Young boys behind bars: An ethnographic study of violence and care in South Africa
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2 THE INSTITUTION, BOYS AND STAFF

To understand the dynamics and processes described in this book, we have to be acquainted with the physical building of the facility, its location and ground plan and the different social actors that populate it: boys and staff. This chapter will provide such an introduction, but first the policies that govern and embed the institution will be described.

2.1. Government approaches to the institutionalisation of children

Like the United States and UK, South Africa has seen an alarming increase in the number of children who find themselves in trouble with the law (Goldson 2002). The criminal activities perpetrated by these children range from theft to more serious violent crimes such as rape or murder (Garbarino 1999; Hagel and Jeyarajah-Dent 2006). Once a child is apprehended, he or she will enter the judicial system and be institutionalised while awaiting trial, until the state has decided his or her fate. Ideally, when an accusation is made, the child is assessed by a social worker, who then recommends to the court the type of custody the child will be subjected to in the waiting period.

Theoretically, the process of deciding the type of custody to implement is rational and depends on objective, mostly measurable data such as the category of the offence, age of the child, and whether the child is a first-time or multiple offender. Once this process has taken place and the child has appeared in court, two main trajectories are possible. While awaiting trial, the child is either placed in a correctional institution (henceforward referred to as a prison) or a secure care facility. These institutions are managed by different government departments. Prisons are administered by the Department of Correctional Services and secure care facilities by the Department of Social Development (DSD). The Department of Social Development is also the main department responsible for the care and protection of children in South Africa.

A secure care facility is defined to be a temporary home where children can stay if they have no one to look after them, and the state has not finally decided where they should be placed (see Child Justice Act for more detailed information). Although the government emphasises the need for children in trouble with the law not to be dealt with by the mainstream justice system but also aims to “prevent children from being exposed to the adverse effects of the formal criminal justice system by using, where appropriate, processes, procedures, mechanisms, services and options more suitable to the needs of children…”, in reality children are still being incarcerated in prisons. The time-frame for the length of incarceration can range from a month to years (Muntingh 2005; Odongo and Gallineti 2005).

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1 Secure care facilities have recently been renamed Child and Youth Care Centres. All boys previously managed by the Department of Education are now managed by the Department of Social Development. The only youths still managed by Correctional Services are the youth in prison.
The Institution, Boys and Staff

During my work at a correctional institution in Cape Town, I was introduced to children as young as 14 who had been incarcerated for months already. In prisons, children are under harsher surveillance than in secure care facilities, allowed less communication with the outside community and are supervised by armed wardens.

Thus, different government departments enforce different regimes that shape children’s daily lives in fundamentally different ways. These regimes include the spatial organisation and physical structure of the institutions, the roles and expectations of the staff members, as well as the children’s daily activities. Once the child is within either of these institutions, further decisions are made about the type of management the children will be subjected to (for example, the strictness of the regimen is determined by age group). Management of the children may also differ by institution.

Although statistical information is scarce on this particular age group (younger than 15 years old), we know from experiences elsewhere that the choice of institutionalisation has a tremendous impact on the course of a child’s life (Goldson 2002, 2005; Lapornik et al. 1996; Rhodes 2004; Zimbardo 2007). This study does not aim to compare these different trajectories, but to study the impact of institutionalisation in secure care facilities. Below I describe the secure care facility where I did most of my ethnographic work.

2.2. The geographical location of the secure care facility Middletown

Before visiting Middletown, I had to search high and low for the directions to the facility on various city maps. When my searches proved fruitless, I consulted a road map of a larger region of the Western Cape: still nothing. I had already visited the facility but struggled to remember the exact location. Various facilities such as hospitals, monuments and schools are clearly demarcated on the maps but there was no sign of Middletown. It was as if it did not exist.

