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Researching ‘NEET’ Young People in the Margins of Scottish Society: Using Innovative Qualitative Research Approaches

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Abstract:

Despite calls for developing new ways of engaging vulnerable young people in research studies, published research that has utilised innovative methods remain scarce. This article highlights challenges associated with conventional qualitative research processes among marginalised groups within society, and through that exemplifies creative qualitative approaches and techniques that help in obtaining useful information from research involving these vulnerable groups. The article demonstrates that the approaches it illuminates appeal for three key reasons. First, they are concrete and tactile rather than abstract and verbal, allowing participants the opportunity to shape research agendas. Second, they engage researchers in dialogue with participants and encourage the exploration of their life stories. Third, this form of research involves researchers collecting participants’ stories, collaborating with storytellers before producing narrative reports, thus providing access to perspectives and experiences of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard through traditional methods of academic discourse.

Keywords: *Qualitative research approaches, NEET, vulnerable young people, marginalised youth, Scottish society*

1. Introduction

The research study on which this article is based explored the lived experiences, hopes and aspirations of the group of young people in Scotland referred to generally in social and educational policy terms, particularly in the context of UK, as ‘NEET’ (not in education, employment or training). The afore-mentioned research project, entitled *Targeted Support for NEET* was commissioned by Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) and undertaken by a team of researchers from the Quality in Education Centre at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. The project aimed at conducting robust research with NEET young people and making the findings available to LTS to enable it develop a better understanding of the background, experiences and aspirations of the NEET group to help LTS enhance its contribution to supporting Scottish schools in improving the life chances of all young people. The project activities were undertaken between April and June 2007 and the final project report was completed and submitted to LTS in September same year. A journal article emanating from the project activities was submitted, accepted and published in 2010 (see Finlay, Sheridan, McKay & Nudzor, 2010).

This current article reports on the methodological aspect of this LTS commissioned study. The article highlights the challenges associated with the use of conventional qualitative research processes among marginalised groups within society, and through that exemplifies in a telling and illuminating way creative qualitative approaches that are helpful in obtaining useful information from research involving these vulnerable groups. Acknowledging the fact that the experiences of NEET young people vary and differ, we demonstrate, here in this article, that the approaches we illuminate appeal because they are concrete and tactile rather than abstract and verbal, allowing participants the opportunity to shape the research agenda. We also contend, although implicitly, that the qualitative approaches we adopted in the study with NEET young people within the context of Scotland are needful as they help to engage the researcher in dialogue with participants and encourage the exploration of their life stories. For us essentially, this form of narrative research is imperative as it involves the researcher collecting participants’ stories, retelling them and collaborating with storytellers before producing a narrative report. Thus, the approaches provide access to the perspectives and experiences of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard through traditional methods of academic discourse.

So, while the objective of the substantive LTS commissioned research project was on developing a better understanding of the background, experiences and aspirations of the NEET young people in Scotland, the focus of this current article is on methodological issues relating to creative ways of eliciting rich and in-depth data to maximise the quality of research involving vulnerable groups in

society. We hold the view strongly that following the methodological path we outline in this article, the researcher is able to explore, more deeply than statistics could, the lives and attitudes of the young people living in the margins of society.

1.1. Who are 'NEET' Young People?

Whilst significant concerns about youth unemployment have existed in many countries for almost half a century, the term NEET is a policy construct associated with certain technical and ideological shifts which have occurred since the 1980s (Simmons & Thompson, 2013). The term has had a central place in recent policy discourse in the context of the UK, particularly in the New Labour years. The review of the literature on youth studies suggests that NEET came into usage following the publication of the 1999 Government report "Bridging the Gap" (Social Exclusion Unit [SEU], 1999), and represents a categorization of young people who had previously been described variously as *off register* (Bently & Gurumurphy, 1999); *getting nowhere* (Bynner, Ferri, & Shepherd, 1997); *at risk* (Conrad, 2005); *wasted youth, disengaged, disaffected or disappeared young people* (DfES, 2007); *inactive or unemployed youth* (Mullen, 2015); *generation X* (Pearce & Hillman, 1998); *status zero* (Williamson, 1997); and *non-college bound youth* (Worthington & Juntunen, 1997). The term is often used to describe young people who are not currently in education, employment or training. It is also used sometimes within the literature to describe young people aged 16–24 who fall into the NEET category. However, NEET as a policy construct was originally used collectively to refer to the 16-19-year-old group (although it is acknowledged that NEET status in this group is influenced by experiences of education below the age of 16) who, during the critical period of the late teens, spent or were likely to spend a substantial amount of time outside any form of education, employment or training (Finlay, Sheridan, McKay & Nudzor, 2010; Nudzor, 2010).

