

**Early leavers from mainstream education: A
phenomenological examination of their lived experiences
of loss, adversity and system blockages**

By

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education (EdD) is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Cummins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

Signed: Jennifer Cummins

ID No: 16211603

Date: 23rd August 2024

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Thank you to my children for their unconditional love and support during this process. It has been tough on all of us but you were always there to brighten up the day and encourage me to keep going. I love you Fáinne, Oisín, Hannah and Caoimhín.

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Abbreviations

ACES	Adverse Childhood Experiences
AEN	Additional Educational Needs
DALY	Disability Adjusted Life Year
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity
ESL	Early School Leaving
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
ET	Educate Together
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
EWS	Education Welfare Service
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison Coordinator
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate Course
SCP	School Completion Programme
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SES	Socio Economic Status
SNA	Special Needs Assistants

Abstract

Early leavers from mainstream education: A phenomenological examination of their lived experiences of loss, adversity and system blockages

Jennifer Cummins

This research examined the lived experiences of seven young people living in North Dublin who left mainstream education before the Leaving Certificate, the final state examination at the end of second level education in the Republic of Ireland. These young people all returned to full-time education in an alternative education setting where they then undertook Quality and Qualifications Ireland level certifications in general learning, construction studies, sports, and catering.

The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach was applied. Each participant had self-reported experiencing one of the following adversities in childhood: death of a parent, having a parent in prison, growing up in care, parental separation, parental homelessness, or poverty. There were additional factors also reported including family history of early school leaving, experiencing mental health difficulties, experiencing domestic violence, child abuse, and parental drug use.

There are four main findings. These findings are grouped under the following headings: The concept of time and memory; Who Cares? The loss of a mother figure and the importance of friendship; School structures; and Support structures. The implications for each of these findings extend into the areas of policy and practice in education, social work, youth work, mental health services, and family support. The examination of young people's experiences of services and support in these areas gives voice to a marginalised and often unheard cohort of people in our education and care systems.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study explores childhood adverse experiences and their influence on the educational decision making of young people from the Republic of Ireland. The study is based in an urban setting in Dublin City in which the majority of the population experience low social and economic status (SES). The research is a phenomenological examination of seven young people's lived experience of childhood adversity and its influence on leaving mainstream school before the Leaving Certificate, which is the last formal state examination in the school system in Ireland. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system is the central theoretical framework in this research.

Chapter 1 outlines the aims and rationale for the research as well as the researcher's positionality and background in undertaking this research. The chapter will also outline the research questions and the theoretical framework used in this study.

The purpose of this thesis is to look at the phenomenon of early school leaving through Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It will look at the child, his/her family, the community in which they live in, and the wider society. The focus of the work is the experience of the young person as told by them in their own words. This thesis aims to address the gap in the voices of young people from North Dublin and their experiences of early school leaving. The Irish Joint Oireachtas Committee Report on Early School Leaving (2010) observed the link between trauma and early school leaving (Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science, 2010). This thesis will expand the growing body of research which focuses on adverse childhood experiences and early school leaving.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with seven young people aged between 16-20 years, to gain an understanding of what factors led them to leave mainstream school early. Phenomenological inquiry allows the researcher to look at an issue as part of uncovering meaning. It “uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) called an essence description” (Creswell, 2014, p. 196).

1.2 Research Questions

The research has two central questions:

1. What is the perceived impact of adverse childhood experiences on a number of young people living in a North Dublin urban area, aged 16-20 years and how did these experiences affect their decision to leave mainstream school before the completion of the Leaving Certificate?
2. What support systems did the young people have in their lives? What influence did the support systems (eco-systems), such as family (microsystem), peers (microsystem), community (macrosystem), and schools (microsystem) have in their lives in supporting their decision making process to leave mainstream school before the completion of the Leaving Certificate?

The aim of the research is to examine this phenomenon through the experiences of the young people and to examine how their lived experiences could influence policy to identify areas where protective factors can be implemented to try to create trauma responsive systems (Treisman, 2017).

Children and young people do not just arrive into Junior Infants (the first school year in Ireland) at aged 4 or 5 years, and suddenly become at risk of early school leaving. It is not

only their educational attainment and participation levels which influence their future educational achievement. There are other factors that contribute to the students' struggle to complete their education to the uppermost certificate at second level school. Early mainstream school leaving is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon. This study outlines what those factors are and how they can contribute toward the policy and practice of preventing early school leaving.

Students may experience negative educational experiences from a multiplicity of perspectives. This thesis looks at the challenges facing these young people and asks them about the factors that led them to leave mainstream school early. In looking for the reasons why students leave school early, it is necessary to look at several aspects of their lives in order to map the opportunities that need to be provided in order to prevent future system failures for students in our education system. The themes which are likely to arise from this study are complex and are dependent on many factors in the young people's lives through the stories they tell.

When the young person starts to withdraw from mainstream school over a period of time, there are a number of things that happen. The student often disengages from school on an emotional, psychological, social, and finally physical level. The reaction that the student experiences from those around him/her is one that often results in social and emotional supports being withdrawn. Disengagement from school is an issue of relationships (Downes, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) discusses the ecosystems that surround children and young people in order for them to develop and learn. When the young person is withdrawing they put barriers and blockages to prevent the interruption of an educational exit. The systems in which they exist can provide support and protection to work with the individual and family

to enable young people to continue their education in that setting or to successfully transfer to another setting (Rogers, 2016).

1.3. The Researcher and the Research

The researcher has worked with children and young people since she was a teenager, beginning her work as a volunteer leader in a local youth theatre. Over three decades the researcher has held many positions both paid and voluntary in the youth, community, arts, and education fields. Her work has always been driven by the desire to truly listen to and hear young people and support them in making their own decisions and achieving their aims and goals. Her practice has been developed through on the ground work and her qualifications. Her Master of Arts in Sociology (1997) research was on the Social and Personal Development of Young People through Youth Theatre. This was followed by a further Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Drama) in 2004.

Her practice is informed by a child led approach in all aspects of engagement involving decisions for and about young people. Her work includes sitting on the National Boards of the National Youth Council of Ireland, the National Association for Youth Drama, and the National Youth Work Advisory Committee. She was the Chairperson of Educate Together Board of Directors for several years. Her paid role is as the Coordinator of the Ballymun Anseo School Completion Programme, where she has held the post since 2007. The work of the School Completion Programme will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The researcher believes deeply in the idea that in order to create a just society there must be support in place for the most vulnerable people. The researcher believes that in order to have what Fromm called a humanistic society, we must create a society which has equity as well as equality. The fundamental right to be free from oppression, exclusion, and violence (Fromm, 1942, 1993, 1997; Freire, 1972, 1985, 1994, 1998) is central to the researcher's

voluntary and paid work. These experiences have led the researcher to want to use research to highlight the lived experiences of young people who have left mainstream school before the Leaving Certificate. In the course of her work the use of the term adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) has been used to highlight the difficult and challenging events that children experience and puts a framework on the behaviours seen in schools. It explains the blockages to positive behaviour, engagement in learning, and well-being. There is ever-increasing research being done to develop trauma informed schools and communities (Perry, 2021; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021; Song & Xueqin, 2020; Treisman, 2017;). It is the aim of this thesis to contribute to this knowledge in an Irish context.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This thesis is a phenomenological research study of early school leaving. This research will use interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This is a qualitative research approach that is committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model supports this approach from a systems perspective. Locating the child in the micro, meso, and macrosystem and the interrelation of the ecological system on the child's development allows the research to be child-centred but also allows the researcher to explore the ecological environments that are constituted in a phenomenological field that orients the developing child's actions and interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979).

1.4.1. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's reflexivity in the development of his theory over decades was a contributing factor as to why this theoretical concept was chosen for this research. The major volumes of his work show his thought process and the evolution of his theory to move

towards the participant in his/her own environment and outside the laboratory. Child development was researched in laboratories in the 1970s. Because this environment was unfamiliar to the child with a researcher who was unknown to the child, Bronfenbrenner questioned the validity of the findings (Bronfenbrenner, 1973, 1979). Bronfenbrenner wanted to see the child in his or her usual setting, with other people the child is usually surrounded by, in order to identify developmental processes and outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1973, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979). The interaction of systems in which the child exists must be taken into account by researchers. Research has now moved to researching the child in his/her own environments. This allows the child to be seen as an agent with his or her own ability to influence theoretical understanding, as well as the contexts in which he or she lives influencing these understandings (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The bioecological system allows the child to be seen via the many parts of his or her life which are not linear but indeed complex and nested in one another, like Russian Dolls as Bronfenbrenner illustrates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's work has been used by many researchers in the field of youth, community, and education. His theories have been central to the development of policy procedures and training in these fields. His framework is used to investigate many aspects of a child's life, including early school leaving. The national longitudinal study Growing up in Ireland (Greene et al, 2010) uses Bronfenbrenner as the theoretical framework for this multi annual, multi focus study. Training in youth work and the School Completion Programme is also based on Bronfenbrenner's work.

