

## **Conceptualising and capturing voices in dropout research**

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### **Introduction**

The construction of methodological approaches for the Students Completing Schooling Project presented challenges on various levels. For the qualitative component of the project the focus was upon capturing the 'voices' of students about post-compulsory schooling, early school-leaving, and 'hanging-in' for completion of the SACE. We have found that our thinking about the pragmatics of collecting information from students through research processes like interviewing has been informed by some concentrated theoretical work about how 'voice' is conceptualised as a way of knowing and as a way of doing research.

Our challenge in advancing a methodological position has been to explicate the theoretical foundations upon which the existing research that claims to use voiced methods is grounded. This has required us to ask questions about what it is that voices bring to the production of research knowledge and what this means in the design and conduct of the research process. This has not been an easy task for we have found that much of the research work which claims to appropriate voices in research activity usually avoids any detailed engagement with these issues. We have sought to take on these issues in creating a 'position' for this project about voice as an epistemological imperative which informs the broad methodological orientation and the specific pragmatics of how this takes shape when working in the field. A summary of our work in framing a position about voiced knowledge and developing an approach to collecting information through fieldwork is presented below.

### **Voice as a way of doing research**

Voice is a term used increasingly in qualitative research and critical theorising as a way of recognising the capture of an epistemological and methodological edge to the creation and collection of knowledge about life experience that cannot be achieved and communicated through conventional means (LeCompte, 1993). Conventionally, stories are segmented, then categorised so they can be numerated, so they qualify as 'formal scientific knowledge'. Often voice is meant to convey that the informant(s), author, or text will act as a privileged

revelator of life-world narratives. Voice functions to remind the reader that the research deals with the lives of real people.

Voices are variously described, but it is not uncommon to find them endowed as unique, or as having a specific existential quality, bearing such labels as: heard, spoken, lost, found, oppressed, empowered, reclaimed, released, sponsored, accommodated, revisited, unlocked, and ventriloquised. The literature overwhelmingly alludes to voices as being in some way hidden and hard to locate (Schratz, 1993). There are multiple sources for such voices, including: teachers, students, the powerless, women, youth, the voiceless, the working class, the homeless, the aged, and migrants. In accordance with the general patterns of the literature, the most interesting voices belong to individuals and groups that are in some way disadvantaged, deficient of social power, or located at the margins of society (Giroux, 1988a; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). It is claimed that access to, and the interpretation of, voices is significant because they provide evocative and highly resonant information about people's lives in an ethnographically rich, sometimes putatively 'realist' and sometimes fictive, form through: life-stories, anecdotes, biography, narratives of difference and identity, and discourses of struggle (Denzin, 1991; Mariani, 1991).

Popular constructions of voice give it an irrevocable political dimension through its clear association with thinking and writing about the struggle of marginal and disempowered groups. Claims to the suitability of empirical 'voice-data' are often present in the development of positional thinking about: theory, culture, politics, pedagogy, democracy, change, class, dissent, and multiculturalism (Giroux, 1988b).

The special perspicuity of voice is grounded in its representation of subjugated groups, normatively different from the mainstream, that are absent from the dominant cultural discourses of life. Such normally subjugated voices interrupt the dominant discourses and invite the possibility for the articulation of other visions, counter-narratives, of life (McElroy-Johnson, 1993; Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren & Peters, 1996). Voices compete for public audibility within a cacophony of other voices, and the voices of those at the margins of the dominant social vision are often inaudible, or silenced, precisely because they are the sound of marginalised ways of life, and hence disturbing. Some voices will always be heard above others, some will be heard only at certain times and there are no guarantees that voices can, or will, be heard in ways and places that are accessible to all those who should, or need to, hear them. Voice must always be contextualised within the machinations of the regimes of power and knowledge (Giroux, 1986).