Ample evidence in the literature suggests that in the UK, concerns of social and economic exclusion, together with the fear that a poorly educated population unable to make informed choices is a threat to democracy have led particular policy attention to be directed towards the group of young people described herein as NEET (Conrad, 2005; Yates & Payne, 2006, cited in Corresponding Author, 2010, p. 12). Although the 'NEET' literature acknowledges that there is no such thing as a 'one size fits all' attitude towards the issue of risk factors for *NEETness*, disadvantage, educational disaffection and low educational achievement are identified to be the most prevalent causes (Scottish Executive, 2006; Scottish Government, 2007; Spielhofer, White, O'Donnell & Sims, 2006; Yates & Payne, 2006). Other risk factors identified as leading young people to NEET include deprivation, financial exclusion, weak family and other support networks (such as peers), stigma and attitudes of others, and debt aversity. Of all these themes, young people who are disaffected with schooling in the form of exclusion, truancy or bullying are identified by the literature to be at an increased risk of becoming 'NEET' (Payne, 2000, cited by Maguire & Rennison, 2005). Available research evidence also indicates that whereas *NEETness* is signified by, or associated with, not being in education, employment or training, *at riskness* (that is, those at risk of becoming NEET) is most frequently manifested by poor academic and social skills that promote a general disconnection with the school culture (McDonald, 2002; Scottish Executive, 2005). Similarly, participation in education and training appears largely to be related to the family background of the NEET young people. Those with at least one parent in full-time employment, with parents in non-manual occupations, and those who live in owner-occupied housing are identified as having a higher likelihood of being in education and training than young people not in these categories.

Thus, by definition and for the purposes of the original research on which this article reports, NEET young people were described as those young people located in the margins of Scottish society without education, employment or training. By their circumstances, it was considered unlikely that they would be stimulated to engage effectively in research through methods such as questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. In our view, such conventional approaches were unlikely to yield the accounts of young people's lives necessary for the kind of understanding that would lead to effective policy recommendations. A multi-media and multi-activity approach which encourage participant to tell their life stories was required to elicit rich and in-depth data for this purpose. It is against this backdrop that the research on which this article reports was conducted to enable LTS develop a better understanding of the experiences and aspirations of the NEET group so that they will be able offer meaningful contributions to support Scottish schools in improving the life chances of all young people.

1.2. The Context of Research into NEET in Scotland

During the last two decades in Europe, interest in public policy directed towards young people has grown tremendously (Kahan-Strawczynski, 2003; Maguire and Rennison, 2005; Yates and Payne, 2006; Vanttaja and Jarvinen, 2006, cited in Corresponding Author, 2010, p. 12). While a variety of reasons have been put forward to explain this emphasis, Conrad, (2005), for example, explains that a central focus of these policies appears broadly and in many other contexts to be around the issues of social and economic exclusion. That is, the fear that excluded youth, or those at risk of being excluded socially, may not become productive, contributing members of society. In the UK, generally, as a result of the upsurge in numbers of the NEET group, a major report from the Government's Social Exclusion Unit was devoted exclusively to the problems of this group. In England, for instance, a new policy of support and counselling for these young people: *ConnecXions*: was formulated to help them achieve successful transition to adulthood (SEU, 1999). In Scotland, a similar policy initiative referred to as *The More Choices, More Chances* was introduced and tasked to outline concrete strategies to reduce the size of the NEET group. The initiative is said to be part of the *Closing the Opportunity Gap* wider policy initiative (Scottish Executive, 2005; 2006) that brings together the Scottish Government targets on worklessness, health inequalities, rurality, financial exclusion, community regeneration, low attainment in school and NEET, including improvement for care leavers.

Statistical records available indicate that there had been little change in the size of the NEET group as at 2007 in Scotland, which stood at approximately 35,000 young people (that is, about 13.5% of all 16-19-year olds). However, Government reports suggested

that this figure included those who were NEET for positive reasons, such as those taking a gap year or completing voluntary work. These groups, according to the sources, were not considered to require additional support to make future transitions to education, employment or training. As a result of this, and as at the time of undertaking this research, there remained some uncertainty about the actual number of young people who were NEET. In fact, as at the time the study on which this article reports were conducted, there was some shred of evidence to suggest that a truer figure for those who required future support to make the transition to education, employment and /or training was closer to 20,000 young people aged 16-19 years (Scottish Executive, 2006).

Available documentary evidence today, as was also the case in 2007 when the original NEET study was undertaken, suggests that the NEET group itself is not necessarily a homogenous group. A number of different sub-groups within the NEET group can be identified. These include care leavers; carers; young parents; offenders; and young people with low educational attainment. The others comprise; persistent truants; young people with physical/mental health problems; and young people with drugs or alcohol abuse problems. As NEET is linked directly to deprivation, it has been possible also to identify local authorities in Scotland whose young people are more likely to be NEET. The local authority areas identified as NEET hotspots include Glasgow, Clackmannanshire, Dundee, East Ayrshire, North Ayrshire, Inverclyde and West Dunbartonshire (Scottish Executive, 2006).

Against this backdrop, and putting it succinctly in context, the NEET debacle in the UK context generally is part of Governments' response to targets related to increasing engagement in the labour market and eradicating child poverty. In Scotland, which is the context for this article, the NEET challenge is based on significant concern that the NEET group are at risk of not making a future successful and sustainable transition to education, employment or training, and that this will most certainly impact on their long-term life chances negatively. It is in view of this latter consideration of improving the life chances of all young people, particularly those living in the margins of Scottish society that this research was commissioned to explore the lived experiences, challenges and aspirations of the group of young people described for policy intervention purposes as NEET.