I decided to phone the institution to get the directions. The receptionist guided me out of Cape Town’s city centre onto one of the freeways that takes tourists to scenic places. To most locals, this road leads to places and people of wealth and prestige, or so I thought. As I drove along the national road, the suburbs on either side of the freeway became less congested compared to the areas closer to the city centre. My trip began at the picturesque city-bowl, beautified by Table Mountain and the Atlantic seaboard, and rapidly moved into areas of dry, sun-burned land. After driving for half an hour, I reached the exit that led me off the freeway and guided me to a little town. I noticed a place that looked like a school, with a colourful park on the grounds and a road sign signalling the name of the place. This was an institution for young people, what was called a ‘Place of Safety’ for youth needing care but still not the secure care facility I was searching for. So I continued to drive. Minutes later, I found myself in a little town, lost.

I turned back and continued down the regional road that headed out of the town. There I came upon an informal settlement. This area is a predominantly black township, with an estimated population of 32,000 people. On the other side of the road is another settlement, populated mainly by coloured people in more formal housing. As I drove by, continuing my search for the institution, it was by chance that I noticed a small, weathered green sign indicating the physical address of the institution, still not clearly the name of the institution.
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I turned onto a narrow gravel road that crosses the stream running parallel to the road. Big trees arched neatly over the road, touching each other as if sheltering the route to the institution. The institution itself was not as visible because it was tucked away behind trees and obscured by a neighbouring wine farm. The impression of isolation was confirmed by the absence of any hub for public transport. Taxis are available to the main road and trains to the closest town, but if visitors are coming for the first time, they would, like me, have had trouble not just finding but getting to Middletown. Eventually I parked my car on the grass patch in front of the facility and looked at the building.

2.3. The physical world of the institution

2.3.1. The gatekeepers: Steel gates and security guards

In 1991, the facility Middletown was established to provide accommodation to children in need of care; children, for instance, who had to be removed from their homes as a result of abuse, in terms of the Children’s Act. However, since 1996, the mandate of the facility changed to provide accommodation for children awaiting trial under the Criminal Procedure Act. This change can be observed from the lay-out of the facility. Visitors are greeted with a huge billboard: ‘Middletown. Place of Safety’. Barbed wire fencing and steel gates surround the brick building. The facility is spread out and seemed to me to resemble the schools in the city, since many of those are now secured with barbed wire due to the high levels of violence spilling over from the communities. There are parking spaces in front of the facility for visitors and staff. Once their cars have been parked, visitors and staff proceed to the steel gate where contract security staff (male and female) monitors who and what enters the institution. The security guard(s) present at the gate greet whoever enters the premises. The outer gates are usually locked, although I noticed this was not always the case. Visitors are welcomed with a huge steel gate locked closed with an exceptionally small padlock. I found it strange and amusing that such a large gate was being held together by such a small lock.

But once a visitor moves past the gate and sets foot on the premises, he or she is not allowed to move beyond the security station, a tiny space filled with a small desk and one chair, accommodating only two people at a time. Here, bags are searched and a visitor’s form has to be completed. The form requests the following information from the visitor: full name, telephone number, reason for visit, organisation that the visitor is representing, who the visitor has come to visit, car license plate number, time of arrival and signature. Once the form has been completed, the securities usually walk the visitor to the reception area. Here, the officer informs the receptionist and asks for the person being visited to be contacted. With my daily visits I became more familiar to the security guards. As a result, they would sometimes let me walk unescorted to the dorms, occasionally without even searching my bag.

When facing the building, the reception is at the entrance point. On the left-hand side of the facility are two dorms, for the younger boys, hidden behind a wall and a steel gate. Further to the left is the school, set apart from the other sections of the institution. To the right of the reception are two dorms for the older boys, and next to them is a field for sport and recreational activities.
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2.3.2. The reception area

On entering the facility, one has to walk through wooden doors at the foot of which lies a doormat reading: ‘Welcome to Middletown’ Batho Pele (People first).2 On the right-hand side of the entrance, the receptionist sits behind a glass door so that she can watch who moves in and out of the facility. This area is visitor-friendly, furnished with tables and comfortable chairs. The reception area is painted bright yellow and decorated with photos of some of the boys previously or currently housed at the facility. At the entrance is a multi-leveled fountain, water streaming from one level to another. Above this fountain hangs a painting that covers the entire brick wall. The painting portrays an older person lifting up a child. This message suggests that the institution takes care of the boys.

