

**THE MATT TALBOT COMMUNITY TRUST:
A CASE STUDY OF PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTION OF
EDUCATION IN A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT**

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ABSTRACT

The Matt Talbot Community Trust is an organisation in Ballyfermot, Dublin, which helps people who have had issues with substance abuse and/or had experience of prison. The organisation works to provide a supportive community for its participants and their families. Education is one of the organisation's key roles in this regard. This is an exploratory case study which focuses on the views of Matt Talbot Community Trust participants. The study will explore their views in a social and political context. This will be done by examining critical education and feminist theory and the social and political context in which the organisation operates. The implications of the study will be oriented towards possible future action which might be beneficial to the participants and similar groups. As critical education principles and feminist methodology inform this study, it is written with the intent that it is accessible to non-academic readers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
ABSTRACT	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
PREFACE	v
INTRODUCTION	
Research question	1
Background to the study	1
Arguments	3
Findings	4
Overview of chapters	5
Glossary	7
LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction	9
Social Partnership and the voluntary and community sector in Ireland	9
Critical Education	12
Feminism	14
Conclusion	15
Glossary	16
METHODOLOGY	
Feminist analysis	21
Sampling	25
Ethical considerations	26
Methods	28
Conclusion	33

Glossary	34
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS	
Introduction	37
Focus group 1	37
Focus group 2	40
Interview findings	42
Discussion of findings	52
Analysis of interviews	53
Discussion	57
Conclusion	58
Glossary	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY	65

PREFACE

The research for this **thesis** was carried out with participants in The Matt Talbot Community Trust, so the thesis will have a readership which extends beyond the **academic** as I'd like it to be accessible to them. With this in mind I have tried to write the thesis in simple language which will be understandable to both academics and a more general readership. I can't promise that the thesis will be easy to read but I have made an effort to make it easier. I referred to the 'Guide to Plain English'¹ while writing it and have included a glossary of sociological and other terms that I think aren't used in everyday language.

Inglis (1997:7), discussing **empowerment**, **emancipatory** education and power, argues that academics feed into unequal power relations when they discuss such issues in a language that is difficult for adult learners to understand. Martin (1998:8) discusses the politics of research and objects to the **enclosure** of knowledge into areas of expertise. He argues that a lot is lost to knowledge in blocking access to academic fields from 'non-experts' outside the field. I think that in the interest of including non-academics, and particularly those with something valuable to say, that I should make this document accessible by writing it in plain language as far as possible. I will give a copy of the thesis to the Matt Talbot Community Trust and discuss the findings with participants and staff after making a presentation on the project.

A note on the text for non-academic readers:

When you see a name in brackets it indicates the author of the idea that is being mentioned in that particular sentence or paragraph. It is important in academic texts to credit the people whose ideas you are using. The year is mentioned and, to be more specific, sometimes the page number as well. For example: 'Inglis (1997:4) argues that...'. This refers to an article or book that a person called Inglis (must be a surname) wrote in 1997, and the idea I'm talking about can be found on page four. This means that if anyone wants to check the sources for what I'm writing they can look at the **bibliography** at the back of the text and see the full name and publishing details of the book or article and read it themselves.

¹ <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf>

Throughout the text you will see words in **bold**. This means that the word is explained in a glossary at the end of each chapter². It is important to keep reading beyond the occasion where you might not entirely understand something. At times in my own studies I have had to re-read texts several times to fully understand what the author is saying. I hope that this won't be the case with this text.

² Words on this page will appear at the back of the introduction chapter. This is a glossary designed for this particular document and should not be used as a definitive reference.

INTRODUCTION

The Research Question

My research question is how do Matt Talbot Community Trust (MT) participants **perceive** education³? I asked this question because I do voluntary work with MT and believe that the reason for MT being where it is, in Ballyfermot, has a social and political **context**. I gained a lot from my education at university in terms of helping to explain the difficulties and challenges I faced growing up in Ballyfermot. I wanted to know if the people I worked with felt that some of the theories I have learnt about have any relevance to them. It is important to name my other reason which was that I wanted to achieve a further step in my own education and this thesis is a part of that effort. As some of the participants said of them-selves, engagement with the subject material is important to me in the learning process. What I mean by this is that I did not want to do a thesis that simply ticked all the academic boxes; I wanted to ask if what I have learnt matches in any way the views of other adult learners. As theory is written from the point of view of academics I wanted to see what I could learn from those who are, like my-self, still involved in the learning process.

Background to the study: The Matt Talbot Community Trust and Ballyfermot

Ballyfermot is an area that has always had social problems. It has a population of approximately 23,000 people. It has a long history of higher than average unemployment rates. Some of the statistics from MT research make disturbing reading: 46% of the population have at most primary education; 63% of women have no formal education or primary only; 52% of unemployed are educated to primary only; 22% of households in the area are lone parent and there is an estimated one thousand drug users in twenty-five treatment programmes in the area. The organisation draws a link in its most recent Annual Report between low educational outcomes and consequent unemployment, addiction and crime in the area (MT Annual Report, 2010).

³ For the rest of the document I will call the Trust simply MT, which is short for “Matt Talbot” as it is called by the people there.

The Matt Talbot Community Trust was founded in 1986 by Sr. Caoimhín Ní h-Úallacháin. Presently, it has a professional staff and volunteers who work to help people in the area who have been marginalised and are seeking to find their place in their own community. In its strategic planning document the organisation describes itself as a drug-free voluntary organisation, working with those seeking assistance with substance abuse, and those involved in the criminal justice system. It actively works toward the reintegration of adults into the community. MT hopes to create an environment

[...] which recognises the value of an individual's spirituality within a context of trust, belonging and learning. This in turn enables the development of positive relationships and the ability to make informed choices which in turn will benefit not only themselves but the entire community. The organisation has a professional staff of seven, as well as a number of volunteers, and is managed by a voluntary Board of Trustees. (MT **Strategic Plan**, 2011).

I grew up in Ballyfermot and always had a sense that very little ever changed for the better. I did my Leaving Certificate⁴ and went into full-time employment. I eventually returned to education as an adult learner in university and studied **Social Science**. This gave me the ability to analyse my situation in a social context. It didn't provide all the answers to society's problems but it taught me some ways of framing questions and resources to help understand society. One of the issues that came up was **neoliberalism**. I will talk about this in the next chapter. It is relevant here because while MT began as a local voluntary organisation with support from the Catholic Church, it has grown into a professional service which relies to a large degree on various state funds. This reflects a broad pattern of the co-option of local initiatives where local organisations have less control over how they do things, particularly in terms of campaigning on social issues. A large part of this happened under **Social Partnership**⁵ which I would argue is a mechanism for introducing neoliberal policies. Steger and Roy (2010:12;13) point out that a basic tenet of neoliberalism involves a shift away from government bureaucracy but with state machinery remaining very much a part of social organisation. So I see this study as having a context of voice in political and social organisation. Where MT is a valuable and supportive organisation for those who use it, its voice and that of similar organisations, is limited. This means that the voice of those who participate

⁴ The Leaving Certificate is the final exam at secondary level.

⁵ Social Partnership is a mode of policy making based on agreement between the government, business, trade unions and the community & voluntary sector. See Allen (2000) and Taylor (2005).

in MT is also limited. I will go into this in further detail but it was important to name it at this stage as it was a large part of what made me take on this research. Rather than look at the stated priorities of the official bodies, I wanted to see what MT participants had to say. It helped me to put my voluntary community work in context.

The Arguments

In my analysis MT operates in a neoliberal power structure⁶. At the core of MT's operation are the programme participants. While they clearly benefit from MT, I would argue that a social analysis element would form a valuable part of the educational programme. MT participants have had life-paths that would probably have been different had they been born elsewhere. Not everyone would agree with this view but the point is that surely MT participants are entitled to decide this for themselves. To do this adequately, I feel that critical education is important to develop analytical skills to ask questions about the social circumstances of their lives so far.

I have had the benefit of being politically aware for a number of years and have studied Social Science at university. Besides the subject matter, I learned how to think in a disciplined, analytical way. I learned how to develop an argument based on evidence. I make some claims in this thesis that would be thought of as radical by many but let's say that I'm wrong: I still think that it is very important that MT participants have the critical skills to decide this for themselves. If they agree, then I feel further learning might usefully involve learning about the feminist struggle to find a voice and make it heard effectively.

Two of the key theories of interest here are those of **critical education**, particularly Freire's on **emancipatory** learning, and **feminist theory**. Freire (1996) argues that people should be able to 'read the world' as well as the word. He looks **critically** at traditional education where a teacher holds all the power and decides what the student should learn. He calls this 'banking education' as the teacher deposits information into the student's mind (1996:52). Freire argues that learning should happen in a context of equal power, otherwise the student is simply learning to submit to authority without question. Freire argues that knowledge is something

⁶ This is a claim that I will develop by looking at the literature on Social Partnership.

that should be constantly re-evaluated. Freire argues that critically evaluating your situation and changing it for the better is part of what makes us human. He rejects traditional education methods where everyone is forced to behave in the same way and obediently learn the same things (1996:53).

Feminists see **oppression** as patriarchal which means that it comes from the power of men over women. Women analysed their own situation in terms of this and successfully struggled to change it in important ways, such as gaining access to education and getting the right to vote amongst others. However, Feminist theory is complex and covers a lot ground. I feel it is important to this study because it is an example of emancipatory learning processes. If women did not share and discuss their views on their circumstances they would not have made the progress they have. Feminists constantly analyse their situation and struggle to improve it. It is a way of looking at the world which is grounded in the real world and not simply a theory that people in universities discuss and debate in isolation.

This is the **theoretical context** to the study. The key factor is what the participants think of it. I want to find out what they identify as useful knowledge. I will ask them about critical education and then see how it relates to my analysis.

Findings

What I expected to find was that participants were working towards qualifications which would help them find jobs. What I found was that education means much more than that. Issues such as confidence, self-esteem, family, positivity and hope were much more likely to be mentioned. There was talk of some very harsh school experiences which made me quite sad at times and it became clear to me that these experiences had negative knock-on effects on people in later life. I found that while MT doesn't run courses to specifically deal with these issues, they do provide supportive educational environment which has a positive effect. There was a lot of positivity in terms of future projects and in terms of how people can relate to their children through their school-work.

I found that there was a deep distrust and **scepticism** of authority, particularly regarding politics. However, in terms of critical or emancipatory education the participants seemed more focused on their current projects. Where we could go in terms of critical education after this is not clear from the research. One participant

said of radical education that it was hard for people to imagine things that are outside their daily reality. Another participant raised the question in my mind as to whether it needs to happen in a classroom at all. I found that I had automatically imagined social and political discussions happening in this way. From the interviews I found that the participants had a much broader understanding of education than I had been focussing on, with life-experience being very important. Learning useful information to get them through current challenges seemed to be a priority.

Overview of Chapters

Literature Review

In this chapter I will outline my theoretical framework in detail by discussing the literature which informed my approach to this study. The literature features feminist epistemology and standpoint theory which I will explore and expand to apply to an analysis of the issue of voice of MT participants. I will also discuss Social Partnership in a political-power context. I will discuss how this influences the operational environment of the community sector in Ireland and the implications of this for MT participants. I will also look at literature on critical pedagogy.

Methodology

In this chapter I will explain the thinking behind how I went about the study. The chapter deals with why I chose my particular research methods which were focus groups and semi-structured interviews. This is a **case-study** method. I use a **qualitative** approach in my research. I will describe in my methods section how I will try to open up conversation and record the data in a method agreed with the research participants. I use a form of **thematic data-coding**. The data took different forms, in some cases handwritten notes from participants, and added a dimension to the research that problematizes its interpretation in a purely **objective** analysis.

Findings and Analysis

In this chapter I will discuss my findings and analysis. I will describe the form the data took and use my notes to enhance my interpretation of them. I draw on common themes in the data which record **narratives** of the educational experiences of the research participants. I will explore the relationship between the findings and the theoretical framework and discuss the common themes which arose. I also discuss the **implications** for the study within the context set out in the theoretical framework.

Glossary

Academic: Anything to do with formal learning such as that in schools or universities is academic. When a person is called an academic it usually means that they work in a university.

Bibliography: A list of all books or journals etc. that were mentioned in the text. It's usually found at the back of academic texts.

Bold: As with the words listed in this glossary, 'bold' just means darker lettering.

Case-Study: A case-study involves a focussed look at a particular case, as opposed to a broader approach which would study numerous comparable cases.

Context: The particular line of argument or discussion in which something is said.

Critical: To be critical does not necessarily mean to be negative. It means evaluating something giving equal importance to the positive and the negative.

Critical Education: This is view of education which includes social and political circumstances in evaluating education. It emphasises equality in the learning relationship and the relevance of the learning material to the learner.

Emancipatory: Emancipation means freedom, usually in a political or civil rights sense.

Enclosure: A space that is closed in and where entry can be controlled.

Feminist Theory: Feminists have developed theories to examine, and try to explain, society informed by women's experience.

