

**Truths, Lies, Sex and Stories?
Researching Allegations of
Sexual Misconduct Made
Against School Teachers**

Dr Pat Sikes

Professor of Qualitative Inquiry

University of Sheffield

Invoking the sociological imagination so that

‘the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues’

(Mills, 1970, pp. 11 – 12)

Mills, C.W. (1970) *The Sociological Imagination* Penguin, Harmondsworth (first published in 1959 by Oxford University Press).

‘fortunately, cases of malicious allegations or false allegations that are wholly invented are very rare’

DfES (2004a) *‘Definitions and Thresholds for Managing Allegations Against Education Staff’*, London: DfES.

'over the last few years there have been 2,316 allegations against NASUWT members alone. Of the 2,231 (*cases which have been*) concluded, in a staggering 2,116 either no grounds were discovered for prosecution or the allegation was not proven at court' (NASUWT, February 19, 2009).



RESEARCHING SEX AND LIES IN THE CLASSROOM

**ALLEGATIONS OF
SEXUAL MISCONDUCT IN SCHOOLS**

PAT SIKES AND HEATHER PIPER

Research Dilemmas

- Researching sex related topics
- Problems of intention and interpretation

'almost invariably there is a real incident or event that is the basis for an allegation'

we can agree that

'in many cases the allegation is based on different perceptions of an incident by different people, or a misunderstanding, or misrepresentation, or exaggeration'

DfES (2004b) *'Proposals for Dealing with Allegations against Teachers and Other Staff: A Consultation'*, London: DfES.

Research Dilemmas

- Moral Panic

at a time when there is so much concern about child protection, it is difficult to write about adult vulnerabilities. The temptation is to begin with a great deal of throat-clearing in the 'Don't get us wrong, we really agree with child protection ...' vein.' (p.119)

McWilliam, E. and Jones, A. (2005) 'An Unprotected Species? On Teachers as Risky Subjects' *British Educational Research Journal* 31 (1) pp. 109-120.

Research Dilemmas

- Challenging a master narrative

‘reluctant to acknowledge the
existence of false allegations
“because it might be seen as
trying to protect abusers”’

Children, Families and Schools Select
Committee Inquiry (2009) *Allegations Against
School Staff*, London, TSO.(CSFC, 2009: 8).

Truth is
unequivocally
at the heart of
the issue

the point of research as traditionally, and thus conventionally understood has long been thought of as a matter of discovering the truth. Within the empiricist epistemological perspective that has dominated our understanding of research, truth is defined as the accurate representation of an independently existing reality.

Smith, J. and Hodkinson, P. (2005) 'Relativism, Criteria and Politics', in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research: Third Edition*, Thousand Oaks: Sage: 915 – 932 (916)

Inverted commas and qualifying adverbs

How will you know if they're telling the truth?

Fallacious Identities?

- Wronged innocents?
- Abused innocents?

We could not unequivocally ascertain the truth

- Acknowledge and accept the difficulties
- A minor safeguard

Seeking stories

What stories can do

- Convey complexity and ambiguity
- Create a sense of feel and place
- Evoke emotions
- Promote empathetic scholarship (Pelias, 2004)
- Provoke sociological imagination (Mills, 1970)
- Broaden audiences
- Lead to praxis, empowerment and social change (Denzin, 2003)

stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history ... Experience ... is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones.

Clandinin, D. and Connelly, F. (1994) 'Personal Experience Methods' Inquiry', in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage: 413–427:415)

stories are and can only
ever be interpretations
and re-presentations

(performative accomplishments –
Denzin, 1997)

More questions around truth

claiming to write 'fiction' is different from claiming to write 'science' in terms of the audience one seeks, the impact one might have on different publics, and how one expects 'truth claims' to be evaluated. These differences should not be overlooked or minimized.

Richardson, L. (2000) 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry', in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research: Second Edition*, Thousand Oaks: Sage: 923 – 948 : 926

- by suspension from school,
- by isolation as a result of prohibitions on contact with colleagues,
- by attempts to maintain the anonymity of the accuser,
- by measures aimed at maintaining secrecy about what was alleged to have taken place, and which
- had continuing repercussions for mental and physical health and for family members, and
- adversely affected ability to continue working as a teacher or in any other way with young people, and insult was added to injury because of
- lack of punishment of and absence of consequences for their accusers.

I am grateful to have secured this debate today. I want to tell part of the story of my constituent, Nick Cousins, because that will allow me to ask how a teacher who has never been found guilty by a court is now unlikely to be able to return to his vocation because, in effect, of the intervention of the Government and their agencies. The story raises serious questions about the balance—in our schools, in the education system as a whole, in government and in our popular culture—between the protection of pupils and justice for teachers, and about the consequences for those schools, that system and our education and popular culture, if that balance goes awry. It also raises profound questions of justice and equity. (Hansard, 2009, np)



House of Commons
Children, Schools and Families
Committee

Allegations Against School Staff

Fifth Report of Session 2008–09

- The scale and nature of allegations of improper conduct made against school staff;
- Whether staff subject to allegations should remain anonymous while the case is investigated;
- Whether the guidance available to head teachers, school governors, police and others on how to handle claims of improper conduct by school staff should be revised, with particular reference to:
 - The procedures to be followed by disciplinary panels;
 - When suspension of the staff member concerned is appropriate;
 - When arrest of the staff member concerned is appropriate; and
 - The retention of records of allegations found to be false. (Children, Schools and Families Select Committee Inquiry, 2009)

The Department (*for Children, Schools and Families*) surprised us by claiming that it was “rare for an allegation to be deliberately false or malicious”. This claim was based upon the one-off review conducted by the Department in 2007 ... which indicated that the proportion of allegations which were malicious was 2.8%. (CFSFC, 2009: 8)

'much private uneasiness goes unformulated; much public malaise and many decisions of enormous structural relevance never become public issues ... it is the uneasiness itself that is the trouble; it is the indifference itself that is the issue' (1970 pp. 18 – 19)

Mills, C.W. (1970) *The Sociological Imagination* Penguin, Harmondsworth (first published in 1959 by Oxford University Press).