In the reception area there are couches on a blue mat and artificial flowers on a wooden table, which is neatly arranged with pamphlets on HIV prevention and life insurance planning. The windows in the reception area are securely barred and pasted on the opposite wall next to the painting is a framed print of the ‘code of conduct’. This front section of the facility accommodates the professional and management staff. In the immediate space of the reception area the offices of the general manager and care worker managers can be found. Next to the general manager’s office is the medical staff’s office (two female nurses and one male nurse). Boys are sent here for whatever health problem needs to be attended to or when new admissions are examined. Next to the medical office and on the other side of the reception are the offices for the social workers, who are resident mental health workers. Alongside these is the resident occupational therapist’s office. The administrative offices are located here too.

2.3.3. The dorms

Beyond this front section lie the boys’ dormitories, which are referred to by the staff and boys as the ‘dorms’ When exiting the front section to reach the dorms, there are steel gates at the end of the reception passage. Each of these steel gates leads to an open space. On the left-hand side the steel gate leads to an open tarmac playground with a basketball hoop, which is situated next to the two dorms that house the younger boys in the facility. ‘Panthers’ mostly accommodate the youngest boys, who are aged nine to about 12 years old, and ‘Sharks’ mostly houses boys aged 12 to 14 years. On the opposite side of these dorms two other dorms accommodate the older boys of the institution. ‘Tigers’ holds the oldest boys in the facility (up to age 16), whereas ‘Owls’ is the dorm for boys who are not yet considered teenagers, but are too old or physically/socially/emotionally developed for the boys in Panthers or Sharks.

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2 Batho Pele, a Sotho translation for ‘People First’, is the name of the government’s programme for transforming its public service from an inefficient bureaucracy with a focus on rules to a culture of customer care, in which the needs of all citizens of South Africa are served irrespective of race, gender or creed. This programme is set out in the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Government Gazette No. 18340, 1 October 1997). It is an initiative that encourages public servants to strive for excellence in service delivery. It is a simple and transparent mechanism that allows citizens to hold public servants accountable for the quality of service they deliver (Batho Pele Handbook: A Service Delivery Improvement Guide). For further information see http://www.ipid.gov.za/about%20us/batho_pele.asp.
Directly between these two sections of the facility stands the kitchen and dining hall, which also serves as a hall for other activities. Sharks and Panthers are located on a side of the building more open to natural light than the other side. In contrast, the playground leading to Tigers and Owls is covered, which produces a dome-like effect. The cover was created to protect the boys from bad weather when they wanted to play outside in winter but, as a result, no sunlight comes through onto the playgrounds and into the rooms of the dorm. Various staff members jokingly refer to the area of Sharks and Panthers as ‘Kirstenbosch gardens’ and Tigers and Owls as ‘the ghetto’.

Each of the four dorms lodges approximately 16 boys. After you enter a dorm, a steel door keeps the boys and staff locked in. When this door is opened, yet another steel gate needs to be unlocked before anyone can enter the dorm. Each dorm has a second steel gate and door to the passage connecting the dorm to another dorm. Once you enter a dorm, there is a common room where boys spend most of their time. In it boys have lockers to protect their private possessions. There are a table and chairs for the care workers, who are locked in with the boys during the day. For entertainment purposes, the common room has a television. Inside each dorm, a staff room provides a basin and urn for the care workers, along with a table, chairs and telephone. In many instances care workers also use this staff room as a private space, for instance during their lunch break. But it is also a room that serves as a space for consultation between boys and staff. Here care workers interact with the children privately, especially when conflicts need to be addressed.

