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# *'Researching Our Lives'*

## **Developing Inclusive Research Methodologies - Testing the Voice Centred Relational Method of Qualitative Data Analysis in a Collaborative Research Project on Early School Leaving.**

**Working Paper April 2004**

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*'It would be very rare for this group to actually be asked what they think about anything...To work in partnership with adults has improved the younger team members ability to communicate and listen, and examine other perspectives...They tell their own story best and this research project has provided a space for the young people to express their ideas, observations and gripes, in an atmosphere that has been essentially empowering. '*

**Stephanie Troy**

**Key Words:** Democratising Research Process and Practice, Collaborative Partnerships, Qualitative Data Analysis, Voice Centred Relational Method, Early School Leaving, Social Exclusion

**Abstract**

Committed to developing collaborative research processes and practices, this study sought to establish research partnerships between academic researchers, activists working in a context of social exclusion and those experiencing social exclusion. Responding to ideological and methodological challenges to democratise research processes and practices, the paper discusses the process of establishing collaborative research partnerships while assessing a methodological adaptation of the Voice Centred Relational (VCR) method of data analysis. The VCR method was used to interpret data on different experiences of school with a particular focus on early school leaving among a group of teenagers in a rural area in the West of Ireland.

The VCR method claims to clarify conventions for the interpretation of qualitative data. Arguably, this removes some of the technical barriers that inhibit the possibility for the researched to become active interpreters of the data that they present to researchers. In order to test this and other claims of the VCR method, a collaborative research study was designed which included research participants in the analytical and interpretive practice of data analysis. This paper reports on the process of establishing a collaborative interpretive community and on the practice of adapting social science analytical methods so that deeper inclusion in the practice of research is realised for researchers and researched alike.

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## **SECTION 1: The Democratisation of the Process and Practice of Research**

In the interests of autonomous inquiry, the social scientist has had a privileged position in interacting with others. Awkward questions can be asked, provoking unsettling emotions in the researched. Intrusion into the private sphere of people's lives is tolerated. The trust that is placed in the social scientist as an autonomous inquirer has been founded on a belief in knowledge generated by research as contributing to the social good, on the rigour and validity of research methodologies and in understanding that social scientists have developed a code of professional practice and research ethics which seek to protect the research participant from 'harm'. But who decides which knowledge, generated by whom, by what means, contribute to the social good? Who is responsible for extending research methodologies to ensure that the social good is achieved? Who decides what is ethical and what is not?

Recently in the Irish context, the legitimacy of the researcher's authority to research other people's lives has been questioned (see Lynch 2000, Lentin 2000, O'Neill 2000, Feldman *et al* 2002). Critical observations and complaints concerning research practices have come from researchers and researched alike. These range from contesting the privileging and separation of expert knowledge from experiential knowledge, frustration at the complexity and inaccessibility of research methodologies, producing public accounts of ethical abuse incidents, and criticism of the paucity of attempts to include the researched in the research process. As consent to being researched is withdrawn, the authority of the researcher to do research is weakened.

The privileged expertise of the researcher, conferred by professional and educational institutions, enhanced by academic qualifications and on the job experience has separated the sociological researcher from others. His/her ability to do the job is based on a specialised knowledge of research methodologies

which others do not have. The authority of professional researchers to engage in research is being challenged by the researched. Greene (1996) has noted that researchers '...are called upon to defend our work by those who must bear its consequences' (Greene:286). The researched may agree to participate but only on their own terms. Individuals and communities seek to place limits on who can do research, by whom and for what purpose as topics on what can and cannot be researched are identified. The challenge to democratise research has come from the researched and from within the investigative disciplines.

Researchers have long been critical of the 'methods, ethics and politics' of objective, value-free inquiry (Daly 2000). In contrast to conventional methodologies, researchers utilising participatory methodologies seek to engage in meaningful partnerships with the researched from the initial planning and design stages to 'following through' on implementing policy/action recommendations (see McDonagh 2000). The potential of participatory methodologies to 'empower' participants is often emphasised as the control and ownership of the research process moves from researcher to the researched, though little mention is made that researchers too may be empowered in ceding control, through experiential learning and learning mutuality in research relationships. Lynch (2000) characterises participatory research as 'emancipatory' based on 'the moral right of research subjects to exercise ownership and control over the generation of knowledge produced about them and their world...' (Lynch: 87). The consequences of ideologically or technically excluding people from 'democratic engagement with research practice' inhibits access to information, decreases the capacity to make informed judgements about the validity of research findings and crucially, disrupts the capacity to make informed, strategic choices (Lynch 2000). The onus for democratising the research process lies with researchers who acknowledge that 'knowledge is power' (Lynch 2000: 87) and who are willing to share knowledge, cede power.

Professionally, the authors have begun to respond to internal and external challenges to democratise research processes and practices: (1) by theorising the meaning and consequences of diverse models of participation; (2) by adopting a more reflexive attitude in our work; and (3) to a lesser extent, by experimenting with methodological practices to include the researched in generating, analysing and representing the data about their lives.

### *Models of Participation*

For some researchers a participatory approach consists of inviting participants into the researcher's process, to read and comment on transcripts and/or draft final reports. However it is the researcher who controls the research design and outcomes. Others have taken this somewhat further in designing the research with participants from the outset and by engaging in a lengthy consultation and feedback process with the researched. Biggs (cited in Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) has devised a typology outlining the potential extent of participation with a focus on ownership and control of the research process. The typology moves from 'shallow' participation which is researcher led, to 'deep' participation characterised by mutuality, shared learning and participant led. Deep participation affirms local knowledge and is based on the premise that people are informed agents, 'capable of analysing their own situations and designing their own solutions' (Cornwall and Jewkes: 1670). Critically, researcher-researched roles are dissolved/shared as all members become participants in the production of knowledge. Biggs (1989) describes four possible modes of participation:

Contractual - people are contracted into the projects of researchers to take part in their inquiries or experiments

Consultative - people are asked for their opinions and consulted by researchers before interventions are made



Collaborative - researchers and local people work together on projects designed, initiated and managed by researchers

Collegiate - researchers and local people work together as colleagues with different skills to offer, in a process of mutual learning where local people have control over the process (cited in Cornwall and Jewkes: 1669).

While we may aspire to the collegiate level of participation in research projects, in practice this is rarely the case. Participation may move from one mode to another as research relationships develop. For mutuality and reciprocity to be achieved in research relationships a willingness to invest time combined with an attitude of openness to the process and consequences of participation is required. In venturing towards collegiate levels of involvement, contractual, consultative and collaborative relationships are required. Similarly, researchers may operate conventional and participatory approaches at different stages in the life of a research project. Cornwall and Jewkes note that 'the most important distinctions centre on how and by whom is the research question formulated and by and for whom are research findings used' (Cornwall and Jewkes: 1668).

Within Irish research practice we are currently witnessing the beginnings of the 'democratisation of the research process' (see Cockburn and Mulholland 2000, O'Neill 2000, Feldman *et al* 2002). Locally based projects are utilising funding to train participants in participatory research methods so that they are skilled to do their own research supported by the 'researcher as consultant'. Promoters and research practitioners are advised to plan relevant projects so excluded peoples are involved in all stages of the research process. This has implications for removing technical barriers to participation as well as revising our research ethics.

There is an increased interest from research practitioners and recipients in specifically adapting sociological research methods with a view to removing technical barriers to doing research (Van Son 2000; NWCI 2001; CPA 2002; Feldman *et al* 2002). Guidelines for the use of participatory mechanisms are now available and more creative approaches to facilitate research participant involvement are also being urged (Van Son 2000).

### *Action -Research*

Research projects that engage with emancipatory themes are concerned about the benefits of research findings to the individuals and communities who comprise the researched or the communities of interest whom they represent. What research practices are necessary in order to promote action or change, based on research findings? Lynch is doubtful that there are mechanisms within emancipatory methodologies themselves which can effectively move the 'radical understandings which emerge from research...into discourses and political practices which would enable it to become active in the struggle for equality and social justice' (Lynch: 91). She argues that knowledge of injustice does not necessarily lead to change, rather new structures and practices that reflect the emancipatory ethos are required to support 'emancipation'. She identifies the importance of total involvement of the researched from research design to policy implementation, the setting up of 'research coalitions' between the academy and community and 'learning partnerships' between researchers and the community, if action is to flow from research. Lynch advises that researchers working on equality issues devise equality action plans in collaboration with community representatives, to ensure a link between research and action.

