EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SCHOOL NON-COMPLETION

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science
DOHC	Department of Health and Children
EU	European Union
ESL	Early School Leaving
ESRI	European Social Research Institute
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
JCSP	Junior Certificate Special Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NEWB	National Education and Welfare Board
OCO	Ombudsman for Children's Office
OMYCA	Office of Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
SCP	School Completion Programme
SEN	Special Educational Need
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

ABSTRACT

This study is of an explorative nature, investigating early school leaving in Ireland today. Despite a range of interventions to address school non-completion, approximately 14% of students (as of 2007) continue to leave school without completing their education every year (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). A disproportionate amount of these young people come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Barnardos, 2006). Education is a powerful predicator of life chances and opportunities. Those who leave school with little or no formal education have less opportunities in later life, are more likely to be unemployed, have lower levels of general health and are at a greater risk of becoming involved in crime (Barnardos, 2009).

This study investigates the reasons why young people are opting out of school, the contributing factors to their leaving school and the barriers that prevent them from achieving their educational potential. Using a mixed methods approach, data was collected from early school leavers, teachers and stakeholders within the school system. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted to provide for a thorough examination of this educational problem. Findings highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of early school leaving. Disengagement from education is essentially a process which does not have one sole cause and for many, starts as far back as primary school. A variety of factors and influences impact on a young person's educational career, with a greater incidence of early school leaving occuring where a number of risk factors co-exist. This study offers a number of recommendations for increasing student retention, with a particular emphasis on improving school relationships and revising the curriculum and modes of assessment.

Chapter One
Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study examines the issue of early school leaving in Ireland, with a specific focus on *why* young people leave school prior to completing their education. The study investigates the reasons why young people are opting out of school, the contributing factors to their leaving school and the barriers that prevent them from achieving their educational potential. Using a mixed methods approach, data was collected from early school leavers, teachers and stakeholders within the school system to facilitate a thorough examination of this educational phenomenon. The remainder of this chapter outlines the rationale for conducting a study of this kind, the aims and objectives of the study and the key research questions.

Chapter Two provides a context to the study and an overview of the literature on early school leaving. Key areas are as follows: (i) Developments at a national and international level contributing to a climate of consumer participation and consultation (ii) The consequences to leaving school early (iii) Contributing factors to school non-completion and (iv) Irish policies and initiatives to improve student retention.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology adopted by the researcher, the research strategy employed and the research tools used to gather this data. The findings of the research are outlined in Chapter Four, while Chapter Five offers a discussion of these findings, drawing on research at both a national and international level. This chapter also presents a number of key recommendations to reduce Ireland's level of early school leaving and to promote student retention.

1.2 Rationale

The idea for this research came about as a result of the researcher taking on a new post. Taking up a post as a School Completion Project Worker meant working with children and young people who were considered to be at risk of early school leaving and having a thorough understanding of the contributing factors to this was essential to the implementation of this role. Much of the anecdotal information on why previous

students had left school early came from teachers and other stakeholders within the education system and the researcher felt that hearing what the ex-students had to say, *their* perceptions and experiences and factors which *they* feel have contributed to them leaving school would be a very worthwhile venture. This data would provide an additional and very important perspective for those working within the field and enhance our understanding about their lives. From this, the research project in its current form emerged, with a view to examining the influence of particular factors on a young person's educational career and identifying a number of strategies for improving student retention.

1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Research

This research aims to investigate some of the contributing factors to young people leaving school early, through gathering information from teachers, stakeholders and most importantly, students who made the decision to leave school prior to completing their education . The key objectives are as follows:

To identify key factors contributing to the decision to leave school early.

To investigate the influence of family, individual and school factors on a young person's educational career.

To carry out this investigation in a comprehensive and holistic manner, gathering data from a variety of sources: early school leavers, teachers and key stakeholders.

To keep the experiences of early school leavers at the very heart of the research, as their lived experiences are an invaluable source of data in understanding why young people leave school early.

To outline the barriers to participation and student retention.

To propose key strategies to improve retention among the student population.

1.4 Key research questions

The key research questions guiding the research are as follows:

(i)   *Why do young people leave school early?*

(ii)   *What factors contribute to school non-completion?*

(iii)   *How significant are individual, family or school factors to early school leaving*

(iv)   *How can schools best support young people in completing their education?*

1.5 Summary

Early school leaving has emerged as a 'hot topic' in recent years. The Masstrict, Amsterdam and Lisbon Treaties have played a significant part in developing policies for our education system and have consolidated a framework of common educational goals among European Union (EU) member states. The EU benchmark 2010 for levels of non-completion in education was 10% and this benchmark has been extended to 2020 (European Commission Education and Training, 2010). Within this context, the last ten years have seen the introduction of a number of curricula reforms and a range of supports to increase student retention. Despite these interventions, early school leaving is still a very concerning and prevalent problem, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Barnardos, 2006). Understanding the factors which contribute to young people's decision to leave school will highlight the barriers impeding our young people's education and illustrate areas in need of future policy development.

Chapter Two
Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

In Ireland, a significant proportion of the student population do not complete their education each year. Byrne and Smyth (2010) indicate that in 2007, 14% of Irish students left school without completing their Leaving Certificate. This represents an increase in school completion rates as the 1990s and early 2000s saw approximately one in five students leaving school early every year (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Ireland has set some important benchmarks as regards school retention for the coming years. In the *Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020)* adopted in 2009, EU Member States have agreed that the rate of those aged 18-24 years of age leaving school without an upper secondary qualification should be at no more than 10% (European Commission Education and Training, 2010). Ireland's action plan for reducing poverty and achieving social inclusion, NAPInclusion (2007-2016) echoes this commitment and aims that those aged 20-24 completing upper second-level education will *exceed* 90% by 2013 (Office of Social Inclusion, 2007).

3.2 Theoretical Framework and Context of study

Consulting and listening to children has become internationally recognised as best practice in terms of children's services (McAuley & Brattman, 2002). Research indicates that when consulted, children have a lot to contribute about the services that they use, leading to better services and promoting an agenda of social inclusion (McAuley & Brattman, 2002). A number of developments both at national and international level, coupled with the growth in popularity of the social studies of childhood have propelled this agenda and accorded children a status that is equal to adults. These developments, outlined below, have contributed to a climate where the participation and consultation of children and young people is firmly on the agenda at both policy and practitioner level. It is within this context that the author will conduct the main thrust of the research, focusing on a cohort of young people who have much to say but may have not had opportunity to contribute.

3.2.1 Changing views of childhood

Childhood is a socially constructed concept (Prout, 2005). In the past children were perceived as helpless and vulnerable dependents and were seen as *citizens in the making* rather than as citizens in their own right (Smith, 2007). In some circles this view of childhood persists, however a number of developments have contributed to a new view of childhood emerging. The global commitment to children's rights and the growing popularity of the social studies of childhood heralded a shift in how children are perceived within society (Hayes & Kernan, 2008). This new view of childhood moves away from seeing the child as a helpless dependent or adult-to-be towards the notion of the 'rich child' as a competent social actor (Hayes & Kernan, 2008; Smith, 2007). Particularly in the UK, recent government policies have been criticised for being instrumental in nature, for focusing on the child as a *citizen in the making* rather than a *citizen 'of the now'* (Lewis, 2006). Commentators claim that the tide is changing and that a greater commitment towards listening to children and a global context of child consultation and participation is reflective of this change (Smith, 2007). How we view children influences how they are cared for, provided for and educated, and recognising the importance of children's agency and voice has important implications for children's services within society.

3.2.2. Children's Rights, the international context

The adoption of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* by the UN Council in 1989 was very significant in enhancing the status of children (Pugh & Selleck, 1996; Prout, 2005). The UNCRC is an international agreement on the rights of children and accords children a number of rights, most notably Article 12, which gives children the right to express their views about all matters affecting them (United Nations, 1989). It provides for the participation of children, moving beyond the traditional notion of children simply being governed to one where they occupy a citizenship role within society (Roche, 1999; McAuley & Brattman 2002). The UNCRC has been extremely influential worldwide and has been ratified by all nations worldwide, bar the U.S and Somalia (Lansdown 2005). Following its adoption, the Council of Europe launched The *European Charter on the Participation of Children and Young People in Municipal and Regional Life* in 1992. This document promoted the citizenship agenda for children and advocated that countries should implement policies to facilitate

the meaningful participation of young people in community life (McAuley and Brattman, 2002).

3.2.3 Policy developments at a national level

The National Children's Strategy, a 10-year action plan was launched in 2000 in response to a recommendation made by the UN Council. The Strategy was introduced to improve the quality of all children's lives and advocates a vision of :

> "An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential." (Department of Health and Children, 2000).

The National Children's Strategy represents a commitment at Government level to involving and listening to children and its objectives have defined children's policy since its publication (McAuley & Brattman, 2002). It provided for the establishment of both the Office of Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMYCA) and the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), discussed below.

The OCO, established 2002, ensure that children's rights are being upheld in the services that they use and promote an agenda of communication and participation at policy level (OCO, 2010). The OMYCA, established 2005, focuses on policy issues that affect children and aims to bring greater coherence to policy-making for all children (Department of Health and Children, n. d.). Children's services in Ireland have been challenged to adopt and promote the ethos of the UNCRC and National Children Strategy and to endorse a view of childhood that recognises the agency of children and young people.

3.3 Consequences to leaving school early

Education is a "powerful predictor of adult life chances" (Barnardos, 2009 p. 5) and those who leave school with little or no formal education have access to fewer opportunities in later life. Early school leavers are more likely to have trouble finding work and are three to four times more likely to be unemployed that those who completed their schooling (Barnardos, 2009; Marks, 2007). They are more likely to become involved in low-paid, low-status work and according to US figures, earn just 65% of the average US salary (Bradshaw, O'Brennan & McNeely, 2008). Early school leavers have

lower levels of general health, report more anxiety and depression and have a higher mortality rate (Barnardos, 2009). They are also at a greater risk of becoming involved in crime and O' Mahoney, (1997) indicated that from a sample of prisoners in Mountjoy prison, 80% had left school before 16 years of age.

At a societal level, there is also a significant cost incurred by the state. Early school leavers are more likely to be unemployed, to be claiming job seekers allowance or unemployment assistance and to experience personal and social problems (Barnados, 2009; ESRI, 2007). The pool of skilled workers is also reduced, which has consequences for the state's ability to compete economically in the global market (Combat Poverty Agency, 2003).

3.4 Contributing factors to early school leaving

Research on early school leaving has revealed a number of factors that contribute to a student leaving school. Some studies emphasise factors at an individual and familial level. Others dispute this view, placing the emphasis on the culture or organisation of the school. More recent research by Byrne & Smyth (2010) argues that it is misleading to focus on one set of factors, as this problem is complex and multidimensional in nature.

3.4.1 Individual and family level factors

The influence of individual and family level factors on school performance has been the subject of much debate at international level. W.B. Yeats once wrote "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire". Yet for some children, this thirst for knowledge is never fully realised, with school careers characterised by low achievement, haphazard attendance, behaviour difficulties and poor literacy and numeric skills. A disproportionate amount of these students tend to be found in disadvantaged areas, serving to highlight the link between socio-economic status and educational achievement. Barnardos defines educational disadvantage as:

> "The impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage, which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (Barnardos, 2006, p. 4).

Educational disadvantage is essentially a relative term. Individuals can be said to be disadvantaged in relation to others who are more advantaged (Barnardos, 2009). Research has shown a strong link between socio-economic status and educational

achievement and the majority of people not benefiting fully from our education system come from impoverished or disadvantaged backgrounds (Combat Poverty Agency, 2003; Barnardos, 2006). Only 10% of young people with parents in professional occupations leave school early, versus one third of young people from unskilled manual backgrounds. According to (Lalor, de Roiste & Devlin, 2007), secondary school students miss an average of 14 days per year. This figure increases to 21 for young people from severely disadvantaged areas.

While poverty is a significant contributory factor to educational disadvantage, it is not the sole cause and is symptomatic of a range of problems affecting families. It is a complex problem rooted in the attitudes of parents to education, their experiences of the education system, the home learning environment, the schools resources and ability to cope with the child's needs, low teacher expectations and so forth (Connolly, 2006). Those who leave school early are at a significantly higher risk of poverty and social exclusion thus continuing the cycle of poverty and deprivation, what is generally referred to as the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Combat Poverty Agency, 2002; Lalor et al. 2007).

Beekhoven & Dekkers (2005) indicate a strong association between parental education and school completion. Parents of high economic status are more likely to have higher levels of education and to be more involved in their children's education (Hango, 2007). Parents with lower levels of education are less likely to prioritise education or motivate young people to achieve academically (Barnardos, 2009). Parental involvement is a hugely important influence on a child's learning and unfortunately if this level of involvement is not present, this can have negative effects for the child/young person's future academic career (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Hango, 2007). Parents from low-income groups may have had negative experiences of the schooling system themselves and may find the school environment intimidating (Lalor et al. 2007). Others may be struggling to manage other problems within the family and these stress factors will impact on the family as a whole. However it must be noted that there are many low-income parents that are involved in their children's education in Ireland. An Irish study on parental involvement conducted by Hanafin & Lynch (2002) indicated that while low-income parents wanted to be involved in the education of their children, school structures and processes often prevented them from doing so, resulting in them being

positioned to a peripheral status within the school system. Byrne & Smyth (2010) have suggested that the education system is embedded in a middle class perspective, which promotes values that may be incompatible with the value systems of low-income families and children. Essentially, a cultural capital is created that low-income families have to learn for their children to progress academically. From this perspective, disengagement from school is seen as a "mismatch between the cultures of home and school" (Byrne & Smyth, 2010 p 27).

Young people from the Travelling Community are at particular risk of early school leaving and 80% of 12- 15-year-old Traveller children do not attend secondary school (Barnardos, 2006). Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani (2008) identify students with a behavioural difficulty as being at high risk of early school leaving and argue that poor behaviour leads to disengagement and eventual drop-out. Gender, culture and whether one is from an urban or rural background also have an influence on school completion (Marks, 2007). Boys are more likely to leave school early than girls (Barnardos 2009; Lalor *et al*. 2007). Those from a non-English speaking background are more likely to leave school early than students from an English speaking background (Marks, 2007). In terms of rural/urban location, according to Marks research in Australia, those from rural backgrounds tend to have a higher rate of early school leaving. This was once the case in Ireland, however in recent years retention among rural communities in Ireland has improved and early school leaving is now higher in cities such as Dublin (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

3.4.2 Academic achievement
Research has shown a strong link between low academic ability and early school leaving (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Marks, 2007). According to Byrne & Smyth (2010), students who have low reading or maths scores on entry to secondary school are at higher risk of dropping out of than their peers. Falling behind in schoolwork and repeated educational failure, impacts on the self-esteem of young people who ultimately, lose confidence in their learning (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). In disadvantaged communities approximately one in three pupils experience literacy and numeracy problems (Barnardos, 2006). Byrne & Smyth (2010) found how the school addressed the student's difficulty and how the student perceived this was hugely significant in terms of school retention. Schools that actively engaged young people

were more likely to retain those who academically underachieve (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

3.4.3 School effects: Culture and organisation

Smyth (2005), Smyth & Hattam (2002) and Lee & Breen (2007) identify the school environment as central to whether a young person completes their schooling. Smyth & Hattam (2002) focus on the school culture and argue that the 'cultural geography of the high school' has an important effect on student engagement (2002 p. 375). They argue that focusing solely on the individual and family factors of early school leavers positions the young people both as victims *and* causes of their school failure and operates from a deficits model. They contend that in order to fully understand what is going on we have to look at the culture of the school, a dynamic that has been underrepresented in debates about early school leaving (Smyth & Hattam, 2002; Smyth, 2005).