Having established the context of the original NEET research project in the previous three sections, the focus of the article now shifts to highlight the methodological challenges associated with the use of conventional qualitative research methods with vulnerable groups. In the process, examples of innovative qualitative research tools and their strengths from research methodology literature are illustrated. Thereafter, the qualitative approaches used in the conduct of the original research on which this article reports are exemplified to demonstrate and put in context the argument of the article before the summary of key findings and concluding thoughts respectively.

2. Methodological Challenges Involved in Researching Vulnerable Youth: Insights from Research Literature

The challenges associated with the use of conventional qualitative research processes among individuals who are marginalised within society are well documented. Curtis et al. (2004), drawing upon their own and others' research experiences, discuss a number of difficulties associated with interviewing participants described as having 'challenging behaviour'. These difficulties include participants feeling ignored due to questions not being directed specifically at them in focus groups; feelings of frustration at having to elaborate on responses; and reluctance to be interviewed. Curtis et al. (2004), point out that many researchers assume that young people want to talk and can articulate their thoughts when, in fact, this is not necessarily or always the case. For those with learning difficulties, as much as those in the various NEET categories, the research literature suggests that generalising from experience and thinking in abstract terms can be teething problems (Booth and Booth, 1996).

In recent times, these challenges associated with research with vulnerable youth have been taken to a whole new level. Mullen (2015), for example, conceptualises these issues along the lines of research with large numbers of young people, enabling some grouping or segmentation of participants, as opposed to research that considers responses from smaller sample sizes. Citing research evidence from commissioned research projects by Government Departments (such as the ones undertaken by Spielhofer et al., 2009; and National Institute of Adult Continuing Education [NIACE], on behalf of Department for Business and Skills [BIS], 2013) and those from research practitioners of repute (for example, Colley & Hodkinson, 2001; Furlong, 2006; Wolf, 2011), she offers a strong critique against segmenting data as offered by or through research with large samples of young people who are NEET. She concedes that researches with large samples of NEET young people provide interesting insights as the segmentation they provide may allow for some consideration of how different support and solutions for the various sub-groups may be possible. However, she is quick to add that studies of this nature either fail to pay particular attention to the needs and aspirations of NEET individuals within sub-groups or that they simply are disinterested in undertaking what she refers to as the "deconstruction of the categories" involved in the NEET parent group. For this reason, and in the view of Mullen (2015), research with large samples of NEET young people "provide the broad brushstrokes of information associated with this group but what it cannot do... is to enable any consideration of the young people subsumed within the statistics or to consider any of the wider societal factors or structures which impact upon young people who are NEET (p. 24). Arguing in defence of what could be called innovative and creative approaches to engaging vulnerable groups (including NEET young people), she argues that in contrast to segmenting data, innovative qualitative data collection methods are less concerned with the provision of the broader picture of conceptualising young people who are NEET and are more concerned with gathering data that allows an in-depth understanding of this particular group (Mullen, 2015, p. 24). Summarizing her criticisms against segmentation or categorisation evidenced in/by traditional approaches to researching vulnerable groups, she writes:

- It is my view, in contrast, that by virtue of categorisation there are participants whose experience and voice are not 'captured' and as such, no further consideration of them or their situation is undertaken, future support cannot therefore be considered or targeted for them. Continued categorisation or segmentation negates the individual characteristics of the members of the group under consideration... (p. 29)

Thus, as a result of sentiments such as the ones outlined crisply in the above paragraphs, researchers have begun to recognise the value of engaging marginalised groups in research activities that give them more choices in relation to the subject matter and research design than they would have as interview or questionnaire respondents (Hill et al., 2004). In relation to individuals with communication difficulties, for example, the literature suggests different types of communication tools (Beresford, 1997; Ward, 1997) as well as visual aids, props and games (Beresford, 1997; Berson & Meisburger, 1998). As will be shown in this article, these techniques appeal because they are concrete and tactile rather than abstract and verbal and allow participants the opportunity to shape the agenda (Thomas & O’Kane, 2000). They also engage the researchers in dialogue with participants and encourage the exploration of their life stories. This approach, as was mentioned earlier, is a form of narrative research involving the researcher collecting participants’ stories, retelling them and collaborating with storytellers before producing a narrative report. As has been argued earlier in the opening paragraph to this article, and in the view of Booth and Booth (1996), these narrative methods provide access to the perspectives and experiences of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard through traditional methods of academic discourse.

2.1. Innovative Qualitative Research Tools: Examples from the Literature

Despite calls for the development of new ways to elicit the views of young people, published research that has utilised innovative qualitative methods such as those used in this study is scarce. In a brief review of the education literature, only a handful of studies were located that had used alternative qualitative methods. The majority of these involved research with children. Thomas and O’Kane (2000), in a study which explored decision making among looked after children, reported that during individual interviews, children were given a choice of activities which included making charts, constructing timelines and stories and drawing. In that study, and in group sessions, games, posters, drawings, jigsaws and role-play were used to create a variety of opportunities for children to express their views. The authors found that children who lacked confidence in verbal discussions with adults were easily engaged by these activities. Moreover, the authors reported that drawings provided a powerful means of prompting children to talk about their views and of providing data that could be analysed comparatively. Perhaps most importantly, the researchers concluded that the research method used allowed the children’s concerns to define the research agenda.