## *Reflexivity*

Bringing a reflexive dimension to a research project on the other hand, not only demands researcher reflexivity, but reflexive research relationships, reflexive practices and a commitment to developing a reflexive social science (see also Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Our understanding of researcher reflexivity is based on the individual researcher reflecting on his/herself in relation to the research task, the aim being to illuminate one's own assumptions and biases as these relate to the research and how they may enter and influence the research process.

Focussing on researcher-researched relationships and on the conduct of research, feminist researchers, among others, have advocated the mutual and transparent collection, interpretation and representation of research data (Byrne 2000; Lentin 2000). There are analytical, ethical and credibility difficulties in intertwining researcher and researched in the mutual creation and interpretation of data (see for example Hammersley 1992). Problems that occur can be partially resolved, it is argued, through the exercise of reflexivity to interrogate power, privilege and multiple hierarchies in the research process (McIntyre and Lykes 1998).

Our research findings, our authoritative claims to speak on behalf of others, rests on how we know what we claim to know. Responding to the democratisation of knowledge making, we wish to make a case for inclusive and reflexive research paradigms. To do this we have to be prepared to explicitly discuss, write about and document research relationships (including our own) to the research, planning, process and methodological practices. This is challenging, time consuming and revealing work and we were often provoked to ask the question 'is it worth it?'

Tangling with a criticism of the ethos and practice of conventional research methodologies with its distinctive views on ethics, research relationships, knowledge production and use, in this project we wished to engage in research practices that follow a more 'inclusive' approach. We wanted to do research that was more authentic in terms of how it addresses the reality of people's lives and which moved away from the 'in-out' nature of much of the methods used in mainstream policy and evaluation research. In the attempt to produce 'less false accounts', an experimental attitude is required, we argue, to test, adapt and revitalise the design and implementation of research methodologies. If the ideological commitment is to inclusive research paradigms, then we are obliged to develop and evaluate research methodologies which accommodate reflexivity and inclusion as core concepts in research planning, process and practice.

Two other elements influenced the general research design of the current project. Aware of the few examples of qualitative work in Irish poverty research and strong arguments from community representatives to 'tell it like it is' (O'Neill, 1997), we were committed to working with a project concerned with social exclusion that was already engaged in their own programme of activities. Specifically we sought a working partnership with a group for whom engagement with research would complement their own action plans. We wanted to compose a diverse and open research team to include members of the target group, academic researchers with varying interests and backgrounds, and members from support organisations or other persons interested in reflecting on democratising research process and practice in a community context. The *Researching Our Lives* (2000-2003) project developed in this context, with members of the research partnership sharing a commitment to equality, a participatory ethos and a willingness to experiment with research methodologies.

## **SECTION 2: Democratising the Research Process: Working Partnerships**

The *Researching Our Lives* project, utilised both research coalitions and learning partnerships. Lynch (2000) argues that 'research coalitions' between institutions and 'learning partnerships' between researcher and researched are required so that emancipatory goals can be translated into action. The former included partnerships initiated by academic researchers at NUI Galway with (1) West Training and Development, the regional support agency for Community Development and Family Support Projects (2) the Management Committee of the *Creative Communities for Change* arts project and (3) project funders, NUI Galway Millennium Research Fund and the Combat Poverty Agency Poverty Research Initiative<sup>1</sup>. The research learning partnerships that evolved included two smaller groups consisting of the academic researchers on the one hand, teenagers and the Community Arts Worker from the *Creative Communities for Change* project on the other. Both these smaller groups combined to form the larger group for the purposes of the project.

Initial contact among the academic researchers arose from shared interest in sponsored research involving qualitative approaches to studying the experiences of Low Income Households with Children. The researchers formed a team and prepared a tender for the work. In coming together, different aspects of the project had appealed to the individual researchers: the focus on children; poverty; qualitative research; and the qualitative research-policy link being key among them. Also motivating us was the desire to work together in the context of bringing different sets of skills, experiences and interests to bear in what had the potential to be both a useful policy and academic exercise. In spite of being

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<sup>1</sup> The Millennium Research Fund at NUI, Galway granted the NUI, Galway team a small amount of money to develop the project in the initial phase. In late 2001, the CPA partially funded a joint bid from the NUI, Galway and Creative Communities for Change teams in support of the research work. In 2002, the Creative

unsuccessful in the tender, we felt that the combination of a participatory approach and developing inclusive research methodologies in the area of social exclusion could be worthwhile and decided to continue our work.

Making contact with individuals or groups experiencing and working within the context of social exclusion was the first step. One route would be via well-established, locally credible projects working in disadvantaged communities. Community Development Projects appeared to be an appropriate start point.<sup>2</sup> We felt that the best way to gain access to such a group would be via West Training and Development, the support agency for CDPs and Family Resource Centres in the west region. West Training and Development identified the potential of the methodology for use by themselves, other support agencies and projects. That organisation identified a community arts project, operated between a number of CDPs in a neighbouring county as a possible vehicle through which the research could proceed.

The third research coalition in the project involved the Management Board of the Community Arts project. Following initial contact from WTD, the academics sought a meeting with the management board, to discuss the proposed project. The main concerns of the Community Arts Project Management Board would be that the research would not be additional to the work of the Community Arts Worker but would rather enhance that work. The possibility of doing a research project with teenagers already participating in the Community Arts Project was identified. Following contact between the community arts worker and the young people, and further contact between the

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Communities for Change team made a successful application to the CPA for funding for support for further video work with the young people.

<sup>2</sup> As operated under the Community Development Programme operated by the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs.

community arts worker and the academics, agreement was reached to work together.

The core learning partnership in the research project is that among the academics, Community Arts Worker and teenagers. At most, there were five young people participating, while the smallest number was two. The commitment of the Community Arts Worker to the project was key. She mediated between the academics and teenagers facilitating the participatory research process. Moving from gatekeeper to mediator, the Community Arts Worker guarded and promoted the interests of the teenagers from the intrusive aspects of the research process. At all times her concerns were for the well being of the teenagers. One of the early challenges she identified was 'Finding the starting point where everyone can access the project from an even playing field'. She motivated the young people to remain involved throughout the project, driving it forward and communicated their responses at different points to the academics. Through her the teenagers were given the opportunity to meter their involvement and shape the direction of the research. She brought a creative dimension to our work, encouraging all of us to experiment with painting as a means of expression and to come to trust each other in the process of shared activities. Her continued commitment to an ethos of equality in research relationships reflected her professional interest in a mode of work that was different to her own but that raised important questions for her own work. She noted that

'One of the challenges with the developmental nature of the work is to ensure that the process of engagement is empowering and the concept of equality is taken very seriously. The guiding principle of 'from the people, for the people' is easier to aspire to than to realise, but I do believe that the concept of the 'researched' being the 'researchers' goes a long way toward realising the principle'.

She was keenly aware of the importance of promoting self-reflection among the teenagers as a basis for moving into adulthood and saw being involved in the

research project as another opportunity to do this work. Moreover, her contribution to the research team guided our thinking on developing working models of participatory research.



*Seeing the Other's Worlds – NUI, Galway Library*

At the time of establishment of each of the partnerships, a significant amount of work went into explaining what the research was about. Insofar as the partnership was always going to be led by the academics as the project initiators, much time has been given by that team to articulating what we meant by partnership, participation and collaboration. The idea of researching the research process, rather than being driven only by an interest in substantive topic (eventually early school leaving/the story of school) was certainly new to most of our partners, as was the nature of the VCR method as an approach to



data analysis. This process of explanation and clarification continued to be a feature of the work throughout the life of the project.

Considerable investment of time was required to develop and maintain the partnership process. Each new partnership involved in the project required a time commitment for meetings, discussing research objectives and working to reach agreement about a mutually beneficial programme of work. Making connections with each other and establishing relations of trust take time. There are no short cuts.

### *Research Beginnings: Setting Up Contractual-Reciprocal Relationships*

Having invested considerable time in locating and accessing a community development project actively working with the theme of social exclusion, and who were interested in working with a group of academics on inclusive research practices, the next phase of the work was devoted to establishing mutually beneficial research relationships. The aspiration to test the suitability of utilising the VCR method with a group of people who had little experience of or formal training in research was important. The main question for us was it possible to share our learning of a sophisticated interpretive technique with a group of teenagers interested in 'doing something on early school leaving'?

Our initial contact with each other involved a process of teasing out with the young people what they wanted from the research, many planning sessions, and working sessions involving training, taped discussions, interviews and analysis. Research planning and training sessions and workshops were held in the university and in the youth club, each of which were ninety miles apart. We also spent two residential days in an Outdoor Education Centre combining 'fun' through outdoor pursuits (orienteering, archery, team work games, walking on

the beach) with 'work', interpreting transcripts of discussions and art work on our schooling experiences.