Smyth & Hattam (2002) propose a 3-culture typology (aggressive, passive and active) with each school culture treating students in a different way. The aggressive school culture embodies hierarchical relationships between teachers and students, an absence of trust and respect for young people and strong discipline policies culminating in an atmosphere of fear and resentment. The passive school culture appears 'pleasant' but fails to connect meaningfully with young people or engage them fully in their learning. Curriculum tends to be boring and students experience a sense of indifference with regards to their learning. Finally, the active culture embraces a pedagogy of respect, of actively reaching out to young people, of mutual trust between teachers and students and of valuing the student voice. According to Smyth & Hattam (2002), aspects from each culture may co-exist in any one school. The active culture is most conducive to learning, however average schools tends to locate somewhere along a passive/aggressive dichotomy.

The dynamic of school culture is gaining more recognition in debates around student engagement and "a strict but fair school climate appears to be optimal for pupil performance" (Smyth, 2005). This view is also supported by Byrne & Smyth, (2010) who assert that student teacher relations are a key dynamic of the school climate and identify negative student-teacher relations as a key contributor to young people leaving school early. School organisation has also been said to have an impact on retention.

Organisation relates to the actual structural content of the school such as streaming, teacher resources and disciplinary regime and there is a relationship between the culture of the school and the structures the school adopts. According to Lalor *et al.* (2007) and Byrne & Smyth (2010), streaming or ability grouping contributes to early school leaving. Streaming results in lower teacher expectations and separation from other students resulting in disengagement and alienation from the learning process (Byrne & Smyth 2010). According to Byrne & Smyth (2010), students in the lowest streamed class are 13 times more likely to leave school early than those in mixed ability classes.

3.4.4 Belonging and relationships

Research by Lee & Breen (2007) indicates that a sense of belonging in schools is linked to positive academic, behavioural and psychological outcomes. They argue that the 'need to belong' is crucial at this particular stage of development and that students need to feel a sense of connectedness to school. Young people who do not have this sense of belonging experience an increased level of emotional distress, stress and health problems and are more likely to leave school early (Lee & Breen, 2007). Relational approaches such as the development of a caring school community can promote this sense of belonging among young people. This is again linked to the climate of the school and school environments that promote student centred learning and give all students a voice can foster a sense of belonging among the student population.

3.4.5 A dynamic approach to understanding early school leaving

More recent studies have adopted a more comprehensive way of viewing early school leaving. It is likely that school leaving cannot be attributed to factors solely at an individual, familial or school level. Viewing early school leaving in a holistic way involves looking at the dynamics across each of these dimensions and the interplay that occurs within this to cause young people to become disengaged from the education process. Byrne & Smyth, (2010) emphasise this dynamic way of viewing early school leaving and argue that individual, family and school factors can have a cumulative effect on non-completion. Discourses on early school leaving are moving away from 'blaming' the victim to a wider understanding of the processes at work that lead to school completion or disengagement. Focusing on one element such as socioeconomic status or school culture provides too narrow an understanding of young people's lives and the many influences that impact on their daily experiences. While individual and family

level factors do certainly play a large part in the educational attainment of young people, poverty is essentially a structural problem rooted in how society has chosen to distribute its resources. Focusing on individual, familial and cultural deficits takes the focus away from larger political and social forces at work, often which lead to the situation in the first place (Smyth, 2005).

3.5 The Core Competences Framework

In recent years an alternative way of thinking about early school leaving has come to the fore. *The Core Competences Framework* moves the focus away from the risk factors associated with early school leaving to the promotion of core competences to keep young people in school (Bradshaw *et al.* 2008). According to this framework, there are five competences that are associated with school success: a positive sense of self, self-control, decision-making skills, a moral system of belief and pro-social connectedness (Bradshaw *et al*. 2008). These competences are interconnected and proficiency in one area is likely to impact positively on other areas. The relevance of each competence changes according to the developmental period of the child, a factor that is important to consider as school disengagement is a process often occurring over a number of years. The framework recognises that there are other factors at work aside from individual characteristics of the young person and argues that these competences must be supported by the adolescents' wider environment. The framework proposes that in order to promote school retention and success, policy makers and schools must focus on interventions that promote these five areas. In the US, the Parent-Child Home Program, a support service for families at risk, has been shown to reduce early school leaving, most likely through improving decision-making skills and connectedness to parents (Bradshaw *et al*. 2008).

The EU has adopted a similar framework and all countries promote the development of key competences within their education systems. The *Key Competences Framework* identifies eight competences needed for social inclusion, active citizenship, personal fulfillment and employment. According to this framework, education should provide for the development of these eight competences as well as promote the development of other important skills such as creativity, critical thinking and problem solving (European Commission on Education and Training, 2009).

3.6 Policies and initiatives

In Ireland many resources and interventions have been rolled out to increase the levels of retention among pupils. Despite the introduction of these worthwhile initiatives, young people from disadvantaged areas continue to remain at greater risk of leaving school early than other pupils (Barnardos, 2009).

3.6.1 Curriculum reform

A number of curricula reforms have been made to meet the varying needs of the student population and to increase retention among at-risk students. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Cert Applied Programme (LCA) were introduced as an alternative to the traditional Leaving Certificate course (Lalor *et al*. 2007). These alternatives were introduced for students who might benefit from a more project based, vocationally oriented curriculum. The LCA is particularly oriented towards the more vulnerable student with an emphasis on continuous assessment and group project work. While both the LCVP and the LCA been quite successful in retaining young people who might otherwise have left the school system, they has been criticised due to their lack of access to Third level colleges (Lalor *et al*. 2007). The Junior Certificate Special Programme (JCSP) is similar to the LCA programme and was introduced to respond to the needs of particular students at Junior Certificate level (DES, 2005).

The provision of alternatives to the traditional academically focused Junior and Leaving Certificate courses were introduced to meet the diverse needs of the student population with a view to improving retention and engagement among students. The JCSP has yet to be evaluated, however evaluations of the LCA suggest that a number of students attributed their remaining in school to the provision of the LCA curriculum (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

3.6.2 Increased funding and school supports

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is a Department of Education and Science (DES) initiative whereby disadvantaged schools receive extra funding per student and additional teacher allocations to reduce class sizes (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). This is available to both primary and secondary designated 'disadvantaged' schools. Schools that have disadvantaged status have been assessed according to certain socio-

economic and educational indicators[1] and receive greater supports due to the high level of needs among their student populations (DES, n.d.).

DEIS also provides for a comprehensive package of supports to support student retention. These supports include the School Completion Program (SCP), Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme, Early Start and the Support Teachers Programme. These supports provide a range of interventions to enable at-risk students to receive the same benefit from their education as their more advantaged peers. SCP is responsible for the provision of in-school, out-of-school and holiday supports, while the HSCL Scheme is responsible for maintaining positive home-school links. The Support Teachers Project provides extra support teachers for students whose learning is affected by their disruptive behaviour. Early Start is a one-year preventative intervention offered to children in disadvantaged areas to offset the effects of educational disadvantage and to improve the child's readiness to learn (DES, n.d.). DEIS was phased in over five years, from 2005/2006 to 2009/2010 and has not been evaluated to date.

3.6.3 Establishment of NEWB
The National Education and Welfare Board (NEWB) was placed on a statutory footing following the Educational Welfare Act 2000 (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). The remit of the NEWB is school attendance and the Board has the responsibility for ensuring that every child attends school. Once a student has missed a certain number of days, their case is referred to an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) who begins a formal monitoring of the child's attendance. NEWB places a new level of responsibility on parents for their child's attendance and prolonged absenteeism can result in court proceedings for the parents involved (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Schools have given mixed reviews on the implementation of the NEWB; with absenteeism a common precursor to early school leaving and its monitoring a welcome and necessary development, the caseloads of the EWOs are so heavy that they are often unable to follow up on many of the cases (Barnardos, 2006).

3.6.4 Alternatives to the formal school system
Increased funding has been made available for the establishment of out of school

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[1] Such as unemployment levels, housing, number of medical card holders and information on basic literacy and numeracy

alternatives. Educational alternatives such as Youthreach and community training workshops have increased in number in recent years, providing a greater number of places to young people who leave school early (Lalor *et al*. 2007). With a significant number of young people leaving school every year, having alternative pathways to education is an extremely important and necessary provision.

The provision of alternative pathways to education has been introduced for the purpose of integrating young people into the labour market. However these second chance educational interventions play an essential part in engaging vulnerable and alienated individuals and fulfil an important inclusionary role (McGrath, 2006). McGrath (2006) revealed that young people in a Youthreach Centre experienced a sense of educational inclusion through a sense of trust in their learning environment, being treated as an 'adult' and being accorded a level of responsibility and independence.

3.7 Summary

Early school leaving is a very complex and multifaceted issue. Understanding the dynamics of early school leaving requires a thorough understanding of the factors at work across a number of dimensions. Risk factors at an individual, familial, community and societal level interact and contribute to disengagement from the school system. Moreover, disengagement is a process often occuring over a number of years.

Bromfenbrenner (1994) emphasises the importance of a child's environment in his/her development and in his *Ecological Systems Theory* argues that an individual is situated within a number of systems, all which impact on and powerfully shape development (see Figure One). It is likely that early school leaving works the same way; that children and young people are subject to a range of influences all contributing to and impacting on their educational careers. Interventions at an individual and school level have some benefit in addressing this problem, however a restructuring of the processes at a societal level that place people in a position of disadvantage in the first place is an area that requires future attention.

Figure One: Ecological Systems Model
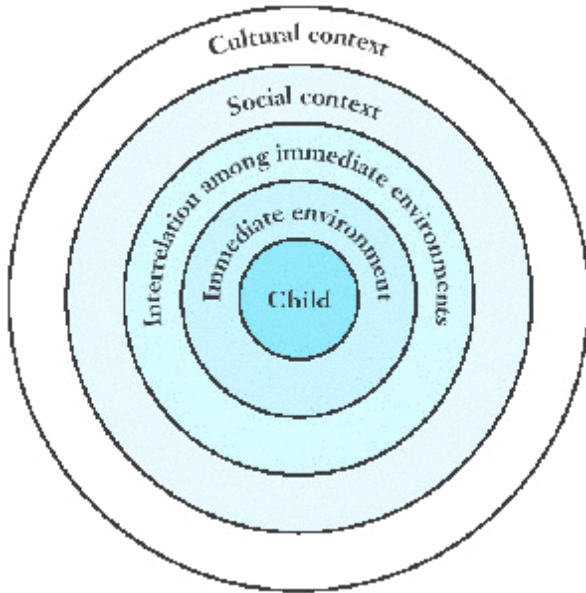
Chapter Three
Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research was of an explorative nature, investigating the factors contributing to young people leaving school early. For the purpose of the study, a mixed methods strategy was deemed most appropriate. Mixed methods research refers to the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods within the one research project (Denscombe, 2007). In this case, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were used to collect the information needed. There were several reasons why this research strategy was selected. Firstly, combining methods gives a more rounded picture of the issue under investigation (Denscombe, 2007). In this study, using a mixed methods approach would provide for a more comprehensive examination of early school leaving and offer a more holistic understanding of why young people leave school prior to completing their education.

Secondly, using a mixed methods strategy allows the researcher to compensate for any weaknesses that may emerge over the course of the research study (Denscombe, 2007). In this particular study, the main thrust of the research consisted of interviews with early school leavers around their decision to leave school. For many of these young people, they may have been unaware of the structural issues that have invariably impacted on their life chances and seeking the opinions of professionals (teachers) added to a thorough understanding of this phenomenon.

3.2 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is concerned with the depth rather than breadth of information and "the exploration of complex and subtle phenomena" (Denscombe, 2007 p.174; Punch, 2005). It is concerned with the *who*, the *why*, the *how*: the processes that occur within the context of people's everyday lives and the lived experiences of the research participants. Qualitative approaches are generally (although not always) concerned with theory generation rather than theory verification and researchers typically employ methods such as interviews, documentary analysis, case studies, focus groups, observations and so forth (Barbour, 2008). In this research project the researcher opted to use semi-structured interviews in gathering the data required. Interviews were carried

out with early school leavers, ranging in age from 16 to 28 years. This was perhaps the most crucial part of the research, as early school leaving is best understood from those who have experienced it themselves. This is in line with international best practice on service development (McAuley & Brattman, 2002); it is often the service-users themselves that are best placed to make recommendations on how to improve a service, in this case the education system. Interviews were also conducted with three key informants; individuals who are very knowledgeable about early school leaving. It was felt that these participants could add valuable insights and contribute to a greater understanding of this complex phenomenon.

3.2.1 Interview design

In this research study, the researcher opted to use semi-structured interviewing with all participants. This involves the researcher having a number of clear topics to discuss with the participant, but the interview is conducted in an informal and flexible way with regards to the order in which these topics are explored (Denscombe, 2007). Semi-structured interviewing is very useful for this type of study as it allows the interviewer to place some direction on the interview but gives the interviewer and interviewee a certain flexibility to expand on topics that he/she feels are important (Denscombe, 2007).

Interviews were conducted one-on-one. This format was chosen over group interviews as the research topic was quite a sensitive and personal one for some participants and the researcher felt that participants were more likely to speak openly and frankly if they were not in a group setting. Questions tended to be open-ended in nature to allow the participant to speak freely about his/her experiences[2]. According to Denscombe, open-ended questions produce answers that are more likely to "reflect the richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent" (2007 p.166).

3.2.2 Sampling

Both purposive and network sampling were used to select interview participants. Both of these are forms of non-probability sampling, where research participants are not chosen at random and consequently are not representative of the population as a whole (Denscombe, 2007). According to Punch, purposive sampling is "sampling in a deliberate way, with some purpose or function in mind" (2005, p.187). Participants are

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[2] See Appendix A

deliberately chosen because of the data they will be able to produce. Network sampling, otherwise known as 'snowball sampling' refers to a scenario where the researcher utilises their own contacts or, through a research participant, is put in touch with other potential participants that match the selection criteria.