Bronfenbrenner defined the ecology of human development as involving "the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21). In the

bioecological model, development is defined as “the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups. The phenomenon extends over the life course, across successive generations, and through historical time, both past and future” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).



Figure 1. Bio-ecological Framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)

Figure 1 demonstrates the nested layers of the child’s life. The child is at the centre as an active agent in his or her own world. Their personality traits, temperament, motivations, genetic inheritance, and dispositions are influenced by the other levels of the bio-ecological system and are seen as part of their agency (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005)

The microsystem is the system that refers to the world in which the child has direct experience on a regular basis, such as the home and school. “A microsystem is a pattern of

activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face to face setting with particular physical and material features and containing other person with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148). The child’s family influences their development through the value system that may motivate the parents in supporting their child’s education. The microsystem describes the face to face, direct relationships the child has with significant people in their lives, like parents, teachers, and friends. This interaction becomes more complex and interrelated over the course of the child’s life.

The mesosystem refers to the point of connection between the child’s everyday contexts. “The mesosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g., the relations between home and school, school and workplace). In other words, a mesosystem it is a system of two or more micro-systems, it is a system of microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006; O’Toole 2016). It is made up of the linkages and processes between two or more of the microsystems like family and school. Others like Rosa & Tudge (2013) are not convinced that this layer should be one in itself, but rather a linking mechanism between layers as it is the connective process which is of importance.

The fourth is the exosystem, where external elements influence the child but the child does not have direct interaction with them. For example, the child’s parents’ workplace and/or pressure from their workplace would influence the child. It is important to note that any social institution that makes decisions that ultimately affect conditions of family life can function as an exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 26). The exosystem “encompasses the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence

processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person...” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148).

The fifth is the macrosystem. It is the “overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and ecosystems” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 149). This is where the belief systems, the social systems, and the cultural norms of the society in which the child is growing up are located. Policies and laws are also a part of this layer. As Bronfenbrenner’s attention to proximal processes intensified he focused less on the macrosystem. This research would like to include the macrosystem and its influence on every system within which the child exists. Bronfenbrenner asserted that all research should have social policy at the core. The research being undertaken in this study asserts that it is social policy that needs to be challenged by the potential findings.

Finally, the chronosystem lies at the edge of the model. It is the most recent addition to the model. The chronosystem refers to environmental events and patterns of transitions that impact a person’s life (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). Notably, experiences and reactions to experience often change over time (O’Toole, 2016). The influences on the systems may be proximal, but others are indirect. Influences on each level are bi-directional, and they change over time due to reasons ranging from individual development to societal change.

These systems can seem simplified, based mostly on context and perhaps lacking in the individual or human element of life (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, 1999). It could also seem that the power or the influence of the systems overpowers the individual or the time in which one is living, the bigger picture per se. Bronfenbrenner over the course of his career further developed his theory to include the levels of individual structure and function such as biology, psychology, and behaviour (Lerner, 2005, p. xiv).

1.4.2. Process-Person-Context-Time

By the 1990s Bronfenbrenner had verbalised his reflexivity. It was from the year 2000 onwards that he used the term Process-Person-Context-Time model (PPCT). It is the interrelated nature of these four concepts which are the essence of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner's later work (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2005) is often overlooked by researchers and trainers in the field of youth, social, and educational fields. This may be due to the success of his earlier work (1979). Nevertheless, his Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) approach is explored in the following section and applied as a guide for conducting this research.

There are four principal components of the PPCT model. They are described as being dynamic and about the interactive relationships among them. They are Process, Person, Context and Time. The first is Process.

1.4.2.1 Process

According to Bronfenbrenner, the proximal processes of the child and his or her environment are the primary mechanism for human development. Children develop through the relationships they experience (Bronfenbrenner, 2007). Bronfenbrenner refers to these important relationships as proximal processes to emphasise that they are located within all areas of the child's life and occur over time. He argues that human development takes place through processes of increasingly more complex interactions between the active, evolving child and the persons, objects, and symbols in their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 2005). The more often these interactions occur the more effective they will be.

1.4.2.2 Person

This principle indicates the role of the child and their personal characteristics in social interactions and their individual development. The person is not viewed as a passive receptor, but as an active participant in their own development. This occurs through the actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances that they are positioned within (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The characteristics are dispositions, resources, and demands. The power of the process in influencing the child depends on the characteristics of the person. Bronfenbrenner identifies that these three types of person characteristics influence whether the proximal processes will be operational or not.

Dispositions can initiate proximal processes in a certain area of development and continue to maintain their function. Next, bioecological resources of skills, experience, knowledge, and skills are required for the effective functioning of proximal processes at a given stage of development. Finally, demand characteristics invite or discourage responses from the social environment that may promote or disrupt the functioning of neighboring processes. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris, “The differentiation of these three forms leads to their combination in patterns of Person structure that can further account for differences in the direction and power of resultant proximal processes and their developmental effects” (2007, p. 795-796).

1.4.2.3 Context

The bio-ecological model serves as the context for the child’s development. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) argue that biological factors, evolutionary processes, and contextual factors impose opportunities for the child to achieve their full potential. The environmental condition must be investigated to deem the factors that are supportive to

children and to consider the factors that set limits on the child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's assertion that an individual can change their context is based on three elements. The first is that simply by being in the context the individual changes it. The second is the active change based on the individual resource characteristics. Finally, the most active is based on an individual's force characteristics, such as motivation, persistence and as Tudge et al. describe "the desire and drive to do so" (Tudge et al., p. 201, 2009). Force is seen in Chapter 5 when participants of the research describe their lack of motivation, to stay in mainstream school, their persistence to return to education.

It is the shape of the context or environment that is to be changed which is of relevance to this study. What is key is the understanding of how an individual can alter the course of their life when the world in which they live is volatile, violent, oppressive, dangerous, and neglectful. Comprehending where the individual can gain the characteristics to evoke change in order to overcome adversity and to become free is crucial. This research asks whether the personal characteristics provide enough strength (force) to effect change, or whether they need support and intervention from outside, such as from another microsystem of the child's life. Another question that is posed is: Were the proximal processes enhancing or hindering the child's development and how to halt or alter that is of central importance to understanding the child's risk of early school leaving because of the proximal processes? Chapter five discusses the findings of the research.

The bioecological system assists in understanding adverse childhood experiences and in addressing early mainstream school leaving. An example of this is the role of the school and parent's relationship in tackling issues such as absenteeism, participation, and attainment. These microsystems form another layer of support for the family and the child. It assists the professional working with the child and family to identify what the need is and to encourage

and coach the parent to engage in support. It is the interactions between these microsystems that is of importance.

1.4.2.4 Time

Time is the fourth element, and it is relevant not only to the current time when an activity is occurring (micro time) but also to the meso time, which describes the consistency with which things occur, and finally to the macro time (previously called chronosystem) which is the wider view of societal time.

The proximal processes that occur in the child's life are highly influenced by the historical period during which they live. The continuity, or discontinuity of relationships within the micro-system is referred to as micro-time. Proximal processes which occur over broader time intervals of days and weeks are considered meso-time. Macro-time focuses on the changes in the larger society within and across generations. The child's experiences may occur cumulatively over time, however, changes that may seem small and statistically insignificant can be predictive of significant changes in the future (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; O'Toole, 2016). The timing of trauma will be discussed in the next chapter. The timing and duration of trauma is important in the continued development of the child and their ability to cope with the adverse experiences (Perry, 2017, Hawes et al., 2021,)

The bio-ecological model allows this research to be framed through these systems. These systems focus on the lived experience of the child or young person over the course of time and in the context in which they live. The child, the family, and the school/community are all affected by the system in which they are placed. The influence and impact of policy from the central government on the education system and other systems, such as the health system, also impact the child, the family, and the school/community. According to Lau and

Ng, "An important aspect of the microsystem is its emphasis on the lived experience or phenomenological dimension of the individual" (2014, p. 426). This research aims to look at the child in his or her environment and investigate the support and mechanisms of proximal processes that affect their decision to leave mainstream school before completing the final state examination, the Leaving Certificate.

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological lends this research a basis for the exploration of the research questions. The model presents a foundation to build upon that extends models such as Downes (2012, 2016, 2020) as well as Neal & Neal (2013) to address system blockages that participants experienced. It extends the use of the phenomenological approach that Bronfenbrenner incorporated into his systems framework, though giving it more emphasis than in Bronfenbrenner's initial account of phenomenology. It also extends Bronfenbrenner's model by looking at power, particularly in the context of poverty. Bronfenbrenner's model is about young people and this research uses his model to explore what young people say, in their own words.

1.5. Conclusion and thesis structure

This thesis will look at the lived experiences of young people who have left mainstream education before completing the established Leaving Certificate. The research questions will guide the focus of the research, along with the main themes that fall under adverse childhood experience in this context, which are the sample criteria of the research participants. These themes are, children in care; parental/guardian death; parent in prison; parental separation, and child homelessness and poverty.

This chapter introduced the research questions and the researcher and introduced the theoretical framework for the study. The rest of the thesis is laid out as follows. Chapter 2 will explore the Review of Literature. Chapter 3 will discuss the current policy contexts.