Noyes (2004) used a video diary technique to map primary school children’s learning dispositions prior to their transfer to secondary school. Having conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, Noyes became aware that his presence limited participants’ contributions and he could not access their unseen day-to-day experiences. A video diary technique in which children were given access to a ‘Big Brother’ style diary room once a week for seven weeks was subsequently found to offer several advantages as a data collection tool. For example, the prospect of being in front of a camera was found to excite and engage children and, in turn, the technique facilitated the production of rich data that provided a fuller representation of the issue under investigation. Indeed, the author felt that the children’s accounts were so compelling and poignant that he was unable to convey them adequately on paper. Moreover, the video tapes, according to Noyes, provided an excellent opportunity for the researcher to seek expansion and clarification on specific excerpts, thereby adding further layers of data. The tool was highly recommended for those wishing to explore aspects of children’s lives that are not accessible through conventional research methodologies. Despite the clear advantages of this approach, certain difficulties were highlighted, including complications surrounding confidentiality and the increased complexity of data, which magnifies the challenges of recording, analysis and interpretation.

Drawing from the field of anthropology, some studies have used dramatic engagement as a means of generating research data. This approach draws on participants’ experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through theatrical means, and has typically been used with adolescents to explore issues relevant to their lives and as a moral education tool. Conrad (2004) conducted a theatre project with ‘at-risk’ high school drama students to collectively draw out, represent and question their experiences. The process was found to be useful in allowing participants to re-examine their beliefs and, in turn, provide new insights and critical understandings of risky youth experiences. The advantage of these performance approaches to research lies in their uncovering of the meanings of lived experience (Denzin, 1997). Indeed, it has been argued that some types of cultural knowledge cannot be expressed simply in discursive statements, but can be represented through action or performance (Fabian, 1990).

Gervais (2006) used drama to explore the moral values of high school students. The drama process, which focused on personal story and was followed by group discussion and reflection, was found to heighten students’ values articulation processes and improve their problem-solving skills. This example highlights drama as a means to evoke story-telling. As Gervais puts it, story-telling is central to who we are; we tell and re-tell stories every time we engage in describing events, situations and places because stories contextualise and make real our experiences. McAdam (1985) puts these ideas slightly differently but forcefully. He posits that the story belongs to the teller and that even although there may be many who may have been in similar situations the way the teller tells his/her story is unique and helps him/her to form his/her identity. For him, “we are all tellers of tales, we each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories” (McAdam, 1985 p. 56).

One good example of research involving the use of innovative qualitative approaches with NEET young people directly is one undertaken by Russell, Simmons and Thompson (2011) and reported by Mullen (2015). In this study, three case studies of young people who are NEET are presented in order to explore the actions of the young people and the opportunities and barriers they face. The research which was undertaken over a three-year period aimed to give a “voice to the young people by exploring their views, understandings and aspirations” (Russell et al., 2011, cited in Mullen, p.29). This longitudinal approach enabled the researchers to engage in ‘prolonged close involvement’ with the young people, in part driven by a wish to move away from methods such as formalised interviews and focus groups in which the researchers felt ‘participants may feel pressurized by external agendas’. The research methods the researchers used included participants observations, interviews and photographs taken by the researchers and participants, described as ‘another medium to enter, discuss and explore the young people’s world’. Importantly, the researchers also

utilised 'life history maps' to elicit key life events of the young people. The use of this innovative approach led the researchers to conclude that whilst the actions and beliefs of young people can have influence upon their life chances, broader structures in society are equally important. The findings from this study also showed that informal resources available to young people such as those through their families or neighbourhood are also affected by wider social and economic changes. A further observation by the authors, according to Mullen (2015), is how in this study participants utilised their circumstances and dispositions as resources to help them negotiate everyday life and to maintain a focus upon preferred outcomes and aspirations, reinforcing the notion of individual agency as an important factor. Against this backdrop, the authors concluded that 'being NEET is not merely a state of absence; such young people do not spend their time merely doing nothing or abstaining from choices' (Russell et al., 2011, cited in Mullen, 2015, p. 30).

2.2. Strengths and Limitations of Innovative Qualitative Research Methods

On discussing the 'promise' of alternative forms of data representation, Eisner (1997) notes how tools such as drama, drawings and stories have a stronger ability to engender a sense of empathy for the lives of those of interest. Such feelings of empathy, he argues, cannot be powerfully evoked through reading, yet are necessary for the reader to know the person portrayed. These depictions also provide a sense of particularity and authenticity that allow the situation and people being portrayed to take on their own distinctive qualities. A further advantage, according to Eisner, is that the material presented is often more evocative and invites attention to complexity. As a result, the number of questions that can be asked of the education systems under study is increased. Beyond these benefits, the use of innovative tools in qualitative inquiry helps young people to express their ideas and views in their own terms. This, in turn, facilitates a more valid answer to the question of what they can tell us about how to deliver a good education system (Curtis et al., 2004).