### **Voice as a way of knowing in research**

As a general rule, voice is a 'slippery' term that is used both as a way of knowing and as a way of collecting information. It has both epistemological and methodological credentials. Contained within the notion of voice is that essence of knowing about oneself, and one's position in the social world. The 'connection' between an individual, other people, and the social fabric is implicit to the relational aspect of voice that locates the individual within a bigger interpretive realm, a public space, or a shared culture. Voices are lifeless without the 'resonances' that come from connection with other people (Gilligan, 1993). Having a voice finds substantive meaning in the relationship between one set of experiences, one life, and another (Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995).

You may know something and speak about it, but you only have a voice when your speaking is heard, listened to, and responded to. That is, when your words are honoured. (Garcia, Kilgore, Rodriguez & Thomas, 1995). When individuals do not find resonance with other people and sense that their voices are not honoured, they are, in fact, silenced, marginalised, and rendered powerless. Finding voice is about seizing the agency integral to

putting out self-knowledge of the world in ways not otherwise possible (Oldfather, 1995). Having voice is about making epistemic interventions into the dominant expressions of knowledge about some kind of life experience and thus making more permeable the inhibitive discursive boundaries that exclude marginalised selves. (Freire, 1970; Bruner, 1986; Silverman, 1988; Otte, 1995).

The conceptualisation of voice, and its specific contextual significance, is usefully examined against a backdrop of prior silence. Voice as a way of knowing should be framed against thinking on the epistemics of silence (van Manen, 1990). Voice is that which allows one, who has something to say, to gain relative discrimination in meeting the epistemic challenge of the dominant position by offering the promise of anchored, local knowledge in the face of objective, normative, hegemonic, and depersonalised forms of knowledge about the world (Grumet, 1990).

Some people speak in voices imbued with the privileged tones of the dominant culture whilst others must struggle to accommodate their voices to strange discursive and cultural frames, fall despairingly silent through the sheer pressure of an overwhelming sense of 'cultural homelessness', or assert a resistive silence through adoption of illusory, but residually alien, cultural forms that hide refusal (Fine, 1987; Aronowitz, 1992).

In the telling of stories of life, previously unheard, or silenced, voices open up the possibility for new, even radically different, narrations of life experience. Voice is the key to the 'truths of experience' which are sometimes consciously forgotten but which are remembered at times when heard again, and understood fully for the first time, in the visceral recounting of the life experience of others (Marin, 1992). The methodological challenge is to find ways to allow the smaller voices embodied with these aesthetic qualities to be heard. Often the smaller voices are there, in the background, albeit apparently invisible, drowned out by others louder, more dominant, and putatively more epistemically legitimate.

It would be foolish to assume that voice is an unproblematic concept (Hargreaves, 1996). Those critical of 'voice-inspired' knowing and methodological imperatives that assert it claim that people on the margins do not need the controlled intervention of sophisticated research processes to speak knowingly about the struggle - the frustration and the desperation - in their lives (Lincoln, 1995). Sensitivity is required in how voice is viewed as research methodology and how it simultaneously exists as the indigenous narrative of individuals and sub-cultures. Tension between pursuing a research agenda and honouring voices presents an ethical minefield. It is not unknown for researchers to be accused of abusing their privileged access to voices after presenting accounts which are seen to be demeaning to, or critical of, the people who have made themselves vulnerable through speaking out or exposing their lives (Hobbs, 1993).

### **The voiced construction of dropouts**

One of the more interesting methodological challenges of this project hinges around how the students we shall be speaking with are construed, because this has a significant bearing on how we make sense of what they say. Fine & Rosenberg (1983) put this most directly when they argue that "critical perspectives on social institutions are often best obtained from exiles, that is, persons who leave those institutions (p.257).

They go on to argue that this is the reason exiles' views are "frequently disparaged as deviant and in some cases are conspicuously silenced" (p.257). The words of Fine & Rosenberg (1983) nicely capture this:

. . . high school dropouts represent individuals who challenge the dominant belief that education leads to labour market success -- employment and income guarantees. It may be in the best interests of business and government officials to maintain the belief that dropouts leave school because of personal deficits and ultimately pay an enormous price for that decision. But we have learned that many dropouts are indeed fully capable of academic achievement and leave school with a critique of institutional inadequacies and discrimination . . . [These adolescents expose contradictions in prevalent cultural beliefs about meritocracy, individualism, and self-motivation, and for that reason are socially constructed as "losers", if not dangerous (p.258).