Chapter 4 will outline the methodology used in the research project. Chapter 5 will describe the data analysis and findings. Chapter 6 will describe the conclusions and recommendations from the findings.

Chapter Two Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

A literature review has been defined as ‘a written argument that promotes a thesis position by building a case from credible evidence based on previous research’ (Machi & McEvoy, 2012, p. 3). A review of literature is fundamental in obtaining a clear understanding of any topic, to ascertain what has already been studied, to understand how it has been researched, and to identify the areas that need to be researched further (Hart, 2018).

Examining the literature is crucial in order to ascertain what is already known and what is yet to be understood about a topic (Aveyard et al., 2016). The process of a literature review can be divided into three broad parts: identify the relevant literature; understand and interpret this literature; and creating a new perspective by writing the review (O’Neill et al., 2018). This literature review, in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, provides a clear outline of the thesis position, context, and background concerning early mainstream school leaving as well as the effects of adverse childhood experiences on this phenomenon.

The field of child development has moved from laboratory examinations to studying the child in her/his natural environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2007). It is through examining the child in their own situation with the people who they usually reside that researchers are able to understand the natural setting for a child. The family situation and belonging within a community and within a social and political context positions the child and her/his development. Whatever a child experiences, whether that experience has profound negative or positive effects, it occurs within the macrosystem of the child, within the macro, meso-, and micro-time sphere. This section will look at adverse childhood experiences through Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development (2007). It will examine the

proximal processes that impact the child's development. The Process-Person-Context-Time framework will be central to the examination of ACEs and the impact they have on educational decision making.

2.2 Adverse Childhood Experience Studies

Over the course of the last few decades adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have become part of the vocabulary of people working in the fields of social work, health, and education as well as youth work. Theories about trauma first emerged over 150 years ago (Nickerson et al., 2020). These theories were developed using adult participants. The prevalence of studies about the effects of ACEs is described by Hughes et al. (2017) who outline that a search of Pubmed yielded more than 2000 such studies. The data gathered demonstrates that the more ACEs a person experiences, the higher their risk of developing physical health challenges, as well as unhealthy lifestyle behaviours, mental health issues, and social underachievement (Anda et al., 2006; Douglas et al., 2010; Dube et al., 2003; Edwards et al., 2001; Felitti et al., 1998; Logan-Greene et al., 2014; McDonald et al., 2015; Ross et al., 2020). However, firstly it is important to examine the historical context of trauma.

Crocq and Crocq (2020) outline the historic references that describe the aftermath of war or other catastrophic events on those who experienced them, and their findings are summarised as follows. They start with a description from classic and epic writing. Etiologic hypotheses were cited by doctors during the French Revolution (1800-1815). The syndrome "vent du boulet" was used to describe the reaction that people had to loud sounds such as cannonballs. Emerging from the field of early modern psychiatry German physicians such as Oppenheim and Honigman studied the effects of trauma that occurred in the workplace or during war. Freud published the Aetiology of Hysteria in 1896. The Belgian psychiatrist Jean Crocq in the same year was researching railway accidents and described the effects that such

traumas had on those who experienced them. It was Honigman who coined the term “Kriegsneurose” in 1907. This translates as “war neurosis”. It described the effects war has on the human condition.

One of the first tests in this field was in the 1950s, the Midtown Community Health Study of Manhattan. The study identified adverse childhood experiences that were associated with adult mental health problems (Langner, 1963). The random sample was 1,660 people aged between 20 and 59 years. The data was collected using a questionnaire which was used in a 2 hour interview. There were 100 questions asking participants about a range of topics and gauging attitudes. Ratings were given to answers and two independent psychiatrists rated the “severity of the symptoms and the degree of impairment” (Langner, 1963, p. 921) .

Such experiences included parental mental health problems and childhood economic deprivation. Coming from a “broken home” featured very strongly in this study. However, they did not find a positive correlation between coming from such a home and mental disorder. There were other factors that increased the risk of mental health problems in adulthood, such as socioeconomic status and the age of the child when the family change occurred. The study did, however, identify factors in a child’s life that had an impact on his or her adult health.

The Vietnam War occurred between 1955 and 1975. The injured soldiers who were returning from this war displayed behaviours that ultimately led to the development of the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It became a category in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III, which was published in 1980. The Veterans were experiencing the following symptoms: “(i) the recurrent and distressing reexperiencing of the event in dreams, thoughts or flashbacks; (ii) emotional numbing and avoidance of stimuli reminiscent of the trauma; (iii) and a permanent state of increased arousal” (Crocq & Crocq,

2000, p. 53). This understanding and description of PTSD has continued to be developed over the past several decades.

A very large study of ACEs took place in the US in the 1990s. It is the largest longitudinal study in ACEs in North America. The service users of the Kaiser Permanente's San Diego Health Appraisal Clinic were posted a survey after they had completed a standardised medical evaluation at the clinic. 18,175 surveys were posted and the response rate for both waves of the study yielded a total number of 17,337. The respondents were sourced from the Kaiser Health Plan which had members visit its Health Appraisal Clinic over a period of time between August 1995 and March 1996 and in wave two August 1995 and March 1996 (Felitti et al., 1998, 2005).

The survey covered a range of childhood experiences. The questions were divided into seven categories: psychological, physical or sexual abuse, exposure to household substance abuse, mental illness, maltreatment of step/mother, and criminal behaviour in household. There were 17 questions asked, which are outlined in the table below.

Table 1. Prevalence of Childhood Exposure to Abuse and Household Dysfunction (Felitti et al., 1998)

	Abuse by Category
Psychological	Did a parent or other adult in the household... Often or very often swear at, insult, or put you down? Often or very often act in a way that made you afraid that you would be physically hurt?
Physical	Did a parent or other adult in the household... Often or very often push, grab, shove, or slap you? Often or very often hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
Sexual	Did a parent or other adult in the household... Touch or fondle you in a sexual way? Have you touch their body in a sexual way? Attempt oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you? Actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
	Household dysfunction by category
Substance abuse	Live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic? Live with anyone who used street drugs?
Mental Illness	Was a household member depressed or mentally ill? Did a household member attempt suicide?
Mother Treated violently	Was your mother (or stepmother) Sometimes, often, or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes? Ever threatened with, or hurt by, a knife or gun?
Criminal Behaviour in Household	Did a household member go to prison?

The findings indicate that 64% of the respondents reported experiencing one ACE. The findings also showed the correlation between adverse childhood experiences and health and wellbeing in adulthood (Anda et al., 2008; Dong et al., 2004; Felitti et al., 1998). The findings indicated that more adversity faced by the child increased the health risk factors in adulthood. It was found that if a child had experienced a trauma in childhood, the probability of exposure to another category was heightened. The likelihood of having experienced greater than two categories was approximately 54% (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 249).

When four or more ACE were experienced by an adult in childhood, the risk to health and behaviour increased many fold in each of the categories. For example, panic reactions increased by 2.5-fold. Sleep disturbance increased 2.1-fold. The risk of alcohol use and drug injection increased by 7.2 and 11.1-fold respectively. When compared with people who had not reported ACEs, those adults who reported 4 ACEs were 7 times more likely to be an alcoholic and 1200% more likely to attempt suicide. If an adult reported 6 or more ACEs, their lifespan was at risk of reducing by 20 years (Felitti et al., 1998).

The greater the dose ratio of childhood trauma the more detrimental the impact on a person throughout their lifetime. This means that higher amounts of trauma impacts on future health. ACEs contribute to ischemic heart disease, liver disease, mental illness (chronic anxiety, chronic depression, OCD, bipolar and personality disorders), obesity, alcoholism, drug addiction, and early death. However, as Mulcahy (2018) expands, the original ACEs study did not include people from high risk participants such as those who are homeless, in prison, or who attend for psychiatric support.

It is important to consider how the linkages between adverse childhood experiences and adulthood health are made. Felitti et al., found that the “linking mechanisms appear to center on behaviours such as smoking, alcohol or drug abuse, overeating, or sexual

behaviours that may be consciously or unconsciously used because they have immediate pharmacological or psychological benefit as coping devices in the face of the stress of abuse, domestic violence, or other forms of family and household dysfunction” (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 252). There is a correlation between adversity in childhood and the likelihood of the person to use substances or use certain behaviours as a coping mechanism which may not be healthy choices and therefore this may lead to lower health and higher disease in adulthood. The question of whether that person would have chosen such a lifestyle had they not experienced trauma as a child has not been evaluated in the ACE study. The ‘proximal risk factors’ (McCrorry et al., 2015, p. 687) such as lower educational attainment leading to lower occupational position and income, determine material conditions in adulthood. This may result in engagement in a number of health-compromising lifestyles choices and behaviours. The study also fails to show measures that were taken to ensure validation of the answers in this data collection. The questionnaire was sent out to participants. They filled it in at home, but were not asked to qualify anything they answered. This raw data was used to develop the themes of ACEs.

