‘Dropped Out or Pushed Out?’

Creative research methods to explore early school leavers’ experience of school exclusion and oppression.

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Introduction

Augusto Boal (1993) advocates for stories and experience to be presented from the perspective of the oppressed, in order to provoke individuals into changing society. This research aims to present the experience of school exclusion from the viewpoint of early school leavers, several of whom are acutely marginalised, in prison, in care or homeless. Collaborative and creative methods, that work on transmuting participants’ words into aesthetic form, have been employed to investigate, describe and present the educational experience of an ‘at-risk’, in an attempt to foster greater empathic understanding, and to reduce the existential gap between those for whom the education system works, and those for whom it doesn’t.

This paper provides an overview of the research and methods carried out to date in stage by stage format, in order to illustrate how creative methods have been employed, and to what degree of success. This is a work in progress.

BACKGROUND

In order to appreciate the nature of school exclusion in Ireland, it is necessary to have an awareness of the historical context of school discipline. Approximately 90 per cent of Ireland’s state sanctioned primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church. This has characterised the conformist nature of Ireland’s formal education system since its inception, and is maintained by systems of privilege and the exercise of power through ‘exclusion, coercion and control’ (Quilty, McAuliffe & Barry, 2016 pp. 29-30). The socially disadvantaged have continually fared the worst under this system, with social class background and parental education significant indicators of a range of educational outcomes among young people in Ireland (Smyth & McCoy, 2009).

Historically, Ireland relied on corporal punishment and a wider system of incarceration run by religious orders to manage student behaviour (Pembroke, 2013). Up until the 1970’s industrial and reformatory schools dominated the education landscape (Keating, 2015.p.97). Poverty was the overwhelming cause of children being placed in these institutions (Garvin, 2005), an issue that Governments continually failed to address (Keating, 2015, p.97). In 1967 ‘free education’ was introduced, giving immediate rise to the class-based system of fee-paying and non-fee paying schools. The Catholic education system was therefore the main area where poor children were educated, and from the inception of the National School system in 1831, its influence within education is evidenced in the coercive and oppressive nature of the educational landscape (Quilty, McAulife & Barry, 2016).

The curriculum gave little regard to the needs, interests or abilities of the individual child, while at the same time placing a strong emphasis on didactic teaching and punishment, emanating from the belief in the doctrine of original sin. This resulted in a school life that was often difficult and joyless (Walsh, 2005 p.263). Corporal punishment was standard practice, and while it was never supposed to go beyond a light caning, this was generally and widely being ignored (Ferriter, 2005). In 1982, under immense public pressure, the Department of Education set out new regulations in relation to the use of corporal punishment in schools explicitly forbidding the use of corporal punishment, and to avoid the use of ridicule, sarcasm or remarks which could undermine the self-confidence of students (Maguire et al., 2005).

With this shift in policy away from corporal punishment and confinement, what emerged, was the practice of exclusion. Formal exclusion involves sanctions such as school detention, suspension, and expulsion (Skiba et al, 2002), which are employed in response to students who are deemed to have flouted school rules. In a suspension, this results in a student not being allowed to attend school for a specific amount of days, and in the case of expulsion, a student has their school place rescinded. Informal exclusion may take the form of the child being refused access to certain classes; attending school for half days or partial weekly attendance; being segregated from class mates either within the classroom or to another room altogether; managed moves or transfers that involve moving a pupil from one school to another (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). It would appear that the values embedded in previous practices that excluded these learners constitute an unchanged elitist stance (O’Brien, O’Byrne & Ryan, 2002, p. 48), as research indicates that whether applied formally or informally, school exclusion is not only counter-productive but also disproportionately impacts young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, children with special educational needs, children who are in care and youths of colour (Duncan & McCrystal, 2002; Evans, 2010; Parkes, 2012; Skiba et al., 2002).

STAGE 1 – THE FICTIONAL FRAME

‘Dropped Out or Kicked Out?’ was a filmed forum theatre play, drawing heavily on Augusto Boal’s formula for Theatre of the Oppressed (1993), devised to be a way of framing focus groups to explore the experience of school exclusion with early school leavers. The use of the ‘fictional frame’ allows participants to create meaning through distance, while providing the safety to engage emotionally and honestly (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015). The aim of the research was to shift the focus from the characteristics of early school leavers, to triggers of disengagement that are within the remit of the school, in an attempt to promote change within the education system. The purpose of the fictional frame or *ethnotheatre*, was not to create a commercial Broadway hit or anything which might be remounted by another theatre company (Saldana, 2005), but rather to bring participants together to explore shared understandings of what it means to be excluded from school. This was also done with the idea of creating a dramatic tool, which could be used interactively in schools or in teacher training to raise awareness of the issue.