Using a purposive approach, the researcher identified three key informants through her work contacts and all three agreed to participate. Recruiting early school leavers proved to be more challenging. The researcher initially approached a Garda Diversion Programme, however found that none of the young people were interested in participating. One sixteen year old agreed to only participate if the researcher would purchase him some alcohol in return. Permission was given by the local secondary school principal to contact ex-students (or the parents of those who were still under eighteen years of age) who had left school early. Of the eight contacted, all but one declined to participate in the study. With regards to the low uptake, the researcher felt that, in both of these cases, the young people involved did not want to think about or be reminded of their school experiences and once they learned that what the research was about, they lost interest. The researcher then approached a local Youthreach centre, where five young people agreed to participate in the study. It appeared to the researcher that these young people did not mind participating because they were pursuing their education through an alternative pathway and were keen to tell their story.

Using a snowballing approach, the researchers own contacts also put her in touch with two individuals, both of whom agreed to participate in the study. Both of these participants were slightly older (twenty-five and twenty-eight), a situation which had both its advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, the researcher felt interviewing older participants would provide an additional perspective as they would have had greater time to reflect on their school life and their past decisions. On the downside, the researcher worried that they might have left school too long ago to produce any data that would be relevant. Luckily this was not the case and both interviews contributed significantly to the study.

3.2.3 Interview procedure

The interview was semi structured in nature[3]. The venue for the interview changed according to who was being interviewed. Key informants were interviewed in their place of work, as this was most convenient for them. For interviewing the participants from Youthreach, the researcher was provided with a room in the Youthreach centre. This room had a window in the door and was located along a busy corridor, an important consideration when interviewing minors. For other participants (adults) the researcher arranged to meet them in a local community centre, where there were also rooms available.

Participants were informed in advance that the interview would be recorded and a dictaphone was used for this purpose. Participants were informed, both in the initial consent letter[4] and at the beginning of the actual interview, that they could choose not to answer any of the questions if they did not want to and they could choose to stop the interview at any time.

3.3 Quantitative Research

In order to obtain an additional perspective on early school leaving, the researcher surveyed the staff team of a secondary school by distributing a questionnaire[5]. Quantitative research is concerned with gleaning relatively straightforward information from a large number of respondents and the questionnaire is a commonly used method to achieve this goal (Denscombe, 2007). Questionnaires tend to be relatively easy to arrange and are economical in terms of both time and money (Denscombe, 2007). However, they can often have a poor response rate, something the researcher was very conscious of due to the small number she was distributing. The researcher made some provisions to counteract this and these are outlined below.

3.3.1 Survey design

The questionnaires were designed to incorporate both closed and open questions. The closed questions measured age, gender, length of time teaching, a ranking of factors contributing to early school leaving and so forth, whereas the open questions asked for respondents opinions on measures currently in the school and in the community to

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[3] See Appendix A
[4] See Appendix C
[5] See Appendix B

improve student retention. The length of the questionnaire was a key consideration as the researcher wanted to maximise the response rate and the questionnaire itself was kept at just over two pages. According to Denscombe, there is "no more effective deterrent to answering a questionnaire that its sheer size" (2007 p. 161). For this reason, the questionnaire covered just the crucial issues related to the research, and any parts that were considered non-essential were removed.

In order to identify respondents' feelings about the contributing factors to early school leaving, the researcher adopted the Likert scale (Bryman, 2008). Using a five-point scale, the researcher could measure a respondent's level of agreement to a particular set of factors. This scale was originally developed by Rensis Likert in 1932 and is always used "to discover strength of feeling or attitude towards a particular statement" (Bell, 2005, p.142).

3.3.2 Sampling

Sampling in this case was again purposive in nature. The school that was selected is situated in a very disadvantaged area and has a high rate of early school leaving. The teachers involved in the survey were familiar with this phenomenon and had particular views about its causes, effects and of the ways to improve retention. Questionnaires were also distributed to members of the School Completion Executive Committee who are based in that school and whose particular remit is that of student retention.

3.3.3 Distribution and response rates

On meeting with the school principal prior to distributing the questionnaires, the researcher was informed that this staff team was notoriously bad at completing questionnaires and any research conducted previously in the school had had a very poor response rate. In order to minimise this, the questionnaire was kept as short as possible and participants were informed on their cover letter[6] that the name of each teacher who completed a questionnaire would go into a raffle for a bottle of champagne. This required some organising as the researcher wanted participants to complete the questionnaire anonymously, in order to allow people to respond more honestly. Questionnaires were placed in each teacher's pigeonhole and a sealed box was placed in the staff room. Beside the box a list of names was placed and when a participant placed

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[6] See Appendix B

the completed questionnaire in the box, they ticked their name off the list so that the researcher knew what names to put into the raffle. Forty questionnaires were distributed, with a response rate of twenty-five (62.5%).

Table One: Sources of data

Method	Data Collection Instrument	Description of respondents	Quantity
Quantitative	Questionnaires	Teaching staff Designated disadvantaged community school	25
Qualitative	Interviews	Key Informants: 1. Deputy Principal 2. School Completion Coordinator 3. Attendance Officer, NEWB	Three
Qualitative	Interviews	Early School Leavers 1. Five under 18years 2. Three 18+ years	Eight

3.4 Ethical considerations

A number of ethical considerations were taken into account. Firstly informed consent is essential when doing any research of this kind (Bryman, 2008; Denscombe, 2007). Participants received a letter outlining the type of research being conducted, a participant information sheet explaining what they might be asked and a consent form that they needed to sign as part of their agreement to participate[7]. For those under eighteen years of age, the letter was addressed to their parent/guardian and the consent form included required both the signature of the young person in question and his/her parent.

Secondly, confidentiality was a key consideration in conducting this research (Bryman, 2008). From the onset, participants were reassured that the interview would be confidential and that the data would only be used for the research study at hand. At the

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[7] See Appendix C

transcribing stage, each participant was given a pseudonym and all transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer. Following the analysis of the data, any printed transcripts were shredded and following the submission of the thesis, those stored on the computer were deleted.

Thirdly, participants were advised that they were under no obligation to participate in this study, that they could choose to stop the interview at any time and that they did not have to answer any question they did not want to.

Finally, the researcher was aware of the importance of establishing a rapport with the interview participants and maintained a respectful, non-judgemental and attentive attitude at all times. The researcher made good use of interview skills such as prompts and checks during the course of the interview and found humour to be a very powerful tool, particularly with the younger participants.

3.5 Limitations

The researcher identified two main limitations over the course of the research.

3.5.1 Self report

The interviews with the early school leavers required these participants to report on various elements of their school lives. These participants were relying on recall and as is the case with any retrospective study, this may have had implications for the accuracy of the data collected. Another factor to consider is the existence of multiple realities. Barbour (2008) warns that the telling of any story differs according to whom it is being told to and that in any scenario, a number of realities exist depending on the perspective from which it is coming. She argues that individuals can be prone to embellishment to make a story sound more interesting. This is important to consider especially with regards to the younger participants as the researcher found over the course of the interviews that some behaviours appeared to carry a certain level of status for the perpetrator and in some cases young people were prone to bragging about their mishaps.

3.5.2 The participant pool

The early school leavers interviewed all appeared to be quite motivated about their future goals and were all involved in training, education or employment. This was

certainly not the case for some of the young people the researcher had encountered at the recruiting stage. According to the Garda Diversion Project Co-ordinator, all of their young people were unemployed and were not involved in alternative education. This also appeared to be the case with regards to the young people contacted through the school. This caused the researcher to wonder if there was a relationship between post-school trajectories and participation in the project. It is possible that it is easier to participate if you are perceived to be doing something worthwhile post leaving school. For those who have not moved on, reliving their experiences may serve as a reminder of their 'failings'. Whatever the reason, the study is not as representative as the researcher would have liked due to a number of young people declining to take part in the research.

Chapter Four
Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the research study. The researcher collected data from three different sources and each set of findings have been presented seperately.

4.2 Quantitative Data: Findings from the questionnaires

4.2.1 Teacher Population Profile.

The school was establised in 1986 and is a *designated disadvantaged* community college (see *Literature Review 3.6.2*). Of the teachers who participated in the survey (seven males and 18 females) seven were 20 to 30 years old, eight were 31 to 40years old, six were 41 to 50 years old and four were 51-60yrs old. Six of these teachers had 1 to 5yrs of experience, ten had 6 to 10yrs and nine had 10+ years of teaching experience.

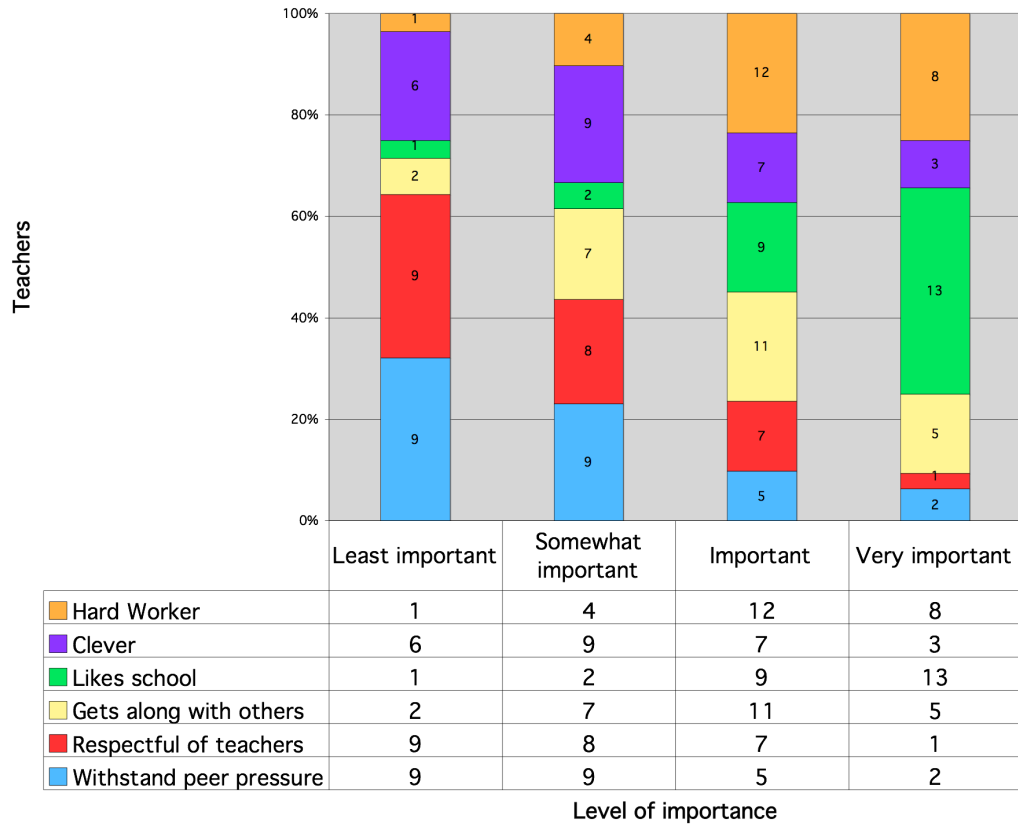Figure Two: Keeping students engaged in learning

Figure Two illustrates the level of difficulty teachers experience in keeping students interested and engaged in their learning. As shown, the majority of teachers surveyed indicated that they found this *difficult*. Only one teacher stated that they found this *easy*. This appeared to be the case regardless of level of teaching experience.

4.2.2. Individual characteristics and school performance

Teachers were asked to attach a value of importance to a number of characteristics that may impact on students' level of engagement at school. Using a Likert scale, teachers

indicated which characteristics they viewed as most important in assisting a young person to get on well at school. These results are presented in Figure Three.

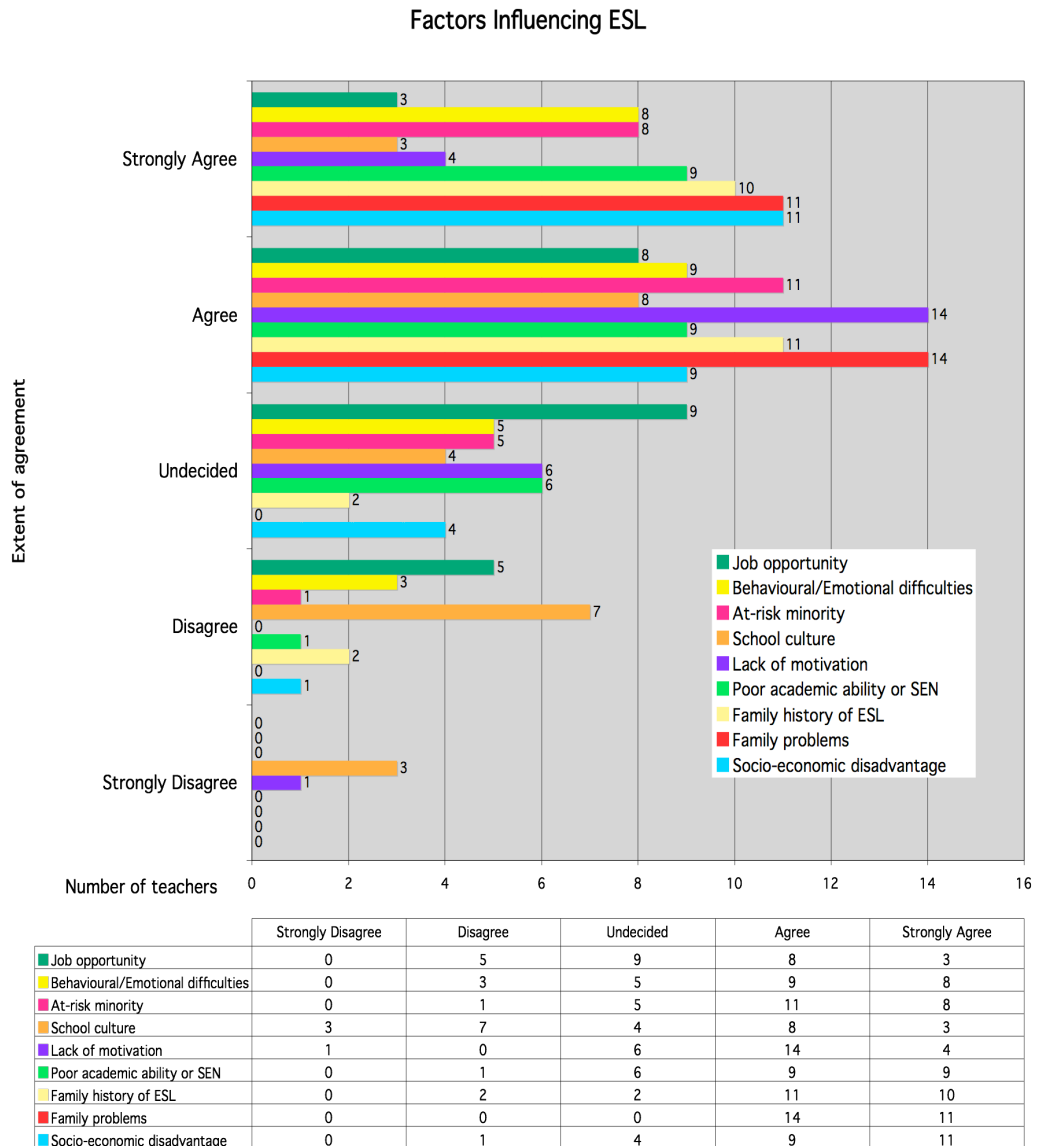Figure Three: Individual Characteristics and School Performance

	Least important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important
Hard Worker	1	4	12	8
Clever	6	9	7	3
Likes school	1	2	9	13
Gets along with others	2	7	11	5
Respectful of teachers	9	8	7	1
Withstand peer pressure	9	9	5	2

Level of importance

As illustrated, the majority of teachers surveyed viewed 'Being a hard worker' and 'Likes school' as crucial to a student getting on well at school. 18 teachers placed 'Getting along with others' in the *important* and *somewhat important* categories, while 'Being clever' received seven and nine votes respectively. This indicates that while a significant proportion of teachers view these characteristics to be important, they are not considered crucial to a student's school career. Finally, both 'Being respectful of teachers' and 'Being able to withstand peer pressure' featured strongly in the *somewhat important* and *least important categories*, indicating that a significant proportion of teachers do not attach a huge level of importance to either of these characteristics.