The ACEs study produced a stark pyramid to explain how adverse childhood experiences can lead to early death. It starts with the adversity at the bottom of the pyramid which then leads to social, emotional and cognitive impairment, leading to adoption of health-risk behaviours, followed by disease, disability, and social problems and ending at the top of the pyramid with early death. Extensive research has exposed that ACEs are associated with a variety of risky behaviours, unhealthy life choices, unintended pregnancy (Hillis et al., 2001), learning and behaviour disorders (Burke et al., 2011), homelessness in adulthood (Herman et al., 1997; Murphy, 2019). Illicit drug use (Downes, 2003; Dube et al., 2003) Early school leaving and lack of educational attainment is also found to have a correlation to ACEs (Chafouleas et al., 2018; Perfect, 2020; Sung-Man, 2020; West et al., 2014).

This pyramid is an illustration of the lives of some of the people accessing services such as social work, psychological services, youth services and school completion programmes. It highlights that even though there were limitations to the ACE study the fundamental assertions were in fact indicative of the experiences of childhood adversity.

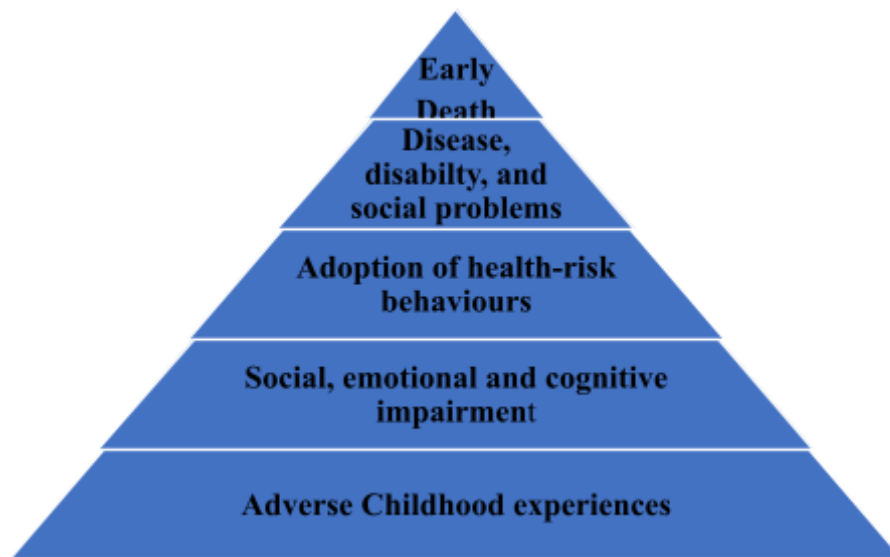


Figure 2. Potential influences throughout the lifespan of adverse childhood experiences. (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 256)

ACEs does not cover other types of loss and trauma (Downes, 2020; Finkelhor, 2018). Death of a parent or sibling is not covered in the Felitti et al. study. Bereavement in childhood was a criteria sample for selecting participants for this study, in chapter five the impacts of parental death of a mother is discussed. Other kinds of trauma which are omitted are natural disasters (Iachini et al., 2016), forced displacement, medical illness, community violence, serious accident/injury and bereavement (Barlett et al., 2018; Downes, 2020; p. 151). Homelessness is also not covered by the ACEs scoring. Bullying or victimisation, isolation and peer rejection are not ACEs in the original study (Finkelhor et al., 2015). However, these factors were identified by participants in this research as being a factor in their decision to leave mainstream school before the Leaving Certificate and it is discussed in chapter five.

These factors are potential themes which the young people in this study may identify with in the interviews.

The types of adversity which a child may face in childhood as outlined in the ACE study have been extended following more recent studies in the area. Boullier, et al., (2018) say that the ACEs study respondents were white and college educated. They outline that in Philadelphia young people from lower socio-economic areas were interviewed and that adversity which they experienced mostly surrounded the poor familial supports, lack of love, the child having to take on a parenting role due to the parents' inability to parent due to a variety of reasons.

Poverty and ill health were highlighted by Boullier, et al., (2018) as being a vital element which is missing in the ACE study. Living in poverty and in a poor neighbourhood leads to the community being unable to create a safe, resilient environment for the children and families who live there. Globally, the number of those living in extreme poverty declined by more than half, falling from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015, with most progress occurring since 2000 (Downes, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system is evident here. The child being protected by the family unit who are being protected by the community around the family. However, when there are cracks in these protective units the resilience of the child's bioecological system is compromised. Therefore, the child is exposed on a multidimensional level to the risk of adversity. This finding is evidenced in the Growing Up in Ireland Study.

2.3 Irish Studies on Adverse Childhood Experiences

2.3.1 Growing Up in Ireland

The Growing up in Ireland study is a longitudinal study funded by the Irish Government. It is managed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Central Statistics Office. The study follows the progress of two groups of children: 8,000 9-year-olds (Cohort '98) and 10,000 9-month-olds (Cohort '08). The members of Cohort '98 are now 24-25 years old and those of Cohort '08 are around 14 years old.

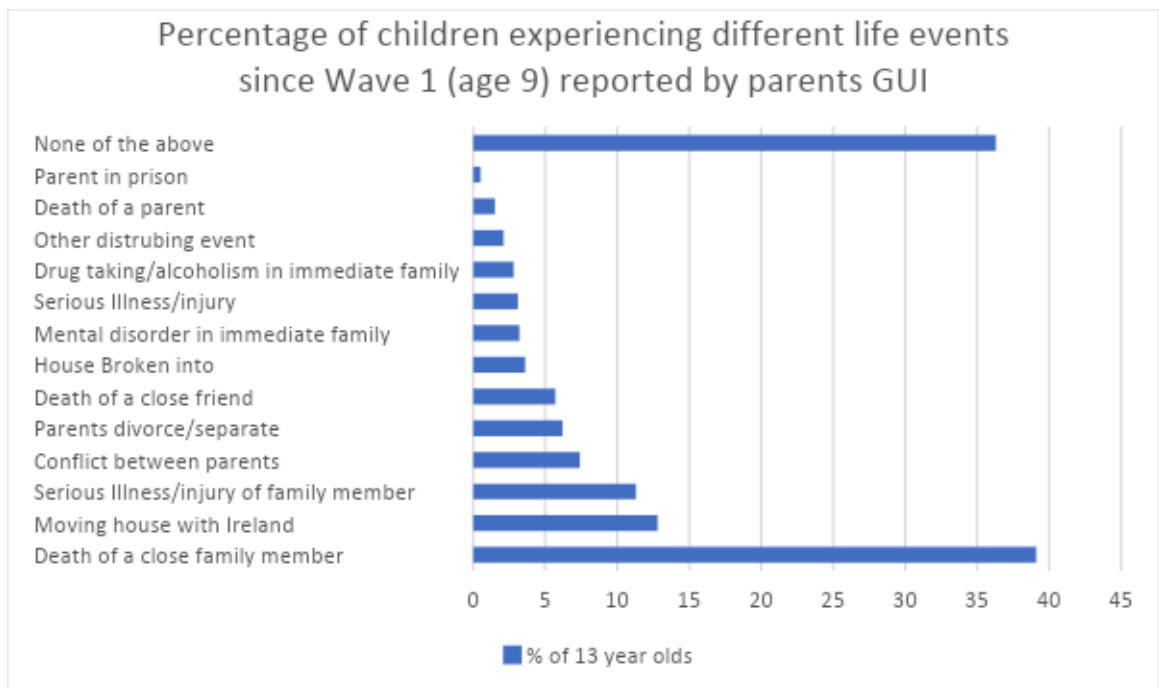
The study measures all elements of the child's life including the effects of stressful life events on the children. The same questions were asked when the children were nine and thirteen years old. The types of stressful events asked about were, the death of a parents, death of a close family member, death of a close friend, divorce/separation of parent, moving house, moving country, drug taking/alcoholism in immediate family, stay in foster/residential care, serious illness/injury to self, serious illness/injury of family member, conflict between parents, parent in prison. Only 4 of the original 14 ACEs questions were asked, omitted were the items regarding abuse and neglect (McCutchen et al., 2022).

At age nine 34% of the cohort had experienced just one event. 36% had experienced two to three of these events and just 9% had experienced four or more of these events. However, by age 13 years, 64% of the children had experienced one of these events. 15% had experienced two events and 8% had experienced three or more events. The types of events they had experienced are outlined in the table below.

The Table below is adapted from the Growing Up in Ireland study for the life of 13 year olds. The parents were asked if the child had experienced any of the above events. As

the table demonstrates, death of a close family member has the highest incidence.. Serious illness/injury of self of family member is next followed by parent’s conflict, separation or divorce. However, 36.3% did not experience any such events in the study.

Table 2. Growing up in Ireland Study Percentage of children experiencing ACEs (Williams et al, 2011; 2018).



Death of a close family member was experienced by 39.1% of the children. These deaths were mostly of grandparents (64%) or aunts/uncles (16%). Death of a parent was experienced and that is separated from this calculation as being 1.5% of the children. Conflict between parents (7.4%) and parents’ divorce/separation (6.2%) are among the most common experiences. Growing up in Ireland recognises that experiencing several of these events means that the child is “more likely to be at risk of heightened psychological problems” (Williams, 2018, p. 149).