Hierarchies: A hierarchy is a power structure (like a pyramid) where those at the bottom have the least power and those at the top have the most.

Implications: The implications for the study are the possible outcomes that might result from it. For example, the implications of this study would be any further action that MT might take as a result of the findings. Another would be an action research project which would be undertaken by the MT participants and my-self.

Narrative: A narrative is a spoken account of something. It allows the speaker to decide what is important rather than, for example, structured interviews where the important details are decided by the interviewer in constructing the questions.

Neoliberalism: This is a view of the world in which economics is most important decision making factor.

Objective; Objectivity: Objectivity is the idea that something exists in the world outside of human experience. Objective research is a way of studying society by eliminating any personal bias or views about what is being studied.

Oppression: When people are controlled against their interest or exploited they are oppressed. It is a term usually used in a political and/or social context.

Perceive: To see or to understand.

Qualitative: This means a study which looks at how people create or understand meaning. It can be used with, or instead of, quantitative methods which focus more on statistics.

Scepticism: To be sceptical of something means to doubt or question it in some way.

Social Partnership: This is where the government, trade unions and business interests draw up agreements on things like wages, taxation and employment policy. For a period of time the community and voluntary sector had a seat at the partnership table, although the sector had no input on economic matters.

Social Science: The study of society including sociology, social policy, anthropology etc.

Strategy; Strategic Plan: A plan drawn up by an organisation or business outlining future actions and priorities in detail.

Thematic Data-Coding: Data is what you record in your study. In this case it is what the research participants said or wrote. Themes were identified by noting what people mentioned most often. In this way the data was organised, or 'coded', into themes.

Theory, Theoretical Context: A theory is an idea of what, how and why something happens. This study is based on certain theories outlined in the text.

Thesis: A thesis is a worked out argument. The term is also used to refer to the text itself in book form. Theses are sometimes produced at the end of a university undergraduate degree but more often for master's degrees and PhDs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

What frames my interest in MT participants' views is the desire to look at the issue of voice in a social partnership context. While the **corporatist** policy structure of governance in Ireland (Fahey, 2007:5) uses the language of partnership, various authors such as Allen (2000), Coulter and Coleman (2003) and Taylor (2005) suggest that Social Partnership is a way of introducing neoliberal policies. Within the hierarchical structure of Social Partnership, disagreeing voices are actively silenced. At the bottom of the social partnership power hierarchy are organisations such as MT. The participants of MT have very little or no say at all in local partnership structures or in the decisions made by it in the broader sense. As the struggle for the acceptance of women's voices has shown, there is a possibility of change if an effort is made to claim a right to voice on the part of MT participants and others in similar projects who share their standpoint. Critical educators such as Freire (1996) argue that the first step is to work with learners to develop a critical analysis of their world. Inglis (1997) argues that there is a need for a strong analysis of power in a truly emancipatory **pedagogy**. Kothari (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) argues that people who have the most reason to challenge hierarchy and inequality find themselves instead negotiating the benefits of inclusion while the power inequality is continued. Feminist theory is very useful in looking at the issue of power, voice and action. Connolly gives an account of how women developed educational methodologies based on lived experience and effected change (2007:125). Feminism has a lot to offer MT participants, and people who share a similar experience, in terms of developing an independent voice, or standpoint, from which emancipatory **strategy** could be developed.

Social Partnership and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Ireland

My research area is in the community and voluntary sector. This sector has changed over the last twenty years in that **grassroots** community groups organising around local issues have become a professionalized and highly controlled sector. In

Ireland community organising has a history in local grassroots participation including support for efforts coming from the Church. Since the beginning of national partnership programmes such organisations have become increasingly **professionalized** moving away from voluntary local expertise to more **bureaucratically** recognisable expertise in the form of qualifications and training. Meade (2005:360) indicates a move away from voluntarism ‘[...] towards regularized organisational structures and a willingness to engage in partnership’. Meade agrees with other authors, such as Allen (2000), in linking social partnership with industrial peace and securing other policy objectives recognisable as neoliberal in ideological outlook.

Meade highlights a contemporary manifestation of this when she refers to the engaged and the estranged in the social partnership process (2005:357). Meade challenges the notion that social partnership is a form of participatory democracy. She argues that those lucky enough to be afforded recognition by the state under this process may influence aspects of policy to which others, who are not involved in consultation, must adopt nevertheless. According to Meade (2005:357):

In truth, the right to participate in national social partnership is gifted by the central government to its favoured interest groups, negotiations take place away from the public gaze, and it is primarily professional workers, policy experts or senior managers who participate in discussions.

Meade ([DSW, 2000:10] 2005:359) goes on to cite a government White Paper which makes evident an **ideological** slant in its policy direction:

The Government’s vision of society is one which encourages people and communities to look after their own needs – very often in partnership with statutory agencies – but without depending on the State to meet all needs.

Some commentators, such as Fahey et al (2007), highlight positive social impacts of what was known as ‘The Celtic Tiger’. They drew upon **empirical** research to question the **pessimism** of commentators who were critical of aspects of Celtic Tiger Ireland. In their book, *The Best of Times?*, they compare pre- and post-boom Ireland and conclude that Ireland is in a much more desirable position on a number fronts such as: **subjective well-being** and national morale; living standards, the **abundance** and quality of jobs; immigration replacing emigration; family formation and health improvements. Contrary to my argument that Ireland’s use of

national partnership agreements is an ideological mechanism to implement neoliberal policy, the authors contend that such institutions are in fact **corporatist** (2007:5). They do not take for the object of the research the factors that contributed to the boom. Their analysis is apparently **apolitical** in that it focuses on **empirical** data to challenge more politically informed **critiques** of the Celtic Tiger. While empirical data is useful for testing claims for or against the benefits of the economic boom period as a method it is problematic in that it attempts to measure things like happiness.

Kuhling (2008:165) questions the preference for empirical data over deeper analysis in *The Best of Times?* She points to the fact that the work is celebratory and uncritical. This is in spite of significant negative findings in the work such as: increased social inequality at the top end of the wealth ladder; a high degree of income inequality; an increase in those falling below the poverty threshold; a rise in the number of lower skilled jobs and the **persistence** of inequality of opportunity in the occupational sphere particularly for working class groups. She argues that the work is ‘[...] more consistent with the emerging neoliberal consensus in the Irish state than with the ESRI’s⁷ former role in providing an empirical foundation to a critical social science in Ireland.’ She challenges the work on the grounds that it assumes the ability for empirical research to reveal a ‘true’ social reality (2008:164).

Allen (2000:184) highlights the **ideological implications** for partnership arguing that ‘Ideologies often work by combining elements of people’s experience and reconfiguring them in ways that suits ruling groups.’ Allen highlights the fact that partnership structures presented barriers to union activity. He argues that any meaningful partnership intent from employers is not evident in terms of sharing the wealth and that they viewed the agreement structure as a mechanism for controlling the unions (2000:185). Coulter also examines the partnership agreements in a more ideological light. He points to the majority view that partnership was the main factor in securing the prosperity of the economic boom (2003:11). In terms of seemingly **apolitical** analysis and positive readings of the Celtic Tiger he says that **omissions** that define such readings ‘[...] serve to disclose the ideological interests they are intended to serve.’ (2003:17) Coulter argues that rather than **prudent** policy-making decisions, the Irish economic boom had more to do with the **global expansionary drives** of US **multinationals**.

⁷ ESRI stands for the Economic and Social Research Institute.

Ireland was attractive in terms of its low **corporation tax** and social partnership ensured an atmosphere of industrial stability and wage restraint. The partnership structures created conditions which were agreeable to neoliberal principles. Taylor (2005:14) shows how partnership agreements which involve various opposing interests tend to produce neoliberal outcomes; to the extent that free-market **revisionists** can ignore the contribution of governments and trade unions. I agree with Allen's view (2000:185) that it served to co-opt trade unions. My argument is that the idea of partnership in this context is a tried and tested mechanism of introducing neoliberal policies via **co-option of dissenting** voices⁸. This mechanism has been characteristically bureaucratic in nature which, as Meade outlined above, ties up the resources of organisations such as MT. It also ties them into formal agreements which control their capacity to criticise policy.

Critical Education

Freire explains *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* like this:

[...] a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (be they individuals or whole peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle pedagogy will be made and remade.(1996:30)

Freire (1996) links authoritarian education with **unreflective** learning. Teachers put **prescribed** information into the minds of the students. The students must **passively** accept this and Freire argues that this alienates the students from what they're learning. A key part for this study is the 'culture of silence' which is a consequence of blind respect for authority and 'uncritical consumption of knowledge' (Mayo, 1999:59). Freire talks about the importance of the learner being at the centre of the learning process. He talks about an equality of respect in the relationship and that the ideal situation is one where the teacher learns from the students as well.

⁸ See for example Bondi *et al*, *Antipode* (2005), Vol. 37: 3; which discusses neoliberal strategies from different times and in different places around the world.

As I understand this, Freire is always talking about social transformation where the oppressed of society reflect on their situation and become aware of their powerlessness in the system. Freire believes that humans are creative beings and that when they become **conscious** of their situation will act to overcome it. For Freire, education is at the core of the democratic project because it replaces the **authoritarian** influence of the mainstream education and replaces it with one of critical thinkers. The people take ownership of their learning and develop it creatively instead of learning material dictated by those in power.

Mezirow talks about 'frames of reference' in his theory (2007). In his view, people are subject to **dominant frames of reference** and critical thinking means evaluating their own assumptions. In doing this, people think outside their normal frames of reference which is an act of emancipation. Mezirow sees this as the role of an adult educator. Another key role is being a facilitator of '**collaborative discourse**'. This means creating the ideal conditions for communication. Mezirow makes a similar assumption to Freire that people coming together and thinking critically will lead to social change.

Inglis (1997:4) argues for a deeper analysis of **power structures**. Power as experienced and explored by critical thinkers might not suffice if the hope is to bring about social change. Inglis argues that a more **structural** analysis is required if people are to free themselves from power and he mentions **Foucault's** theory which says that people are trapped by **discourse and practises**. Inglis notes Freire's **ideological** and structural awareness of power. This informs Freire's analysis when he talks about the importance of **praxis** and theory in challenging it. Inglis says that Mezirow focuses too much on the individual as an agent for social change. When this happens, he argues, people's reflexivity becomes more to do with **self-regulation**. Self-regulation is something that supports power structures rather than challenges them. Inglis argues that educators who are interested in **emancipation** should talk about the nature of power in structural terms but also that the debate needs to happen with people normally excluded from these debates, such as those people who did not gain access to advanced levels of education. This is a key point because the practise of talking about power in an academic language which excludes people is exactly the type of structural power that emancipatory educators are trying to overcome.⁹

⁹ This point supports my decision to write the thesis, as far as I could, in an accessible way.

Feminism

Feminism also has a critical approach to society and its struggle for the emancipation of women. It has developed knowledge based on the lived realities of women and has expanded its analysis to include the different experiences of women in terms of race and/or class. It has a structural analysis in terms of making issues of social practices and discourses that are problematic to women. I am not going to say that MT participants represent a group or a class comparable to the enormous issue of women's emancipation. What I am saying is that from an **epistemological** and '**standpoint**' point of view there is much value in the feminist approach for my study. Jagger (1983:371) describes **socialist feminist** standpoint theory and its **implications** below:

The political economy of socialist feminism establishes that, in **contemporary** society, women suffer a special form of **exploitation** and **oppression**. Socialist feminist epistemologists argue that this distinctive social or class position provides women with a distinctive epistemological standpoint. From this standpoint, it is possible to gain a less biased and more **comprehensive** view of reality than that provided either by established **bourgeois** science or by the male-dominated **leftist alternatives** to it. An adequate understanding of reality must be undertaken from the standpoint of women. As socialist feminists conceive it, however, the standpoint of women is not expressed directly in women's naïve and **unreflective** world view. We have seen earlier that socialist feminists recognize that women's perceptions of reality are distorted both by male-dominated ideology and by the male-dominated structure of everyday life. [...] the standpoint of women is discovered through a collective process of political and scientific struggle.

Connolly (2007:125) gives a good account of how feminism links **methodologies**, a structural analysis of power and the merging of different actions with feminist scholarship. What I feel this approach has to offer to this study is a methodological approach based on belief that meaning is **socially constructed**. Feminists recognise this and argue that they have a particular view that is overshadowed in a male-dominated society. They develop social knowledge which, they argue, is more valid as it is conscious of the distortion of male biases or taken for granted notions. Feminists have analysed their situation to the point that they can challenge not just what science knows, but how it claims to know. Feminists have not simply analysed and discussed women's views, they have as Connolly shows,

they use this in practise to demystify ‘**canonical knowledge**’ and clarify the mechanisms of oppressive power (2007:125).

Conclusion

What is important in this study is the process of critical reflection and how this might be of benefit to MT participants in becoming active agents in the social processes that involve them. In this study we are talking about educational processes in MT. There is a broader context in which MT operates, however. There is an ideological factor to this which I associate with the Social Partnership process. I wanted to find out if this holds any importance to the MT participants using feminist methodology. Feminist theory and its relation to social activism offers a model that would be useful in terms of developing a collective voice for people in a similar situation to MT participants.