Initially, much time was spent clarifying the expectations of all members of the research team in terms of project process, practices and outcomes. For example, the Community Arts Worker and teenagers expected 'to have a bit of crack, to learn something new, to talk to people what they think about school, to have a publishable document at the end, to have a visual record of the research process, to learn new skills...and to get people to think about their lives'. They also expressed the aspiration that the research that they would do on early school leaving 'might change the schooling system'.

Teenagers' membership of the research team was entirely voluntary and not paid. Different motivations informed members' participation in this collaborative community. The teenagers talked about how angry young people feel and the fact that early school leaving is particularly a problem in the area in which they live, while it is not a problem for young people living in other areas of the town. The Community Arts worker believed that a peer research project built on the ongoing work and offered teenagers a further opportunity to reflect on and research themselves begun in the 'Boards Project' and in making the rockumentary 'The Strike Outs'<sup>3</sup>. She also trusted that the opportunity to be members of a participatory research project would be beneficial for the teenagers. The project offered the scope to explore the use of art and creativity as a means to encourage participation and the development of ideas to raise

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<sup>3</sup> The 'Boards Project' led by the Community Arts Worker working with young people from the local Youth Club involved painting scenes onto boards which covered the doors of a number of derelict and abandoned houses in the local authority estate in which they lived. Controversy ensued with some residents and the local authority objecting to the activity on the grounds that it detracted from the housing estate. This was an opportunity for the young people to engage with local political actors and was medium through which they could express their views about the poor facilities for young people in the area. Following from this some of the young people made a video 'The Strike Outs' combining a song which they had written with interviews with other young people on their perceptions of the area which they lived in and their thoughts on their own futures.

awareness about social exclusion. For the academics, the project represented an opportunity to initiate and evaluate a participatory research partnership between the academy and the community. Particularly concerned with developing innovative, interpretative practices our research aim was to create a collaborative community as an appropriate context in which we could collectively apply the VCR method to data generated by the *Creative Communities for Change* project.

### *Research Roles and Responsibilities*

The teenagers were very clear about what they expected from the academics: assistance with interviewing and guidance on using audio-visual equipment. They were interested in learning about how a researcher knows what questions to ask, how to help people to talk at length and how to interview people you know. It was agreed that the academic researchers would provide information and practice on doing interview-based research as well as the opportunity for the teenagers to use tape recorders, camera and audio-visual equipment. We also agreed to do collaborative work on generating research topic areas on early school leaving and to provide practice-interviewing sessions. The academics agreed to provide training in interpreting and analysing data generated by the teenagers. It was envisaged that the early school leaving research would be led and shaped by the teenagers, some of who were early school leavers, though supported by the Community Arts Worker with assistance from the academics. They had in mind that the ultimate outcome for the research on early school leaving could be film based. The academics talked about being interested in writing and presenting papers at conferences on the methodology of the research process. Aware that the teenagers were 'learner researchers' it was important to be explicit about the planned uses of our collective work. We proposed that all members of the research partnership have right of access to the materials generated by the project. We also agreed to document all team

meetings either visually, in written 'minutes' or to tape-record our discussions as a record of the process, plans and actions of the *Researching Our Lives* project.

During the 'practice interviews' facilitated by the academics we began to talk with each other about our various experiences of school. The academics offered advice on the technical aspects of using a tape recorder and on conducting a qualitative interview. Advice was given on listening with full attention, not interrupting the flow of talk and identifying follow up questions from the topics or themes suggested by the speaker. It was important to the process of establishing our research partnership and to the ethos of collaborative research, that all of us took up the role of interviewer/interviewee. In interviewing each other and us, the teenagers and Community Arts Worker were aware that they were revealing information about themselves in a different mode and setting. Listening to the sound of their own voices on tape as they asked and answered questions was a novel experience. The same was true when reading a verbatim transcript of our discussions. Likewise, engaging in individual and collaborative creative painting about our experiences of school was a novel experience for the academics, not all of who were comfortable with this process. The teenagers in contrast were well used to this way of working having been part of the *Creative Communities for Change* project for some time. Being involved in learning partnerships requires that we risk and trust as researchers and researched become 'participants'.

### **SECTION 3: Democratising Research Practice: the Voice Centred Relational Method of Data Analysis**

In inviting another to speak about a private, personal experience for the purpose of research, the researcher intrudes into that life, interprets aspects and re-presents that life for public display and consumption. Often what researchers present in the public domain is not recognisable to those who uttered the words in the first instance. Even when *verbatim* interview transcripts are first read by interviewees, a common response can be 'that is not what I said' or 'do I speak like that?'. The data has been transformed. Interpreting the spoken word through the thick layer of text, is influenced by methodological approach, intellectual biases, memories of the interview itself and of the interactions between researcher and narrator. Interpretation is as much a social exercise as a methodological undertaking (cf. Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994).

A further challenge to data analysis is identified by Doucet (1998) who is concerned by the extent to which the personal biography of the interpreter influences the choice of theoretical and ontological frameworks used to 'see', 'hear' and analyse the lives of others. Brown *et al* note that researchers deal with the complexity of interpretation either by simply attributing the interpretation to themselves or the narrator. This is a practice that they contest.

Having been in this relationship, any attempt to belie that experience either by giving authority for the meaning of the text to the narrator alone, or by claiming it for oneself, requires giving up a certain degree of knowledge, a certain reality, and we would add, a certain accountability, derived from this experience of relationship (Brown, Debold, Tappan and Gilligan 1991:43).

How we account for the interpretations we produce is key. In accepting the influence of personal biography on how we 'see' and 'hear' respondents' voices,

Doucet advises that

The critical research issue involves tracing and documenting our data analysis processes, and the choices and decisions we make, so that others can see for themselves what may have been lost and what may have been gained in the processes of moving from private lives into public knowledge (Doucet: 56).

To understand and interpret another's words, Brown (1997) suggests we utilise a method which disposes researchers to ask and answer the following questions: 'Who precisely is speaking, and under what concrete circumstances?...Who is listening and what is the nature of her relationship with the speaker -especially with respect to power?' (Brown: 686). This brings attention to the factors that influence what narrative is related, to whom and in what context. Though researchers have devised various strategies to minimise the 'interviewer effect' such as matching the race, gender or class of interviewer and interviewee, the effect nevertheless remains. A relational methodology in contrast, brings awareness and attention to the differences in accounts elicited by different listeners as well as paying attention to differences among narrators. This relationality spills over into interpretation.

### *The VCR method*

The Voice Centred Relational (VCR) method utilises a 'relational ontology', posited on a view of persons enmeshed in multiple social relationships with others as opposed to an understanding of persons as independent autonomous individuals (see Ruddick 1980; Gilligan 1982; Meyers 1989, 1997; Jordan 1993; Brison 1997, Mauthner and Doucet 1998). In using the VCR method, data analysis and interpretation focus on '...individuals narrative accounts in terms of their relationships to the people around them and their relationships to the broader, social, structural and cultural contexts within which they live' (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 126). VCR also utilises a 'relational approach' to

the process of research inquiry, defined by paying attention 'to who is listening as well as who is speaking', an approach in which cultural and other differences '...directly enter the research process' (Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan: 14). Taking the positionality of the listener seriously, the VCR method is enhanced by the formation of 'interpretive communities'. For example, in their *Understanding Adolescence Study*, Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1995) devised a core research group of academics to comment on the analyses of interviews, to re-examine research questions and to redirect their research with poor, working-class, ethnically diverse girls deemed 'at risk' for early parenthood or early school leaving. The interpretive community was later enlarged, reflecting changes in emphasis in the themes of race and ethnicity in the project. As the investigators moved from being an all white group to a more ethnically diverse group, the research team described themselves as 'coming into relationship more openly with girls around issues of race and ethnicity' (Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan: 16). The core interpretive community was also extended on occasion by sharing analyses in a less formal basis with other researchers interested in social class, race and ethnicity. Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan write that in bringing the class and race of the researchers and the adolescent girls

..to the center of our method of inquiry and analysis, we experienced the dynamic interaction of an interpretive community. Opportunities for discussion around our interpretations from our different social locations vied with difficulties in speaking, and with class and racial tensions and silences. Where we have succeeded in developing culturally rich and multi-layered responses to the voices of girls in this study, the diversity of our interpretive community was key (Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan: 17).

