than had previously been the norm. The shape of educational provision is changing in England; competition for learners is increased as sponsored Multi-Academy Trusts, Free Schools and University Technology Colleges open. Many schools convert to gain academy status with some then electing to expand. As the impact of education policies bite, less efficient, inadequate or effective schools face tough choices.

Successive changes to the curriculum imposed by politicians have frequently been derived with limited opportunity for the teaching profession, young people or educational researchers to exert influence. The transferability and wisdom of policy borrowing from the country’s heading the PISA tables by Secretaries of State may have been questioned but profound change at fast pace has been implemented to school organisation, the curriculum, and the form of assessment and examination. The emphasis on EBACC subjects swaying from vocational courses and the introduction of more rigorous assessment of subject knowledge and recall skills,



have been ideological as are the measures of success. The impact of such change on schooling, and on the young people on the receiving end of the initiatives, is of concern to those who advocate student involvement in their own education. If we are failing to see the purpose of education as promoting “a more equitable, democratic, and emancipatory society” (Popkewitz and Fendler, 1999, p.9), we should critically seek to find out why. This research explores the personal impact on a group of young people in a school, St Luke’s, affected by government reforms; it questions whether the fundamental principle of “the right to an education acts as a multiplier of rights” (Lundy, 2007, p.940) is being achieved, and whether the expression of their individual voices is an inalienable right of all young people. These fundamental democratic principles sit uncomfortably against the policy ideologies described in this section, and raise questions about schooling and education.

### **Education for democracy**

Callewaert argues that schooling and education are directly or indirectly the monopoly of the state, that education is primarily preconscious socialization, and that socialization presupposes primary ties within a social network of some sort.

Schooling and education perform with a framework that today is mainly made up of articulations between individuals by either market or bureaucratic power mechanisms. Schooling and education have to implement the square circle consisting of socialization without primary ties. Socialization based on market and bureaucracy obscures its dependency upon the primary tie networks that it is negating in theory and trying to destroy in practice (1999, p.125).

Carr has argued that, “one of the inevitable results of our inability to democratically discuss the role of education in modern society has been to deprive the philosophy of education of any significant cultural or practical role” (1991, p.183). By engaging philosophically with the cultural and practical roles of education Carr is saying that

there can be greater understandings both in research and in practice to show “how education can enable all future citizens to participate in the process of contestation through which their society – including its system of education – is reproduced and transformed” (p.187), therefore impacting on what is taught in schools.

On the face of it, the role of education is to transmit “from one generation to the next knowledge of the values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness” (Shujaa, 1993, pp.330-331). To this end, “meaningful education is about learning which is relevant and which offers a connective pedagogy in that it is understood, valued and seen as useful” (Corbett, 2001, p.17). This is not quite so straightforward, however, as “the conceptions of education”, of what is understood, valued and useful, “are likely to be reflected in the policies and practices of schooling” (Hartnett and Naish, 1990, In Entwistle, p.15) controlled by those in society with power and influence.

Schooling, Shujaa contends, “is a process *intended* to perpetuate and maintain the society’s existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements” (1993, p.330). He goes on to make the point that “institutionalised education, exerts an influence on members’ achievement expectations through policies”, such as “tracking and testing, grading and award credentials, social inclusion and exclusion”. All these, Shujaa maintains, “reinforce and are reinforced by the society’s structural conditions” (1993, p.332). If this is true, the general problem of “[w]hat preparation is to be given to the young so far as to enable a society to sustain itself”, which Harnett and Naish (1990, In Entwistle, p.12) say “the enterprise of education” is attempting to address, will always be flawed.

Education is therefore not confined to schooling. Young people bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise that has been developed from other areas of their lives. However, these may not always be valued or acknowledged within the formal education system. Educational research has a significant role to play in the continual questioning of the 'reason' of schooling, which Popkewitz (2009, p.303) states "embodies a style of comparative thought that differentiates, distinguishes, and divides". In the case of St Luke's, financial considerations are primary and as such they override the education provision offered. Inevitably, despite best intentions and promises made, this has resulted in adaptations and compromises to stay in budget, a position that was not sustainable at St. Luke's.

By situating education within a democracy Carr (1991, p.187) has argued that:

One of the distinctive features of a democracy is that it empowers all its members to collectively shape the ways in which society is being reproduced. Another is that it acknowledges its responsibility to educate its future citizens so that they can influence the process of social reproduction in a rational and self-conscious way.

Teacher researchers are potential change-makers in this regard because Carr argues that they:

Expose and articulate the theoretical understanding they have of their activities when they describe and explain such things as their choice of teaching methods, their attitudes to discipline and the selection of curriculum content (1995, p.53).

According to Carr, "if further questions are asked about the adequacy of these descriptive accounts the discussion eventually becomes 'philosophical'. When these conversations about education include and value the voices of young people, then the reason of schooling would have developed "the habit of intelligence" (Carr, 1988,

p.335). The extent to which these aspirations can be realised in contemporary policy contexts is questionable.

## School closures

The “reorganisation of schooling in an era of educational reform offers a paradigm case of complex educational change,” according to Wallace and Pocklington (2002, p.8). A school closure is one such ‘reorganisation of schooling’ that is not a new phenomenon but is operating arguably in a new era based less on the “school – initiated change of the past” (Wallace and Pocklington, 2002, p.26) but more on complex neo-liberal education policies that are ideologically driven. Torres points to the fact that, “education has become increasingly a function of the state ... [whereby] educational systems and practices are sponsored, mandated, organized, and certified by the state” (1995-1996, p.262).

In Britain between 1945 and 1979, many small schools in rural areas were closed for “three reasons – all related,” (Rogers, 1979, p.3). They were said to be uneconomic; they disadvantaged the children who went to them and with declining birth rates they were believed to be both uneconomic and disadvantageous to those who attended (Rogers, 1979, p.3). Today the same arguments of economics, educational disadvantage and birth rates persist but the picture is more nuanced and complicated. Whilst falling rolls is still a major cause of school closures, over the past decade there has been a new development where schools have increasingly closed in urban centres, despite the growing need for more school places. London is a prime example of this. In urban settings many parents do not select their nearest school as an automatic default but instead are prepared for their children to embark on relatively straightforward journeys to attend their preferred school. The impact of

parental choice is evident as some schools are in high demand whilst others become unpopular. Informed by more, and better, materials readily available to parents, particularly through the internet, they make their choices. Data such as Ofsted ratings and student performance in examinations, in addition to good or bad news stories, and the accessibility of school websites inform parents. This is in addition to the traditional methods of finding out about schools such as by word-of-mouth and attendance at open evenings.

The government policies promoting parental choice, together with the freedoms for the expansion of schools and the set-up of academies and free schools, are effectively creating more school places. Additionally, schools categorised as 'failing' by Ofsted are also being closed. In many, but not all instances, this leads to the school being closed and then reopened under a new designation with new governance and leadership. So, on the one hand the demand for school places is rising but alongside this is the closure, or re-designation, of a number of schools. This creates a dichotomy which has led some academics to question the policy of parental choice, thus raising the question "does school choice lead to spirals of decline?" (Gorard, Taylor and Fitz, 2010). They argue that, "in effect, social segregation between schools" as a direct result of parental choice for their children, "is increasing, leading some disadvantaged schools into a 'spiral of decline', and creating a clear system of winners and losers" (p.369). Gorard et al stress that they are not blaming parents for choosing to send their children to a 'good school' however "the spiral [of decline] stems from the relationship between... two characteristics in a market driven by pupil-funding and raw-score performance indicators. As schools become more socially disadvantaged their 'league table'

position tends to decline..., so more families might prefer to use alternative schools” (p.369).

However Ball et al. (2012, p.21) make the point that “policies – new and old – are set against and alongside existing commitments, values and forms of experience”. Current policies dictate that, “the performance of schools should be measured relative to cost-constrained best-practice benchmarks that simultaneously take account of both outcome effectiveness and cost efficiency” (Barnett, Glass, Snowdon and Stringer, 2002, p.291). The national floor targets for pupil performance at the end of Key Stages are intended to raise standards of achievement and lead to improved education provision. These sit alongside the schedule of Ofsted inspections with schools expected to achieve ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ judgements. Comparisons between schools are made year-on-year, looking at improvement in GCSE grades including English and Maths, informing: “transfers at primary-school level, exercise of parental choice at the age of transfer into secondary education, and staffing policies based on constant pupil/teacher ratios” (Molinero, 1988, p.347). Of all of these measures I would argue that parental choice is a critical factor for a school, for even in densely populated urban areas unpopular schools close due to falling rolls or as a result of inadequate performance which are often linked.

### **Parental choice and schools closures**

Unpopular schools are at the highest risk of closure in areas where there is a surplus of school places. Government policy has enabled organisations to establish additional places regardless of the local council’s view on place planning. So despite the increased requirement over recent years for school places, mostly in urban areas, the creation of additional places in popular schools, and through the opening

of new schools, a number of schools have in turn seen a fall in their roll. Parents have chosen popular schools and where unpopular schools have become unviable they have closed. Typically, schools have been unable to continue with falling rolls if after reducing their planned admission number (PAN) and reorganising as a smaller school, they are still unable to stabilise and stop a declining trend. Such schools are at high risk of being economically inefficient and it then falls upon decision makers, whether that is the Council, Academy Trustees, Diocese or other relevant stakeholders to assess the viability of the school.

As parents use the powers given to them to choose educational institutions for their children, “schools as providers and stakeholders have become increasingly dependent on pupil rolls for primary funding. Poor levels of enrolment have had an immediate fiscal impact on the school. Hence it has become increasingly important for schools to attract ‘customers’ (pupils and, more importantly, their parents) in order to secure a healthy level of enrolment” (Coffey, 2001, p.24). This has fostered new power relationships between schools, pupils and parents leading to spirals of decline.

As a consequence of aligning economic output with educational outcomes, schools such as St Luke’s that can appear ‘less efficient’, than the new school built close by. Where parents select new or popular schools for their children in undersubscribed areas, there are knock-on effects for under-subscribed schools. As a result, schools like St Luke’s face a number of reorganisation scenarios: becoming academies where sponsors come together to take over and run a cluster of schools, immediate closure, or, like St Luke’s, a phased closure over a number of years. These complex

and inter-linked policy changes ultimately shape educational provision, student's experiences and, possibly, longer-term outcomes.

### **Failing schools and school closures**

Schools are deemed as 'failing' for a number of reasons. Some of these include: receiving an inadequate judgement in an Ofsted inspection, student outcomes falling below national floor targets or because of an extreme incident.

Ofsted inspectors categorise schools in accordance with the Inspection Framework. Inspectors' rate schools on a four point scale with the highest ratings of 'Outstanding' and 'Good' being the expectation. Schools not achieving this might be rated as 'Room for improvement' (RI). These schools are subject to monitoring visits. Those classified as 'Inadequate' are considered to be 'failing' and are subject to closure.

On occasions, the school may still remain popular with parents after being deemed as 'failing'. Downhills Primary School in the London Borough of Haringey is a prime example of this. Despite being judged as 'Inadequate' by Ofsted, parents and members of the community rallied around to support the school aiming to keep it open. In this case, despite much local support and adverse DFE publicity, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for education from 2010-2014, ruled that the school should be closed and be taken over by an academy chain. Protests such as this have been few, though significant at the time; nevertheless, government resolve has been to systematically close schools that have been judged as Inadequate in Ofsted inspections.

Schools that fall below the national floor targets are at high risk of being deemed as 'failing'. If the low performance is a one-off dip the school may be able to implement



a Raising Achievement Plan and recover from the position and stabilise. But, if the trend is sustained the school should expect an intervention by Ofsted with closure being a usual consequence.

Less common reasons for school closure include those deemed as 'coasting'. Such schools have now also been deemed to be 'failing' and Nicky Morgan (Secretary of State for Education) promised to "tackle coasting schools by putting them on a notice to improve" (Department for Education, 2015). The identification of coasting schools is based on student performance. Extreme incidents in schools might also require further investigation and put the future of the school at risk. Issues concerning safeguarding, the PREVENT duty, health & safety or severe violence can have acute implications for schools.

A Freedom of Information Request to the Department for Education (June 2016) shows that in the 4 years between 31/08/2011 and 31/08/15, when the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government were in power, 1907 secondary schools in England were affected by closures. Of these 1745 were schools that were re-designated as academies, with 1414 of these electing to be converted to academies. For the 81 schools that closed and merged into another school, and the 27 that closed and changed from being a middle school to a secondary school, the change is liable to have been profound. But most relevant of all to this research are the 43 schools that closed completely. The large number of schools involved in change outlined above underlines the relevance of this study and the large number of young people and stakeholders affected by school closure.

## Research on school closures

Research in England and other developed countries such as Canada, Australia and the USA, provide insights into the impact of school closures at different levels. Such research studies have centred on 'The Effect of School Closure on Principal Leadership' (Lenarduzzi, 2010), 'School Closure – A Case Study (Bathgate, 2006), 'School Closures in Ontario: Who has the Final Say?' (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005) and 'The paradoxology of failure: Perspectivist flirtations with threat, risk of closure in England's secondary schools' (Griffiths, 2008).

One recurring theme throughout each of the research studies has been the impact that a school closure has on the stakeholders involved. Lenarduzzi's research highlights the delicate position of the principal leadership "of balancing obligations to both the district and community" and the "possible disturbance that the school leader may feel" (2010, p.31, p.33). Similarly, Bathgate argued that during times of closure, "schools need to be viewed not just as educational institutions where children learn but also as workplaces where adults teach" (2006, p.29). The emphasis is on the impact on staff, whereas there may be wider implications for the young people in terms of their experiences and emotional responses.

A common thread throughout these studies shows that falling rolls has been the most significant feature for the decision to close schools. For Rogers, "falling rolls and school closures are educational and social phenomena which parents, teachers and the local community – as well as national and local government – must come to grips with quickly" (1979, p.6). But while falling rolls are usually greeted with suspicions of failure by those in power and deemed 'unattractive' by parents, Rogers says that:

Falling rolls can bring great benefit to our society if the opportunities are seized – greater resources for children, improved pupil/teacher ratios, more space for new and existing activities to accommodate more community – oriented educational schemes in a local school (1979, p.6).

The decision to close a school over a period of time is, in my opinion the most complex of the three reorganisation scenarios because it is “intrinsically contextually dependent, facilitated and constrained by many aspects of the wider political and historical milieu with which it interacts” (Wallace and Pocklington, 2002, p.42). “The change,” they argue, “will interact with an evolving profile of other planned and unplanned changes” (2002, p.42) and “during this phase of terminal contraction, the expectation is that the institution must continue to serve its clientele” (Whiting, 1980, p.2). It is these two competing discourses that add to the complexities of a school closure as part of educational reorganisation.

Bathgate (2006) considered the experiences of stakeholders (i.e. teachers, students and parents) at her school and revealed that “in terms of educational outcomes it would appear that the students who remained in the school for 1998 [the year it closed] were probably disadvantaged educationally and that a quick closure might have benefited them” (Bathgate, 2006, p.165). For Bathgate, the phased closure of her school “was of benefit to the morale and adjustment of staff” but it was “probably less beneficial for the students involved” (Bathgate, 2006, iii-iv). She makes the point that had there been “proper counselling support and identification of the closure as a critical incident, a quick closure would help student learning outcomes”.

In the case of St Luke’s, governors, together with the Diocesan decision makers, considered the falling roll and decided that closure over a longer period was most appropriate. This suited a plan to invest in a nearby primary school so as to

redevelop and build into an all through primary-secondary school. A gradual closure would facilitate the building programme required to achieve this. The parents and young people of the closing school were promised the highest standard of education possible during the process, including the bonus of smaller classes. In contrast, Bathgate (2006) warns against slow or phased closures, and argues that a “quick closure” averts the educational disadvantage found in her study. Bathgate advocates the essential need to understand the thoughts and feelings of those involved and concluded that quick closure dealt with this better, notably reducing the onerous requirement to guide and manage participants through the changes leading up to closure. Bathgate’s study stresses the importance of voice in the management of closures and the need to take into account a school and the emotional life of those associated with it.

## Voice and voices

### ‘Student voice’/ ‘Pupil voice’

*Voices are nothing without hearers (Noyes, 2005, p.536).*

In understanding what young people at St Luke’s think and feel about their closing school there must be an exploration into the concept of ‘voice’. This section explores what has been known as ‘student voice’ or ‘pupil voice’, a suggestion that students speak with one voice, or should be listened to as a collective. I highlight the advances made both in research and scholarly writings on ‘student voice/pupil voice’ (Fielding, 2004; Whitty and Wisby, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2006).

As a ‘hearer’, this section will challenge and help me to connect the sounds of young people speaking, “not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence, but also with their having the power to influence analyses

of, decisions about, and practices” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.363) within their school. In understanding ‘voice’ and then ‘student voice’, I am better able to evidence what I see as failures and lost opportunities to engage with and include the young people at St Luke’s during this time of change. I am also seeking to understand student voice in order to extend “knowledge and understanding through investigations” (Flutter, 2007, p.345), so that this research does not perpetuate the disengagement and disenfranchisement of the young people at St Luke’s. The identification of common themes in the ‘student voice’ debate will play a crucial role in ultimately showing the transformational potential of ‘student voice’ in this research, even though it will become clearer throughout the research that I am veering towards a discourse of ‘students’ voices’ as opposed to ‘student voice’. Later on in Chapter 3, I also endorse narrative methods in “liberating the voices and stories of people who would ordinarily remain silent” (Owens, 2007, p.299) or who would traditionally remain uninvolved in change in their school that concern them.

There is no uniformity in the understanding of ‘student voice’. According to Flutter (2007, p.344), however, pupil voice is “nested within the broader principle of pupil participation, a term which embraces strategies that offer pupils opportunities for active involvement in decision-making within their schools”. Flutter and Rudduck, (2000; 2004; 2007), make the point that this resurgence of interest in pupil voice is somewhat different from before, where the pupil’s role within research and within the school community was seen as a “passive one, with pupils regarded as ‘consumers’, or ‘products’ of educational provision” (2004, p.14). They believe that pupils are now seen as “active participants in a learning community” (2004, p.14) but this is where I begin to disagree slightly with Flutter and Rudduck. Like so many other initiatives, pupil voice has become ‘synonymous with implied meanings’ and I would argue that

before we say that pupils are now seen as “active participants in a learning community”, we problematize and, like Noyes (2005, p.533), give “both the term pupil and voice...careful critique” to see if active pupil participation is universally understood and uniformly practiced.

Students can sometimes be ascribed identities by researchers. This occurs when insufficient consideration is given to what Cook-Sather calls the “intersection of identity, language, context, and power that inform all pedagogical relations” (2006, p.368). Ascribing identities to young people is what I term “voice giving”. Voice giving under the banner of ‘pupil voice’ is fundamentally flawed. If, throughout the research process, the status quo is left unchallenged or, as Fielding adds, “its methodologies and contextual circumstances reinforce subjugation” (2004, p.296), then this falls short of the tenets of ‘pupil voice’.

Ecclestone calls for “transition workers” like myself, in the dual role of being both teacher and researcher, to have a better understanding of the problems that young people may face in constructing and maintaining their identities (2010, p.198). Part of that understanding, I believe, is about repositioning students in both practice and research. This involves thinking about power relations and, as Noyes explains, power relates “not only to what is spoken, but who gets to say it and how it is ‘said’ (which includes actions)” (2005, p.537). Such considerations will need to be at the forefront of my mind, especially as I interview the young people.

Fielding goes further to remind us that “issues of voice are not circumscribed by verbal or written text; they are embedded in historically located structures and relations of power” (2004, p.300). Rather than seeing young people as being “dependent and incapable”, they are “regarded as individuals possessing the right to

be heard and to be respected” (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004 p.134). According to Whitty and Wisby, “pupil voice includes every way in which pupils are allowed or encouraged to offer their views and preferences” (2007, p.306). For Cook-Sather (2006, p.359), student voice is “a way of thinking” that has “re-emerged that strives to reposition students in educational research and reform”. She continues by stating that “in its most profound and radical form ... [student voice] calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students” (2006, p.363). The differences between Whitty and Wisby and Cook-Sather are profound. In the former, pupils are allowed, or encouraged, to air their views, whilst the latter understanding shows a power shift whereby the spaces and minds of adults are opened up to young people and what they bring.

Lundy, on the other hand, suggests that ‘pupil voice’ as an “initiative” should not be the nexus of the debate, instead she asserts that “respecting children’s views is not just a model of good pedagogical practice (or policy making) but a legally binding obligation” (2007, p.930). She cites Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the legally binding document that reifies ‘pupil voice’. She believes that “Article 12 can make a unique and powerful contribution to the creation of a children’s rights culture in schools” (2007, p.940). Gersch et al (1996, In Davie, Upton and Varma, p.28) also approach ‘pupil voice’ from a discourse of rights. They think that children should be actively engaged “from understanding what is happening, to giving their point of view, to being provided with their results.” Like Lundy, Gersch et al also believe that another statute, the *Children Act* of 1989, provides “the general principle of listening to children, taking their views seriously and giving them due weight” (1996, cited In Davie, Upton and Varma, p.29). So far

the discourses in respect of 'pupil voice' have been threefold: respect, power and rights.

Whether 'pupil voice' is viewed from a perspective of respect, power or rights, 'voice' "signals having a legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/ or having an active role" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.362) in educational decisions that will affect young people. Lundy believes that two of the prerequisites for meaningful engagement with young people is the creation of an opportunity for involvement, which she calls "a space in which children are encouraged to express their views" (2007, p.933) and "a 'right of audience' – a guaranteed opportunity to communicate views to an identifiable individual or body with the responsibility to listen" (2007, p.937). I believe that if schools and researchers are serious about 'pupil voice', they will create opportunities for adults to be responsible listeners.

Young people do not always speak with a unified 'voice', hence I agree with Whitty and Wisby that "pupils will benefit from having more than one means through which to input into decision-making" (2007, p.307). Cook-Sather also cautions against what she terms "monolithic quality" where adults "run the risk of overlooking essential differences among students, their perspectives and their needs" (200, p. 368). To this end, "if student voice is to be understood it is only by grasping the complexity of voices which find, or are denied, expression within the organisational life of schools" (MacBeath, 2006, p.203).

### **Students' voices**

*Voices on the outside of normal find it difficult to be heard (Ball, 2007, p.2).*

It is possible that the fear of listening to voices "on the outside of normal" is what drives many schools, and those who lead them, to not listen, or to lump the



experiences of young people as a collective set of experiences. The shift from 'pupil voice' to 'students' voices' needs an inclusive environment in order to become effective, long-lasting and meaningful. An inclusive environment requires adults to "consider what they could do to create a truly listening ethos, communicating trust, respect, patience, openness, sincerity, warmth ... rather than using closed questions or arguing back" (Gersch et al, 1996, In Davie, Upton and Varma, p.39). Creating this environment can be possible even where there is uncertainty amongst the adults themselves, as displayed at St Luke's.

To this end, Lundy (2007, p.933) argues that "voice is not enough". She believes that four key provisions are needed. These are:

Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view

Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views

Audience: The view must be listened to.

Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

These key provisions are still not enough, because they assume, again, a universality of thoughts and feelings. The first provision is for schools to commit to a culture of openness, even in times of uncertainty. Then each child must have his/her space to express their views through a multiplicity of forums – speech, drama, art, storytelling and poetry. The views of each child must be listened to and then acted upon as appropriate. A willingness to engage with the young people about how they are feeling, and about what they are thinking, can help to engender feelings of "can do" on the part of everyone as the school nears closure. According to Ruffolo (2009, p.305):

Educators and students are both in permanent states of becoming and are filled with infinite potentialities to become-other. For researchers, educators, and policymakers, this implies a change in how they approach agency as the creation of open spaces that fosters new creations and not closed relations that maintain individual subjectivities.

Listening to the voices of the young people may, therefore, have the transformational effect of them choosing to remain loyal to their school until closure in 2016. Their choices are influenced, however, by the wider structures within which they are situated and the power effects of decisions that are made about their education and future.

The move from voice to voices is not euphemistic. It is a bold acknowledgement that the thoughts and feelings of young people are of great value, and, ultimately, are better understood if young people are seen as individuals in their own right. Young people must be allowed platforms for their voices to be heard within an inclusive environment, especially during periods of change in their schools. This perspective accepts that there is “a plurality of voices devoid of existing hierarchies of status and privilege” being listened to and, more importantly that young people “are enfranchised to suggest their preferences for a level of participation in education that contributes to improving their quality of life” (Corbett and Slee, 2000, p.135).

### **Dispelling myths of nonchalance**

Research carried out by Flutter and Rudduck (2004: p.132) indicated that young people’s lives outside of school contrasted sharply with their experiences within school. They then made the link that, “these differences can give young people the impression that school is a “world apart” and therefore what happens in the classroom is seen, to some extent, as irrelevant”. I agree to some extent. The lives

of young people are sometimes in contrast to their experiences in school, but I do not agree with the suggestion that young people then, to some extent, see what happens in the classroom as irrelevant. From talking to the young people at St Luke's both in the classroom and on the playground, they are interested in what is happening in their school and they are concerned about what happens in their classrooms.

Adults sometimes believe that because life experiences in school and the wider society are contrasted and sometimes conflicted, young people may sometimes see their schooling and education as irrelevant. This shift towards 'students' voices' requires adults who work in schools, both those who teach and research and those who oversee policy enactments, to be mindful of what Prout describes as, "the emergence of new forms of childhood within late modernity" (2003: p.18). This development calls for a change in the way children are seen and a reconciliation of the teacher-student contradiction, "so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 1996, p.53). This emergence necessitates the need for the creation of "notional" (Prout, 2003, p.22) and literal spaces for voices.

What Prout and Freire advocate forms, in part, the basis of 'students' voices' as I conceptualise it in this research study. Prout says that institutions need to be responsive and that they must "engage in a creative dialogue with their users" (Prout, 2003, p.18). This is a bold acknowledgment, both in recognising that young people do have a voice and, further, that their voices must be listened to. Adults must view young people as individuals who are being and becoming, and who will begin to take their places in a democratic society. This perspective on power, voice, and rights means that the practice of democracy must therefore begin in schools.

A key issue over time has been whether adults care to listen and understand the perspectives and experiences of young people. For researchers and policy makers, too often, and too easily, young people are positioned as disaffected or lacking in understanding (a homogenous group for whom decisions have to be made), because adults do not take the time to listen and to care.

Young people must not be seen as voiceless individuals to whom change, when implemented collectively, is perceived and received in a uniform manner. Similarly, the notion of ascribing children a communal voice is dubious, being bound up with “social relations that are modelled on the market” (Prout, p.18). These perspectives will need to be challenged by the kind of deconstruction and construction that critical research offers during a period of significant change for the young people in this research.

### **Change, loss, grief and resilience**

I believe there is an emotional component to every aspect of learning. This may become even more pronounced when there is change within a school. This is not part of the curriculum, however, so adults need to be prepared to guide young people through change and help them to make transitions in their setting.

The young people at St Luke’s are attached to both their teachers and peers. Many of the young people do not live in the immediate vicinity of the school and therefore the school also functions as their social hub, almost their pseudo-family. The impending closure could mean the closure of an important chapter in their lives. The working environment of the school is gradually changing for the young people and this may cause worry and anxiety.

Drawing on the attachment theories of John Bowlby, Brown (1999, ix) described the powerful bonds of affection between children and their adult carers, which are fundamental towards feelings of wellbeing and safety. If the bond is broken, Bowlby believed this would result in acute anxiety and grief. There are already signs of these emotions amongst the young people at St Luke's. With news that another teacher is leaving or has left, the young people are visibly upset. They cry, become withdrawn in lessons, or sit by themselves on the playground, whilst others simply refuse to accept their new teachers.

Whilst these transitions are "unsettling and difficult for some people", Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2010, p.2) argue that, "risk, challenge and even difficulty might also be important factors in successful transitions for others". Every child matters, therefore transitions need to be fostered in the form of educational resilience. "Resiliency", according to Waxman, Gray and Padron (2010, p.52), "is fostered when teachers provide meaningful opportunities for students to contribute their skills and energies...". Furthermore, the students are allowed to "express their opinions, make choices, problem-solve, work with and help others", and teachers "treat students as responsible individuals allowing them to participate in all aspects of the school's functioning".

I want to understand what the young people are thinking, and how they are feeling, about their education and their schooling, at different times leading up to the closure of their school. With the passing of time other provocative questions have emerged which also must be answered. For example, as they see their teachers and some of their friends move on to other schools and settings, will they show loyalty to their school and remain until 2016? Will the young people feel that their education is being compromised as the school nears closure, given the reduced curriculum options,

non-specialist teachers and supply teachers? Will they see starting Year 10 as a good opportunity to start in a new school?

## Summary

The notions of education, schooling, school closures, power and students' voices are all connected within the wider socio-political context of the current state of education in England. The literature review, with its critical underpinnings, exposed these connections, albeit within the context of one school. According to Smyth and Shacklock (1998, p.3), making such connections is best achieved by "locating the issues being investigated in their historical and structural contexts". This at times meant that I disagreed with other writers on a number of subjects; but, as Apple reassures, this in no way signals the loss of one's "political soul" (2010, p.7), so long as this informed critique is "based on a clear understanding of the position (or range of positions) being examined" (Phillips, 1995, p.5). This chapter showed that it is the presence of a "political soul" that leads one to adopt a critical stance and, further, to accept that the aims of this research are those of "understanding, uncovering, illuminating, and/or transforming how educational aims, dilemmas, tensions and hopes are related to social divisions and power differentials" (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 2014).

## Chapter 3 Research design and methodology

### Introduction

*....what results from ethnographic research cannot be divorced from its relationship with the researcher. (Pole and Morrison, 2003, p.129).*

Crotty (1998, p.2) appears to also share this belief. He argues that the “justification of [my] choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches into the assumptions about reality that [I] bring to [this] work’. Creswell and Miller (2000, p.126) describe this as ‘a lens’ or ‘a paradigm assumption’ where in this case I as the researcher openly “engage in validity procedures of self-disclosure and collaboration with participants in the study...” in a bid to “help minimise further the inequality that participants often feel.”

This in practice, means that in order to contribute to holistic understandings of the young people’s thoughts and feelings about their education during the phased closure of St Luke’s, my choice of research design and methods must acknowledge the quotidian education policies, guidance and initiatives that purport to drive up standards in education, whilst at the same time leave young people anxious and feeling excluded during a time of change. It is against this backdrop of social justice that I proposed to listen to the young people’s voices and collaborate with them in arriving at the many ways of listening to their voices, during times of change. This chapter accepts that the task of the researcher is to “investigate, to find things out, to interpret findings and to make sense of the aspect[s] of the world they are focusing on” (Sikes, 2004, p.16), then, details and justifies my validity processes and procedures. This position developed from adopting an interpretivist methodology called critical ethnography, narrative as an approach, the Three Dimensional

Narrative Inquiry Space Structure and re-storying as a way of analysing and presenting the data by way of stories, through to ethical considerations. The central question that aided the decision about research design, methods and ethics was: how can the voices of all 10 participants be best heard? This chapter details the appropriateness of the research design, methods and ethical considerations of the research, in response to this question.

## Critical ethnography

### Understanding ethnography

Ethnography as a research design is difficult to define. This is, in part, because ethnography has many trajectories and variants, such as realist ethnographies, case studies, critical ethnographies, auto ethnographies and post-modern ethnographies. Even within these modified methodologies, there are variants. To prove how highly contested a terrain ethnography is, Pole and Morrison admit to having “allied ethnography very firmly to qualitative methods” (2003, p.7). Their epistemological justification is that “in order for ethnography to have specific meaning ...it requires some kind of limits or boundaries which distinguish it from other approaches to research”. They continue to justify ethnography as being qualitative by making the deductive claim that “the methods identified make an important contribution to establishing those boundaries.” While I agree that methods such as interviews, surveys and observations for example, are key to establishing boundaries in ethnography, I also think that there is great danger in identifying “research activity solely or primarily in terms of the *method*” (Angus, 1986, p.64). I am more inclined to agree with Hammersley (2006, p.3), that “ethnographic work sometimes includes the use of quantitative data sets and analyses, so it may not be purely qualitative in character”. For this research study, fifteen months were spent “in the field’



interviewing, observing,” (Creswell, 2008, p.474) and gathering progress and achievement data. The gathering of progress and achievement data from Maths, English and RE over time, has added a quantitative element to this research.

Hammersley explains that, “‘ethnography’ does not form any part of a clear and systemic taxonomy... And, as a result, it is used in different ways on different occasions to mark off work of one kind from that of another” (2006, p.3). While I view the lack of clear and systemic taxonomy as a compelling strength of this design, because of the freedom and flexibility that it allows, I must admit that it is sometimes viewed as the chief incongruence that adds to the criticisms levelled at ethnography. Angus (1986, p.62) clarifies this point of view by arguing that, “the essential feature of most ethnographic research is that it attempts above all to describe, and then to interpret”. He goes on to paint a picture of the researcher “with open mind and open notebook” attempting “to get close enough to the group to understand its social interaction”. Perhaps the all-important move towards ethnography occurred as it does not seek to “create artificial situations or require those at the focus of the research to change their behaviour in any significant way” (Pole and Morrison, 2003, p.6). Although ethnography is difficult to define, for the purpose of this research ethnography should be understood as “a form of social and educational research that emphasises the importance of studying *at first-hand* what people do and say in particular contexts” (Hammersley, 2006, p.4).

### **Criticisms and possibilities of critical ethnography**

For Angus, ethnography as a “stand-alone” design “is flawed by its structural-functionalist perspective which,” he argues, “fails to grasp the complexity and uncertainty of social life, and fails to address notions of agency in the reproduction and transformation of social situations” (1986, p.64). I do not share this belief in its

entirety because the human quality is essential in ethnographic work, “researchers make decisions about the best ways of observing, documenting and reporting on human behaviour as it happens” (Pole and Morrison, 2003, p.29). What I understand from this is that any failure within research to adequately reflect the nuances of social life, agency and transformation, should not see ethnography as a design being castigated as ‘flawed’. Instead the processes and the methods used need to be scrutinised more meticulously.

Having said that, critical ethnography as a variant of ethnography offers a type of social construction in listening to the voices of the young people, of the kind that is “critical of the status quo” that exists at St Luke’s and that has “an underlying aim to raise consciousness” (Hacking, 1999, p.6). If this still emerges as being similar to ethnography, critical ethnography in this interpretive body of work, “places a primacy on the importance of situated meaning and contextualized experience as the basis of explaining and understanding social behaviour” (Pole and Morrison, 2003, p.5). The processes of critical ethnography demand reflexivity which, according to Rizvi and Lingard (2010, p.48), is the “transparent articulation of researcher positionality and the significance of this to data collection and analysis”. I would also go a step further, and agree with Brewer (2000, p.128), that reflexivity acts as “a bridge between interpretation and the process by which it is conveyed into text”. For this, he stresses that reflexivity “requires a critical attitude” (Brewer, 2000, p.128) of the kind where my beliefs and biases and all the ways that I am implicated in this research study are laid bare “early in the research process to allow readers to understand [my] positions and then to bracket or suspend these researcher biases as the study proceeds” (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.127).