Glossary

Abundance: When something is abundant it means it is plentiful.

Alternative: An 'alternative' way of doing something means a different way of doing something, usually suggested as an improved or preferable way.

Apolitical: A position where someone claims an unbiased view in terms of politics.

Authoritarian: Highly controlled and punitive (punishing disobedience).

Bourgeois: Of the 'higher' social classes.

Bureaucratic: This is to do with office-based requirements in terms of finances and managing information, time and people. Bureaucrats are unelected people who are employed to carry out official tasks, usually for the government (such as the community welfare officer).

Canonical Knowledge: A 'canon' of knowledge means a well-established and unchallenged body of knowledge.

Collaborative Discourse: Collaborative means people working together and discourse basically means talk, so collaborative discourse is about people discussing problems together to come up with solutions.

Comprehensive: Very detailed.

Conscious: Aware.

Contemporary: Modern.

Co-opt; Co-option: To co-opt an organisation means to bring it under your influence so that it will not work against your agenda. This can be done by providing funding and then threatening to withdraw funding if the organisation works against your interests.

Corporatist: A corporatist arrangement means that large powerful organisations (such as trade unions, farming organisations and business groups) negotiate their interests with other corporate bodies and government drawing up official agreements.

Corporation Tax: This is a tax on company profits. Ireland has the lowest corporation tax in the EU.

Critical Education: This is view of education which includes social and political circumstances in evaluating education. It emphasises equality in the learning relationship and the relevance of the learning material to the learner.

Critique: An evaluation of something focussing on both the strong and weak points.

Discourse and Practises: ‘Discourse’ means what is said, in public or private. ‘Practise’ refers to action or what we do. For example, sexism can be both when you make jokes which put women down. What you say is sexist discourse and by engaging in the verbal abuse of women it is a sexist practise.

Dissent; Dissenting: To dissent means to disagree with, or go against, the majority view.

Dominant Frames of Reference: A frame of reference means the world-view through which we make sense of life. Dominant frames of reference are those that are thought of as the most important by those in power. A dominant frame of reference in modern Irish society is, for example, the economic frame of reference. Most big decisions, both personal and national, depend on whether it is economically possible or not.

Emancipation: Emancipation means freedom, usually in a political or civil-rights sense.

Empirical: This is research that focuses on facts and observations which are testable or repeatable. It focuses on observable evidence but this means it can lack deeper analysis.

Epistemological: Epistemology is the study of how we know things.

Exploitation: Where someone benefits unfairly from the labour of someone else.

Foucault, Michel: French social theorist who examined the historical development of modern power structures (amongst other things). Instead of examining the obvious mechanisms of power (such as the police or army) Foucault focussed on how people internalised control structures by learning to think and behave in certain ways.

Global Expansionary Drives: This refers to US companies which were keen to invest in countries around the world where they could avail of stable industrial and political systems, low company tax and cheaper labour.

Grassroots: An organisation of people from the ground up, rather than an organisation which was developed by a larger organisation. Generally it means local people who organise themselves around a particular issue without traditional power hierarchies.

Hierarchies: A hierarchy is a power structure (like a pyramid) where those at the bottom have the least power and those at the top have the most.

Ideology/ Ideological: This a world-view based on a political analysis. While it is a complex subject we can say for example, ‘left-wing’ ideology argues that capitalism is an exploitative system that puts the interests of the rich ahead of society. ‘Right-wing’ or neoliberal ideology argues for a free market, saying that putting society first limits the market and interferes with the liberty to own and protect individual property.

Implications: This means the consequences of an action or the impact resulting from something.

Leftist: Ideologically left-wing or socialist.

Methodologies: A methodology is an overall approach to doing something. Such as feminist methodology which appreciates experience and interpretation as opposed to an empirical methodology which would focus on statistics. Not to be confused with methods which are specific ways of doing something, e.g. interviews or surveys.

Multinationals: This refers to, usually US, companies (also called corporations) which have interests all around the globe. They are also sometimes referred to as TNCs, Trans-National Companies. The global reach and influence of these companies is where the term ‘globalisation’ comes from.

Neoliberalism: This is a view of the world in which economics is most important decision making factor.

Omissions: Things that are deleted or left out.

Oppression: When people are controlled against their interest or exploited they are oppressed. It is a term usually used in a political and/or social context.

Passively: Without any feedback, simply listen and take in the information without interacting or questioning.

Pedagogy: The science of education.

Persistence: Something that happens continuously without apparent end.

Pessimism: To take a negative view of something or to focus on the negative than the positive value of something.

Power Structures/ Structural Analysis: An analysis of how power exists within institutional or social structures. For example, voting power depends on having an address which can exclude homeless or Travelling people. Women are often subject to the economic power of men because men typically receive better pay. This can mean that the woman stays at home rather than the family earning less as a unit if

she goes to work instead making her dependent on the man's pay. These are examples of power in a social structure.

Praxis: Praxis is an on-going process where action is planned according to theory and/or experience. Each action provides the theory and experience for future action. It is about learning from success or mistakes. It refers to a very conscious and systematic way of doing this.

Prescribed: As a doctor prescribes whatever he decides is necessary for the patient, what is to be learned is also prescribed. The doctor does not have to explain his rationale to the patient it is normally taken on trust, as is the education provided to people.

Professionalized: This means people who are professionally trained in specific areas such as management, finance, computers etc., as opposed to people with knowledge based on experience only.

Prudent: Carefully thought out.

Revisionist: Someone who re-writes history according to their own agenda. In this context, free-market revisionists write trade unions and government out of the story of the 'Celtic Tiger' and explain it in terms of free-market economics only.

Self-Regulation: In this context self-regulation means people thinking about and judging their actions to fit into expected behaviour and power structures.

Socially constructed; Social Constructivism: Social constructivism focuses on meaning in social life. Meaning is created and shared by human beings. Understanding society can be understood by interpreting what events or situations mean to people and how they make that meaning rather than a simple description of what happened.

Socialist Feminist: Feminist theory is made up of many different modes of analysis. Socialist feminism involves a socialist class-power analysis but is equally concerned with patriarchal power and the relationship between the two.

Standpoint: Point of view based on a collective lived experience and formed into an argument.

Strategy: A plan drawn up by an organisation or business outlining future actions and priorities in detail.

Subjective Well-Being: Subjectivity means how you feel, your own experience of reality or your own particular view. In this context it means people's sense of well-being as they describe it in answer to survey questions.

Unreflective: Doing something without thinking about it. In this context it is learning whatever is being taught without asking why or for what bigger purpose.

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will explain how my **epistemological** approach is influenced by Feminist analysis and how this informed my **data-gathering** process. Feminism informs my approach in terms of focussing on the group at the user-end of an educational programme and challenging the assumptions and power relations involved in providing that programme. In critically assessing the dominant structures of governance new knowledge can be generated to challenge and even change the same structures. My research focus is on those whose lives are impacted most by these structures and on how they perceive the situation. While I do not expect that my thesis will adequately cover the scope of what is a very broad subject I do hope to record the views of MT participants and explore how they match with my theoretical analysis. I will firstly link my theoretical framework to my methodological approach and then give an account of the research methods and process.

Feminist Analysis

I use a Feminist epistemological approach to explore the views of MT participants because Feminist Standpoint Theory emphasises the importance of lived experience in the creation of knowledge (Jagger, 1983:371). By using this approach I am recognising this in action. I am also levelling the balance in emphasis between the **perceived rational authority** of **academia** and the **experiential knowledge** of the participant.

Feminist Epistemology and Standpoint Theory

Harding (1991) outlines the reasoning behind feminist **empiricism** and standpoint theory. In terms of feminist empiricism it challenges **conventional empiricism** in that the latter is **androcentric** in tradition and that strict adherence to the scientific method requires that any form of personal bias be rigorously guarded against (1991:111). Harding highlights the fact that there is a tension in empirical discussions when criticism comes from the feminist perspective. She goes on to say that in the history of science the most significant discoveries have often come from

those outside the dominant paradigms. Giving the examples of the structure of DNA, and the relationship between poverty and the control of labour processes, she shows how critical perspectives and fresh ways of thinking which lead to such innovations come precisely from those outside the accepted fields of expertise (1991:110). MT participants and people who are in a similar situation are within the field of experience but outside the field of expertise. This means that they have little input into defining or identifying problems relating to their needs.

Harding doesn't claim this approach to be a radical one (1991:116). It is a strict adherence to scientific method. Feminist empiricist analysis is focused on bias in research processes but without rejecting the broader methodology. Biases enter the research process at the stage where scientific problems are being identified and defined and findings evaluated (1991:110). 'Feminist empiricists argue that sexist and androcentric biases can be eliminated by stricter adherence to existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry; only "bad science" or "bad sociology" is responsible for their **retention** in the results of research.' (1991:111) Harding poses a criticism of conventional and feminist empiricism by say that empiricist tradition from British philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 'defends experience rather than ideas as the source of knowledge and is thus contrasted with **rationalism**.' (1991:112)

Harding makes a crucial point by saying that after a movement of struggle that the context of discovery becomes clear. For example, women's perspective was not seen as valid or relevant before the women's movement which means that any knowledge or insight gained by feminist theory has come about as a consequence of this movement. It is argued that (1991:116) '...the individualism of empiricism and its paternal liberal political theory is challenged by feminist epistemology.' She argues that what is observable in the world is not simply a matter of **phenomena** being **objectively** observed but rather phenomena observed through **cultural filters**. Harding draws a distinction between individual assumptions and biases that can be eliminated by routine scientific methodology and those that are culture-wide which require different methods of detection. This is key to my argument in that MT participants' perspectives can offer valid detection of taken-for-granted assumptions made about their needs. Drawing on Harding, there is a link between the feminist project and mine when she says (1991:116): 'A social movement on behalf of the less advantaged groups is one such different and valuable scientific method.'

Following this line of argument a call can be made for an independent user-led movement, rather than individual organisations, advocating for addicts and recovering addicts. This would not only provide a much needed voice for those affected by drug addiction but should also generate knowledge from a new critical perspective as the feminist struggle has done for women.

Harding (1991:118) points to more **radical** critiques of **empiricism** (although ones which fall short of standpoint theory) which ‘target western generalisations from masculine to human in the case of ideal reason.’ These critiques present the argument that ideal western rationality leaves ‘partial our understandings of nature and social relations by devaluing contextual modes of thought and emotional components of reason.’ Feminist epistemology argues that **gender binaries** exist where masculine traits of cold calculation are favoured in the power-context of social relations over feminine traits such as empathy (Oakley, 2000:24). Where arguments are made on behalf of marginalised groups they are of little value if they don’t fit in with the dominant economic rationale. I argue that these voices are marginalised and therefore are absent from the totality of the social reality in question. This situation presents a gap in knowledge in this field.

Harding goes on to explain Feminist Standpoint Theory. It is an approach that views mainstream epistemology as being formed by social situations. Feminist Standpoint Theory presents an epistemological approach that looks at the differences in men and women’s lives and generates knowledge grounded in the social reality of these differences. A key difference between this approach and feminist or conventional epistemology is that standpoint theorists draw on specific resources that conventional researchers do not use. Harding argues that this enables feminist researchers to produce ‘...empirically more accurate descriptions and theoretically richer explanations than does conventional research.’ (1991:119) It is perhaps best explained in terms of bias. Where conventional research tries to control for and eliminate bias, feminist standpoint theorists acknowledge their bias on the grounds that the researcher and his/her motivations form part of the social reality being researched.

I find this approach convincing because I come from a similar background to those I wish to conduct research with. In my analysis of drug addiction I see that the concentration of the problems in working class areas like my home town presents a fundamentally social and political aspect to the problem. This influenced why I

chose to study this field of research. Where conventional research methodology would argue that such personal biases be left out of the research process, standpoint theorists would argue that this in fact enhances the empirical value of the research as it is grounded in the reality under observation. They would go further and say that the notion of objectivity is, in itself, a political position (Ali *et al*, 2008: 25).

Another strong reason for choosing feminist analysis is that it offers an analysis of gendered ideas about what is relevant and what is not. My study does not focus exclusively on women but it is located in the reality of patriarchal power; the structures of which reflect the dominance of rationalistic masculine values as opposed to feminine sympathetic values. These structures can be seen to favour some voices at the expense of others. Oakley (2000:24) highlights a series of **dualisms** between **positivistic** methods and **qualitative** methods showing the key differences between both.

Oakley's dualisms between positivist and **interpretive** research methods:

	Positivist	Interpretive
Purpose	Verification	Discovery
Approach	Top-down	Bottom-up
Technique	Quantitative	Qualitative
Method	Surveys, counting, Experiment.	Observation, In-depth Interviews
Implementation	A Priori	Decided in field
Values	Value-free	Value-bound
Data	Hard, reliable, replicable	Rich, deep and valid
Data Analysis	Specified in advance	Worked out in field
Image of reality	Static, singular, tangible, external	Multiple, socially constructed, dynamic.
Research Product	For scholars	For scholars and producers of data.