Mullen (2015) adds to these useful points. She posits that the use of innovative qualitative methodologies which do not seek necessarily to segment or categorize NEET young people enables some considerations of wider factors which impact on individuals' difficulties in finding and maintaining learning opportunities or work. Utilising innovative qualitative methodologies in order to understand and potentially target resources to NEET young people, she argues, ensures that young people who do not 'fit' into any segmented NEETness criteria are not left out unduly but rather are reflected upon in a more individualised manner and with the view to understanding their individual needs for mediation. Mullen (2015) underscores the strength of innovative qualitative methods which engage small samples of NEET young people by arguing that a lack of understanding of the landscape in which individuals young people who are NEET, or those in other vulnerable situations, operate can mean that misconceptions and/or mis-categorisations are bound to occur. She cites Colley's (2006) example, where a young mother's wish to remain at home (and therefore to remain as NEET) was misconstrued as continuing failure or non-engagement in education, employment or training, to buttress this valuable point. She argues that instead, the young mother's insistence "to remain at home reflected the strong view that 'a child needs its mother when it's young', which was a reflection of her own experience of having been placed in care at a young age" (pp. 32–33). To gain an insight into individual's circumstances, experiences and reasons for being NEET, for her therefore, requires research to ask questions of individuals about their decisions choices and experiences, as the research on which this article is based did, in order to provide a holistic picture of their circumstances and avoid them being missed out of categories or being miscategorised.

Despite the strong advantages of using the kinds of innovative qualitative methods described here, limitations could and should be acknowledged. While the probability of multiple perspectives emerging from the data might be seen as an advantage (by offering different interpretations and fresh insights), such ambiguity can be problematic as different people confer their own meaning to the data, making it impossible to reach consensus and precision (Eisner, 1997). Other drawbacks include questions surrounding how to display findings and persuading the audience that findings are legitimate. Nevertheless, our view is that addressing these questions and concerns, as is done in this article, can expand our conceptions by exploring the frontiers of what educational research means, how it is pursued and what can be learned from it.

2.3. The Innovative Method Used for the NEET Study on which this Article Reports

In the light of the methodological considerations and the evidence in the literature outlined above, we decided to use a creative qualitative approach that engaged participants, allowed them to capitalise on areas in which they were likely to be most competent and which maximised the quality of data garnered. However, it should be noted that this 'participant-led' approach, whilst enabling the young people to express their views and knowledge, did have limitations in the context of this project. The young people were encouraged with open-ended questions to speak generally about the research objectives, but a structured interview schedule was not developed. The intention was to encourage the young people to talk freely, and to prioritise themselves the issues and contributions they wished to make. Therefore, their responses provided more data against some research objectives than others. Where this was a factor in the data collection and analysis, a due acknowledgement was provided in the report.

3. Data Collection

A multi-media and multi-activity approach was adopted, with a view to encouraging participants to share their experiences of schooling, of the transition from school to the adult world, of their experiences since leaving school, of their hopes and aspirations for the future, and of real and perceived barriers and assistance to achieving these aspirations.

3.1. Selection of Participants

The selection of research sites and participants was done meticulously. All our research sites were identified through personal contacts by the research team members. Our aim was to identify young people in pre-existent groups who were being supported and developed

by statutory or voluntary agencies. We also aimed to involve young people who had a range of the characteristics and conditions that others have identified as increasing the risk of NEET status (for example, being a young parent, care leaver, drug user, young offender, young carer, not having achieved well at school, etc.). We also wanted to involve young people in our research who came from a range of the 'NEET hotspots' – areas that have a disproportionately high number of young people in the NEET category. The groups came from the following areas: Dundee, Inverclyde, Paisley and Renfrew. However, to preserve the anonymity of participants, these sites have been randomly coded throughout the report as sites A to D.

- Group 1, site A. This was the largest group, with 10 participants: 6 males and 4 females.

These young people were part of a scheme run at Site A, the purpose of which was to gain some understanding of work ethic. Each young person who attended earned more, financially, than they would on benefits. Most had been together for a number of weeks so there was a strong interpersonal dimension.

- Group 2, site B. This group of young people (5 participants, 4 males, and 1 female) were brought together specifically for the research project. Each had been telephoned by the newly appointed Youth Worker and asked if they wished to participate in the research. At the start of the day there were four participants and then one of the young people asked if his friend could join the group. We all agreed and so a fifth young person, who lived close to the space in which we were meeting, joined us for the start of the session.
- Group 3, site C. The young people (6 in total, 4 males and 2 females) were all part of the Site C project. Most of the work was of an individual nature but they were permitted to also attend group sessions/activities that appealed to them. A few of the young people knew each other through a social setting, while others had just met for the first time. Two Youth Workers accompanied the group and were sensitive to the group dynamic, withdrawing when necessary to give the young people disclosure time and supporting and joining in with the camaraderie.
- Group 4 site D. The young people in this group (3 males, 2 females) were supported by the local council. A Youth Worker had invited the individuals to participate in the project and those who arrived knew each other through social circles. All of the participants in this group lived in homeless units.

In conformity with research ethics, all young people took part in a discussion about their involvement in the project, and were given information sheets and consent forms. The young people were offered a range of levels of consent. They had the opportunity to discuss these and ask questions, and were advised that they could change their minds and thereby increase or withdraw their consents at any point in the project. Most participants gave full consent to their involvement, allowing names and faces to be recorded.