Rexhepi and Torres (2011, p.691) are clear in their belief that “there exists no perfect or comprehensive interpretation or understanding, nor equally a conclusive analysis that cannot be challenged or subjected to debate and criticism”. Although I agree, I also believe that variant methodologies, such as critical ethnography, face even greater criticisms and scrutiny both from inside and outside their respective schools of thought. One of the criticisms levelled at critical ethnography is that “the ethnographer’s material location is often at odds with those whom they research” (Jordan and Yeomans, 1995, p.400). This is not a new concern, but a relevant concern nonetheless.

Thomas’ (1983, p.485) proposition to the researcher is to “continually be wary of imposing a taken-for-granted conceptual map on the social object”. Oliver (1992, p.103) incisively argued in favour of “changing the social relations of research production”. In his view, this would “at least, offer the possibility of developing a social research enterprise which is relevant to, and significant in, the lives of those people who are the subjects of this enterprise”. These were two of the ways that I sought to bridge what some would argue is the researcher/teacher-participant locational divide. More recently, these sentiments have been echoed by Grbich (2004, p.68) who argues that there needs to be “active decentering of the authorial voice in order to allow the voice of the researched to emerge more loudly and to be viewed more substantially”.

Critical ethnography is also negatively judged due to its multidisciplinary nature. I, however, advocate its multidisciplinary nature as its strength. Critical ethnography involves more than what, as Eder and Corsaro say, is often a “prolonged fieldwork in which the researcher gains access to a social group and carries out intensive

observation in natural settings for a period of months or years” (1999, p.521). The word ‘critical’ precedes ethnography in this research study because the body of work, from the literature review, through to the processes involved in the data collection and the data presentation, “cannot be viewed as a discrete piece of action that achieves its objectives and comes to a close” (Crotty, 1998, p.157). Instead, the research is part of a wider struggle to ensure that during times of change, schools are aware of how young people feel and what they think. Fielding calls this “contemporary teacher professionalism”, whereby learning and understanding during times of change are “enabled and enhanced by dialogic encounters with their students” (2001, p.130). For me, the leadership team at St Luke’s needs to be aware of how the young people are feeling, and to know what they are thinking about the changes leading up to the closure of their school. These dialogic encounters should then translate into action. Critical ethnography is a way of highlighting these concerns, but also suggesting better ways of ensuring students’ voices are listened to.

Critical ethnography allows me to retain, what Angus (1986, p.72) calls, “a dialectic between theory and data”, which, I agree, in principle leads to a more sophisticated and better understanding of the young people’s experiences of their closing school, whilst also providing a more complete theory (Angus, 1986, p.72). Youdell is in part responsible for laying the philosophical groundwork for this inclination towards critical ethnography. In her book *School Trouble*, she highlights how, for some time, “[s]ocial and political theorizing and empirical research have treated the status of knowledge and the disconnection of knowledge from enlightenment notions of truth and progress as a significant concern” (2011, p.63).

Finally, critical ethnography allows for the use of multiple methods of data collection which, in this study, illustrated how the thoughts and feelings of the young people about their education within their closing school were “embedded in larger social, educational, economic and political structures” (Pole and Morrison, 2003, p.109), both nationally and internationally. In this small-scale research study, there was never a disconnection between what the young people said, what I observed and the social and political structure of our school, all of which form analytic categories and are major concerns of critical ethnography. Adopting a critical methodology highlighted both the importance of “listening to pupils’ perspectives ... to develop a clearer understanding of schooling” (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.133), but more importantly as a critical ethnographer, to unmask “dominant social constructions and the interests they represent ...with a goal of transforming it” (Anderson, 1989, p.254). In response to the question of how can the voices of 10 participants best be heard, critical ethnography emerged as the appropriate methodology for this study. This was mainly due to the fact that its processes kept in check any ethnocentrism, i.e. those “assumptions - conscious or otherwise – that our own way of thinking about and doing things is somehow more natural and preferable to all others” (Angrosino, 2007, p.38).

## **Narrative approach to data analysis and presentation**

### **How can the voices of 10 participants best be heard?**

Narratives “tell the events of human lives; reflect human interest and support our sense-making processes” (Bold, 2012, p.13). Narratives, whether as design, methodology or as an approach, presents opportunities to probe more deeply, deconstruct and problematize participants’ responses. What drew me to the use of narratives is that “all of these lines of inquiry is an interest in the ways that human

beings make meaning through language,” (Casey, 1995-1996, p.212) be that spoken, written, or body language, indicating how embodied these voices are. Using narrative as an approach to analyse and present data ensured what I call an ‘unsanitised’ version of events as seen through the eyes of the young people experiencing change in their school leading up to closure.

In what appeared to be a summary of narratives, Kumar (2014, p.194) said “essentially the person tells his/her story about an incident or situation and you as the researcher listen passively....” Yet he went on to say that “narratives are a very powerful method of data collection....” I believe Kumar missed the essence of narrative as an approach by the diminished role he ascribed to the researcher, for at no time is the researcher a passive listener. He is correct however about the power of narratives. Trahar argues that, “a much proffered reason for using narrative inquiry is that it supports silenced voices to be heard” and that “it has an overtly political purpose – to challenge or trouble established ways of thinking” (2013, p.xiv). With social justice in the spotlight, there is no place for researcher passivity.

Using narrative as a means of data analysis and data presentation helped me see more vividly how the young people in my school constructed and understood their social world (Bold, 2012, p.13) over time. Narrative as an approach proved advantageous because it gave me the ability to see the divergence and convergence of experiences of the young people. Where there were differing stories from the same person, narrative excelled at making this apparent in ways that shed light on St Luke's as an institution that supported, or did not support, the young people during the phased closure of the school. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure, reveal my central role as the

researcher in data analysis in both interrogating and presenting the findings. This then allowed me to “represent the contingent, nuanced, and symbolic aspects of the findings” (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007, In Clandinin, p.20) that are so central to critical ethnography, and these are set out and discussed at length in Chapter 5.

The validity processes, procedures and responsibilities that I shouldered in this research were immense. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p.61) describe it as working “within the space not only with our participants but also with ourselves”. They go on to assert that “working in this space means that we (as researchers) become visible with our own lived experiences and told stories. Sometimes, this means that our own unnamed, perhaps secret stories come to light as much as those of our participants”. It was this realisation that gave me the confidence to write my own narrative in Chapter 6, as one who also experienced change alongside the participants from the moment the announcement was made to close the school in February 2012 but to a greater extent from January 2014 – July 2015.

### *Re-storying – a commitment to students’ voices*

“Storytelling,” Trahar explains, “is a universal practice” (2013, xi). Stories are the ‘substance’ of generations, history and culture. They reflect our journey through life (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p.25). Re-storying on the other hand “is the process of gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewriting the story to place it within a chronological sequence” (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002, p.332). Re-storying is a “researcher-generated story (a retelling) that answers ‘How’ and ‘What’ questions about the life story and meaningful experiences” (Suter, 2012, p.369) of each of the young people at St Luke’s. The act of re-storying or “the creation of further meaning” is arguably

“one of the most difficult of all to capture in writing” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.9).

What emerged “from this temporally muddled set of data collection events” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1989, p.14) involving group and individual interviews, observations, feelings cards, surveys, a transcript of gestures and their meanings and journal entries, were 10 stories of the experiences of change in a closing school over 15 months. The processes leading up to the stories showed that “the narrative inquiry process is not a linear one. There is data collection, mutual narrative interpretation by practitioners and researchers, more data collection and further narrative reconstructions. The narrative inquiry process itself is a narrative one of storying, re-storying and re-storying again” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1989, p.16). The presence of several methods of data collection, and the 15 months spent in the field, justified the act of re-storying for sense and meaning to be garnered from the muddled data. It made for pluralistic perspectives to be heard from the participants and also a better understanding of the context of each participant’s views (Creswell and Miller, 2000, 128).

Like Casey, (1995-1996, p.233) “Learning to take respondents' storytelling seriously had a number of unsettling effects on me”. At times I questioned myself, for example asking if I had the right to be retelling the stories of the young people in my school, were the stories accurate in as much as did they represent how the young people were feeling during interviews or observations? I questioned whether or not the titles given to each of the stories accurately reflected the totality of experiences and emotions that the young people felt over 15 months, which was a long time in the field, which saw the young people go through a range of emotions and changes.



These tensions emerged and re-emerged as I attended to my experiences of moving from the close relational work with the participants to beginning to represent my inquiries to a larger audience (Clandinin, 2006, p.48).

However I believe that a number of actions, for example working in a three-dimensional space that was formulaic but not rigid, gave structure and credibility to my use of re-storying. As each of the young people related their experiences of the impact of the closure on their education over 15 months, the framework allowed me to “see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning” and it was my responsibility “to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about [each] individual and social change” (Andrews et al., 2008, p.1) by ordering these accounts in a coherent way. Engaging with narrative as a means of analysing and presenting data and then re-storying these accounts provided “a multiple standpoint perspective” (Angrosino, 2007, p.11). This was only made possible through constantly “collaborating and renegotiating information with participants and returning again and again to the field text” (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002, p.324) for deeper understandings and to “show respect and support for the participants” (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.128).

True to the act of re-storying each story had a title and, background information about the participant telling the length of time that data was collected from them, their achievements during celebration assemblies and sports day. This added context and gave an insight into the life and personality of each young person who took part in the study. Each story had “time and place, plot and scene” and these worked together to create “the experiential quality of the narrative” or the plausibility factor where the reader could say, “I can see this happening” (Connelly and

Clandinin, 1990, p.8). This process was more nuanced than at first glance. The data which would become Jade's story for example, was defined by sadness, indifference, remorse and a need to leave St Luke's "to go college". It was difficult to situate these emotions into a single story that had time, place, plot and scene. It was only once I revisited the data and especially of the times that I observed her on the playground and in lessons, and then questioned her about the meaning of her gestures, that I realised that Jade felt trapped. And so the title of her story was "I feel trapped" to suggest the mixed emotions Jade had of wanting to leave St Luke's (albeit without completing her GCSEs), admitting reservations about meeting new people, whilst not wanting to leave her friends at St Luke's nor wanting them to leave her at St Luke's. The process of arriving at a title, a place, a plot and a scene were difficult and required several revisits to the data before deciding on what to include. Taking note of "symbolic interactionism" and "examining individual interactions, assume[d] a need to examine the subjective experience of individuals in order to understand and describe their symbolic world from their point of view" (Owens, 2007, p.300). In the end it was worth reminding myself that the validity processes throughout the act of re-storying gave prominence to students' voices as opposed to what has become known as 'student voice' or 'pupil voice', and that these 10 stories were tentative.

### *Working in a Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure*

According to Suter (2012, p.369), "the challenge for the researcher is to define the elements of a person's stories (the raw data), identify themes, uncover important sequences and retell the story in ways that provide insight (the meaning of the story)." Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure framework provided a structured and thematic approach to the analysis

and presentation of the data in the form of 10 stories. The framework highlighted the importance of students' voices' during times of change because I had to "examine their personal experiences as well as their interactions with other people" (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002, p.339). I used this framework because it allowed my inquiries into the young people's lived experiences to travel –

**Inward** – looking at the internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions of the young people.

**Outward** – taking into account the existential conditions that is the environment in which the young people find themselves.

**Backward and forward** – temporality – past, present and future feelings and memories of the young people and situated within place, that is the context of their closing school (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.49).

For this small study, Clandinin and Connelly are right in saying that "narrative inquiry is a way, the best way to think about experience" (2000, p.81). Although they say that their Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure is metaphorical (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.50), I found that mapping some of the questions, and especially the research questions, on a grid gave me a better base by which to understand how the framework could work for the stories (see Appendix 2). Once I saw the questions on the grid, and how the stories could emerge, I then mapped the responses that participants gave, under the original headings and subheadings: **Interaction** - Personal and Social; **Continuity** – Past, Present and Future; and **Situation/Place**. The stories were an amalgamation of group and individual interviews, participants' feelings cards, responses to attitudinal surveys and my

observations made on the playground, and in RE, Maths and English lessons, over 15 months.

I replaced situation/place with 'context'. In this sense, 'context' highlighted, from a critical standpoint, how the power structure of St Luke's shaped inequalities and contradictions for the young people and their education that they themselves often recognised and highlighted. Moving from situation/place to 'context' reflected the young people's views, and their changing views, of their school over time. It reflected the view that "reality is socially constructed and it is what participants perceive it to be" (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.125). Finally, 'context' revealed more overtly my own knowledge of the school and how I came to terms with my involvement in the research, as one who also had a story to tell.

I devised a Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure for each of the participants and used coloured pens to highlight their responses under the main themes Interaction, Continuity and Context. This added clarity to the data that would later become their stories. In essence, using the Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure framework and thinking three-dimensionally throughout the data collection process, allowed for flexibility of questioning and also for the young people to respond in whatever order they wished. Their responses did not always fit neatly into the categories, but this was positive in that it was possible to understand the nuanced nature of their experiences over time. In the end, the voices of all the young people emerged more volubly and individually as 10 stories.

Finally, the framework highlighted "the relational dimension of narrative inquiry" (Clandinin, 2006, p.47), meaning that I could not bracket myself out of the research, even though I had initially thought I could. I had to make decisions each step of the

way and justify them. I concur with Clandinin’s belief that it is necessary to find ways to inquire into the participants’ experiences, the researcher’s own experiences, as well as what she called “the co-constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process” (2006, p.47).

<i>Interaction</i>		<i>Continuity</i>			<i>Situation/Place Context</i>
<i>Personal</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Future</i>	
<b>Look inward to internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic, reactions, moral dispositions</b>	Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other people and their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view.	Look backward to remembered experiences, feelings, and stories from earlier times.	Look at current experiences, feelings and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters’ intentions, purposes and different points of view

Table 3 Clandinin and Connelly’s Three-Dimensional Space Narrative Structure (2000)

*Applying the Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure framework*

It became apparent that in order to be able to elicit full and meaningful responses from the participants it was necessary to meet with some of them individually, sometimes on more than one occasion, to clarify key points from our previous meeting. Sometimes it was necessary for me to re-present the questions in a tiered format, together with follow-up probes, so as to enable the young people to access the questions and address the key queries within. It was important to ensure that the participants understood the questions posed, otherwise some may have been inclined to provide superficial responses which would prove of little value to the research questions. In clarifying responses with participants, they were mapped on Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space

Structure framework (see Table 3, p.76), which was completed for each participant to provide consistency in the format of the narratives.

The young people's stories of their closing school are told in Chapter 4.

## Methods

Methods act as tools, sometimes working together, to provide rich descriptions in response to research questions. The 10 participants were told that three methods would be used in this study to help tell their stories; they would be interviewed, observed and occasionally asked to complete a survey sheet. They knew that their individual narratives about "recovering and discovering memories, about remembering and forgetting, about sharing, recalling and explaining, about scripting, repairing and crafting" (West, 2013 in Trahar, p.2) of thoughts and experiences in their closing school, would then be re-storied after 15 months. The participants were aware that the interview questions and the survey questions were drafted in collaboration with the pilot group. They were also conscious that they would be instrumental in helping me draft the observational schedule. All this was done in order to form collaborative partnerships with the young people so that the purpose of the research and the responsibilities were shared by all (Bold, 2012, p.63).

I was mindful that I could influence, disturb and affect what was being researched (Wellington, 2000, p.41), having openly stated my values and biases. I was also aware that these could affect the validity of the research, hence I employed a triangulation strategy, even at the data collection stage, examining each information source and finding evidence to support each theme (Creswell, 2008, p.266), rereading answers and asking new questions of the participants. I sought to ensure that, without being apologetic about the decisions I took, the processes would render

the findings credible and, crucially, that the stories reflected the experiences of the young people. I wanted to show my genuine interest in the human stories of the participants and, more importantly, their constructions of knowledge (Midgley et al., 2013).

### **Open-ended interviews –**

To protect their identities, the young people chose pseudonyms at our first meeting, yet still expressed concerns about their anonymity and whether they would be identified. I found this interesting, especially as I had opted not to use visual recordings in order to protect their identities. This then prompted me to consider the use of questionnaires rather than interviews, as they offered full anonymity, being “no face-to-face interaction between respondents and the interviewer” (Kumar, 2014, p.181). I felt, however, that stories of grief, loss, anxiety, nonchalance and resilience over time could not be suitably told through the format of a questionnaire. I reassured each of the participants, therefore, that their identities would be fully protected.

I returned to open-ended interviews because I knew this method would allow me the freedom of “digging deeper ... [and] identifying diversity and variety” (Kumar, 2014, p.177) in participant responses. I practiced “shadow listening” (Owens, 2007, p.305) throughout each interview. This is where whilst listening, recording and observing body language, I would be having a shadow conversation with myself making sense of what is being said by the group or by individuals to “probe emergent feelings” (Owens, 2007, p.305) in real time. Open-ended interviews also ensured flexibility of responses from the participants, and bestowed on me the freedom to ask whatever I wished, in whatever order or format, whilst providing me with the opportunity to respond to the participants’ narratives.

Group interviews were timetabled to take place at strategic points over 15 months – half-termly, or termly, when changes were likely to occur. These changes might have included staffing changes, or instances of supply teachers being brought in to cover an absent colleague (see Appendix 1). I had to practice flexibility, however, and alter the timetable to capture and reflect the frequent changes in the school. I met the participants more often than planned, mainly because they spotted changes in the context of the school that they felt were necessary for us to talk about. It was at this point that I began to realise emergent changes in the nature of the research and its processes. The young people had moved from being participants in the research to being “knowers and actors” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.367) of the research, which then prompted a re-imagining on my part of how they were to be approached, listened to and represented in the narrative of their closing school.

The decision, then, to interview the young people in a group setting was to encourage everyone to share their thoughts and feelings without feeling scared or intimidated. The participants soon informed me, however, that on some occasions one-to-one interviews would be better to discuss issues and would encourage them to say how they were really feeling. For some time, I struggled in assessing when to involve them in group interviews and when to engage them in one-to-one interviews, primarily because I thought that some of the participants might be scared or intimidated by the kind of questioning that places individuals in the spotlight. The participants, however, were confident in deciding amongst themselves when the questionings warranted a one-to-one meeting.

### **Feelings Cards -**

On one occasion the participants suggested ‘feelings cards’ as a way of expressing their emotions at the time and I seized upon this preference. They collectively



thought about and wrote down as many words as they could that described how they, and others, might be feeling about returning to St Luke's to start their GCSEs in September 2014. These were typed up and taken to the next meeting, where they chose the cards that best described how they were feeling, before explaining these emotions in more details (see Appendix 5). By now the participants had cemented their role in the project by expressing their agency to the research design in ways that better reflected their concerns. Rather than constraining the voices of the participants and restraining the aims of the project, this overt involvement by the participants, and the tacit shift in power dynamics, proved "emancipatory in both process and outcome" (Fielding, 2001, p.124).

All individual and group interviews were digitally recorded and then stored on a password-protected computer (see Appendices 10 and 11). These recordings will not be shared with the school or handed over to a third party. Listening back to the recordings and transcribing the interviews was helpful. I also benefited from the notes I made in my journal to capture who said what, comments that needed further clarification and general thoughts about the research process. All transcriptions were stored on my computer under password protection and once printed were deposited in a folder in a secure place in my study.

#### **Attitudinal surveys –**

Some of the questions that formed the attitudinal survey came from the interview questions. These questions were structured and were repeated throughout the research to track any change(s) in the participants' thoughts and feelings about their closing school. The surveys helped me to trace the extent to which the leadership of the school was responsible for any change in perception that the young people might have in relation to the closure of their school and its impact on their education.

## Observations –

Although highly subjective, with questions of “the degree to which an observation actually demonstrates what it appears to demonstrate” (Angrosino, 2007, p.58), I observed all the participants over 15 months. Participants were observed once on the playground and once in each of the core subjects: English, Maths and RE. The participants almost always shared lessons, hence multiple lesson observations were common.

I wanted to gauge the participants’ interactions, both with their peers and with members of staff. I wished to investigate if there was any change over time or differences in interaction across subjects. Recording these interactions with the aid of a grid, which the participants helped to construct, (see Appendix 6), proved valuable in tabling, and then understanding, the participants’ experiences and interactions outside of an interview setting. On occasions I would be met by individual participants in the playground who told me what to add to the grid. For example, in one instance I was asked to add ‘relationship with teacher’ to the observational grid. When I questioned the participant on the reasoning behind this, I was told, “I don’t like my teacher so you can see what I’m like with her.” Using the grid helped me focus on what I needed to be looking out for in the field. I did not want to arrive at conclusions that were inaccurate or attribute what I had observed to the closure of the school. The observation grid and the interview sessions therefore helped to clarify my understandings of the participants, and how they constructed and experienced their worlds over time (Owens, 2007, p.305). Observing, especially those participants who sometimes struggled to articulate their feelings, gave me a more rounded understanding of their experiences once the process of coding and decoding began (see Appendix 6).

### **The use of quantitative data sets –**

I was allowed access to the participants' performance and attendance data, but I chose only to use their progress data. I scrutinised the data from the time that the young people were told about the closure of their school (February 2012) to July 2015. I took the decision to include Maths, RE and English because these are core subjects that all the participants study. These subjects have internal assessments at the same time and the data were more reliable than other subjects which had different assessment slots, and were not prone to long term or short term supply teachers.

Combining quantitative and qualitative data sets in this interpretative research study added richness to each narrative by showing changes over time. It also showed the differences in the young people's perceptions of their performance in three core subjects versus their actual attainment (see Appendix 8). Using quantitative data sets improved the validity of my findings, they increased my capacity to cross-check one data set against another and they also provided other 'takes' on my qualitative data (Grbich, 2007, p.197). The use of quantitative representations of student performance and their relevance is considered further in Chapter 5.

### **Introducing the research study**

An assembly in January 2014 was the means by which students in Year 9 were informed about the research. All the young people, therefore, had the opportunity to be a part of the study. At the end of the assembly I invited questions before issuing each prospective participant a letter addressed to their parents which stated the aims, purpose, ethics, use of data and interview processes of the research. The letter also included a consent form (Appendix 3) with a date to return it by.

### Including the wider student body

The young people were also told that even if they were not selected for the research, they could still contribute, enabling their voices to be heard. A 'Feelings Board' was considered, whereby students would write their feelings on post-it notes to be displayed on the board. Initially, I planned to locate the board at the front of the school, but after careful consideration, I decided not to proceed with the idea at all as I anticipated it bringing me into conflict with the gatekeepers. As this is a study focussed specifically on St Luke's students, I promised the young people that a few of them would also be interviewed nearer the end of the research.

### Gaining consent

Although it was only a small cohort, class notices, new letters, telephone calls and text messages had to be sent to remind prospective participants and their parents about returning the consent forms. By the end of February 2014 only five parents had given their consent, leaving seven parents still to do so. One student claimed his parents had given verbal consent, so a telephone call was made that confirmed it; this was then followed up with another letter and consent form which were received three months later in April 2014.

By April, 23 consent forms were returned and were a big enough number to enable purposive selection to take place in order to begin this small critical ethnographic research. There were four males and 19 females. Due to the gender imbalance, I was keen to include all the male respondents in the research. Purposive sampling meant that I could use my judgement to include those young people who could reflect the diversity within the year group to achieve the objectives of the research (Kumar, 2014, p.244). 15 young people were selected to take part in the research:

five for the piloting phase (one male and four females), seven for the research (or 10% of the cohort as of April 2014) and a further three for attrition. It was important to include these three young people given the fluid nature of the school and the knowledge that some young people might choose to leave the school before my study was completed.

Although parents had given their consent, it was important that the young people understood for themselves their role in the research and the processes that would be involved. This formed part of my ethical practice of “not only saving [the young people] from physical or psychological danger” but also “safeguarding their privacy and maintaining the confidentiality of all research records that might identify them” (Angrosino, 2007, p.85) Further, I wanted to challenge what Oliver (1992, p.102) described as “the social relations of research production”. He pointed out that in order for research to become more useful and relevant, researchers needed to essentially dismantle the belief that there was (or ought to be) “a firm distinction between the researcher and the researched”. He maintained that “such an idea is the product of a society which has a positivistic consciousness and a hierarchical social structure which accords experts an elite role” (1992, p.102). I did not consider myself an expert, but a learner, who wanted to collaborate with the young people in understanding their thoughts and feelings about the closure of their school.

To this end, 15 young people (five for the pilot phase and 10 for the research) agreed to meet with me and each completed a student-friendly consent form to give personhood and autonomy to their involvement in the research (see Appendix 4). The young people were also encouraged to use this forum to ask questions about the research process.

## The piloting phase

The decision to pilot the research was threefold:

1. To ensure that the questions 'will be understood and will be likely to prompt useful responses' (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.140);
2. To make sure any necessary change could be made to the research questions and methods before the data collection began;
3. To confirm that student-friendly questions could be formulated from the four research questions that I drafted.

The pilot group included five young people, who were made aware that their role in the research was crucial, even though they would not take part in the research over the full 15 months. They were informed:

The validity of this research rests on your small shoulders. Validity means that you will have to read through the questions that I came up with, say honestly which ones you understand and which ones you don't. You may also need to change the questions if you would like to and you may add new ones if you wish so that we can be sure that the main question: "What do you think and feel about the changes in your school as it moves towards closure in 2016?" is answered.

Some of the questions I will need to ask time and time again in a survey, so think about which ones could be asked repetitively?

**Research Question: What do you think and feel about the changes in your school as it moves towards closure in 2016?**

**Research Questions**

1) Do you know why your school is closing? Do you know the reasons leading to its closure?

**Student Question: How do you feel about the school closing?**

2) What do you think will be the main changes that will affect your education as the school nears closure?

**Student Question: Do you think these changes will affect your future?**

3) How do you feel about any changes that might affect your education as the school nears closure?

**Student Question: Do you think the teachers care less as the school nears closure?**

4) Are the changes in the school affecting your performance and progress?

**Student Question: Do you feel like you could get a better education in another school?**

**Student Question: Are you planning to stay and why?**

*Table 1: Student-friendly research questions, as formulated by the pilot group*

Table 1 shows the redrafted research questions, plus five extra questions added by the pilot group.

### **The participants**

To ensure a wide range of 'voices', members of both sex were chosen, three participants being males and seven females. The 10 participants included:

- two young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN);
- two young people on the free school meals register (FSM6);
- two gifted and talented young people (G&T);
- two young people with English as an additional language (EAL);
- one young person new to the school;
- one young person on the Students' Council.

Other factors associated with the participants were mapped, even though I was unsure at the beginning of the process if these would prove significant to the research (Table 2).

Pseudonyms	Sex	Race / Ethnicity	Primary characteristics for involvement in the research	Other significant factors	KS3 Ability Grouping (Higher, Middle, Lower)	Initial emotions expressed about the closure	GCSEs taken in summer 2015	Status
Shaniah	F	Black African	EAL	FSM6	M	Disappointment & nervousness	Spanish Drama Science	
Marie	F	White British	FSM6	SEN(S) Behavioural difficulties & FSM6	L	Disappointment & worry	Functional Skills Food Technology (Entry Level Certificate) Science	
Marcel	M	Black Caribbean	SEN(A) Behavioural difficulties	Reading Age 15.9	M	Don't care & not bothered	Spanish B. Studies Science	
Bob	M	Iraqi	FSM6	SEN(A) Mild Learning Difficulty	M	Don't care	-	Left October 2014
Jade	F	Black Caribbean	G&T	School Council	H	Not bothered & worry	Music Spanish Science	
Michelleh	F	Black African	New Student (started 06/12/13)	EAL	M	Anxiety & uncertainty	History, Spanish, Science	
Evelyn	F	Black African	School Council	EAL	H	Anxiety & uncertainty	-	Left September 2014
Lenaè	F	Black African	G&T	100% attendance	H	Uncertain	History Spanish Science	
Tina	F	Egyptian Arab	EAL	School Council	M	Worried & happiness	Drama Spanish Science	
Nima	M	Afghan	SEN(A) Other Difficulty	EAL	M	Excitement, sadness & worry	-	Left April 2014

Table 2: Charting the participants

## Data gathering

Data gathering lasted 15 months, from April 2014 to July 2015, and took the form of group and individual interviews, attitudinal surveys and observations. Gaining entry to St Luke's was not problematic, being a teacher at the school. However, there was one potential gatekeeping obstacle that I encountered. Following purposive sampling, the head teacher strongly advised that the 10 participants were vetted by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) to ensure that none of the young people had pre-existing medical or psychological conditions that could be heightened by the research questions. There was a nervous wait, but on the second day I gained confirmation that all the participants could be approached for the research to begin.



All the participants were interviewed no less than five times, observed at least once and completed a minimum of one attitudinal survey at St Luke's. As some of the young people transferred to other schools, however, it was necessary to follow these participants to their new schools. This proved challenging, as contact had to be made with parents once again, then with the young person, and subsequently with the new school. It was necessary to coordinate interviews through the Year Learning Co-ordinator in these schools. Sometimes staff members were slower to respond than I had planned, which resulted in two of these off-site interviews having to be conducted by telephone due to time restrictions.

The young people's progress and achievement scores in Maths, English and RE were mapped out against their own predictions of their progress and achievement. The aim was to gauge the extent to which the young people's perceptions reflected the official data of the school and also to ascertain whether or not their perceptions vis-à-vis the official data, spoke to the changing contexts of the school. Although the school had six strategic data collection points throughout the school year, I opted for the first (October 2014), the fourth (March 2015) and the sixth (June 2015) collection points. I felt that collecting data at these times would be a reliable indicator of individual progress and achievement over time.

### **Member-checking**

I collaborated with the young people throughout the process of the research and included them in research design and in the construction of our meeting schedules and 'feelings cards'. I therefore felt it necessary to prioritise dissemination of the research to all the participants first and also before the research results were finalised (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010, p.62). I wanted to confirm that the 10

narratives reflected each of their lived experiences in their closing school. I also wanted to ensure that I had time to make changes to both the data and the findings if necessary before the research was made public.

The process of member-checking was too important to be a tick-box exercise, yet I did not want the data and the findings to be diluted through this process, so I relied on Hallett (2013, In Midgley et al., p.37) for guidance. He warns that member-checking is a “complex social process that warrants careful consideration before being employed”, and highlights how “the concerns tend to focus on the research, not those researched”. To ensure that this was not the case in my research, and that the voices of the participants were always at the centre, a variety of tools, some forwarded by the participants themselves, and thick descriptions including gestures (see Appendix 9) were used in triangulated ways of questioning and re-questioning the data and findings. Hallett urged caution towards even these approaches, however. He believes the researcher should “carefully read the materials through the lens of each participant before asking him or her to engage in this potentially harmful process” (p.37). He was cautious that validity, so central to member-checking, did not outweigh the need to protect each, or any, of the participants from harm.

I used thick descriptions in each of the narratives and, after thinking about some of the participants whom I had come to know more personally, I felt it necessary to meet with them individually, to have them read their stories and answer any questions that they may have surrounding accuracy, meaning or my choice of words. I also wanted to use the forum to explain how I had arrived at my findings. Although I was guided by Hallett, I still felt it necessary to member-check with all the participants, rather than a sample of them, as he chose to do.

Locating all the participants over a two weeks period proved difficult. I was able to have a face to face member-checking session with Shaniah, Marie, Marcel, Jade, Michelle, Lenae, Tina and Fatima. I allowed them to read their stories but in the first session, Shaniah also asked me to read her story. She wanted to know “how it would sound coming from an adult”. I found this interesting and illuminating as again ‘voice’ was placed firmly in the spotlight and highlighted what she saw as the difference between ‘her voice’ and ‘my voice’. For the remaining sessions, I allowed the young people choices, to read their stories themselves, to allow me to read their stories or both – they could read then I could read to them. At the end of each of their stories, I also included their comments about member-checking.

Evelyn and Bob, who had moved to other schools, member-checked their stories via email while Nima could not be located.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this research was granted on 19 December 2013 by the University of Sheffield (see Appendix 12). Throughout the research process, I adhered to the ethical processes as outlined in my Ethics Proposal, which was also shared with and approved by St Luke’s. Letters went out to both parents and to the participants outlining the research and how all involved would be safeguarded. The school, young people, the borough, the diocese and staff would all be anonymised.

My actions throughout the research process, whilst strictly adhering to ethics and safeguarding requirements, retained the necessary flexibility to respond to findings and changing circumstances: “to point out that the educational character of any practice can only be made intelligible by reference to an ethical disposition to

proceed according to some more or less tacit understanding of what it is to act educationally” (Carr, 1987, p.166). This meant thorough deliberation of how to safeguard the identities, voices and wellbeing of the participants.

I was acutely aware of the need to give close attention to individual participants during group interviews. In this practical wisdom was required. Carr (1987, p.172) explains this as “knowledge of what is required in a particular moral situation and a willingness to act so that this knowledge can take a concrete form”. He continued by saying that, practical wisdom is “a comprehensive moral capacity which combines practical knowledge of the good with sound judgement about what, in a particular situation, would constitute an appropriate expression of this good”. In practical terms this meant that any change in the mood or behaviour of any of the participants was investigated or followed up by a one-to-session. For some of the young people it was clear from *their* questioning in some of our meetings that they were finding the closure of the school upsetting. I was sensitive to this and keen to avoid heightening their anxiety. At times, I would quickly move the conversation on to talk about ‘lighter’ topics, such as how they were preparing for sports day, their preferred sixth form courses or even the weather.

I also used each meeting to “reconfirm consent and its limits” (O’Reilly, 2012, p.66), so that the young people were aware they:

- could opt out of the research process at any time;
- could choose not to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable;
- could talk to one of three gate-keepers if they became anxious or upset about the research.

As the participants relayed their lived experiences by way of group and individual interviews, I was mindful of the need to constantly monitor my relations with them and adapted based on what I was learning about myself in relation to them (Tripp, 1988, cited in Shacklock and Smyth, p.41). Throughout the study this kind of deliberation, practical wisdom, triangulation and constant researcher awareness ensured that the processes of the research and the subsequent findings were credible. It ensured that the voices of each of the participants were represented accurately and their wellbeing was safeguarded.

### **Summary of Chapter 3**

In this chapter I detailed how critical ethnography led me to narrative and re-storying using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure for both presentation and analysis of data. This chapter showed my support for Mansfield's view that: "[s]imply asking students how their schooling impacts them, and counting their responses, is not sufficient" (2013, p.398). This was not a sentiment against quantitative methods, rather she was making the point that "prioritizing student voice in educational research and leadership practices is the most authentic means of advocating for social justice and promoting change in communities" (2013, pp.398-399). I would also add that problematizing these voices through the use of multiple research methods and validity processes made it possible to hear the voices of all the young people individually and audibly in this research. I shared how I adhered to my ethical responsibilities towards the participants whilst still ensuring that the research was rigorous and could be justified (Sikes, 2004, p.32).

## Chapter 4 Young people's stories of their closing school

### Introduction

*... one of the basic human forms of experience of the world is as story (Clandinin and Connelly, 1989, p.4).*

In this chapter, the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the young people during the 15 months of research are told as stories. The story of one student, not part of the original group of participants, is also told in order to fulfil a promise I made to all students in January 2014 that they could also voice their feelings and experiences about their closing school (see Appendix 10).

These are the 11 stories about the young people's perspectives on the effects of the impending closure of their school on their education.

## Shaniah's story

### **“People just think it's a bad school”**

Shaniah was involved in group and individual interviews over 15 months, whilst also being observed in lessons and at play. She completed regular surveys and a feelings card.

At the Easter 2015 Celebration Assembly, Shaniah was awarded Excellence in Drama.

#### **Situation/Place (CONTEXT)**

We've been described as a bad school and when people say that St Luke's is a bad school, they mean academically. Other people are saying that teachers are leaving and coming and now the school is shutting down, that's making it a bad school.