Source: *Experiments in Knowing* (Oakley, 2000:26).

What emerges from looking at this side by side list, for me, very much sums up the two **ontologies**: on the positivist side is the belief that an objective truth is out there to be discovered using equally objective methods and on the other side is the belief that there is no objective reality as such, that the observed reality is interpreted through the socially-constructed lens of the observer. Oakley (2000:24) presents another set of dualisms where on one side she has: hard, masculine, rational, intellect, scientific etc. opposed to (in the same order) soft, feminine, intuitive, emotion, artistic and so on. She does this in the context of **paradigm wars** showing that the positivist tradition is by no means uncontested in science and that it is itself **embedded** in a social context of academic debate as opposed to existing in **objectivity**. My research is located in the reality of the social power relations as experienced by the research participants in the MT. It is a reality that I have always been familiar with in my lived experience. It therefore seems inadequate and inappropriate for me to claim a position of objectivity in this research.

Sampling

I conducted the research with two groups which basically self-selected. In terms of representative value the groups are different from each other and have different relationships with MT. The first group are programme participants and have been in prison and almost all have had drug addiction issues.¹⁰ While I could have predicted that the group would be representative of other similar projects in the area in that they are working class with problematic histories with mainstream education and the authorities I felt it would be better to verify this with staff and participants who have experience and knowledge of other organisations and it was confirmed that MT participants are representative in this regard.

The second group is a women's group based in MT. They meet every week for prayerful meditation but the meeting also serves as a support group for the women. The women have not necessarily had direct experience of alcohol or drug addiction but in most cases they are related to or know someone who has addiction

¹⁰ MT does not operate an exclusively addict-oriented programme; one participant had no drug issues but did spend most of his life in prison.

issues. I felt that it was important to extend the study to this group as well. The women's group do exert some influence in MT although they are not members of staff and neither are they course participants. They are, however, an important part of the MT community.

Ethical Considerations

Ryen (2011) highlights a distinction between what she calls **positivist** research projects and **qualitative** ones. She objects to a **universalist** approach of pre-defined **ethical** guidelines and argues that an ethically sensitive researcher is more appropriate in a complex social field. She locates this duality in terms of **ontology**, where the positivist is looking for **objective** truths that an interviewee reveals from observation and the interpretivist view sees the interview as co-constructing meaning around an event (Ryen, 2011:421/2). Feminist researchers challenge the idea that ethical practise, per se, can ensure non-harmful research (Kelly and Ali, 2008:116). Ryen's analysis is appropriate for my research and some topics that concern me are: the basic **conventional** requirements and how they might apply to this study; access and accessibility; confidentiality; and the effect of research on the participants. There is also a broader ethical implication to my study, as highlighted by feminist research, which I feel is relevant to this study also and which I will discuss below.

Ryen (2011:418) mentions some conventional requirements for doing ethical research. The participant(s) must know they are being researched. They have the right to be informed about the research and informed that they have the right to withdraw at any time. In some countries, Ryen notes, consent forms are mandatory but in many cases oral consent is acceptable if the participants are not members of 'vulnerable groups' such as children, clients, patients or pupils etc.

The question of **vulnerability** was one that I felt I should give serious consideration to as a lot of the participants had addiction issues. However, all programme participants are drug-free and had achieved a lot in terms of dealing with their addiction by the time I met them. I felt comfortable to proceed as the nature of the research dealt with a general issue of education and asked for impressions freely given by the participants. The subject of education did bring up bad memories. At no point did anyone get upset during the research although there were some **emotive**

accounts given. As Ryen (2011:432) points out, the researcher needs to be reflexive on an on-going basis throughout the research and I was prepared to stop the project if I felt, at any point, that the process was in any way harmful or upsetting to the participants. The research was carried out in the safe, familiar space of the MT centre and every part of the research, including why I was doing it and what it would involve, was explained before it was carried out. I was keen to make sure that each group were OK with what was happening and the groups actually decided themselves what shape the process would take.

At all times I reassured the participants could say as much or as little as they liked and this avoided anyone being 'put on the spot' with a question they were uncomfortable with. With the interviews I felt that I should use consent forms as the process involved more engagement and the **narratives** were more personal. The focus groups were largely anonymous and only first-names were recorded. The data was collected on large sheets of paper in front of the group and could be seen by anyone at any time. The participants were invited to reflect on the discussion and delete anything that they felt should be. Also, the groups and the interviewees were assured that they could withdraw at any time from the research and any use of the data was subject to their approval which they could withdraw at any time.

Ryen (2011:419;420) discusses the **implications** of trust which she identifies as a key concern in **conventional** ethical guidelines. She highlights the issue of good **field relations** and not doing anything that might put participants off assisting future research. Ryen also discusses trust in the deeper implications of on-going relationships in longer research processes (2011:424-428). Feminist ethics in research emphasise power-relations at all levels of knowledge production; from the epistemology that frames the research to the **dissemination** of the final product (Kelly and Ali, 2008:116). For this study then, it was important that I respect the participants as co-producers at all times and evidence that I did this lies in the flexibility and sharing of control in the **data-gathering** process. An example of this was my intention to use a **world café**¹¹ method to create discussion and record data. According to its website '...the World Café is a powerful social technology for engaging people in conversations that matter, offering an effective antidote to the fast-paced fragmentation and lack of connection in today's world.' This method was not popular and was duly abandoned.

¹¹ World Café: www.theworldcafe.com

In terms of the on-going relationships, I expect to make a presentation of this study to MT. I also think the trust issue in ethics is important to how I write this. If the finished work was presented as a text which was **impenetrable** to the average reader it would be a breach of trust, in my view, to those who co-produced it. While I hope that the thesis will impact upon MT on-going evaluation of its educational approach, I would like the study to be useful to the participants in facilitating their part in that evaluation process. I feel that power relations and trust are intertwined in this study, not just in terms of how I interacted with the participants but also what I do with the text. One of the issues for the thesis as a whole is that of voice in a broader political-power context. This is recognised as an ethical issue by feminist researchers (Ali and Kelly, 2008:118). It would be inconsistent for me to use an approach that acts as a barrier to understanding for the co-producers; for example by writing a strictly academic text. Ali and Kelly (2011:125) refer to this as **epistemic** responsibility which means that researchers must be conscious of all levels of power relations and must be reflexive of ‘social, institutional and political contexts as well as intellectual frameworks.’

Methods

I used a mixed methods approach. Firstly, I arranged for two focus groups to begin a general debate about education from which I recorded data. Then, I had three in-depth interviews with three participants from the focus groups. The interview participants were selected because they expressed an interest in the study after the initial focus group research.

Oakley, above, identifies a range of methods associated with qualitative research which emphasise a **grounded** approach to research. Qualitative research can be used as an approach developed in the field and I consciously adopted this method to avoid being too **prescriptive** in the course of the research. If my primary data were the narratives of the participants then I needed to facilitate this in ways that suited them. Charmaz and Bryant (2011:299) describe interviews as being co-constructed and the contributions of interviewees as performance; instead of an accurate description of events that happened. What is important is how the interviewees interpreted these events and not an objective record. The authors point out that the interviewer sets the context of the performance by setting the questions

and is then a co-constructor of the narrative. I feel justified then in giving a narrative account of how I went about the focus groups to detail my somewhat **improvised** approach. Creswell (2009:67) discusses the value of different theoretical lenses which are used in the design of a mixed-methods approach. He gives examples of how such an approach reflects the diversity of people's lived experience. This is something that is consistent with my examination of feminist standpoint theory. I feel that recalling my methods in the following descriptive way gives a more accurate impression of the process rather than simply writing a list of methods and lends itself to better understanding.

The Focus Groups

Firstly I felt it was important to introduce what I was doing. I told the group about my academic requirement to submit a thesis for my **Master's degree**. I explained that the focus of my thesis was their views on education. I thanked them for giving me the time and explained what I hoped to do in terms of research. I explained that I would be taking notes and asked if anyone felt uncomfortable with this. I told them that the notes would be available to view at any time and that they would be left out for general observation at the end of the session. Secondly, I showed a short film¹² which problematised the topic of mainstream education. I told them that it wasn't important to remember the details or information provided in the film. It was simply to introduce the topic and present a different view. It was to challenge taken-for-granted notions about education and encourage critical debate. The film was eleven minutes long. There was a brief chat about impressions of the film and then a break which would take place outside the room. At this point I engaged the participants in a casual chat about their impressions of the film. When we returned, we had a discussion of personal experience of education and we talked about what education means as a word or concept. On this point I emphasised that any comment at all in terms of education would be useful regardless of how irrelevant, strange or otherwise it might seem at first.

¹² The film was a talk by Sir Ken Robinson, educationalist, for 'RSA Animate' and can be found on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U&feature=related> It takes a critical look at mainstream education.

Focus Group 1: MT Participants

With the first group I carried out my research as outlined above. It was a really sunny day and when I suggested a break outside the group happily obliged. The film seemed problematic in that people felt they hadn't quite understood what was being said. I found that while each person said something it was not a topic that animated a lot of people. People were lounging in the sun and some made jokes about their scant educational experience. Some asked why I was doing what I was doing and how it related to the video. I explained that I was interested in education and how it was designed from the top down and how it assumed an understanding of education based on **establishment** values.

We went back for a group discussion in the room and I knew from the conversation outside that the group would not be brimming with ideas on this topic so I invited them to talk about their own educational experience and said that they could say as much or as little as they liked. After beginning the process by speaking about my educational journey and what I felt education was about I asked a participant whom I knew was a confident speaker in the group to go next. He gave his story and the group formed its dynamic of each person taking their turn when the person beside them had finished their story.

We broke for lunch and I left the group in the hope that they would discuss the session and with everyone having told their story and heard everyone else's I felt that there would be plenty to record on the sheets at the **World Café**. According to its website '...the World Café is a powerful social technology for engaging people in conversations that matter, offering an effective antidote to the fast-paced fragmentation and lack of connection in today's world.' As it turned out the World Café didn't happen. I told the group that I would like to record their views as it would be important data for my research. So, in the time that was left we went over the educational experiences. One group member volunteered to take notes and I wrote down the personal narratives as they were spoken.

Focus Group 2: The Women's Group

The second group is made up exclusively of women who meet once a week for prayerful meditation, a cup of tea and a chat. They are not MT programme participants but they are considered an integral part of the MT community. They help out with various activities of the organisation. I began the research process in the same way as with the first group, thanking them for agreeing to facilitate the study and explaining what it was about. I gave a preamble about the video and explained who the narrator was and reassured the group that the detail of the film was not important. After the film I asked for their impressions about the film and I was asked for further clarification on what it was actually about. I explained that the film was about a highly regarded academic who challenged notions which underline mainstream education. I said that he linked the development of mainstream education with the history of industrial development and that he said that nations are challenged to rethink education as the world changes. I noted some confusion about the film and on reflection I realise the women must have been thinking 'what has this got to do with us?' I told them that the point of my study was to find out how other people felt about the issue and that critical views were welcome. I then invited the group to talk about their experiences.

The group was more mature in years than the first group and some members said that it was so long ago that it was difficult to say anything meaningful about their experience. During the discussion one member of the group said that some of "her sisters" told her how they had at times up to seventy children in their classrooms and that in these circumstances it was very difficult to give everyone equal attention. I didn't realise up to this point that one of the group was a sister of the Dominican order¹³. I suspect that this might have inhibited some of the women in criticising the local school system. The atmosphere was very friendly and the sister even had some banter directed at her about what an easy life she had so I don't want to give the impression that she in any way oppressed the others. Rather, I observed an interesting group dynamic in which decisions seemed to be made without anyone directly voicing them. For example rather than suggesting that I change the topic of the debate the group spoke about their children and grandchildren's experiences. The

¹³ The Dominicans are a congregation of nuns who have provided education on behalf of the state for children in Ballyfermot since the early 1950s.

world café idea, which required that the group split up into two groups to write down ideas or impressions, was also dismissed although I would be hard-pressed to identify a specific moment when this decision was made. I told them that I needed some record to provide data from my study. It was agreed that the women would take some time to reflect on the film and discussion and their own experience and each one would write a piece on this reflection. I was to collect the writing a week later.

This was an interesting experience in that the group made decisions quickly and easily without anyone taking a leadership role. Possible problems such as not wanting to openly criticise their schooling provided by the Dominicans in the presence of one of their order was easily and effectively overcome without any debate or argument. The decision to commit to writing about their experiences should not be dismissed so readily as some of the group cheerfully acknowledged difficulty with literacy once the commitment was unanimously agreed. Literacy difficulties were evident in some of the writing submitted and some women highlighted in their writing that it was an emotive issue for them. I did say to the group that they could write as much or as little as they liked, or indeed nothing at all. I said that they could get someone write for them if they wished and that they could write anything they liked around the subject of education. If I had to criticise this arrangement I would say that I should have ensured that there was a different method to writing should anyone have preferred that.