Brown, Debold, Tappan and Gilligan (1991) argue that use of the VCR method demands researcher reflexivity, a focus on researcher-researched relationships, brings issues of interpretation and representation of people's lives into the analytical foreground and is a solution to the challenges these issues raise for researchers and researched.

The Voice Centred Relational (VCR) method is a set of guidelines for reading and interpreting interview transcripts. Interview transcripts are two-dimensional text-based written reproductions of multidimensional nuanced talk between two or more people. In moving from talk to text the narrator and listener disappear. The transcript remains and in conventional methodologies it is 'interpreted' by the listener/researcher or another researcher using a reductive data analysis technique to identify similar topics and themes across a range of transcripts.

In contrast, the VCR method claims to re-insert the act of listening into the act of reading a transcript. The researcher continues to listen to the voice of the narrator while reading the transcript. The VCR method is presented as a 'reading and listening guide' for interview transcripts. It obliges the reader/interpreter of the text to listen attentively and deeply to the voice relating the story. The VCR method compels the researcher to confront own difference from and identification with the narrator as she relates her story. Brown, Debold, Tappan and Gilligan recognise that the same words in an interview text can be interpreted differently, 'depending on the lens through which one is reading' (Brown, Debold, Tappan and Gilligan 1991, p39).

The VCR method was first devised within a psychological paradigm and was concerned with listening to 'care and justice voices' in narrative accounts (cf. Brown, Debold, Tappan and Gilligan 1991). Mauthner and Doucet (1998) adapted and broadened the method for more sociological purposes. Dissatisfied with the mystery inherent in the activity of interpretation as researchers leaped from voice to text, Mauthner and Doucet (1998) noted with surprise the paucity of methodological guidance for those involved in qualitative data analysis. This was of some concern given the extent to which social scientists defend the methodological tools that authorise and give validity to sociological ways of knowing over other ways of knowing. Given their interest in critically reflecting



on the impact of the personal biographies of researchers on theoretical and ontological choices in data analysis, Mauthner and Doucet were drawn to a methodology which moved interpretation from an *implicit* process to an *explicit* process, making 'conventions of interpretation clear' (Brown, Debold, Tappan and Gilligan: 42).

The VCR method has been used in diverse disciplines, to research a variety of topics, to research different social groups utilising text-based narrative accounts, voice and video recordings (see for example Brown 1997, Mauthner and Doucet 1998, Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan 1995, Mauthner 2002). Researchers have utilised VCR on their own or in collaboration with other researchers as members of an interpretive community (Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan 1995, Mauthner 2002). The VCR method however had never been utilised in collaboration with research participants. We recognised that in the claim of the VCR method to make interpretative conventions explicit, the possibility for participants to become active collaborators in meaning making was created. Our aim to establish an 'interpretive community' of teenagers, academics and arts worker and using the VCR method, would allow us to make interpretations about early school leaving as an interaction of our varied experiences of school, our diversity of thinking about those experiences and different knowledge bases from which we operated.

The basic materials required to use the VCR method are coloured pencils, tapes and transcripts of interviews, combined with time to engage in multiple readings of transcripts. Mauthner's and Doucet's adaptation of the method involved four to five distinct readings of interview transcripts, each time listening and highlighting particular aspects of the narrative with different coloured pens. The analyses thus generated is then combined with writing case

studies and in Mauthner's and Doucet's adaptation, sharing qualitative interpretations with research peers in a group setting.

The first reading concerns the overall story being told by a narrator with a focus on the main events, actors, plots and relationships. The listener/reader asks 'Who is telling what story?', tracing with one coloured pencil repeated words and themes, key images and metaphors, contradictions, inconsistencies in style and moral language. The listener/reader's intellectual and emotional response to the narrative is also taken into account in this first reading, paying attention to 'who is listening'. The researcher reads the narrative in her/his own terms, tracing themselves in the story, locating themselves socially in relation to the respondent, attending to their emotional responses to this person, locating themselves theoretically and documenting these processes for themselves and others. The first reading, Mauthner and Doucet (1998) claim, encourages the exercise of reflexivity at the data analysis stage as interpreters explicitly document how theoretical interpretations of narratives are made.

The second reading of the transcript traces how the respondent represents her/himself in the narrative. Attention is focused on when, where and how the participant uses personal pronouns, 'I', 'we', 'you' in talking about themselves, 'signalling changes in how the respondent perceives and experiences herself' (Mauthner and Doucet:128). The second reading helps to listen to how the narrator speaks about herself, attuning the listener/reader to the narrator's sense of agency and social location. Crucially, reading for the voice I "creates a space between her way of speaking and seeing and our own, so we can discover... ' how she speaks about herself before we speak of her'" (Brown and Gilligan 1992 cited in Mauthner and Doucet:128).

The third reading is devoted to listening for how narrators speak about relationships with others and the consequences of these relationships, while the fourth reading involves placing people within cultural contexts and social structures. This transcript 'reading guide' alerts the researcher/interpreter to listening for the different voices in which narrators speak about themselves and their relationships with others. In reading for different elements (the story and responses to the story, the self, relationships, social structure) the method also allows the researcher to offer a number of slants on the same narrative material.

The method can be adapted so researchers can read and listen to narrators' voices in terms of own interests. For example in reading the narratives of poor, working class white adolescent girls on femininity, Brown paid attention to their gossip and 'put downs' of others in order to understand their conceptions of themselves based on who they were and who they were not. She listened to expressions of anger and social critique asking 'What people, events, or experiences provoked their anger or criticism?..Who or what forces constrained their expressions of these strong feelings?' (Brown:687).

#### *Our Adaptation of VCR method*

Researchers have written of their experiences concerning conflicts over interpretation and representation of research findings between researcher and researched. The detail of the meaning and constitution of 'equality' in researcher-researched relations is often obscure. Scepticism has been expressed about the possibility of establishing equal research relations considering the status, power and motivational distances between researcher and researched (cf. Fine 1994, Mauthner and Doucet 1998). Mindful of these cautions, nevertheless we remained committed to working within an interpretive community composed of learner researchers that support the learning and interests of all members.

Our adaptation of VCR method involved inviting learner researchers to learn the method, to apply the method to narratives generated by the group and to generate and share interpretations in a group setting. The Community Arts Worker, three teenagers and the three academics participated in the VCR training provided by Dr Natasha Mauthner<sup>4</sup>. The training took place over two days in which the use of VCR method as a listening and reading guide to interpreting qualitative interviews and transcripts was explained. Only one member of the team, an academic, had previous experience of using the method. Specifically, we were offered guidance in tuning into narrator's voices, listening for how the story is told and for situations, relationships or subjects that are difficult to talk about. We paid attention to when the speaker was animated or not. We were asked to identify how we were different from the speaker, bringing the interpretive frame of the listener/reader to the fore. We were shown how different voices are revealed as the speaker switches from 'I' to 'you' in speaking about herself. We were invited to share our various listening/readings of one of the 'practice interviews' we had made in which the Community Arts Worker interviewed one of the teenagers about her experience of school.

The story which emerged from the tape to which we listened was one in which the narrator felt ignored, 'classed', shamed by teachers and treated differently in school because of where she lived in the town. She understood that teachers labelled her home place in a negative manner perhaps because of its reputation as a place in which ongoing, public family disputes and feuds took place. Aware of others' negative perceptions of the housing estate area in which she lived and the consequences for those who lived there, she could not understand why, commenting 'I don't know why they do it - I don't find it bad'. For her, being

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<sup>4</sup> Dr Mauthner is based in Aberdeen with the Arkleton Trust. The workshop training was made possible by grant aid received from NUI, Galway Millennium Research Fund.

surrounded by family, friends and relatives was the most important part of living on the estate. She felt teachers ignored her. 'Some teachers would class you. They won't heed you or nothing'. She interpreted comments from teachers such as 'I can't deal with you now' as having no time for her 'because probably from where I live'. In contrast, one of the few teachers whom she liked 'had time for everyone'. Unfortunately for her, that teacher was no longer in the school. The teenager left school after passing her Junior Certificate determined not to return. Asked if she could change anything about the school system she replied 'that everyone would be treated equally'.

The steps in utilising the reading and listening guide were practiced and members had a basic understanding of the method. In discussing what they know well, the teenagers were skilled in eliciting and relating stories about school. Would the teenagers be able to move from talking to sociological interpretation, learning from personal accounts to making general statements about the phenomenon of early school leaving? The promise of the VCR method is that the act of interpretation is made clearer. In following the listening/reading guide, it would be possible to invite learner researchers into the process of generating and sharing interpretations about early school leaving. It was precisely this possibility we wished to explore.