Whether real or imagined, Shaniah believed this to be the reason for the 2012 decision to close her school.

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

April-July 2015 - Throughout the research, Shaniah's feelings remained constant; she was nervous, frustrated and angry. She was nervous for herself but also her peers. What has disappointed her most about St Luke's has been the school's lack of communication with students about the changes leading up to the closure of the school. “I feel nervous,” she said, “because the school isn't providing me with the best education possible so I think it will worsen and affect my GCSEs. I also feel disappointed because the school won't do anything about it”.

Before Shaniah even started Year 10 in September 2014, she was already speculating about what conditions would be like for her and her peers:

I think that when we get to Year 10 and start our GCSEs, teachers won't care as much because we're the final year so teachers won't pay as much

attention to our work. They are just going to relax on our learning time. Some of my teachers are OK but not all of them.

She had a question too:

In September, like will our education be disrupted because they are focusing on like Year 11s more than the younger years?

By mid-late June 2014, Shaniah was worried about everything.

On teachers:

I feel like teachers are coming and going frequently, they stay for a bit and it's hard to adapt to new teachers and like ... get them to understand you and what you're saying.

On her subject options:

I think that they are really limited. I wish that we had more options. I would be able to take something apart from what I'm doing now because they're like ... 'you should do Spanish' but I don't wanna do it ... it's like whatever they have, you're gonna get it, even if it's not specialising stuff that ....

Her voice then tapered off into a sigh. Shaniah was not happy that she was being made to do subjects that had no obvious connection to her future plans.

On new students and early learners of English, she described the concerns shared by her and her friends. She felt that they were having too much Language Support leaving little time for the main subjects and confided that they were finding it hard to rise to the levels of everyone else in the school. On supply teachers, Shaniah expressed alarm at having two supply teachers in her option subjects in one week. By the end of the summer, Shaniah had lost hope and was worried about everything, but she was committed to returning to St Luke's for Year 10.

#### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

In June 2015, just over three years since the decision was made to close St Luke's, and 15 months after my first meeting with Shaniah, she was still looking sad and



forlorn. She hung her head low and squeezed her fingers tightly together in our final meeting. "I feel the same as I did before," Shaniah sighs, "I think I should have left. I think I could have made an earlier start in Year 9 in another school. I don't think I should have stayed. I did Drama and Spanish this year, it was something I had to push myself to do. It wasn't what I prepared to have as options ... maybe Drama but I didn't actually prepare for Spanish to be an option so it was like a last minute thing".

She thought that the school's promise to give her the 'best education possible' had gone unfulfilled. She didn't think that there had been an actual improvement or prioritising of students. In her mind:

.... it's worsened actually. It doesn't seem like there's more concentration on students or improvements for students, it's like 'last year let's relax' basically.

She only felt encouraged to do well in Mr Craven's assemblies. He is the Associate Deputy Head and lead for Raising Standards. In his assemblies, she felt he displayed exams as a 'now or never situation'. He told her that they're like a 'ticket in life', but other teachers failed, she reckoned, to explain it to students in this way.

Shaniah was angry. The lack of a wider variety of options had not gone away.

I am upset about the options, yeah because other schools have a wide variety of courses you can do and St Luke's keep closing each one down every year.

She felt that decisions about options were made at the last minute by the school.

They wait until the end ... at the last minute to tell us about changes that are affecting students and teachers.

She admitted that it was unlikely to happen, but ideally she would want the school to increase the options in the final year.

Shaniah recalled an assembly in late June 2014, where the Associate Head Teacher announced the imminent start of the Year 10 timetable, even though she was still in Year 9. She remembered him saying that an early start to GCSEs meant that all students would get used to the timetable and that this would help all the students in the long run. She didn't understand what he meant, she confessed. She also remembered him saying that the teachers would pay more attention to students because they were the last few years left in the school. She understood this part of what he said but she wasn't sure if it was all true. She left the meeting thinking "the school is gonna lose many students."

Sports Day 2014 (July) provided a much needed respite for Shaniah from her worry over the closure of St Luke's. She took part in the 800m relays, hurdles and team game activities. For her, Sports Day 2014 was an "opportunity for the whole school to get together, have fun, do different activities and wear our own comfortable clothes." Although this was a fun day that has stood out in Shaniah's mind, she was still nervous and frustrated and wished that she had left St Luke's.

**Member checked** – 6 July 2015 – I believe the story is well written and constructed. It portrays my manner towards the closure of the school. I do still feel the same way bringing forth the same attitude so nothing major has actually changed. (Shaniah)

## Marie's Story

**“Some good teachers are leaving ... it's sad ... make them stay!”**

Marie was involved in group and individual interviews over 15 months, observed in lessons and at play, completed regular surveys and a feelings card. For her final interview, Marie was accompanied, at her own request, by her Teaching Assistant (T.A.). Marie's T.A. had just returned from maternity leave and Marie wanted to be with her at every opportunity.

At Celebration Assembly, just before the Easter 2015 holidays, Marie was awarded Form Champion. She was commended for being polite and helpful.

Marie's Special Educational Needs (SEN) mean that she was allowed alternative provision by St Luke's in Functional Skills and a cookery course at a local college. In May 2015, she also gained a Food Handler's Certificate which will allow her to work anywhere that food is sold.

### Situation/Place (CONTEXT)

June 2014 - The Associate Head Teacher called a meeting of the whole school (some 160 students) in the hall. Marie was in Year 9 and remembered assemblies being bigger when there were a few more hundred students, located on two sites. Marie giggled uncontrollably when I asked her what was said at the meeting, “I can't remember anything.”

Marie was preoccupied throughout the meeting. In a room with 160 students, including Years 9 and 10 and a small sixth form, Marie's only thought was just how her school “suddenly felt small”.

By late May 2015 the Year 11s had left St Luke's and Marie was in Year 10. It was only now that she began to notice other profound physical changes that were about to become the new norm for her at St Luke's, such as an empty playground.

It's just gonna be so weird ... just us. Like at lunchtime me and Sandy looked out at the playground, 'that's your life' that's what I said to her. It's gonna look like ... completely bare.<sup>1</sup>

She gave off a loud laugh but, knowing Marie for as long as I have, I could tell she was finding this change unsettling.

Is it going to be 'weird good' or 'weird bad'?

Both, it's gonna be quieter but bad because it used to be so noisy with Year 11s always coming in straight away after the bell, we could be late but now we'll have to come inside straight away, since it's just us.

Marie gazed towards the ceiling and after a few seconds of silence, told me, "It's just so different with just us Year 10s." So again I quizzed her:

Is this a 'good different' or a 'bad different'?

I dunno because every day after school Jamie (a Year 11 male student and friend) always comes with me and Sandy and takes us home and sees that we get home safe and stuff, now he can't. So it's weird. I will miss him.

#### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

Back in 2012, Marie remembers being told that a new school was going to be built and St Luke's was going to close. Three years after the decision to close St Luke's, Marie is still disappointed that her school is closing. Marie is also worried about the continued changes leading up to the closure of her school. She is still trying to understand why her school is closing.

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<sup>1</sup> Sandy is her best friend.

It's a good school and I don't want it to close. Like, all the teachers support us and they help us with our education.

Marie's worry is being magnified by the continued departure of established members of staff whom she's grown close to. Of this she said:

It's a shame that half of the teachers are leaving and new teachers are coming. It won't be the same without the other teachers. I do feel like my teachers this year have been supportive. Like, first they say, 'always try your best by yourself first' and if you don't understand ask them but always do it yourself first. I've found out that some more good teachers are leaving, it's sad as well, so make them stay.

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

Marie is struggling with the changes but she admitted that going to another school would have been weird and that she would have struggled to make new friends.

Did she think of leaving? Yes, for a moment she had thoughts of leaving. She had a conversation with her mum who insisted that she 'couldn't move'. Her Mum had said that all her brothers attended St Luke's and so Marie *had* to finish her time at St Luke's whether she liked it or not.

Marie didn't mind because she felt she had made many friends and as long as she was getting her education, she would be fine until 2016.

Marie was happy to take part in the research over 15 months because she feels that schools need to "talk to children more and let them know what's happening." She also feels that finding out how children feel would make them "feel less worried and more positive because they know what's going on."

Sadly, she feels that the lack of information, communication and the departure of some of her T.A.s and teachers have made her worried and disappointed.

**Member checked** – 13 July 2015 – It's exactly what I said but it sounds like someone else's story. The teachers are still supportive. But I ask less for help because I do my work by myself. I miss the old teachers like Mrs Patel and Mr Delaney (T.A.). I wish they could come to Thorpe Park with us and have a catch up with teachers and see how we're doing. (Marie)

## Marcel's Story

### **“I don't care and I'm not bothered ....”**

Marcel was involved in group and individual interviews over 15 months, observed in lessons and at play and also completed regular surveys and a feelings card.

One of his happiest moments was winning the Easter 2015 raffle – a large hamper with Easter treats. He skipped to the front of the hall and smiled broadly as he collected his oversized hamper from the Associate Head Teacher.

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

Marcel said that he didn't care, and wasn't bothered, that St Luke's was closing. From observations in several lessons this initially proved true. He was often disengaged, chose not to complete classwork or homework and on some occasions he would argue with his teachers. Marcel's more engaged moments were usually during break and lunch when he would skip eating, to play football or basketball with his friends. For a while, this appeared to be all he cared about. So when Evelyn, also a part of the research group, left St Luke's, he said he didn't even notice for a couple of weeks, much to the amazement of the rest of the group.

In a very matter-of-fact way, Marcel stated:

If the school closes after I get my GCSEs then I'm not gonna be relying on the school anymore to help me get on in life but I do think the school should have become an academy – more money, more equipment and a bigger budget.

In relation to his subject choices, he boasted:

The subjects I chose are easy; I chose the harder ones for Year 11 and the easier ones for Year 10 to relieve myself from extra stress.

Marcel was excited, even as his peers were expressing concerns about teachers, teaching and subject options, “I’m excited yeah because certain teachers are retiring Miss ...”

Between the start of the new school year in September up until November 2014, no one from the Senior Leadership Team mentioned the closure of the school. This concerned the other members of the group but Marcel was unperturbed: “All I’d want to know is if certain teachers are leaving because I’d be happy.” Marcel lent over in a conspiratorial way towards me: “Do *you* know which teachers are leaving Miss?” “No Marcel, I don’t,” I said.

By December 2014, Marcel’s nonchalance was dissipating. What, though, had led to this change of mood and seriousness in attitude? Marcel was about to open up to me:

Basic’lly yeah Miss, I can’t change a subject that I’m doing now because we’ve already started and I wanna change my subject Miss. So I’m not happy.

Marcel had gone nearly a full term into his GCSE option subject and now wanted to switch to another option. Marcel was now realising that his informal approach to Year 10 was not paying off.

This wasn’t Marcel’s first disagreement with the school about his own option choices, however. At the end of Year 9, his mum chose Geography as one of his Year 10 GCSE option subjects but he stopped at nothing to have it changed and his new options became Business Studies and Spanish.

There would be no further changes to Marcel’s timetable.



Why was there a decision taken to close St Luke's? Marcel heard that:

Mrs Rose [the head teacher] decided that she didn't want the school to turn into an academy. Like the government wanted to turn it into an academy, so the government wanted it shut down.

On hearing this reason for the closure of his school Marcel said he felt good and began thinking of the future:

Now that there'll be no other year group, when we get to years 10 and 11, we'll get a lot more attention from the teachers.

They could get more equipment for the school, more things for the playground, like footballs and basketballs.

As St Luke's has gotten smaller, Marcel has noticed that all his teachers now have him in their gaze. They have been encouraging him to do his homework and to behave well in school. His mum has also been encouraging him to change his attitude too. Due to this extra attention, Marcel expects his achievement to be good in all his subjects because he says he has changed his attitude towards his work.

Marcel was beginning to feel conflicted. He had never considered leaving St Luke's because he said he hates meeting new people, but at that point in time Marcel was feeling nervous, worried and weird about being the only year group in the school. "I dunno", he muttered, "nervous because it's only gonna be our year left and yeah ... the school is gonna be empty. It's gonna be weird walking through the corridors." But was this the only reason? Marcel acknowledged that he remained aware of the fact that his teachers still had him in their gaze and for him this was also part of his worry and anxiety.

### Situation/Place (CONTEXT)

Asked what another school could gain from his involvement in the research, Marcel said:

They can learn how the students feel and they can make improvements for the students and the school as well, even though it's closing.

**Member checked** – 6 July 2015 – I feel everything said was true and now that I look back at it, some of the things I said were immature but now I am in Year 11, I feel I realise how important school has become. My attitudes have changed for the better and I hope to continue down this path and do well with my work. (Marcel)

## Jade's Story

### **"I feel trapped"**

Jade was involved in group and individual interviews over 15 months. She was also observed in lessons and at play, completed regular surveys and a feelings card.

Jade contributed to her form class gaining valuable points at Sports Day 2014 by entering shot putt, football and rounders.

At Celebration Assembly, Easter 2015, Jade won Excellence in Maths Award, Highest Attainment in Year 10, Form Champion Award, Uniform Award, and Excellence in Spanish Award.

### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

Jade was worried but she did not reveal this to many people. She was worried that with the decision to close her school over four years, her friends would leave: "I will have no friends", she sighed.

She confessed that she is very close to her friends and if they left she wouldn't have anyone else as she didn't really talk to many people outside of school.

That was in April 2014, but fast forward to 2015 and Jade was no longer worried about her friends leaving as they were all about to start the Year 11 timetable, even though technically they were still in Year 10. Jade was one of the lucky ones, her friendship group remaining unchanged. She was now able to boast,

They're not gonna leave but if they do leave they're gonna mess up their future because our school started that one year thing (GCSEs in one year), so if they go to another school, they may have to do four subjects in one year. So they're not gonna leave.

She smiled broadly.

03 June 2015, Jade also reflected upon her time at St Luke's:

Not to say everything was bad because it wasn't but I have *really* bad memories of St Luke's. I did like Sports Day. Sports Day was good ... like going off to the stadium. St Luke's Got Talent as well, like in Year 7 and Year 8 ... those were good. I enjoyed Year 7 and Year 8. After that ... As time has gone on ... what's the word? Children have got less *enthusiastic* in joining into stuff because they just thought, 'aaah y'know what, this school, there's no point in me doing anything in this school anymore'. Like even with our year that's left yeah, there's no one that would want to perform.

Of the closure, she remembered being told that the school was undersubscribed, that it didn't have enough students and so had to close. Back then, Jade said she wasn't bothered. She said she was still learning and she was determined to get her GCSEs in spite of the decision to close her school. She believed, "it all depends on me and what I choose to do." When pressed to explain what she meant, Jade exclaimed with confidence,

Well I mean I'm the one who decides whether in the end I'm going to try my best or not because of the situation that the school is going through, so that's why it all depends on me.

As the summer term (June and July 2014) got under way, Jade began to have a few concerns and a question. She was able to choose the option subjects that she wanted to do but "eleven times over two weeks of Spanish is just too much", she protested. By now, three established teachers had left the school and she began to question whether she would continue to have new teachers every year until closure.

Jade was back at St Luke's for the start of Year 10, but between September and November 2014 she said that neither of the head teachers nor the deputy mentioned

the closure of the school. She found this strange, but there was a more pressing issue.

Top set is not very high ability. I feel it's mixed. If you need the teacher's help, she's too busy with the people at the front of the class and then if I turn around and start asking another student to help, I get in trouble.

The tide was turning and observations of Jade in class revealed boredom and disengagement in some lessons. In some lessons her head would be on the table or she would be pre-occupied doodling. Jade had become jaded with St Luke's so there was no surprise when during one of our meetings she asked:

"Miss can I go college?"

"Now?"

Jade shakes her head affirmatively.

"No Jade, you have to complete your GCSEs first. Why would you want to go to college now?"

Sounding bewildered with both her arms outstretched across her table, "Because I'm not liking school at the moment."

"Why Jade?"

"Because I don't like the subjects ... all the subjects ... I only said I was happy with my choices because I *had* to pick them. I'm not happy. I don't like this school anymore."

I met with Jade privately to discuss why she wasn't happy.

In June 2015, nearly the end of the academic year for Jade, she was in a defiant mode. She felt no sympathy for the position in which St Luke's has found itself. Even though she doesn't like change, she believed the school should have told her a long time ago about the decrease in curriculum provision. She felt trapped. She knew she couldn't leave now but she thought she should have tried, even though it would

have meant going on a waiting list at a local academy. She didn't believe the school was providing the highest standard of education it promised in 2012 and she said:

I don't know why. I think that even though the school is closing, they should be giving us the range of options, even if they have to find the teachers because that's what my dad was saying. 'They should find the teachers even if there are three people in the class'.

#### **Situation/Place (CONTEXT)**

Despite all the difficulties that Jade was facing at this time, she did feel encouraged by her teachers, whom she said encouraged her to aim for A and not C grades. Jade said that if she visited another school that was closing, depending on what year the children were in, she would offer this advice:

I would tell the head teacher to get the children away from the school ... like to get them into other schools so that they have better chances and opportunities. Also I would tell them that no matter like how small the school gets, keep going with the children they have left because without those children the school would be finished before the time.

Jade endorsed this research and thought it important because:

It gets you to hear what the children are saying because a lot of children would not have been able to speak up if it wasn't for things like this. The school would just close and the children would have no say apart from if they left the school. And I can't really leave the school now because I'm going into Year 11.

**Member checked** – 3 July 2015 – I think this is an accurate representation of how I feel. (Jade)

## Michelleh's Story

### **"I am confident things will get better in 2015-2016"**

Michelleh was involved in group and individual interviews over 15 months. She was also observed in lessons and at play, filled out regular surveys and completed a feelings card.

At Celebration Assembly, just before the Easter 2015 holidays, Michelleh won the Uniform Award.

### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

In June 2013, when Michelleh joined St Luke's as a Year 8 student, she had no idea that the school was going through a phased closure. It was only once she started that she realised this, as she began to hear rumours that the school was going to be joining with another school. She didn't mind as she had worked out that it would have little effect on her as she would be leaving in 2016.

By our first meeting in April 2014, however, she was feeling anxious and uncertain. Michelleh announced to our group that her 18 year-old brother was planning on removing her from St Luke's to his school, so that he could 'keep an eye' on her. This announcement came as a shock to her peers, they all gasped in disbelief before launching into questions:

"Really, you have a brother?"

"Can he do that?"

"That doesn't make any sense, why would he do that?"

".... but you've just started here? Why leave?"

Michelleh was uncertain, not knowing if she would be moving schools despite having settled in and made new friends at St Luke's. She was anxious too because

“apparently there will be new teachers every week and we’re not gonna really learn anything.”

She wanted to know if the teachers that she had for her core subjects then, would be the same teachers she would have the year after when she started her GCSEs. She didn’t want a change of teachers because she felt it “would be sort of different and harder.”

Would she be back at St Luke’s in September to start her GCSEs?

In June 2014 students chose their option subjects for GCSEs, but Michelleh was not happy. While some of her friends had chosen their options subjects, her parents chose her subjects and she was not happy with their choices, especially one.

I don’t really wanna do those subjects. It’s kinda sad, I wanna do Drama instead cos I just really feel comfortable in Drama as I have been doing Drama since I was 9 so I like, really want to do Drama but I can’t. Cos what I want to be when I’m older doesn’t really fit with Drama.

So I feel .....

She retracted, then continued:

.... my parents feel there is no point studying Drama. But I feel like the school should have some after-school club for Drama.

Michelleh was directed to the Drama teacher with her suggestion.

In the autumn term 2014, Michelleh was back at St Luke’s and her learning was going OK, but she thought she could be doing better. She did not blame the closure of the school at this point but believed her late start at St Luke’s had put her at a disadvantage.



In December 2014, the Associate Head Teacher called a meeting of all Year 10 students, but Michelleh complained that she didn't really "get it". This was a meeting to announce a further reduction in curriculum provision and for students to number in order of importance, 1- 5, their subject preference, for Year 11.

"I'm confused," Michelleh moaned, "Some of the lessons they said they would have next year weren't on the paper so I don't know if they're not gonna have them or if those lessons weren't full, so they've removed them ... It was a bit confusing. I asked my form tutor and he didn't know what was happening."

(Form tutors present at this meeting were hearing the announcement for the first time, along with students, so struggled to help explain).

Michelleh continued:

Mr Craven, the Assistant Head teacher, was just walking around, I was like, 'Sir, I don't understand what's going on.' He was like, 'yeah at this point I'm just handing out the papers.

Michelleh and others had questions, but were not given an opportunity to ask them.

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

In May 2015 Michelleh was feeling scared and restricted. She had hopes of becoming an architect but needed Art and a couple of other subjects, she said. She blamed the reduction in curriculum provision for not being able to study these in Year 11. She was resigned to the fact that she could not leave St Luke's at that point because she was in the middle of her GCSEs. "I'm sorta stuck" she said indignantly, in her non-British, American sounding accent. "Last year I was thinking of leaving buuuuuut at the same time, I decided to stay. I could have got on a little bit better in another school."

Michelleh was torn; she felt that the limited options at St Luke's might make it difficult to apply to the best colleges or sixth forms, but in some ways she thought she had

made the right decision by remaining at St Luke's. She told me her teachers were encouraging and inspiring, and often tell her she must revise and concentrate in class.

#### **Situation/Place (CONTEXT)**

In spite of all the difficulties and mixed emotions, Michelleh was confident that for the final year things will get better and she expects her progress and achievement to be good.

She was happy to be a part of the research because:

It sorta gives a voice to the students that aren't really listened to and heard all the time. 'Cos sometimes we uuum, us students like we talk to teachers but it's not always heard or responded to so I feel like it gives us a little bit of a boost to be able to say how we're feeling while the school is closing.

**Member checked** – 8 July 2015 – This story is an accurate depiction of my feelings over 15 months. (Michelleh)

## Evelyn's Story

### “Should I stay or should I go?”

Evelyn was involved in group and individual interviews, one of which was a telephone interview; she was observed in lessons and on the playground. She also completed surveys and a feelings card.

#### **Situation/Place (CONTEXT)**

Evelyn desperately wanted to win some medals to prove to herself that she could. So at Sports Day 2014, she took part in the Long Jump, 200m and the relays. She was thrilled! She won some medals and the day was fun. Even on this warm summer's day, surrounded by cheering staff on the microphones and screaming young people in the stadium stands however, Evelyn's thoughts were on Sports Day 2015. There will be less people – only one year group. What will the environment be like? Where will the sports day be located?

Because as the school gets smaller, I'm starting to wonder if it will be that fun...

She was at a crossroads and didn't know if she wanted to return to St Luke's after the summer holidays to start Year 10. She felt a move might be for the better.

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

Evelyn was one of St Luke's brightest students and she excelled at nearly everything and got involved in most activities. She represented her class on the students' council, but there was a constant battle raging inside Evelyn: should she remain at St Luke's or should she go to another school to begin her two year GCSE courses? Evelyn was “[a]nxious and uncertain.”

“Am uncer’ain”, she said in her deep London accent, “because I don’t know what the situation will be like; I am anxious because am between deciding if I want to move and if I don’t move then I am worried that my GCSEs might be affected.”

As Evelyn was hoping to become a lawyer, she needed someone to help her understand what subjects she required to study for Law and how, in fact, to become a lawyer. Sadly, however, Evelyn informed me:

I feel like we’re not getting that help ... like some people don’t know what they need or what grades they need to progress.

### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

On the closure of St Luke’s, all that Evelyn remembered hearing was that St Luke’s was going to be made into a “one way school from like 5 to 18 years”. It was, by far, a big shock to her. She was simply told and didn’t feel involved in the decision-making process to close the school:

The school should have asked for young people’s opinions on whether they think it’s right or wrong. It didn’t have to be detailed ... but it’s just that it’s the students who have experience in the school and know what it is like. Even if they still decided to close the school the young people should have been a part of it. In fact ... before we came to Year 7 they should have changed some stuff, like demolish part of the school and build a new building.

By the end of the summer term 2014, Evelyn began to accept the closure, but was determined to move schools as she felt that her Year 10 options would be limited and another school might have other options and new opportunities.

Evelyn was not prepared to chance it with St Luke’s. She applied to the local academy, but after hearing nothing from them all summer, she returned to St Luke’s in September 2014 with mixed feelings and began her GCSE courses.

It was a nervous three weeks for Evelyn but she was finally told that she had got a place at the local academy.

Looking back, Evelyn thought that there were two main factors that made her decide to leave. Having experienced a range of supply teachers, she didn't know the quality of education she was going to get and how good the teaching would be:

When we had supply teachers, sometimes we didn't learn and they didn't know what to do. The teachers weren't there and the supply teacher didn't know what to do. Sometimes we would just draw [sic] and talked and didn't do much work. This didn't bother me because I thought we're not doing any work this is just fun but later on thinking about it and seeing that we hadn't done much work ... we felt like we're just not getting enough work done and weren't where we're supposed to be.

Evelyn misses St Luke's and sometimes she questions whether or not it was the right decision. Overall, though, she's happy in her new school. She is studying Maths, Triple Science, Business Studies, Spanish, History, Drama, and English Language. If she excels in Year 10, she can be entered early for GCSEs and be allowed to pick up an extra subject in Year 11. She smiled heartily at the prospect.

She's made new friends but she misses her friends at St Luke's, especially those she's known since Year 7 and those who went to primary school with her. Social media, however, has made it easier for her to communicate with some of them. Mention of St Luke's was minimal by Evelyn, except to ask which teachers were still around.

**Member checked** – 8 July 2015 – I think that the story sounds like me and things I would say, including my pronunciation of words. Overall I think that it's very accurate and due to its accuracy I could recall what I said in discussions during the interviews. I am very happy with my decision to move as I've improved academically and helped

me to come out of my shell little bit more. I've become friends with a lot of people I never thought I would become friends with and as cliché as this sounds, I am a changed person now... However at one point, I was wondering if it was the right decision because I had to redo some exams 'cause they needed to know my exact grades. This added more stress on me as I had to revise whilst also ensuring that I am doing my other school work as well.

Afterwards I realised that I have a chance to improve myself and get better grades than before. Overall I am excited and little bit anxious to see what the future holds for me in xx Academy. (Evelyn)

## Lenaè

### **“Uncertainty and feelings of insecurity”**

Lenaè was involved in group and individual interviews over 15 months. She was also observed in lessons and at play. She completed regular surveys, and a feelings card.

At Celebration Assembly, just before the Easter 2015 holidays, Lenaè was presented with the Excellent Progress Award which she won for the highest attainment. She also received the Excellence in Spanish Award and the Excellence in RE Award.

### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

In April 2014 Lenaè was not sure why St Luke’s is closing and the reason for the decision to close the school was of no great concern to her. Her mantra since the announcement had always been, “I don’t mind [the closure] because I’ll get my education anyway.” Lenaè believed that her success or failure was all down to her.

By June 2014 Lenaè was becoming increasingly uncertain about many aspects of school life that were changing as a direct result of the decision to close her school. On the one hand, she was thinking that with less students and smaller classes, students would get more individual attention, but on the other hand, she was concerned that specialist teachers would be leaving.

Lenaè had seen many teachers leave since the announcement, but in June 2014 alone three more teachers had left St Luke’s. She was finding the departure of staff sad: “I think it’s sad for us children,” Lenaè said wearily, “because with the teachers you get a bond and when a new teacher comes you have to show them your talent all over again”.

The prospect of new teachers for Lenaè also equated to non-specialist teachers. She was worried that she would not understand the content, because the teacher would not be a specialist in that particular subject and hence may struggle to explain things to her in a manner she understood.

The school took the decision to start the Year 10 timetable early, whilst Lenaè was still in Year 9. She was happy with her subject choices for the year – History and Spanish. She knew that some students were not so happy, either because their options no longer existed or because they wavered in making a decision and missed out on a space in existing groups, so had to go where there was space.

At the meeting to announce the start of the new timetable, the Associate Head Teacher also made mention of the benefits of being in a small school. “We know your needs”, he said, “the average class size in a similar school that is larger, is around 30 students; your class sizes will be a lot smaller.” Lenaè left the meeting feeling reassured that, along with her peers, she would be given all the attention she needed to excel in school.

In July 2014 it was almost time for a much needed break from school, but first Lenaè was taking part in football and relays at Sports Day in order to earn much needed points for her tutor group. For her, the day was a “fun time to show talent and to compete with others”. Her mind, though, was already on Sports Day 2015, as she knew it would be different, with only one year group, but she was not worried about this fact.

By the autumn of 2014, Lenaè was a Year 10 student. Since the start of the new school year neither of the head teachers, or their deputy, had spoken of the closure



of St Luke's, but Lenaè had noticed changes. She witnessed her peers leaving and new students coming in, mostly non-English speaking students.

As time went on, her concerns were heightened. I know this because, even outside of our meeting sessions, Lenaè would often seek me out to ask questions or to clarify rumours that she had heard - ranging from teachers leaving to subject options and group settings being changed.

I asked her, therefore, "Am I right in thinking that when you see me and you ask when we're going to meet next, it's at those times that you feel most uncertain and insecure and you want answers?"

Lenaè hung her head in embarrassment and replied:

Yes Miss ... and I don't know Miss it's weird cos I want to find out more about the school but I know there's nothing you can do. We're only students and we can't quite do anything to put our voice in but it doesn't really go through unless it's accepted by the teachers ... cos they can listen to us but they don't have to do it. But I'd like to know more about what's happening in the school.

**Interviewer:** What would you want to know?

I'd wanna know ... next year it's gonna be different. So how are they gonna make that the best year of our school life, with only one year.

At this point Lenaè looked dejected, so I changed the subject slightly. I asked how she felt her learning was coming along, to which she replied:

I'm getting along. I don't always understand ... it's just there and I just do it.

**Interviewer:** Is that because the school is closing that you feel this way?

No ... I dunno but I'm just scraping along.

### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

In a meeting called by the Associate Head Teacher in December 2014, which Lenaè and her peers attended, students were given bits of paper which informed them of the possible subjects on offer for the 2015-16 school year. Lenaè, however, spotted a caveat:

They said that the options on the paper may not be the same options that they have next year because they want to see how many people want to do each option. Therefore say I picked Business for next year, and if not many people want to do it, they're gonna close Business for next year, which is the only subject I want to do.

She commented that students were not given an opportunity to ask questions in that meeting.

In March 2014 Lenaè's uncertainty and insecurity were heightened once more; she sought me out to tell me about another meeting that the Associate Head Teacher had called for all students. According to her, he said:

"The leadership team would be meeting with all students to talk about their options."

"There would be more trips next year."

"Most colleges ask for six or five GCSEs so students are doing enough GCSEs."

After the meeting she wished she had left St Luke's.

Me personally ... because I'm independent and I learn independently (well sort of) and so my core subjects I'd be able to do it anywhere and my option subjects, I would have got to do one more in another school.

In my final individual interview with Lenaè, in June 2015, she was still bemused and bewildered about the changes leading up to next year's closure.

Well Miss, I think that the school has defeated its purpose because this year [Year 10] we have had smaller classes but next year they're gonna join like Maths, there's gonna be three sets. So then, we're not gonna have that individual time with the teachers. So we're going back to square one. So it's gonna be the same thing and I don't know if teachers will be able to handle such big classes cos they're gonna be bigger than ever.

I asked, if she could suggest anything to the leaders of the school what would it be:

....make the classes smaller again but they won't do that because of financial issues ... they don't wanna pay teachers. They may say, 'Why have so many teachers with so little students?'

#### **Situation/Place (CONTEXT)**

Lenaè felt that St Luke's had succeeded in not making the closure of the school "a big scare" to students, even though the school could have done more to explain to students why it was closing and what was wrong with the school. She said that although the school is closing, she doesn't feel as if she is going to fail, as some of her teachers do encourage her to do well.

Asked about the importance of a research of this kind she said school leaders, even after the decision to close a school is made, would:

.... know how to fix the school. There are certain things this school hasn't done. Like you researching it, another school could use it to prevent such uncertainty and feelings of insecurity amongst students.

**Member checked** – 3 July 2015 – The story is well written and correctly specific to the actual feelings I feel. It is correct; it is well explained. However, I am not too worried anymore about the closure of the school as I'm getting the grades I am predicted. (Lenaè)

## Tina's Story

### **"I'm not leaving!"**

Tina is a confident 15 year old. She represents her class on the students' council. At Sports Day 2014 she took part in shot put, long jump, football and rounders. Her medal haul was minimal, but she took part to gain points for her class.

At the Easter 2015 Celebration Assembly, she won the Excellence in English Award and an award for 100% Attendance.

### **Situation/Place (CONTEXT)**

Tina has had one burning question throughout our time together:

How come xx Academy has a new school but bad kids and we have an old school with good kids and we're closing?

Tina is confused and thinks that the closure is unfair.

### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

When I met Tina on 23 June 2014, she was beaming with confidence. The head teacher had used his assembly that day to talk to the whole school, some 160 students across Years 9, 11 and 13, about a new timetable and the benefits of being in a small school. Tina has watched student numbers decreasing over the years but the gathering on that day was a stark realisation for her that St Luke's was small and it even "felt small".

At the meeting, many things were said but Tina only remembered two things, that the 2014-15 timetable was starting, making her officially a Year 10 student, and that the head teacher had led her to believe she was "gonna have more attention now from the teachers", due to the reducing number of students at the school. This made her smile.

In the meeting, Tina provoked stares of astonishment from her peers sitting around her, but didn't care that her optimism wasn't universally shared or believed. Concerning the remainder of her time at St Luke's, she revealed confidently:

I'm really excited because we're going to be the only ones left and all the attention is going to be on us. We'll have more attention on our GCSEs and we are 50% more likely to get a higher grade.

Tina remembered being told in 2012 that St Luke's was earmarked for closure in 2016 due to the falling number of children born in the local area, hence St Luke's not being needed anymore. Tina questioned why St Luke's, and not another school, was facing closure, but she is pragmatic and accepted the logical reasoning behind the closure.

Tina's survey responses showed no concern, over the whole 15 months, about the closure of her school, but in nearly all interviews, and on her feelings card, Tina was experiencing what she called, "worry". "Yes I am worried because their [sic] will be less teachers to teach and help us for GCSEs."

By mid-June 2014, one Science teacher, the Drama teacher and Mrs Kempton, the much loved Food and Technology teacher, had all left St Luke's to start new jobs. Tina missed Mrs Kempton deeply, she was her favourite teacher. In one meeting, Tina said in the gloomiest of tones:

I'm upset that Mrs Kempton left because she knew how to cook! But the new teacher, I feel like she doesn't know what she's doing and she's too strict.

Tina continued to complain about "supply teachers", but everyone knew that she had not bonded with Mrs Kempton's replacement. So when she said, "with supply teachers, they don't know what they're doing and for example in Drama we don't do

any work,” everyone knew who she was referring to and the subject that she really meant.

When Tina was nearing the end of Year 10 she was worried that her subject options for Year 11 were very limited. She heard that she would have to choose between Geography and Business Studies. Tina found the issue of options quite stressful, so she bravely asked a teacher about the options. She was informed that the options were limited, but this would enable her to “get a better grade in Maths and English and to focus more on them.” Tina smiled lukewarmly, “unfortunately” she commented.