4.2.3 Factors contributing to early school leaving

Teachers were provided with nine possible factors contributing to a young person leaving school early. They were asked to indicate the degree to which they thought these factors relevant, using five indicators: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree*. These results are presented in Figure Four.

Figure Four: Factors influencing early school leaving

Factors Influencing ESL

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Job opportunity	0	5	9	8	3
Behavioural/Emotional difficulties	0	3	5	9	8
At-risk minority	0	1	5	11	8
School culture	3	7	4	8	3
Lack of motivation	1	0	6	14	4
Poor academic ability or SEN	0	1	6	9	9
Family history of ESL	0	2	2	11	10
Family problems	0	0	0	14	11
Socio-economic disadvantage	0	1	4	9	11

Key points of note in Figure Four are as follows: (i) 'Socio-economic disadvantage' and 'Family problems' both featured strongly in the *strongly agree* and *agree* categories, with the majority of teachers indicating that they felt these factors to be important. (ii) 'A family history of early school leaving' also appeared to be important to the majority of participants, with ten indicating that they *strongly agreed* and 11 indicating that they *agreed* with the relevance of this factor. (iii) Nine teachers indicated that they *strongly agreed* with 'Poor academic ability or having a SEN' being relevant and nine stated that they *agreed*. Six others remained *undecided* with one teacher *disagreeing* that this was relevant. (iv) 'School culture' received mixed results with three *strongly agreeing*, eight *agreeing*, four remaining *undecided*, seven *disagreeing* and three *strongly disagreeing*.

4.2.4 Measures currently in the school to improve retention

A range of supports were identified and are presented in tabular form below.

Table Two: Supports available to improve retention

Academic	1. Junior Certificate Special Programme (JCSP)
	2. Leaving Certificate (LCA)
	3. Access Programme[8]
	4. Learning support
	5. Behaviour support classroom and shortened time-tabling for students with behavioural difficulties
Attendance	1. Attendance tracking system
	2. Attendance Committee and reward system for good attenders
	3. Breakfast Club[9]
	4. Visiting Teacher for Travellers
Relational	1. Counseling service
	2. Pastoral care system[10]

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[8] This aims to remove the need for students in their exam year to get a part-time job by providing them with a financial reward for attending night study.
[9] Providing breakfast to students to encourage them to come to school on time

	3. HSCL Scheme
	4. School Completion Project
	5. Restorative Practice Approach[11]
Extracurricular	1. After-school clubs (sports, hair and beauty, adventure sports)

4.2.4 Measures available within the local community to boost retention

In this section, participants cited the local Youth Service, Community Centers, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the local Garda Diversion Programme, counseling and family support services. Specific to education, Youthreach and the Higher Education Access Programme were mentioned. The Higher Education Access Programme aims to increase the number of young people from disadvantaged areas accessing third level education through organising in-school projects and trips to third level institutions.

4.2.6 Suggested interventions.

A number of recommendations were made: (i) More emphasis on team initiatives and group activities to promote teamwork and a sense of belonging among students (ii) Extra one-on-one academic support (iii) Training on alternative teaching strategies (iv) Early intervention at primary school level (v) Assistance for those who do leave school early to access apprenticeships and further training and (vi) The increased involvement of parents. This final suggestion was mentioned in two thirds of the questionnaires with parenting skills programmes, better communication with parents and parent and student activity nights featuring strongly here.

4.3 Qualitative Data: Findings from interviews with key informants

Semi structured interviews were carried out with three key informants: a coordinator of a School Completion Project, a NEWB Attendance Officer and a Deputy Principal of a designated disadvantaged community college.

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[10] Each class a tutor assigned to it to act as the first point of contact for a young person should they have any problems
[11] An approach to conflict resolution with an emphasis on relationships, personal responsibility and emotional literacy

Table Three: Key informants

	Pseudonym	Position	Level of experience (with ESL)
1	Mary	School Completion Coordinator	35 years
2	Ann	Deputy Principal, community college	10 years
3	Ben	Attendance Officer, NEWB	15 years

Outlined below are a number of clear themes that emerged throughout the course of these discussions.

4.3.1 The challenges of maximising retention

For all three participants, improving student retention was a central part of their role and all agreed that this was very challenging. One participant (Ben) acknowledged that there would always be a minority of young people who would not be suited to the mainstream system and trying to find real alternatives to keep these young people in education had emerged as a real challenge for him. Two interviewees identified keeping young people interested in education as particularly challenging:

> *"that's probably the biggest challenge, to get them in and keep them in. To have them develop an interest in their own education you know"* (Mary).

Ann also identified a relationship between early school leaving and teacher allocation. According to Ann, when a number of students drop out, it has a knock on effect on the teacher allocation within the school. This can means the curtailing of certain subject options, which can negatively impact on a young person's interest in school if the subjects that they like are not provided.

4.3.2 Factors contributing to early school leaving.

Interviewees were asked to outline reasons as to why young people leave school early. Two interviewees highlighted that early school leaving is influenced by a myriad of factors that often overlap and influence each other.

Absenteeism

All three interviewees highlight the importance of good attendance, and Mary links it to a sense of belonging, stating:

> *"If you haven't got attendance, if they are not in, they can't take part in the school day and feel a part of the school"* (Mary).

According to all three interviewees, absenteeism is a common precursor to early school leaving. One interviewee links attendance to other factors, stating that poor attendance can often be indicative of other difficulties, whether that be in their home or school life. Poor attendance can lead to the student falling behind on their schoolwork and, as highlighted by Ann, this can act as a significant push factor:

> *"...they fall further and further behind so that it comes to the stage where they are just not able to cope with daily school life. It's easier to stay in bed and just throw their hands up at it and say what's the point"* (Ann).

Family Factors

All three interviewees stress the importance of family factors and the impact the family situation has on a child's educational career. Ann highlights the effect of family circumstances such as ill health of parents, ineffective parenting and/or drug and alcohol problems among parents. She links this to attendance, stating that when a parent does not, or *cannot* support their student in attending school, their attendance begins to suffer, which eventually may lead to them dropping out:

> *"When they're not there to support the student in school, first of all there is poor attendance, becoming chronic non-attendance and then it is eventual drop-out. So, really poor parenting is one of the causes I believe of the high incidence of school dropout"* (Ann).

Two interviewees make reference to some parents not putting a value on education, particularly parents who may have left school early themselves. They both assert that it is through their actions that parents can communicate the importance of education but acknowledge that this is not always the case as, particularly in disadvantaged communities, parents may be struggling to deal with other problems as well:

> *"When people have problems, you know chronic problems in the family, other things start to take less and less importance ... and I think education is sometimes one of those things"* (Mary).

Peers

Two out of the three interviewees made reference to the influence of peers. According to Mary, as the child gets older, the influence of the family often becomes second place to the influence of peers. Ann asserts that when some students leave, sometimes other students choose to follow. She states that, in cases where friends who have left are putting pressure on those who remain, sometimes *"that pressure is greater than the attraction of school"* (Ann).

The School Effect

All three participants identify the importance of the school culture in retaining students. According to one interviewee, the culture of the school has a big impact and she states:

> *"The school culture does have a large impact on how the child perceives education ... if the school feels like a nice place to be and students feel that they are welcome there, that they are there for something positive, of course they will want to be there"* (Mary).

Ann also refers to the importance of school culture but cautions that although a positive atmosphere may deter some students from leaving, it won't retain all students. She asserts that in schools where it appears that the curriculum is more important than the individual student and where discipline is harsh, students can become alienated from school life. According to Ann, positive relationships with teachers are a big part of creating a positive school culture but cautions that peers exert a greater influence on young people than teachers:

> *"It certainly does mean that students have a better sense of school, it may make them want to come to school but I think the peer pressure is stronger than the pupil teacher relationship"* (Ann).

Ben states that, in his experience, schools can often be too strict and can have little understanding for some of the difficulties young people face. All three agree that schools with a negative atmosphere and fraught relationships with teachers can contribute to a young person wanting to leave school early.

Lack of interest

All three participants cited losing interest in education as an important factor in why a young person chooses to leave school. One interviewee linked this to attendance and falling behind in class and states that when students feel that they cannot catch up, they will lose interest. He states that this is particularly pertinent for those with low ability:

> *"The bright kids can catch up but when the attendance is bad on a kid with low ability, he will drop out real easy. He'll just hate going in every day, he'll become disruptive, he'll get expelled or just leave"* (Ben).

Mary attributes some young people leaving school to a lack of maturity on their part and an inability to see the bigger picture:

> *"When you are young, when you're a teenager, you're not interested in what is going to happen to you when you are twenty-five"* (Mary).

Low Academic Ability

Low academic ability also emerged as a reason why a young person might leave school early:

> *"Some just don't like school, it's too hard for them and they don't understand what is going on in class. If they're in a class that is too difficult for them … they'll hate going in every day. No child likes to feel stupid"* (Ben).

> *"Those of low academic ability might feel stupid compared to their classmates. If you are always trying to catch up with everyone else, that can be very stressful for a child. Sometimes it's easier not to try at all, than to try and fail"* (Mary).

Ann disagrees, making reference to the JCSP and LCA curricula. She argues that low academic ability can be pertinent if the school doesn't address the young person's needs but asserts that schools can provide a range of supports to assist a young person in obtaining their education.

Membership of the Travelling Community

Two interviewees agreed that being a member of the Travelling Community increases the likelihood of the young person leaving school early, particularly if they are male. According to Ann:

"Travellers have a culture of their own and their school attendance is very different to that of the settled person… While we have managed to retain some of the girls to Leaving Cert, we've only ever managed to retain one lad and he did his Leaving Cert two or three years ago." (Ann).

Both interviewees attributed this to a different set of priorities and a different value system among the Travelling Community, one where education does not carry much stock. For some female Travellers, to get married young and to have a family is *"the store by which they achieve"* (Ann).

Employment

Only one interviewee makes reference to the draw of the labour market. Ann claims that money can act as a pull factor:

"They [students] *were getting part-time jobs in shops and so forth. And then with the lure of money, they tended to extend their part-time working hours so eventually they became full-time working hours and they dropped out of school altogether"* (Ann).

Ann acknowledges that this has become less of a problem in recent months because of the downturn in the economy and a drop in the availability of part-time work.

4.3.4 Changes they would make

In school suspension

One interviewee (Ben) advocates the introduction of in-school suspension in place of sending young people home. In his experience, young people who are continually suspended often found it difficult to return to school.

Continuous assessment

Two of the interviewees thought a system based on continuous assessment rather than a once-off state examination would be more successful at retaining students as it would allow students to feel that they are working towards something. Ann comments:

"As is written down in one of the classrooms, 'small stones make big castles'. I think students need to be reassured that they are making progress and once they can see achievement, they can build on it" (Ann).

Practical Curriculum

Two of the interviewees suggest introducing more practical based subjects. Ann feels that these could *"engage those whose strengths are of a practical nature"*. Mary suggests bringing back the technical schools that the Vocational Education Committee (VEC) schools eventually replaced. Mary argues that the current education system has nothing to offer young people who are not academically minded:

> *"The Techs offered teenagers another way to educate themselves through a more practical approach ... the VEC schools have taken over the role of the Techs but with a focus on academic attainment. So we have gone to the point now where there is no more room for the children who don't have an academic head"* (Mary).

By reintroducing the Technical Schools, she feels that young people will be provided with an alternative that is practical in approach and that this may engage those who otherwise would leave school.

4.4 Qualitative Data: Findings from interviews with early school leavers

Eight interviews were carried out with individuals who had left school prior to completing their education. Some details are outlined in tabular form below.

Table Four: Early School Leavers

Pseudonym	Age leaving school	Level of certification prior to leaving school	Current age	SEN or assigned to a low ability class
Kate	15	None. Left after 1st year	17	Low-ability class
Peter	16	Junior Certificate	17	Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
John	16	Junior Certificate	17	Dyslexia
Mark	17	Junior Certificate	19	None
Aaron	16	Junior Certificate	17	None
Mary	17	Juinior Certificate	19	Dyslexia
Thomas	15	Junior Certificate	28	None
Carol	16	Junior Certificate	25	Low-ability class

4.4.1 Relationships

Family

Six of the interviewees appeared to have a fairly positive relationship with their parents. In some cases, parents were initially annoyed with their teenager's decision to leave school. In other cases, parents were quite accepting of the interviewee's decision, however this appeared to be in situations where the student had been getting into a lot of trouble in school:

> *"My ma thought it was a bit of a good decision ... I was getting into trouble. Teachers were still blaming me on things and all. My ma got sick of it as well but she didn't want me to leave school and then not do anything"* (Aaron).

For Mary, her family's acceptance stemmed from concerns over her emotional wellbeing and while they would have preferred for her to get her Leaving Cert, they understood the reasons behind her decision to leave:

> *"...my family were quite accepting of me. They didn't want me to do it but they understand how difficult I did find school. I wasn't happy in it and they could see it in me that I was getting worse and worse"* (Mary).

For two other interviewees, relationships with family appeared to play an instrumental role in their decision to leave school. For one, a lack of support from home and a subsequent placement in care had a negative impact on his school career, culminating in him leaving school. For another, relationships breaking down at home resulted in him moving from his home in Laois to his sister's in Dublin. His school placement in Laois ended as a result and he was unable to get into a local school in Dublin.

Teachers

Seven of the eight interviewees spoke very negatively about their relationship with teachers in their school. Many of the interviewees spoke of daily conflict with the teaching staff, of being 'kicked' out of classes and being sent to the Principal's office. The interviewees felt that teachers did not treat them with any resepct. Mark recalls:

> *"They don't really have the right to talk to you as if you're a piece of dirt. They're real smart and cocky and all and you couldn't really say anything back else you'd be getting into trouble and all. Teachers always believe teachers. So what can you say?"* (Mark).

'Being treated like a child' featured strongly in this regard. Interviewees felt that teachers spoke down to them and were constantly telling them what to do. In four of these cases, relationships with teachers acted as a significant push factor in the interviewee's decision to leave school. Thomas recalls:

> *"I never got any support in school off the teachers. They knew what circumstances we were living in and it was like, they never tried to intervene. They never tried to sit down and talk to us. Build a relationship with us, they were just there to teach"* (Thomas).