3.2. *The Data Collection Methods/Activities*

The activities we used were spread over three-day sessions with the four different groups, ranging in size from five to ten participants, depending on recruitment and attrition. The three days were split into an initial two-day slot, followed by a further day after the interval of one week. In broad terms, the activities over these 3 days were organised in such a way that a range of activities were covered. On the first two days, the groups of young people engaged in a range of drama, video and audio productions, all designed to encourage them to talk about their life experiences. During the intervening week, participants had the opportunity to prepare for the final day by taking photos with disposable cameras that were issued to them, with detailed instructions, at the end of day two. On the third day, during the morning session, the participants produced individual collages which were used as the basis of a discussion with the researchers. In the afternoon of the third day, they used the photographs they took to produce a storyboard using a proprietary computer package. Thus, by engaging participants in these kinds of activities, we were able to capture the emotional as well as descriptive elements of their experiences.

3.3. *Fieldworkers' Reflections on the Research Process*

A summary of the fieldworkers' account of each day's activities as well as their reflections on the data collection process is given here to enhance understanding of the methods and activities employed and their rationales. It is important to add that some of the views outlined here were articulated prior to engagement with the young people, and that these views relate very much to the researchers' aims for employing the activities they used as well as the working relationship they envisaged with the young people. The methods and activities we employed include the following:

3.3.1. *Developing Relationships and Trust*

We wanted groups to explore past, present and future, real and imagined situations and tap into their world experiences. As facilitators, we planned to build a close rapport with each group, show appropriate empathy with participants while maintaining a facilitative distance. We wished to give status to the disclosure rather than be concerned with the manner in which this was delivered. All well-intentioned contributions would be acknowledged, including their anxieties and we, the young people and ourselves, agreed to find ways to minimise any emotional stress. Several activities were used to encourage the young people to feel comfortable, confident and to talk openly. These included: *Geographic mapping* (where the young people drew and described their locale areas and the people and places that were important to them, on a described 'journey'); *Zip Zap Bong* (where words were passed across in a random fashion, and other rapid exchange activities); *Teacher memory* (this involved the young people visualising the teacher with whom they had the strongest memory, and described that person to another using the teacher's mannerisms, vocal tones, etc.); and *Choosing a pathway* (where the young people looked at where their lives are now and considered what might have happened had they chosen another route). The other activities employed included: *A view to the future* (this entailed the young people projecting themselves 5, 10, or more years into the future using mind mapping, or other activity); and *Blind drawing* (where the young people

drew pictures of themselves, with eyes closed, then illustrated these pictures with clothes, likes and dislikes, aspirations and discussed their drawings).

3.3.2. Safe Environment

Our view, supported by evidence in the research literature, was that drama addresses the person as a whole and takes into account thoughts, feelings and behaviour in equal measure. Given the power of this medium, we thought it expedient to ensure that the young people were able to express their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment. This was against the backdrop of evidence in the literature showing that involvement in theatre and drama (and indeed in any cooperative art) has lasting effects on the social element of the participants (Baim et al., 2002).

3.3.3. Addressing Resistance

We considered that the groups could be resistant, apathetic, ambivalent, suspicious, reticent or even fearful of the prospect of 'drama' activities. This energy, although negative, is a creative force. For this reason, the workshop activities were designed to channel that creative energy through presenting drama as a natural process, offering simple scene setting, giving positive feedback and engaging the best instincts of the participants.

3.3.4. Structuring the Events and Capturing Evidence

We knew that setting goals and targets was important as this gives structure to planned activities. However, we were convinced that the structures needed to be flexible and respond to the energy and drive and the commitment of the group of young people we were dealing with. The end product of a DVD of the young people's contributions was therefore a method we chose to record and capture those moments of disclosure that can be lost through the transitory nature of the drama process. We were aware that because of the recording, the activities devised could move, change and disappear, knowing that there would be a tangible outcome. We also knew that the structures within the sessions may be difficult to trace in terms of educational progression, but that in itself was useful in our view because they provided an alternative structural approach to those generally experienced by this group of young people.

3.4. Effectiveness of Methods Used

The methods used in the original research on which this article reports, in our view, were most effective in a number of ways and for a number of reasons. In the following few lines and headings the effectiveness of the methods and activities employed are illustrated. It is however, important to mention that these views as they relate to the methods used are retrospective.

3.4.1. Finding Appropriate Activities to Engage Groups

The four groups of participants had different dynamics, and activities that worked with one group did not necessarily work with others. For this reason, the facilitators had to have a wide repertoire of activities and be willing to adapt quickly in order to engage the young people in a way which allowed them to open up and talk freely about their life experiences including their challenges, barriers, needs and aspirations.

3.4.2. DVD and Filming

This was one of most successful aspects of the work with the NEET young people. This is evidenced in the fact that all groups engaged with this and, in one group, where there were group relationship difficulties, the focus of the DVD gave sufficient common agenda to overcome difficulties to a large degree. The DVDs served a useful purpose of providing a lasting record of their views and stories.

3.4.3. Drama

The making of the DVD was linked to drama and the recording of significant locations in the lives of the young people. Two of the groups, in particular, took this very seriously and dressed appropriately for roles they would take on. Also important was the fact that enacting roles in locations chosen by the young people was effective in allowing them to give accounts of their own life stories.