*School - The Good and The Bad*

Later, at another meeting of the research team, using the medium of art individually and collectively we drew and spoke about our associations with the 'good', the 'bad' and the 'ugly' aspects of school. 'Bad' aspects of school included 'the Uniform, the Nuns, the Bullies, Being Humiliated in Front of the Class, the Competition, Failing Exams. Early Mornings, Seeing Others Being Hit, Being Hit, No Money, Homework, Being Made Feel Small, The way some teachers would treat you - like you had two heads, So Controlling'. The 'Good' included 'Music, Art, Maths, Winning at Football, Musicals, History, Getting an Education, Confidence, Girls, Friends, Soccer, School Newspaper, English'. The academics were asked to identify possible themes from the relevant literature on early school leaving which could be used to focus the discussion. Themes on the exit process from school, role of the school leaver him/herself, parents, teachers in this process, push and pull factors such as bullying or the attractions of paid employment, gender differences, attitude to and knowledge of alternative educational options

were identified and passed on to the Community Arts Worker and teenagers. We also advised that it might be preferable to offer an opportunity for the young people to set the issues agenda themselves rather than only responding to a set of prompts. We agreed to assist with preparatory work on organising and facilitating focus group discussions.

The teenagers and community arts worker proceeded with plans to generate further information on early school leaving in the area. Plans were made for the focus group discussion on school and young people's lives in the local area. The teenagers' rockumentary 'The Strike Outs' would be shown and used as a starting point for discussion. It featured young people from the estate talking about growing up in a provincial town in rural Ireland with few recreational facilities and 'nothing to do'. At the heart of many of their comments was the idea that there was nothing for them, inside or outside school and that many of the young people had no aspiration or desire to be in school. What was also striking was the clarity of the voices of the young people demanding change and improvement in their lives. They were also accurate observers and analysts of the poor material conditions and oppressive societal labels that denied them access to opportunities and facilities available to other young people living in more affluent areas.

The planned focus group was to be composed of young people from the town with the discussion to be led by two of the teenagers, supported by the Arts Worker (move). It was the research team's intention to utilise the material from the focus group in two ways. Ideas and narratives on early school leaving could be used by the teenagers together with the arts worker for creative projects and for making a radio or film documentary. Their intention was to bring public attention to the failure of the school system to adequately care for young people in the local area. In talking to one of the teenagers, the arts worker explained

that initially she wanted to 'find some way of painting to show this issue' but was now more drawn to making a radio or film documentary with young people 'who have things to say'. For the teenagers and arts worker, setting up a focus group would enhance the consciousness raising and developmental work in which they were already engaged - particularly in helping the young people to move from 'giving out' about their circumstances to engaging in 'action'. In collaboratively reading and interpreting the transcript from the focus group discussion, the academic team would have the opportunity to test the inclusive claims of the VCR method.

The focus group as originally planned did not transpire. This was a period in which the Community Arts Worker found it difficult to maintain the motivation and interest of the teenagers in her work in the youth club. As time was passing, the teenagers interests altered and moved beyond the activities of the youth club. One of those interested in our shared work and one of the few young women attending school did not return at the beginning of the new school year due to family commitments. She was now working as a shop assistant, with a varied time schedule and was no longer as available to work with the Community Arts Worker or on our shared project. Leaving school, getting a job, having money often meant that the young people were no longer interested in coming down to the youth club and getting involved with whatever was going on. The Youth Club venue itself was also a problem. It was not an attractive or comfortable place for young people to come to.

The Community Arts Worker had only limited time each week to work with the teenagers as her work was divided between three different projects. She recognised that if her time investment was constrained she could not expect the teenagers to dedicate the extensive time commitment required to plan, organise and deliver on local issues. In discussing our shared project, the Community



Arts Worker thought that the academic focus and time commitment required may well be deterrents to on-going participation and involvement by the young people. From her experience, activities that are sharply focused sustained over a short period of time, with identifiable outcomes were more attractive to teenagers. She was, however, motivated to respond at this juncture by developing creative ways to encourage participation.

Despite these considerable constraints, the work continued, step by step, and the Community Arts Worker organised a group of young people committed to discussing the problem of early school leaving in the locality. Youth club members could use the material generated and analysed for planning subsequent activities. The link between research and action needed to be maintained.

In the event, the focus group was composed of four teenagers, one academic and the Community Arts Worker. Of the four teenagers, two young women and two young men, three were members of the research team while the fourth was active in the youth club/drop-in centre and concerned about the lack of facilities for young people in the area. Two of the teenagers talked at length about themselves, each other, and their story of school. They also invited the academic and Community Arts Worker to do the same. The discussion was transcribed *verbatim* by one of the academic researchers and circulated to all members of the research team. It was agreed that we would use this portion of the transcripts as the basis of our collaborative application of the VCR method to investigate and interpret 'the story of school these days'.

#### *Collaborative Interpretation: Applying the VCR Method*

Mindful of the Community Arts Worker's advice on encouraging the participation of teenagers and of our experience of the time and commitment data analysis requires, and paying attention to the teenagers request for 'fun' we

agreed to spend a residential weekend in an Outdoor Education Centre. This was located in a rural area away from either the university and youth club. In this 'in-between space', we proceeded to collectively read and analyse our transcripts using the VCR method.

Being members of this diverse interpretive community allowed all of us to make interpretations that are an interaction of our experiences and thinking about those experiences. Familiarity with the VCR method varied in the group, combined with different levels of expertise in interpreting qualitative data, in doing research and in working creatively. As stated, the three academics also came to the project with diverse interests and backgrounds ranging from an interest in methodological innovations, developing policy applications and querying the possibility of establishing more equitable models of research. We were also diverse in terms of experiences of poverty, class background, age, gender, and commitment to the project and in our experiences of success and failure in the educational system. As members of the interpretive community, two of the academics were in a different relation to the transcript from other members as they were not part of the focus group. The interpretive community was composed of four people who had contributed to the discussion and two people who had not.

Having reminded ourselves of the main steps required to apply the VCR method and furnished with coloured pencils we embarked on multiple readings of the transcripts. We videotaped, voice taped and made notes on all our discussions as a record of our work and as a means to re-visit and evaluate what was done. Over the two days we completed the two staple readings of the VCR, reading for the plot asking 'who is telling what story?' and the reader response asking 'who is listening?', as well as reading for the voice of the 'I'. In addition, we read for how narrators spoke about significant relationships with others which

influenced their own attachment to or separation from the educational system. We talked and made notes, sharing our responses, distinguishing the readings with different coloured pencils while we moved slowly through the transcripts. For the first reading we worked as a team of six identifying the main narrators, their interactional patterns and emerging themes concerning school. These included for example, reasons for leaving or staying on in school, conforming or breaking school rules, perception of school surveillance systems and discipline, the importance of friends, transferring from the junior cycle to the senior cycle, transition year programmes, relationships with teachers and family involvement in schooling. In the first half of the transcript attention is focussed on the teenagers narratives. One of the teenagers took up the role of the lead interviewer from the outset asking her companion penetrating and provocative questions about why she had left school without completing her Leaving Certificate, then supplying the answers on her behalf. This teenager then invited the Community Arts Worker and the academic to talk about their experiences of school, specifically why they had remained on in the educational system.

After the first reading, we worked in pairs, one person from each partnership, sharing our responses to this reading, comparing experiences and bringing this back to the bigger group. The teenagers identified inaccuracies in the transcript correcting people's names, mis-transcribed words or filling in missing words. Significantly, they added to the narrative, expanding on the story of school, consistently expressing their desire to return and the need to be asked to return by the school authorities. They related their perceptions of how some teachers perceived them and other young people from their area as trouble makers, as requiring more attention than other students, as not being as smart as others. We talked about the role of the school in perpetuating or preventing early school leaving, questioning the consequences of school selection policies of who could and who could not proceed to transition year after the Junior Cycle. Having

attained the legal minimum age for leaving school, and aware of the perception of them as problem pupils, the teenagers believed that the school authorities and teachers were glad to see them go. They were also alert to perceptions of injustice, referring to an incident where young people from another school were allowed by the headmistress into transition year while they were not. As one of the teenagers remarked:

"They don't care. They are glad to get you out of school (hmm, yeah). Sure she wouldn't let us do fourth year either and we put in the letter to go into to it. She wouldn't let us do it. She let three people from the other school in on front of us. She wanted us out of the school as quick as she could."