Although Tina thought she was doing well in school, she believed some of her teachers could have tried harder to improve students’ understanding of the situation. She sensed that some teachers didn’t care anymore. To her, their attitude suggested “oh it’s gonna close next year, so what’s the point ... I’m just gonna finish my job and get paid and go”. In relation to the “good” teachers, however, she wished to know why they were leaving after a year. Tina wanted the school to do more to encourage teachers to stay and even suggested that the Mayor of Banbury could read her thoughts and do something to help St Luke’s in its final year.

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

Reflecting on her personal decision to remain at St Luke’s, Tina was happy she had stayed. She feared another school would have made her retake the year, since they would be expecting higher grades from her. At this stage she also thought:

It’s a good thing that I’m still in this school because if I go to a different school, it’ll be really different and it will be harder to get used to because I’m almost in Year 11 ... and I feel that if I leave its not gonna be the same, having to meet new people. I might as well finish this year, it’s no different.

The prospect of meeting new people was just too daunting for Tina.

**Member checked** – 3 July 2015 – The story was very good and I liked it but there was one bit where it needs to change. The bit I would like to change is about the replacement teacher for Mrs Kempton saying that I was in that cooking class but I wasn't. I was complaining about the replacement teacher who was being very strict and nasty to her students. (I heard it from her students). (Tina)

## Nima's Story

### “One big school”

Nima did not return to St Luke's after the Easter holidays of 2014. Nima's older brother was tasked with breaking the news to Nima's friends and staff members that Nima was now attending Jesus College, an all-boys school for 11-18 year olds, not far from St Luke's. This came as a shock, as Nima appeared to love St Luke's and made no secret of the fact he wanted to remain at the school until the end.

It took nearly three weeks of telephone calls and letters to Nima, his parents and his new school to arrange an interview.

On the day of the interview, I arrived at reception and was greeted with the warmest hug from Nima. His Head of Year then showed us to the room where our meeting would take place.

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

Nima thought that St Luke's was going to merge with the local primary school and become “one big school”, which would “start from nursery [and go] all the way to Year 13.” He was excited by the prospect of a bigger school and new people.

Nima soon realised that his school was closing down for good and would have nothing to do with the new all-through school, even though they would eventually take over the sites that St Luke's occupied. He was not sure exactly when he had this realisation, but was clear that it had made him quite sad. He began to ponder to himself: “There's gonna be no year 7s and if there's gonna be no year 7s, that's gonna mean more teachers are gonna leave. There's gonna be less people!”



Over time, however, he found himself worrying less. Once he reached Year 9 and realised that not that many people had left and “there was no problem because [his] teachers were still teaching,” Nima became settled again.

#### **Situation/Place (CONTEXT)**

So what made this happy boy leave his school?

Basic'ly my little brother, I have a little brother and when we realised that St Luke's was shutting down and there's no Year 7s, my dad wanted me to go to the same school as my little brother just in case something happens, like so I could guide him to the right path.

“But”, he said, turning as if to make a special point to me, “I think if someone new comes to the country they will learn better at St Luke's. The school is small and everyone is like a family.”

#### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

Rain clouds outside darkened the tiny room where Nima and I sat talking and it was as if he'd forgotten that he was being recorded. “I like St Luke's better”, he exclaimed in a livened voice. “Why?” I interrupted. To which he responded:

Because, like I went there for three years yeah and I know everyone there, I'm comfortable there, I know the school off by heart, I know all the teachers, I know everyone in the school, a lot of people know me and that's why.

Nima was, at times, speaking to me as if he was still a student at St Luke's.

He missed being in a co-educational school, especially form time in the mornings, as the girls always had stories to tell. Everyone spoke to each other and it was relaxed with a good atmosphere.

He recalled his first month in his new school:

At first I didn't feel that welcomed like but it was like you can't ... like if it was at St Luke's, I could have a laugh with every single person in the class but in this school I could only have a laugh with a couple of people that I know ... and Mrs Singh teaches me Maths.

Mrs Singh was a highly regarded Maths teacher who left St Luke's in the staff exodus of summer 2013.

Nima feels that all the young people at St Luke's will continue to get a good education until the school closes in 2016. Though he does believe that "It will all depend on what teachers are left behind."

After looking up to the ceiling and back down again he said:

Maybe one or two teachers may not care but for the majority of the teachers that they have left, they will be putting their backs into it so the children can learn.

When asked what he thought the final year should be like for St Luke's students, he replied:

I think the final year they should, like, make the final year very happy like, not too much parties and games but happy because they're gonna be leaving and they'll be the last people at St Luke's they should have a good, goodbye.

**Member checked** – No (unable to locate participant)

## Bob's Story

### **"I just wanted to leave"**

Bob was involved in group and individual interviews, one of which was a telephone interview, he was observed in lessons, completed surveys and created a feelings card.

Bob only returned for two weeks after the October half-term break in 2014, then, like Nima, he left St Luke's to take up a place at Jesus College.

Bob's departure, unlike Nima's, came as no surprise. He had told everyone he was leaving and in his lessons he was disengaged, as indicated by his gaze, and was evidently no longer committed to St Luke's.

#### **Situation/Place (CONTEXT)**

Bob was unequivocal about his departure from St Luke's. He said there was nothing that the teachers or the head teachers could do to make him stay. His logic was also clear: "There must have been a reason why the school was closing and so I just wanted to leave." When asked if he knew why his school was closing, he answered boldly, "Yeah, I do. They, like mark schools from 4 to 1 and 1 is like the best and our school got 4." He was less clear about who 'they' were, but that did not matter to Bob. He stopped caring about anything because he was going to be leaving the school soon.

#### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

Bob experienced highs and lows before leaving St Luke's. One high he experienced was Sports Day 2014 as all his friends were there and he took part in shot putt and javelin. He was still keen to leave, but said if he had to stay at St Luke's he would try some other sports that he had not been able to try at Sports Day 2014.

Each time the head teacher met with students about their subject choices and what the school was offering or wasn't offering, Bob was left feeling exasperated. In our meetings he would shake his head, he would sigh and sometimes he would just hang his head down. At one group interview meeting he complained that he was not happy due to the fact that he could only choose a couple of possible options for September 2014 (the start of year 10). His friends had more choices, even though he "got higher grades than all ... [his] friends".

At the end of the summer term 2014, Bob was still doubtful about returning to St Luke's, but, looking to the future, he said:

I feel like my true full potential will not have an opportunity to be shown next year, and that is why I want to move schools. There aren't that many teachers which are staying, so the school isn't handling the closure very good [sic], by compromising on the students' education.

When I spoke to Bob in February 2015 he had been at Jesus College for four months. This had given him time to reflect on his decision to leave St Luke's:

I think it was a good decision. I'm learning loads more stuff. I don't know how to say this but I've got a clear mind-set for GCSE and I can prepare in a better way.

Bob was excited about his new subject options. He is studying Maths, English Language, English Literature, Chemistry, Physics, Additional Science, Computing, GCSE PE and Psychology. He was especially enthusiastic about Psychology: "It's new to the syllabus and it's being offered at my school."

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

Bob still keeps in touch with his friends at St Luke's. They tell him that new students continue to come to St Luke's and the school is now "live" (a slang word for fun). He

misses form time and the girls who were always “alive and awake” in the mornings since the boys in his school are like zombies in the mornings, who don’t interact with other people.

Bob never felt included in the decisions that were being made around him at St Luke’s. He believes young people should be involved in decision making in their schools and that they should be given:

.... a voice as to whether or not to close down the school. The students have a bond with the teachers and for this reason I think young people should be part of the process.

**Member checked** – 16 July 2015 – Yeah miss this is well written and very accurate.

Thank you for using me for your experiment. (Bob)

## Fatima's Story

**“I think they just wanna close the school and get it over and done with ....”**

### **Continuity – Past, Present and Future**

Fatima was not originally part of the research sample, but sought me out over many weeks, if not months, in an effort to be included in the study. She demanded to know: “Why am I not in your project? ... I want to be in your project ... I’ve got things I want to say.” I responded by saying I would interview her “at the earliest possible time.” She was very clear on her pseudonym: “Fatima, call me Fatima! ...Yes I want my name to be Fatima in your project.”

With a sense of resignation to her fate, Fatima told me that she felt upset and saddened by the closure of her school. She said she didn’t feel that she was getting the “highest standard of education possible” promised to all students in 2012. In this era of declining subject options, she remembered a time when Further Maths was offered on the curriculum at St Luke’s but that it was now a thing of the past.

In June 2015 Fatima did not know the school’s subject options for 2015-16, but was already worried that the subject she would like to study, Drama, would not be offered to her in any case. She felt that the limited subject options may have already blighted her chances of future success.

With head held low, she spelt out how next year she would only be able to choose one option subject alongside her core subjects, English, Maths, Science and RE. She wanted more options, like other schools provided, but St Luke’s is not like other schools. One thing she felt sure of was that: “I will have like ... less GCSEs than everybody else.”

Fatima’s sadness was palpable, though at times tinged with an uncomfortable smile. Reflectively she told me “I could have succeeded more in my GCSEs but the school limits my options.”

With an ever decreasing curriculum, Fatima lamented how she should have left St Luke's "ages ago". She said that "with the overcrowding in London schools, it might have been too late to go on to another school's waiting list." She blamed St Luke's and felt that they should have told her they were considering closure *along with* a reduction in subject options before it was made official. She felt that the school should have at least helped those students who wanted to leave to get into another school before it was too late.

When I asked Fatima how she felt about sitting two GCSE option subjects after a year instead of two years, she said she had mixed feelings. Whilst she felt that things were still fresh in her memory and that this could help her attain a good grade, she worried that there would be no possibility of resitting the exam next year, should she fail. She felt the year was crammed, but admitted that the one year GCSE would take the stress off her studies in the final year.

#### **Interaction - Personal and Social**

Fatima was not happy that St Luke's was taking in new students at this point:

They bring over students but them students are not fully English students so they don't really understand what's going on. They're thinking like OK, more students ...They're not thinking about us and what we want ....

She accepted that there were not enough students and not enough teachers, but thought that by having three teachings groups and no top set was "just gonna hold people back ....!" She continued:

They are putting our education first to an extent but they're not fully thinking like how we are taking it in. They're not being straightforward about what's going on.

### Situation/Place (CONTEXT)

Fatima's request to be in the project resulted from her desire to have a voice and her frustration at not feeling listened to:

We have students' council and year council and we're trying to get our voices heard but it's not ... they're saying 'it not our decision and what goes on with the school is the governors' decision'. So even though we try to say our perspective, it doesn't get forward to the school governors. It probably goes no further than the head teacher. There's nothing that the school can do.

**Member checked** – 3 July 2015 – This is an accurate article on how I feel about the current situation that I am in. It has all the correct quotes and explanations that I stated. (Fatima)



## Answers to the research questions

In this section, the main research questions are addressed, capturing the *voice* of each of the participants and offering a “collection of themes” (Suter, 2012, p.369) that go some way in understanding the thoughts and feelings of the young people about the closure of their school. This is followed by a discussion of the findings.

### Do you know why your school is closing? Do you know the reasons leading to its closure?

Only one of the participants, Lenaè, did not know why St Luke’s was closing. All the other young people clearly expressed their understanding of the reasoning behind their school closure and were adamant that their personal interpretation of the situation was the real reason for its closure. Jade heard that the school was undersubscribed, that it did not have enough students and therefore had to close. Tina remembered being told that the population in the local area was low and so there was no longer a need for the school. She wondered for many months, however, why her school, and not another school, was being closed. Bob said he understood that schools were graded with a mark from 4 to 1. Grade 1 being the best. He believed that St Luke’s had achieved a grade 4 and that was the reason for the decision to close his school. Marcel heard that the government wanted to turn St Luke’s into an academy but the head teacher did not want the school to become an academy therefore the government decided to shut the school.

Michelleh, new to St Luke’s, claimed that she only discovered about the closure after she had settled into her new school life. She was led to believe that St Luke’s was going to be joined up with another school. Nima also thought that St Luke’s was going to merge with another school, and believed the other school was St James’

(the local sister primary school). This would have resulted in one big school with education from nursery level all the way up to year 13. Evelyn was convinced that St Luke's was going to be made into a "one way school, from age 5 to age 18". Marie's understanding was that St Luke's was going to become a new school.

Shaniah said that St Luke's had been described by people as a "bad school" and that was the reason why the school was shutting down. She felt that people had come to this conclusion because many teachers were coming and going and the school was not doing very well academically.

#### **How do you feel about the school closing?**

At the beginning of the research in April 2014, eight of the ten participants responded favourably when asked, 'How do you feel about the school closing?' Jade, Lenaè and Marie felt that St Luke's was still providing them with an education which enabled and encouraged learning and, therefore, the closure was not a concern to them.

Bob did not care to elaborate on his view, simply saying "It won't really affect me much, like there'll be students and there'll be teachers, so I don't mind."

Nima and Marcel were optimistic about the closure of St Luke's but for very different reasons. Nima, thinking that his school was going to be joined up with the local primary school, was excited because "the school is gonna be much bigger and there'll be new people". Marcel believed that as the school became smaller, with his year group being the final one before closure, all students would get more attention from their teachers.

Shaniah and Tina were less optimistic; Shaniah thought that once she got to Year 10 and started her GCSEs, her teachers wouldn't care as much. She reckoned that teachers would begin to 'relax' on students' learning time and would cease to pay attention to students' work. Tina was concerned about the effect the closure would have on her further education: "it kinda bothers me because when we're in year 11, other schools have a sixth form and it's gonna be hard to find a school and then go there for sixth form and be a 'newbie.'"

Although their feelings towards the closure were favourable, Michelleh and Evelyn expressed a desire to leave St Luke's.

Michelleh: "I feel good, I don't mind ... If it wasn't closing I would still be leaving anyway."

Evelyn: "I don't really mind it. But I just wanna move ...."

As time went on, the young people began to see, and experience, change in their school. I, therefore, altered my thinking and began to include the following questions in open-ended interview sessions with the young people, without always being explicit in my questioning.

- What change(s) were they experiencing?
- Were these the changes that they were expecting?
- What changes were they expecting?
- How did they feel about these changes?
- And would their opinions change when asked again how do they feel about the school closing?

## What do you think will be the main changes that will affect your education as the school nears closure?

In June 2015, I asked the young people to try to think ahead as to the changes that might affect their education as closure loomed.

The main change that all the young people felt would affect the quality of their education leading up to the closure of St Luke's was teachers leaving the school. The young people worried that their established teachers would be replaced by temporary or supply teachers. Bob worried that there would not be that many teachers teaching him and that he would be left to be taught by "cover teachers" (supply teachers) all the time. He felt that his true potential would "not have an opportunity to be shown". Rumours began to surface and Michelle informed that:

Apparently there will be new teachers every week and we're not gonna really learn anything. The new teachers who come in won't know what year we're at and stuff and it's gonna get complicated and I won't get the education that I could get ....

To Lenaè, established teachers leaving and new temporary teachers being brought in, was "[s]ad for us children because with the teachers you get a bond and when a new teacher comes you have to show them your talent all over again."

Whilst Shaniah could see nothing but complacency on the part of her teachers leading up to the closure, Marcel saw the closure as an opportunity for students to get more attention from their teachers, even though he was looking forward to some of them leaving the school for good.

There were other changes that the participants worried about, but these changes would not necessarily affect their education leading up to the closure. Four of the

young people could see that Sports Day 2015 would be very different from Sports Day 2014. They worried that it would be boring with just one year group and hardly anyone would be there, forcing it to finish quickly. Marie worried about the playground being empty, whilst Jade was more concerned about her friends moving to other schools to start Year 10.

### **How do you feel about any changes that might affect your education as the school nears closure?**

There were changes that the young people anticipated and changes that they did not anticipate. What were these changes and how did they feel about them? Eight of the participants, including Fatima, responded to this question. A decrease in curriculum options, changes to set groupings, larger classes and the arrival of large numbers of new non-English speaking students brought out emotions of bemusement, nonchalance, frustration, anger and disappointment amongst most of the participants.

**Decrease in curriculum options:** Since the decision was made to close the school, option subjects continue to be removed from the curriculum. By 2014-2015, Travel and Tourism, Health and Social Care, Resistant Materials, Graphics, ICT and Clothing and Textiles had all been removed. For 2015-2016 the following subjects will no longer be offered: Food Technology, Music, Spanish, PE, Art and Drama. Shaniah felt upset that, “other schools have a wide variety of courses you can do and St Luke’s keep closing each one down every year.”

Evelyn made it clear in April 2014, whilst she was still in Year 9, that the limited options in the school made her anxious and that the possibility of another school offering more options and opportunities made her want to leave.

By June 2014, an exasperated Bob told me how he got higher grades than some of his friends but he was given the colour 'brown' as his pathway and his friends got 'turquoise'. I asked Bob to explain this system to me as I had never heard of it. He told me that although you were not guaranteed the option subjects you chose, turquoise gave you four option choices and brown allowed for three. He shook his head in despair and held down his head for the duration of the interview.

In our December 2014 group meeting, there was more bewilderment, worry and fear amongst the participants. This was the consequence of an assembly where the head teacher declared a further reduction in curriculum provision for the academic year 2015-16 but stopped short of telling the young people what subjects would be offered. Michelle was annoyed as all she wanted was to know which option subjects were going to be offered in her final year at St Luke's. Jade was visibly upset and questioned, there and then, whether she could leave St Luke's to go off to college. Lenaè reminded the group that if, for example, she chose Business Studies and the numbers were low, it would not be offered. The group looked even more distressed. Jade believed that although the school was closing, the young people should still be given the range of subject options.

Marcel approached his choice of subject options with nonchalance and derision. He said he just went ahead with his subject choices because there was nothing else to pick anyway.

**Changes to set groupings and a steady increase in class sizes:** The participants had grown used to being in small, clearly defined classes - top set, middle set and bottom set - throughout Key Stage 3 and in Year 10. A new change that some of

them have noticed is that in Year 10, “top set is not very high ability ... it feels mixed” (Jade).

In June 2015 Lenaè was disappointed as she remembered the Associate Head Teacher’s promise of smaller classes and individualised attention for all students leading up to 2016, but there has been yet another change. Back in June 2014 when he made the announcement, Lenaè in particular felt reassured by the promise of smaller classes, as she felt “the teacher would be able to teach and it will be easier to get stuff across reassuring students that they have the attention they need”. Once again, the school took the decision to start the Year 11 timetable in late June 2015, whilst the young people were still in Year 10. The Associate Head Teacher announced three teaching groups for the 2015 to 2016 school year. This meant that all students would be taught their core subjects, English, Maths, Science and RE, in either group X – 28 students, Y– 26 students or Z – 22 students. Lenaè felt betrayed. “Well Miss”, she began with a sigh:

I think that the school has defeated its purpose because this year (Year 10) we have had smaller classes but next year they’re gonna join like Maths, there’s gonna be 3 sets. So then, we’re not gonna have that individual time with the teachers. So we’re going back to square one. So it’s gonna be the same thing and I don’t know if teachers will be able to handle such big classes cos they’re gonna be bigger than ever.

Fatima felt the same:

By having three groups and not top set its just gonna hold people back because some people work faster than some people already and by putting some bottom students in a top set class it’s gonna slow down the whole learning process. And the amount of time teachers get to teach the subject, some people will understand the topic and then then the bottom set students won’t and then she will have to go over it [the topic], over and over again with the subject and even if she does after school classes, some of these students won’t attend.

She took a long deep breath before shaking her head in bewilderment.

**The arrival of new students most of whom spoke very little English:** Some of the participants questioned why St Luke's was still taking in new students.

According to Fatima:

That is not a good thing because they bring over students but them students are not fully English students so they don't really understand what's going on. And, I think the school is trying to sugar coat what they're doing. They're not being straightforward about what's going on. They are putting our education first to an extent but they're not fully thinking like how we are taking it in. They're thinking like OK, more students here what not, what not ....

Shaniah's concern was on behalf of the non-English speaking students themselves:

Some children complain that the English as an Additional Language support is not really helping them. It's like with people that are getting language support, they can't do language support and do all these other lessons at the same time. They have more language support than they do academic lessons. And they're finding it hard to rise to the levels of the rest of us.

### **Do you think the teachers care less as the school nears closure?**

Over the 15 months I spent in the field collecting and analysing data sets, opinions varied as to whether teachers' attitudes towards their students were changing or not. Seven of the young people were asked this question.

From the beginning of the research in April 2014, Shaniah and Tina had been sceptical of their teachers' dedication towards them and their peers. By May 2015, there had been a slight change in Shaniah's opinion. She now claimed to feel encouraged and supported to do well in school by one teacher, Mr Craven, the Associate Deputy Head, but it was only this teacher's dedication she noted. In his



assemblies, she said her GCSEs were presented “like a ticket in life”. At the same time, Tina believed that *some* teachers still cared but not all, “[s]ome teachers don’t care anymore”.

Contrary to these views, Marie has loved all her teachers and she continues to feel supported by all of them but she struggles to understand why the good ones continue to leave. Jade too feels encouraged and supported by many of her teachers. When she tells them she’s going to achieve grade C in her subjects across the board, she says they tell her to aim for As. Marcel does not feel that his teachers care less, instead, Marcel says, “they push me to do my homework and behave in school”. Lenaè, too, feels that all her teachers have been encouraging and supportive, especially her History and Maths teachers. Michelleh feels that her teachers encourage her to revise and concentrate.

### **Are the changes in the school affecting your performance and attainment in English, Maths and RE?**

Seven research participants responded to this question on two occasions, once in November 2014, three months into the start of their 1 year GCSE courses (see Table 2-Charting the participants (p.87) for option choices) and then again in June 2015.

**Shaniah:** I think I’m doing well for myself ... The lessons are OK but I feel like some teachers, well just one teacher, doesn’t make any sense sometimes.

**Marie:** I think it’s OK but sometimes I get unfocused [sic] because of one specific person.

**Interviewer:** Does this have anything to do with the school closing and would you like to say who that person is?

**Marie:** No it doesn't and it's Richard.

**Interviewer:** Do you like him...or...does he like you?

**Marie:** eeeeeeeeeew [with a look of disgust on her face]

**Marcel:** Uuuuum I don't really know. I don't really concentrate on *how* I'm doing ... I just do my work...

**Jade:** My learning is fine there's a few students in the class who disrupt learning like but like every school will have that. I think maybe some of the new teachers don't know what they're doing cos they're just fresh teachers coming at the start of the year.

**Michelleh:** My learning is fine. I just like yaah...like personally I think I could do better.

**Interviewer:** So Michelleh, why aren't you doing better? Does that have something to do with the school closing?

**Michelleh:** No, but because some of the stuff that's being done now some of the other students learnt it in Years 7 and 8 and I didn't do those things.<sup>2</sup>

**Lenaè:** I'm getting along. I don't always understand...it's just there and I just do it...

**Interviewer:** Is that because the school is closing that you have this attitude?

**Lenaè:** No...I dunno, but I'm just scraping along.

**Tina:** Uuum, I think I'm doing well in school but the teachers could try harder to make us understand properly.

**Interviewer:** Do you think this has something to do with the school closing?

**Tina:** No

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<sup>2</sup> Michelleh arrived 06/12/2013.

In June 2015, the young people were asked for their assessment of the GCSE level they thought they were performing at in three core subjects, English, Maths and RE. The table below shows their assessment against their teachers' assessment of their actual performance in their mock exams.

The table shows that the young people are largely underachieving relative to their own perceptions in the three core academic subjects.

Data June 2015	English			Mathematics			Religious Education		
Name	Pupil Assessment of Grade working at	Teacher Assessment of actual performance	Difference	Pupil Assessment of Grade working at	Teacher Assessment of actual performance	Difference	Pupil Assessment of Grade working at	Teacher Assessment of actual performance	Difference
Jade	C	B	+1	B	C	-1	C	C	=0
Marcel	B	D	-2	E	U	-3	C	F	-3
Tina	B	C	-1	C	D	-1	A	E	-4
Shaniah	B	C	-1	D	E	-1	B	C	-1
Lenaè	A	A	=0	B	C	-1	B	A	-1
Michelleh	C	C	=0	D	D	=0	B	C	-1
Marie	E	D	-1	C	U	-5	B	G	-5

*Table 4 Pupils' assessment vs. teachers' assessment in core subjects*

The participants were then asked again if the closure of the school had anything to do with their assessment of the standard of work they were currently achieving. Five participants reported that the closure of the school had nothing to do with the grades they were working at in English, Maths and RE. Whilst Jade conceded that she was not "taking English seriously", she said that the closure had nothing to do with this. Similarly, Shaniah confessed, "I don't really do my homework". Whilst Lenaè explained, "I'm not used to teachers' style and the ones I used to have are leaving

and so many children in the class ... All noisy students even though they're top set, are in *one* class”.

### Do you think these changes will affect your future?

Seven participants were asked this question and all seven responded affirmatively, believing the changes in the school would affect their futures. The one change that they felt would have a direct bearing on their futures was what they saw as the “closing down of subject options” (Shaniah).

Michelleh wants to study architecture and believes she needs GCSE Art, amongst other subjects, to make her dream a reality, but while Art was offered as an option subject in 2014-15, Art will not be offered in the final year 2015-16. She is scared that she will not be able to apply to the best sixth form colleges in the local area.

Shaniah is clear about the devastating effect the changes to options will have on her future:

I think if we wanted to take courses at A Levels you'd have to do something to do with that at GCSE, but if the school don't offer it, that's going to affect our options. This will affect our future. It depends on what you're doing but say for example like Travel and Tourism, they close that down and you want to do that in A Level, it will affect what you can do because of the limited options you did in GCSE.

Despite these setbacks, all the participants expressed a determination to move into higher education and then into careers such as law and architecture. They fear, however, that the closure, and what they see as the constant closing down of options, will adversely affect their futures in the short term. Shaniah and Jade have already devised coping strategies. Shaniah revealed that:

I've had to find that extra push for myself. I've even had to do an extra GCSE outside of school, to push myself to get higher than what St Luke's should be providing me.

Jade said that in the final year, she plans on coping by focusing on her work. Everything else "socially" she said, "could just be done outside of school. The school closing doesn't have to affect my social life."

### **Are you planning to stay and why?**

This question was used as a survey question, hence it was asked at regular intervals to track any differences in the participants' responses and to ascertain whether or not these differences could be attributed to the closure of St Luke's. The young people were first asked this question in June 2014, by which time Nima had left St Luke's, so only the remaining nine participants responded. Six replied that they wanted to complete their education at St Luke's, whilst three were unsure. When asked the same question again at the end of the summer term in July 2014, four of the participants gave their commitment to completing their education at St Luke's while five of the participants said that they were not sure that they would be returning in September 2014.

Something had changed since the beginning of the research in April 2014 and so I asked the young people more specifically, 'How are you feeling about September?' It was at this point that they suggested the use of 'Feelings Cards' to express just how they were feeling about September 2014, the official start of Year 10, and the reasons why. It was clear that the changes that they had anticipated, and those changes that they had not anticipated, had begun to affect the young people in different ways.

### *How are you feeling about September 2014?*

On her 'Feelings Card' Shaniah wrote that she felt nervous about September and disappointed because St Luke's, she claimed, was not providing her with the best education possible. She felt that some of her teachers would not teach her well in the future as they would become relaxed knowing that her year was the last before closure. She was also of the opinion that things would worsen and affect her GCSEs. Finally, her disappointment came from the fact that the school was unable to do anything about it.

Marie's 'Feelings Card' reflected disappointment and worry about the prospect of having new teachers. Lenaè felt uncertain about September because, on the one hand, she felt students would have more individual attention from teachers but, on the other hand, she worried about specialist teachers leaving. By now three teachers had left the school (departing in June 2014) and Lenaè said she knew of at least seven more teachers who would not be returning in September 2014. Like Lenaè, Evelyn also felt uncertain as she did not know what September was going to be like. She was also anxious because she was one of those young people not sure if she wanted to return to St Luke's in September. Evelyn would have to make a decision.

On Tina's 'Feelings Card' she wrote that she was both worried and happy. She felt worried because there would be fewer teachers to teach and help students with their GCSEs, yet she felt happy as the school would now be focusing on her year group only.

Of September, Bob wrote on his 'Feelings Card' "I don't really care because I'm going to be leaving school soon!" Jade claimed that she was not bothered about September but yet she was worried at the same time. She worried that she would

have no friends left at St Luke's if they all went to other schools, however she was "not bothered" because getting her GCSEs was all her doing and she was determined to get them. Marcel said on his card, "I don't care and I am not bothered about September. I feel this way because it doesn't affect me 'cause most subjects are easy."

### *Closure = change!*

I now knew how the young people were feeling about returning to school in September 2014 and why they felt this way. What, though, had led to this seismic shift in feelings and attitudes in a matter of three months? The answer could be found in the number of significant changes that the young people were faced with in the final term of Key Stage 3.

Over the years, there would be a graduation at the end of Key Stage 3. Previously, this graduation had meant to students that they had completed years 7 to 9 and would be starting their GCSEs on the other school site. This year, there would be a graduation but no physical move to the other site.

In this summer term alone, over 10 teachers were leaving, some of whom had taught the young people since Year 7. The participants, for the most part, found this upsetting. As a result, some of the young people were made to choose subjects that they did not want to do because subjects such as Health and Social Care, Travel and Tourism, Design and Technology, Resistant Materials, ICT, and Clothing and Textiles were all made defunct. The range of subjects that existed throughout their time in Key Stage 3 now no longer existed and many of them found themselves rethinking their futures.

Their options now included History, Geography, Music, Spanish, Art and Business Studies. There were two option groups of History, Geography and Business Studies, and one group of Music, Spanish and Art. Shaniah, Bob and others expressed frustration at just being assigned subjects, as they bore no relationship or connection with their future aspirations. The young people felt alienated from the very processes that they felt needed to include them.

By December 2014, the participants were well into their one year GCSE option courses. These one-year GCSE courses were a new practice to which the school was adjusting. Evelyn, Bob and Nima had all left St Luke's by this time. The remaining seven participants were asked again if they would be returning to St Luke's after the Christmas break and they all agreed that it was too late to leave the school so they would be coming back to complete Year 10.

#### **Do you feel like you could get a better education in another school?**

In summer 2015, nearly the end of my time in the field and nearly the end of Year 10 for all the participants there were mixed views from the eight participants (including Fatima) who were asked this question. Nearly all the participants, at one point or another, had given thought to leaving St Luke's. Could they have had a better education in another school though?

**Michelleh:** I could have got on a little better in another school.

**Lenaè:** Me personally, yes, because I'm independent and I learn independently (well sort of) and so my core subjects I'd be able to do it anywhere and my option subjects; I would have got to do one more.

For Tina it was a no, however. She believed that she still made the right the decision to remain at St Luke's. However, going to a different school for her:



...would be harder and maybe some schools would make me retake the GCSEs I've already taken because they expect high grades.

Fatima believed that she could have had a better education in another school and she should have left St Luke's, in her words, "... ages ago!"

[Yet] ... by the time they told us, it was kinda like, late, because you go on a waiting list [for another school] and then London is like overcrowded so it's like by the time you get accepted you'd probably be in Year 10 and we start our GCSEs in Year 10, whereas other schools they do a two year course so it didn't make any sense.

Shaniah took a long pause and sighed:

I think I should have left. I think I could have made an earlier start in Year 9. I don't think I should have stayed.

Jade too believed that she could get a better education in another school, even though she doesn't like change. She was angry about not being told about the changes at St Luke's. She even knows the name of the school that could have offered her a better education.

Marcel and Marie struggled to answer this question directly, but they both said that even though they had thought of leaving St Luke's, they probably wouldn't, because they would struggle with the change as they are uncomfortable meeting new people.

### *Life in a new school...*

Two of the three participants who left St Luke's between Easter and autumn 2014 felt that they *were* receiving a better education in their new schools.

**Evelyn:** Yes I think I am. I have improved a lot in Science and in Business and in Business I've covered a lot more. We've covered more in English too, so I understand a lot more than I did at St Luke's.

My grades have all improved! I'm in higher sets ... we have 5 sets and in this school you feel motivated to get to set 1 or set 2. The school is open 24 hours a day ... it's craaaazy but it's good ... because when you stay behind you can have one to one learning with the teachers.

**Bob:** I think it was a good decision. I'm learning loads more stuff. I don't know how to say this but I've got a clear mind set for GCSE and I can prepare in a better way. I'm studying Maths, English, English Literature, Chemistry, Physics, Additional Science, Computing, [GCSE] PE, Geography and Psychology.

Yes. It's like less distractions ... But there are some lessons like chemistry which has some distraction ... so not always different from St Luke's.

When I say less distraction – students don't distract the teachers when they are speaking and for example in Maths there are 6 sets and in English they have 6 sets. And so you won't have someone who doesn't know English for example, with you in that class. Students who didn't speak English would slow down the lesson ... slow down the flow that others could maintain.

Nima, however, felt that the education he was receiving in his new school and that which he received at St Luke's was the same but that St Luke's had something special about it that his new school did not have.

**Nima:** Naah, naah, naah. I don't think so. It's the same. I think if someone new comes to the country they will learn better at St Luke's. The school is small and everyone is like a family.

### A phased or an immediate closure?

The difficulties encountered during closure, coupled with the happy times that the young people experienced along the way, made me want to know whether or not the students would have preferred a phased closure or an immediate closure of St Luke's. Nine participants responded to this question, including Fatima who was not

originally part of the research. Five of the participants felt that the school should have been closed immediately in 2012, whilst four participants felt that the decision to close the school over four years was the right decision. Below are the reasons they gave.

### **An immediate closure**

Shaniah believed:

They should have closed the school immediately because then the students would have the specialised education that they are entitled to rather than a terrible dragged out situation with less options. That would have seemed a more intelligent and smart reason to close it down, in order to benefit the students.

In a similar vein, Jade thought:

They should have closed it because then children would have went [sic] their separate ways and we would have got a better education in another school than being dragged through this year or the years not knowing what's actually going to happen with their teacher. So I think the school should have closed immediately.

Michelleh agreed:

They should have just closed it in 2012 because it would have given us a better opportunity to apply to other schools that had more options for us. By making us stay, they are forcing us to do subjects that we didn't necessarily want to do, we only found out that subjects were going to be cut half way through year 10 sort of and that was unfair.

Lenaè, too, would have favoured immediate closure:

It would have been better for them to close the school in 2012 because you're gonna get the same in every school so it's like we're moving back and forth. What I mean is that there are certain changes that they made in Year 7 that we're going back to now, like the big classes. If you go to another school you're still gonna have the big classes but it's just that we're not used to it in our school. They should have closed the school immediately.

Fatima concurred:

Close immediately because then they wouldn't have to drag it on and we'd at least have the opportunity to exceed in more GCSEs that would be useful for what we wanna do and like now that they're dragging it on, it's like when we're in Year 10, we don't know what's gonna happen in Year 11 so we're just left on our tip toes. So an immediate closure for me ...

### A phased closure

Marie, on the other hand, prefers the fact that St Luke's is:

Closing slowly because it would be weird going to another school in Year 8 and I know all the teachers since Year 7 so going to another school would not be the same.

Marcel believed:

A phased closure is better because we already know the layout of the school and we already know each other so if we went to different schools we would probably miss people from this school and lose contact with them.

Evelyn and Tina reflected upon the fact that in 2012 they were only very young.

Evelyn remarked:

I think the slow closure is better because we were still babies and sending us to different schools would have been hard for people to adapt quickly. Especially the older years, they were close to completion therefore closing in 2012 would have had a huge impact on them.