If dropouts are in fact exiles who are "critical of the meritocratic ideology promoted in their schools" (p.259) as Fine & Rosenberg (1983) argue, then how we tangle with 'what is the problem?' becomes an interesting methodological research issue in itself. The focus is not upon deficits or pathologies or inadequacies within individual students, but rather on a set of social practices in which adolescents "challenge authorities over a perceived injustice" or fail "to accommodate to the social relations and definitions of knowledge that schools legitimate" (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983, p.259). These adolescents, in rejecting the "hidden curriculum" are "resisting the dominant ideology of school and work" (p.259).

So, we had to assume that we might not be dealing with a group who were despondent underachievers, except in the sense that they had experienced continual rejection and failure by schools, but rather with a group who had a robust self-image of themselves and who were self-assuredly assertive in challenging the academic injustices of schooling.

The starting point in our discussions has to be to engage these students in telling us about their lives -- and not to pre-judge them as 'failures'. An orienting question has to be something along the lines:

*"Tell us about how you make sense of your life.*

*What are the things that are working out for you?*

*How have you made decisions about things that are important to you recently?*

*In what way has school helped or hindered you in this?"*

Out of this we will at least get a sense of who is prepared to talk to us and their level of articulation.

As Fine & Rosenberg (1983) put it: "Their critical voices within schools are obscured in educational, psychological, and sociological literature which targets the 'psychological problems', 'educational deficits,' or 'family problems' plaguing dropouts" (p.260). So in the work we did we had to be extremely mindful of the way others framed adolescent problems in terms that construct the inadequacies as being within them. If we failed to properly take account of this, then we would have allowed the focus to have shifted off the broader social, educational and cultural context that we hypothesised as the heart of the problem.

As we get further into engaging youth in these kind of conversations, we need to move up close to how it is they have made decisions to 'hang in' or 'drop out' of school. Questions that come to mind, at the next layer are:

- *Who has contributed most to school-related decisions you've made? Your peers? Teachers at school? Family and friends?*
- *What factors going on in your life at the time had an influence on your decision?*
- *In what ways did the school, its organisation, or the curriculum have an influence in your decision making?*
- *do you think you made the correct decision?*
- *What effect do you think this will have on your life?*
- *Do you feel in control of your life?*
- *What would you like to be doing in three years time?*

If the adolescents we are dealing with are likely to be the ones most likely to challenge injustice in classrooms and schools, as is being suggested, this poses some interesting issues for us as researchers:

- will we find ourselves being forced into some kind of advocacy role because of the feeling that it is "under-dog research", and what does this mean -- especially to the other stakeholders in the research?
- how do we draw boundaries around this kind of research when the focus becomes the structural issues of education and the economy surrounding the experiences of these adolescents? Indeed, should we do this?
- what will this mean for the ethics of the research, and even the manageability of it?
- how will we conceptually and politically handle the bind we will find ourselves in as expressed in the "tension between the ideology of the high school dropout as a 'loser' and the actual data [which may indicate] the dropout to be at least a resister, unwilling to accommodate to a hidden curriculum that fails to meet her or his needs" (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983, p.269)?

In examining the experiences and perspectives of dropouts themselves we shall directly confront the hypothesis that schools are at least partly responsible for students dropping out. Stevenson & Ellsworth (1993) put this in terms "of schools and larger structural features of our society as [being] partners . . ." (p.262). The other part of this argument is that because of stereotyping "the school remains protected from a serious analysis of its contribution to students dropping out" (p.260). The focus has conventionally been on the victim, rather than the institution from which they have been excluded. Our focus is much more on the "interdependent relationship between school processes and the personal characteristics of dropouts" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p.259).