Being engaged in interpreting our collective narratives confronts us with the raw experience and the feelings that these experiences elicited. Our emotional and intellectual responses are also brought to the fore. For example, stimulated by the teenagers perception of feeling uncared for in the school system and aware of the consequences of educational disadvantage combined with other forms of disadvantage, feelings of anger began to surface at the systemic injustice meted out to young people in the education system. These feelings influenced the interpretive narrative offered by one of the academics but the VCR method demanded that they were acknowledged and spoken about. Another academic struggled with anger but motivated by feelings of distance from the young people, annoyance at their apparent lack of interest and commitment, resulting in lack of empathy with them. Such effects of doing collective interpretation were mediated to some extent by the interpretive community as we were also receptive, attentive listeners not only to the narratives in the transcript but also to each other. It takes time, commitment and a method to acknowledge and work from our biases.

The teenagers persisted in the task of data analysis though the work was difficult, tedious and time consuming. These numerous and varied readings by

six people generated a multiplicity of responses and interpretations. For example in the reading which focuses on the voices of the narrators, we traced the 'I' and multiple voices of four narrators - two teenagers, Community Arts Worker and academic. Applying the VCR method with a six member collaborative community to a focus group narrative generates streams of interpretive data that have to be organised and formed into a coherent research output. Following the collective readings, each member of the academic team made multiple readings of the transcript, documenting their sole responses and interpretations. The academic researchers met, discussed the various interpretations and a combined interpretation was prepared. This interpretation was shared first with the Community Arts Worker who then brought it to the teenagers for discussion. The Community Arts Worker pointed out that that we the academics had focussed only on the teenagers' stories of early school leaving and had neglected to include the analysis of either her story of school or that of one of the academics. Despite our ethos of equality, we had neglected to include these analyses in the written version of our shared interpretations. Why and how had this happened? As we had maintained a chronological, visual and audio record of all events, meetings and actions of our project we reviewed the steps that had led to this situation.

In doing analytic work outside of the larger interpretive community, influenced by the intellectual, policy, social exclusion appeal of the substantive topic in the face of a huge amount of data, we selected early school leaving as a priority theme after the first reading. Though the Community Arts Worker and the academic were identified as narrators in the first reading, when it came to analysing how the teenagers spoke about themselves, reading for the voice of the 'I', only the teenagers narratives were selected. We became blind to our own 'I' and had ignored the dialogue that ensued when the Community Arts Worker

and the academic shared their experiences of school in the 1970s and 1980s with the teenagers.

Our answers to the teenagers' questions revolved around justifications of why we stayed in school. We talked about a combination of parental and economic constraints which prevented us from leaving (poverty, emigration, nothing to do), our own awareness that education meant a chance of a job that we liked and that we had preferences for particular subjects at school. We did not mention teachers that we liked as factors which ensured that we stayed in school. We did mention friends as important to us creating a common point of contact with the teenagers. We were also aware that there was no question of leaving - this would not be tolerated either by parents or the school. Middle class children did not leave school early. In ignoring our part in the narrative we had also abandoned a premise of the VCR method - the focus on difference between narrators. As a method of data analysis the VCR method invites the researcher to relate to the complete and unique story of the narrator, focussing on how her particular story is different to all others. This delays the search for commonality and the impulse to divide and segment the story into themes and sub-themes which can then be connected to the similar stories of others. In erasing our own stories, were we perhaps ashamed of the differences among us?

The VCR method used conventionally can generate multiple interpretations of data, though our adaptation of it invites copious outputs. Selection is necessary but in a collaborative partnership, who selects what themes to be prioritised can also be a reflection of dominant research interests and relationships and the unilateral exercise of power. We were fortunate that through the structure of the research partnership, we had been alerted to this tendency despite our best intentions to do otherwise. Our collective interpretations were amended to include the missing narratives. It was agreed that the Community Arts Worker

and teenagers would respond to this document, though the format or medium of the response was not clear. The Community Arts Worker talked about 'painting a response' or using the material as a mechanism for continuing with their own work - in particular their intention to make a film about young people in the area.

### *Collaborative Interpretation: Moving From Private to Public*

VCR method used in a reflexive and collaborative context compels researchers/researched to actively engage with, rather than ignore, the practical ethics of doing research. Collaborative methodologies can be confronted with the same ethical demands - such as prevention of harm to participants, informed consent, no deception, provision of confidentiality or anonymity - faced by all forms of social inquiry. But these may no longer be sufficient in the context of the democratisation of research processes and practices. For example, the edict 'do no harm' inherited from medical experimental work may need to be extended to include 'do some good'. Issues of power disparities between paid researchers and voluntary researchers also arise.

Ethical dilemmas in collaborative research are difficult to predict at the outset as they may evolve with the research process. However, representatives of the researched continue to alert researchers to some of these issues through specifying conditions under which research can proceed (see McDonagh 2000, Feldman *et al* 2002), part of which is clarifying procedures for *informed consent*. In this project, consent to proceed was in constant negotiation. This is described by Grafanaki as *'process consenting*.

...it allows the researcher to assess consent throughout the research project, thereby providing more protection and freedom of choice for participants. Such freedom is also facilitated through a willingness to ask for and receive feedback on the impact of the research procedures on them and a

readiness to change parts of the inquiry process that seems to create discomfort for them. (Grafanaki:333)

The teenagers were comfortable expressing their views concerning the research process to the Community Arts Worker who in turn communicated them to us. For example, there were times that the young people felt academically inadequate compared to other team members and wondered what was the point of experimenting with research methodologies. They identified the discrepancy in the fact that they were the only team members not being paid to do this research. For the academics and the Community Arts Worker, this sort of activity was part of their paid, professional employment while for the teenagers, though researchers in name and practice, and though receiving expenses for days out and travel, they were not paid for the work itself. The question 'what is in it for us?' still remains. What are the outcomes of this kind of work for those who collaborate and for those whom we represent: teenagers, the Community Arts Worker and the academics alike?

While process consent is tied to the ongoing, evolving activities of the project, explicit consent to work with the research products in the public domain also needed to be discussed. We wanted to talk with the teenagers about our varied responses to confidentiality, whether members would all use real names, first names, surnames and whether or not we would identify place names when writing or speaking about the project. We also wanted to discuss how we might represent our shared interpretations of early school leaving. While we had discussed how the project materials such as art work, photos, video and tape recordings, transcripts and records of meetings might be used from the outset and agreed that all members had the right to use the materials as they wished while consulting other members, this did not seem to be of much import to the teenagers. Research output is not as significant to teenagers as it is to academics. Having arranged to meet with them to talk about the academics plans to publish work in relation to the project and the consequences of putting



our work into the public domain, the teenagers did not show up. It is tempting to explain their reluctance to engage at this point as a response to the planned ending of the project. Another possible explanation lies in the fact that within the research design we had not sufficiently planned how and when we might explore the meaning of consent and confidentiality with respect to the use of project materials. While we had focussed on process consenting throughout the project thus maintaining participation, we assumed that we could explore consent and confidentiality issues in greater depth towards the end of the project. This was too late. It is the academics responsibility to support the teenagers so that they could make fully informed consent decisions.

Though the teenagers were absent, the Community Arts Worker agreed to engage with this aspect of the work. Her view was that the teenagers were happy to allow us to use the materials as we wished. We had no opportunity however to fully discuss with the teenagers whether they wished to be named or their locality to be identified. As a consequence only the academics and the Community Arts Worker are named. Of course, it is in our interest that we are so identified. The Community Arts Worker drafted a working agreement of how project materials could be used which included an action element. She agreed to bring this to the teenagers. Consent to our accumulated research data being used was agreed on the following conditions:

1. Participants view the content of the finished/edited research before it is discussed/viewed in public.
2. That there is prior notification of where data will be used and in what context.
3. That the dignity and integrity of the participants on the team is foremost to be protected.
4. That the research and our involvement in the research remains non-intrusive and our privacy respected.
5. That we all share a commitment for this information to be used to affect policy around education.

We have agreed to actively observe the above conditions to the extent that is feasible. With the passage of time it is not clear to whom we will communicate our research intentions as the teenagers and Community Arts Worker move on and the *Creative Communities for Change* project ends.

The ethical issue of when to leave the field is fraught in collaborative research. Research teams with a diversity of membership means that there may be diverse 'fields' and time frames in operation. Batchelor and Briggs suggest

... the field is best left when the researcher has met the demands of their role to the satisfaction of themselves, and their subjects and of those through whom they have negotiated access (Batchelor and Briggs 1994:949)

For us this dilemma did not arise as the young people let us know through their non-participation that it was time to bring the project to a close. Having maintained connection with the project for over a year, the teenagers withdrew and did not turn up for two agreed meetings. We left many lines of communication open to the young people should they decide to change their minds.

