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## **Closing Schools for the Future: detecting the death partners of a closing school**

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### **Background**

Whilst the logic of school closures is portrayed in communications from the British Government's Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and English local authorities as an act of logic and rationality, school closure invariably generates press stories of incensed parents, irate communities and exhausted teachers. What is frequently lost amongst the sturm und drang of closure however are the tiny stories (Denzin, 1991) of loss of teachers, pupils and families: the loss of professional expertise, collective memory, and shared hopes and fears.

In counterpoint to the national Building Schools for the Future programme currently being accelerated by the British Government in English secondary schools, this project is informed by earlier work conducted by Whitefield (1980) Molinero (1988), Schmidt (2007) and Picard (2003) who is particularly scathing about the rationale for school closure when arguments about size and value for money are brought to bear. This study is thus both timely and of significance to future policy developments: the lived experiences of the community of teachers, families and children during school closure is rarely researched and a great deal of understanding and knowledge remains uncaptured, analysed and assessed.

### **Research Questions**

This paper introduces a research programme which asks what is lost from a school community once the programme of closure has been agreed and a school moves inexorably towards its final days. It asks: What is lost in terms of social capital during the process of school closure? What impacts do closures have on social cohesion? What examples of best practice can be retained within the educational infrastructure? In using performative instrumentation for the assessment of a school's validity - value for money, targets, school rolls - do schools and communities lose out on the bigger stories of closure?

### **Methods**

This project uses two approaches: in the first case, research data was generated in one school from a series of small stories which led to an interplay of competing narratives told by competing narrators who demonstrate varying degrees of reliability (Booth, 1983), observational astuteness and rhetorical cloaking. Official documentation was juxtaposed against interview transcripts, field notes and voices mediated through the local press: a macro-political context is assessed alongside the micro-event, sometimes purposefully, sometimes frivolously, in an attempt to detect new narratives emerging unscathed from the forcible juxtaposition of their parent narratives. This generated a collection of tiny stories - a technique used within the practice of creative writing workshops. Nanofiction or microfiction are terms given to writing exercises in which the length of a story is arbitrarily determined to perhaps absurd lengths: Stern's microfiction model for example states that micro-stories should be no more than 250 words. The World's Shortest Stories (Moss, 1998) is more stringent: stories should contain no more than 55 words (excluding the title which must be no more than 7 words long) and each story must contain the following four elements: 1) a setting, 2) one or more characters, 3) conflict, and 4) resolution. Snellings Clark (2008) refers directly to the term tiny stories and whilst offering another set of limits on length (100 words) also directs the writer not to use the same word twice (albeit making an exception for contractions).

Additionally, a second methodology was developed at a second school which utilised photography as a research method: firstly to record photographs made with a camera on a digital phone, and secondly to encourage project participants to chose their own photos sites on the school premises

which were of interest to them. These materials then became a spur to conversations about the school and what was likely to be lost in the closure process.

### **Frame**

To say we live in a visual culture is to increasingly state the obvious and with the onset of digital photography and the preponderance of cheap miniature cameras, either as stand alone items of built into mobile phones, means that the ability to take, copy and distribute photos has become a far more every day occurrence than it was when Wendy Ewald was involved in her ground breaking work in teaching photography to children with analogue cameras and traditional technologies of the negative, the print and the darkroom (Ewald, 2001) or when Cartier-Bresson produced his iconic work in 1952. Whilst far more people may be able to take photographs, it is arguable whether the products of their endeavours count as art, disposable family snaps, vacation pictures (Becker, 1986: 244) or just plain visual flotsam and jetsam. The accessibility of contemporary digital technology, the ease with which images can be created, destroyed, copied and circulated means for the researcher endeavouring to use photography as a research tool has various implications both for the researcher and the participants in that research.

### **Research findings**

The results of the first part of the study are written as a series of tiny stories which conform to the Snellings Clark model: no more than 100 words in length, in commemoration of the age of the school at its closure. 78 tiny stories were written, each one representing a child who would have been on the school role had it been kept open in September 2008. These will be presented in the form of a mini-opera in order to develop a critical debate about how arts practice can not only be a means of generating research data, but can be a means of disseminating that data. The results of the second part of the study identify answers to the research questions concerning themes of displays and ownership, the pleasures of unpleasurable spaces, role and job development, attitudes to closure, systems and the systemisation of the school, moving from a school of *gemeinschaft* to a school of *gesellschaft*, transition or transit, ownership and positivity. The paper concludes with an identification of the schools death partners and discusses the application of bereavement methodologies for future school closures.