### **A voiced method for dropout research**

We required a research method that enabled us to continually focus and refocus what we were learning in the research, because of the "complex web of interrelated personal and

school factors [that] contribute to students' decision to drop out" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p.264). This meant a research strategy that was sufficiently nuanced as to allow a continual re-framing of the issues as we were hearing them from the adolescents.

Subsequent interviews will 'reframe the issues' on the basis of insights we develop from earlier rounds. This requires that we meet as a team to de-brief fairly quickly after each round of interviews.

Many of the instances encountered were not simple analytical episodes (that has been the inherent limitation of psychological and deviancy-oriented research) -- rather, we encountered a cascading set of inter-woven elements eg. instances of disruptive behaviour, isolation from peers, bad reputation among teachers, absence from school, poor grades, reinforced perception by the school, a feeling among adolescents that the school is uncaring, etc.

In the interviews, we had to be sensitive to the "self-silencing" that sometimes occurs, when dropping out students needlessly blame themselves and repress criticism of schooling and school processes: "This self-silencing seem[s] to grow from the tensions created by holding oppositional beliefs about school, oneself, and the relationship between the two" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p.266).

We need to go for the 'intersections' in the lives of youth in ways that capture the complexity of how they make hanging in or dropping out decisions. The kind of areas in which we need to posit questions are:

- *what do you think of school?*
- *what do you think of your job prospects?*
- *what effect have your peers had?*
- *how has your family history come to bear?*
- *what do you see as relevant in what you are learning?*
- *how relevant is the way you are learning?*
- *what do you think of where society is going and your place in it?*
- *what 'image' do you have of yourself and your age cohort?*
- *how does the school deal with you, especially in disciplinary ways?*

We might get them to give us an actual example in response to a question such as:

*Think of a recent example of where you think "school sucks". Tell us about the incident -- what you did? To whom? Who was to blame? How did people in the school react? What was the effect on you? On your peer group? And, tell us how this incident had an effect (if any -- on your decision to stay on or leave school.*

On the other hand, a more positive example could be:

*Tell us about a recent positive experience you had at school -- why, with whom, with what effect, and how it has changed (or reinforced) your perception of school and 'staying on'. What two factors contributed most to this?.*

We had to be aware in dealing with many of these students that they were in a stage of "identity formation" -- ie. they didn't possess a strong sense of identity and are engaging in "self-exploration" and "experimentation with different roles . . . that feels comfortable" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 268). Some might see their peers as having "adjusted to the system" (p.268) and feel isolated as a consequence. The images these adolescents conveyed might not, therefore, be especially stable, and susceptible to constant revision, reversal and adaptation. But then, isn't this true of all research involving people?

Fine & Weis' (1996) argue that another of the challenges of this kind of research is "self-reflexivity", in which "we interrogate in our writings who we are as we co-produce the narratives we presume to collect" (Fine & Weis, 1996, p.263). Somewhat more expansively:

. . . as critical ethnographers, [we] have a responsibility to talk about our own identities, why we interrogate what we do, what we choose not to report, on whom we train our scholarly gaze, who is protected and not protected as we do our work (Fine & Weis, 1996, pp.263-4)

In a project like ours, this is an especially poignant issue.

The kind of reflexive questions we need to ask ourselves as researchers in this project are:

- *How do we know that we are allowing youth to have 'voice' in this project? What's the evidence?*
- *What's the evidence that we have been listening?*
- *Why are we consciously (or otherwise) choosing particular individuals to speak to? Who are we avoiding?*
- *Who leads who in the conversations?*
- *What gets left out of the writing? and why?*
- *How are our own middle class values intruding?*
- *Have we sufficiently distanced ourselves from institutions that youth find problematic?*
- *Have we "gone native"?*
- *What are our safeguards?*

An essential pre-requisite of this would require that we follow Denscombe's (1995) suggestion of starting the interviews with a personal biography "in which we give a brief introduction to [ourselves] and [our] interest and history of involvement in the topic". In this sense we will be declaring ourselves to be "partisan" (Bennett, 1991) in the research process.