Aaron also had a very conflictual relationship with the teaching staff and identified this as the main reason as to why he left school:

> *"There were one or two teachers who never did anything for me, I'd ask them questions and they would turn their head away from me. So that's probably why I had to get out of that school as well. There was one teacher who told me to shut my mouth and all, that's when my ma went down and had murder* [gave out to the teacher]*"* (Aaron).

Six out of eight interviewees spoke about a particular teacher that they had a good relationship in their respective schools. Each interviewee stated that they respected and liked this teacher and this teacher often acted as a buffer between them and the rest of the teaching staff. For the other two interviewees, they could not think of any teachers that they had a good relationship with and both of these interviewees had very few positive memories of their school experience.

Peers

Peer influence on the decision to leave school did not feature strongly in any of the interviews. Rather, the interviewees spoke of their peers trying to convince them to stay on in school. School friends appeared to be important to each of the interviewees, with six out of eight identifying leaving their friends as the worst thing about leaving school. Mark comments:

> *"Coz like you go in and you have your friends there, everyone was just* [pause] *I miss it, I'd love to be back in school"* (Mark).

However, with regard to school performance, a number of interviewees expressed concern about 'looking stupid' in front of others and one young person refrained from joining the LCA programme because of the 'slagging' he would receive:

"When you're doing LCA you get slagged to bits over it. 'Coz they say you're dumb, if you do LCA you're dumb. People in the ordinary Leaving Cert are getting more respect, treated better than the ones in the LCA" (John).

4.4.2 Curriculum

With regards to subjects, five of the interviewees expressed a preference for practical subjects, preferring a hands-on approach to learning rather than a focus on academia. This is best illustrated by John who states:

"I'm more good with my hands, with cooking, doing, fixing bikes, getting under or taking out an engine. Playing football … I can do anything physical. When it comes to having to sit down and do writing, it's not my thing" (John).

For these students, practical subjects held their interest and they worked harder and behaved better in these classes. Two of the interviewees stated that they found classes boring, however it can be said that a general lack of interest in school subjects permeated all eight interviews. For some interviewees (three), there was a relationship between liking the teacher and liking the subject. In the subjects where they liked and got on well with the teacher, they tended to work hard. Carol recalls her Business Studies teacher:

"The teacher was great. He'd be fun and interesting. Having a laugh … He made it interesting" (Carol).

4.4.3 Low academic ability or special educational need

Three of the interviewees reported having a special educational need (SEN), while another two were placed in a low ability class (JCSP or LCA). Of those with an SEN, this made school harder for them across a number of fronts. One participant remarked that she felt stupid and was often afraid to raise her hand in class:

"You'd be too afraid to put up your hand, you'd be embarrassed of who you are, because of the age that you were as well[12]" (Mary)

She identifies the best thing about leaving school as:

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[12] Mary was dyslexic and had repeated a year in school, consequently was older than her peers

"The relief. Not being put in situations that you didn't want to be" (Mary).

All three communicated a sense of failing, of always trying to catch up with everyone else with one participant remarking:

"You've no time to breathe; in school they were constantly throwing everything at you" (John).

Certainly these young people did not experience a sense of achievement from school. Mary illustrates this best as she talks about how fixing machinery made her feel:

"Yeah, it made me feel brilliant. It was totally different [pause] *you didn't know how to read out of the book properly, it was much better to sit there and go and try to fix something and you'd actually see the improvement right there and then. It's done and you feel good"* (Mary).

Another interviewee confides:

"I wasn't great for studying. So, that's probably why. I used to try but I'd never get good marks" (Carol).

4.4.4 Behaviour, attendance and poor academic achievement

Four interviewees reported having very poor attendance while at school, with all of these stating that they hated attending. Consequently, each of these interviewees found themselves falling behind on their school work and having difficulty catching up. One interviewee reports:

"Oh I missed out on loads, once I went back and my mocks were on and I didn't know. I went in and everybody was doing their mocks and I didn't have a clue" (Aaron).

Behaviour in school also emerged as an issue with four interviewees admitting that they were constantly in trouble. John admits:

"Like, I'd be in a lot of fights. A lot of bullying my mates, messing, throwing things around the class and just not listening to the teacher. Never doing work" (John).

Two of these interviewees offered some insight into their behaviour, with one stating that he behaved this way to mask his inability to catch up in class, and another linking it to not having an interest in the subjects he was being taught:

> *"You constantly think I'm not going to catch up with them, they're six pages ahead. I'll just mess and try and get the rest of them to fall behind"* (John).

> *"...my worst subjects were maths, science and history. I was never interested in them. They were probably the three classes that I always got into trouble in coz I never had an interest in the subjects"* (Aaron).

4.4.5 Changes to their school

Three interviewees suggested making changes to the school building such as renovations, repainting or removing bars from the outside of the windows. Three participants also made reference to changing the uniform, with two of these stating that in the winter the current uniform is too light and in the summer too heavy. Four interviewees suggested teachers making use of different teaching methods. Making classes more interesting, a greater use of practical tools and greater time for discussion featured strongly in this regard:

> *"I'd probably be a laid-back teacher. I'd be more like talking to the students and getting them to talk about what they're learning"* (John).

> *"One size doesn't fit all. You can't teach all kids in the same manner* [pause] *some kids aren't for books. Some people are hands on. Some people are athletic. Nearly everybody's different. And you can't teach everybody the same manner"* (Thomas).

One participant suggesting making classes smaller so that students could have more individual time with the teacher. Certainly, of the interviewees that are currently in Youthreach, each of them mentioned how much easier it was to learn in a smaller class environment. One interviewee suggested getting more supports to help students to achieve academically:

> *"I'd get more help in with work and all. Help people get better and all"* (Kate).

Two interviewees also suggested breaking up the school day. For those students who struggle to make it through the school day, they felt having an activity would give students a little break and ultimately help them to concentrate more. Mark suggests:

> *"A bit of work, then halfway in the school day, do something to break it up. Some sort of activity ... More people would be interested in their work. You get so far in the day and you're just like, if I see another sheet of paper in front of me I'm going to snap"* (Mark).

Making school a more enjoyable place to be was also mentioned by several of the interviewees, with three of these stating that they would introduce more clubs or short courses to keep students interested and engaged. Mary outlines how she would make school more enjoyable:

> *"...things that people like, like doing little photography classes or film classes and stuff like that. Yeah, just to make school a more pleasant place. And just showing people different things and what careers they might like"* (Mary).

Finally, two interviewees suggested changing some of the subjects. Mary advocates introducing more practical subjects:

> *"I think I'd definitely bring in a wider range of stuff. Different types of subjects ... That's my opinion coz I think hands on is a very big part of your life. It's not all about books"* (Mary).

4.4.6 The decision to leave school

For three of the interviewees, they did not decide to leave school, but were told to leave by the school principal. One interviewee recalls:

> *"The Principal turned around to me and said 'John this is your choice. Either leave now or you get expelled in three days'"* (John).

In each of these cases, this decision was precipitated by deterioration in their behaviour and followed a number of suspensions throughout the school year. Two interviewees attributed their leaving school to family difficulties at the time. While this appeared to be the sole factor for one interviewee, this coupled with largely negative relationships with teachers acted as push factors for the other. The curriculum posed a problem for two others; one acknowledged that the academic curriculum did not suit him, while another (Mary) struggled to cope with her pending Leaving Cert exams. Mary confides:

"I didn't think I was strong enough. I did try and study and it just wasn't working … I wasn't happy in it and they [family] *could see it in me that I was getting worse and worse. Like, down you know"* (Mary)

For the remaining interviewee, it was not her intention to leave school but after getting a summer job, she decided not to return:

*"I didn't have it in my head to leave. It was just after Junior Cert, we were on summer holidays and I got a summer job. And I just said I don't want to go back to school" (*Carol).

Despite each of the interviewees pinpointing a reason for their leaving school, it was clearly evident over the course of the interviews that there were other contributing factors, with interviewees reporting school careers characterised by at least one, but often more than one of the following; absenteeism, poor academic achievement, trouble with teachers, poor behaviour, suspensions and disinterest in the curriculum.

4.4.7 Regret
Most of the interviewees expressed a sense of regret about leaving school. For some, this centered around not achieving their Leaving Cert:

"Just for the piece of paper coz it might make stuff a bit easier" (Mary)

"I do remember when all my friends got their Leaving Cert, I felt a bit hard done by. I don't know why. I felt I had missed out" (Thomas).

Carol spoke about feeling embarrassed that she didn't have a Leaving Cert, particularly in work situations:

"Everyone that does the same job as me [credit controller] *has done college. Have done their Leaving and that. I just put my head down and try not to say that I haven't done my Leaving, or got into college"* (Carol).

For others, they missed their school and their school friends, a factor they had not considered when deciding to leave. Many maintained contact with school friends after they had left, yet regretted their decision. Peter states:

> *"I regret it big-time. I should have stuck it out. At the time it seemed like the only solution but I should have just stuck it out"* (Peter).

One interviewee expressed regret over his behaviour:

> *"I'd say to my nephew, stop messing in school, look what I did when I was in school. Now I'm looking back, when I was your age I was laughing at some of the stuff I did but now I think how stupid I was to do that"* (John)

> *"I'll never regret leaving school because I was never going to get anywhere in school. But I regret how I behaved"* (John).

Others spoke of missing out on important rites of passage, such as attending the Debs or celebrating with friends on the night of the Leaving Cert results:

> *"Even though you still can go* [to the Debs] *but I just felt a bit weird if I went coz I had left school. I remember them all going"* (Carol).

> *"I remember meeting a few of them in town coz I was living in the City Centre then and they were all going out and I was kind of like, damn that could have been me"* (Thomas).

Throughout most of the interviews this sense of regret permeated and all eight interviewees stated that they would discourage a younger family member from leaving school.

4.4.8 What they are doing now

Of those interviewed, five are pursuing their education through an alternative pathway; Youthreach Education Centre. Three of these interviewees are doing a Catering course, another two are working towards completing their Leaving Cert. Of the remaining three, one had completed his Leaving Cert as an adult and had gone on to third level education, another is currently managing a bike sales section in a retail outlet and the third is working as a credit controller. All interviewees stressed the importance of getting a job or further educating themselves and appeared motivated and focused on their future goals. Mark sums it up best:

> *"I'm not sitting at home wasting my life. I'm in here getting my education. Sit at home and collect the dole, what's the point in that?"* (Mark).

Chapter Five

Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion on the findings documented in Chapter Four. It outlines the main contributing factors to young people leaving school early, with a focus on the dynamic interplay between these various factors. It looks at existing supports within the Irish education system to improve retention and outlines suggestions made by research participants to further boost school completion. Finally, the implications of this research for student retention are discussed, with a number of recommendations provided.

5.2 Contributing factors to early school leaving

5.2.1 Family and Individual level Factors

The importance of family factors emerged as a reaccuring theme throughout the course of the research. Both teachers and key informants identified family as being very influential on a young person's educational career. Socio-economic status was considered an important element within this, with the majority of teachers surveyed identifying this as influential in terms of early school leaving. From the research it appears that (i) A stable and supportive family background can act as a buffer to early school leaving (ii) In cases where family functioning is impaired, problems within the family can have a very significant and ultimately negative influence on the young person's school career. When families are struggling to cope with other problems, education can become less of a priority for all involved. (iii) While young people from more advantaged backgrounds also leave school early, research indicates that it is disproportionately higher among those from low-income and unemployed households. This can be linked to a range of factors such as a higher incidence of family stressors among low income families, the parents' own levels of education and experiences of the school system, the home learning environment, the mismatch between the cultures of home and school and so forth (Barnardos, 2006; Barnardos, 2009; Combat Poverty Agency, 2003; Beekhoven and Dekkers, 2005; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Hango, 2007; Byrne & Smyth, 2010). This study did not have sufficient information about the families of the early school leavers to comment on their socio-economic status. However, the

family effect was clearly evident in two of the eight cases, with both interviewees indicating that family dysfunction played a key role in the breakdown of their school placement.

Being a member of the Travelling Community was also considered to have an impact on early school leaving, with both teacher and key informant groups identifying this as an important factor. This is supported by both Irish and international research: Irish research estimates that up to 80% of 12-15 year old Travellers do not attend secondary school and international research identifies a higher rate of high school drop out among minority ethnic groups (Barnardos 2006; Marks 2007). While this is partly linked to the poverty and disadvantage experienced by these groups, there also appears to be a cultural mismatch, with the education system reflecting middle-class values and a cultural capital that these young people can struggle to tap into.

Individual factors can be difficult to distinguish from family related factors. For example, factors such as attendance, behaviour and motivation are of a very individual nature but are often strongly linked to the young person's upbringing and the value system within the home. These factors can impact strongly on a young person's educational career. The literature on early school leaving also identifies gender as a key individual factor, with early school leaving more common among boys than girls (Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Marks, 2007). During the course of this research the key informant group highlighted this trend. The gender profile of the early school leavers interviewed reflected this, consisting of five males and three females.

The impact of absenteeism was stressed in the key informant interviews, while seven of the eight early school leavers reported poor attendance, particularly in the year leading up to their finishing school. While absenteeism is often an indicator of disengagement from school life, it can also act as a contributing factor as missing out on schoolwork and the consequent struggle to catch up can have a negative impact on the young person involved. This was highlighted by a number of early school leavers over the course of the interviews and is supported by Smyth & Byrne's (2010) research on early school leaving.

Both the key informant and teacher groups outlined the young person's behaviour as having an impact on their school career. This theme also emerged over the course of the

interviews with the early school leavers. For those interviewees who admitted to engaging in bad behaviour, it appeared that their behaviour set them on a pathway that they found difficult to leave behind. They earned a reputation as troublemakers and were treated as such. Their behaviour impacted on their relationships with the teachers in the school, consequently making school a more difficult and less pleasant place to be. This finding is supported by the literature, with research indicating that poor behaviour leads to disengagement and eventual dropout (Archambault *et al.* 2008).

Motivation or indeed a lack there-of also emerged as a key theme for key informants and teachers surveyed. Interestingly, the interviews with the early school leavers revealed a high level of personal motivation among all of the participants. Interviewees spoke positively about their future goals, their education and the training or employment they were currently involved in. This may suggest that the school system failed to channel this motivation in a way that was beneficial to their school careers or provide a learning environment suitable to their needs. On reflecting on their school learning environment; boredom, a curriculum geared around writing and rote learning and an inability to cope academically were elements that young people felt hindered their education. Research by both Byrne & Smyth, (2010) and Lee & Breen (2007) positions early school leavers not as 'no-hopers' or 'down-and-outs' but as competent social actors making real decisions about their lives. Both authors identify aspirations and goals among these young people, an aspect which seems incompatible with a more negative discourse around early school leaving.