Tina agreed with Evelyn that:

It was a good idea for a slow closure because we had just started this school and had got used to it. So it would have been hard and long to find another school and also have to get used to it. It was good to close it slowly too so the older years could focus on their GCSEs more instead of focusing on finding new schools.

Only time, and exam results, will tell if the young people were disadvantaged by remaining at St Luke's until 2016.

### **Summary of Chapter 4**

In this chapter the young people's individual thoughts, feelings and lived experiences, garnered over the 15 month research period, were told as stories using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000), 'Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure framework'. The stories gave a holistic account of the lived experiences of the 10 participants and Fatima about life in their closing school.

The research questions were also responded to and these showed the convergence and divergence in the experiences of the participants as individuals and as a group. Based on the young people's responses to the main research questions, other questions emerged which I sought to find answers to. These new lines of enquiry included questions such as: a) Are you planning to stay and why? b) Do you feel like you could get a better education in another school? c) Would you have favoured an immediate or a phased closure?

The stories and responses to the research questions revealed that the young people were all affected in some way by the 2012 decision to close their school. The decision to close the school over a four-year period brought about changes that the participants were not expecting, such as the departure of staff and the reduction in curriculum provision.

## Chapter 5 Discussion of findings, analysis and links to literature

### Introduction

Student voice work...

*...acknowledges and argues for students' rights as active participants – as citizens – in school and beyond it (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.366).*

This section details my findings, over 15 months through the eyes of the young people. It details what elements were positive and what, for them, would have been more helpful. Their feelings, thoughts and lived experiences form part of a wider academic discussion linking back to Chapter 2, the literature review. As I made the point in Chapter 2 (p.36-37), “education does not exist in isolation from the larger society” and as a result, “its means and ends and the daily events of curriculum, teaching, and evaluation [and the closure process] in schools are all connected to patterns of differential economic, political, and cultural power” (Apple, 2002, p.85).

The discussions in this chapter therefore challenge assumptions about students' voices, school closures and managing change on the one hand, with issues of voicelessness and disempowerment on the other hand. The discussions highlight differential power relationships and how these disenfranchised the young people. The discussion of my findings will take on the main heading 'Information', because this is what the young people felt that they lacked over time and will be discussed under three subheadings: (i) Frequency of information; (ii) Type of information; and, (iii) How information was shared with the young people. These highlight what the young people felt happened and what they would have found most helpful during this period of change. The young people repeatedly expressed that there was a dearth of information given to them and whenever information was shared, it sometimes left

them confused, let-down, worried, upset and angry. The research showed that hard and soft skills of managing a closure were also needed, which might have been approached in a threefold manner to address the concerns and questions of the young people.

### **Operating within limits**

From the outset, there have been differentiated power relationships impacting on, and within, St Luke's, operating in ways that have not been visible to the young people but, nevertheless, affecting them in tangible ways. The local authority imposed financial restrictions on St Luke's. The governors, who had in the prior inspection been judged to be inadequate by Ofsted, were still in post and responsible for the oversight of the school closure. They agreed to a four year phased closure process with the local authority and were required to take key decisions with regard to staffing, provision and budget. The head teacher, who had seen the decline in the school roll, had delegated responsibility for leading and planning the closure process. Throughout, she showed a primary commitment to ensuring the school did not close with a deficit outturn in August 2016.

Due to the budgetary limitations placed on St Luke's by the Borough of Banbury and the diocese, the school's governance and leadership had to operate within a tight financial window. It was inevitable that as the school roll dropped year-on-year staffing would also have to be reduced to remain within budget. As mentioned in Chapter 2 (p.46) schools are dependent on pupil rolls for funding and therefore poor levels of enrolment had an immediate fiscal impact on the school (Coffey, 2001, p.24). It was inevitable that this would have knock-on curriculum implications. An overview of the situation was never shared with the young people, or their parents,

so this resulted in many questions being asked during the closure period about curriculum changes and why teachers were leaving the school. Unaware of the financial picture, most simply took at face value the information they received and concluded that all the staff would remain, thereby facilitating the creation of smaller classes, and a wide range of curriculum subjects so they would be looked after in a smaller school setting. Subsequently, the whole-school assemblies called very sporadically to provide information to pupils delivered news that the young people were not expecting. Most significant were the reductions in staffing and curriculum provision. There was a “multiplicity of power relations” (Apple, Au and Gandin, 2009, p.13) in operation at St Luke’s and they conspired to limit the curriculum provision for the young people. It was assessing the policies and practices of St Luke’s through the eyes of the young people, who had the least power (Apple, 2008, p.257) in this multi-layered situation that provided greater understandings of the power-based dynamics that were inherent in the decisions being taken by different stakeholders at St Luke’s.

Many of the young people understandably questioned and criticised the 2012 promise that the school would continue to provide them with the “highest standard of education possible”. In Chapter 2 (p.57), the importance of the move from ‘voice’ to ‘voices’ was stressed as being “devoid of existing hierarchies of status and privilege” and I suggested that in this state of being, the young people would be “enfranchised to suggest their preferences for a level of participation in education that contributes to improving their quality of life” (Corbett and Slee, 2000, p.135). The young people in this research did not feel as though they were being treated as responsible and engaged in the curriculum and provision changes that were affecting them.



Fatima, Jade and Shaniah, in particular, did not believe they were getting the highest standard of education possible.

Fatima summed up her feelings when she stated:

I think they just wanna close the school and get it over and done with. As I said, they're not thinking about *us* and what we want.

Jade agreed that on the “highest standard of education possible”:

I don't think we're getting it. I don't know why. I think that even though the school is closing they should be giving it to us ... the range of options, even if they have to find the teachers because that's what my dad was saying, they should find the teachers even if there are 3 people in the class.

Shaniah further confirmed this view:

No. I don't think I've been given the best education possible. The school promised us the 'best education' seeing as there'd be less students, there'd be more focus on us but that promised hasn't been fulfilled yet.

Fullan and Boyle (2014: 1) remind us that, “.... education policy and practice are influenced to a great extent by broader economic, political, and social forces”. Governors and the head teacher were expected to keep within the budget set externally; but unfortunately the messages given to the young people failed consistently to give them a realistic picture of what this might mean in practice. Working within budget meant that, St Luke's was unable to match the good intentions promised in assemblies and so the expectations of the young people could not be delivered.

## Information

The process of a school closure invariably impacts on a wide range of stakeholders as recorded by Bathgate (2006) and Lenarduzzi (2010) in their studies. In many cases these may be emotionally charged because of their specific involvement and interpretation of the situation that exists. A school may not be fully prepared or equipped for these eventualities and the feelings held by young people in that setting. The common denominator expressed by the young people throughout was the need for 'information'. In the absence of information, individuals speculated and drew their own conclusions.

The information provided in whole school assemblies was sometimes upbeat and occasionally positive, with the key points clearly expressed. The information shared with the young people referred to immediate events or actions, yet failed to consider the bigger picture or give projections of what might happen over the longer-term. I would argue that this was power being exercised, "through the generation of consent rather than through coercion, through ideology rather than through physical force" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 531), as the young people were often told the bare minimum. The young people also interpreted these messages differently, exacerbating their feelings of insecurity.

### Frequency of information

Information provided to the young people about the closure of the school, and the impact of the closure on school life, was given infrequently. When announcements were made, they often necessitated urgent action on the part of the young people for which they had been rarely prepared. For example, by June 2014 the young people had made their option choices for Year 10, yet at this point in time some of them

found out that certain subjects they expected to be available for the 2014-2015 school year would not be offered to them. The range of curriculum option subjects had been reduced. The young people understood that Art, Food Technology, Geography and Music would be axed from the 2014-2015 list of option subjects. After making their feelings clear about the unfairness of the process and the late notice of the pronouncement, the head teacher reconsidered her decision and teachers were sourced to teach these subjects for one further year only. The young people at St Luke's had been able to prove that they were not passive to the changes of the closure. In Chapter 2 (p.58) Prout's view was endorsed, that institutions need to be responsive and that they must "engage in a creative dialogue with their users" (2003, p.18). In the absence of creative dialogue on the part of the leadership team, the young people consistently complained about the changes and had been successful on this one occasion. As highlighted in Chapter 2 (p.33) "schools are likely at various times to be the focus of political struggle" (Harnett and Naish, 1990; cited in Entwistle, p.14) and to a great extent, change.

Tina, who had the understanding that she would be able to do four option subjects, had chosen Drama, Spanish, Business Studies and Geography. Tina did not know, however, that her options were in fact limited to two subjects, which were then further restricted due to timetabling clashes, as subjects were arranged in two blocks against each other. This meant that she would have to choose one from each block. In addition, Tina said she did not know that Travel and Tourism, one of the subjects she really wanted to study, would not be offered in the 2014-2015 school year.

Information was not regularly relayed to the young people resulting in long gaps (typically half a term) during which there was no specific mention of the closure and

the associated changes. During these silent periods the young people said that there were questions they wanted answered. The student participants reported, for example, that there was no mention of the closure, and any subsequent changes, after they made their subject choices in June 2014. Between September 2014 and our meeting date on 17 November 2014, no one from the leadership team had mentioned the closure of the school. When the school convened a meeting on 2 December 2014, the young people said that this was to inform them of further reductions to the curriculum for 2015-16. Our next group meeting was on 16 March 2015 when we discussed timetabling and option changes that the Associate Head Teacher had announced. Lenaè reported:

We're going to have PSHE lesson where we'd normally have our other option and then that is going to accommodate more time for us to do trips without us worrying about missing core lessons and we're only going to be able to do one option next year. And they're gonna have meetings with us over this week to kind of like figure out the option that everyone wants ....

For Lenaè and the others this was a lot of information to take in all at once.

By their final interviews with me, between 22 May and 3 June, the student participants said they were all unsure of which subjects they would be studying for in 2015-16, even though they were expecting to start the Year 11 courses on 22 June 2015 whilst they were still in Year 10. This led to much uncertainty and caused great upset amongst the research participants.

The long gaps between the young people receiving information on the changes in their education resulted in their speculation with one another about the closure process, with no evidence provided to correct them. Lenaè, for example, felt that most specialist teachers were leaving and that this would affect her learning, whilst Jade had heard that, "we're only getting one GCSE option choice for 2015 to 2016".

Shaniah thought her teachers would become relaxed and not care as much when they only had one year group, which, she believed, would result in her learning suffering. Michelleh heard that she would have different teachers every week.

### *What might have helped?*

In Chapter 2 (p.58), I stated that adults sometimes hold expressed views about young people because life experiences in school and the wider society are contrasted and sometimes conflicted. Some, therefore, conclude that young people are not interested in what happens in their school and in their classrooms. In contrast, I found in my research that the young people at St Luke's were indeed interested in what was happening in their school. The young people were not to blame for the failure of the school to regularly update their students on changes. The young people wanted to be participants in the school closure process, but the approach taken by the school significantly restricted the potential for engaging the young people as responsible participants. Instead of being treated as 'partners in change', they were treated as 'targets of change efforts and services'. St Luke's should have ensured that the young people were more involved in their "learning choices, actively consulted about the quality and improvement of teaching and substantially engaged in the overall governance of the school and its development" (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009, In Fullan, p.35), albeit that the school is moving towards closure. That the school failed to engage meaningfully with the young people about their educational provision showed that the education provided by St Luke's was "not even remotely concerned with the development of rational autonomy and intellectual freedom" (Carr,1995, p.58 ), the qualities consistent with education for democracy.

The closure of St Luke's and the impact on school life might have been mentioned more frequently to avert what Holcomb describes as "school stress" (2007, p.57), which for the young people at St Luke's was a genuine concern as expressed in comments and through the habits and body language of the young people. I agree with Bragg (2007) that "[n]egative outcomes are less likely where students are supported ... and enabled to understand the broader context of their activities, and where issues of values and ethics are addressed early on and returned to throughout the process." (p.513). Holcomb styles this as "school connectedness" (2007, p.63), the idea of combatting stress but also opening up spaces for meaningful dialogue to take place about the implications of the changing context of the school.

Key messages could have been regularly reiterated to reinforce understanding. Typically, the young people heard about the changes together but they did not take away the same message(s). An example of this has been the varying interpretations that the young people have of why their school is closing. These varied misunderstandings might be the result of various issues including, a poor grasp of English, concentration issues, absence from school on the day that the announcement was made and/or interpretations picked up from their peers.

Making mention of the closure process more frequently may have facilitated greater consistency and a deeper understanding across the school of the reasons why the school has to close and the change process associated with the closure. The difficulties of managing the change process are highlighted by Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher. They point out that the process of change is "difficult and frustrating to grasp because it requires leaders to take into account factors that they would rather not have to stop and deal with. They would rather lay out the purpose and plan and get on with it. Change doesn't work that way" (2009, p.11). Flutter (2007, p.351) makes

the case that where teachers and pupils and I would like to add school leaders, “have been able to establish a spirit of trust and collaboration through a sustained programme of pupil voice work, this has served to create a more positive learning and culture within the school”.

News which the young people saw as particularly negative, such as ‘the closing down of option subjects’ and teachers having to leave, might have been broached with them early on so that they could be better prepared and have a clearer understanding of the bigger picture. Those in management at St Luke’s could have been more open with the young people about the direct impact of the closure on curriculum provision and staffing levels. This would have gone some way in ensuring that the young people understood why some teachers had to leave. It may also have limited questions such as:

In September 2014 ...will our education be disrupted because they are focusing on like Year 11s more than the younger years? (Shaniah, June 2014)

I’d wanna know if the teachers we now have for our core subjects are gonna be the same teachers ....? (Michelleh, November 2014)

The closure of St Luke’s needed to be managed as an ongoing process and not as a number of key annual events. The long gaps between information sessions allowed false perceptions to fester. Information sharing could have been prioritised by the school and through this, anomalies might have been cleared up by the school and better understanding developed amongst the young people. The research participants’ perceptions were often inaccurate. It was not true, for instance, that most of the specialist teachers were leaving mid-year. Most departments that remained still had a head of department or at least a specialist teacher in the subject. Similarly, teachers could not “relax”, as Shaniah feared, because regular and intense

monitoring was still ongoing for all members of staff. The school did employ agency teachers but most of these teachers were offered year-long contracts, hence Michelle's worry about having different supply teachers every week was misplaced. St Luke's missed the opportunity to reduce student anxiety and stress as they did not share information with the young people frequently enough. The governors and senior leaders ignored the rights, agency and feelings of the young people. The closure of the school may have been to them a technical process, but for the young people, the closure has been a lived experience in which they feel their voices were not asked for, let alone listened to.

### Type of information

The research participants considered the type of information given to them either too vague or too intense. These two extremes resulted in mixed emotions for the young people, with feelings ranging from confusion to anger. The young people did not feel they were active participants in the school closure process. They were not given the responsibility to participate in decisions that ultimately affected them and the decisions that were made did not measure up to what they felt had been promised. In particular, the provision that the young people would receive leading up to the final year of the closure was not extensive enough. An angry Fatima believed:

They should at least tell us when they were considering it before they made it official and if some people wanted to go due to the options or something along them lines they should at least help us to get into another school before it's too late.

In essence, the longer term vision was not shared with the young people. Many were unclear as to why changes were taking place and did not understand the reasons behind the decisions that were being taken. Tina expected her achievement to be



good but for this to happen she felt she needed “good teachers”, but was at a loss as to why her teachers were leaving:

I dunno why they're leaving if they know that they are doing this for us ... so why yuh gonna leave? We're used to you, we're used to how you teach and then you encourage us to work harder, why yuh gonna leave. It's gonna be harder for us (22 May 2015).

The young people also found that, like them, staff members did not always have a full grasp of the reasoning behind the changes, so were not always able to allay their fears or respond to their queries. Michelleh recalls an assembly in which she asked her form tutor for clarification concerning the most recent changes and he told her that he did not know what was happening.

Changes were communicated to the young people as they were about to happen.

This made Shaniah afraid. She said:

I'm just afraid that they're just gonna keep closing the options ... like they're gonna have a variety of options then close the others and shouldn't really depend on what the maximum numbers of students want to do. It should depend on what individual students want to do.

### *What might have helped?*

There were a number of cumulative tensions here for the young people, exacerbated by the lack of full and timely information by the school leaders. I found in my research that these tensions affected their decision-making capabilities. In Chapter 2 (p.57) I declared that “listening to the voices of the young people has the transformational effect of them choosing to remain loyal to their school until closure in 2016”. I was wrong. The young people overwhelmingly disliked change and were afraid to move schools. This was the chief reason why seven of the participants chose to remain at St Luke's even though they all contemplated leaving at one point

or another. They chose to remain at St Luke's despite believing another school would have offered them more options and opportunities. Their decision to stay was not out of loyalty to their school but largely due to an intense fear of change, of being 'newbies' in another school, of repeating a year and/or having to do too much to meet the levels of more established students in a new school. They also felt unable to move at what they call a 'late stage' in their education – just before proceeding to Year 11.

Factual information could have been shared in more detail, and at increased regular intervals, with the young people, however difficult this may have proved. St Luke's could have expanded further on why the school was being forced to close, which may have prevented the young people from developing different understandings of the closure. These varying understandings then fed into their interpretations of the changes the school was making over a period of several years. In Chapter 2 (p.29) I highlighted the need for schools to reflect the democratic processes of society and adopted, as one of my theoretical perspectives, Carr's (1998, p.335) view that:

The primary aim of democratic education is to develop in pupils 'the habit of intelligence' – the habit of confronting and resolving problems through reflective enquiry, collective deliberation and rational debate.

The journey of the young people might have been shared with them giving them a longer term perspective of what the steps would be over their next few years. The research showed that the young people wanted to be a part of the decisions that ultimately affected them. Sometimes adults working with young people construct "professional identities as caregivers and protectors of children, whom they [see] as vulnerable and even passive" (Bragg, 2007, p.516). The research showed that the young people wanted to be kept informed and then they would be able to view the closure of the school as a journey that involved change. They may have been able to

see the decisions made by the school in the context of the closure process, rather than events in themselves.

The leadership team could have empowered staff throughout the closure process. Staff could have played a greater role in mediating students' anxieties in substantive ways, if they knew and understood the context within which change was taking place. As I mentioned in Chapter 2 (p.56), "the shift from 'pupil/student voice' to 'student voices' needs an inclusive environment in order to become effective, long-lasting and meaningful" (Gersch et al, 1996, In Davie, Upton and Varma, p.39). This shift is an adjustment in power dynamics between adults and young people. It has to include all adults in school working towards the same outcome. If staff members had been better informed and had been able to communicate openly, they could have helped, to a much greater extent, to alleviate the confusion and address disappointment and fear felt by the young people.

### How information was given

Information tended to be given to the young people by the Associate Head Teacher in whole school assemblies at critical times when it was deemed that the young people needed to know. Some of the young people claimed that the announcements came *out of the blue* and the change was done *to* them, rather than *with* them.

A positive spin was often put on the information given to the young people. In one of his whole school assemblies, the Associate Head Teacher told the students:

We *know* you ... we know your needs.

The average class size in a similar school that is larger is around 30 students; your class sizes will be a lot smaller. Your teachers will be able to give you more attention in these smaller classes.

More curriculum time will benefit you in the long run.

This is a new phase in the life of the school.

All you need to do is believe and achieve (24 June 2014).

Despite this, the majority of the research participants felt they were only actually given information deemed “good enough for them”. In a meeting between the Associate Head Teacher and Year 10 students, for example, Lenaè reported what the head teacher had told them and her feelings on this:

Most colleges only asked for 5 or 6 GCSEs and so we’re doing enough GCSEs. We wouldn’t like quite get as much time for core [subjects] in any other school than we are this year so they’re still accommodating for all the GCSEs that we need (December 2014).

Lenaè, being one of the more aspirational students, felt that her prospects were being restricted as she knew of friends in other schools that were preparing to sit in excess of ten subjects.

When Tina questioned her limited options she recalled that a member of staff reasoned “it’s for you to get a better grade in Maths and English and to focus more on them” (22 May 2015).

The young people noticed another change, whereby a proportionately larger number of new students were joining St Luke’s than in previous years, and were predominantly non-English speakers. This was not discussed with the young people, as Fatima declared:

They bring over students but them students are not fully English students so they don’t really understand what’s going on. And, I think the school is trying to sugar coat what they’re doing. They’re not being straightforward about what’s going on (1 June 2015).

The young people acknowledged that the management of St Luke's made efforts to address student voice through the student council and a focus group which provided another source of information to them. These groups met periodically throughout the process, but some research participants did not feel that these outlets were meeting their needs. Fatima explained:

Even though we have school council and year council and we're trying to get our voice heard but it's not ... they're saying it's not our decision, and what goes on with the school is down to the governors of the school. So even when we try to say our perspective, it doesn't get forward to the school governors. It probably goes no further than to the head teacher (1 June 2015).

Even though groups were set up to listen to student views, participants reported that these were highly structured and provided limited opportunity to express their feelings and views about the changes taking place. These groups did not satisfy the young people's hunger for information and their myriad of queries and concerns. In meetings with myself, therefore, the participants frequently seized the opportunity to ask a wide range of questions that often had no obvious connection to the specific focus of the research meeting. They also utilised the chance to try to express their feelings of frustration and anxiety in various ways. Some struggled to put these into words, but, as teenagers, they expressed their emotions through body language – sighing, shaking their heads, folding their hands across their chests, knitting their brows and audibly starting to respond then tailing off and hanging their heads. All these actions were carried out whilst they pointed out gaps, misunderstandings and perceived unfairness in the school's handling of the impending closure. This body language was one way in which the young people communicated with myself and other members of the group and I could see through this that their responses affected them more deeply than they were sometimes able to articulate.

This suggests that there may have been inadequate platforms and opportunities set up for the young people to discuss issues and ask questions that were of real concern to them. The emotions displayed, views expressed and questions raised by the research participants were wide-ranging.

Tina, for instance, wanted to know what the school was planning on doing with “all the equipment that we have like books in the library and the equipment in the gym”, yet she did not explain why this, in particular, concerned her (17 November 2014).

Jade, who studied Music as an option in Year 10, wanted clarification on the status of the Music department’s instruments and equipment. Jade believed that St Luke’s was storing all instruments and equipment to pass on to the new school:

.... people wanted to buy stuff from Music now that it’s finishing but it’s going to the new school. I don’t think that’s right. If children want to buy it, they should have priority and then whatever is left can go to the school or whoever they’re gonna give it to (3 June 2015).

Jade also wanted to know if St Luke’s was finding it a struggle to offer the wide range of option subjects that other schools offered. Her queries demonstrated a high level of interest in the changes and a desire to engage in the closure process. In common with the other research participants, though, she was uncertain how she might do this and felt powerless.

Evelyn planned on becoming a lawyer and wanted advice on what subjects to study, but she felt she received little career guidance and was not helped along the pathway to becoming a lawyer by St Luke’s.

### *What might have helped?*

St Luke’s attempted to lift morale and provide information, but these were seen as events/staging posts and were not perceived to be part of an on-going managed

process of change by the participants. The Associate Head Teacher made efforts to communicate curriculum changes with the young people and the leadership team met with them to discuss their options. These might have been better scheduled across the school year, however, with an effort to prepare the young people in advance of these assemblies and meetings. The research showed that the young people felt they were being told what would be “good enough for them”, emphasising the school’s failure to strategically take into account the feelings and opinions of the young people throughout the process. Even after assemblies where information was distributed, further changes in practice were made, which served to confuse and alienate the young people, making them fearful of the future.

In Chapter 2 (p.55) I suggested that “the fear of listening to voices on the outside of normal is what drives many schools and those who lead them to not listen at all or to lump the experiences of young people as a collective set of experiences”. Freire describes this as the “banking concept of education” which regards the young people as “adaptable, manageable beings” (1996, p.54). Through my research I found that the school meetings, although ensuring that some information was given to the young people, did not present any opportunity for asking questions and, consequently, the young people were unable to transform their school. Freire (1996) surmises that “[t]he more students work at storing deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.” (p.54).

These meetings served not only to silence the young people, but also to ensure passivity and, more importantly, acceptance of the changes that were being meted out to them.

In general, the participants resigned themselves to the changes, taking a pragmatic view and accepting what they had to do and what they were being expected to do. Whilst some were at times frustrated and expressed this in different ways, perhaps not always understanding why, they often still resigned themselves to the change, feeling that decisions were out of their hands and things were being done to them rather than with them. For many, it was the change in itself that made them unhappy, specifically change which they did not understand and struggled to attach reason to. Whilst the students were obviously displeased, I found that the research participants who had committed to staying at the school submitted to the changes at each staging post. They reported that they had complained to a wide range of staff, including the dinner lady, support staff and teaching staff, but although they often found responses to be sympathetic they were consistently uninformative and unfruitful. The young people realised that staff at all levels were powerless to effect change in their school.

Although Cook-Sather explored “respectful listening” as two separate constituents of student voice work, I believe this combination would have been beneficial to the young people, instead of the absence of platforms for asking questions. When put together, I believe respectful listening to mean “honouring the dignity and distinctiveness of young people” through the attention given to their voices as part of an ongoing discussion that does not seek to exclude them (Cook-Sather, 2006, pp.376-377).

The young people perceived that the gradual increase in class sizes was due to large numbers of new students joining St Luke’s mid-year. The research participants commonly viewed this as detrimental to the quality of their own education. They explained that they saw the classes growing in number and noted that the young



people joining the school predominately had very low levels of English language acquisition. Participants consistently felt that this was happening because the school was closing and that the consequence for them was reduced attention from teachers as they were diverted to the new students instead. In some ways, St Luke's was operating like a school that was not in transition but as I was keen to stress in Chapter 1 (p.25), "a closing institution must be managed valiantly as a going concern or it will die many times before its death" (Whiting, 1980, pp.2-3). The school's leadership could have clarified this issue by explaining to the young people that whilst St Luke's was still open and was undersubscribed, it was required by the Borough of Banbury to accept new students.

Participants reported that, although operational, the students' council and focus groups could have given more attention to questions and concerns that the young people had with regard to the closure and its impact on school life. Fatima was not convinced that the students' council was the platform it should be. From what she described I understood the meetings to be structured voice-giving, where the young people were allowed to speak but did not have the potential to influence the status quo or provide the opportunity to seek answers to the questions that really mattered to them. Fatima felt that the concerns of the young people only went as far as the head teacher, not reaching the governors who had overarching control of the school. Whitty and Wisby (2007) may be correct in their assessment that "[w]here there is no such potential for challenge there is a real danger that school councils will produce a cohort of young people convinced that democracy is tokenistic and a sham" (p.314).

Whether the young people were part of the students' council or not, a box could have been placed centrally for them to ask questions about the closure of their school or related concerns that they have. The young people then "should be told what

decision was made, how their views were regarded and the reasons why action has proceeded in a certain way” (Lundy, 2009, p.939). Scheduled drop-in times could have been set up with senior leaders and an audience with the Associate Head Teacher could have been arranged. In Chapter 2 (p.55) I mentioned the two prerequisites for meaningful engagement with young people and I suggested that creating opportunities for adults to be listeners meant ensuring a “right of audience” (Lundy, 2007, p.937) for the young people with those in charge. In addition, assembly time might have been given over to answering the young people’s questions. This might have gone some way to clarifying matters and answering their questions and concerns.

“Celebrations”, according to Holcomb (2007, p.17), are “critical in maintaining a culture of hope, energy, and motivation in the midst of a sense of urgency for change.” The young people recalled memories of happy times at St Luke’s such as sports days, talent shows, trips and visits. In the main, the young people were happy with the bonds they had formed with their teachers and peers. St Luke’s could have built on these by fostering a kind of camaraderie between the young people, with a view to facing the journey of closure together. They could have championed the uniqueness of the situation, this being the last year group of St Luke’s with over 300 years of history. Timely uplifting assemblies and social events, therefore, could have been weaved into a closure development plan.

In summation, there is an emotional element to schooling and education and this is further discussed in Chapter 7, however:

Student voice activities, however committed they may be, will not of themselves achieve their aspirations unless a series of conditions are met that

provide the organisational structures and cultures to make their desired intentions a living reality (Fielding and McGregor, 2005, p.7).

## Summary of Chapter 5

There was a clear correlation between the anxiety levels of the young people and those times when information was absent, or perceived to be too vague or, conversely, when they were overloaded with information. The participant responses to the research questions identified that information was lacking in three ways – (i) the frequency of information, (ii) type of information and (iii) how information was given to the young people. The young people also explained that they wanted to be a part of the process of change. There were times when the closure, and the changes associated with it, occurred as events as opposed to stages in the process of change, which resulted in the young people feeling excluded from the decisions that were being made for them.

This chapter also saw me discussing my findings in relation to Chapter 2 and to the rest of the research. St Luke's appears to have missed many opportunities to engage meaningfully with the young people and to listen to their voices. The participants found that staff in general were frequently not equipped to respond satisfactorily to their concerns.

## Chapter 6 My experiences of closure

### Introduction

*...value-neutral research is flawed (Greenbank, 2003, p.792).*

This chapter aims to outline the context, culture and practices of St Luke's during and immediately leading up to the research period thereby explaining the prevailing circumstances in the school. In order to paint the picture it balances some of the best aspects with dysfunctional elements of St Luke's from my vantage point. It looks to outline the conditions experienced during the change process, highlighting factors and key indicators that set the young peoples' views in the context in which they were being expressed.

This chapter also summarises my acute awareness and fear, as teacher/researcher at St Luke's, of inadvertently hijacking the research which was intended to track the lived experiences of 10 young people. From the outset, I wanted to make audible the voices of the young people. I wrestled for some time over my specific input in this research. I felt that to articulate any other voice, be that mine or that of other stakeholders, could have adulterated and marginalised the very voices that I was seeking to make audible. My actions were designed to avoid this.

### A decreasing institution

The announcement to close St Luke's in 2012, was subsequently followed by a prolonged period of noticeable change in staffing, management and use of the premises. By December 2013, overall staff numbers had gradually reduced by over 60%. The end of term saw another 22 staff leave with 40 staff remaining; this was further reduced to just 13 staff by the end of 2015. The site had been compressed

through the closure of all the outer buildings. And, as each year passed the roll had reduced a year group at a time so that only Years 10 to 13 remained. The school had systematically become a much smaller institution.

### **Operational**

Senior staff spoke of a Closure Risk Register that anticipated the risks that the school might encounter during each year. This plan, drawn up annually, listed potential challenges in relation to finance and related factors. Pupil well-being and performance were notably missing from the plan. The strategy adopted by the senior leaders to deal with the motivation and management of students and staff was to preserve St Luke's with a 'carry on as we always have' approach to school life. To this end the operational framework that was present when the school had a full complement of staff and students was maintained, albeit with smaller numbers. The aim was to function as if change was not happening, being reiterated with a strong mandate from the head teacher, "business as usual." So the school remained 'Ofsted ready' with regular reminders of the teaching standards. Lesson observations, subject reviews, learning walks, data review, raising standards meetings, department meetings and line management meetings continued as normal. The schedule of whole school staff meetings and CPD meetings were calendared in the same ways as they were when the school had a full cohort. In these meetings the closure of the school was never mentioned and a forum for airing staff and student concerns were never created. Operationally, the school attempted to proceed as it had in previous years. But in practice things had changed on the ground.

When a major change was about to happen or had happened, this would typically be announced at Staff Briefing before the start of a school day. On other occasions closure changes were announced in assemblies where staff and students were made aware of changes at the same time. Essentially, the management of change was of such that staff and students were made aware of changes at the last minute.

In relation to staff matters, concern for a timely reduction of staff was prominent; London Borough of Banbury HR policy and procedures were complied with. However, it was evident from the meetings that focused on “deleting posts” that planning was short term that dealt with the next step, as opposed to being part of a longer closure plan mapping out the years to the final school closure. Union representatives were present at redundancy meetings but expressed resignation to the practices of the school. They did not challenge decisions on provision but oversaw those involved in the redundancy procedure and openly encouraged other members not affected to leave the school before the final year.

In the absence of a longer term plan teachers decided to leave. By January 2014, the school had lost significantly more teachers than had been needed. Some staff were, in addition, granted voluntary redundancy even though the positions then needed to be filled. Subsequently, experience and subject expertise were lost, requiring those that remained to take on wider non-specialist teaching and management remits. The prevailing climate in the school made it increasingly difficult to recruit teachers. Interest by supply teachers to fill fixed-term roles was thin. Staff appointed would be retained despite significant shortcomings in knowledge or expertise.

### **Staff morale**

Some subjects had long-term supply teachers, many of whom struggled with the challenge they faced, and support for them was severely stretched. During the school year 2014-15, frequent and vehement complaints came from parents and students that some of the supply teachers were incapable of providing the young people with the standard of education they felt they deserved. It was evident that the quality of teaching and learning was inadequate in some lessons. For instance, one teacher taught the wrong examination specification for almost half of the autumn term, another regularly cried in lessons as she was unable to manage poor behaviour, whilst another frequently used her mobile phone during lessons. The inaction or inability of the leadership team to resolve these issues, even after many complaints from core staff, was perceived as an indication that learning had become a peripheral issue. Staff morale declined to a low point. Staff complained to me of feeling bewildered and saddened that the young people's education appeared secondary to those in authority. In general the core staff kept the heart of the school going.

### **Finance**

One factor that was dominant throughout the change process was finance. Budgetary limitations were imposed on the school by the London Borough of Banbury. This seemed to invariably limit actions. The budget delegated to the school, based on pupil numbers, declined with each year. The head teacher managed the finances tightly and her clear overriding objective was to manage the closure of the school using strategies that achieved a positive financial outturn. This meant that decisions were made where financial considerations were primary and,

whilst efforts were made to reduce the adverse impacts on young people, this could not be avoided as the provision for young people was secondary.

### **Provision**

Curriculum provision was reduced but it was planned so as to maintain most of the core EBACC subjects; this also conserved the potential for broadly positive DFE league table and RaiseOnline scores. However, changes to provision always came as a surprise to staff and the young people. Courses therefore unexpectedly stopped, including at the end of Year 10 after one year of study as in GCSE PE, Spanish, Design & Technology, Music, Drama and BTEC Leisure and Tourism. This heightened the uncertainty of the change process.

### **Exam results**

Overall, GCSE examination results had a gradual year-on-year downward trend over a five year period slipping from 53% gaining 5+A\*-C grades including mathematics and English in 2011 to 43% in 2014. Core staff remained highly committed to guiding young people to success. And, whilst disappointed in the overall decline in standards this was generally preserved as a success. Staff took great delight in individual success and in the few subjects, such as RE, that were consistently able to buck the overall trend.

### **Student behaviour**

As the school reduced in size, the head teacher became increasingly reluctant to permanently or temporarily exclude students, being aware that high figures for unacceptable behaviour could reflect badly when monitored by the London Borough of Banbury. However, unacceptable behaviour exhibited by a minority of pupils became increasingly an issue for staff in general. As St Luke's became a small



school, incidents of extremely poor behaviour became well known to everyone and staff felt increasingly angry for themselves and for the young people who were not exhibiting poor behaviour and expressed their views on how these students were to be punished. Some wanted permanent exclusions, others internal exclusion. Some called for a managed move to another school but for the most part, no action was taken by the school. This often led to a standoff between the leadership team and staff who often complained that they had no voice. These anxieties concerning behaviour persisted throughout the data collection period.

### Cohort

During the research period the cohort of students underwent notable change. Overall numbers for each year group remained broadly the same; however, as students transferred away to other schools they were replaced by new arrivals to the UK, mostly from Romania. The influx of new arrivals had been met with a promise made by the Associate Head teacher of smaller groupings, but this was financially unviable. Teaching groups remained large with a wide range of abilities in each of the sets, adding to the difficulties of teaching.