There is the representational issue, as Fine & Weis (1996) call it, the "triple representational problem" of how we present "(a) ourselves as researchers choreographing the narratives we have collected; (b) the narrators many of whom are wonderful social critics . . . [and] some who are talented ventriloquists for a hateful status quo; and (c) others who are graphically bad-mouthed by these narratives" (p.266). Fine & Weis (1996) struggle hard, therefore with how to "represent and contextualize . . . narrators, [themselves], and the people about whom they are ranting" (p.267). They confess that "audiences have nevertheless been alarmed at the language in our texts, and the vivid descriptions and the portraits" (p.267). Again, as researchers, we need to ask why such alarm should concern us.

The context within which these narratives are collected also have a significant bearing, and how people act as individuals can be quite different from their responses in a group situation. From Fine & Weis (1996):

. . . if individual interviews produce the most despairing stories, evince the most minimal sense of possibility, present identities of victimisation, and voice stances of hopelessness, in focus groups with the same people the despair begins to evaporate, a sense of possibility sneaks through . . . [W]e see and hear a cacophony of voices filled with spirit, possibility, and a sense of vitality absent in the individual data (p.267).

Their point is that much of social science research has gone down the individualist path and as a consequence may have painted an unnecessarily despairing story -- collectives are more likely to generate stories of hope and possibility. However, it must be said that a tentative conclusion from the transcripts in this study is that individual statements contain a spirit of hope and vigour, despite often harrowing accounts of past experiences.

Interviews will need to be conducted on terrain and in ways comfortable to youth. This means non-school (even non-institutional) territory, and it will mean interviews with pairs and groups. We need to ask ourselves questions like:

- *are we getting different information from individuals (ie. pairs) than from groups?*
- *what are the qualitative differences?*
- *how is context an enabling construction?*
- *how does context disable?*

There is a danger in this kind of research of presenting dangerous and misleading dualisms -- most notably "representing historically oppressed groups as victimized and damaged or as resilient and strong" (Fine & Weis, 1996, p.270).

Simple stories of discrimination and victimization, with no evidence of resistance, resilience, or agency, are seriously flawed and deceptively partial, and they deny the rich subjectivities of persons surviving amid horrific social circumstances (p.270).

For Fine & Weis (1996), this means searching for an alternative intellectual stance that does not obliterate or erase the complexity of "structural oppression, passion, social movements, evidence of strength, health, and 'damage'" (p.270). In other words, where all of these get recognised, a fully dimensioned person rather than a stereotype is depicted.

## **Collecting student stories through "purposeful conversations"**

(i) So far as conversations with students are concerned, it would seem that trying to conduct interviews as "joint constructions of reality" Gudmundsdottir (1992), while a significant shift from standard interviewing practices, may not work that well for us. The reason for this is as Herr & Anderson (1993) point out, when working with adolescents in public institutions we are often dealing with "inner silencing" (p.188) where students self-censure their inner dialogue. Quantz & O'Connor (1988) drawing on Bakhtin argue that inner voices are silenced "before they even become vocalized in the public domain" (Herr & Anderson, 1993, p.188). This will likely mean that we will have to develop different ways of vocalizing "the non-legitimated voice" (p.188) -- such as, through drama or theatre in which there may be a greater likelihood of them acting out aspects they might otherwise be inarticulate about.

(ii) The adolescents who will be our informants will in all likelihood be struggling with what Wexler (1988) calls "identity work" -- which means, they will be "juggling . . . the multiple worlds [they] inhabit" (Herr & Anderson, 1993, p. 190). Wexler (1992) also calls this "becoming somebody". The consequence of this is that we will possibly encounter "stable" images adolescents give of their versions of their lives (possibly around out-of-school experiences), which will contrast with the much more unstable images represented by the school around "acting out" or disruptive behaviour. As Herr & Anderson (1993) put it, this instability will be derived from the inability of the school to understand or even be aware of the cultural conflict being experienced by many students. Whether students chose to give us only the "stable persona", and if we have to extract or solicit the unstable ones, will be an important issue for us to encounter. The juxtaposition of these various persona will be both a challenge for the research and a source of frustration for us.