In the findings and recommendations GUI states that there is a “need for support to address potential socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties among young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, those who have experienced several stressful life events, those whose parents have separated, and where the parent-child relationship is characterised by conflict and low levels of monitoring and disclosure” (Williams, 2018, p. 182).

2.3.2 Homelessness and ACEs prevalence

Other Irish studies also show the impact of ACEs on adulthood. Peter McVerry Trust in conjunction with the Educational Disadvantage Centre conducted a study of the holistic educational needs and experiences of a sample of homeless men (n=50) in Dublin aged between 18-38 years. The findings indicated that there were levels of ACEs across the sample. 68% of the respondents to the survey said they had experienced ‘traumatic childhood events’ (Murphy, 2019, p. 83). The survey did not explicitly ask what type or duration of ACEs they experienced but during the course of the interviews respondents referred to traumatic childhood events.

The table below shows the range of adversity which these men faced as children. There were 50 respondents. The study also highlighted the educational gaps which they faced in terms of bullying by students and teachers. It highlights the level of suspensions and exclusions these men experienced. This research thesis examines the types of support which are needed to help young people who are experiencing adversity and how the community around them can offer holistic, trauma responses which are effective and timely.

Table 3. Adaption of Respondents Interviews on ACEs (Murphy et al., 2019)

Childhood experience of homelessness	4 Respondents
Death of a parent or sibling	4 Respondents
Family Breakdown	2 Respondents
Exposure to suicide during childhood	1 Respondent
Exposure to drugs and alcohol	2 Respondents
Experience of abuse in childhood	2 Respondents
Being Placed in State Care	1 Respondent
Growing up in consistent poverty	2 Respondents
Growing up with family addiction	2 Respondents
Childhood addiction	2 Respondents

The Cork Simon Community (2017) examined their service through the lens of trauma informed practice. The people using their service were asked to participate in a study on ACEs. 77.6 % of the participants had experienced four or more traumas.. However, the average trauma experienced by the participants (n=53) was 5.15. The study linked the findings to the original research from Felitti et al. and created the table below. It starkly shows the levels of trauma the service users had experienced in comparison to the original research. This study was part of designing a trauma informed service and the collection of this data was in order to examine the extent of the prevalence of trauma for service users.

Table 4. ACE categories (Felitti et al., 1998 & Lambert et al., 2017)

ACE Scale Item	Original ACE study % (N=17,2337)	Cork Simon Community study % (=49)
Verbal Abuse	10.6	75.5
Physical Abuse	28.3	67.3
Sexual Abuse	20.7	34.7
Emotional Neglect	14.8	67.3
Physical Neglect	9.9	26.5
Loss of Parent	23.3	49
Mother Victim of Domestic Violence	12.7	42.9
Substance Abuse in the Family	26.9	71.4
Mental Illness in Family	19.4	59.2
Incarcerated Family Member	4.7	30.6

Mayock et al., (2011) examined the process, meaning and definition of young people exiting homelessness. They collected information about the young people's circumstances surrounding why they left home. It was discovered that the majority of young people had experienced adversity in childhood, "including economic hardship, neglect, inadequate or inconsistent care or abuse" (Mayock et al, p. 810, 2011). Three broad pathways into homelessness were identified. These were associated with: "(1) a history of state care; (2) family instability and family conflict; and (3) the young person's 'problem' behaviour and negative peer associations" (Mayock et al, p. 810, 2011). The young people's stories were similar in that their entering into homelessness was an extension of the adversity they had faced in childhood (Mayock and O'Sullivan 2007).

2.3.3 TILDA

McCrorry, Dooley, Layte and Kenny (2014) examined the lasting legacy of childhood adversity for disease risk in later life. The sample for this study was 6,912 people who were aged 50 years or over and who were part of The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA). The research looked at a four items measure – socioeconomic disadvantage, substance abuse among parents, physical abuse and sexual abuse. The adverse childhood experiences were based on the lifetime trauma list (Krause et al., 2004). The findings indicated that the experience of adversity during childhood “was associated with significantly increased risk for cardiovascular disease, lung disease, asthma, and emotional nervous or psychiatric disorders in later life” (McCrorry et al., 2015, p. 692) However, ACEs were not found to increase the risk of cancers, osteoporosis or diabetes. This supports Felitti et al. (1998) original findings, which found that heart disease, stroke and bronchitis had a stronger association with ACEs. Of significance to this research, McCrorry et al. study reinforced that socioeconomic status was one of the strongest predictors of adult disease (Matthews & Gallo, 2011). They found that childhood “material disadvantage” negatively affects the ‘quality of nutrition, household environmental conditions, economic resources and the intergenerational reproduction of inequality” (McCrorry et al., 2015, p. 694).

Ward et al. (2020) examined the TILDA to assess whether resilience was a protective factor against later life depression having experienced adversity as a child. The study found that ‘higher resilience is associated with a decreased likelihood of later life depressive symptoms (Ward et al., 2020, p. 905). Their findings also criticise the ACEs pyramid Figure 2, above, because it is a linear representation of what can occur on the pathway from childhood traumatic events to early mortality. However, their findings indicate that such a journey is complex and that it is potentially malleable and therefore may not necessarily or

always follow the expected path. The research found a positive association between ACEs and adult depressive experiences. There will come a time when the GUI children will be eligible to be part of TILDA, that data will allow for a lifetime longitudinal study in Ireland.

McCutchen et al. (2023) examined Irish adults (n=535) over the age of 50 resident in Ireland. The main aim of this study was to extend current understandings about the level of ACE exposure among older Irish adults, and test whether perceived social support moderated the effect of ACEs on symptoms of mental ill-health among older adults. A higher proportion of older adults in this sample reported having experienced an ACE event (94%) than in the TILDA study (24%; Ward et al., 2020). The researchers explain that this is perhaps because they used a broader range of ACEs, such as neglect, mental illness, witnessing domestic violence, and bullying. Furthermore the participants in their research reported higher rates of exposure to specific ACEs that were measured in both studies, such as sexual abuse (21% vs. 6%), physical abuse (56% vs. 7%), and parental alcohol or drug use (17% vs. 9%). The researchers assert that it is reasonable to assume that the true rate of ACE exposed older adults is higher than the 24% identified in the TILDA study, and likely to be at least as high as estimates from the general adult population (McCutchen et al., 2023).

2.3.5 Further Irish Studies

Doyle & Byrne (2018) highlight parents are at risk of cross generational inequalities because survival becomes the basic need and all other aspects of the family life is centred around ensuring safety. The impact of life stressors was found to have a profound effect on the lives of everyone in the family. Holmes and Rahe (1967) five highest ranked stressors were used to identify what the stressors are: death, divorce, marital separation, jail term and personal injury and illness. Doyle & Byrne found that the first four of these stressors were most significant to their study. The findings of most relevance here is that those stressors

affect the children and young people's ability to participate or attend school because 'education comes second to surviving' (Doyle & Byrne, 2018, p. 13).

McCutchen et al. (2021) compared the occurrence and co-occurrence of ACEs and their relationship to mental health in the United States and Ireland. This study examined Irish adults and United States adults' experiences of ACEs and the correlation to major depressive disorder (MDD), generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex PTSD (CPTSD). The sample was 1893 US adults and 1020 Irish adults. The US sample was created using probability-based sampling and was representative of the entire US population. The Irish part of the research used quota sampling methods to construct a non-probability sample that represented the adult population broadly. There were four measures used to collect the data. The ACE-Q created by Felitti et al., in 1998; The Patient Health Questionnaire - 9 that measures MDD was used in Ireland, with PHQ-8 being used in the US. (The difference is that PHQ-9 measure includes suicidality/self-harm); The Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7-item Scale (GAD-7) was used to measure GAD in US and Irish samples; finally, The International Trauma Questionnaire ITQ was used to measure PTSD and CPTSD in both samples. The findings indicate that Irish participants were significantly more likely than U.S. respondents to meet the requirements for diagnosis of MDD, GAD and CPTSD. Females were more likely than males to meet the diagnostic requirements for MDD, GAD and PTSD. Higher educational attainment was associated with a reduced risk of meeting requirements for diagnosis for MDD and GAD. The Irish respondents had also experienced a higher mean number of ACEs. CPTSD diagnosis was related to the higher number of ACEs respondents experienced. The study found that US adults (61%) compared to Irish adults (65%) had experienced at least one ACE.

Leahy et al. (2015) conducted a study about the social context influences on the development, identification and treatment of mental health and substance misuse by young people through the perspective of the health care providers. This study used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory as a guide analysis for the methodology that used semi structured interviews of health care providers in a multitude of settings. The study concluded that the 'role of context in a young person's life is a vital one, within each system from the micro to the macro, opportunities for positive growth and development can be lost or gained' (Leahy et al., 2015, p. 124). The study discusses the interconnectedness of the young person and their community, family home and the support system. The recommendations made are that practitioners and policy makers endeavour to comprehend the 'relationship of dependency and influence with all the other systems when creating treatment and interventions for young people' (Leahy et al., 2015, p. 124). Chapter five of this research looks at the interconnectedness of a young person's life as they described this in the interviews conducted.