Many of these young people started with no grasp of English and, if St Luke's had been the St Luke's of old, their language needs would have been specially catered for. The school was already accustomed to meeting the needs of significant numbers of students with EAL. However, the impending school closure introduced a turnover that was unprecedented. There was a changeover in each year group ranging between 20% and 26%. With only one part-time member of staff teaching English as an additional language provision for new arrivals could not satisfy the demand. This was compounded by a curriculum offer that relies on competence in literacy and so many of the young people struggled to access these courses.

## **My school is closing**

Although I accepted the decision made in 2012 to close my school over a four year period, I remain saddened that St Luke's, as I know it, will cease to exist after August 2016. That aside, since 2012, many teachers I have come to call friends have left the school. Some of them did not want to leave, but felt that they had no choice; others were made redundant, a few took voluntary redundancy, whilst some positions and subjects were removed, leaving the teachers in question superfluous. Each departure has not only been a personal setback for friendships that I formed with staff over many years, but it has also seen a loss of experienced and much-loved staff for the young people, which continues to be a destabilising influence in their lives. I have found the continued reduction in curriculum provision, as well as the shortcomings in communication with staff about plans for the young people, and their reactions to these changes when they are made public, especially discomforting. I remember being told that the young people would continue to receive the 'highest standard of education possible'. The annual decrease in subjects, leading to what can now only be described as a skeletal curriculum, is not what I anticipated. To some extent the powerlessness of the students was mirrored in the experiences of the staff. The lack of communication and the failure to involve staff consistently in decisions that affected everyone in the school were implicated in this reduction in professional agency, and the ability of staff to protect the students from some of the most negative effects of the closure process.

## **St. Luke's at its best**

At its best, St Luke's retained high expectations and aspirations for its young people. The school remains at the heart of the community, where the young people continue to take part in Jack Petchey events, Duke of Edinburgh expeditions, football and

basketball tournaments and music festivals. Students still visit the local mosque and a local Jewish group visited the school in early July 2015 to facilitate workshops on stereotyping. St Luke's shared in two special assemblies with primary and secondary schools across the UK – Remembrance Assembly (10 November 2014) and Magna Carta: the story of Human Rights assembly (15 June 2015) – which were broadcast live on Discovery Education TV. St Luke's involvement in such activities highlights the school's continued interest in events of the past as well as the present.

St Luke's is proving that the young people within its walls have talents and aspirations that are all being nurtured by the staff who remained in spite of the challenges. In this regard, the closure of our school has not been considered a crisis by all of the young people. Lenaè confirmed this, admitting that, in some ways, the leadership of the school had handled the closure delicately:

.... because they haven't really made it a big scare to us. It's not a 'scare'. It's just something that we know is going to happen and they've tried to like handle it in a way ... even though they don't tell you why the school is closing or what's wrong with the school but you don't feel like you're gonna fail (Interview, 22 May 2015).

On Monday 23 June 2014, the Associate Head Teacher held an assembly in the main hall, in which he outlined why he was starting the Year 10 timetable in the summer term and what the benefits were of being in a small school. He stated:

We are not like other schools in the Borough of Banbury. We are a significantly smaller school. We *know* you ... we know your needs. The average class size in a similar school that is larger is around 30 students; your class sizes will be a lot smaller. Your teachers will be able to give you more attention in these smaller classes.

Following the meeting, I met with six of the young people. Five of them reported that the assembly made them feel “relaxed” and “better” about the changes that were taking place at St Luke’s. Reflecting on the meeting, Lenaè commented:

.... it made me feel better because the smaller the class the more the teacher will be able to teach and it will be easier for the teacher to get stuff across, reassuring students that they have the attention they need.

One participant, Shaniah, who remained critical of the school’s lack of communication with students, said that while she understood what the Associate Head Teacher had said, she questioned how truthful his words were and wondered what the school would be like, especially in September.

Every day I witness staff working zealously to protect, support and safeguard the well-being of the young people in our closing school. When the young people become anxious, a core group of staff always endeavoured to calm their nerves and promise them that all would be well and that they would be remaining to see them through to Year 11. I have repeatedly seen members of staff trying to source answers to queries about the closure, which usually focus on subject options and staffing as these have been of most concern to the young people. When one of the participants was distressed she went to the dinner lady, Elizabeth, and this was what she said Elizabeth told her:

.... even though the school is closing we still do care about you and we’re gonna like pay more attention and anything that happens will be dealt with because it’s just one year group (Final interview with Tina, 22 May 2015).

At its best, St Luke’s operates like a family, with everyone from teachers to support staff ensuring a safe and happy environment for the young people. In these

moments one is made starkly aware that although “pupil voice undoubtedly troubles existing relationships and identities...it also fosters new ones” (Bragg, 2007, p.517).

It has been beguiling, and sometimes sad, to see the staff members whose jobs were under threat promising the young people that everything would be OK. This speaks volumes about the character of the people who worked at, and those who still continue to work at, St Luke’s.

### **St Luke’s - the dysfunctional aspects**

Unfortunately, I witnessed my school’s leadership team missing opportunities to empower staff to go further in equipping students to cope with the changes in the school on many occasions. For many months staff members were told that “it’s business as usual” and it became not the “done thing” to mention the closure of the school to the young people, or to have a conversation about the closure. We often did not know about impending changes and would only find out about these in assemblies alongside the young people. Communication, at these times, fell considerably short of what the young people expressed they wanted. It came as no surprise that in late June 2014, six out of nine research participants said they were being actively encouraged by staff to leave, whilst only three reported that they were being encouraged to remain at St Luke’s.

Due to the approach adopted by the senior leaders, reasons for decisions were not always explained to staff so that “the school culture also fell short of its rhetoric of teamwork and aiming to value all members of staff” (Bragg, 2007, p.508). Opportunities to inform staff about impending changes were often neglected. Such opportunities could have ensured that at times of heightened anxiety and stress for the young people, staff were empowered to address student and parent concerns in

order to relieve anxiety about changes related to the closure of the school. The issues that were reported consistently by the young people, and were therefore of most concern to them, were the continued decrease in curriculum provision and the departure of their teachers.

In an interview meeting on 22 May 2015, an exasperated Shaniah exclaimed: “I don’t get told, we don’t get told. They wait till the end...at the last minute. But I think we should get told as the changes affect us more than they affect teachers.”

At times, aspects of my school culture and organisation appeared simply dysfunctional. Staff understanding was lacking and opportunities were missed in assemblies for the young people to ask questions. Michelleh recalled a special assembly, held on 2 December 2014, where the year group were informed which subjects were being removed, yet were not told which courses would continue. Michelleh asked her form tutor to explain what was happening, but received the response that he did not know and was unaware of decisions made. She went on to explain that Mr Craven (Associate Deputy Head Teacher and lead for Raising Standards), was walking around the hall, so she approached him and said, “Sir, I don’t understand what’s going on”. He was like, “yeah at this point I’m just handing out papers”. She was alarmed that an explanation was not given and no questions were allowed at any point in the assembly. In essence, on occasions such as this, I felt aligned with Michelleh’s interpretation that the closure was being done to the young people and they were not party to the decisions and actions that were being taken.

## **Wrestling with my 'roles' and my 'voice' – researching from within**

My 15 months in the field, which included preparing for data collection, collecting and analysing the data, gave me insights into the lives of the 10 young people. My interactions with them proved the importance of listening to the individual voices of young people during times of change, because, in the end, they all had things that they needed to say. Their stories solidified my belief in the necessity for school facilities and procedures to enable the voices of young people to be heard and their concerns acted upon. Their stories proved my hypothesis in Chapter 1 (p.20) that there were changes leading up to the closure that were not always understood by or beneficial for, the young people.

In the end, they were all affected at some point by the changes in their school; some of the young people were more affected than others. Even those young people who showed much resilience and optimism during the most difficult periods were, at times, bemused and saddened by the changes that were happening as a direct result of the decision to close the school. All of these factors pointed to the need for more questioning and the necessity to seek answers about the social structures and consciousness of those leading St Luke's during this time of change.

My time in the field also gave me an insight into the structures at St Luke's, of which I am part. I looked at the structures from within, as a subject teacher of RE, form tutor and as a school leader, line managing RE, History, Business Studies, Geography (for three months), belatedly Food Technology and, as a researcher. As a teacher at St Luke's and a researcher, it was incumbent upon me to treat the familiar as strange, which was especially challenging as I was always conscious of my insider roles at St Luke's.

These are the roles I held:

**Researcher** – Over 15 months, I met regularly with participants, asking them questions, listening to their individual voices, observing them at play and in lessons. Being very conscious of the power dynamics of being the researcher, I negotiated meeting times with the participants, often letting the participants decide on one-to-one or group interviews. For example when Shaniah said St Luke's was closing because it was described as a 'bad school' I agreed to meet with her on her own to work through her understandings but this was at a time and place of her own choosing.

**RE teacher:** As one of two RE teachers in the school, I taught all the participants. I found being a researcher and a teacher conflicting at times. For instance, during our interviews the young people would sometimes make comments about feeling supported or unsupported in their lessons, occasionally naming specific teachers but at other times speaking more generally. At times I wondered if they felt supported or unsupported in my lessons or, more generally, if they felt personally supported by me in and around the school. Without a clear answer, I accepted that they may have disassociated me and my lessons from the research, since I was never mentioned over the 15-month study.

**Line Manager:** (History, Geography, Business Studies, RE and, latterly, Food Technology). As Line Manager of these departments it was incumbent upon me to peruse and analyse all students' progress and achievement data, hence I knew the levels at which all the participants were working. It was also my responsibility to work closely with staff that I lined managed in order to put strategies in place to support the progress of all the young people. When Marcel told me that he was excelling in



school, therefore, I knew that this was not true as I had seen the data which indicated otherwise. During our interviews, however, this was not a view that I could have countered.

Line managing these departments also meant that I sometimes had to ring parents, or invite them in for meetings, to have difficult conversations about their child's behaviour, effort and commitment, punctuality and lateness to lessons. I had to ring Michelleh's, Marcel's and Shaniah's parents to arrange meetings. All of these contacts were made in my role as line manager of the various departments and not as a researcher, even though we were still meeting for group and individual interview sessions at this time.

**Counsellor:** Over time, the participants became more comfortable with each other and more comfortable with me. Sometimes their responses to questions or comments that they made, some of which were unrelated to the research, necessitated a private conversation. I made myself available to meet with Marcel, Michelleh, Marie, Jade and Fatima to provide counselling on a range of issues, from broken friendships in school, to one participant wanting to drop out of school. I felt that although I had a research study to complete, I also had a responsibility of care towards the young people.

With these roles, none of which I could relinquish, a widening of perspective for self-involvement was needed. The widening of perspective for self-involvement emerged from:

- Observing critical ethnography through fresh lenses because it purports to challenge institutional relations and practices. Critical ethnography also endorses reflexivity as "a dialectical process among a) the researcher's

constructs, b) the informants' common sense constructs, c) the research data, d) the researcher's ideological biases and e) the structural and historical forces that that informed the social construction under study" (Anderson, 1989, pp.254-255), all of which needed to be present throughout the research. This also meant listening to the voices of the young people whilst interrogating and problematizing the social structures at St Luke's that gave rise their thoughts, feelings and experiences over time in their closing school. This made me realise that as an insider researcher, I had an existential role in the research and to reject that role would render the research invalid.

- The application of the Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Framework as the means of analysing and presenting the experiences of the young people as stories. The framework made it clear that I also had a story to tell, since I was experiencing change at St Luke's.

It was embracing these two perspectives that gave me confidence to write the young people's stories and my own.

There were benefits to being an insider teacher researcher at Luke's. I was given unrestricted access to the young people's baseline data. I was easily accessible to all the young people, I taught them and saw them daily. I knew the culture of the school and was also experiencing change and so I shared some of the emotions and some of the concerns that the young people had. "Insider researchers" according to Mercer (2007, p.7) "usually have considerable credibility and rapport with the subjects of their studies, a fact that may engender a greater level of candour than would otherwise be the case". Based on my own experiences, I concur with this perspective. I also enjoyed a very open relationship with the young people whereby

they were able to speak freely to me. I made myself available to listen at ad-hoc times, during break and lunch times, after school, whilst walking through the corridor and whilst talking to other members of staff. At any given moment in time, whilst occupying the space as teacher, I could become, and did have to become a researcher if one of the participants made their way to me and initiated a conversation about the research and/or spoke generally to me about the closure of our school.

It is true that “discussions of insider/outsider status have unveiled the complexity inherent in either status and have acknowledged that the boundaries between the two positions are not all that clearly delineated” (Merriam et al, 2010, p.405). Another criticism is that research of this kind are “inherently biased, and [as an insider I am] too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions” (Merriam et al., 2001, p.411). What is clear is that researching in one’s own setting raises issues of power and positionality. I acknowledged these criticisms and I avoided these pitfalls by accepting what Greenbank (2003, p.793) says is “the influence of my own values upon the research, rather than falsely assuming that I may be able to depersonalise the research”. I also ensured that I was not exerting my status as teacher over the participants by approaching my questioning and observations of the young people through different lenses, like an “auto-critique” (Wellington, 2000, p. 43, 200), to ensure that I did not perpetuate their lack of voice.

I created different platforms for listening over the time period of the study, whilst also utilising suggestions from the young people about how to go about the research, returning to their responses all the time to problematize throwaway, muted or seemingly mundane responses. The process of triangulation and probing further into their responses and body language proved that their feelings and beliefs about the

impact of the closure were more nuanced than first thought. Finally, the creation of different platforms for listening also made it possible to read and understand the facial expressions of the young people, the tightening of hands, the sighs, and the lowering of their gaze (see Appendix 9 for a transcript of gestures and their meanings according to the young people). These concretised my understanding of their voices on a more personal level. Indeed what I saw and understood may well be different from what an outsider would see but the understandings are just as valid (Merriam et al, 2010, p.415).

## **Summary of Chapter 6**

This chapter has placed me firmly in the research as someone with a voice and, like the young people, someone also experiencing change. I described the context, culture and practices of St Luke's during the data collection period of 15 months. I recall St Luke's at its best and some of the more dysfunctional aspects. These dysfunctional aspects resulted in me viewing the school's approach towards the young people, their voices and their schooling during this time of change, less favourably than I had done previously. I believe that the failure of the school leaders to meaningfully guide the young people through change is a basic injustice as the school moves towards closure in 2016. It is impossible to predict what may be the longer-term effects on the young people's life chances and future achievements.

## Chapter 7 Conclusions

### Introduction

In the end...

*What is important is that they [research /teacher practitioners] adopt a reflexive approach that is clearly articulated in their writing (Greenbank, 2003, p.798).*

This chapter concludes this 15-month research study which sought young people's perspectives on the effects of the impending closure of St Luke's school on their education. The young people were initially asked nine questions (see Table 1, p.86), but as others emerged during the process of the research they also answered them.

It has been important to me, throughout this process, to ensure that the voices of all the participants are heard, not in tokenistic ways but as true representations, during every aspect of the research. Like Mansfield, I believe "student voice is a type of conversation that must take place between adult and student stakeholders and this can only be done if students are included in school reform efforts" (2013, p.425). Consistent with my belief that schools and, by extension, research processes must reflect the democratic structures in our society, I include, in this chapter, the young people's thoughts about what makes a research study of this kind unique. They also make recommendations which could assist St Luke's, and other schools going through a phased or immediate closure, in understanding their lived experiences over time. I also make contributions to these arguments.

In retrospect, there are parts of my study I would now approach differently. This chapter presents my consideration of new approaches, particularly in the areas I am most passionate about, which are 'students' voices' and 'school closures'.

## Claims to knowledge – What makes this research unique?

### The voices of the young people

The participants were all in agreement that a research study of this kind is important. Lenaè felt that the research was important because the school leadership “would know how to fix the school.” She claimed that there were things that the school had not done and, by conducting research of this kind, “another school could use it to prevent such uncertainty and feelings of insecurity” amongst the young people. Marcel felt the same. He believed that with the research, the school could “learn how the students feel and they can make improvements for the students at the school as well.”

Marie felt that the research was imperative because she believes it is important to “talk to children more and let them know what’s happening.” She thinks the research acted as a means of finding out “how children feel”. This, she said, would “make them feel less worried and more positive [as] they know what’s going on”.

Shaniah, who remained critical of the school and its handling of the closure, endorsed the uniqueness of the research:

.... by you finding out how we feel, you’ll know what to improve; you’ll know what aspects need to be changed. You know what not to do and how to make it a ‘more better’ educational system. The research will be benefitting the welfare of children here so they can go on and exceed rather than y’know failing here and not being able to make it in the world.

Shaniah is still hopeful that there will be improvements in the final year.

Jade thought the research was unique as it allowed me, the researcher, to hear what the children were saying. According to Jade:

A lot of children would not have been able to speak up if it wasn't for things like this. The school would just close and the children would have no say apart from if they left the school.

Michelleh spoke directly about the voice that the research gave to young people.

She said:

It sorta gives a voice to the students that aren't really listened to and heard all the time. Cos sometimes we uuum, us students like we talk to teachers but it's not always heard or responded to so I feel like it gives us a little bit of a boost to be able to say how we're feeling while the school is closing.

Finally, Tina believed the research was important "because it spreads the word on what the children think and how they feel so that if this gets passed on to the Mayor of Banbury, he would probably do something." When asked what the Mayor could do, she said, "just help us more ... do something that will help in the final year."

These are interesting perspectives that the young people share. They acknowledge that I have listened to their voices, but ultimately they know that it is the adult leaders who hold power in determining the processes of change that they would like to see. It is possible that the young people see the adults in their school and those closely affiliated with the school, like the Mayor, as gatekeepers to their rights. It may be that these adults, by not carrying out their responsibilities as the young people see them, are proving increasingly frustrating for them.

### **The voice of the researcher**

This research study makes a contribution to knowledge because it gives prominence to students' voices during a period of radical change in their lives. There was never any attempt on my part to lump the young people's thoughts, feelings and lived

experiences along a single continuum of experiences. I listened to the thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of each participant and treated each as an individual in his/her own right by ensuring their distinct stories were recorded.

In Chapter 3 (p.77 & p.89), I explained how triangulation would be used to mitigate the criticisms of negativity associated with critical research. I said that I would constantly monitor my relations with the young people throughout the research study and that I would base my actions on what I was learning about myself in relation to them. I succeeded in doing this and I also tailored my research methods, based on the baseline information I had of each of the young people (see Table 2, p.87). Sometimes this meant changing from group interviews to one-to-one sessions in order to probe more deeply and to better understand their responses. Not only did this give me confidence that my findings would be credible, but this process of triangulation, which also included a multi-layered scrutiny and questioning of the data, allowed me to interrogate my own assumptions in relation to how some of the young people were feeling about the closure of our school. I was then able to identify the nuanced convergence and divergence in all of the participants' stories over time.

Although I sought the perspectives of the young people through their spoken voices, their responses often included non-verbal modes of communication. This research contributes to an understanding of 'voice' as being multi-modal and multi-vocal, because it shows that voice involves more than what is spoken. The research revealed how meaning can also be conveyed through body language and gaze (see Appendix 9).

Student voice and students' voices were not explored in a vacuum. The importance of listening to students' voices was researched holistically as part of a wider debate



about education, schooling, school closures and power dynamics in an educational setting. Critical ethnography played a major role in the deconstruction, and later reconstruction, of these understandings. This research makes an original contribution to knowledge in that the deconstruction of these discourses was “less a method or stage by stage approach” and more a “natural unravelling which the text invites by presenting opportunity within its own structure” (Grbich, 2007, p.175). This approach allowed a critique, and understanding, of the reasons why a phased closure has led to worried voices, dissenting voices, silenced voices and, sometimes, absent voices.

In Chapter 2 (p.33) I quoted Rogers’ belief that, “inquiry into meaning making is always an exploration into power” (2011, p.1) and this research study clearly confirms this, by showing the power divide between the young people and the leadership of the school. The young people’s responses throughout the research study exposed these power relationships, as they appeared to have accepted that they held little power in the decision to close the school. They did believe, however, that they could have had more influence in how the closure was managed. The research simultaneously revealed the powerlessness of staff to effect change and to allay the fears of the young people at critical times.

Rudduck and Flutter’s belief that there is considerable transformative potential when young people are consulted is a view I also share. They are, however, correct in cautioning that, “[i]t can fall short of making a difference to and for students because of power issues embedded in the everyday regimes of schools and even woven into the strategies we use for consulting pupils” (2004, p.157).

This research study demonstrates that young people should not be considered merely as consumers of education or that they should be positioned in ways that limit their meaningful participation in their education and schooling. Each young person has a voice and to view 'voice' as a collective means that individual thoughts, feelings and lived experiences are often ignored. Therefore this research has paid attention to multiple voices, and to multiple ways of expressing those voices.

In the past, research has focused on 'The Effect of School Closure on Principal Leadership' (Lenarduzzi, 2010) and 'The impact of closing an urban secondary school' (Bathgate, 2006), but none have dedicated their research to the voices of young people and the effect that closure has on their education. Though Bathgate came close, her research was not solely focussed on the young people as she also took into account other stakeholders. The originality of this research, in part, comes from the fact the young people each tell their own story and the member-checking process validates their voices.

Finally, this research makes a distinctive contribution to knowledge because it is also a personal narrative of my experience of change. I have come to believe and embrace the practice of researchers having a voice in their own research. Being detached from one's own research may appear to add validity and credibility to the process, but this is a positivist stance and raises questions of the intentions of the research in its bid to raise consciousness and awareness of students' voices.

## Limitations

### Being conscious of spaces

30 April 2014 - The Associate Head Teacher allowed me the use of his office to interview the young people. The layout was very formal, akin to that of a boardroom. Some of the young people had only ever visited his office when they were in trouble, or had to write up an incident report. They were cautious in their responses to my questions, very reserved and all sat upright, almost in awe of the office both as a space and 'the office' of authority that it represented. This was not conducive to my research, hence the first few interviews I carried out may not have produced the most honest responses from the participants due to their negative associations with the space. I decided, therefore, to hold subsequent meetings in the school library, which was a far more relaxed and student-friendly setting. In future research work, I will give careful consideration to the location of interviews, possibly including the interviewees in the decision-making as to where meetings are held.

### Sensitivity to participants

Gaining the necessary permissions from participants' parents resulted in a four month delay in commencement of the research. When all the necessary consent was received I was both anxious and excited to begin my work in the field (see my journal entry, Appendix 7). The day before the first meeting session with the participants, a teacher in another school was fatally stabbed in her classroom. On the morning of the interview, this had been talked about in assembly. The young people were clearly upset and shaken, so I opened the discussion up so they could voice how they were feeling. After we had talked about the tragic event, I did

proceed with the interview questions, but I may not have had the best responses on this day due to how the event had affected them emotionally. In my next research study, I will exercise more sensitivity towards the participants so that their feelings are always at the forefront of my work in the field.

### **Size of the research and time**

This was a small research study focusing, as it did, on only one school and using a sample of just 10 pupils. Despite the fact that 15 months were spent in the field collecting and analysing data, generalising from this body of work would not be wise. What can be gained from this research is the knowledge of how a particular group of students felt about the changes in their school, and the impact on their education, as it moves towards closure. In addition, the research raises awareness about the need for schools to create “a place, a space, a structure to *keep* engaging, acting on and broadcasting the student voice” (Holcomb, 2007, p.14). Although I cannot speak for other schools, my findings reveal how theories about power, and power relationships, are revealed in the context of change processes in one school.

### **Recommendations**

The phased closure of my school has been difficult for all stakeholders. This research has proven that the school leadership team, staff and the young people have all struggled with the changes implemented as a direct result of the decision to close the school. The research also shows that a school is a community where people’s lives come together and are bound in a myriad of ways. In voicing their present and past experiences at St Luke’s, it is clear that the young people expected

to receive more information about the closure of their school and to be involved in the processes leading up to it.

### **Participants' Recommendations**

The participants made a number of recommendations for the leadership of St Luke's, including changes that they would like to see employed in the final year before the school closes in August 2016.

Shaniah expressed a desire for St Luke's to return to a wider range of option subjects, whilst instigating "more communication between students and everybody ...." Reducing students' option choices highlights most explicitly the exercise of power on the part of the school's leadership in the closure process.

Tina wished St Luke's to prevent her teachers from leaving in the final year. The research has showed that St Luke's, and by extension schooling, is not just about education. Teachers were not simply seen as educators by the young people, but performed other roles, acting as familial figures and support agents when necessary. The research emphasizes the importance of relationships, revealing an intimacy between the young people and their teachers, but also fragility due to the destruction of these bonds as a result of the phased closure of the school.

Lenaè at first declined to make any recommendation, then sighed and muttered "Miss", and with a look of defeat on her face, she continued "I would say to make the classes smaller again but they won't do that because of financial [issues] ... they don't wanna pay teachers. They may say, 'why have so many teachers with so little students?'"

Fatima appeared resigned to her fate and in a frustrated voice she explained:

Well there's nothing really that they can do, there are not enough students and not enough teachers and then they're trying to come in with the whole 'Intervention thing' and then they're putting it on our timetables that we'll have triple Science or triple Maths and that's pressure for some people because some people might need a break from that lesson or will just have three hours straight ....

Despite the fact Fatima was resigned as to what she thinks will happen in the 2015 to 2016 school year, many things were still of concern to her. Fatima's response, in respect of recommendations, is representative of the uncertainty and fragility experienced by the participants. From my own intimate knowledge of some of the young people, the fragility outside of school was being mirrored inside by the processes of change from which they felt excluded from offering input.

Jade concentrated on another school. She said that if she visited another school faced with closure:

Depending on what year the children are in, I would tell the head teacher to get the children away from the school ... like to get them into other schools so that they have better chances and opportunities. Also I would tell them that no matter like how small the school gets, keep going with the children they have left because without those children the school would be finished before the time.

### **Researcher recommendations**

All schools must endeavour to engage in meaningful and creative dialogue with young people, thereby allowing for both presence and power in their school, especially during times of change.

### **Asking**

During the research study I found that the views of the young people were not sought by the school leadership team at significant times, yet when their views were

sought, their deeper worries and concerns were not addressed. Mansfield's question is particularly pertinent at this point. She asks "[i]f educational leaders are not asking students about their lived experiences, how will they ever know what is happening in their lives?" She then continues by stating, however, that "[a]lthough conducting a school survey can be helpful, and is a step in the right direction, surveys fall short of opening up the necessary space for students to truly give voice to their most heartfelt concerns" (2013, p.425).

My use of multiple methods in gathering data, including surveys, enabled me to capture the thoughts and feelings of the young people, but the central point being made by Mansfield is that school leaders need to create the space and the culture for the right questions to be asked and for young people to be given responses to their most heartfelt concerns. School leaders must also be prepared to find some of these questions uncomfortable. In this study, there were so many things being taken away from the young people and they did not understand why. Whether it is a school closure or wider educational reform, young people's voices must be brought into meaningful dialogue with those who hold power if they are to influence change processes.

There was confirmatory evidence in the research study from all the participants, most notably from Marcel and Shaniah, that they cared about the changes that were taking hold in their school as it moved towards closure. Though Marcel positioned himself in group interviews (see Appendix 11) as being unconcerned by the changes at St Luke's, one-to-one interviews proved otherwise. His responses proved that he did care, wanted to excel in school and wanted to be a part of decisions being made that ultimately affected him. The strength of Shaniah's responses similarly indicated

not just a hunger for information, but a desire to actively participate in the decision-making processes that were shaping her future in ways that she did not anticipate nor envisage.

### *'Tuning in'*

As an advocate of 'student voices', and as someone who generally takes the view that young people are often positioned in ways that limit their meaningful participation resulting in feelings of exclusion and anxiety, I was keen that the processes of this research allowed for the voice of each of the participants to be articulated. Throughout the process, this meant embracing methods that were not originally thought of, such as 'feelings cards' and one-to-one interviews. I opted for small group interviews, and, subsequently, one-to-one interviews, because I valued what the young people had to say. I also wanted to capture the 'voices' even within a single voice. To do this, I adopted Owens' (2007, pp.304-305) idea of "microskills", which she says can assist in "tuning in" to people. This meant learning to use my body instinctively and being aware of my own non-verbal communication so as to enhance the interview relationship. Owens also suggested listening, which was always at the centre of what I hoped to do throughout this research. She quotes Egan's (1998, pp.65-66) understanding of "listening" as "being present psychologically, socially and emotionally". For Egan, listening involved four things:

- (i) Listening and understanding verbal messages
- (ii) Observing and reading non-verbal behaviour, e.g. tone of voice, posture and facial expressions
- (iii) Listening to the context or the whole person in context of their social setting



(iv) Listening to the sour notes or things that may require challenging

Interviewing Marie was particularly interesting because of her learning difficulties. In large group settings, Marie would laugh her way through questions, often giving responses such as “yes”, “no” and, “I dunno”. I always believed Marie had much more to say and I remembered Corbett’s point that “young people who are seen to have moderate learning difficulties ... [are] those least often listened to with care and respect...” (2007, In Clough and Barton, p.55). Owens also drew attention to the problems inherent in interviewing someone with learning difficulties, but argued that although “[t]hese difficulties in vocalising are a challenge for the interviewer ... [they] should not be an eliminating factor when attempting to obtain the stories of informants” (2007, p.306).

With Marie, I found that one-to-one interviews yielded the best responses, even though questions often needed repeating or rephrasing. One of her favourite words for describing just about everything was, “weird”. Each time she described something as ‘weird’, therefore, I would seek clarification by asking, “good weird or bad weird?” I found that by doing this she was better able to articulate what it was that she really wanted to say, thereby deepening my own understanding of her experiences. Marie was also allowed to have her Teaching Assistant with her in our final one-to-one interview and this put her at ease. Including Marie in the research, and listening to her story of closure, gave me an insight into how important it was for her, more so than the other participants, to have a stable environment in school, which meant her support staff, teachers and her friends remaining at St Luke’s.

## Implications

I have gleaned from this research that, “it is possible to collect objective reliable knowledge” (Brewer, 2000, p.186). This research has succeeded in capturing, through stories, the thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of young people in one school going through a phased closure. Young people do not speak in unified ways and change does not affect all young people in the same manner and this research succeeded in showing differences and similarities.

### ...for research typologies

According to Hammersley, ethnography makes it possible in “coming to understand the perspectives of the people being studied if we are to explain, or even to describe accurately, the activities they engage in and the courses of action they adopt” (2006, p.4).

The research also adds to the growing literature in support of critical methodologies, such as critical ethnography, which challenges institutional relations and practices in order to understand either a part of it, or the whole of it.

### ...for research interpretation

The different methods used to collect the data (group and one-to-one interviews, observations and surveys) combined with the Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure, used to analyse then present the data, has implications for research, returning to the participants to collaborate, probe and renegotiate their individual and collective accounts of the impact of the closure of their school on their education.

### ...for stating biases

I was also aware that by overtly stating my biases, and the ways in which I was implicated in the research as an insider researcher, could have diminished “the status of more interpretivist research” (Greenbank, 2003, p.795). As time went on, however, I embraced the fact that my roles as researcher and teacher were intertwined and, therefore, determined my unique positionality to understand these events as they unfolded. I also found that highlighting these tensions throughout the data collection phase and also problematizing “the multiplicity of researcher and participant identities and how they intersect” (Srivastava, 2006, p.211), added credibility to the research process and minimised my voice thereby preventing it from drowning out the voices of the young people.

### ...for participatory approaches

Researchers often experience what I call ‘a researcher conundrum’ of how to ensure that the power dynamics do not continue the alienation and disempowerment of those being researched. According to Greenbank, these could be countered by employing “participatory approaches” to the research process. He argues compellingly that participatory approaches “act as a counterbalance to the influence of the researcher's values” (2003, p.796). In practical terms, this means consulting with the young people on drafting student-friendly questions and arranging convenient meeting times. He believes that this kind of “egalitarian approach involves the researcher and researched working as partners to develop theory, or may even allow research participants the final say in the interpretation of data” (2003, p.796). This research has, therefore, seen listening to the participants and actively responding to their voices and concerns, in ways that enabled them to become co-participants and not just subjects of the research. These participatory

approaches make educational research which is dedicated to listening to young people, and highlighting wider issues within education, still a worthwhile endeavour.

### ...for future research

With education in England in a constant state of change, there are many implications for research and researchers. Successive governments have embraced policies that have generated market force approaches to schools and education that are resulting in an increased number of schools becoming susceptible to closure, be they immediate, or phased, or taken over by academy chains. In 2015, the newly elected Conservative Government and its Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, committed to continuing with their reforms to make sure “that every child has the opportunity of a world-class education, regardless of who they are or where they are from” (Morgan, 2015). While this commitment must be lauded, the Conservative government’s plans to seal what they see as ‘loopholes’, that have made it difficult to close ‘failing schools’, is questionable. Nicky Morgan announced that the:

Landmark [Education] bill will allow the best education experts to intervene in poor schools from the first day we spot failure. It will sweep away the bureaucratic and legal loopholes previously exploited by those who put ideological objections above the best interests of children ... This bill ... [will allow experts] to do their job faster and more effectively, ensuring that thousands more pupils, from across the country, get the world-class education they deserve (Morgan, 2015).

This kind of policy rhetoric does not resonate with the lived experiences of the young people in this setting, who do not see themselves as receiving a world-class education as their school moves towards closure.

She further states that, “at the heart of our commitment to delivering real social justice is our belief that every pupil deserves an excellent education and that no parent should have to be content with their child spending a single day in a failing school” (Morgan, 2015). On the face of it, these are commitments not to be argued with. I believe school reform should include students’ voices, however, and her press release failed to include the views of young people, whose schools have been described as ‘coasting schools’. According to Mansfield, “prioritizing student voice in educational research and leadership practices is the most authentic means of advocating for social justice and promoting change in communities” (2013, p.399). Researchers who value the contributions young people can make to school reform, need to be more vocal themselves in drawing attention to the importance of students’ voices in order to have any chance of influencing government policy and practice.

## **Concluding arguments**

### **Schooling and education**

At the beginning of this research study, I made the decision to situate schooling, education and students’ voices within a democratic society, all too cognizant of the fact that by doing this I would trigger the problematization of the structures at St Luke’s. This emanated from a belief shared with Holcomb that, “if schools undertake to create citizens, they should engage students in the practice of democracy within the society of the school” (2007, p.25). I used this approach as I believed this would be the most effective way to listen to and understand the thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of the young people as St Luke’s moved towards closure, which was scheduled for August 2016.

One of the central aims of this research has been to challenge, holistically and critically, the set of social relationships which gave rise to feelings of voicelessness, uncertainty, frustration and anger in the young people, during a time of change in their school, from their own perspective. In Chapter 1 (p.9) I gave these the name analytic categories. They include voice, education, schooling, power and school closure. I agree with Lundy when she makes the point that “the right to an education acts as a multiplier of rights” (Lundy, 2007, p.940) and I see each students’ voice as an inalienable right. She continues by saying that one way of sustaining the existing momentum as it relates to students’ voices might be to “reframe the discourse to reflect the fact that pupil involvement in decision making is a permanent, non-negotiable human right” (2007, p.940). While I hope that, by way of this research, I am helping to sustain the existing momentum in this area of work, this would not be my starting point.