5.2.2 School effects

Relationships with teachers also emerged as a very significant theme. The majority of the teachers surveyed indicated that they either disagreed with or were undecided about the influence of negative student-teacher relationships on the decision to leave school. Key informants highlighted the significance of student-teacher relationships and the climate of the school on retaining students, stressing that schools with a negative atmostphere and fraught student-teacher relationships can contribute to a young person leaving school. For those who had left school early, relationships with teachers featured very strongly in seven out of eight interviews, with most of this being of a negative nature. These interviewees spoke of teachers 'picking' on them, of being treated unfairly, of hating going to school because they knew that they would get into trouble. For these seven interviewees, negative relationships with their teachers played some role

in their decision to leave school, with this factor being more significant for some interviewees than for others. These results are in line with international research on school culture, which assert that the quality of relations between teachers and students is a key factor in whether a young person stays in education (Smyth & Byrne, 2010). It is important to interpret these results with caution and to consider the context in which some of these interactions may have occurred. Many of the early school leavers admitted that their behaviour was unacceptable at times and in some cases school disciplinary procedures such as suspension or expension pre-empted their leaving school. However, not feeling listened to and feeling that they did not receive the help that they needed was also a reoccuring theme among many of these interviews.

5.2.4 Academic ability and achievements

This emerged as quite a significant theme over the course of the research. According to the key informants, low academic ability can lead to the student falling behind on coursework and consequently losing interest in school. Feedback from the teachers indicated that the majority of teachers agreed that poor academic ability or having a special educational need (SEN) may play a role in the young person's withdrawal from school. However, the impact of low academic ability is best illustrated by the early school leaver interviews. Seven out of eight reported struggling with the coursework: three of these reported having a special need and two were in a low-ability class (JCSP and LCA). The remaining two appeared to struggle on account of their absences more so than their academic ability and were in a higher ability streamed class. Of those with a SEN, two of these had dyslexia, one had ADD and all three either had an Special Needs Assistant (SNA) or some access to what they referred to as a 'special class'. Despite these extra supports, these early school leavers felt that they did not receive enough help and felt 'stupid' in comparison to their peers. Throughout the course of the interviews the seven interviewees tried to communicate the sense of failure they experienced when they were unable to keep up with the rest of the class. For some this effect was cyclical: they became locked into a cycle of missing out on school, falling behind and then missing out on more school due to fear of not being able to catch up. For others these experiences of educational failure led to them losing interest in school and acting out to take the focus off the fact that they were behind the rest of the class. The impact of both low academic ability and poor academic achievements is supported by the literature on early school leaving (Marks 2007, Beekhoven & Dekkers 2005). Academic achievement

plays a particular role within school retention. When students are achieving and feel that they are doing well at school, they remain interested and thus engaged in their learning. Byrne & Smyth, (2010) also highlight the link between academic ability and early school leaving. According to this study, students who have low reading or maths scores on entry to secondary school are at higher risk of dropping out of than their peers (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

5.2.5 A dynamic approach to understanding early school leaving

The picture that emerged over the course of the research highlighted the complexity of circumstances faced by some young people. For the most part, early school leaving did not have one causitive factor but a combination of factors which caused the young person to disengage from school. Early school leaving is a process and it is likely that it cannot be attributed to factors solely at an individual, familial or school level. This holistic view of early school leaving is supported by more recent research on the subject, which looks at the dynamics across a number of dimensions (family circumstances, school culture and so forth) and the interplay that occurs within this to cause young people to become disengaged from the education process (Byrne & Smyth, 2010)

5.3 Existing supports to improve retention

The teachers surveyed identified a range of supports available in their school to maximise retention. The variety of supports available across a number of domains serve to emphasise once again the complex nature of educational disengagement. These resources represented a comprehensive plan to keep young people engaged in school life and to address any difficulties which may be impeding them from getting their education.

5.4 Suggestions for improvement

Early school leavers' suggestions were generally related to making school a more interesting and enjoyable place. Some of these suggestions centered around the practicalities of school life, such as doing up the school building or improving the uniform. Other suggestions involved making classes more interesting, more practically oriented and more interactive, and the early school leavers felt that these changes might keep students more interested in school. Introducing more clubs was also suggested as was short courses on life skills subjects such as computers and photography. By and

large, early school leavers interviewed found school to be boring and while they understood that teachers needed to teach the curriculum, they recommended that the curriculum be changed to accommodate more practical subjects and a more discussion oriented and co-operative way of learning.

Key informants also put forth a number of suggestions to improve the retention of students. The introduction of a more practically oriented curriculum also featured strongly here, to engage those students whose strengths are of a practical nature. Replacing the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations with continuous assessment was also suggested to enable students to feel that they are achieving and working towards something. Key informants felt that experiencing achievement on a smaller scale would encourage students in continuing to pursue their education. Suggestions from the teachers centered mainly on greater parental involvement, highlighting the important role parents play in keeping their teenager in school. Some echoed the early school leavers, requesting training in more active teaching practices and group activities to keep students engaged.

5.4 Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions to be drawn from this research project. Firstly, the research indicates that early school leaving is a process which is influenced by a variety of factors, some of which include socio-economic status, family circumstances, gender, relationships with teachers, academic ability and membership of the Travelling Community. High impact personal issues such as family trauma, bereavement and acute family problems were also found to have an impact.

Secondly, for some young people there seems to be a cumulative effect and the more risk factors they are exposed to, the greater their level of vulnerability. For others, it may not be *what* they experience but rather *how* they experience it, their internal coping responses and resilience. However, it can be said that early school leaving is a very complex and highly individual experience that differs from young person to young person and in many cases a process of disengagement starting as far back at primary school age.

Thirdly, family related factors appear to extert a higher degree of influence than other factors. Family circumstances, particularly acute family problems or impaired family functioning can have a direct and lasting effect. There is also an indirect effect to be considered as the family plays an important role in the value system, the outlook and the identity the young person has adopted. These variables all affect their school life, the choices they make and the expectations that they have for their future.

Fourthly, many teachers appeared to underestimate the impact of poor student teacher relationships. Most of the early school leavers interviewed perceived this factor to play an important role in their decision to leave school, whereas a significant proportion of teachers disagreed with or were undecided on whether poor teacher student relations had any impact on a young person's decision to leave school.

Fifthly, low academic ability or poor academic achievement appears to have a huge impact on whether one stays in school. An inability to cope with the coursework or to catch up on topics they had missed placed these students at a distinct disadvantage to their peers, and in some cases contributed to a negative self-image, where they perceived themselves to be "thick", "stupid" and incapable of catching up with the rest of the class. The current curriculum appears to have contributed to this, with limited practical subject options and what young people felt was an over-reliance on writing and rote learning.

Finally, those who leave school early can often be depicted in a negative light, as 'drop-outs' or 'no-hopers'. That was not the experience of the researcher in this research project. Rather, the early school leavers interviewed appeared motivated about their future and several were pursuing their education through alternative pathways. However, regret was clearly evident in much of their discourse, with seven out of the eight wishing they had stayed on at school.

5.5 Recommendations

These recommendations are not a list of things that need to be done in order to unequivocally eliminate early school leaving. It is likely that a small percentage of the student population will always leave school early every year. These suggestions center on addressing the unequitable nature of early school leaving and reducing the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who fail to complete their education.

5.5.1 Continuous assessment

Replacing the current exam based system with a model of continuous assessment would have a number of benefits for students. Firstly young people, particularly those who struggle academically, might perceive this method of assessment to be more achievable than studying for one major set of exams. Secondly, exam pressure is known to cause students undue stress. Preliminary findings from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study, carried out by the ESRI and due to be published later this year, highlight the negative effect exams have on the health of Leaving Certificate students (Newenham, 2010). Thirdly, continuous assessment is considered to promote motivation and experiencing small achievements might encourage those who would otherwise lose interest before their big exam.

5.5.2 Prioritise caring school communities

The research indicated that relationships with teachers do have an impact on students, particularly if these relationships are of a negative nature. A positive school climate is conducive to greater levels of student retention. Schools that adopt a person centered and positive school ethos are more likely to hold onto a greater number of students for longer (Smyth & Hattam, 2002). Some schools achieve this very well; others may need some support in fostering a positive school culture.

5.5.3 Revitalise the curriculum and teaching practices

The results indicate a real need to rethink the curriculum. For those whose skills are of a practical rather than academic nature, the current curriculum is very limiting. Introducing more practical subjects and rethinking the teaching methods employed in the teaching of *all* subjects could have real benefits for students. Utilising more active teaching methods and providing opportunities for interactive discussison based learning may have a positive affect on social development while also keeping young people engaged and interested.

In conclusion, there are a significant number of young people that the education system does not suit, who become alienated and disengaged from education from a very young age. Ireland's rate of early school leaving is currently falling short of the current EU

benchmark, with a disproportionate amount of these young people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Perhaps it is time to rethink our current education system and utilise a more creative and holistic approach in educating our young people.

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Appendix A:

Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Early School Leavers:

Introduction:

Where did you go to secondary school?

When did you leave?

What age are you now?

Experiences of school:

Can you talk me through a typical school day?

What did you like about school?

What did you dislike about school?

What did you think of the curriculum- the subjects that you learned?

Did you have a favourite subject?

How were the other subjects?

Did you take part in any school activities, clubs etc.

Can you tell me a bit about the other students in your school?

Did you like or dislike the other students in the school?

Do you still keep in touch with any of your peers?

How did you find the teachers? (Like/Dislike? Why?)

Did you have a favourite teacher?

How did your parents get on with the teachers? (Parent/teacher meetings).

If you could make any improvements to your former school, what would you change?

Your decision to leave school

When did you decide to leave school?

Why did you want to leave?

Were you having any particular difficulties in school at the time?

What did your parents think about your decision?

What did your friends think about your decision?

What was the best thing about leaving school?

What was the worst thing about leaving school?

The 'now'

What are you up to now?

What would you like to do in the future?

Is what you are doing right now better or worse than school?

Do you miss school?

Can you think of any piece of advice you would give to another young person thinking about leaving school? / What would you say to another student thinking about leaving school?

Interview Questions for key informants:

Can you tell me a little about the work that you do as it relates to student retention?

How long have you been involved in this work?

What challenges have you found with regards to retaining students?

What reasons have you encountered over the course over your work as to why young people leave school early?

What factors have an impact on their decision to leave school?

How important are family factors?

How important are peers and peer pressure?

Do you think having a behavioural difficulties or a special educational need puts the young person at greater risk of early school leaving? Please expand.

Is there a relationship between poor academic performance and early school leaving?

How important is the ethos or culture of the school in retaining students?

What has been your experience of students from a Travelling background in the school system?

What challenges do young people face as a result of their leaving school early?

If you were Principal in 2010-2011, what two changes would you make to your school to improve retention?

If you were appointed Minister of Education tomorrow, what changes would you make to the education system as a whole?

Appendix B:

Cover letter and questionnaire

Dear Participant,

I am conducting some research on early school leaving and the factors that may contribute to young people leaving school. The aim of this questionnaire is to ascertain the opinions of the professionals on the ground level. While I will be interviewing early school leavers at a later stage, gaining some insight from teachers, principals and other stakeholders within the school system will provide a more rounded picture of this educational problem and provide for a more comprehensive study.

This questionnaire is completely **confidential and anonymous**. Please __do not write your name anywhere in the questionnaire__

As a thank you, the names of those who complete a questionnaire will be put into a draw to win a bottle of champagne!!

Please place the questionnaire, once it has been completed, in the box that has been placed in the staff room. Attached to this box is a sign-in sheet. Please tick your name off this sheet once you have dropped off your questionnaire. This is to keep record of the names that will be put into the raffle!! **The last day for collecting questionnaires will be Wed 26/05/2010.**

Should you have any queries please don't hesitate to contact me on 087-9975685. Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire,

_____

Jenny McGarr (School Completion Project Worker)
MA in Child, Family and Community Studies, DIT

Questionnaire on Early School Leaving

Please place an **X** in the corresponding boxes below (Questions 1-4).

1. What age are you?

   20- 30 ☐

   31- 40 ☐

   41- 50 ☐

   51- 60 ☐

   61+ ☐

2. What is your gender?

   Male……………………...☐

   Female…………………...☐

3. Length of time teaching?

   Less than 1 year………....☐

   1-5 years………………...☐

   6- 10 years……………....☐

   More than 10 years……...☐

4. In your experience, how would you rate the challenge of keeping young people engaged in their learning, generally?

   Very easy………………...☐

   Easy……………………….☐

   Neither easy nor difficult.. ☐

   Difficult…………………..☐

   Very difficult……………. ☐

5. The following statements outline possible factors contributing to young people leaving school early. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with these factors by placing the appropriate number in the space provided. (Please note that these statements **do not** relate directly to your school but represent an overview of factors nationally).

   1.Strongly Agree   2.Agree   3.Undecided   4.Disagree   5.Strongly Disagree

   _____   Socio-economic disadvantage
   _____   Family problems (drug or alcohol problems etc.)
   _____   Family history of early school leaving
   _____   Low academic ability or special educational need   (PTO) ⇨
   _____   Lack of individual motivation and/or goals

_____ School culture (negative student-teacher relations)
_____ Membership of an at risk ethnic minority (e.g. Traveller)
_____ Job opportunity or apprenticeship
_____ Behaviour difficulties and/or emotional problems

6. Outlined below are a number of characteristics that may assist students in doing well at school. Please attach a value to each of these, according to how important you view each of these characteristics to be.

   1= very important   2=important   3=somewhat important   4=least important

   _____ Hard worker
   _____ Clever
   _____ Like or have interest in school
   _____ Gets along with others- good social skills
   _____ Respectful of teachers
   _____ Can withstand peer pressure
   _____ Other….please outline_____

7. What three measures are currently in your school to improve student retention?

   _____
   _____
   _____

   What measures are available within the community to improve student retention?

   _____
   _____
   _____

8. *In your experience* what else could be introduced to your school to improve school completion?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

9. Any other comments?

   _____
   _____

   Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire ☺

Appendix C:

Consent Letters

Adult Consent Letter:

Date

Dear Participant,

My name is Jenny McGarr and I am a student of the Masters of Child, Family and Community Studies programme in Dublin Institute of Technology. As part of my studies I am doing a research project on early school leaving and I am interested in finding out more about the experiences of those who have left school early. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to give up some of your time to take part in an interview. This interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will focus on your experiences of the school system, what you liked/disliked about school, your future aspirations etc.

The interview will be confidential and used only as part of the project outlined above. Your can choose to stop participating at any time and you can choose not to answer any of the questions you are asked. Interviews will be recorded so that I can accurately remember the contribution each individual has made.

If you have any questions now or at any stage during the study please do not hesitate to contact me. This research should give valuable insight into the experiences of young people who have left school and your participation is highly appreciated. If you are happy to participate in this research, please sign the form attached.

Looking forward to chatting with you,

Jenny McGarr
Tel:
Email:

CONSENT FORM

I have read and understand the letter about this research and I am happy to participate in this study:

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Young Person's Consent Letter:

Date

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Jenny McGarr and I am a student of the Masters of Child, Family and Community Studies programme in Dublin Institute of Technology. I am writing to you to seek your permission to interview your son/daughter for a research project I am undertaking as part of my studies.