(iii) Herr & Anderson (1993) speak of the phenomenon of "the privatization of public issues" (p.192) which takes the form of reinforcing "institutionally sanctioned discourse and prevents other vantage points from being introduced for analysis" (p.192). What this means is that institutions remain "deaf" to adolescent struggles, while legitimating the line that students are the problem because they misbehave. As researchers we are going to have to confront the issue of how we help people in institutions actually hear the voices of the students, and confront the pain of admitting that they are part of the problem.

(iv) If we are successful in firstly, eliciting student stories, and secondly, presenting them in such a way that the teacher and educational administrator can hear, honour and act on them, then we have achieved our purpose as action researchers.

## **AN INTERVIEW PROTOCOL - PAIRS OF INTERVIEWERS**

### **Preparatory Phase - June-July, 1997**

In this phase we tried to work out, in the field, the communicative repertoire to use with youth. This was important because unless we got this properly worked out, rapport with

young people would not be properly established, interviews would be disrupted, and the analytical veracity of the interview data severely confounded.

Involved 10 interviews of individual youths with three sets of 2 interviewers.

This gave us enough familiarity with the techniques to be able to sort out procedural problems and to reformulate the process. It included an 'evaluation' of the transcripts by other pairs with feedback on the effectiveness of interview technique.

### **Phase 1 - August - November 1997**

Involved 200 interviews, most individual but some pairs with three pairs of two interviewers (composition of pairs changing)

### **Phase 2 - June - August 1998**

Involved 20 second individual interviews. 3 pairs of 2 interviewers - change composition of pairs.

In this phase we were able to move confidently to extend what we commenced in phase 1, clear up ambiguous or unclear information, and both expand and get more depth.

### **Phase 3 - October 1998 - "Reactive Phase"**

This phase will come after extensive analysis of data collected in the earlier two phases and will be designed to pursue issues that are either elusive or that we feel have not been adequately exposed earlier, and feed back some tentative conclusions to students. This took the form of a three hour workshop with ten students, most of whom had been interviewed twice.

## **Portraits**

### **Barone's model**

Three models for portraits were considered. The first model was based on Barone's (1992, 1993, 1995, 1997) work. The aim here was to keep some ambiguity and interpretative space in the telling but not to remove the researcher fully from the telling. That is, the story is based on the 'facts' from the field data, but is not constrained by them, to avoid the control of didactic analysis meant avoiding closure and neutral description in favour of uncertainty and authorial engagement. Given that each story was told to us in a particular style, manner and emotional positioning, it was an ethical necessity that it be retold from a similar position.

### **George (extract)**

A major knot that needs unravelling is how he managed to get suspended if he had turned over a new leaf and was improving with his work at school. He told a long story about getting followed around the school by teachers at recess and lunch. "Watching me, all the time - spying." he said. "I used to try and get away from them but it was hard, so after a while I got mad at them and ended up smashing a door. In a temper, I just got irate, I just slammed it, and it smashed". To be precise it was only two teachers who followed George around. He thought maybe it was because of his reputation, as he said: "I did do a lot of bad things for a while. I don't know if they had a grudge against me or what". The confrontation that led to the final suspension occurred over a dispute about where George was entitled to shelter

from the rain when he had been barred from certain privileged spaces at school. His telling of this 'big' event resonated with his story of building pressure and his not being able to handle it: "It was raining a lot outside, I had to get out of one area, then get out of another area, then I went into the hall and I had to get out of there. I wasn't doing anything wrong, I was just standing there out of the rain". Such things are rarely one-offs, they often have a history, like the wagging, the swearing and the avoidance of work he had already told us about. What should be made of the final blow-up happening with a teacher who he had another gripe with, one that involved an intersection in their lives out of school. Eventually, but a little reluctantly, he hinted at another issue - one that cast a relational shadow over his last year at school. All he would say was: "He told his daughter to keep away from me and if she went near me, she'd get grounded - and, yeah, she did."