2.4 International Studies

Bellis et al. (2015) published a study they had conducted with 2028 Welsh adults 47% of the respondents indicated that they had experienced at least one ACE, however, 14% said they experienced four or more ACEs. The study compared the findings from the respondents' from the study to the general population and found the impact of ACEs on the respondents' health. They found that those people who had experienced four or more ACEs were:

Table 5. Adverse Childhood Experiences (Bellies et al., 2015, p. 5)

4 times more likely to be a high risk drinker
6 times more likely to have had or caused unintended teenage pregnancy
6 times more likely to smoke e-cigarettes or tobacco
6 times more likely to have had sex under the age of 16 years
11 times more likely to have smoked cannabis
14 times more likely to have been a victim of violence over the last 12 months
15 times more likely to have committed violence against another person in the last 12 months
16 times more likely to have used crack cocaine or heroin
20 times more likely to have been incarcerated at any point in their lifetime

Bademci et al. conducted a mixed methods study with children and young people engaged in child labour in Istanbul, Turkey. There were 135 participants, 52% of the participants were younger than 18 years of age. 84% were male. The “children and young people had been exposed to traumatic experiences during critical periods of childhood and adolescence” (Bademci et al., 2017, p. 280). These included exposure to chronic abuse, neglect and exclusion from school. The children and young people suffering from ‘negative self-concept, fearful attachment, overprotection, and rejection styles of parenting were all linked with depression and anxiety conditions’ (Bademci, 2017, p. 280). The focus of the work that Bademci and her team completed was to provide these child labourers with a psychosocial programme over a number of months one day per week. There was a multidisciplinary team in place to support these children and young people. At the end of the programme most of the children and young people reported that they felt improved self-esteem and self-confidence. The study reported that the participant who engaged in the programme for over three months had a further decrease in depression and other issues.

Bronfenbrenner's proximal processes assert that the more often these interactions occur the more effective they will be (Bronfenbrenner, 2007). Bademci et al., support for these young child labours will be examined further in the section on trauma responsive supports.

Denmark collects data on its population through the DANish LIFE Course (DANLIFE) (Rod et al., 2021) It examined data regarding 508168 children born between 1st January 1994 and 31st December 2001. It was a longitudinal study of these children until 2018. The study's focus was the hospitalisation patterns among children exposed to childhood adversity. The adversities they examined were poverty, family dysfunction, parental divorce and severe illness in the family. The study highlighted that one in three children in Denmark experience more than three childhood adversities. The findings demonstrate that hospitalisation was consistently higher for children who were experiencing or exposed childhood adversity. The hospitalisations were due to injuries, unspecified symptoms, respiratory and infectious diseases, congenital malformations, diseases of the nervous system, mental and behavioural diagnoses as well as pregnancy and childbirth. These children and young people who experience adversity across the dimensions of social, health and family life, have an increased burden of disease, which in turn then puts pressure on the health system. The study points to the need for preventative and early intervention elements to ensure that children and young people are not burdened with such adversity and subsequent ill health in adult life.

Hughes et al. (2021) examined the health and financial cost of adverse childhood experiences in 28 European countries through a systematic review and meta-analysis. The study discovered the 'immense health and financial costs to European nations associated with ACEs and consequently, highlights the importance of investing in safe and nurturing childhoods' (Hughes et al., 2021, p. 853). The analysis warned that the data between

countries could not be compared to one another but it outlined the costs. Below is a table which shows the data from five countries - the research study shows more. The data shows the GDP per capita in US \$, the ACE-attributable Disability Adjusted Life Year (DALYs), the ACE-attributable costs and the equivalent percentage of GDP. The difficulty this research had in comparing data was based on the varying methods countries used to collect the data. The WHO has now provided leadership for consistent methodology in ACE measurement and data collection. This will mean that data between countries can be comparable.

Table 6. Adapted Total Annual ACE-attributable DALYs and costs calculated for five countries (Hughes, et al., 2021).

Country	Population (millions) 2019 as per World Bank data	GDP per capita US\$, 2019	ACE-attributable DALYs (thousands)	ACE-attributable costs (US\$ billion)	Equivalent % of GDP
Ireland	4.9	\$78661.00	97.8	\$7.7	2.0%
Finland	5.5	\$48685.90	225.20	\$11.0	4.1%
Germany	83.1	\$46258.9	2796.6	\$129.4	3.4%
Lithuania	2.8	\$19455.5	93.0	\$1.8	3.3%
UK	66.8	\$42300.3	1858.7	\$78.6	2.8%

2.6 Adverse Childhood Experiences and Child Development

Perry (2017) explains that a child or young person who has experienced trauma may be in a heightened sense of alert. A state of stress/distress. Such children need stability and predictability in their lives in order to survive and thrive. All aspects of their lives need to be under their control otherwise it leaves them in a vulnerable state. In school, where children

spend a significant period of their day they need that safety also. Perry asserts that “to become resilient, children need environments where they feel safe and comfortable, and know what to expect so that their sensitized, over reactive stress systems can gradually become calmer, and more “smoothly” regulated” (Perry, 2017, p. 314).

The type of adverse childhood experience or child maltreatment that people are exposed to have been found to have correlations between the type of challenges faced by that person in adulthood. Teicher & Samson (2013) conducted a series of meta-analyses of 118 studies which involved over 3 million people. The findings were that exposure to sexual abuse doubled (roughly) the odds of developing depressive, anxiety and substance misuse. It was found to quadruple the chances of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (Fitzhenry et al., 2015).

There is a growing body of evidence about the psychological and neurobiological alterations in people who have experienced adversity and how that impacts on their everyday life (Anda et al., 2000, 2006; Khambati et al., 2018; Liming et al., 2018; Santini et al., 2021, Song et al., 2020). In clinical settings methodologies have been created to address the needs of the child based on their developmental rather than chronological age. The reason for this is that the child may have experienced adversity at a time of development which means that s/he has not progressed past this stage. The age at which trauma occurs for the child is as important as the relationship the child has with its caregivers. This is as a protective factor, as seen above in Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological system. ‘Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes that, where young people are supported by trusted individuals in one setting, there is likely to be a positive spill-over for other settings. In this respect, positive interactions between young people and significant adults cannot be overestimated’ (Smyth et al., 2021, p. 13).

A child who experiences maltreatment over time learns to cope with what is happening to them. If they have few protective factors or secure parental/caregiver relationships then may learn maladaptive coping mechanisms. Usually a parent or caregiver teaches or models how a child can cope in stressful situations. This may not be available to the child because the parent has poor coping skills in their own life or is experiencing trauma either currently or as a child or may not have positive parenting skills.

Boullier et al. (2018) state that “adverse childhood experience can affect the developing brain, immune and endocrine systems” (Boullier et al., 2018, p. 133). They use the example of the “bear in the woods” to example the reactions that are happening for someone experiencing maltreatment. The body responds by activating the sympathetic nervous system – causing heart rate to increase, pupils to dilate etc. The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis is also activated releasing cortisol, triggering the production of glucose for immediate utilization by cardiac and skeletal muscle in preparation to escape the danger posed” (Boullier, 2018, p. 133).

This heightened state of alertness is normally followed by a time of ease and rest. The body can then return to its normal state. However, for children who are being maltreated this state of rest may never be achieved thus leaving the child in this heightened state. This may result in “dysregulation of the pathways and have long term consequences on the way the neurological, endocrine and immune systems function” Boullier, 2018, p. 135). The child can have neurological changes due to this heightened state which causes toxic stress. “The hippocampus, prefrontal cortex and amygdala have all been shown to be vulnerable to the toxic stress caused by adverse childhood experiences. This in turn can lead to behavioural problems, difficulties with concentration memory and learning and poor executive function” (Boullier, 2018, p. 135). The endocrine system is in control of the production of hormones.

When the body is stressed and in a heightened sense of hyper arousal it can have long term effects on the health of the person. (Perry, 2017, Siegel, 2020, Treisman, 2017; Van der Kolk, 2014).

2.7 Protective Factors for Reducing Effects of ACEs

There is increasing evidence that people who experience a higher number of ACEs scores may not necessarily be diagnosed with poor health, social and psychological outcomes if they have positive interpersonal traits, such as social, emotions and cognitive function or adaptive coping strategies (Poole et al., 2018 & Ross et al., 2020). Research in the area of resilience highlights the impact of having a trusted caregiver, healthy attachments, effective parenting skills, as well as living within communities and societies which are supportive to the person. Ross et al., study of 226 adults in Nova Scotia outlined the correlations between people with high total ACEs scores and high resilience scores demonstrated that they experienced fewer health problems in comparison to people who had high ACEs scores but low resilience scores.

The definition of resilience according to Ungar (2008) is that: “In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways” (Ungar, 2008, p. 225).

Resilience was first conceptualised with focus on the individual or the factors that the individual was able to generate in order to overcome negative experience (Anthony, 1987; Kaplan, 1999). The focus was very much on the child as being strong, resilient, having a bounce back personality. It also helped if the child lived in a safe and nurturing family.