3.4.4. Graffiti Art

One group that was not keen on going out of the venue to make location recordings was introduced to the work of the graffiti artist, Banksy. This proved very useful in engaging this group, as it provided a focus and direction for discussion and probing views on their life issues.

3.4.5. Drawing

This activity was effective with some groups. Of particular interest were the drawing location maps or 'blind' drawing, where the young people in these groups drew pictures of themselves with their eyes closed. We discovered that talking around their drawing evoked views of their self-concept and their life experiences.

3.4.6. Photos, Collages and Storyboard

This aspect of day 3 activities had limited success, due to a number of the participants who either did not take the photographs or did not bring the cameras back. Those who did engage, however, showed high levels of commitment and produced compelling accounts

of their life experiences. Those who did not have their own photographs, however, made collages with pictures from magazines. This latter activity, just like taking photographs, allowed the young people to talk a lot about their lives, and many exchanges took place between group members and with the researchers.

4. Our Approach to Data Analysis

The original research project from which this article is culled involved a large team of researchers to ensure that a range of data collection, youth work, research and analysis skills were available. This did mean that throughout the project, members of the team were working to skill strengths. This approach, however, did raise some pertinent challenges. Perhaps most significant is the highly interpretive nature of this type of data analysis, and the fact that the approach demanded regular and repeated review of the analysis and conclusions across the entire team to ensure the full contribution of fieldworkers to the analysis. Also, the 'analysis team' did not have the benefit of first hand observations of the sites and the young people. They were only working to the video footage to be able to visualise the data collection, and this was a time-consuming approach. In practice, this raised few difficulties initially in terms of the confidence and accuracy of data collection and analysis. These aside, the processes of data analyses, as is shown below, were stimulating and insightful.

The physical data derived from the activities described above comprised several hours of video material from the first two days of drama activities. This was available for all of the sites. It also comprised seven individual collages from three of the sites with associated recorded interviews with the young people who had produced the collages. There were three storyboards also from three of the sites, again with associated recorded interviews. Responsibility for analysing the data for each site was given to the analysis team, who had not been involved in the fieldwork or who had only been minimally involved. This, although problematic at the beginning stages of analyses, ensured that the initial analysis was removed from any personal knowledge of the young people gained through their recruitment or through information shared outside of the research activities. The team analysed the data against the research objectives, picking out factors that addressed these points and illustrative quotations from the young people. In addition, the analysis team transcribed much of the audio recordings (including discussions of collages and photo diaries) and the video footage, and coded these transcriptions against stated research objectives. Significant discussions and materials from the young people which were outside of the research objectives were also coded and collated.

Throughout the project, we encouraged the young people to express their views freely, and the findings were presented, in part, in their own words in the individual site analyses that were undertaken, and which were combined into an overview narrative that forms part of the full project report submitted to LTS. For eight of the young people, their transcriptions were collated into the personal accounts. These were included, as an integral part, in the final project report. These eight young people were selected from the sample to form a representation of a range of characteristics, namely: gender, age, and geography. Their accounts were viewed to be trenchant and perspicacious in the sense that they showed the complexity of conditions and behaviours that are exhibited by and/or present in an individual NEET young person.

In finalising the project report for submission to LTS, the entire processes of data processing were reviewed and the analysis was checked and re-checked by the whole team, including, most importantly, the fieldworkers, to make sure the findings which were being reported had reliability within the team. At this point, and with the assistance of the fieldworkers, the collage and storyboard material was integrated. This stage of the analysis was highly interpretive, and the field workers' written record of their observations of the context in which these were produced was included in the process to ensure all the bits and pieces of the jigsaw fell together to make the 'big picture'. Finally, the entire analysis was discussed among the research team, and the findings and recommendations put forth were agreed, drafted and validated with the fieldwork team to ensure and assure their validity and reliability.

5. Summary of Key Findings

The full project report, including detailed findings and discussion of findings, was submitted to LTS. In this section of the article, we report a summary of the key findings of the research to add some meaning to and/or espouse the efficacy of the many examples of creative qualitative approaches we recommend for use in research with vulnerable groups. It is important to add that owing to the focus of this article on the methodological aspects of the NEET project, this brief summary of findings cannot be said to represent the richness of the young people's accounts, nor the complexity of their lives. This fuller picture is presented in their more detailed narratives which are contained in the full project report. For purposes of brevity and succinctness, the summary of findings is presented here along the lines of seven themes that emerged from the data analyses.

5.1. Profile of the Young People

Most of the young people we worked with had difficult and unstable family backgrounds.

The findings revealed that only 3 out of 27 participants had been brought up in stable family units. Experiences of homelessness, living in care and being in secure accommodation were the norm. The early death of a parent, a parent on drugs and an abusive partner of a parent were also reported by group members. Three of the 27 were young parents and two of the young men had 15-year-old sisters who had children. One young participant had a role in helping to support his younger sister, and thus, bringing up the importance of family into sharp focus. Also, whilst not all participants in our study were drug users, the use of drugs was common. Individual participants admitted to being either current or past users of heroin, cocaine, marijuana, valium, 'Es', 'speed', 'jellies' and 'blues'. Various reasons were cited for getting started on drugs, including having nothing else to do and trying it out. Alcohol played a major part in the lives of many of the young people. Besides these, many of the young people we worked with had criminal records. Some had spent time in young offenders' institutions whilst others had court appearances pending, with possible custodial outcomes,

or were on community service. Four of the young people had been handcuffed and during discussion of this it appeared that some were bemused by it and were not sure why it had happened to them. Violence was part of the lives of several of the young people, so personal safety during the periods of engagement was an important issue. Owing to the aforementioned, it was not surprising that several of the young people reported mental health problems, including depression and self-harming behaviour.