The discourse needs to be framed in the broadest sense possible, so that the questions become, ‘What should schooling be?’ and ‘What preparation is to be given to the young so far as to enable a society to sustain itself?’ The answers to these two difficult questions, though tentative, could encourage research practitioners to “situate their research in a broader context, shifting it from the more personal or individualistic level to broader, more systemic ones” (Milner, 2007, p.397).

### *What should schooling be?*

If we think about the ‘the politics of schooling’ in terms of a curriculum question, Popkewitz argues that it becomes a question of “whose knowledge is privileged in schooling, locating which actors and agents are favoured and handicapped through the processes of schooling”. He also believes that the politics of schooling “is located

in modern political science notion of politics as the allocation of values” (2015, p.164). The young people at St Luke’s would argue that they have been handicapped through the processes of schooling, as they no longer know what the future holds for them. Are they able to do the subjects they want in order to enable them to take the next steps towards who they want to be? What will the long-term impact be if they cannot choose the subjects they want to study, as a result of the school closure?

Schools and school leaders need to reposition themselves. Apple (2008, p.254) believes it is important for schools to be seen as places for action. Schooling should, therefore, be a process intended to do what is best for each young person through active engagement. I agree with Fielding and McGregor (2005, p.16) that public and private spaces need to be created: “Both physical and metaphorical, where dialogue, not just discussion can take place in ways that are emergent and unanticipated, not just purposefully and properly planned.”

Apple states how “[s]chools have played central roles in the creation of movements for justice in general, but have been central to the building of larger scale social mobilizations” (2008, p.253). Schooling should not exist to maintain society’s power relations and structures. Valuing each individual and challenging the status quo must be the nexus of schooling.

*What preparation is to be given to the young so far as to enable a society to sustain itself?*

Schooling must address this fundamental question. According to Carr (1991, p.186), “in a modern democratic society the idea that education should function only to reproduce an existing form of life is unacceptable”. This is a view that I also share.

Carr posits four features of education within a democracy as the blueprint of preparation to be given to the young, so far as to enable a society to sustain itself.

- (i) First, there needs to exist space for the “development of critical reflection” by young people.
- (ii) Secondly, an acknowledgement that education in a democracy “does not seek to maintain its identity from one generation to the next in any static or determinate way”.
- (iii) Thirdly, education in a democracy “empowers all its members to collectively shape the ways in which society is being reproduced.”
- (iv) Finally, the education system in a democracy “acknowledges its responsibility to educate its future citizens so that they can influence the process of social reproduction in a rational and self-conscious way” (1991, pp.186-187).

It was the frequent questioning by the young people in my school, in the classroom, corridors and on the playground, that, in part, gave rise to my interest in their thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of the phased closure of St Luke’s. It turned out, that what could have been a journey and a process of change for the young people, with creative dialogue and freely egalitarian spaces for airing their concerns, became, for them, a critical event over 15 months. I call it a critical event because it was a “change experience” (Webster et al., 2007, p.75) for the young people, which left them without the curriculum options they were expecting, voiceless to the changes meted out to them and powerless to effect change in any meaningful way.

The participants involved in this research study consistently felt that they were not engaged, in the widest sense of the word, in the changes in their school. They felt



infrequently informed about the reasons for the changes imposed on them that, consequently, affected their education and ultimately their futures. They expressed the view that at those times when information about change was given, it often failed to ameliorate their anxieties and queries. They were left feeling anxious and uncertain.

As the researcher, I felt that St Luke's did not effectively explore the range of ways to listen to the voices of the young people. The approach to managing the process of change did not attempt to try and understand if the young people comprehended the reasons for the impending changes. There was no meaningful platform established for the young people to express their views, frustrations, anger or concerns about the changes in their school. The school did not have a closure development plan or, if they did, this was not shared with wider staff and the young people. The absence of this meant that senior leaders dealt with the closure, and the associated changes, as a series of events, rather than a managed process of change taking the young people with them on this journey.

Although Billington (2000, p.24) cautions that "childhood itself has developed as a discrete population which can be subject to change, thus according with the properties of contemporary forms of governmentality", St Luke's still has time, albeit not much, to meaningfully engage with the young people about the closure of their school in August 2016. Engaging meaningfully with the students will require a total rebalance in how St Luke's operates. This includes: listening to the thoughts and feelings of the young people, providing platforms for the young people to ask questions about whatever it is that might concern them and emboldening and equipping staff with information so that they, too, can engage meaningfully with the

concerns of the young people. In the end, all that Tina wanted was for St Luke's and all other schools to "listen to children more".

There is no guarantee that if senior leaders were to listen to the concerns of the young people, or were to share fully the reasons for their decisions for the changes they wished to implement, that this would be the panacea to the difficulties the young people experienced. Throughout the research, the participants consistently expressed the opinion that they wanted to be listened to. Primarily, they wanted information and by this they meant they wished to influence the decision-making process and thereby shape decisions to suit their own wishes. Secondly, they wanted information so that they could understand the reasons for decisions and have clarity amongst themselves about them. Thirdly, they wanted information that answered their individual queries and addressed their anxieties. The participants explained, throughout the research study, that these would have helped them cope better with the whole journey of change as the school moved towards closure.

Education in a democracy according to Cook-Sather, "should be premised on change, not just reproduction, but there is" she says, "more and more that is interfering with that commitment within school frames" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.381). However if schools are serious about embracing students' voices they must acknowledge that the risks are greater when young people feel excluded from decisions that affect them. Also, alternative voices are often heard in alternative spaces, but if power dynamics are challenged through research, then alternative voices could soon be heard in mainstream spaces. This could benefit all educational stakeholders during a time of change.

I was heartened throughout the processes of this research study by the emotional resilience of all the participants. They are aspirational even though they cite possible short-term and long-term setbacks relating to college and to their career paths. Shaniah, for example, sat an extra GCSE outside of school to increase her prospects of admission to a “good” college, whilst the other participants had given considerable thought as to how they would eventually achieve their goals and dreams. There were times during the research study, and particularly during the triangulation process, when I felt guilty that my questionings were taking the young people back to places and times they would rather forget. I soon found comfort, however, in the fact that it may have proven cathartic for them, as they often began to think of ways of preventing the changes associated with the closure blighting their future aspirations.

Finally, I believe that “education research has a future” (Brewer 2000, p.187) as long as we, as teachers and researchers, continue to challenge the reason of schooling, and the purpose of education.

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## Appendix 1 - Research timeline

Karlene's research timeline and chronology of key events at St Luke's 2012 - 2015

Date	Proposed Action	Progress
<b>Feb 2012 - The head teacher announces that St Luke's is to close over a four year period</b>		
July 2013	Researcher to seek head teacher's permission to use host school as the research site. Assignment 6 to feed into main research literature.	Permission granted Progress being made with the literature review
Oct – Dec 2013	Researcher to meet with head teacher again to outline the main aims of the research and discuss participants.  Researcher to apply for ethical clearance from the University of Sheffield.  Researcher to peruse additional literature for the literature review.	Oct 2013  Completed ethics application. Sent to Supervisor on 30 Oct 2013.  On-going  <b>19 Dec 2013</b> - Ethics approval granted by the University of Sheffield
Jan 2014	<p><b><u>INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH</u></b>            –Researcher to introduce research (purpose and aims) &amp; students to be given letters and consent forms for their parents.</p> <p><b><u>MEETING THE PARTICIPANTS</u></b>            -Upon receipt of parental consent forms, negotiate meetings 1 &amp; 2 with participants.            -Select and meet pilot group.            –Researcher to purposefully select 10 boys and girls. As the school is now so fluid, 3 students are included as part of the 10 for attrition.(These will include 2 SEN, 2 G&amp;T, 2 EAL, 2 FMS6 and 2 Student Council Reps.)            -Aims and purposes of the research to be outlined to the young people.            -Students to sign consent form.            -A copy of student consent form to be sent home if the young people would like this to be done.</p> <p><b>FIRST MEETINGS (2 JAN) CANCELLED NOT ENOUGH RETURNS ON</b></p>	<p><b>13 Jan 2014</b>            Attended Year 9 assembly to formally introduce research and issue letters to parents.</p> <p><b>14 – 24 Jan 2014</b>            Consent given – 3            Consent not given – 2</p> <p><b>Jan 2014</b> - 3 students asked for new letters to be sent home to parents; letter sent home.</p>

	<b>CONSENT FORMS.</b>	
14 – 16 Feb 2014	Progress on literature review to be discussed with supervisor at Sheffield Weekend School.	<p><b>14 – 17 Feb</b>– guidance given by supervisor as to how to proceed with literature review.</p> <p><b>27 Feb 2014</b> – Only 5 parental consent forms received in total. Students again reminded to return letters.</p>
March 2014	Background reading for literature review continues	<p><b>March 2014</b> No further returns of consent forms Students once again reminded of the consent letters via typed up notices in their register packs.</p> <p>*Head teacher asks that participants be ‘given the all clear’ by the SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) and by the YLCs (Year Learning Coordinators) to ensure that the nature of the research would not create anxiety.</p>
April 2014	Third meeting with participants for interviews about their feelings about the closure of St Luke’s.	<p><b>April 2014</b> - Only 15 consent forms now received.</p> <p><b>SEN</b> Nima Marcel</p> <p><b>STUDENT COUNCIL</b> Jade Evelyn</p> <p><b>FMS 6</b> Marie</p> <p><b>NEW STUDENT</b> Michelleh</p> <p><b>EAL</b> Tina</p> <p><b>Telephone Consent</b></p> <p><b>G&amp;T</b> Lenaè</p> <p><b>FMS 6</b> Bob</p> <p><b>EAL</b> Shaniah (and written)</p> <p>Piloting phase and research can begin. Research is running four months behind schedule.</p> <p><b>30 April – Interview 1</b></p>



		– Nine participants together.
May 2014	Completion of literature review and meeting with supervisor at Sheffield Weekend School.	<b>May 2014</b> – Still working on literature review <b>21 May</b> – Final telephone interview with Nima (no longer a student at St Luke's)
June 2014	Fourth meeting with participants for interviews about their feelings about the closure of St Luke's.	<b>June 2014</b> – still working on literature review <b>18 June – Interview 2</b> – 9 participants together <b>19 June – Interview 3</b> – 9 participants together <b>25 June – Interview 4</b> – 6 participants together
<b>23 June 2014 – St Luke's begin September's timetable. Year 9 students are officially in Year 10. Students are all in their option groups and sets.</b>		
July 2014	Continue work on - data presentation and analysis	<b>16 July – Survey and Interview 5</b> - 9 participants together <b>22 July – Interview 6 (Feelings Card Revisited)</b> – 8 participants together <b>24 July</b> – Literature review sent to supervisor <b>30 July</b> - Literature review returned with corrections to be made.
<b>15 July 2014 – Sports Day. All the young people attended and took part.</b>		
Aug 2014	Researcher will begin to analyse data collected; theming responses, a reflective and reflexive endeavour in light of the work carried out so far. - Continue work on Chapter 3 – Methodology. <b>**Reworking of research timetable for 2014-15.</b>	<b>Aug</b> - Corrections made to literature review
Sept 2014	- Continue work on Chapter 3 – Methodology.	<b>21 Sept</b> - Literature review complete
Oct 2014	5 Oct - meeting with participants now in Year 10. Research is outlined again, as well as its purpose, right to withdraw at any time and negotiated meeting times for interviews about their feelings about the closure of St Luke's.	<b>1 Oct</b> – Chapter 3 sent to supervisor. <b>12 Oct</b> – Chapter 3 returned, with corrections to be made.
Nov 2014	Continue work on the whole research.	<b>16 Nov</b> – Chapter 3 complete. <b>17 Nov – Interview 7</b> - 6 participants together
Dec 2014	Continue work on the whole research.	<b>3 Dec – Interview 8</b> - 6 participants together
<b>02 Dec 2014 – Meeting called and students told of a further curriculum reduction</b>		
Jan 2015	Sixth meeting with participants for interviews about their feelings about the closure of St Luke's.	

Feb 2015	Meeting with supervisor at Sheffield Weekend School.	<b>13 – 15 Feb</b> – Supervisor suggests a personal narrative to be included in research. <b>21 Feb</b> - Final telephone interview with Evelyn (no longer a student at St Luke's) <b>23 Feb</b> - Final telephone interview with Bob (no longer a student at St Luke's) **Parental consent given for both participants.
March 2015	Work on Data and Analysis Chapter and Findings Chapter	Further reading on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure.
<b>16 March 2015 – Associate Head Teacher calls a meeting to inform the young people that there would only be one option subject for 2015-16. (This was later rescinded)</b>		
April 2015	Seventh meeting with participants for interviews about their feelings about the closure of St Luke's.	Further reading on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure. Writing up thesis.
May 2015	Meeting with supervisor at Sheffield Weekend School regarding Data Analysis Chapter	<b>15 - 17 May</b> - no meeting as supervisor is away, but good communication via email. Setback with Data Analysis Chapter - supervisor encourages me to send what I have written. <b>22 May - Individual Interviews 9</b> -6 participants: Shaniah, Marie, Marcel, Michelleh, Lenaè and Tina. Writing up thesis.
June 2015	Eighth meeting with participants for interviews about their feelings about the closure of St Luke's	<b>1 June – Individual Interview</b> with Fatima, student not initially part of the research. <b>2 June – Individual Interview</b> with final participant, Jade. Writing up thesis.
<b>23 June 2015 - St Luke's begin September's timetable. Year 10 students are officially in Year 11. Students are all in their option groups and sets.</b>		
July 2015	Ninth, and final, meeting with participants for interviews about their feelings about the closure of St Luke's and thanks for participation.	<b>Story Member Checking –</b> <b>3 July</b> - Lenaè, Jade and Fatima. <b>6 July</b> - Michelleh, Tina, Marcel and Shaniah. Writing up thesis.
Aug 2015	Summer – Autumn 2015 Writing up, binding and submitting.	<b>24 July &amp; 2 Aug -</b> <b>-Thesis sent to supervisor.</b>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feedback received on 5 Aug.</li> <li>- Completed thesis sent to supervisor on 17 Aug.</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;"><i>Gave birth on 19 August</i></li> <li>- Feedback received on 28 Aug.</li> </ul>
Sept - Oct 2015		<p><b>Meeting with supervisor re: Chapter 7 – Conclusions on 17 Oct at Weekend School.</b></p>
<p>Summer – Autumn 2015 Writing up, binding and submission.</p>		

## Appendix 2 - Research questions

Research questions mapped to the Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space Structure.

Interaction
<p><b>Personal –</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: How do you feel about the school closing?</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: How do you feel about any change that might affect your education as the school nears closure?</b></p> <p>Do you have any concerns/new concerns about the school closing?</p> <p>You say you feel worried about September, what are you worried about?</p> <p>What could the school and its leadership do to make you feel less worried or scared?</p> <p>How do you feel about your GCSE subject choices for September?</p> <p>Lesson and playground observations</p> <p>Progress and attendance data</p>
<p><b>Social –</b></p> <p>Lesson and playground observations</p> <p>Did you take part in Sports Day? Why did you take part in Sports Day?</p> <p>How do you feel about the teachers who will be leaving in the summer?</p> <p>When the Associate Head Teacher spoke of the benefits of being part of a small school how did that make you feel?</p> <p>Some of your friends have left, what reasons have they given? What do you think of these reasons? How do you feel about your friends leaving to go to other schools?</p>
Continuity
<p><b>Past –</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: Do you recall the reasons you were told why your school is closing?</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: Do you know the reasons leading to its closure?</b></p> <p>What did you think of your school when you just started?</p> <p>What are your best memories of your school?</p>
<p><b>Present –</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: Do you think the teachers care less as the school nears closure?</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: Do you feel like you could get a better education in another school?</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: Are you planning to stay and why?</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: Are the changes in the school affecting your performance and progress?</b></p> <p>Are things changing? How is your school changing?</p> <p>Will you be back at St Luke's in September 2014?</p> <p>What would make you not want to come back?</p> <p>Lesson and playground observations</p>
<p><b>Future –</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: What do you think will be the main changes that will affect your education as the school nears closure?</b></p> <p><b>Research Question: Do you think these changes will affect your future?</b></p> <p>What do you think Sports Day will be like next year?</p>
Context
<p>St Luke's had been a thriving secondary school and was well liked by parents. The decision to close means that young people continue to leave between 2012 and 2014. Friendship groups are being disrupted.</p> <p>Subject choices have shrunk since 2012 even though students were promised the 'highest education possible'.</p> <p>Many teachers have left the school.</p> <p>No one speaks to the young people about the closure of their school.</p>

Young people are confused about the limited curriculum and the implications of this.

The closure appears to be happening *to* the young people and they feel isolated.

The young people's levels of worry and frustration, however, are not constant but rise and fall during the year.

## Appendix 3 - Letter to Year 9 parents

Letter to Year 9 parents informing them of the research

9 January 2014

Dear parent/carer:

**Re: Pupil Name  
Research Project**

I am writing to request permission for your son/daughter to participate in my doctorate research project being undertaken with Sheffield University. I would appreciate it if you could take the time to read the information below which outlines this opportunity.

**Project focus**

To listen and explore children's views and feelings concerning the scheduled closure of St Luke's School in 2016 and to understand how this process affects their education.

**Why has your child been chosen for the research?**

10 students have been selected from Year 9 that would be able to provide a wide range of thoughts and feelings about the closure of the school.

**Does my child have to take part?**

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary and if you or your child does not wish to take part, please inform me. To agree to participate in the research please sign the attached consent form.

**What will happen during the research?**

Meetings and interviews with the children will take place before school starts in the morning, during lunch times or after school. I will meet with students to decide which time of day is most suitable. We will meet twice in January 2014, once in April 2014, once in June 2014, once in October 2014, once in January 2015, once in April 2015, once in June 2015 and once in July 2015.

Our meetings will last for no longer than 30 minutes each time. During this time there will be group interviews and these will be digitally recorded.

**What will happen at these meetings?**

Participants will meet with other students and share opinions about the closure of the school.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**

There are no adverse risks to taking part in the research. Your child will not be named in the research and all opinions will be treated in confidence. The digital recordings and notes will be stored on a password protected computer. If your child should ever feel anxious about the interview questions s/he should let me know immediately. S/He could also speak to the Mrs Jacobs, Mrs Williams or Mrs Aryon, or if you have any concerns please ring xxxx – xxxxxxxx ext. 147.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The benefits are numerous. The school will know how children feel and could make changes to ensure that students are happy, making excellent progress and that their wellbeing remains important to all staff.

**What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

If for any reason the research stops earlier than expected, both you and your child will be informed.

**What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The results of this project are scheduled to be published in autumn 2015. A copy of the research will be available from the school office.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

This is self-funded research. I am not doing this research on behalf of a company or organisation.

**Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project was ethically approved by the Department of Education, University of Sheffield on 19 December 2013.

If after reading this letter you have further questions, please contact me:

Karlene Gordon, Head of RE

Mobile: xxxxx xxx xxx

Work: xxxx xxxx xxx ext. 159

Email address: [edq11kg@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:edq11kg@sheffield.ac.uk)

Please keep this information sheet in a safe place. Thank you for considering this opportunity. I do hope that your child will be able to participate in this project.

Yours sincerely



**Karlene Gordon (Ms)**

**(Names above have been anonymised to protect people's identity)**



Consent Form (Please return in the envelope enclosed)

I have read the information letter. I have been informed that the research is confidential and I agree for my child, .....of 9(..) to take part.

Parent's name:.....

Parent's signature: .....

Date: .....

✂.....

I have read the information letter. I have been informed that the research is confidential but I do not agree for my child, .....of 9(..) to take part.

Parent's name:.....

Parent's signature: .....

Date: .....

## Appendix 4 – Student consent form

### Student-friendly consent form

Place a tick in the box if you agree  or  
put a cross in the box if you disagree.

#### My Consent Form



My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am in 9\_\_\_. This is my consent form which says that I have agreed to be a part of this research project giving my views about the closure of my school and the effect that this will have on my education leading up to 2016.

I know that I will meet with Miss Gordon whenever we all decide that it is convenient.

I know that I can choose not to answer a question if it makes me feel anxious or uncomfortable.

I also know that if I am not happy with any aspect of the research, I can speak to Mrs Jacobs, Mrs Williams or Mrs Aryon at any time.

I also know that my meetings with Miss Gordon and the other students involved in the project will be digitally recorded on a voice recorder and will be kept on a password locked computer to keep it safe.

I know that Miss Gordon will not use my given name in her research. I know that she will use a name that I have chosen that won't identify me.

.....

Signature

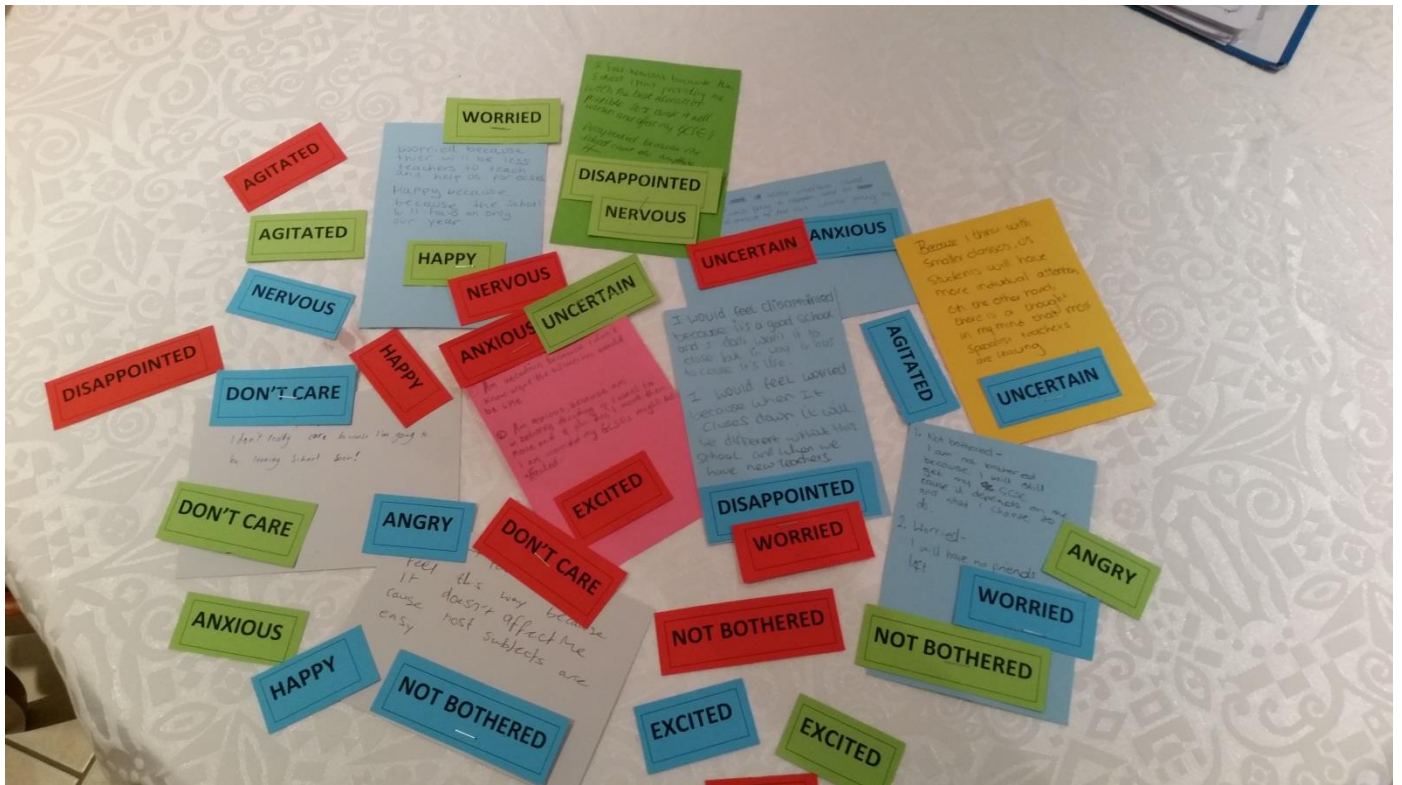
.....

Date

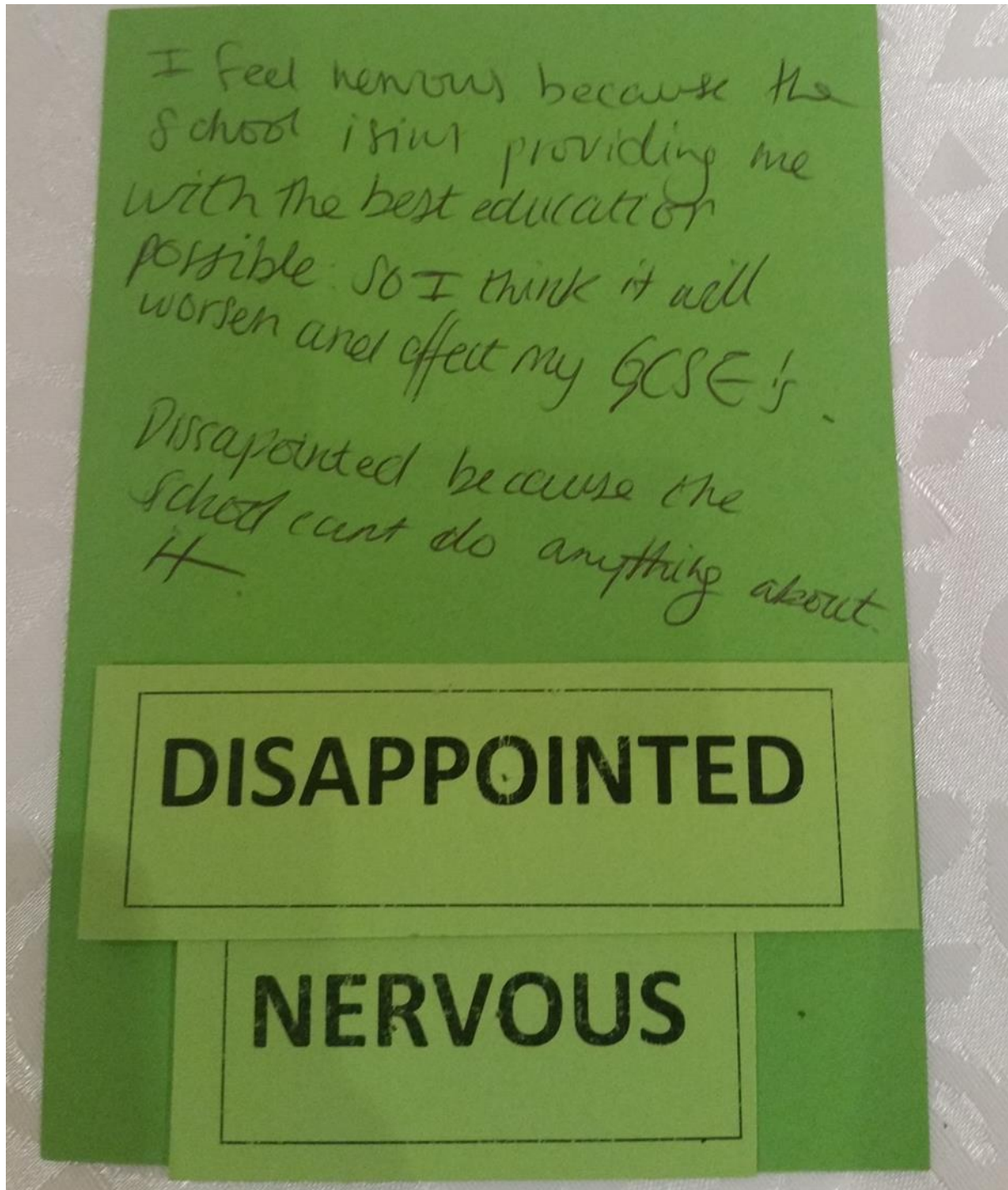
## Appendix 5 - Student 'Feelings cards'

### 'Feelings Cards' -

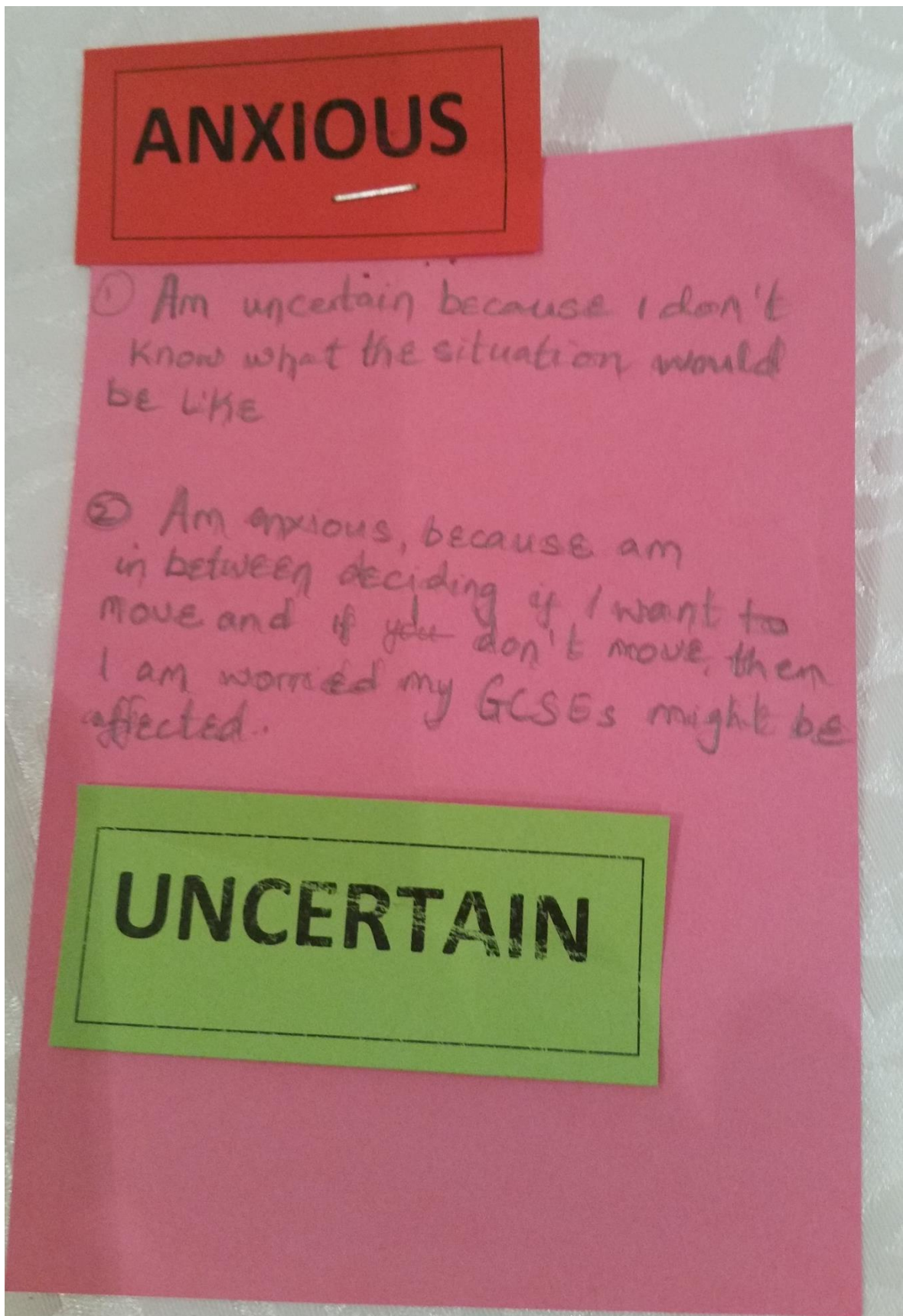
Showing the possible feelings students may have about the closure of their school



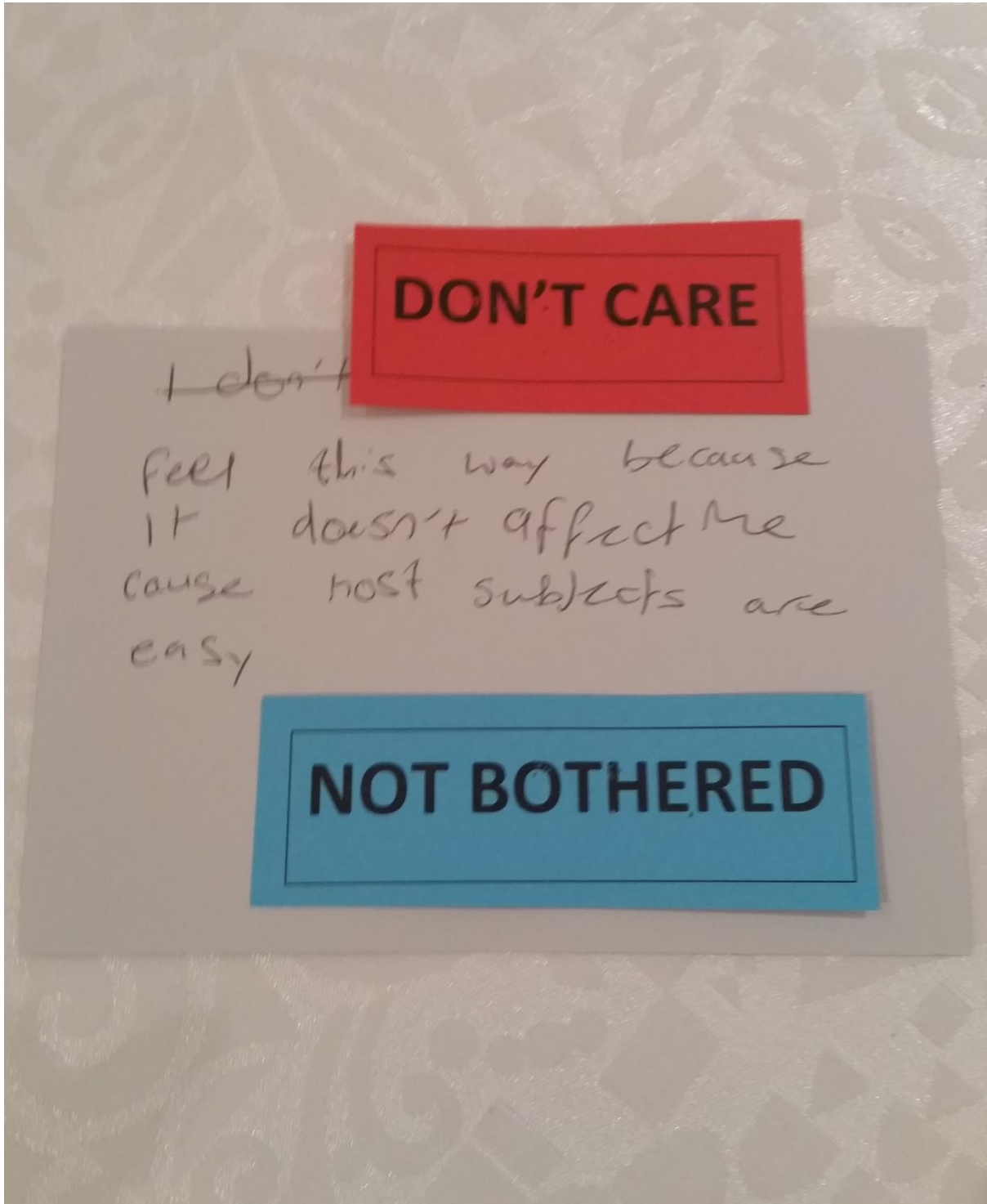
a) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Shaniah



b) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Evelyn



c) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Marcel



d) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Marie

I would feel disappointed because it's a good school and I don't want it to close but in way it has to cause it's life.