This was followed by research into resilience focusing on the protective factors and processes. Researchers Rutter (1987) and Zimmerman et al. (1999) demonstrated that it was the “temporal and relational aspects of positive development under stress” (Ungar et al., 2007). Meaning that it was not only the child’s ability to be resilient but also the people around the child that formed protective features for the child who is experiencing trauma.

Another development in the research of resilience body of work expanded to include the child, the relational and the processes which contributed to resilience. It was an ecological approach to resilience. Ungar et al. (2007) explains that ‘resilience is, therefore, both a characteristic of the individual child and a quality of that child’s environment which provides the resources necessary for positive development despite adverse circumstances’ (Ungar et al., 2007, p. 288). These contextual and environmental factors are drawn from ecological models (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Resilience identifies, from a Western culturally specific perspective, that ‘resilience is not only an individual’s capacity to overcome adversity, but the capacity of the individual’s environment to provide access to health-enhancing resources in culturally relevant ways’ (Ungar et al., 2007, p. 288). Downes (2020) stresses the need to ensure that the notion of resilience should not rest on an individualistic level. It needs to concern itself with identifying “structural features of blockage in systems hindering resilience and to develop structural features of inclusive systems for fostering resilience in the face of adversity and vulnerability” (Downes, 2020). Downes asserts that resilience has other factors to ensure that the individual is supported and that there are services in place to surround and help the individual faced with adversity.

Resilience in the context of this research is seen as not counting on what the child can do to prevent harm or continued stressors or their personality traits. This research asserts that

it is the responsibility of the people surrounding the child in their microsystem as well as the macro system that are vital to the protection of children through safeguarding, policy, and education.

The effects of ACEs on a person can subsequently be transmitted to their children. This is called epigenetics. “Outcomes occur through multiple routes, including epigenetic pathways whereby traumatic events can modify gene expression in the prefrontal cortex, cause inflammation, and trigger allostatic responses to stress that alter the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems, in ways that may disrupt parenting and economic success” (Jing Sun et al., 2017, p. 884) ‘The clinical care provided during pregnancy and early childhood offer opportunities for potential intervention. Health professionals providing maternity care may consider screening for ACE and current adversities, depressive symptoms, and caregiver health, and in response provide services or refer to other providers before delivery’ (Jing Sun et al., 2017, p. 889). However, the scope of this thesis does not extend to a lengthy discussion about epigenetics. It would however, be extremely interesting to understand from a longitudinal perspective the effects of trauma on the participants in this study, their parents who raised them and the children they go on to have in the future.

ACEs are complex, affect individuals differently, depending on the context, time, location and duration of the event/s. The protective factors that surround an individual may include support services, other individuals and their own personal resilience. Ward et al., (2020) cite several studies that outlined a mixture of results. One such study is a Canadian study that examined the moderating and mediating effects of factors related to resilience in later life mental health - its findings were mixed. “While social support and neighbourhood cohesion explained substantial proportions of the relationship between early life adversity and later life mental distress, they only partly mediated the relationship and there was no

moderation of the associations between early psychosocial adversity and mental distress through these resources” (Ward, et al., 2020, p. 905). These mixed findings Ward et al. suggest warrant further research to examine ‘what, if any, influence other individual level characteristics such as coping style or personality may have on the pathway’ (Ward et al., 2020, p. 906).

Yule et al., (2019) examined the effects of individual factors as well as community based protective factors. The “value of prevention and health promotion efforts that seeks to strengthen supportive relationships across ecological contexts including families, schools and communities, and for the potential benefit of school based programs that foster self-regulation capacities” (Yule et al., p.423, 2019). In chapter five and six the support services that the young people in this research engaged in will be discussed. The need to have comprehensive, joined up, collaborative support for young people will be highlighted.

During childhood and adolescence there are critical phases in the child’s brain growth. The skills and information acquired in the first years of life form the foundation for the rest of the child’s adult life. (Siegel, 2020; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; Hambrick et al., 2019). If major incidents occur whether they are positive or negative, the person might show an inclination towards a particular set of behaviours. Children exposed to adversity during this sensitive period are inclined to have modifications, delays, impairment of both emotional and cognitive brain processes that can be mirrored into adult life, especially in the ability to learn and control stress but also in anxiety, later addictions or psychiatric admissions (Bărbuceanu, 2023). The hippocampus is essential for learning and memory, it is located near the center of the brain and it is vulnerable to stress and ACEs (Perry, 2017, Siegel, 2020). Bărbuceanu explains further that exposure to stress and ACEs in early childhood decreases the volume of the hippocampus, thus hindering learning and development.

This chapter examined adverse childhood experiences from its beginning studies to Irish and international studies. It outlined the breadth and depth of the effects of ACEs on the developing child and the person's adult life potential outcomes for health as well as looking at the economic implications for not ensuring children grow up in a safe and nurturing environment.

Chapter 3 Early School Leaving

3.1 Introduction

The Irish State was 100 years old in 2022. During that time successive Governments have grappled with the idea of education equality. Over the decades there have been windows of opportunity which occurred when the three separate streams of policy making theory converge (Kingdon, 2011). These streams are made of the problems, the politics and the policies. When they come together that is when the policy change can occur. Fleming et al., (2022) believe that over the last century there have been windows of opportunity, but not always the full implementation of what would have needed to occur in order to address the wicked problem of education inequality.

3.2 Irish Education Pathways

The Irish education system consists of several levels from pre-school until doctoral study. Over the past twenty years the importance of high quality preschool education has been highlighted at European and national policy levels. The introduction of the early childhood care and education system allowed for children to receive such high quality and accessible early education. There is evidence about the link between quality early education and continued success at further schooling levels (McLeod et al., 2018). Students go to preschool for 1-2 years. Primary school is 8 years in duration. Post Primary school until the end of the Senior Cycle is either 5 or 6 years depending on whether the student completes the Transition Year programme in fourth year, just after the Junior Cycle.

Figure 3 below shows the National Framework for Qualifications in Ireland. These levels can be achieved in mainstream school settings, alternative school settings, as an adult

learner. For students who leave school before the traditional Junior Certificate there are also alternative centres for them to attend, such as iScoil or youth encounter programmes. These programmes can also provide students with qualifications such as QQI level 3 or 4. This is achieved by addressing the social, emotional and educational needs of the students.

After second level education students can attend third level. There are several types of courses that can be completed: Post Leaving Certificate courses, apprenticeships and diploma and degree programmes. Courses can be taken in third level institutions consisting of Colleges of Further Education, Technological Universities and Universities.

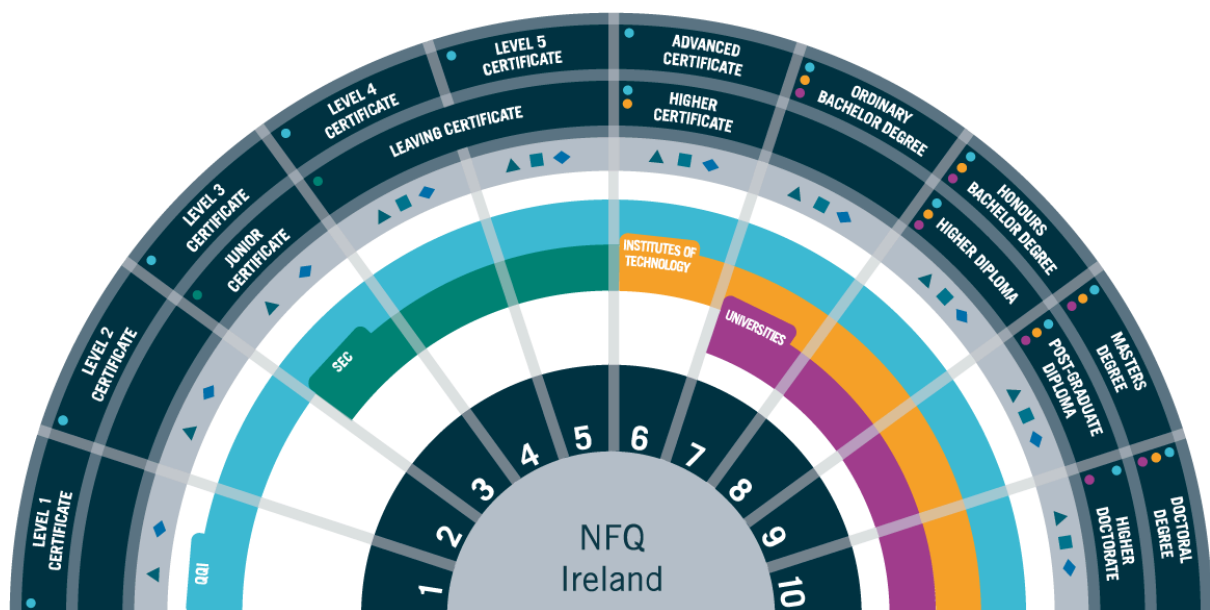


Figure 3. National Framework of Qualifications Ireland (QQI, 2021).