I am interested in finding out more about the experiences of young people who have left the formal school system early. If you agree to your child participating in this study, he/she will be asked to give up some of their time to take part in an interview. This interview will take part during the school day and will focus on their experiences of school, what they liked/disliked about school, their future aspirations etc.

The interview will be confidential and used only as part of the project outlined above. Your son/daughter can choose to stop participating at any time and they can choose not to answer any of the questions they are asked. Interviews will be recorded so that I can accurately remember the contribution each individual has made. All young people who participate will be rewarded with 10euro mobile phone call credit as a thank you for taking part.

If both you and your son/daughter consent to their participation, both of you will need to sign the form attached.

If you have any questions now or at any stage during the study please do not hesitate to contact me. This research should give valuable insight into the experiences of young people who have left school and their participation is highly appreciated.

Jenny McGarr
Tel:
Email:

CONSENT FORM- YOUNG PERSON

I have read and understand the letter about this research and I am happy to participate in this study:

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

CONSENT FORM- PARENT/GUARDIAN

I have read and understood the letter about this research and I am happy for my son/daughter to participate in this study:

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D:

Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet (Adult Version):

Some information about this research project:

What is the study about?

This study is about exploring the experiences of young people who have left school early. Some areas that may be discussed include: why you decided to leave school, what your parents and friends thought about your decision, your experiences of the school system, what you liked and did not like about school, what you would like to do in the future etc.

What will I have to do?

If you choose to take part in the research, you will be interviewed by myself (Jenny) for about 30 minutes. I will ask you a number of questions about your decision to leave school and we will discuss your thoughts and experiences. This interview will need to be recorded so that I do not forget any of the information that you choose to share with me.

What happens if I don't want to answer something?

If you are asked a question that you do not wish to answer, you have the right to tell the researcher so. You will not be asked to answer anything that you do not feel comfortable with.

What happens to my information at the end of the study?

Your information is confidential and will be treated as such. It will be stored safely until the research project is completed and then will be destroyed.

Many thanks for agreeing to take part and looking forward to chatting with you ☺

Participant Information Sheet (Young Person's Version):

Some information about this research project:

What is the study about?

This study is about exploring the experiences of young people who have left school early. Some areas that may be discussed include: why you decided to leave school, what your parents and friends thought about your decision, your experiences of the school system, what you liked and did not like about school, what you would like to do in the future etc.

Why do I need parental consent?

As you are under 18 years of age, any research being conducted with a minor must have the permission of the parent/guardian in order to take place.

What will I have to do?

If you choose to take part in the research, you will be interviewed by myself (Jenny) for about 30 minutes. I will ask you a number of questions about your decision to leave school and we will discuss your thoughts and experiences. This interview will need to be recorded so that I do not forget any of the information that you choose to share with me.

What happens if I don't want to answer something?

If you are asked a question that you do not wish to answer, you have the right to tell the researcher so. You will not be asked to answer anything that you do not feel comfortable with.

What happens to my information at the end of the study?

Your information is confidential and will be treated as such. It will be stored safely until the research project is completed and then will be destroyed.

Many thanks for agreeing to take part and looking forward to chatting with you ☺

Appendix E:

Sample Transcript

R= Researcher

J= John (Early School Leaver, 17yrs)

Interview with 'John'

J: I went to secondary school in ████████████.

J: In ████████.

J: I left just last year.

J: I was in fourth year at the time.

J: I was sixteen.

J: Just ten months, I've been here ten months.

J: Yeah there was a short break, then I started straight here in September.

J: Well, my typical school in ████████ was like, I'll go in, I went to class and straight away the teachers started wrecking my head coz I was a messer. So I'd go in and they wouldn't leave me alone for the rest of the class and then I'd go on a mad one. Then I'd get sent up to the principal's office and then sent back down to class and then…you'd do all your lessons and all but I was never any good at sitting down and writing but…I was alright, I wasn't too bad but I didn't like sitting down, being told what to do and the teachers treat you with no respect so…I couldn't sit there. You go on your lunch break, you go home for your lunch and come back and probably have good classes after break like woodwork or metalwork. You'd enjoy them coz they're practical subjects, then like

you'd go home at four o clock. Most of the time I never went home at four 'coz I'd have detention.

J: If you're after getting four notes in class or you're after getting suspended, you get brought into school from nine to five instead of nine to four so you have to sit in the one class and get writing, like work, off one of your teachers, like for all of your subjects for an hour and do all that work.

J: Constantly.

J: Like, I'd be in a lot of fights. A lot of bullying my mates, messing, throwing things around the class and just not listening to the teacher. Never doing work. Just torturing people basically.

J: I'd jump up, snapping, threaten the teacher and all. At one stage I threatened to slice a teacher's throat open and all (sounds ashamed).

J: She was terrified, tried to get me out of class, tried to get me expelled from the school. But because I was going to a counsellor in the school at the time, the counsellor got on to the teacher, talked to the teacher to keep me in the school another while.

J: I thought…that specific teacher was…she never liked me but I never did anything on her but, 'coz I used to be terrified of her from first year to fourth but because my two sisters were in the school before me, they were 'messers', they would cause murder in her class. And one of them actually threatened her. So when they found out I was

related, she picked on me 'coz I was related to the two sisters. If your sister was a 'messer', or your brother was a 'messer', the teacher treated you the same.

R: So tell me, what did you like about school?

J: I liked…I played for the school football team. So I loved that.

R: GAA or Soccer?

J: Soccer. That kind of kept me out of a lot of trouble because if I was messing in school, I wasn't allowed to play football. 'Coz sometimes when you got in trouble you weren't allowed to play at all. They'd try and keep you out of P.E. as well, I loved doing P.E. Anything that's like sport or activity or doing something with your hands. I'll do it like. Woodwork and metalwork, I loved doing it.

R: You were saying that you liked the practical subjects. How was your behaviour in those classes?

J: It was ok…not as bad.

R: Was it easier to behave yourself in a class that was a bit more practical?

J: Yeah it would have been, because you concentrate more. Like when anything, you know English and all, could never do it, maths could never do it. But when it comes to history, because it was talking about…what you're doing in class, you're not constantly writing, so you're talking about what happened here, what happened there, then you're like "I'll listen. Ill be able to listen to something".

R: What do you think about the way the subjects are taught?

J: Sometimes you go into class and they just want you to constantly write. Like I think you should talk more about the subjects, like they don't give you different ways. When I was in Maths class I had my own way of doing Maths. It turned out right but my teacher kept going 'No that's wrong. The answer is right but the way you're doing the sum is wrong'. I was like 'If I'm getting the same answer, what does it matter?'. I'm actually getting the same answer as everyone else. She goes 'You're doing the layout of the sum wrong' (sounds frustrated). But what does it matter like? The sum was right. But it had to be the way she wanted me to do, not the way I wanted to do it myself. It was like, even do you're doing it right, they want you to do it their way. I don't see why you have

to do it if you're going to get the same answer. You both should have an opinion on what's right and wrong.

R: If you were teaching a subject, not a practical subject…say it was like an academic subject…

J: Like English?

R: Like English. How would you teach it? What sort of teacher would you be?

J: I'd probably be a laid-back teacher. I'd have a laugh with the class but then if they mess or whatever, I'd be strict on them but like I'd be more like talking to the students and getting them to talk about what they're learning. Like if you were reading a book, you could be like "what do you think he's thinking?" and all. But like don't constantly say "Read the book, do an essay". That's what a lot of teachers do, they just tell you to read a book and do an essay. And that's it, that's the end of that lesson.

R: Do you think that using things like discussion time would help students to learn more?

J: Yeah, it might get it into their head more. Like, they might concentrate more and then know a lot more about the book. 'Coz sometimes people miss class but then if you go back over the stuff, the people who are after missing the class can catch up on what's after being happening while they've been out.

R: Were you out much?

J: Yeah loads and I couldn't catch back up. A lot of times when you are after missing class, for whatever, you're after being out sick, then you come back to class and you're like "Miss can you explain it to me?". (Mimics teacher) "No I cant. You weren't in, it's your own fault". Then when it comes to a test, or an essay you probably wouldn't have a clue.

R: How were you expected to catch up?

J: In your own time. By yourself like. And you've no help at all then coz you can't…say if you don't understand a word or something…

R: Did that ever happen to you?

J: It happened to me a lot 'coz I was, even then when it happened to me, I was constantly suspended so I was never in class. I wouldn't read a book on my own. I could never read books 'coz I have dyslexia. And I found it very hard to read and write so when the teacher told me to catch up I just would throw the book away. I couldn't get the motivation to do it like, I'd try my best, I'd have a read of it and I'd try and understand it but then they'd be reading in ahead and I'd go to the teacher "Can you just tell me what this word is?". (Mimics teacher) "No, no, I haven't got time. I can't slow down just to keep you up". Which meant, if she's not on my side why should I even try? If they could literally give you a pointer and say such and such is after happening. Real quick, just say what's after happening. If you explained what happened I was alright, I was grand.

R: What's it like coming to school when you are falling behind?

J: If you're falling behind you don't want to come in. you think they are all on such-and-such, I must be a thick. Or else it's more of a motivation to mess coz you're behind and you don't think you're going to catch up. You constantly think I'm not going to catch up with them, they're six pages ahead. I'll just mess and try and get the rest of them to fall behind. If you don't keep up you're going to mess and cause trouble.

R: Tell me this, what did you not like about school?

J: I thought that the teachers didn't treat you with much respect. Sometimes you didn't deserve it. When I was in first year I was suspended on the very first day of first year.

R: Why were you suspended?

J: I punched the head off someone. It was my fault basically but he pulled down my trousers on the very first day. In temper I pulled up my trousers and turned around and killed him. It was actually one of my best mates but because he made a show of me on my very first day, I thought I had to show everybody else that I'm not a muppet. Otherwise I would have been bullied for the rest of my time in school. So I killed him, then I got suspended. Then when I came back and the teachers asked me where I was, from then on they just treated me bad.

R: Do you think you got a bit of a name for yourself?

J: Yeah I got a bad name for myself. So none of the teachers gave me the chance to earn some respect. Literally it was "Up the front of the class. Do this, do that. You mess and

you're out of the class". But then, the teachers treated me with no respect so I didn't treat them with any respect.

J: After the fight I was after doing my punishment. I got suspended, I did my punishment. I wanted a second chance to prove myself but when I came back, they didn't give me any second chance to prove that I could behave. You're trying to get talking to people, introduce yourself to other people in first year, and if someone tries to embarrass you…its something you're going to do.

R: Tell me a little bit about the subjects that you learned. What subjects did you like?

J: I actually liked E.S.S a lot. Instead of doing History and Geography as two separate subjects, because I have dyslexia, I did it in the one subject. You don't have to do a test. You do a small test but it's mostly project work. And you're like, if you do your project and your project turns out well you get whatever percent, 48% or just under 48% so all you have to do is get whatever to pass. You don't have to do two tests, like a History test and then a Geography test so it's much easier.

R: Did you do that subject for your Junior Cert?

J: I did that for my Junior Cert and I found it easier because you're like colouring and the way your teacher sits that, was she had us all around the table so we could have conversations and talk to each other while we're doing work and she let us bring in a radio. A radio concentrates most young people more. If I was at home doing homework, I'd listen to music on my Ipod or on my radio, it calms me you know. I'd do work constantly if I had a radio there but most teachers won't allow it, they think it's a distraction. I think it calms me down, keeps me working.

R: Was there any subjects you absolutely hated?

J: Maths. I could never get my head around Maths. Between that and…no it was mostly Maths. I loved Science but Maths; I could just never get my head around. Even though I had the same teacher for both subjects, I still hated Maths. None of my friends were in the class so I had no one to show me what to do. I was just on a table on my own and everybody else in the class I didn't like so…I sat on a table on my own. Most of the people in the year I got along with but the one class I didn't were Maths. All of my

friends were all kicked out of my Maths class so I found it very hard to do it on my own, especially when- I fell behind terribly in Maths and I tried to keep up but I just couldn't. In the end I just got myself kicked out by messing. Constantly annoying the teacher.

R: Tell me about the other students in your school.
J: I got on with most of the...well the main people in the school, the more people that everybody knew, I got along with. I was a 'messer'. I got along with all the young fellas that were rough and bullied people and caused murder. So I got along with them, because I was in with all the more popular people, than all the little losers that you get in that school, so I knew all the young ones and all the fellas. I hung around with everybody in the school. And because I knew all the years older than me. 'Coz I hung around with the older people, then the people in my year knew me from hanging around with the older people.

R: So you got on with most of the people in the school?
J: Yeah most of the people. I never had any problems with anybody really. A lot of the people that I'd fight were people that I didn't like, people that I wouldn't talk to. But then they'd get cheeky with you and you'd be saying "Who are you getting cheeky with?", that's the only reason I wouldn't get along with them.

R: What about clubs or school activities, were you involved in any in the school?
J: Football. And anything that was got to do with sport. When I was getting into trouble they would either send me to the library to listen to music because that was the only thing that would calm me down coz I have anger management problems. They'd send me to either the library to calm down or they'd send me off to the PE teacher to do sport or whatever coz they were the only two things that would keep me calm. I love sport.

R: Do you play much sport now?
J: I can't play it any more 'coz I hurt my neck there last summer. But I'm actually training an under 13 kids football team now. I do that and then I do my own football training. I used to boxing and rugby but I can never do that again because of my neck.

R: What happened to you?

J: I got thrown over a wall. They said to me that if the wall was a bit higher I would have been paralysed.

J: About three times a week. I have my own little nephew on the team and he's eleven but he's good enough to play and he's tall enough. A lot of the kids around the area know us from hanging around with the older lads. We'll always have a mess with the little kids, have a kick around. If you see them with a football on the road, give us a pass, buzz off their heads like. But we know all the kids, they all enjoy us training them coz it's not like, were not like doing fitness, fitness, fitness. We do mostly games, football games with them; we do control…teaching them how to play football. Were not there to be their boss, were there to have fun.

R: What happens when one of them is misbehaving?
J: If they mess I send them on laps. If they keep on messing I say right, you've got your warnings, it's time to go home. You have to go home, I'll let you come back next week but if you mess then, that's it. I'll give them a chance but the way I explain it to them is that I'm coming here on my own time, I don't get paid to do this, its just for yous. So why are you messing with me, I can just pack up and leave. And that's it. Most of them understand but there's always one or two in every group that are 'messers'. That try to be hard men.

R: The teachers that were in you school, were there any that you got on well with?
J: Well, my tutor she was lovely. She was real old but she was mad. She used to race you to her car and all. She'd buzz off your head; let you start the car up or whatever. She used to play football, play rugby and all. She was a mad teacher, just pure funny.