I began work with a local youth theatre in Ireland with the aim of creating the filmed theatre piece hypothesizing exclusionary practice in mainstream school. Initial workshops followed a format employed by Boal (2002). Emerging themes from the literature around school exclusion were explored using Image Theatre, and included additional themes that developed from participants’ own experiences and observations such as; ADHD, trouble makers, labelling, family dysfunction and favouritism. A story developed around a central character Charlie, the 14-year-old son of a single mother, whose seeming lack of educational prowess combined with his difficulty in ‘fitting in’, leads to his having a series of difficulties in school.

**Excerpt from ‘Dropped Out or Kicked Out?’**

**Teacher:**

(sarcastically)

Good of you to join us Charlie

**Charlie:**

(Slumps into a chair, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up over his head)

**Teacher:**

Do you have anything to say for yourself?

**Charlie:**

(Under his breath while rolling his eyes)

Oh for God’s sake

**Teacher:**

What was that?

**Charlie:**

(Silence, studies the ground)

**Teacher:**

(More threatening)

What was that?

**Charlie:**

(Staring at the ground)

Nothing. Sorry right, OK? Sorry

**Teacher:**

(Nods his acceptance that for this time a situation has been avoided, and makes his way back up to the board.)

The short play culminates with Charlie being transferred out of mainstream school and into an alternative education setting ‘more befitting of his needs’.

FOCUS GROUPS

The nine-minute fictional frame, ‘Dropped Out or Kicked Out?’, was shown to focus groups in two settings. The first was in the education unit of a minimum-security prison, the second was in a family-run, non-state-funded alternative education, which helps young pass their state exams. In line with Freirean pedagogy, focus group participants knew that they had been asked to take part because of their experience or ‘expertise’ on the issue, in a deliberate positioning of participants as active stakeholders in the research process.

In all, 25 participants contributed to the feedback on ‘Dropped Out or Kicked Out?’ 12 were from the prison education unit, and the remainder from the alternative education setting. The youngest participant was 15 years old, while the oldest was 59. ‘The play is made up of three scenes; a classroom scene; a family scene; a headmaster’s office scene. After each scene I paused the projector and asked if the scene was representative of the group’s experience, and if not, how it could be remade so as to be more realistic.

It soon became clear, that while our attempt at dramatizing a school exclusion had been well-meaning and indeed well received in academic circles, it fell short of accurately illustrating the lived experienced of these participants. To my mind, this exemplifies Norman Denzin’s explanation as to why why social programs which are intended to alter and shape the lives of troubled people so often fail. According to Denzin, (2010) ‘the perspectives and experiences of those persons served by social justice programs must be grasped, interpreted and understood, if solid, effective, applied programs are to be created’ (p.25). I myself am an early school leaver. I had conducted research and with early school leavers on their experience of school before. I was well informed on the literature around exclusion and early school leaving and incorrectly assumed that these factors combined placed me in a position to be able to replicate excluded learners’ experience dramatically. Yet, as Denzin contends, we mistake our own experience for the experience of others, and often the interpretations and judgements we make on other’s are incorrect (p. 25).

Participants were not shy about setting me right. In the audio recordings, they can be heard engaging with each other, then trying to explain, often with vivid visual description, the school environment as they remembered and experienced it. They spoke of the chaos of the classroom and the corridors, ‘the messing’, rebelling, the punitive punishments, the endless rules, irrelevant subjects, the injustices; being left out; being singled out; being left behind.

Lebbo: “*The teachers are idiots in that. Do you see the way he was told to leave the class? We would have been dragged out of the class. And he wouldn’t have said ‘I’m going to get the headmaster’. You would have just been taken out and whipped to bits like*.”

Frank: *“Anytime the teachers would turn around someone would get hit with something. Get a smack with something flying across. Rubbers going flying.”*

Jimmy: *“Make you stand in the corner and make everyone else watch you. Just pure… and that could have been for anything”.*

Participants’ tones and listening were supportive of one another, and there was a good deal of laughter and humour as the more outrageous stories were recalled. Patricia Leavy (2009), upholds the belief that this is because the arts evoke emotional responses, therefore, the dialogue sparked by arts based practice is highly engaged. Furthermore, by connecting people on emotional and visceral levels, artistic forms of representation facilitate empathy (p.14). Accordingly, I found participants in the Focus Groups to be supportive and encouraging of one another, when it came to expressing both their experience and their points of view.