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3 Kirstenbosch Gardens is situated a few minutes’ drive south from Cape Town city centre. It is a botanical garden visited mostly by wealthier locals and tourists, who enjoy the gardens for picnics, open air concerts, and walks to admire the range of trees and plants. The lush vegetation and backdrop of the mountain make these gardens a picturesque setting.

4 In this context, ‘ghetto’ refers to the Cape Flats and other parts of the city considered to be ‘dark’ areas, in contrast to the uplifting ‘lightness’ of Kirstenbosch Gardens.
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The room of the boys. This photo only shows two of the four beds in this room.

Due to the rapid turnover of boys in the institution, there are times when the dorms are fully occupied, while at other times there are fewer boys. A passage leads from the common room to the dorm. Each dorm has four beds. The windows of these rooms are secured with burglar bars. Further along the passage is a shared bathroom, equipped with several showers and toilets. Directly opposite the bathroom is a general storage room. Neither the bathrooms nor the bedrooms have doors, which allow easier surveillance of the boys.
The passage in a dorm that leads to all the rooms, including the bathroom and storage room. It also connects one dorm to another.

This is the view that one sees while walking through the halls where the boys and staff interact in the facility. The passage from the dormitories leads to a separate building: the school.
2.3.4. The school

All boys attend a few hours of school every day. The school ground is situated a few metres away from the main section of the facility. Unlike the rest of the facility, the school is isolated from the offices and dorms. When approaching the school, there is a glass door secured with a gate. The boys have to stand in a straight line before they can enter the school premises; otherwise they are not allowed to enter. When the boys leave the school premises, security staff physically search boys to check that no objects such as scissors or knives are removed from the school and that no other items have been stolen.

After passing the glass doors, one enters a large common room that is used when boys watch movies at school or when specific programmes are presented. This area is especially useful when staff require a bigger space for the boys and their gatherings. This common room branches off into different sections of the school premises. Closer to the glass doors is the staff kitchen, the principal’s office, staff bathrooms and empty offices. From the common room two main passages lead in opposite directions. On the left-hand side of the common room, different classrooms are located where the boys attend classes on arts and culture and learn social skills. At the end of this passage lies another large room used for sports such as boxing. To the right-hand side of the common room another passage leads to the opposite side of the school where there are more classrooms and another large room in which the boys learn skills in carpentry and similar crafts.

Middletown can be perceived as a total institution in the sense that, in theory, staff members have a position of power in the hierarchy and have clearly designated roles, whereas boys are perceived as children who need care and should be watched over. This part of the chapter will describe the boys that the facility houses, their daily activities and staff makeup.

2.4. The boys

The young boys who enter the gates of the institution are from various parts of the Western Cape. Many of these boys come from the Cape Flats (known in Afrikaans as die Kaapse Vlakte), an extensive flat area of land to the southeast of the city’s central business district. To locals, the place is also known as ‘The Flats’. Under Apartheid in the 1950s, the Group Areas Act (1950) forced non-whites out of the central parts of the urban areas, then only for white people, and moved non-whites into the government-built townships on the Flats. Thus this area became the new home to many non-whites who were forcibly removed from their former homes. It also became known as the ‘dumping ground’.

Other boys, often more than 50%, according to the monthly statistical reports of the admissions and discharges of the institution, came from the Overberg region. The Overberg lies east of Cape Town, past the Hottentots Holland Mountains, along the Cape Province’s south coast between the Cape Peninsula and the region known as the Garden Route. The area is mainly devoted to wheat and fruit farming, the Elgin Valley being one of the largest suppliers of fruit in the country. Even though these areas are situated at opposite ends of the city, and the Cape Flats is more urbanised than the Overberg, it was clear that these two regions had many common traits. The boys from both regions lived in communities rife with social problems such as violence, gangsterism, a high prevalence of teenage pregnancy, high unemployment rates, and substance abuse.
During my study, all the boys I interacted with, both in the secure care facility and in the prisons I visited were from two specific ethnic backgrounds: coloured and black African. All came from lower social classes. In most cases, the boys’ parents were either unemployed or employed on temporary contracts. Many families were in dire financial straits, and therefore many of the boys had to earn their own living. The coloured and black demographic of boys in prisons and secure care facilities can partly be explained by their parents’ inability, compared to parents of white descent, to pay for the legal support that might have helped keep their children out of the prison system.