R: Sounds like you got on well with her?
J: I got on very well with her. She actually cried when I was leaving. It was a shock; I was like most of the teachers in this school hate me. Because I was a messer not many teachers liked me but, the football coach was a teacher and he liked me 'coz I played football. Then the P.E coach. the teachers that do active things liked me a lot. The Woodwork teacher, he liked me coz I was great at doing Woodwork, great with my hands and I always concentrated. Like for my Junior Cert I set up most of the young

ones pieces coz they didn't know how so I helped them out. Me and my mate Peter, me and him were always together. We'd always be great at helping each other do work, then the teachers that did Woodwork, Metalwork, Home Economics and then football and PE…we got on great with them because we had more in common coz we knew what we were talking about. Then when it came to sitting in a class and having to write, we did not like writing so we would start to mess and then it meant we didn't get along with the teacher. If you're a messer, you're going to be a bad apple to the teacher, so then the teacher would give out to you. Then the teacher might kick you out of the class and you'd be walking down the corridor saying this teacher is that and this teacher is this…I'll do this to her and all.

R: Do you think it's important to get along with one teacher, to feel that you have someone in your corner?

J: That's what…my tutor was in my corner. And she was actually my English teacher. She knew I was a 'messer' but even though I was a 'messer' she still tried to keep me, to keep up. She was the one teacher that…well if I had another teacher they hated me. Even when I was getting kicked out of school she tried her best to fight me back into it. There was nothing she could have done at that stage.

R: Do you keep in touch with any of your mates from school?
J: I hang around with most of them.

R: Are they still in school?
J: One of them is on the verge of leaving…he's just like me. Another one is doing honours Leaving Cert and a lot of them are doing the Leaving Cert and LCA, but when you're doing LCA you get slagged to bits over it. 'Coz they say you're dumb, if you do LCA you're dumb. People in the ordinary Leaving Cert are getting more respect, treated better than the ones in the LCA. They're treating the LCA people as just 'messers'. Then they all slag each other. The smart people are slagging the LCA people and calling them dumb. Oh lets count apples and all. Ye can't even read and all. Two of my mates that are actually kicked out of school, one of them is actually doing block-paving and the other one turned to the 'bad side'.

R: Tell me what you mean by the 'bad side'.

J: Getting money the wrong way. A lot of the young fellas that have been kicked out school do turn to selling drugs.

R: Say tomorrow morning you work up and all of a sudden you were the principal of ███████. First day on the job, tell me two changes you would make to that school.

J: I wouldn't be…I 'd get rid of that uniform (both laugh). It's a horrible uniform.

R: Would you bring in a different uniform or would you let students wear their own clothes?

J: Probably let them wear their own. But I know why they set the uniform, it's because not all the kids have the same type of clothes as the other kids would. But like that doesn't mean that they should be stung with a uniform that bad. In summer you do be sweating coz the jumper's that heavy. And you're not allowed go into the school without the jumper. And then our windows are bolted.

R: Bolted?

J: Yeah, they have the windows bolted shut. 'Coz people used to get out of them and run off. We were like, "that's a fire hazard, putting cages on the windows". We were like, "this is like a prison". Which, the windows were drilled shut and there was cages on the outside so you couldn't get out.

R: What other change would you make?

J: I'd do…like more PE. I know you have to learn the basic subjects like, but not the way the teachers teach it. They're too strict on the students, like no doing this and no doing that. If the kid thinks that they can learn better by listening to their Ipod at school and they think they can work with more concentration, if the think they can work better, fair enough let them do that.

R: Do you think that schools need to be more flexible?

J: Yeah. The way I see it is…you need your phone. Sometimes you need your phone because it could be an emergency. You get caught with your phone, the phone gets took off you and then you have to pay a score to get it back.

J: Put their phone on silent. Don't constantly have it on. Most of the young ones, I don't know how they didn't get caught. They used to put it in their shirt pocket and all. And then they'd get a text and they'd be pulling their jumper out…

J: I didn't have a big choice. I kind of more got threatened to leave school because…my mate ███████ killed himself just there last year.

J: He was seventeen like. He was…he had a harsh time, a bad life. I was sitting down in my house, this was coming up to the end of school, I was sitting down having a few bottles in my house watching the match and I got a text on my phone. Here such and such is after dying. No, he goes did you hear about such and such and I was like, no what is he after getting arrested or what? What's he after doing now? He was constantly getting arrested, he was on his way to prison. When I heard he killed himself, I was like, what? Pure shock you know? I bawled my eyes out. Then we went back into the school two days later, he killed himself in the school grounds, so the gate that we had to walk through for school, was a constant reminder of there's where our mate did it. We walked into school…we were all, we weren't in the humour of doing work. It was only two days later and we hadn't got over it and the funeral was that week during school. We were all like, we didn't know what to be doing. And then the teacher throwing work out in front of yez. We hadn't got the head to be doing work while our mate is just after dying. That week that his funeral was on, we had a graduation for fourth year so the teachers thought it was, well if you're not in, you're not getting back to school. But we were like, "we're going to our mate's funeral, it's something that we have to do". "If yous don't come into school, yous are going to get expelled".

J: There was about five or six of us that were best friends with him, we used to sit in his room constantly and have a few bottles or whatever. But they said if we go to the funeral we were getting kicked out of school. We all went to the funeral, we didn't care, it's our

mate at the end of the day. But you know the way you go for a few drinks after the funeral? Well we got buckled drunk. Me and three of my mates went into the school to the graduation, buckled drunk. You were supposed to come up in your uniform, we came up buckled drunk. So we went in and sat down and everybody in our year was there and they were like, "the smell of gargle of yous". So then the Principal said some students in this school don't know how to look after themselves. And we just started saying to the Principal, "shut up you alco and all". Then the Vice-Principal sat down beside us, she was a girl, and we started calling her bad names and that. We were buckled; we didn't know what we were saying. Then the next day he came in and said "you have a meeting, with Mr. ████████ and your ma". We all came into the meeting, we all had it separate. They go to me, "we know it was a funeral but you shouldn't have came into school". I said to them that you told us that if we didn't come in we were going to be kicked out. The Principal turned around to me and said "John this is your choice. Either leave now or you get expelled in three days". So if I didn't leave then I was going to get expelled in three days, so I kind of had to leave. I would get a better reference than if I was kicked out. You go for a job and it says that you got kicked out; they think you're going to be terrible to them. And you go to a job and you say you left school on your own behalf, well then it's going to be better.

R: Was getting a job important to you?

J: Well I actually wanted to join the Army. Ever since I was in first year. I had to be seventeen to join. Last year I was planning on joining and then the recession and all started and they weren't recruiting so when I left school I was like, what am I going to do?

R: Would you like to join in the future?

J: I'm actually hoping to join in the future. Now in Youthreach I'm doing catering so I'm going to go on to college now. Most people when they asked me if I wanted to go to college, I'd laugh at them and say get up outta that. Me? In college? Imagine that! Not a hope, I wouldn't last in college one day. But since I joined Youthreach it's like…I wasn't good in classes and when they brought me out to the kitchen, I loved it. It's something I like doing, cooking. So now I want to go to college to be a chef. If I train to be a chef then, I can go on to join the Army as a chef and then, when you retire at least

you'd have something else to go on to then. You'll always have something to do, there's always room for chefs.

J: I actually did Home Economics and I got an A on that. I'm more good with my hands, with cooking, doing..fixing bikes, getting under or taking out an engine. Playing football…I can do anything physical. When it comes to having to sit down and do writing, it's not my thing.

J: My ma was actually a 100% behind me. Because she knew I was getting kicked out of the school and she said you're probably better off leaving soon. Because the teachers don't support you, the teachers don't respect you. If the teachers aren't going to respect you, of course you're not going to respect them. 'Coz I didn't want to leave school but I was going to get kicked out either ways. And then you're going to end up bad.

J: Most of my mates were kicked out of the school at the time. One of my mates got kicked out; after his dad died he went on a mad one. When a teacher told him what to do he grabbed her by the throat. And said, "keep it up and I'll kill you stone dead". Which he would coz he's a bit tapped. He ended up going on to block paving. A lot of them ended up being kicked out. The gang I was hanging around, I was hanging around with a bad crowd. What happened to my mate (the suicide) messed with my head as well. It completely knocked me off track. I didn't know what to be doing with myself. I was supposed to go over to him the night that happened. I go to him, I'll be over to you tomorrow night, and we'll grab a few bottles. But I never went over. I thought if I had have went over to him he wouldn't have did that. And that kept running through my head but I had no one to get it out to. At that time I bottled everything up. I never told anybody anything and I constantly had a temper. But then people were like, "why are you always so angry?". It doesn't make a difference why I'm always angry. I'd just snap then and go mad. But I never had anyone to say…I wouldn't turn to my ma, my ma had enough on her plate. I wouldn't turn to my dad or my sisters. I wasn't really close with my dad at the time. But I wouldn't turn to my sisters and say such and such. I wouldn't tell my mates coz they'd laugh at you, they'd make a joke. So I turned it into anger, all

into temper like. So if anybody said anything I was up to fight. Which got me into a lot of trouble.

J: Getting paid to do something that you like. What I'm doing in Youthreach now, I love doing. They pay me to do it but I'd get up and do it for free coz I love doing it. And at the end of the day I'm going to come out with something good at the end of it. I can cook this, I can do this. When you go to parties and all, you can say, I'm training to be a chef. You can actually have a proper conversation with older people than just talking about crap. Say an older, more responsible person says, what are you doing? You can actually say, well I'm training to be a chef.

R: Do you like being able to say that you are doing something worthwhile?
J: Yeah. That you are not just hanging around. A lot of my friends that left school don't do anything. I told a lot of them to get into what I'm doing but…because of the money they are making (drugs), they are not going to do it. Like, money wise they are making 500 euro a day. If you are making that money at the age of seventeen, and one of them is actually fourteen, you're not going to stop. He's not going to say, yeah go to Youthreach for 100 euro a week. They don't see the point, but like, I always explain to them, listen you may be making this money now but you could get arrested. One of my mates is waiting to go on trial now for getting caught with a load of heroin. Now that he got caught he's settling himself down, trying to get his education. When he got caught he got a fright so he's trying to calm himself down. But it's loo late at that stage.

R: A lot of young people are influenced by their mates. How do you stay so motivated about your education?
J: I actually didn't at one stage. I fell into the wrong crowd. I'm still constantly stopped to this day by Gardaí but it's more like, I've kind of got a head on my shoulders. After seeing two of my mates get caught with drugs, two of my mates killed themselves, now seeing what happened to them when they left school and they got on the wrong track. I'm not going down the same road. My sister is actually on drugs and she left school and I don't want her on the same track as them. I know all the drug dealers and the junkies around the place, and looking at them…like looking at the drug dealers and saying I want this, I want that. Like looking at the clothes, the cars they have, it's not a life 'coz

they are constantly watching over their shoulder. My sister's fella was a bad person at one stage but now he puts me on track. He says, "John it's not worth it, the money I was getting it wasn't worth it. I was constantly looking over my shoulder, fearing for my life. And then when I moved in with your sister, I was fearing for her life and my baby's life. It's not a life to want. It's not only looking over your shoulder from the Gardaí, it's looking over your shoulder from people who are out to get you". He goes, "what you're doing now is perfect. Get yourself a credit union account, start saving up, you can get them cars, it'll just take you longer and at least then you know you are after earning it by hard work not just killing someone else". But not everyone gets a second chance so I'm trying to fight for mine. But I'm not getting much respect of no one around my area. I'm classed as still a bad apple. I still hang around at the shops. The Gardaí constantly stop you, you can't get away from it. Once you were bad, you can't turn away from it. That's the way I see it. I'm actually hanging around with a different crowd now, and the crown I'm hanging around with, they'd be more relaxed. They wouldn't do or sell drugs or cause fights. We used to go out and get in a fight everyday. For no reason. Most of us got arrested. Thank god I have no arrests coz I always got away. The coppers knew exactly what I was after being doing. But now I'm hanging around with a new group of people. Since I'm hanging around with them, I don't really get in trouble. I'm after starting a kid's football team, going to Youthreach every day but when I was in school I never went. I was always on the hop. I always go to Youthreach.

R: What's different about Youthreach for you?

J: I think, the teachers treat you with more respect. They treat you as an adult. If you have something wrong like, there's something not right with your head or you've had a row with your dad or your ma, the teachers will actually come in and talk to you. They actually ask you what's wrong. They sit you down and say…there's nothing you can't really do. When I was in Youthreach, another one of my mates killed himself and ▮▮▮▮▮ (staff) knew by just looking at me that there was something wrong. She called me into the office and sat me down and asked what was wrong. When she found out what was wrong, she hugged me. But the teachers never did that. I don't mean the hugging. But they never sat you down and asked you what was wrong. They're more there for you than the teachers like. I think a teacher should be, it's not for the money but for the kids. They should be doing something that they like. Get a different job if you don't like it. Why come into a class if you don't want to be there. The people in

Youthreach are there for you, if you want to talk. They'd sit you down and show you the work. They come around to each individual person in the class. They tell you this is what you should be doing. And they'd show you. They treat you more like an adult and they show you a lot more coz they have more time. They have more time for you as a student. Because the teachers here respect you, you are going to respect them back. And you get a great laugh out of them. So then you have it more fun with the teachers. Relaxed. So it's much better in Youthreach.

J: I think the smaller classes are much better coz the teachers come around and talk. And you can actually…well most of the people in Youthreach got kicked out over messing in school. In here we don't mess. And we were all 'messers' in school. We don't get in trouble. When I was in school I would get suspended, say three times a week. That school was much too strict. It was like they had a ball and chain tied to your foot. They don't let you do anything.

If a younger brother, sister, nephew, whatever, came to you tomorrow and said that they wanted to leave school. What advice would you give them?
I was only talking to my nephew about this yesterday.

R: What age is he?
J: He's only eleven. He goes, "as soon as I get to third year I'm going to leave. I'm going to do exactly what you done". I said to him, "it's not worth it. You may think because I get paid for going to school, it's going to be deadly. It's not as good as you think. It's hard work. You can't miss school all the time". He's constantly out of school. Basically Youthreach is more mature. If you are not mature you're not going to make it in Youthreach. When you come to Youthreach, they make you mature. When I first came to Youthreach I felt like a kid. Since I'm in Youthreach now I think I have more of a head on my shoulders. I'd say to my nephew, "stop messing in school, look what I did when I was in school. Now I'm looking back…when I was your age I was laughing at some of the stuff I did but now I think how stupid I was to do that".

R: Do you regret leaving school?

J: I'll never regret leaving school because I was never going to get anywhere in school. But I regret how I behaved. Because I'm in Youthreach I'm glad I left school. Since I left school I'm getting along great. I've less anger in me. When I was in school I was constantly angry. I was constantly fighting. I had a temper. But now that I'm in Youthreach it's more easy and I'm doing something with myself. You've more time to breathe; in school they were constantly throwing everything at you. In Youthreach they let you make your own choices. What you want to do is what you want to do. They help you do up CVs. They help you get a job. So they're constantly always helping you move further, get a better future. They are always telling you that you can do better than this. You can always do better. If I said to my mates that I want to be a chef, they'd say yeah whatever, you're dumb. If someone who is actually a chef says I can make it as a chef, well why couldn't I? If he thinks I can, why should I even listen to my mates?