In the context of the overall research design, our ideal model of collaborative interpretation and our knowledge that the research processes, practices and findings would enter the public domain at some point, we had attached much importance to creating opportunities for teenagers to engage with our written interpretations of schooling experiences. This they did not want to do - at least within our time frame.

While much of the resources of the project were spent in maintaining the interpretive community, we achieved the task of reading and interpreting

transcripts together using the VCR method. We had moved from conventional interpretation without the involvement of the participant to doing interpretation in the presence of and with participants.

#### **SECTION 4: Early School Leaving**

Alongside the commitments to explore the process and practice of collaborative research, we began our work with the substantive ‘topic’ of early school leaving. What we actually analysed was all of our experiences of school, particularly focusing on the processes and factors that promoted inclusion and exclusion for the different members of our group. Framing these individual experiences is a wider picture wherein failing in and being failed by the education system continues to be a problem for a minority of young people in Irish society.

In 1999, 2,400 young people left school with no formal qualifications representing 3.2 per cent of school leavers in that year. A further 11,600 had left having completed their Junior Certificate only. On an ongoing basis, approximately 1,000 children do not transfer between primary and post-primary schooling (NESF, 2002, p.31). Not surprisingly, leaving school early or with minimum qualifications is related to socio-economic background (ibid, p.33). For those that remain in education to the end of the senior cycle, under-performance in examinations is associated with pupils from working-class backgrounds and whose parents are unemployed (Smyth and Hannon, 2001, p.119). Socio-economically related inequalities continue into third level. In 1997, while 17 per cent of school leavers from unskilled manual backgrounds went on to third-level, the comparable figure for school leavers from higher professional backgrounds was 64 per cent (ibid.). Though significant in its own right, most analyses of the issue of educational disadvantage and early school

leaving are couched in terms of the relationship between educational qualifications and labour market outcomes. In the Irish context, this was seen at its most stark in pre-Celtic Tiger years of high unemployment and specifically high youth unemployment. Even in 1999 at a time of overall youth unemployment of 6%, there was a strong relationship between the economic status of school-leavers and their qualifications. The unemployment rate was 41 per cent among those who left school with no qualifications in 1999, with a corresponding rate of 3.4 per cent among those who left having completed their Leaving Certificate.

The State's response to the issue of educational disadvantage over the last two decades has involved three strands: new programmes involving additional resources and different strategies; curricular changes; and new legislation. The longest established source of intervention to tackle the issue of educational disadvantage in schools is the Learning Support (formerly Remedial) teachers' scheme, which provides assistance to children with learning difficulties. The first remedial teachers were appointed in 1963. However, it is the disadvantaged school scheme, created in early 1980s that is the first programme that recognised explicitly the need for additional supports, both financial and teaching for schools attended by significant numbers of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since then, there has been a massive expansion in the variety and extent of pilot programmes established by the State and operated by the Department of Education and Science, which have the stated aim of tackling educational disadvantage. The Home-School-Community Scheme, the Early-Start pre-school programme, Breaking the Cycle, the 8-15 Year Old Initiative, the "Stay In School" Retention Initiative, and now most recently, the School Completion Programme (which subsumes the preceding two interventions) and the "Giving Children an Even Break" Programme are among

the major initiatives.<sup>5</sup> Another high profile programme, the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage, was operated by the Combat Poverty Agency between 1997 and 2001.

Viewed positively, each new initiative can be seen as representing a more sophisticated and comprehensive attempt by the State to tackle the issue. Thus, the School Completion Programme, operating at post-primary level, will involve the development and implementation of integrated, targeted plans to meet the needs of individual pupils drawing on the resources of the school, resources available under the various new programmes and linking with non-school agencies. In this sense, it could be argued that the process of experimentation has led to an increasing level of understanding of the nature of the problem, and will result in more appropriate and effective interventions in the longer-term. For initiative-weary educators and other concerned professionals, there may be a sense that they are seeing a continual repackaging of efforts with marginal increases in the resources available and continuing unrealistic expectations regarding outcomes.

The State has also adopted a strategy of curricular change in its efforts to retain more children in school and ensure their certification. Two new programmes at senior cycle level, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and one at junior cycle, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) have been introduced.<sup>6</sup> The LCA is significant in that it represents a quite different sort of qualification to the mainstream academic leaving certificate. While the curricular alternatives

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<sup>5</sup> The Home School Community Liaison Scheme was established in 1990, the Early-Start Pre-School Initiative in 1994, Breaking the Cycle in 1996, the 8-15 Year Old Initiative in 1998, the "Stay in School Retention Initiative" in 1999, the "Giving Children an Even Break" Programme in 2001 and the School Completion Programme in 2002. This list does not include many initiatives, both large and small scale, operated under EU funded programmes, and via Partnership Companies under the Local Development Programme.

<sup>6</sup> In the 2001-2002 school year, the LCA operated in 228 schools, the LCVP in 484 and the JCSP in 139.

ensure that the system is more focused on the needs of students, a risk is that the certification of the non-mainstream programmes has lesser value. This is evidenced in the fact that those students following the LCA programme can only gain access to third level via a circuitous route involving further education.

Educational disadvantage has also been the focus on legislative activity. As a result of the Education Act, 1998, a statutory committee on educational disadvantage has been established. A key role of the committee will be to advise the minister in respect of strategies in respect of tackling educational disadvantage. Also, in December 2002, the minister established a wider forum on educational disadvantage.<sup>7</sup> A further notable development is the Education (Welfare) Act 2001, which seeks to ensure the attendance at school of children of compulsory school going age<sup>8</sup>. As well as imposing duties on schools, the Act establishes a National Educational Welfare Board and an Educational Welfare service to prevent and respond to truancy.

What is striking about all of the approaches to tackle educational disadvantage in Ireland is the absence of any questioning about the organisation and delivery of mainstream education. Whether in terms of curricular responses, services in schools or special projects, what has been developed has been additional to or a variation on the mainstream, with little impact on how the mainstream itself operates. There has been no explicitly equality driven initiative that asks more fundamental questions about how curriculum, the organisation of schools and teaching, and the practice of teaching is framed in such a way to exclude a significant minority of pupils from benefiting fully from the education system.

### *Researching Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*

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<sup>7</sup> This forum mirrors a policy formation approach used in the 1990s in helping to develop the 1998 legislation and in the creation of early years education policy.

It is possible to classify research in the area of educational disadvantage under four main headings: quantitative studies mainly carried out by the ESRI and involving large scale surveys of schools and school leavers; evaluation studies of varying methodological approaches focused on the many programmes tackling educational disadvantage; policy level research for various departments of state and other governmental and non-governmental bodies; and more open-ended theoretical and empirical research that aims to achieve greater levels of understanding of the issue. The available material is dominated by the former types, with more open-ended, theoretical and empirical research a relatively residual activity. Among all of this research, studies that place the voice of young people as central are relatively rare.<sup>9</sup> Negative relationships with individual teachers and the school is a key theme in the experience of early leavers (Boldt, 2000 and 1997, NESF, 2002, Mc Grath and Canavan, 2001, Holland, 1999, Fagan 1995).

Drawing from our collective analyses of early school leaving generated by the VCR method, we can learn much from listening to the voices of young people as they speak about their connections and disconnections with school<sup>10</sup>. As with other studies, in this project teenagers had an ambivalent relationship with schooling. They recognised that education was valued by society in general. They themselves recognised the distinction of being the first in their families to 'graduate' from second level finishing the senior cycle. As one teenager who was currently not in school said 'None of my family did it. That's why I want to do it. It would be something to talk about'. At the same time, they expressed the

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<sup>8</sup> Under the Act this was raised to 16 years, or the completion of three years post-primary education.

<sup>9</sup> See McCauley and Brattman (2002) on key issues for consideration when consulting young people

<sup>10</sup> Our interpretation reflects the fact that we were a closed interpretive community. We did not invite teachers or others involved in the formal educational process to participate in the project. The decision not to include other voices was based partly on the knowledge that the young people were planning to interview teachers at a future point - though in the event this did not happen. More importantly, maintaining this interpretive community of adults and teenagers demanded much work. In consequence, we limited the size of the interpretive community so that we could achieve our primary research task - testing our research methodology. A collaborative project with teachers and early school leavers would be an attractive option but one which would require extensive preparation and planning.

view that some adult teachers in their lives did not care about them distinguishing between teachers who care and those who don't.