The **data** is recorded on several sheets of paper and I think that it is relevant to say something about the form it takes. None of the writing is more than a page long. Half of the submissions are written on pages from notebooks and one is written on a page from a diary dating Christmas Day, 2004. At the time we agreed that the group would write down their views, no-one mentioned email. None of the submissions were printed from a computer and none of them were written on writing paper; all of which suggests that the group members do not regularly communicate this way. This made the effort more meaningful and real for me as it shows that the women went outside their comfort-zones to express themselves. If I had been working with a computer literate group and received emailed submissions I would have not given it a second thought. Reading some of what the women wrote engaged me emotionally and that I read it from their own hand gave it more expression than if it was written in the anonymous font of a word processor.

The Interviews

The staff kindly arranged the three interviews. Times were scheduled with the consent of the participants for interviews for which I allowed at least one hour, to be extended or shortened as the participant wished. They took place, in private, in the familiar surroundings of the MT centre. Although I wrote down some thoughts after each interview I didn't take notes during the interviews as I wanted to be as un-intrusive in the process as possible. I wanted to record the flow of narrative and let it take whatever direction the participant wished. I did, at times, interject or ask questions because I felt that the process should still be one of give and take and because I wanted to make sure the participants felt that they were being actively listened to.

My research questions ask what MT participants perceive as education; what they have to say about it and how their views are situated in the context in which I came to meet them (i.e. as a volunteer tutor with MT). Interviews are a direct way of going about this. One question that interested me was whether an interview is an interaction during which the researcher extracts information about the social world from a store of experiential information in the interviewee's mind. I am sceptical about the success of such endeavours. An alternative view would be that the interviewee draws on experience to share an interpretation of events in response to the researcher. This is the constructionist point of view (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011: 151). In so far as I have arranged the interview and formulated the questions, I am a co-creator of the knowledge produced by the interview process.

Conclusion

There is a mix of methods used which can make good use of the opportunity to do a case study. Creswell (2009:175) refers to **qualitative** researchers typically using multiple data sources in research. It is particularly appropriate here as I do not have a specific theory to test and so I want to leave the process open. The process itself is important to my methodology as I want to observe equality between my-self as researcher and the research participants; observing in practise what I feel is important as outlined in the theoretical focus above.

Glossary

Academia: Anything to do with formal learning such as that in found in schools or universities.

Androcentric: A male-centred point of view which is taken for granted as being applicable to all.

Conventional: Normal.

Cultural Filters: To observations filtered through socially constructed meaning. Culture can be understood as a set of shared meanings. These meanings structure how we understand events and this makes it difficult for anyone to claim a really objective view of anything.

Data-Gathering: Data is the information collected for research.

Dissemination: Distribution; how the research is shared with, or exposed to, others.

Dualisms: Values which are presented as being opposed to one another, such as day and night, black and white etc.

Embedded: Firmly situated within something. To say something is socially embedded means that it happens in a social context.

Emotive: Something is emotive if it stirs the emotions.

Empiricism: This is an approach to science that focuses on facts and observations which are testable or repeatable. It focuses on observable evidence but this approach can lack deeper analysis.

Epistemology; Epistemic: Referring to the study of how we know things.

Establishment: This means the state or officialdom. It includes the class of people with strong connections to those who hold power in established society such as politicians, senior government officials etc.

Ethical: Moral considerations, whether the methodology and methods are right or wrong in a moral sense.

Experiential Knowledge: Knowledge which is based on direct lived experience of a social situation.

Field Relations: Relations between those involved in the research. The field of research means the specific situation in which the research takes place.

Gender Binaries: Oppositions based on gender such as 'feminine' compassion or 'masculine' rationality.

Grounded: This means research based in the reality of the area being researched. It's about knowledge being generated from this reality rather than academic theory simply being tested.

Impenetrable: Impossible to penetrate or get through. In this context it means impossible to understand.

Implications: This means the consequences of an action or the impact resulting from something.

Improvised: Designed according to the needs of the situation as it occurred rather than being planned in strict detail beforehand.

Interpretive: An approach to research which focuses on interpreting, or understanding, the meaning of social events.

Master's Degree or MA: A Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA) is a level of formal learning acquired at university. The next level is a Master of Arts degree (also called MA) and then a Doctorate (or PhD).

Methodology: A methodology is an overall approach to doing something. Such as feminist methodology in research which appreciates experience and interpretation as opposed to an empirical methodology which might focus on statistics. Not to be confused with methods which are specific ways of doing something, e.g. interviews or surveys.

Narrative: A spoken account of something. It allows the speaker to decide what is important rather than, for example, structured interviews where the important details are decided by the interviewer by constructing the questions.

Objectivity: The idea that something exists in the world outside of human experience. Objective research a way of studying society by eliminating any personal bias or views about what is being studied.

Ontology: Belief of how the world is. One view is that it is an objective reality existing in spite of human understanding and waiting to be discovered. Another view, or ontology, is that things or events can only be understood through systems of meaning and so they cannot be said to exist objectively.

Paradigm Wars: A paradigm is a framework of understanding in a field of study. For example, in sociology there was a 'functionalist' paradigm at one point in which every social phenomenon was seen as serving some function to society overall. Paradigm wars refer to paradigms, like functionalism, being challenged and eventually discarded for more useful paradigms or frameworks of understanding.

Perceived Rational Authority: Perceived means ‘seen as’ as opposed to ‘actual’ authority. Rational refers to strictly evidence-based, objective and instrumental thinking. Authority reflects the power of the institution in the value that people give academia over other claims to knowledge.

Phenomena: Events or situations which occur; in this context events being studied.

Positivism, Positivist Methods: Positivism is a view of science that emphasises the importance of empirical data and observable and repeatable experiments to verify laws of nature.

Prescriptive: Meaning what is done is decided beforehand and told to people rather than being discussed with people.

Qualitative: This means a study which looks at how people create or understand meaning. It can be used with, or instead of, quantitative methods which focus more on statistics.

Radical: A radical view sees deep change or revolution as necessary rather than reform or simply changing the details of an unjust system.

Rationalism: A view of science which focuses on disciplined thought processes as a source of valid knowledge.

Retention: To keep.

Universalist: This means something that applies to all situations.

Vulnerability; Vulnerable: Where someone might be unable to defend themselves against exploitation or any form of abuse they can be described as vulnerable.

World Café: This is where a large group of people will split up into three or four smaller groups in a process of generating discussion and ideas around a particular interest. The groups sit at tables usually and there will be a topic or a question for the group to discuss. There is a certain amount of time each group is allowed to spend at each table at the end of which they move on, as a group, to the next table. The process is finished when all groups have been at all tables. There are sheets of paper on the tables and people can write or draw anything that comes to mind while thinking about the topic. There might also be a designated writer who will write things down for people if this is required. Analysis is done on the collected sheets of paper and a general discussion is held to discuss themes generated by the process.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

The research produced two data-sets which reflect similar themes. In the interest of making the research and analysis more readable, I will detail the findings of each focus group and follow them with their corresponding analysis. Each focus group data set was read over in a broad fashion to identify themes. The interviews were **coded** and were analysed **thematically** so there will be one set of findings and an overall analysis following this. Basically, I drew upon the narratives and sorted the data in a thematic way.

Focus Group 1

The data consists of six A3 sheets of paper recording the narratives of group members. Three sheets are details noted by myself and I used the **phraseology** of the participants to keep the record as close to the narrative delivered as I could. Three sheets are notes taken by a group member who volunteered his services. This will be useful in its **corroborative** value as I can compare whether what I chose as relevant in the narrative to his record of the same event. While every member of the group gave a personal account of their educational experience, three members were prominent in terms of length and detail.

Underlined in my notes is the impact of educational experience on self-image and self-confidence and this impact is echoed in this data on two levels. One level consists of direct expression of negative self-image and the other is the sense of association with negative activity having realised failure in school. Terms used which reflect the first level are:

‘no confidence speaking’

‘you can’t do this’

‘feel stupid’

‘embarrassed’

‘they treat you like shit, you feel like shit’

‘You are going to Clonmel, you are going to Clonmel’ (industrial school¹⁴).

Indirect expressions of self-image are as important as more direct ones. They are arguably more indicative as they say more about the context of their relationship to mainstream education and **consequent** attitudes to life. For example one participant referred to

‘making money on the streets’

‘couldn’t do the theory in D.I.T. because of literacy’

‘I thought education was a load of bollox’

His broader testimony reveals how troubles at home impacted on his behaviour in school and he felt more in common with ‘the wrong crowd’ on the streets. He does, however, identify a change in attitude towards life with better second chance educational experiences. His experience with one-to-one basic education and encouraging learning environments has reversed his self-image as being apart or outside the mainstream. He says ‘I see young-fellas [working] in the credit union that I used to go to school with’; the context being that he could do it if they could.

Another participant spoke in detail about his children’s education and the impact of his second-chance education on his relationship with them. At the beginning of his narrative he said things such as:

‘I went on the mitch¹⁵ everyday’

‘They sent me to St. Michael’s in 1981 because I didn’t go to school’

‘They sent me to Laurence’s and I legged it out of there’

His story progressed to give a detailed account of his children’s achievements in school. While his children did have some behavioural issues at times they all seem to have better experiences with school than he did. One daughter got a place at third-level education but turned it down as she got a job in a retail store. He expressed

¹⁴ Industrial schools were established to care for abandoned, orphaned or neglected children. They were run by religious orders and used as prisons for children who very often did very little to end up there. They are the subject of scandal in contemporary Ireland due to the sexual abuse and physical and mental cruelty experienced by the inmates.

¹⁵ To *mitch* means to skip school.

great satisfaction at having achieved a higher level of education and this related to his relationship with his children and how this in turn impacted on his self-belief:

‘I’m able to help my son and I don’t feel stupid now’

In contrast to his earlier narrative which detailed a lot of running away from institutions he later said, in relation to MT:

‘I’m learning now. I never miss a day’ and ‘I love coming in’.

One participant spoke about not having the confidence to speak. He spent a total of 35 years in prison, a highly controlled environment, and did not regain the confidence to speak in a group until he spent some time with MT.

The participants narratives are not detailed in their future educational plans and my notes indicate that none of the group had much to say when encouraged to speak on this point beyond their current projects in MT.

Analytical Summary

There is evidence in what people said which shows that negative early experiences impacted on their self-image and self-belief later in life. People spoke about two lives, a mainstream school life and one ‘on the streets’ with people seeing themselves as belonging to the non-mainstream life. Family life also seems to be a factor. People said that they had problems at home which made it difficult to engage in school. This was compounded by the strict control of school where people were punished. Family life is enhanced by the second chance of education as is self-esteem. In terms of confidence people said it was enhanced by their recent educational experience. However, there was nothing to suggest, at this point in the research, that this confidence would lead them into further education after MT.

The narratives were focused on the past and present. The participants didn’t mention drugs very much even though drugs played a significant role in the life-paths of all but one of the participants. While education could not be conclusively identified as a causal factor in later drug-use it is safe to say that educational experience was a significant factor. Educational experience features as a powerful influence on self-esteem, with negativity in narratives about early life and positivity attached to education in the present.

Education in terms of social analysis is non-existent in the narratives. The narratives are about personal experience except when people talk about their

families. Education is very much in terms of school or places like MT. Learning outside the strictly pedagogical sense is not mentioned although there is a realisation about self-image improving through education, with very little being said about the subject matter. In terms of critical education and feminist theory, there was no indication of analysing why their experience was the way it was and no talk about how things could be changed for the better.

Focus Group 2

The women's group took a week to reflect on and write something about their educational experience. The data set was their personal testimony written down on paper. I read each piece of writing taking note of the major points as I read and I also took note of any differences. I then looked at my notes and spotted some common themes. What is perhaps not surprising given the women's generation is the strict discipline of the nuns. One woman said:

'Any confidence I had was knocked out of me'

And other expressions used were:

'The nuns were very hard on us'

'All the schools had corporal punishment then, and it was a terrifying experience'

'I learnt through fear of being punished, both verbally and physically, if I produced poor or messy homework. The teachers were very severe'

Some of the women's remarks in this context were:

'After watching the program on education, what stood out for me was confidence'

'I know I want to learn but I don't have the confidence'

'The school I went to had very strict rules. Part of the discipline was standing in line waiting to go into your class every morning'

'However I learnt to discipline myself. Good time-keeping, respect and religion was a big part of the school subjects'

One of the women's contributions was generally positive in her reflection on school life but I noticed that all of the positive details refer to not being in the school building; such as a trip to the bakery, the Christmas play and holidays provided by the St. Vincent De Paul. In relation to her school days another woman said that she can't remember her communion but can remember her confirmation. Others positively refer to Mayday processions in their communion dresses.