Holmes: *“I think it depends on what area you come from. If you’re from a wild area and the schools in the wild area, the teachers have a kind of a thing…”* [Interrupted]

Bressie: *“Where they have to have control straight away…”* [Interrupted]

Holmes: “Yeah, but *you can’t tar everyone with the one brush like.”*

Bressie*: “Yeah…”* [Interrupted]

Holmes: *“But that would be the attitude then because of the area. You know ‘oh these are rough and ready, we’ll treat them rough and ready’, which is wrong.”*

Brosnan: *“That’s true cos none of the teachers would have been from the area like...”* [Interrupted]

Holmes: *“That’s what I’m saying like…”* [Interrupted]

Brosnan: *“And you’d have been labelled from like first year…”* [Interrupted]

Holmes: *“That’s what I’m saying like.”*

In many of the recordings, several participants are speaking animatedly at once. Similarly, I found that the language participants chose to use was hugely visual, almost filmic in content, which I maintain was due to the medium chosen to facilitate discussion. Most importantly though, I argue that the method used here enabled me to interpret and understand participants’ perspectives and experiences in a manner that I had not been able to grasp before, and would not have been possible using traditional research methods.

STAGE 2 - THE ETHNODRAMA

Dropped Out or Kicked Out? (2) as an ethnodrama, originated from research participants’ feedback on the filmed fictional frame. Ethnodrama is a relatively new genre of arts based research, which maintains close allegiance to the lived experience of real people while presenting their stories through an artistic medium’ (Saldana, 2005 p. 3). Rehearsals here were far more structured, in that we now had a clear script. We worked on recreating incidents much as they were told, and instead of portraying the classroom experience from the perspective of one protagonist, we essentially portrayed six separate events from six different participants, but ones which covered some of the themes from the transcript analysis; fear of other students and lack of protection within the system; being singled out for punishment due to family background or social status; teacher racism and discrimination; teacher-student violence; teachers falsifying aspects of student behaviour in order to justify exclusionary practice; hefty punishments for minor misdemeanours such as incorrect uniform.

**Excerpt from ‘Dropped Out or Kicked Out? 2’**

**Joe:**

(Addressing audience)

They used to go around the classroom and tell you to pull your pants up to see if you had the right socks on like.

**Teacher:**

(Marching around classroom pointing at students’ ankles)

Pants up. Pants up. Pants up. Pants up. Pants up.

**Joe:**

(Head down, addressing the audience with a worried expression)

I actually came in in normal clothes before

**Teacher:**

(Dripping with sarcasm)

Joe! Not only are you not wearing the right socks, you’ve decided that you don’t need to wear a uniform at all. Because you’re special. Isn’t that right? Special Joe doesn’t need to wear his uniform like everyone else, because he’s special.

**Jo:**

(Pleading reason to the audience)

It could have been in the wash that day. Something could have been wrong with it like. They just didn’t even like ask!

**Teacher:**

(Voice raising in anger)

Well seeing as you’re so damn special, you can go to a special place Joe. You can go to the study hall and spend the rest of the day there

**Joe:**

(Moves to chair on stage left alone, addressing audience angrily)

And they sat me down there for like fuckin 5 hours! On my own! They wouldn’t let me go home. For nothing like. Cos I wasn’t wearing my uniform.

STAGE 3 – THE FORUM

While the main body of the play differs immensely from the original, the final scene is similar in that it culminates in the protagonist’s expulsion, and is a dialogue that takes place in the headmaster’s office between school management, the protagonist and his father. The play is still being shown, mostly as a film, though sometimes as a live performance, and where possible the last scene is forumed, i.e. audience members have the opportunity to try to change the final outcome. In the forum, the final scene is played through once. Before the scene is played through again, acting as the ‘Joker’, I explain the ‘rules’ of Forum Theatre to the audience. That is, that the scene is to be played through again, but if anyone notices or thinks of anything that either of the oppressed, in this case the student or his father, could have said or done differently that might have changed the outcome, they should say ‘STOP’.