The boys in Middletown were accused of crimes ranging from housebreaking, theft, possession of drugs to sexual assault, rape and murder. Many of the boys had been incarcerated as first-time offenders. Not much data were available regarding re-offenders, but during my fieldwork I often watched boys being discharged, only to see them return again after a few months for similar or more serious crimes.

The majority of the boys in Middletown were Afrikaans-speaking because of the communities they were born and raised in. Most of the coloured boys spoke Afrikaans as their first language and English as their second, whereas black African boys spoke an African language as their first and English or Afrikaans as their second. As a result, most of this study was conducted in Afrikaans, a language that I am fluent in. Various adults dealing with the boys, such as the care workers and even the families of the boys, perceive the boys as a risk to themselves and others. The South African government and the institution itself have a duty to protect the boys but also prevent them from harming others. Moreover, the boys’ financial, social and emotional needs have to be taken care of. The chances are high that these boys have dropped out of school, become teenage parents and experienced various other social or emotional crises related to drug abuse and domestic violence. The complexity of these problems requires a multidisciplinary approach, and therefore different kinds of practitioners are involved in caring for the boys, as this thesis will elaborate.

2.5. The structure of the inmates’ daily activities

The daily activities of the boys at Middletown take place between 6 a.m., when they wake up, and 9 p.m., when they are expected to go to bed. They participate in what appears to be a strictly controlled daily programme. The institution prescribes specific times and places for each day’s activities. Below is the boys’ daily schedule as displayed on a noticeboard at the front of the facility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>06h00</td>
<td>Wake up the boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07h30</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07h45</td>
<td>Smoke break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08h15</td>
<td>School: ½ Panthers and Owls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09h45</td>
<td>School: ½ Panthers and Owls back from school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09h45</td>
<td>Tea break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10h15</td>
<td>School: ½ Panthers and Sharks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11h45</td>
<td>School: ½ Panthers and Sharks back from school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11h45</td>
<td>School: Tigers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13h15</td>
<td>Tigers back from school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13h30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the years of Apartheid, individuals were classified on the basis of their race, supposedly identifiable by skin colour: ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘coloured’.
The basic rhythm of the day is determined by meals. Children are escorted to the dining hall where breakfast, lunch and dinner is served to all children of the institute, constantly surveyed by the care workers and security staff.

All children attend school two hours per day, for five days a week. Different dorms go to school at different times of the day. The curriculum is divided into particular sections presented on particular days. On Mondays and Wednesdays the boys are taught skills (art, crafts, computers and life skills); on Tuesdays and Thursdays their programme consists of academic work in English, Afrikaans, mathematics, Xhosa and the life sciences. Fridays are set aside or recreational activities such as movies, sports and games. However, during the period of my study the boys usually watched movies on Fridays, sometimes on boys’ requests, and sometimes because it allowed teachers to attend to other responsibilities. In theory, the school should provide an afternoon programme for the boys as well. After lunch (13:15–13:45) new boys are assessed to decide where the boy will be placed, and the schedule dictates that from 14:45–16:00 the boys will attend extra classes and participate in recreational activities at the school or outside. But during my fieldwork at the institution, the afternoon programme was almost non-existent. Boys were usually locked up in the dorms and only on the odd occasion allowed to play outside or attend extra classes.

When not at school, children stay in the common room at their dorm where they are either presented with an activity or, in most cases, left to their own devices (playing games, interacting with one another, watching television). ‘Smoke breaks’ allow them briefly outside the dorm; ‘coffee or tea breaks’ are taken either in the dining hall or the dorm. They are not allowed in their bedrooms until bedtime. During the night, a care worker will watch over the boys, sitting in the common room and occasionally walking down the aisle to inspect whether they are asleep. Court appearances take the boys outside the institution in the back of a small police van, as do forensic assessments (referred to by boys and staff as ‘home visits), where medical staff take the children to visit their families to explore specific issues relating to the child. The visiting rights of children in a secure care facility, including in Middletown, are not too restricted and visits take place in the reception area with very little supervision and with intimate contact allowed. Visits from family, friends and guardians are actively encouraged.