'Sister X is not bad it is just that, I don't know, it is just that she is not bothered like about what you do. She is bothered about what trouble you get into but when you are gone you are gone. But Sister Y now, she would call down to the house and say why are you not going to school and all this. Say if you were going on a school tour, she would ask you why are you not going on the tour, do you want me to give you the money, have you not got the money. She would say, you go back to school now and I'll put you to college and all this carry on'

Those teachers that expressed an interest in the teenagers were regarded as caring, though, in general, the young people were aware that this care did not extend to ensuring that they completed the full second level cycle. For example, one of the teenagers expected that teachers would come to their homes, speak with their parents and actively support their return to school. Despite their ambivalence regarding school, school rules, discipline and teachers it was clear that their connection to school mattered. The desire to return to school was strongly expressed though the formal mechanism for returning was neither clear nor responsive to the needs of adolescent girls. Despite telling her teacher on a number of occasions that she was not returning, the information was not regarded as a basis from which the teacher might act. It was as if the teenager was not listened to as she sought ways of maintaining her connection with school.

'...and I seen the vice-principal in the shop...I've seen her a good couple of times..she never asked me really like.. I've said it to her. I said I am not going back in September... she just says come back whenever you feel like going back or are you coming back? I says I am not going back. She didn't say nothing.'

Being told that she could return whenever she felt like it was not helpful, as her family circumstances required her to mind younger children at home and to work part-time. Her father also believed that she knew all she needed to know now. Feeling disconnected she repeated her intention to return, time and time



again and sought ways of making a deal with a friend so that they could return together.

It was clear that the teenagers were aware that if society valued schooling and valued their full participation in the school system, they would need active support from more powerful agents than themselves to return. As one young woman remarked after being away for a while 'it is too hard to go back in'. She wanted to return not only to be with her friends but because she recognised the opportunities that education offered. Comparing her present circumstances to being in full-time education she said 'I am going back because you have a life at school. This is no life like..this is why I am going back'. She remarked that 'after a while of leaving school, you realise that you didn't want to leave in the first place. You were better off in school'. Being out of school also meant that there is little opportunity to be with friends and to 'have a laugh'.

Advocates from within the education system might go some way in identifying and supporting teenagers at risk of early school leaving while in school but also to assist early school leavers to return and complete the second level cycle rather than 'leaving it up to themselves'. Adults paying attention to, caring for and being with teenagers as they move towards adulthood may make the biggest difference of all to their experience of school. The school ethos on early school leaving will reflect the commitment and resource allocation to addressing the problem. Attention needs to be drawn also to the consequences of school policies concerning transition year programmes: and their role in precipitating early school leaving.

It is plausible that we would have arrived at similar recommendations using a different research strategy over a shorter period of time and with less personal

involvement in the project. The question remains is participatory research and collaborative models of learning worth it?

## **SECTION 5. What have we Learned? Collaborative Processes and Practices.**

In a collaborative project, process and practice intertwine. The achievement of this project lies with the creation and maintenance of an interpretive community composed of diverse members, with diverse interests that generated and interpreted discussions about schooling. What was distinctive about this interpretive community was that the researchers were also the researched, engaged in interpreting our own collective narratives of school. This would seem to be a necessary step in participatory work and particularly before we begin to interpret the narratives of others. The reciprocal structure of the interpretive community was also important. Two groups, teenagers working with a Community Arts Worker and academics combined to mutually assist each other in their respective projects. Neither sought to add to the burden of work of the other but rather to improve and extend own projects through being and learning together, combining all of our expertise, perspectives and interpretations.

An interpretive community also offers an alternative temporary identity for members of a participatory research team providing an opportunity to engage with the challenge of diversity and to practice equality in research relations. It explodes the traditional researcher-researched relationships, bringing each closer to the reality of the other's lives. The VCR method as adapted and outlined here illuminates the class, status, power and knowledge differences of researcher and researched offering an opportunity for developing more equitable research relationships. No doubt, this requires a different kind of

energy and application and has significant implications for the scarce resource of time. At the same time members remain connected to their own communities and organisations bringing their interests and reflections to the *Researching Our Lives* project. On cessation of formal research relations, members bring what was learned back to their own settings.

Appropriate action can then flow from the research process within the pertinent structures and organisations. For example, as a consequence of being involved with this research project, the youth club obtained funding to make a film documentary with the young people. Likewise the academics undertook to present their ideas on participatory research to a wider audience and for example, are interested in contributing to a forum to support innovative research methodologies in Ireland.

An interpretative community such as ours, while sharing a commitment to equality must be sensitive to the differences and inequalities to be constantly negotiated so relationships could be maintained. For example, teenagers and academics sense of time or following through on agreements were often at odds. What was urgent for one was not so important for the other. At the fulcrum of our interpretative community was the Community Arts worker. The mediator role she took on proved highly significant in the *Researching Our Lives* project. While other interpretative communities may require similar mediating roles, the way in which they are filled may vary, with members taking on responsibilities in different ways at different times. There is no doubt, however, that the needs met by the Community Arts Worker, on behalf of the young people, exist in interpretative communities made up of diverse members.

To practice VCR with an interpretive community in which all members are researchers and researched requires a considerable investment of time as well as

an ongoing commitment to document the research process in detail. Because of the diversity of members and differences in skill and motivation to do qualitative interpretations an attitude of openness, patience and flexibility is required particularly in relation to the pace of the work. In this context, doing multiple readings in groups and subgroups is a relatively slow procedure. The interpreter also needs to be prepared to reveal own responses to the narrative to the group. As narratives are scrutinised in detail and multiple interpretations are examined, the method can be intrusive of the interior life and emotions of the narrator and reader/listener.

Our adaptation of the VCR method suggests that an interpretive community composed of researchers as researched is a useful, fluid and dynamic structure to support participatory research. For example, an interpretive community can manage open membership as members move in and out of the setting and are replaced by new members. It was remarkable that the teenagers' involvement with the project persisted for as long as it did. The Community Arts Worker observed the benefits for teenagers of working with adults in a mutual enterprise. She felt that their 'sense of themselves was improved'.

'It would be very rare for this group to actually be asked what they think about anything...To work in partnership with adults has improved the younger team members ability to communicate and listen, and examine other perspectives...They tell their own story best and this research project has provided a space for the young people to express their ideas, observations and gripes, in an atmosphere that has been essentially empowering. '

The VCR method brings the voices of all narrators to the fore, helping us to listen with full attention and care to what is said and not said. The reading and listening guide alerts us to the uniqueness of each narrative and how we experience similar events quite differently. The first reading and second readings advised by the VCR method focus on the content of the narrative,

people and events, and the myriad ways in which the narrator presents herself. Paying attention to the readers response alerts us to the extent to which our own connection or disconnection to the narrative may influence how we interpret the narratives of others. The VCR method is relatively uncomplicated to learn adopting a step by step approach. In our study, those unfamiliar with the method were able to understand and apply the main principles without too much guidance. As regards the main claims of VCR we agree that it does move interpretation from an implicit process to a more explicit process, improving the clarity of interpretive conventions for qualitative data analysis. As such it creates possibilities for research participants to become involved in interpretation by removing some of the technical barriers to participation.

### *Future Developments*

Guided by the Community Arts Worker, we used painting as an alternative to talk to express and visually share our individual experiences of school. We also engaged in collective exercises painting our responses to the project. The creative work was a medium through which members could begin to participate in the interpretive community on an equal basis. There is much scope for combining VCR with creative interpretation, an aspect that was not fully explored in this project.

The interpretive community for this project could have been extended to include second level educators and policy makers. This would have been part of a larger investigation and beyond our initial design intentions. We recommend that VCR as adapted here be used in research projects working with voice and narrative material, perhaps as a part of a larger study or survey. VCR can be used on a limited number of transcripts to obtain detailed immersion in the data, to become attuned to the entirety of the narrative and the everyday contradictions of how we speak about our lives. We learn to actively listen to the voice of the

narrator, to respond as listener/reader to what is being said and to listen for example, to themes of connection and disconnection with school. Generating interpretations with narrators is possible.

This study was designed to explore the possibilities of democratising methodological practices with a specific focus on interpreting narrative. Using VCR with an interpretive community composed of researchers as researched is one of a wide range of participatory research mechanisms. Paying attention to research process and practice is part of a democratic ethic, which seeks to empower not only the researched but also to empower researchers. Though fears abound concerning the loss of methodological rigor, the displacement of the expert researcher and the dearth of ethical guidance for collaborative research, there is an expressed need to extend methodological innovation so that collaborating and learning with the researched can be achieved. It's worth it.

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