In a Forum Theatre production, a Joker character, who exists in the time and place of the audience, represents the author's point of view and presents the argument of the drama. In Boal’s initial experiments in the 1960s, the system of the joker, was a way of ‘combining play and analysis’, of introducing a figure ‘who is a contemporary and neighbour of the spectator’ (1998, 174–5). The Joker leads the audience in an analysis of what is happening and calls the audience to action at the end of the play. Spectators intervene directly through replacing actors in the dramatic action, trying out different solutions in order to change the outcome. Therefore, instead of a play being a static event that the audience watches and absorbs, it becomes a living breathing situation which can be engaged with critically in order to explore solutions and complexities at an embodied level, thereby offering insights which often elude disembodied intellectual academic reflection (Pineau 1994, pp. 16, 17).

As Joker, I then play a short ‘voice warmer’ exercise with the audience using ‘stop’ and ‘go’, to help lower audience inhibitions around using their voice to stop the performance. I also explain that if no one says ‘stop’, then the performance will play out to its predetermined conclusion and that nothing will change. The scene is replayed and more often than not has barely begun before someone says ‘stop’. The most common suggestion is that the protagonist should be more forceful in his manner of defending himself against the school management. The person who made the suggestion is then invited onto the stage to replace the protagonist in an ‘intervention’. The audience member who intervenes then has the opportunity to try out their idea and to see if it will work. However, in this instance, it is clear that the student taking a more aggressive stance against management does little but to hurry the scene towards its culmination with even greater speed. The ‘intervener’ is applauded for their courage in stepping up, and a short discussion is then facilitated as to why the proposed solution was not successful. The game then starts up again, someone else says ‘stop’ and so on.

The Joker’s task is to both support and provoke (Osterlind, 2008), so following each intervention I engage the audience in a discussion on what they have witnessed and experienced. In one of the interventions for example, a man stepped up to replace the father and discussed with the school administration his ideas for managing his son’s behaviour in cooperation with the school management. His suggestions, such as staying in open contact with the school, sitting in on his son’s classes if there was an issue, or removing his son from the class to work with him alone in another room until his behaviour had calmed down, were so reasonable and well thought out, that the management team struggled to argue for the expulsion. This led to a stimulating dialogue about the challenge for parents from working class backgrounds in helping their children navigate the state education system, and the need for support around this.

STAGE 4 – RESEARCH POETRY…POETIC TRANSCRIPTIOIN…ETHNOPOETRY…

The research interviews I conducted with male prisoners, as a follow on from the focus groups presented a methodological dilemma. Although I was using dramatic representation to present participants’ shared experience of school exclusion, for these men in prison, their lived experiences of social exclusion were as individual as they were. On top of this, I felt a responsibility to represent and voice these stories in a manner which allowed ownership of the words to remain with the speaker, rather than with me as the researcher. I was afraid that by analysing interview data for themes, the ‘heart’ or essence of these stories was being lost, along with the dialogic style in which the interviews were naturally occurring.

While prose is the form in which social scientists are expected to report their findings, ironically prose may not be the most ‘accurate’ way to report speech, as nobody talks in prose. When people talk, their speech is closer to poetry as everybody speaks using a poetical device, the pause (Richardson, 2002). Poetic inquiry requires us to listen deeply. Listening to the transcripts ‘poetically’ enabled me to ‘hear’ differently. I became more attuned to tone and pause as a means of selecting ‘data’ from transcripts. As poetry embraces the notion of speech as an embodied activity, honouring speakers’ pause, repetitions and rhythm (Prendergast, 2009), the process of poetic inquiry intensifies the ability to listen and delve into the interpretive task of social science research (Walmsley, Cox & Leggo, 2015).

It also became important for me to involve participants in the analysis of their own transcripts so as to affirm that firstly that they had been truly ‘heard’, and secondly, that the elements which held most significance to them also held a place in the representation. The analysis therefore took on a participatory element. I returned to the prison and worked with participants individually. We looked at the transcripts together and discussed which elements jumped out using highlighter pens and markers. In most cases the men expanded more on certain details, which I subsequently recorded and transcribed. I worked independently on the pieces before returning to the men and continuing the process. I was struck by how much I was enjoying the participatory nature of the process. The pieces seemed to reflect the emotional weight I had experienced while listening and transcribing the interviews, and participants appeared both involved and visibly proud of their work.