Analytical Summary

The overriding commonality in the documents is the relationship between church control and self-confidence. I feel this is relevant as the women's experience of education is in the controlled environment of primary or secondary school. Most of the women left school at or before 14 years of age and only one did any post-secondary level study. The nature of the learning experience between secondary level and third level is significant. At university learning and progress depends on the individual's own efforts; allowing for various supports provided by the institution in question. It is a much less controlling environment than a secondary school. I can testify to the fact that I gained a great deal of confidence when I found at a later stage in life that I could perform well at third level. This contrasts with the impression I had of myself when I completed secondary level education and commenced working life.

While I won't draw any assumptions from a small sample of testimony the question does arise whether there is a relationship between institutionalisation of control and the confidence to make decisions for one-self. The Catholic Church has had a virtual monopoly on the provision of Education in Ireland including decisions regarding what education is and means to people. While this highlights some fond memories of school days what strikes me is that the positive aspects had a religious nature, so even their enjoyment had an element of religious control to it. It is also perhaps significant that reference is made to religious events in an educational context.

The women's group are not involved in educational programmes at MT. There is not the same optimism or change indicated except when they spoke about the hope they have for their children. It would be very worthwhile to see whether a series of workshops on educational experience and critical education would be

something that the women would be interested in. There is a wealth of experience in this regard in terms of women's groups in Ireland, such as the Longford Women's Link¹⁶ as an example.

Interview Findings

Because my interest lies in the views, experience and interpretations of the interviewees, I came up with three general questions (or topic guides) and let the interviewees say whatever they felt was relevant in response. Firstly, I asked the respondents to say whatever they perceived education to be. Secondly, I explained my interpretation of **critical education** and asked them to give me their opinion on the idea and thirdly, I asked them to say whatever they felt was relevant about education in MT. The questions were asked of each respondent in this order. Although there is some overlap, the answers fell into four major themes which I will address under individual headings below.

Control

Although one of the respondents spent most of his life in prison, it was not this form of control that the respondents focused on. It was **social control** that figured strongly. Stuart said that his view on education is different from when he was at school. He said that he had an independent nature and that he couldn't understand why he couldn't do what he wanted to rather than conform to the school system. While Stuart's view has changed over the years, he still sees mainstream education as a control issue. He considers education in a broader sense as life-experience. Learning for him is about understanding who he is and should be:

‘An indication of what I want to do and not what people are throwing at me’

‘Education is how I feel and I feel life is to be. What I'm best suited as’

¹⁶ ‘Longford Women's Link (LWL) is a women's centre based in the rural midlands town of Longford in Co. Longford, Ireland. Founded in 1995, our vision is that women in Co. Longford can fulfil their potential in a safe and equal society.’ <http://www.longfordwomenslink.org/>

He associates learning with a personal and emotional process. It is a deeply **subjective** understanding of education and one that would be problematic in the controlling environment of a school.

Stuart's narrative is characterised by an opposition of those 'at the top' wielding power over those below. Stuart expressed the view that there is 'top down' pressure which keeps people, like him, in their place. Stuart gives an example of this from his own situation whereby he wants to do a counselling course but faces a financial barrier. The argument, as I understand it, is that people who have money can achieve their ambitions while those who struggle financially are kept where they are. Stuart believes that an educated people would present difficulties to those in power and are blocked from education after a certain point. In support of this he mentions the rise in students' fees and that people at the top 'tell us what we have to learn'.

Stuart also sees a control issue in the **bureaucratic** hoops people have to jump through to access services such as social welfare using the term '**diversion tactics**'. Stuart argues that there is not enough emphasis put on the individual in school.

'We tell you what to learn and you **regurgitate** it to us. You become a robot'

Ideally, Stuart feels that schools should ask what skills students have, what they want to learn and what ideas they might be able to bring to the situation. Stuart mentions the Catholic Church in the context of control although not, as in other parts of the research, in an educational capacity. Control as a theme looms large in Stuart's personal story as he had a struggle with medical authority in his successful attempt to come off methadone. Stuart is unusual in this study in that his negative educational experience hasn't affected his strong self-belief.

Willie's contribution in terms of control is interesting in that it doesn't figure as much as I might have thought considering the amount of time he has spent in prison. However, he says that he would bite his tongue sooner than criticise authority as he feels that he has experienced enough trouble in his life. Perhaps his sensitivity to control on the outside is low given the highly controlled environment he had to live in for so long. Willie has an outside-the-box appreciation of learning. For example, he has learnt about the realities of his heart condition but rather than being

a cause for worry, Willie feels he can control the condition now that he has learnt about it.

For Willie, education is about learning how to get through certain basic challenges. He talked about the red tape people have to cut through despite their having urgent medical needs. He also talks about the CWO¹⁷ and the forms that have to be filled and certain information provided. Willie does not mention these in the specific context of social control. The point for Willie is that these are barriers to people who might have literacy challenges or who might not have the confidence to overcome these **bureaucratic** requirements.

For Keith control came up in different ways. He mentions the probation and social work services which he feels are more about controlling ex-prisoners than providing services to them. This came up in the context of MT working with the probation service. While Keith didn't mention control in the context of politics he did say, when I introduced the topic of radical education, that people should learn what politics is about at a basic level. His point was that people have trouble understanding the political **institutions** and **legislative** processes. I view this as a control issue because if you limit how much people understand about political processes then you also control their influence on them.

Change

Where a respondent explicitly stated that something had changed or described a situation where change had occurred in response to the questions relating to education, I labelled it 'change'. For example, Keith expressed a key moment of change when he said 'My education is for me, not anybody else'. I recognise this as a change from a passive subject in school to a confident agent in charge of his own learning.

Willie's **narrative** had the most hits for this keyword. His narrative described a positive development in his self-confidence which he associates with MT approach to education. He feels that MT encourage and engage with him in the learning process. This contrasts with previous experiences, mostly in prison, where he was told that he couldn't do certain things. His major area of change is in having the confidence to interact in group settings and in making inquiries with certain state

¹⁷ CWO: Community Welfare Officer.

bodies such as the social welfare service and CWO. Willie relates a story where he was encouraged to learn how to use a calculator during maths tuition. He was reluctant to try it believing that he wasn't able. The tutor encouraged him to learn and it was a **revelation** to Willie that he could make use of the calculator. The important change here is not so much that he can use a calculator but rather that he previously didn't want to try as he believed that he simply couldn't. Willie had realised that his sense of self-confidence was leading him to doubt his ability. He also mentioned that previous educational experiences, such as learning about history during a trip to Glasnevin cemetery, would not have interested him. Now he has a thirst for learning and sees it as something that he will pursue in the long term.

If we understand learning as a process of change then Keith shows this by describing what he learnt from a community development course he took. He learnt the basic skills to sort information and structure it into an essay. He also learnt that he had 'opened his eyes' in terms of equality. He had to do a project on immigrant taxi drivers and found that they did not uphold their negative stereotypes. So, Keith expressed change in terms of skills but also social awareness. Keith also talked about a change in attitude to his **recreational** habits. He was a regular marijuana smoker but re-evaluated what he considered a harmless activity when he saw things in terms of the impact of drugs in the local community. He mentioned gangs of youths smoking hash on the corner and the **intimidatory** effect this has on locals, particularly older people. He no longer smokes marijuana.

In terms of strictly **academic** change, Keith said his view on this had changed since he started with MT. He spoke about how school did not work for him. He felt that he was not really taught at school and that things were simply 'drilled into us'. He sees education in a good light now and he attributes this to the MT approach. He also indicates change in the schooling of his children who attend school not very far from where he did. However, he notes that the teaching methods are different in that the teachers seem to encourage the kids more and focus on their strengths rather than punishing their weaknesses. This would indicate a positive change at the **institutional** level in this particular school at least.

Keith's **narrative** led us to discuss the probation and social services. MT works with the probation service which has a focus on the **vocational** and educational development of the participants. Keith recognises that the hope is to change people who are habitual criminals to law abiding citizens. However he

doubts that people will engage meaningfully in these processes as they are seen as forms of control rather than **rehabilitative** services. Keith feels that there is a need for change in these services at a deep level whereby the requirement for strict obedience is lessened and more meaningful engagement is introduced.

Stuart mentioned 'change' right from the beginning saying that his understanding of education had changed over the years. This seems to have two aspects to it. One is that he previously did not understand why formal education was important at all. He now accepts that it is as he understands better what is 'goin' down'. He knows that he needs recognised qualification to get where he wants to be (he would like to become a counsellor and is actively pursuing this). However, he has a strong sense that he is entitled to define education for himself. His view of learning means understanding his own life and needs and exploring his role in life.

Change in a formal educational sense does not figure as strongly in one participant's **narrative** as it does in the others as he has a leaving certificate¹⁸ and is confident in his ability to learn. What he highlights is that MT seems to be geared towards people with a certain level of education which is lower than this. In this respect he highlights a potential need for adjustment in MT's operation in terms of expanding its ability to help people with different needs. A lot of participants have needs that can be met in the centre itself. Some would be more suited to third level courses but this could be a resource problem for MT. However, I am aware that MT has given a lot of support and active encouragement to participants who have gone on to third level education.

Stuart highlights a potential area of change in that counselling for certain problems should be preferably provided by those with lived experience of the problem so that they can empathise with people experiencing these problems. Currently, Stuart feels that those who can more easily afford the qualifications have the path to a meaningful job open to them while he faces a financial barrier. He also mentions the fact that those with experience of heroin addiction will very likely have criminal records which presents further barriers to those who would arguably be well-suited as counsellors in the area of addiction.

¹⁸ The Leaving Certificate shows that secondary education was completed.

Willie did not attend school but did spend most of his life in prison which is where he got most of his education before coming to MT. This had the consequence of giving him a negative sense of self-esteem. He recalls always being told that he cannot do things and speaks of a stop-start education process where teachers did not spend long periods of time teaching particular subject in the prison. Problems also arose where Willie depended on the prison officers to take him to a class or times when he would be moved from one cell to another which would also disrupt the continuity of his education. Because he had problems with literacy he was excluded from certain opportunities in prison such as learning a trade or doing work which involved machines. Willie learnt his own techniques to help him do things. However, he was not given the chance to try and do certain things because the authorities felt that reading and writing skills were absolutely necessary.

Willie argues that there is an institutional failure in education in two respects. One is that if people drop out of education, not enough is done to find alternative learning opportunities for them. He expressed a desire to do this himself by using his life experience to guide kids on the street. Willie also believes that kids who do complete secondary education and who do not go on to college are also left to their own devices and this is another criticism of the institution that Willie feels is important.

As mentioned above, Willie has a broad definition of education and this is evident in how he relates learning to acquiring pragmatic information. He tells the story of how he arranged for his son to come home from England and face criminal charges that were outstanding against him. Willie had adapted so well to the prison system that he felt he could take care of his son if he was in prison with him. Willie faced institutional barriers in the prison in accessing help for his son. Willie wanted to learn about HIV as his son had the illness and Willie felt that he ought to know about it so that he could look after him. However, as Willie himself did not suffer from HIV he was initially denied access. The point for me here is that in the context of discussing what education or radical education is Willie highlights the fact that people very often have difficulty learning information of a more urgent nature. Such

¹⁹ For the purposes of this study ‘institution’ refers to a state provided service such as the prison or education service, or political institutions such as the Dáil.

people will not have the time or concentration to consider the broader issues even if these are important issues that affect their lives.

While discussing what radical education is, the issue of political action came up. I explained it in terms of people developing the analytical tools to weigh up their situation and actively follow their interests. Willie focused on **institutional** politics, expressing **scepticism** of the intentions of politicians. I tried to steer the discussion towards the possibility of **pedagogical** action for ordinary people giving as an example the St. Michael's estate regeneration campaign. However, Willie related all these actions to the 'people at the top'. What I took from this is that Willie can see the value of organised protest but sees real power as lying in institutional politics and doesn't seem convinced of the possibility of power from below.

Stuart also expresses scepticism of institutional politics. His analysis is that the institution of the state maintains power to keep people down. An example he gives is where the Dept. of Education increases fees which presents a barrier to poorer people to access education. He also objects to the **bureaucratic** 'hoops' that are presented by the state's institutions as '**diversion** tactics' to prevent people accessing services.

When I introduce the topic of radical education, Stuart expressed the view that people's lived reality limits their ability to imagine things differently. The topic didn't hold Stuart's **narrative** and he spoke instead about his school experience. In particular he took issue with the practise of grading students into A1, A2 and A3 in his school which he felt was **prescriptive** and limited the students' potential by defining their ability rather than developing it.

Stuart's narrative was very much concerned with control and this is perhaps keener in his mind as he considers himself as having a rebellious nature. He associates the institution of the church with **conformity** but he also sees social control in the form of peer pressure. **Peer pressure** prevents people from 'looking too deep' but also has the effect of keeping people in their place through language of **begrudgery**.

Stuart spoke about the **co-option** of a youth group by the institution of his local council. This is perhaps only indirectly linked with education but I feel his contribution is relevant here as Willie also mentioned the issue of young people having nothing to do outside of institutional education. A youth group was set up locally to occupy young people and became so successful that the council eventually

offered to fund it. However, as funding was provided the council demanded control. As the **economic recession** took its toll, funding stopped and the youth group had to be shut down. In this instance a **grassroots** youth organisation, taking on the task of dealing with the down time of a **compulsory** educational system, was taken under the control of a local institution and consequently ceased to exist when the institution could no longer fund it.