In this model interpretative explication of detail, and reframing of the student's language, is an integral part of the telling of the story.

### **This is me**

The second model was to reorganise the student responses, explanations and conversation into a short (2-5 page) coherent statement about 'this is me and this is what I've been doing', that captures the mood and style and essence of the student discourse. There were of necessity some omissions of detail (some of the transcripts run to 100 pages over two interviews), but we found that with careful selection and crafting, most of the story could be told in the student's 'unedited' language.

In this model there is no overt interference of the researcher in the story as presented. At the conclusion of the story the researcher sometimes comments, in order to summarise some essential element of the story, or reframe it from another perspective[.

This model has been used and the resulting portraits returned for comment to many of the students who attended the 'reactive' group workshop. Reactions were all positive.

### **Robert (extract)**

There was just this one teacher that I really didn't get along with and I ended up getting suspended for getting a record sheet. It's like if you muck around in class, they write out a sheet and hand it to the Deputy Principal. I can't remember what it was, but it was really minor, and then they suspended me for five days for it. I was already at school for that day so they suspended me for one day internally and four days externally. Then I was out at recess and this teacher that I just didn't get along with, she came out and she said 'You shouldn't be out here with everyone else', and I said, 'every other time I've been suspended I've come out here', and she goes, 'You shouldn't be here,' and I said 'Crap', and she didn't like that too much and she goes, 'Alright then, come up to the front office with me,' and I said 'I'm not going anywhere'. She goes, 'Alright then, you're disobeying an order, I reckon we can get you another five days for that', and I sort of told her where to go and I didn't call her a very nice name and I walked off and that was my last day there. I wouldn't say it's her fault I left, but she sure contributed.

### **Poetic Presentation**

A late comer to the field has been an attempt at poetic representation as described by Richardson (1994). Richardson comments, when we write sociological interviews as poetry,

we are continually nudged into recognising that the text has been constructed. but all texts are constructed, prose ones too: therefore poetry helps problematise reliability, validity, and

'truth'. . . Writing up interviews as poems honours the speakers pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrations, strategies, rhythms . . . further, poetry's rhythms, silences, spaces, breath points, alliterations, meter, cadence, assonance, rhyme and off rhyme engage the listener's body, even when the mind resists and . . . Poetry is thus a practical and powerful method for analysing social worlds. (p522)

An example is given below. It's power is undeniable. In this extract all phrases and sentences are taken directly from the transcript of the interviews. Only the order has sometimes been changed.

### **Jay (extract)**

What changed? I got a life.

Simple fact, I got a life.

If people can't accept me as I am,

They're the idiots, not me.

No one likes the way I am,

They've got the problem, not me.

You walk around the school,

You look real deeply into them,

Everyone's like everyone.

Reckon they're going to be their own person,

And trying to fit into everyone's shoes.

No one's true to themselves,

That's a guarantee.

No one's true to themselves,

If there was, man, gees!

Even the Pope's not true to himself,

He wants to be God,

And he's not.

Hope yous aren't religious!

I'm trying to be true to myself.

I want to be true to myself.

But I know I'll never be.

'Cause even if you lie to others,

You're not true to yourself,

Because you're not telling the truth to others.

School made me feel like a nothing kid.

Now, it's just different.

It feels like

'Jay, you've got to grow up,

You've got to be something,

Not nothing.'

What's a somebody?

A somebody is you,

The person you feel comfortable with,

The person you want to be with,

The person that you are.

Somebody is what **you** think you are.

I'm a somebody to me,

Because I don't care if I'm

A nobody to them.

Because if I'm a nobody to them,

Then they're nothing to me.

But, if you're nothing to yourself

Then how can you be somebody to anyone else.

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### **Conceptualising and capturing voices in dropout research**

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