I would feel worried because when it closes down it will be different without this school. and when we have new teachers.

**DISAPPOINTED**

**WORRIED**

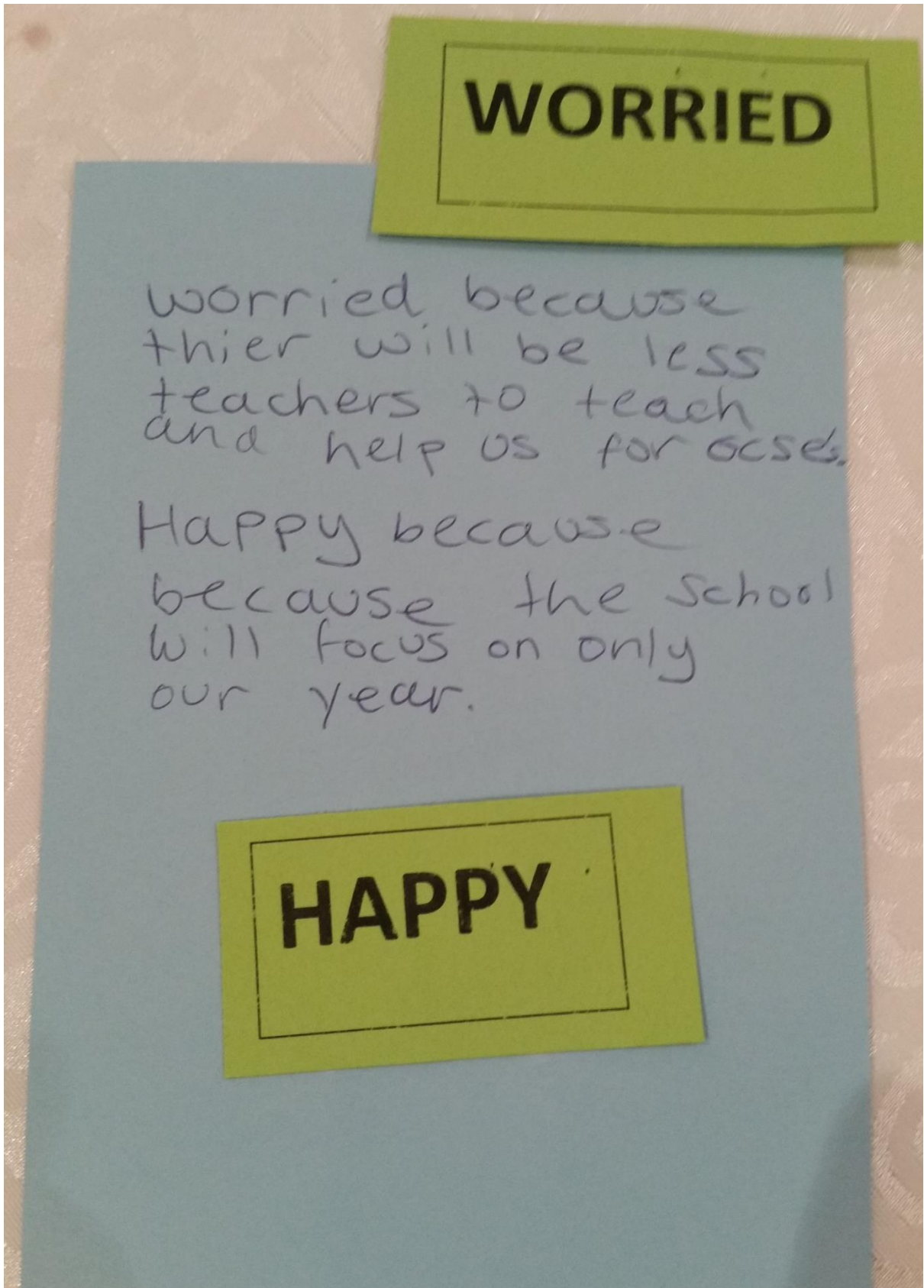
e) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Lenaè

Because I think with  
Smaller classes, US  
Students will have  
more individual attention.  
On the other hand,  
there is a thought  
in my mind that most  
Specialist teachers  
are leaving.

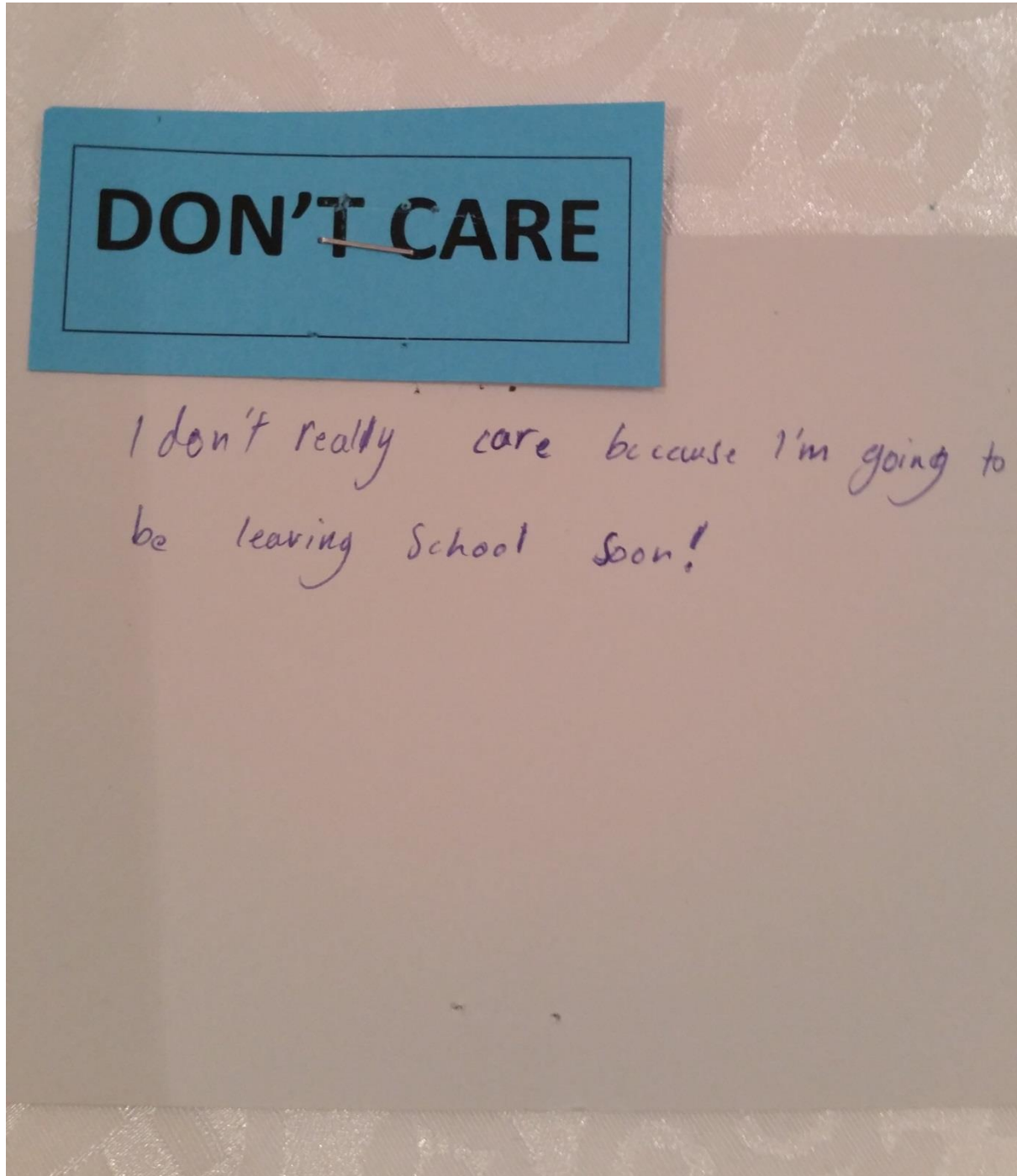
**UNCERTAIN**



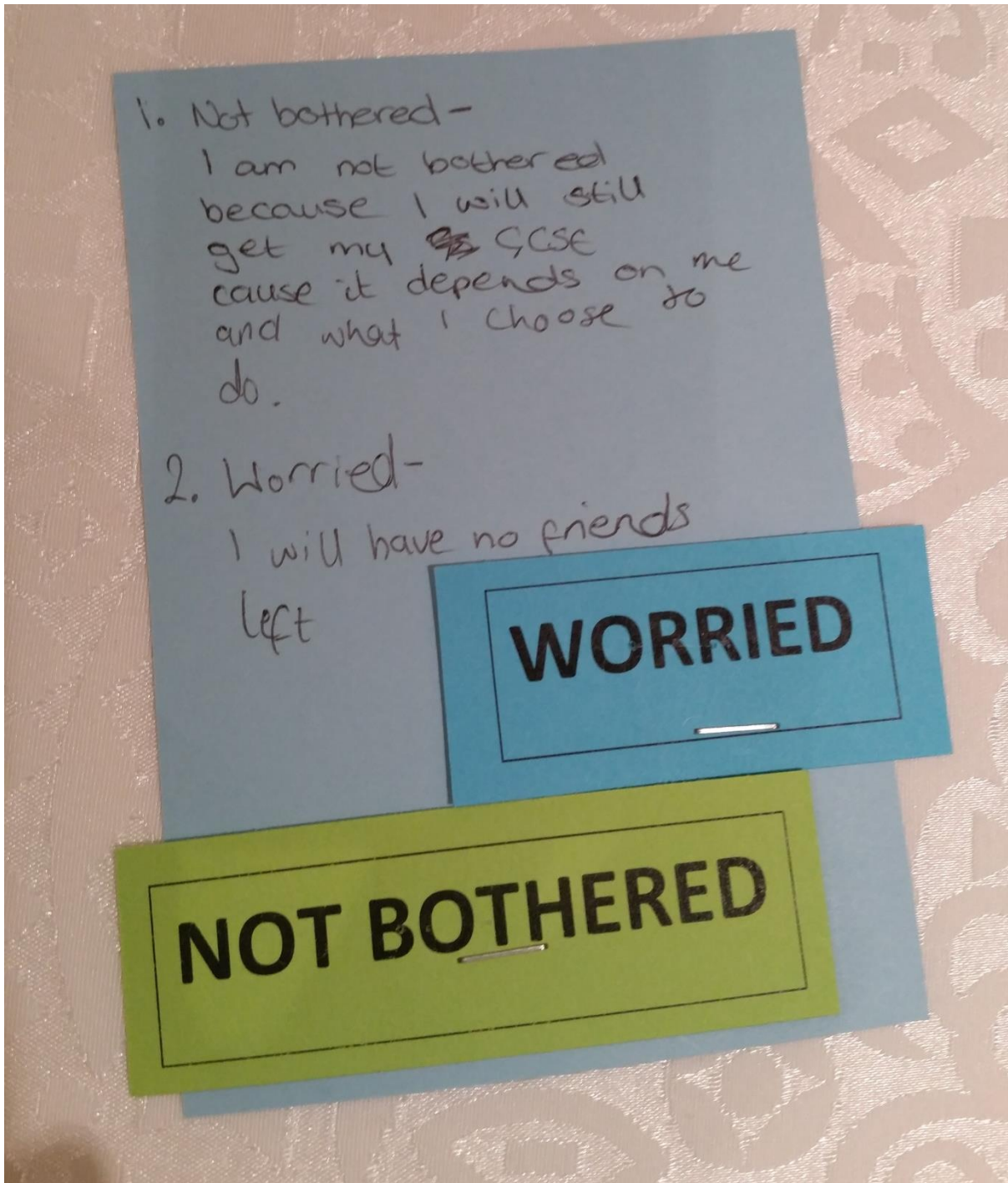
f) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Tina



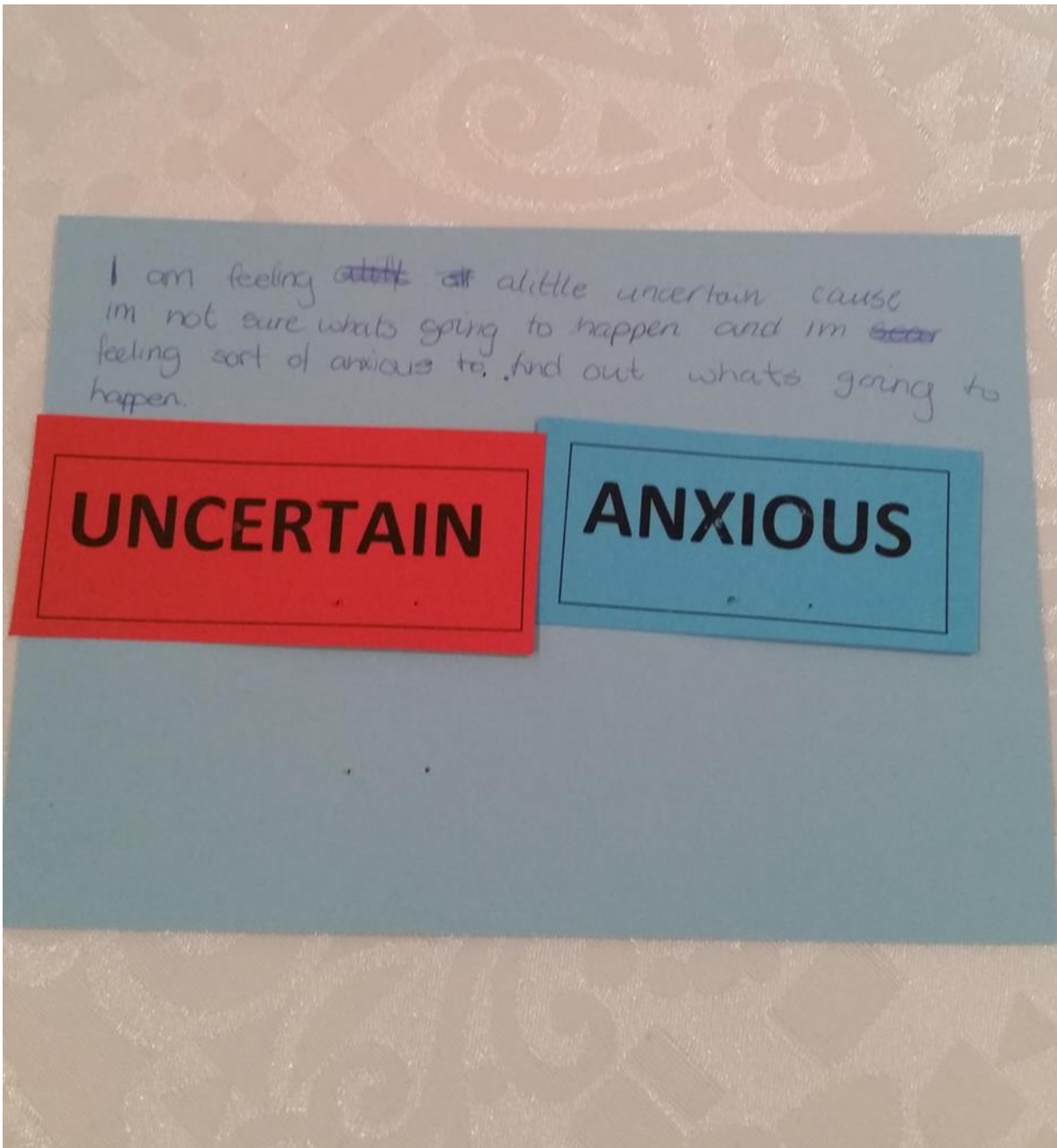
g) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Bob



## h) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Jade



i) Feelings Card - Impact of closure on Michelleh



## Appendix 6 - Observation schedule

Observation schedule – co constructed by the participants

Name :		
Observation	Date:	Notes
<p><b><u>Playground Observation Prompts</u></b>  Engaged in play? What kind of play? Length of play? With friends or alone?</p>		
<p><b><u>English Lesson Observation Prompts</u></b>  Engaged in lesson? Answers questions readily? Completes tasks? Willing to work with others? Relationship with teacher? Body language? Gaze?</p>		
<p><b><u>Mathematics Lesson Observation Prompts</u></b>  Engaged in lesson? Answers questions readily? Completes tasks? Willing to work with others? Relationship with teacher? Body language? Gaze?</p>		
<p><b><u>Religious Education Lesson Observation Prompts</u></b>  Engaged in lesson? Answers questions readily? Completes tasks? Willing to work with others? Relationship with teacher? Body language? Gaze?</p>		

## Appendix 7 - Journal entry

Journal entry (pp.1-3)

ending  
tion  
identity

June 19<sup>th</sup> 2014 (June 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup>)  
So far this WEEK I've met the young  
people involved in my research, 3 times. I'm  
feeling positive about my meetings with the  
participants - they have been in the library  
where the young people have been relaxed,  
they are keen to talk more about their  
feelings and they're talking to each other  
more.

One of the things they're doing is causing  
me to rethink my whole research. Within their  
responses (statements and questions) are  
concerns that they want me to address. They  
are anxious, they are scared and they want  
me to allay their fears. What should I do...?  
I can't just stand back as an observer of this  
unsettling change... But surely this will affect  
my research!! Actually this is affecting my  
research... What am I going to do?

I want to just say to them, if you decide  
to remain, I'll be here with you. We'll find  
ways to work through the difficulties. We'll  
make it happy. I'll fight for you to get the  
highest standard of education possible....

My initial plan was listen to listen to the  
young people and try to understand their lives  
and experiences as they go through the phased

closure of their school. The report would have been completed by the autumn of 2015 so that the school could make changes to ensure the well being and quality standard education for the young people in the final year of their education and schooling.

I have also been promoted. I am now the Humanities Lead, line managing History, Geography, RE and Business Studies. I am also on the extended leadership team. I am no longer just a teacher, I am part of the team I am most critical of.

My research is changing all the time. This is still ~~an~~ Critical Ethnography: Young Peoples Perspectives on the Effects of the Impending closure of their school on their education.

But is this now an action research?

We go back to reading Creswell and he says that "Critical ethnographies are a type of ethnographic research in which the author is interested in advocating for the emancipation of groups marginalised in our society" He quotes others as saying that "Critical researchers are typically politically minded individuals who seek, through their research, to advocate against inequality and domination" (Creswell 2008: 47)

By the end of today's meeting with the young people I knew that I now had to do something. I still don't know what, but my moral purpose as a teacher cannot sit back and have these children worry about the other stresses of life and also the changes around them that are directly or indirectly affecting their education.



## Appendix 8 - Sample survey

### Sample survey of young people's perception of their performance and the role of the closure

English: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>B</u>	Actual: <u>C</u>	Shaniah
Maths: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>D</u>	Actual: <u>E</u>	
RE: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>B</u>	Actual: <u>C</u>	
Is the closure of the school affecting your grades in these subjects?		
<b>It isn't. I don't really do my homework.</b>		
English: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>C</u>	Actual: <u>B</u>	Jade
Maths: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>B</u>	Actual: <u>C</u>	
RE: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>C</u>	Actual: <u>C</u>	
Is the closure of the school affecting your grades in these subjects?		
<b>I don't think it is. I'm just not taking English seriously.</b>		
English: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>A</u>	Actual: <u>A</u>	Lenaè
Maths: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>B</u>	Actual: <u>C</u>	
RE: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>B</u>	Actual: <u>A</u>	
Is the closure of the school affecting your grades in these subjects?		
<b>I'm not used to teachers' style and the ones I used to have are leaving. And so many children in the class. All noisy students, even though they're top set are in one class. (Lenaè opens her eyes widely to express shock)</b>		
English: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>B</u>	Actual: <u>D</u>	Marcel
Maths: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>E</u>	Actual: <u>U</u>	
RE: I think I am working at a GCSE Grade <u>C</u>	Actual: <u>F</u>	
Is the closure of the school affecting your grades in these subjects?		
<b>No.</b>		

## Appendix 9 – Transcript of gestures and meanings

Transcript of gestures and their meanings as seen through the eyes of the young people

Shrug of the shoulders - I do not care/I am not bothered.

Lowering of the gaze – I am sad/I am disappointed.

Gaze towards the ceiling – I am thinking about how to respond to this question.

Rolling of the eyes – I have been told something but I know it will never happen.

Rubbing hands together – I am afraid/I am scared.

Outstretched arms and body across the desk - I cannot be bothered/My mind is elsewhere.

Tightening of hands – I am afraid/I am scared.

Sigh – I do not know what to say/This is unbelievable.

Faded responses – This is the way it is ....

Shaking of the head – This situation is sad.

The folding of their arms across their chest - I am detached from this situation.

Knitted brows – I am angry.

## Appendix 10 – Sample interview transcription

### Sample one-to-one interview transcription

Venue: Careers Office (Digitally Recorded)

Date: 1 June 2015

Time: 10:40 – 11:00a.m.

Present: Fatima and me

Interviewer: How do you feel about the school closing?

Fatima: Umm I feel like it limits our options ... my GCSE options cos now that OK ... in Year 10 we do our two options so that's a good thing but if you fail you don't get a chance to retake it. So say if I wanted to go college and I really needed like History and I failed History this year, I can't do it next year and then next year we only have the opportunity to do one option. So that means like, umm instead of doing two, I will have like less GCSEs than everybody else.

And back in the days St Mary's used to do like Additional Further Maths so now we don't get the option to do anything like that.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Fatima: Upset a bit because like I could have like succeeded more in my GCSEs but the school limits my options.

Interviewer: Do you think you should have left?

Fatima: Yeah ages ago but by the time they told us, it was kinda like late because you go on a waiting list (for another school) and then London is like overcrowded so it's like by the time you get accepted you'd probably be in Year 10 and we start our GCSEs in Year 10 whereas other schools they do a two year course so it didn't make any sense.

Interviewer: How did you feel about that and do you think it's a good thing to have a two year course or a one year course?

Fatima: To an extent it's crammed in. Because a one year course yeah, you get to umm, it's like you don't have to remember everything that you've done over a two year period therefore a one year course it's more fresh in your memory than a two year course. In a one year course, now that I'm in Year 10, it will take the stress off me in Year 11 so that I can focus on like the core subjects like my Science and English.

Interviewer: Do you think that the school has done a good job in terms of communicating and preparing all of you for closing and what they are planning to do? Do you feel like you're told or included in the decision-making where the school is concerned?

Fatima: No not really. All that they are concerned about is like ... they don't think about like now that everybody is gone ... teachers lose their jobs so people that have a better qualification in certain subjects, other subject teachers are teaching it.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Fatima: Sad because they don't really have like a degree in what they're teaching me. The knowledge that they are giving me is very basic knowledge rather than further knowledge.

Interviewer: Do you know your subject options for next year?

Fatima: No and what I wanted to do I don't think they're doing it anyway.

Interviewer: Do you have any suggestions for how the school could make things better next year?

Fatima: Well there's nothing really that they can do, there are not enough students and not enough teachers and then they're trying to come in with the whole Intervention thing and then they're putting on our timetables that we'll have triple Science or triple Maths and that's pressure for some people because some people might need a break from that lesson or will just have three hours straight ....

Interviewer: How do you feel about the groupings for next year?

Fatima: By having three groups and not top set its just gonna hold people back because some people work faster than some people already and by putting some bottom students in a top set class is gonna slow down the whole learning process. And the amount of time teachers get to teach the subject, some people will understand the topic and then then the bottom set students won't and then she will have to go over it, over and over again with the subject [topic] and even if she does after school classes, some of these students won't attend.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the school still taking in new students?

Fatima: No. That is not a good thing because they bring over students but them students are not fully English students so they don't really understand what's going on. And, I think the school is trying to sugar coat what they're doing. They're not being straightforward about what's going on. They are putting our education first to an extent but they're not fully thinking like how we are taking it in. They're thinking like Ok, more students here what not, what not ....

Interviewer: What would be your advice to another head teacher ... since schools are closing all the time?

Fatima: They should at least tell us when they were considering it before they made it official and if some people wanted to go due to the options or something along them lines they should at least help us to get into another school before it's too late. And then some of the subjects that some students need to do to get into the college that they want to go to, they should at least let us do some college courses in one of our periods or something like that, to help us get the grades that we need.

Interviewer: One of the things they said in 2012 was that you would all be getting the 'highest education possible', do you think ...

Fatima: No, no...

Interviewer: Why do you think so?

Fatima: I think they just wanna close the school and get it over and done with. As I said, they're not thinking about **us** and what we want. Even though we have school council and year council and we're trying to get our voice heard but it's not ... they're saying it's not our decision, and what goes on with the school is the governor of the school. So even when we try to say our perspective, it doesn't get forward to the school governors. It probably goes no further than to the head teacher.

## Appendix 11 - Sample group interview transcriptions

### Sample group interview transcriptions

#### \*Interview Feelings Cards Revisited\* (Digital Audio - 19)

Venue: Sixth Form Common Room

Date: Tuesday 22 July 2014

Time: 09:40 – 10:40a.m.

Present: 9 Participants

##### Feelings Card

17-18 June participants developed Feelings Cards that best expressed how they were feeling about September.

In this group interview, 'Feelings Cards' are revisited to probe more deeply what participants' responses mean.

#### Student Responses to 'Feelings Card' –

##### *How are you feeling about September?*

**Participant 1:** Disappointed + Nervous – I feel nervous because the school isn't providing me with the best education possible. So I think it will worsen and affect my GCSEs ... Disappointed because the school can't do anything about it. (Shaniah)

Why does Shaniah feel this way?

**Shaniah:** I think that it's because the teaching. Because y'know it's only a few years before we finish probably the teachers are getting a bit more relaxed because its only us and the year 10s then we go.

**Interviewer:** So do you feel like you're not being taught properly now?

What does she mean?

**Shaniah:** I think it will happen in the future.

**Interviewer:** So how do you find your learning now?

**Shaniah:** I feel that's in some ways easy and in some ways difficult.

**Interviewer:** So what about the teaching? Do you find the teaching ok?

**Shaniah:** Some of my teachers are OK but not all of them ....

**Interviewer:** You said you think things will worsen ...

**Shaniah: Yes**

Why does Marie think that having new teachers will be a problem? What does she mean? (2)

What does Marie mean? (1)

**Participant 2:** Disappointed + Worried – I feel disappointed because it's a good school and I don't want it to close but in a way it has to 'cause its life. I feel worried because when it closes down it will be different without this school and when we have new teachers. (Marie)

**Marie (1):** Like all the teachers support us and they help us with our education and it's a shame that half of the teachers are leaving and it's a shame that new teachers are coming and it won't be the same without the other teachers.

**Marie (2):** I don't know. I just think they won't know what they're doing ... half of them probably won't know what they're doing.

**Participant 3:** Uncertain – Because I think with smaller classes, us students will have more individual attention. On the other hand, there is a thought in my mind that most specialist teachers are leaving. (Lenaè)

What would be the issue for you if specialist teachers left?

**Lenaè:** The new teachers wouldn't be able to teach exactly what the specialist teachers know, the knowledge on that specific subject therefore they wouldn't be able to teach it as well as the specialist teachers would. I might lack understanding because that teacher cannot explain it as well.

**Participant 4:** Worried + Happy – Worried because their [sic] will be less teachers to teach and help us for GCSEs ... Happy because the school will focus on only our year. (Tina)

What does Evelyn think the situation will be like?

What is the benefit of focusing on one year only?

**Participant 5:** Anxious + Uncertain - Am uncertain because I don't know what the situation will be like. I am anxious because am in between deciding if I want to move and if I don't move then I am worried my GCSEs might be affected. (Evelyn)

**Evelyn:** I plan on becoming a lawyer and I need a bit more help and someone to help me understand what subjects I need to do and how to get there.

**Interviewer:** So do you don't feel you're getting that help now?

**Evelyn:** I feel like we're not exactly getting that help. Like some people don't know what they need, what grade they need to progress

**Participant 6:** Don't care – I don't really care because I'm going to be leaving school soon! (Bob)

What is Michelleh uncertain about?

**Participant 7:** Anxious + Uncertain - I am feeling a little uncertain 'cause I'm not sure what's going to happen and I'm feeling sort of anxious to find out what's going to happen. (Michelleh)

**Michelleh:** Well ummmmm, well. On one side, I'm not sure if I'm gonna move schools or if I'm gonna stay. On the other side, if I do stay I don't know what's gonna happen because apparently there will be new teachers every week and we're not gonna really learn anything. The new teachers who come in won't know what year we're at and stuff and it's gonna get complicated and I won't get the education that I could get.

What does Jade mean 'it depends on me'? (1)

Why would it worry you if your friends left? (2)

**Participant 8:** Not bothered + Worried – I am not bothered because I will still get my GCSEs 'cause it depends on me and what I choose to do. Worried – I will have no friends left. (Jade)

**Jade (1):** I mean I'm the one who decides whether in the end I'm going to try my best or not try my best because of the situation that the school is going through so that's why I think it depends on me.

**Jade (2):** Because I'm pretty close to all my friends and if the close ones left I wouldn't have anyone else ... because I don't really talk to many people outside of school.



What does Marcel mean  
'it doesn't affect me' (1)  
'most subjects are easy'?  
(2)

**Participant 9:** Don't care + Not bothered – I feel this way because it doesn't affect me 'cause most subjects are easy. (Marcel)

**Marcel (1):** If the school closes after I get my GCSEs then I'm not gonna be relying on the school anymore to help me get on in life.

**Marcel (2):** The subjects I chose are easy; I chose the harder ones for year 11 and the easier ones for year 10 to relieve myself from extra stress.

All spellings by participants and, therefore, there may be some incorrect spellings.

Venue: School Library

Date: Monday 17 November 2014

Time: 10:40 a.m.

Present: 7 Participants (Marie, Lenaè, Marcel,

Tina, Shaniah, Jade and Michelleh)

Individual interviews will follow to clarify any issues from this interview.

Interviewer: Hi everyone. We haven't met since the last school year, even though you have all spoken to me informally. So I want to talk about how everyone has been getting on and how has the school year been for you so far. Remember to say your name first to make transcriptions easier for me.

*Participants speak informally about KS4 and starting their GCSEs, their teachers, the canteen food and their friends.*

- 1) Interviewer: Evelyn, Bob, Nima and others have left the school, how do you feel about that? Have any of your friends left and how do you feel about that? Who wants to start off?

Michelleh: Aaaah. Aaahm (sighs) I used to hang out with Evelyn at break. I do miss her but yeah ... its fine. (Hangs her head)

Interviewer: It's fine that she's gone?

Michelleh: Yeah .... (her gaze still lowered)

Why does Michelleh sigh?  
When she hangs her head,  
what does it mean?

Lenaè: The fact she left, clearly has an effect because she thought she was leaving for the better of like her education when really, here, she'd get more attention because it's less students in the class and more teachers so it has like a benefit side to us that she's gone.

Marcel: To be honest when Evelyn left I didn't even notice for a couple of weeks so it doesn't impact me.

Jade: It just made the numbers go down but otherwise it didn't really make a difference.

May 2015 – The numbers going down was clearly a plus for the young people. How do they feel now about the increase in student numbers due to new arrivals?

2) Interviewer: Are there any concerns about your classes and how do you feel your learning is going?

Tina: With supply teachers, they don't know what they're doing and for example in Drama we don't do any work.

Why was this the case? Was this down to the students or the supply teachers?

(Students confirmed that they didn't have supply teachers very often ... just the odd one or two, but that they were no good)

Jade: In class, with top set and bottom set, their abilities have changed like top set is not very high ability. I feel it's mixed. (She frowns)

Interviewer: Do you think this has something to do with the closure?

Jade: Yes

Interviewer: Does that bother you?

Jade: Yes because if you need the teacher's help, she's too busy like with the people at the front of the class (the new arrivals or SEN students) and then if I turn around and start asking another student to help me out, I get in trouble.

3) Interviewer: How do you feel you're getting on in your different subjects?

Marcel: Uuuuum I don't really know. I don't really concentrate on how I'm doing ... I just do my work

What does Marcel mean? (One-to-one interview to clarify)

Lenaè: I'm getting along. I don't always understand ... it's just there and I just do it ....(Hangs her head)

Lenaè looks sad. (One-to-one interview to clarify)

Interviewer: Is that because the school is closing that you have this attitude?

Lenaè: No ... I dunno but I'm just scraping along.

Tina: Uuum I think I'm doing well in school but the teachers could try harder to make us understand properly.

Interviewer: Do you think this has something to do with the school closing?

Tina: No

Marie: I think it's ok but sometimes I get unfocused because of one specific person.

Interviewer: Does that have anything to do with the school closing and would you like to say who that person is?

Marie: No it doesn't and it's Richard.

There is more to this (One-to-one interview to clarify)

Interviewer: Do you like him ... or ....

Marie: Eeeeeeeeeew (she interjects, in a voice of disdain)

Jade: My learning is fine there's a few students in the class who disrupt learning like but like every school will have that. I think maybe some of the new teachers don't know what they're doing cos they're just fresh teachers coming at the start of the year.

Shaniah: I think I'm doing well for myself but I agree with what Jade is saying that the supply teachers in some lessons like the optional lessons I have there's like two supply teachers in one week.

What is Shaniah's issue with having two supply teachers in option lessons in one week? (One-to-one interview to clarify)

The lessons are OK but I feel like some teachers, well just one teacher, doesn't make any sense sometimes.

Michelleh: My learning is fine. I just like yaah ... like personally I think I could do better.

Interviewer: So Michelleh, why aren't you doing better? Does that have something to do with the school closing?

Michelleh: No but because some of the stuff that's being done now some of the other students learnt it in Years 7 and 8 and I didn't do those things.<sup>3</sup>

- 4) Interviewer: Has anyone mentioned the closure of the school since the beginning of the school year?

All participants: No

- 5) Interviewer: Would you want anyone to say anything?

---

<sup>3</sup> Michelleh arrived half way through the last school year.

(Students mumble) They all say yes.

6) What would you want to know at this stage?

Marcel: I'd want to know if certain teachers are leaving because I'd be kinda happy.

Tina: I wanna know what they're gonna do with all the equipment that we have like the books in the library, the equipment in the gym.

Michelleh: I'd wanna know if the teachers we have now for our core subjects are gonna be the same teachers or next year we're gonna have different teachers. Cos then that would be sort of different and harder.

Lenaè: I'd wanna know ... next year it's gonna be different so how are they gonna make that the best year of our school life with only one year.

Tina: Also I wanna know why some teachers who came new last year, why did they leave.

Interviewer: Thank you all for meeting with me today. I will want you to think about when might be the best time to catch up with you individually.

## Appendix 12 - Ethical Approval



**The  
School  
Of  
Education.**

Karlene Gordon  
EdD Educational Studies

**Head of School**  
Professor Cathy Nutbrown

School of Education  
888 Glossop Road  
Sheffield  
S10 2JA

19 December 2013

**Telephone:** +44 (0)114 222 8086  
**Email:** edd@sheffield.ac.uk

Dear Karlene

### **ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER**

**A Critical Ethnography: Young People's Perspectives on the Effects of the Impending Closure of their School on their Education**

Thank you for submitting your ethics application. I am writing to confirm that your application has now been approved, and you can proceed with your research.

This letter is evidence that your application has been approved and should be included as an Appendix in your final submission.

Good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely



Professor Dan Goodley  
**Chair of the School of Education Ethics Review Panel**

CC Prof Liz Wood