While MT does not qualify as an institution as I defined it above, it does provide services directly funded by institutions such as the Dept. of Justice and the Dept. of Education. In this respect one participant notes a form of institutional failure. MT encourages participants to think positively and, according to this participant, pursue their individual paths. However, sometimes participants identify an educational path that MT cannot fund and this presents a problem for people in this position.

Stuart criticised what he calls ‘conveyor belt education’ where people put in the time to simply achieve accreditation. He recounts his experience with one adult educational provider (not MT) in which information was spoon-fed to the class in unsatisfactory circumstances. He couldn’t hear the teacher; the teacher didn’t seem to know what to do and materials such as lecture hand-outs weren’t provided. Stuart spoke about his need to engage with education. By this he means to be able to ask questions and discuss the learning material in a meaningful way. This led on to his analysis of other institutional barriers such as requirements for certification in counselling for example, when in Stuart’s opinion the ability to empathise with someone is, at least, equally important. Stuart opposes the search for meaningful work to the simple achievement of certificates in the hope of getting any job at all. This could be perceived as a criticism of the probation service which funds organisations like MT to provide basic Fetac²⁰ level courses without necessarily encouraging people to do what is meaningful to them in terms of work.

Keith didn’t focus as much on institutions as the others. He didn’t directly contrast his negative school experience with MT’s approach. Perhaps because MT has a different focus to that of mainstream educational institutions they can afford more attention to participants. However Keith rings a positive note when he mentions the school that his children attend which seems to have a more positive approach to teaching than Keith experienced.

²⁰ Fetac is the Further Education and Training Council. It is an awards council for training and education approximating second level education. <http://www.fetac.ie/fetac/homepage.htm>

Keith is highly critical of institutional politics. One issue is that of democratic participation where people ‘haven’t got a clue’ what they’re voting for in referenda. People don’t understand the legislative processes of the state. He also sees institutional politics as corrupt. Keith feels that people should be educated in this regard. This came up in the context of radical education and the point I took from his narrative is that people have trouble understanding the basics of claimed democracy in Ireland. If this is the case, they will have also have trouble understanding **informed criticism** of the political institutions.

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is something also came up in the early stages of the research. Willie gives a strong example self-confidence issues. Willie had great difficulty interacting in group situations. I’m not qualified to say to what extent this has to do with the significant amount of time he spent in prison. Willie recalls constant negativity and limitation from authority in terms of his education in prison.

When I asked Willie how he would describe ‘education’, the first thing he mentioned was having the confidence to talk to people. He attributes his confidence issues to the negativity he experienced from his previous educational experience but as I wanted to avoid interrupting the respondents’ stories I didn’t ask him what other factors might be involved. What comes across very strongly in his narrative is a current sense self-belief. He says, for example that he might not have ended up the where he is today had things been different and that he can learn new things now if they are presented with a respectful, patient approach.

Willie shows how important self-confidence is in terms of every-day learning. On the day of the interview a SIPTU representative for CE workers came into the centre to talk to the participants²¹. Willie didn’t know what SIPTU was about and asked the rep to explain some things. He said that previously he would not have had the confidence to ask for clarification. In terms of participation in the MT Willie gives another example when he was asked to pick something up from a local shop on behalf of the organisation. It involved ordering something and signing for it, which meant speaking up in a crowded shop and explaining who he was and what he wanted. Willie said that previously, the idea of doing this would have been

²¹ SIPTU is a trade union and CE stands for Community Employment, which is a state-run job scheme.

frightening but now he has the confidence to do these things. He **emphasises** the influence of MT on this change. I am aware that this example of Willie's change in self-confidence might stretch the traditional context of education but one of the important things about MT is the **holistic** approach to self-development. When Willie says that MT helps him to learn the confidence to learn, this doesn't happen in a direct way. There are no classes specifically dedicated to self-improvement or confidence building, it is the overall environment of respect and encouragement that facilitates the change. This is arguably an essential step to facilitate someone's learning. This is particularly relevant when we note that a lot of the research respondents identified problems outside the classroom as having interfered with their learning processes in their mainstream experience.

One of the remarks Willie made was about education and the ability to express one's point of view. He shows the importance of having the appropriate information to debate things from his own position. This highlights the importance of self-confidence in the learning process in having the confidence to ask for and find the appropriate information so that you can argue your corner effectively. He also highlights an important pragmatic element to this in terms of accessing rights of citizenship. He speaks of having the confidence to deal with local **bureaucracy** in terms of the CWO or the housing authority. He argues that some people don't have the confidence to pursue their interests at these levels. Willie feels confident now that has the tools to do this.

Willie talked about 'branchin'-out'. He talked about taking on his own learning projects; one being a local history project. He also spoke about getting involved in helping local young people who might be at risk of getting into trouble. This also is an issue of self-confidence in that Willie was some-one who developed a sense of self-confidence through a social learning process, not confined to the classroom, and now has the confidence to engage in this him-self and help others. Previously he would not have had the confidence to do this so this learning process has strong potential for positive knock-on effects in a broader sense.

Keith had two points which related to self-confidence. One was the self-assurance to take on new learning projects now that he can count on the support of MT. This is not limited to his participation on the MT programme, he also confident that he can draw on support from MT when he is finished. He expressed the view that this is a feeling that is shared by other participants as well.

Keith says that he feels now ‘There’s nothing I can’t do’ and while this is certainly a strong verbal indication of self-confidence, importantly, it is measured. There are real limits to what one can consider achieving. Keith likes to consider the possibility of becoming a social worker or a vet but at the moment he feels these aspirations might be beyond him. However, as with the other interviewees, there is a sense of positivity in terms of what they can achieve in the future. There is a sense of confidence based on MT support in their current situation but there are also indications that this is just the start of future learning journeys.

Stuart has a strong sense of self-belief and confidence. He also is outside the norm for MT participants in that he has got a Leaving certificate which gives him an edge in terms of embracing learning projects.

Stuart raised the issue of empathy and his ambition to become a counsellor. He, like the other interviewees, feels a great sense of value in their previous experience. The interviewees have a great self-belief in this respect. Another theme that came up in the interviews was that of useful social intentions where the interviewees see desirable future roles as making use of their previous experience for the benefit of others (such as youth-work or counselling). Accomplishing this is real possibility in the narratives. The key factor in achieving it, according to the narratives, seems to be a question of confidence rather than learning specific skills.

Discussion of Findings

The interview participants share a negative early experience of education. This impacted negatively on later life in terms of self-image and self-confidence. What featured strongly in the narratives was talk of control, self-confidence, institutions, change, exclusion and engagement. There is a contrast between these early themes and positivity associated with change and MT. There is a strong sense of support and encouragement in the narratives although there is also room for improvement indicated. One feature that I didn’t plan for was the level of informed analysis from the participants. It wasn’t planned for in the sense that I expected to focus on the substance of the answers. What I got from the interviews was a broader analysis of education from the participants’ point of view. This will impact on the shape of my own overall analysis in the next chapter. There was a lot of critical evaluation of political and educational institutions and authority. There was critical

evaluation of educational needs and the idea of radical education. The level of discussion was deep in that every criticism or positive remark was supported by examples.

Analysis of Interviews

Introduction

One of the key findings was the level of critical analysis that is already there without any specific programme of critical education. It is not a part of the MT programme and didn't come from any social movement, as far as I am aware.

Critical education is about more than just analysis though and I will discuss this further below. I will use the participants' examples of critical analysis to structure this section and follow that with thoughts on how they fit, or not, with my theoretical focus in terms of neoliberalism, critical pedagogy, and feminism.

Participants' analysis on the theme of 'control'

Stuart's **narrative** has parallels with analysis from critical education. His learning experience was not **subject-centred** and he found it difficult to engage with the **material**. His resistance to control is informed by his view of how the world works. His analysis is that, like Freire argues, we live in a situation of oppressors and oppressed. In his view the state plays a role in maintaining the **class divide** by raising fees for third level education and by making people 'jump through hoops' to access citizenship rights.

He also talks about qualifications and the fact that what should be valued in terms of relevant experience, a life which allows for an **empathetic** role as a counsellor, will actually work against him. This analysis of protected fields of work by experts has been analysed by authors such as Martin (1998).

His analysis of education also echoes Freire when he says that students are like robots, the information is fed in and they **regurgitate** it. The people at the top tell us what we have to learn. He also said that people find it hard to imagine things which are outside their daily experience which echoes what Mezirow says in terms of **frames of reference** (2007:10).

Willie doesn't **emphasise** the theme of control in terms of his analysis but he does raise an important issue in terms of critical education. Willie points out that people have enough trouble dealing with challenges in daily life. Willie had basic literacy barriers to overcome in terms of filling in forms for the housing authority or getting access to medical information. Freire began his emancipatory work in adult literacy programmes and it is important to note that there are basic needs in terms of education. Of course, basic education and critical education are not, as Freire has shown, **mutually exclusive**.

Keith spoke about the Probation Service and Social Protection service as being seen as mechanisms of control. While, on the face of it, they are there to help former prisoners **reintegrate** into society they have a clear control and punish aspect to them. Besides this clear example of power Keith also mentions **institutional** politics. He argues that people have trouble understanding, for example, **referendum** material as it is written in a language which is alien to most people. In Keith's view it would be difficult to introduce critical education if people do not understand even the structures being criticised. Keith also spoke about political corruption and how this challenges the **legitimacy** of political figures to govern.

Participants' analysis viewed in the context of change

Keith has spoken about changing frames of reference. He has also said that he has moved from what Freire would call a **passive** learner to an active subject in the learning process. MT has sponsored an empowering atmosphere which helps the participants negotiate the next educational steps in their lives. However, it seems more to do with empowering people to work within the system than to change it. Keith can see how things have changed from the time he was in school to today. His analysis is that teachers are more likely to engage with students now and he says that this is a big difference from his time when information was drilled into him. This to me is an accurate evaluation of educational practise. I don't want to be patronising by saying that this shows a capacity for critical analysis; the point is that much theory on adult education deals with developing this capacity when it is there to some extent already.

Willie has seen big changes in his own development since coming to MT. He has a new passion for learning and has a capacity for reflecting on situations. His

analysis is that the education system does not do enough for people who drop out or those who finish school and have no job to go to afterwards. Willie too has gone from a passive subject of situations to an active one. He wants to help youth in his area and act upon his analysis that young people with nothing to do are vulnerable to getting into trouble. In terms of critical education with emancipatory purpose, Willie's analysis is still based in the world that he is most familiar with.

Stuart again shows that he can critically evaluate the educational system. Stuart's analysis goes so far as to suggest intention in the system to maintain the class divide. This is closer to the critical educational ideal but stops short of any discussion of acting to change the situation. What is clear in all their narratives is that they do want to change things and they do have a critical capacity.

Participants' analysis of institutions

Willie challenges the requirement for formal achievements in education, particularly when they act as barriers to those without them. Willie can learn even if he has literacy problems. He has learnt, for example, to become a welder. His experience undermines the assumption that people who don't reach standards in one area, e.g. literacy, cannot learn anything else. This is relevant to an analysis of institutions as academic institutions are the experts in the field who have monopoly on setting standards in education and in defining what education is.

Stuart's analysis is that state institutions 'keep people in their place' and he gives the example of the Dept. of Education raising third level fees. This will present problems to people who are not well off but pose no problems for wealthier citizens. There is arguably a form of class awareness in Stuart's narrative. Stuart also argues that schools are **prescriptive** when they use grading to categorise students according to ability. Students' learning capacity should be developed through learning processes and not defined as being at a certain level.

Stuart's spoke of the institutional co-option of a local youth service. A grass roots organisation had developed to meet the needs of local youth and was so successful the state offered to fund it. The original focus and control of the organisation was over-taken by priorities set by the funders. Now that the funding has stopped the organisation has shut down having become dependent on a certain level of funding. This is an issue that I also am concerned about when I locate MT in

a context of Social Partnership. Connolly (2007:111;112) also discusses this in her analysis of the development of community activism which shows that there is some level of critical awareness which echoes the field of academic expertise.

While people happily pay to enhance their professional qualifications, Stuart talks about meaningful engagement in education and opposes it to what he calls “conveyor-belt education”. The key point here is that Stuart is not happy to simply accumulate so many certificates and go out job-hunting. Stuart, with the others, wants to find meaningful and purposeful engagement in work.

Keith is highly critical of institutional politics and politicians. Along with previously mentioned issues of corruption and lack of knowledge of the political or **legislative** processes, Keith sees institutional **jargon** as a barrier to democracy.

Willie again puts self-confidence as central to his analysis. He highlights the importance of self-confidence in terms of overcoming the barriers to getting useful information and then having the confidence to argue your point. This is important in terms of **agency** and democracy as surely only informed citizens can act effectively in their own interest in **electoral politics**.

Critical Education and the Matt Talbot Community Trust.