**Excerpt from ‘A Bold Child’**

*My mother she said I was grand*

*No bothers*

*The quietest out of them all*

*Used to sit and play with the milk bottle all day long*

*Until I went to school*

*She said*

*That’s where the trouble started*

*‘He’s a bold child’*

*Up the front on his own*

*Barred out of the yard for a week*

*Sitting outside the staff room*

*A white card or something it’s called*

*Other kids thinking ‘oh he’s the boy’*

*The first time I was expelled*

*Was for throwing a stink bomb*

*In the assembly hall where we were lining up*

*Him catching me by the ear and locks*

*I went home on my own*

*And they never took me back*

Nevertheless, I worried if they would be considered ‘poetry’, and if so was it ‘good’ poetry? Faulkner (2007) contends with the question ‘what is good poetry?’ She argues that she is ‘tired of reading lousy poetry that masquerades as research, and vice versa’ (p. 220), and states that researchers interested in poetry as a means to represent research must be aware of poetic traditions and techniques. Yet Faulkner (2007) herself admits that describing a ‘good’ poem, is a seemingly impossible task, as its definitions are variable and elusive, not to mention highly personal (p. 222).

Glesne (1997) identified ‘3 rules’, to guide the process of poetic transcription. Namely that; the words would be those of the participant, not the researcher; phrases could be extracted from anywhere in the transcript and juxtaposed; the poem should be presented according to his/her speaking rhythm (p. 205). I had followed Glesne’s (1997) ‘rules’ instinctively, having come across them only in hindsight, but I wondered if these rules guaranteed a ‘good poem’ or if they solely served to preserve the speaking style of the storyteller, capturing the spirit of the story? And is this in itself the makings of a ‘good poem’ or ‘good research’?

I took two of the poems in their early stages to Dublin poet Colm Keegan, to ask if they were ‘good’ and to get some advice on how to structure a poem. Keegan is a writer and performance poet, who won the All Ireland Poetry Slam in 2010. In 2015 he was awarded a residency in the LexIcon, Ireland's largest public library. He is also a creative writing teacher, and importantly, is on the panel for the Writers in Prison Scheme, a scheme co-funded by the Arts Council and the Department of Justice and administered by the Prison Education Service. Unsurprisingly, Colm Keegan is very busy, so we met late one evening in Dublin’s Clarion Hotel over tea, chips and poetry.

‘*They’re good’* he says.

And I realised I had been holding my breath.

*‘Are you sure?*’

*‘They’re really good’*.

I began to view all of the transcripts as a series of lyric poems, with an implied narrative that could make this world accessible to the reader, a method which Richardson (1994, pp. 8-9), believes come closer to achieving this than any other form of ethnographic writing. Most important in all of this is of course the written and oral tradition of poetry, and how this lends itself to the dissemination process. Creating research poetry is a performative act (Prendergast, 2009), and just as Boal (1995) spoke of the ‘magnifying’ ability of theatre, in that it brings things closer, poetry too has the attraction in that it can be read, performed, responded to, and presented in diverse settings to different audiences, bringing social theoretic understandings ‘live’ to bars, theatres, research conventions and media (Richardson, 2002), thus bringing the research ‘findings’ closer.

For the performance of some of the prison poems, I enlisted well-known Dublin actor Tommy O’Neill, as much for his acting experience as for his background, and for how he would be able to relate to the poetry, which I felt would enhance the performance. An early school leaver as well as an ex-convict, O’Neill wrote his first play in Mountjoy Prison in Dublin in the 1980’s under the creative writing tutelage of another Dublin poet, Pat Ingoldsby. We recorded four poems in his home on the outskirts of Dublin.

‘*I got angry reading the poems’* he told me, ‘*I didn’t sleep well last night’*.

Two of the recordings were played at the Irish Prison Service *Supporting Prison Education Conference* in Portlaoise in 2016. Several conference participants described the poems as ‘powerful’ and ‘emotional’. I continue to experiment with performance to enhance and expand the dissemination process both within and beyond the academy.

CONCLUSION

O’Connor and Anderson (2015) argue that research as we know it must be urgently and radically reimagined, deliberately and consciously aligning itself with the marginalized and the silenced, as active resistance to the forces of global oppression (pp. 246-248). Creating space in research, whereby ‘the oppressed becomes the artist’ (Boal, 1995), allows for an interruption of status in that the so-called ‘oppressed’ gains agency and is called to speak, participate and author alternative narratives as a collective, thus moving the focus away from the idea that social suffering is an individual’s fault (Connolly & Hussy, 2013). I argue that creative research methods aligned with the ideals of adult education, ‘empowerment, participative democracy and societal transformation’ (Grummell, 2007), can play an active part both in reconceptualising the way research can be undertaken, and in confronting and challenging the status quo.

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