5.2. Experiences at School

The findings also revealed that some of the participants in the study had not been at school for some time and did not talk much about their school experiences. However, according to the reported experiences and perceptions of many of the young people in the study, school had been a very negative experience. In some cases, they gave the conditions of schooling and behaviour of teachers as the problem, with some feeling that they had been labelled by association with other members of their families who had caused trouble at school. In other cases, they recognized their own contribution to the problem, occasionally expressing regret for damage and hurt they may have caused. More than half spoke about not having done well at school and some had multiple exclusions.

5.3. Experiences of Transition from School to Adult World

The findings suggested that the concept of transition was not strong in the histories and accounts of the young people who participated in our research. The reason for this was that several of them had tranted from an early age, whilst others, as noted earlier, had histories of exclusion. Therefore, the period when they should have been approaching school-leaving and transition merged with their non-attendance at school and their NEETness.

5.4. Experiences since Leaving School

In the accounts of their lives since leaving school, some young people reported being successful in college, some had been unsuccessful and others had applied or were intending to apply for college. Some of them reported that they had completed courses, but had been unsuccessful in gaining employment. Accounts were also given of some jobs offered to some of the young people through the 'Job Centre', for example, 'shelf stacking' which were not related to the courses they studied whilst in college. Some others reported to have had jobs, but employment experience in these jobs tended to be short-lived and the jobs that they described were low skilled.

5.5. Hopes and Aspirations of the Young People

The findings also showed that the hopes and aspirations of the young people who participated in our study were, on the whole, what most people would want or wish for (that is, a settled life with a steady partner, a job, a home and possibly children. Some of their career aspirations were modest and possibly achievable with the right support (for example, becoming a landscape gardener), but for many job aspirations were expressed in terms of something which allowed them to make 'quick money'. Two of the participants who had been helped by the organizations that supported them were keen to contribute to the community by helping, particularly volunteering. One participant had plans to pursue further and higher education, whereas another, at least, was aware that before anything else, her drug misuse had to be resolved before she could follow her career aspirations.

5.6. Barriers to Participation at School and in Post-School Education and Employment

Many of the issues highlighted above – crime, homelessness, drugs and alcohol use – were seen as barriers to participation and progress of the young people at school and in post-school education and employment. Essentially, lack of finance was reported as a significant barrier. The overall effect of this was that the young people were careful with money largely because they had so little. For example, they were very apprehensive that researchers have had to spend too much money on them when during the course of the research/ project activities the researchers had to take them to lunch. They were clearly used to poverty but did not appear to have been in the habit of taking advantage of 'others'.

5.7. Awareness of Support Mechanisms

The findings again showed that the three most commonly mentioned sources of support for the young people we engaged were family, peers and the programmes in which they took part, although their reasons for continuing to attend the latter were not always wholly positive. Largely, the reasons the participants cited for attending what could best be described as 'interventionist programmes' were generally viewed simply as a source of additional income or better than sitting at home, rather than contributing to positive progress in their lives. Again, whilst some of the participants were quite pessimistic about anything that would help them to change their situations, others held the view that 'nobody bothers' or that they had been 'let down by the system'. That notwithstanding, some of the participants did speak very positively about the support their current programmes offered them.

5.8. Concluding Thoughts

Despite the compelling approaches illustrated in this article, we do not claim to have produced a 'grand narrative' of an appropriate method for dealing with methodological challenges concerned with research with vulnerable youth. For as the profile of the young people we engaged with would indicate, in pursuit of the research from which this article is culled, we have had to come face to face with some teething methodological issues and dilemmas which would suggest that the approaches we illustrate after all may not be necessarily the 'full-proof' or 'magic pill' for addressing all concerns regarding vulnerable groups. For example, as was clearly evidenced, the young people we dealt with were youth whose lives were in some state of disarray and whose stories were, at times,

very harrowing. There was therefore a balance to be maintained between having the appropriate professional distance to allow the data to be as robust as possible, while also building up trust and empathy with the young people. Similarly, due to the characteristic features of the young people, there were, on many occasions, strong intra-group aggression and lack of trust, making group activities difficult to manage.

In spite of the aforementioned dilemmas, and in particular, granted the enormity of the challenges associated with conventional qualitative methods in researching marginalised groups in society, we argue that the innovative approaches appeal and are timely for three key reasons. First, and as is illustrated in this article, the approaches are concrete and tactile rather than abstract and verbal, allowing participants the opportunity to shape research agendas. Second, they engage researchers in dialogue with participants and encourage the exploration of their life stories. Third, this form of research involves researchers collecting participants' stories, collaborating with storytellers before producing narrative reports, thus providing access to perspectives and experiences of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard through traditional methods of academic discourse.

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