There is clearly a level of critical awareness evident in the narratives. This goes beyond casual scepticism of politicians as the participants gave good examples to support their claims. The critical evaluations are informed by life experience rather than social theory or activism which is possibly why the analysis stops short at critique and does not develop towards action (see Mayo, 1999:133). MT has contributed to an increased sense of confidence in the participants. It fits in with an empowerment model rather than an emancipatory model in that participants are empowered to negotiate the structures of power as they stand. MT is informed by a historical background of Christian compassion rather than radicalism so it does not necessarily see its role as facilitating political emancipation. Drawing on Kothari’s (Cooke and Kothari, 2001:139-152) analysis of the power relations in Third-World development projects, MT is arguably helping to sustain inequality by **legitimising** the partnership approach to social problems. Kothari might argue that MT unwittingly legitimises power structures that institutionalise power inequalities by advocating in **benign spaces**. By helping ‘**marginalised**’ participants to negotiate a

social system that 'keeps them in their place'. By advocating on their behalf rather than developing their own voice, MT could actually be disempowering participants in a political sense.

To be fair to the staff of MT, who I know personally, they are committed and dedicated to social justice. However MT has become, like so many community organisations, a professional service. In the interest of helping the participants they must also, ironically, constantly struggle to satisfy the requirements of their funders. Adopting a radical role now could spell the end, not only of their jobs, but of a valuable community resource.

Discussion

This study is specific to MT and so I won't draw any generalisations from it. I wanted to know what the participants of MT had to say about education in general. The interest in doing this was to discover what they was important about education and if there was a desire to learn what I consider to be useful information in terms of critical education. What I found was that there already exists, at least in the people I interviewed, a critical analysis. The participants are at a transitory stage coming from periods of life which were troubled by drug addiction and/or prison. With this in mind it is perhaps understandable that they are focused on their immediate concerns and have not given much thought to **collaborative** action to bring about social change.

Mayo (1999:133) argues that radical education initiatives are unlikely to be effective if they are not carried out in the context of a social movement. Inglis also refers to this in his critique of Mezirow when he says that Mezirow emphasises the individual rather than social **agency** (1997:3). Inglis bases his analysis on the issue of power. He argues that an analysis of power is key to emancipatory learning. Freire's sense of **conscientization** assumes that a **dialogical** relationship based around issues identified by the learner will lead to a social power analysis and creative ways of overcoming it. There is a sense here that the educator leads the learner in terms of where the discussion goes, which both Mezirow (1995) and Mayo (1999) write about.

Mezirow says (1995:127):

Education becomes indoctrination only when educators try to influence specific actions as extensions of their will, or perhaps when they blindly help

learners to blindly follow the dictates of an unexamined set of culturally assimilated assumptions that determine how learners perceive, think, and feel about themselves, their relationships and their world. To show learners a new set of rules, tactics, and criteria that allows them to judge situations in which they must act is significantly different from trying to engineer learner consent to take action favoured by the educator.

Mayo (1999:138) argues that educators who are 'equipped with a theoretical understanding of the adult learners' **predicament**' are **directive** in the sense that they are informed by a **utopian** vision of a socially-just society. He argues that this is contrary to authoritarian educational approaches as the learner's interests are central to the **dialogical** process he proposes.

In terms of MT then, we can say that MT has a specific mission which is concerned with empowering its participants to actively engage in society. Its role is to advocate on behalf of its participants on issues regarding social justice. MT responds to the immediate educational needs of its participants effectively and clearly inspires a sense of self-confidence and fosters a positive encouraging atmosphere in the MT centre. The design of MT's educational programmes reflects the immediate needs of the participants and comes from a specific historical path which has more to do with Christian compassion than radical political analysis.

Conclusion

While the provision of qualifications is a role central to MT's mission and essential for its financial survival this situation does not mean that it cannot create an emancipatory learning community. Connolly (2007:125) charts a history of women's community education from the 1980s where loose informal networks provided radically different educational programmes. Lived experience was at the centre of these efforts. As we have seen above feminists used new methodology to develop a standpoint, or voice. Through **praxis**, a learning dynamic through struggle developed. Connolly notes the success of the women's liberation movement in terms of achieving valuable social changes. What feminism has to offer MT is a model of critical analysis which values lived experience and which is action-oriented. It offers a model with a **structural analysis** of power which identifies the **discourses** and practises that need to be challenged. Key to **emancipatory** efforts is that it is not led by educators but rather developed by the type of methodologies used in feminist

practise that challenge **hierarchical** and other **conventional** models of community education (Connolly, 2007:125). MT is a small organisation in an area with many other similar organisations operating. The MT participants on their own cannot develop the standpoint for a group which spans the country. I think what feminism has shown is how important it is to challenge oppressive practises in everyday life. I think if MT could maintain their excellent record in empowering participants and informed this effort with an emancipatory drive, that they would become a powerful example to similar organisations.

Implications

In terms of the participants' views of education MT is very effective according to the research. Enhancing the self-confidence to become independent agents is a key contribution that MT makes. Providing a sense of acceptance and community is a form of solidarity in action. MT's educational programmes also enhance family relations as well as supporting the vocational paths of the participants. The research participants talked about education in these basic and developmental ways and MT deals with immediate educational needs in taken for granted areas such as cooking skills and nutritional education.

In terms of radical education the MT participants would, in my view, have an interest in this as a specific group with valuable experience and viewpoints to share in terms of social justice. There was already a capacity for critical analysis but what was absent was a broader social analysis in terms of change. Change was talked about in individual ways.

This links to the issue of **directive** learning mentioned above. I believe that a project of **participatory action research** with MT participants and/or people with similar interests would be very useful. Such a project would critically examine issues identified by the group as needing action. Much could be learnt from feminist and critical education literature in terms of broader social analysis and developing strategy. Key learning in this activity would be what could be learnt and shared by the participants in such an endeavour.

Glossary

Academic: Anything to do with formal learning such as that in found in schools or universities.

Agency: This term refers to people as actors in society. Agency means to have the ability to actively influence a situation. For example, voters are agents in a political system and consumers are agents in a capitalist system.

Begrudgery: Jealous resentment of people who are doing well or trying to 'better' themselves.

Benign Spaces: Benign means harmless. In this context a benign space is one where objections pose no threat to the establishment. Under social partnership the community and voluntary sector has very limited power. If they argue their point here it will have little effect. If they were to become active in an alternative space, e.g. protesting on the streets and in the media, they would be more challenging to those in power.

Bureaucratic; Bureaucracy: This is to do with office-based requirements in terms of finances and managing information, time and people. Bureaucrats are unelected people who are employed to carry out official tasks, usually for the government (such as the community welfare officer).

Class-Divide: Marx wrote about the working class and an exploitative bourgeois, or capitalist, class. Social stratification is a better term to describe how society's complex class structure, however the feeling of 'haves and have-nots' is a reality to a lot of people.

Coded: To code something means to organise it in a systematic way.

Collaborative: Collaborative means people working together.

Compulsory: This means there is no choice, it is a legal obligation.

Conformity: To conform means to obey the rules.

Conscientization: A term from Paulo Freire meaning oppressed people become aware of their oppression in a politically and socially conscious way.

Consequent: The result or the effect following an action or event.

Conventional: Normal; usual.

Co-opt; Co-option: To co-opt an organisation means to bring it under your influence so that it will not work against your agenda. This can be done by providing

funding and then threatening to withdraw funding if the organisation works against your interests.

Corroborative: This means when my account is supported by a very similar account written by someone else who was there; they corroborate, or back up, my account with theirs.

Critical Education: This is view of education which includes social and political circumstances in evaluating education. It emphasises equality in the learning relationship and the relevance of the learning material to the learner.

Dialogical: This is a term from Paulo Freire who argues for educators and learners to learn from each other by talking (dialogue) about the learning material.

Discourse: This means language or an analysis of what people say or write on a personal basis or in the public domain. It can mean language used in government policy documents, newspapers or people's day-to-day talk.

Directive Learning: As in directing what's going on. This is problematic in a context of equal status in the learning process between teacher and learner. Mayo says that it is acceptable if the direction is based on a vision of social justice and the emancipation of the learner.

Diversion; Divert: To steer someone in a different direction.

Economic Recession: When the country's economy stops growing and people can't earn or afford to spend money, less tax is taken in. This means there is less money to spend by the government on public services.

Electoral Politics: Politics in which people act as voters or politicians seeking election; as opposed to alternative politics of protest and/or conscious non-participation.

Emancipatory: Emancipation means freedom, usually in a political or civil rights sense.

Empathetic: Someone who can understand someone's suffering because they've had the same experience.

Emphasise, Emphasis: To really insist or say that something is important.

Frames of Reference: A frame of reference means the world-view through which we make sense of life; which is built on our life experience, social circumstances and education.

Grassroots: An organisation of people from the ground up, rather than an organisation which was developed by a larger organisation. Generally it means local

people who organise themselves around a particular issue without traditional power hierarchies.

Hierarchical: A hierarchy is a power structure (like a pyramid) where those at the bottom have the least power and those at the top have the most.

Holistic: A holistic approach to something means looking at complete systems instead of focussing on individual parts. For example, a holistic approach to education would look at the overall needs of the learners. MT does this by assessing individual needs but also helping with the distractions of life problems and creating a respectful learning atmosphere.

Informed Criticism: This is criticism that draws on researched information, such as policy statements or specific actions rather than general criticism which is not based on anything specific.

Institutions: An institution can be a state provided service such as a school or a prison, or an organisation such as the Department of Education or political institutions such as the Dáil.

Intimidatory: The effect of making someone nervous or afraid.

Jargon: Language that is particular to a specific field. Legal jargon is language accessible only to those with legal training; medical jargon is only understandable to those with medical education etc.

Legislative: Legislative means law-making. Politicians in Dáil Éireann make or amend the laws which people have to vote on if it involves a big change to the constitution. The constitution is a document which details the laws of Ireland.

Legitimising; Legitimacy: If political institutions are legitimate it means they have the genuine support of the people. When people doubt the legitimacy of the state to govern, they no longer respect state institutions and law could break down.

Marginalised: This means people who are on the margins of society, who do not have access to mainstream social life. This could mean poor people, people with little education, homeless people or immigrants etc. The term is problematic in that it is used to describe people as being marginal as if it was an matter of fate rather than a political side-effect.

Material: The information that is to be learnt. At school it would be subjects such as French or Science etc.

Mutually Exclusive: When it is a case of one choice or another, but not both. For example, you can't say you're a non-drinker and drink alcohol, they are mutually exclusive.

Narrative: A narrative is a spoken account of something. It allows the speaker to decide what is important rather than, for example, structured interviews where the important details are decided by the interviewer in constructing the questions.

Participatory Action Research: This is where a group begin a process of research where the aim, design and method of the research are agreed by a group involved in social action as a whole. The results or findings of the research are for the benefit of the group and broader society rather than exclusively for academic interest.

Passive: Without any feedback, simply listening and taking in the information without interacting or questioning.

Pedagogical; Pedagogy: The science of education.

Peer Pressure: Social pressure from your friends, or people of influence, who through judgement, advice or even mockery steer you towards certain actions, attitudes or behaviour.

Phraseology: The phrases or particular ways of saying things that people use.

Praxis: Praxis is an on-going process where action is planned according to theory and/or experience. Each action provides the theory and experience for future action. It is about learning from success or mistakes. It refers to a very conscious and systematic way of doing this.

Predicament: A troubled situation, a problem.

Prescriptive: Meaning what is done is decided beforehand and told to people rather than being discussed with people.

Recreational: Done to pass the time or for the enjoyment of it.

Referendum: When the government want to change the constitution they have to hold an election called a referendum. The constitution is the collection of laws on which the Irish state is founded.

Rehabilitative: To rehabilitate means to repair or fix someone to some accepted standard.

Reintegrate: To play a 'normal' role and be accepted in mainstream, ordinary society.

Revelation: Something important being revealed; an important realisation.

Regurgitate: To bring it back up.

Scepticism: To be sceptical of something means to doubt or question it in some way.

Social Control: In the context of this chapter, social control refers to things such as authoritative control in school, church control and peer pressure.

Structural Analysis: An analysis of how power exists within institutional or social structures. For example, voting power depends on having an address which can exclude homeless or Travellers. Women are often subject to the economic power of men because men typically receive better pay. This can mean that the woman stays at home rather than the family earning less as a unit if she goes to work instead making her dependent on the man's pay.

Subject-Centred: This is where the learner, or subject, is at the centre of the learning process; as opposed to a set of learning goals decided on beforehand and which the learner has to adapt to.

Subjective: Subjectivity means how you feel, your own experience of reality or your own particular view.

Themes; Thematic: Where issues or topics came up very often in the data I called them themes. Looking at it this way I could organise the things that were important to people and group them under thematic headings, i.e. according to these very topics or issues that people focused on.

Utopia; Utopian: This means your idea of the best imaginable world possible.

Vocational: To do with employment or occupation. It can also mean a desire to perform a particular role. For example, some people have a vocation to join a religious order or to become a teacher.

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