On paper, the daily schedule is clearly laid out and defined. However, in practice, it does not always reflect how the day unfolds. The programme proved to be rather flexible. Scheduled duties would be changed as a result of extraneous factors such as public holidays,
church programmes, and the mood of care workers and the boys. Throughout this dissertation I will illustrate and elaborate on this flexibility in the daily schedule.

2.6. The staff and professional makeup

The following table illustrates the human-resource component of the institution. Staff members are divided into specific groups depending on their roles in the facility and location within the physical building. The description below of the structure and services of the staff members is derived from the official institutional document titled, ‘Middletown, Place of Safety: Service Delivery Standards’. The staff of the institution comprises internal and external staff. The internal staff are those employed within the institution, whereas the external staff are those whose services are requested from other organisations or companies.

2.6.1. Internal staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITIONS</th>
<th>SERVICES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Leadership and transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial and personnel administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capacity-building of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sound labour relation practice, staff training, advice, consultation, supervision,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>disciplinary action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitation of collective and individual grievances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occupational and Health safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative clerks</td>
<td>Financial administration, budget control, cost control, transport, provisioning, purchasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typist</td>
<td>All typing to be completed within two working days or to be delegated within administration section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit managers</td>
<td>Oversee the different sections of the institution, including finance, care work, and school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social auxiliary workers / care workers</td>
<td>Responsible for the physical, social, emotional and recreational needs of the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers and occupational therapist</td>
<td>Responsible for the developmental therapeutic services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Different staff members at different times care for the children during the day. Care workers oversee the children in the dorms. They work 12-hour shifts, two day shifts and two night shifts. The care workers have diverse educational and personal backgrounds. During my research, most of them did not possess advanced educational qualifications or training. However, this was bound to change because the professional status of care workers was under review. Staff members are now expected to undergo professional training and education before they can enter the field of child care, since they deal with the children more frequently than any of the other staff. They are locked up alongside the children every day. Their attire requires a degree of neatness but they are allowed to wear casual clothes. However, in an attempt to create a more professional image, staff were provided with uniformed clothing such as T-shirts and tracksuits, all displaying the logo of the Department of Social Development and the name of the institution. Unlike prison wardens, care workers
do not carry arms. Care workers were mildly derogatory when they referred to their colleagues, such as medical and managing officers, who work outside the dorms, as those ‘sitting in front’ or ‘them in the front section’. There are noticeable tensions between different categories of staff located in different sections. These tensions will be discussed at different points in this dissertation.

Apart from the care workers, the medical staff consists of nurses, social workers and an occupational therapist. These are registered practitioners who possess tertiary qualifications, and work five days a week, in eight-hour shifts. They are only in direct contact with the children when specific programmes such as drug awareness workshops are facilitated or when children’s individual medical concerns need to be addressed. Management and administrative staff work eight-hour shifts as well. Management staff mainly deal with the children when ‘major’ issues have to be confronted, such as a particular child’s recurrent violent behaviour. The management staff oversees the various employees and daily activities in the institution, whereas the administrative staff attends to the daily running of the institution. The care worker manager oversees specific issues relating to the care workers. Cleaning staff, kitchen staff and security staff work shifts as well. Unlike those ‘sitting in front’, they interact on a daily basis with the children, but in a less formal manner than the rest of the staff.

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter described the fieldwork setting of this study, against the backdrop of government policy for the custody of children in trouble with the law. General information of the boys’ daily activities was provided and the diverse categories of staff at the institution were described. My understanding of the physical and social make-up of the institution, boys and staff, influenced how and when I collected my data. This brings us to the methodology of this study.