3.3 Types of Post Primary Schools

There are three main types of post primary education in Ireland; secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. There are over seven hundred post primary schools which are recognised by the Department of Education and Skills. The

majority are voluntary secondary schools which are privately owned and managed. They are under the patronage of religious organisations, boards of governors or individuals. They are required by the Education Act 1998 to have boards of management that include parent and teacher representatives. The national representative organisation for these schools is the Joint Managerial Body. Voluntary secondary schools may be fee-paying or non-fee-paying.

The second largest type of post primary school is the vocational school. These are owned by the local Education and Training Boards. The boards of management are a sub-committee of the ETB which has parent, teacher and community representatives as well as ETB representatives. Vocational schools and community colleges are largely funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Vocational schools are also the main providers of adult education and community education courses as well as Junior and Senior cycle programmes.

Lastly the community and comprehensive schools were established in the 1960s. Many of these schools were established as the result of the amalgamation of voluntary secondary and vocational schools. Their boards of management are representative of local interests. They are fully financed by the Department of Education and Skills. The representative body for these schools is the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools.

Table 7 below outlines the type of post primary school and the number of each school. It is clear from the table that voluntary schools are the largest in number. Interestingly the number of post primary schools decreased in this timeframe. While numbers are set to decline gradually at primary level from 2018 onwards, the population bulge will push through into second-level, where numbers are set to rise to a record high of 416,000 by 2025. (O'Brien, 2017)

Table 7. Number of Post Primary Schools Aided by the Department of Education

2015-2016, 2016-2017 and 2021-2022 (Department of Education, 2016, 2023).

Type of School	2015-2016	2016-2017	2021-2022
Voluntary Secondary	375	374	383
Vocational	265	241	250
Community & Comprehensive	95	96	93
Total	735	711	726

3.4 Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS)

Since the 1990s, Ireland has tried to tackle the problem of educational disadvantage through the provision of extra resources and support to schools who had large numbers of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Education disadvantage is a ‘deep-seated and multifaceted problem which is not amenable to easy or in-expensive solutions’ (Fleming et al., 2023). There have been several schemes since then. Starting with the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme (DAS) in 1984. Initially it supported 33 schools in areas of high deprivation. These schools received extra teachers and resources. The Home School Liaison Scheme was started in 1990 as an expansion of the DAS scheme.

In 1994 the Early Start Programme was established to support children aged 3-5 years who are at risk of not reaching their potential educationally, this programme is still in existence. This was followed two years later by the Breaking the Cycle programme, which focused on decreasing class sizes, giving grants for equipment and materials. It was based both in urban and rural schools. It was established as a response to research carried out by the Combat Poverty agency and the Education Research Centre.

The 1998 Education Act enabled the Minister to establish a committee to look at educational disadvantage. The Committee met from 2002 until their final submission to the Minister in 2005. The committee presented a strategy and set three goals, which included placing educational equality within the context of social inclusion, looking at life long learning and looking at education for children aged 2 to 18 which was appropriate to their needs (child centred). The committee was not formed under successive Ministers and in 2012 the then Minister Quinn removed that section of the Act. There is currently a Bill before the Oireachtas on the reestablishment of this committee, Education (Disadvantage Committee) (Bill, 2017).

In 2001, the Giving Children an Even Break programme was started and the School Completion Programme was started in the following year. DEIS –Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme started in 2005 following on from the recommendations of the Educational Disadvantage Committee’s work to date as well as a review of expenditure by the Comptroller and Auditor General of the programmes which were addressing educational disadvantage, as outlined above. This value for money exercise concluded that areas where improvements could be made. Provision was streamlined and DEIS was launched (Smyth et al., 2015). A review of DEIS was carried out roughly ten years later which led to the launch of a new DEIS plan in 2017.

The DEIS plan 2017 was launched, following an evaluation in 2014 by the Education Research Centre (Weir, 2014) with the addition of more schools moving into the DEIS scheme and also schools moving from DEIS Band 2 to DEIS Band 1 status, which signifies a more disadvantaged level than previously. There are five Goals and Actions for the plan which range from implementing robust and responsive assessment framework for identification of schools and effective resource allocation, to improve the learning experience of the students in the schools in DEIS scheme, to upskill the school leaders and teachers, to

engage in interagency work in order to support and foster best practice in schools and finally as all good plans need, research, information and evaluation of the goals.

The plan details the cost of supporting the 170,000 students who are part of DEIS initiatives. In 2018 this cost rose to €112 million. (DEIS Plan, 2017). The Plan also details the supports, systems change and vast investment which needs to be put in place in order to achieve the stated goals and aims.

In 2014 Tusla was established, the following five years saw the School Completion Programme, the Home School Liaison Scheme and the Educational Welfare Service move under the same umbrella to become the Tusla Educational Support Service. The DEIS scheme remained under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills whereas Tusla was under the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. However, in June 2020 the newly appointed Taoiseach, Michéal Martin announced that educational welfare was returning to the Department of Education.

DEIS was expanded in September 2022 to include more schools and students in the support provided under the scheme. There are now 1194 schools with 240,000 pupils, however there are still only 122 School Completion Programmes, albeit with an increased budget to resource the teams working with the students.

Rittel and Webber's fifth characteristic of a wicked problem, (that the solution to a wicked problem is a "one shot operation") is pertinent here. Over those twenty years several programmes have been put in place. However, these programmes constantly need to be developed, expanded and amended, but yet the wicked problem of early school leaving still persists. Perhaps the Educational Disadvantage Committees recommendation that schools are not solely responsible for addressing this issue and that 'everyone gains when educational inclusion is achieved as part of a bigger social and economic change agenda. In such a situation there are social, economic and political advances, with improved life chances,

opportunities and fulfilment for all’ (Chairperson preface in *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage*, 2005).

There is extensive work done under the above-named schemes by schools, school completion programmes, educational welfare officers and youth services to ensure that a young person does not leave school early. Often the “one-shot operation” is the approach taken by these professionals to elongate the young person’s engagement with school. An example of that is through providing a reduced timetable for a set period of time in order for the school and young person to have some breathing space. Another example is arranging for the young person to engage in home tuition, to move to another school, to do work both in school and in the youth service/school completion programme. Alternative education provision is available and when utilised and provided as an alternative in a positive manner there is a potential to see the young person progress further. But, whatever the potential solution, the professional needs to be careful to ensure that the young person is given space to make informed decisions. Because every wicked problem is also unique, just like the student, they have their own unique reasons for leaving. All of these solutions need to be closely monitored and evaluated to ensure that the approach is appropriate.

3.4.1 School Completion Programme

The School Completion Programme was set up by the Department of Education and Skills in 2002 to tackle early school leaving. In 2006 there was an expansion of the programme under the School Support Programme under the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, DEIS.

There had been several earlier programmes such as the Stay in School Retention Initiative and the 8-15 Early School Leavers Initiative, which were replaced by School Completion Programme, known as SCP. The programme was placed within the Social

Inclusion section of the Department of Education and Science. In 2009, the National Educational Welfare Board took responsibility for the programme, which subsequently became part of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 (ERSI, 2015).

In 2014 Tusla was established and this is now the home of SCP under the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) strand of the organisation, which comprises the School Completion Programme, the Educational Welfare Service and the Home School Community Liaison Teachers. There are currently 122 projects in the country. As mentioned above SCP is part of the team of education welfare which will be returning to the Department of Education and Skills as announced by the Taoiseach in June 2020.

Despite the nomadic existence of this programme SCP has a specific remit to work with children and young people who are at risk of early school leaving and children and young people of school going age who are not currently attending school. The supports to these children and young people can be provided through a universal and/or targeted approach. Targeted approach can be either brief or more long term.

“Evidence based/evidence informed interventions at universal level to whole class/whole school groups.

Brief interventions for 8 weeks or less for students identified as needing an immediate short term SCP led intervention.

Targeted interventions to children and young people with significant support needs who have been identified through the SCP Intake Framework. (Only students in this target group need to be processed through the full Intake Framework referral)”

(TESS website, August 2020)

SCP model depends on interagency work, particularly in areas where there are several agencies working in the community. Also because of budget cutbacks over a number of year, SCPs and other agencies need to pool resources leading to more sharing of staff, knowledge

and venues. Meitheal is an example of how agencies come together in the best interests of the child to support the family and to have agencies have a single plan for the child in question through Meitheal. Other examples are holiday provision when youth services, family resource centres, local sports clubs and SCPs pool resources to ensure every child is given an opportunity to participate.

The Retention Plan outlines the supports which are identified by the cluster as being able to address the three areas of importance across TESS services. Improved attendance, improved participation and improved retention. Intervention is based on in school supports, after school and holiday period supports as well as supports for those students who are out of school.

The researcher has insider knowledge of this programme due to being a Coordinator of one of the SCPs in North Dublin. She has worked in the programme since its inception in 2006/2007. The development of SCP over this period has seen many adjustments to how the programme operates. The move to the DCYA saw the programme become more independent of schools, culminating in the Intake Framework for identifying students who would receive targeted support from an SCP. There has been an investment in CPD in conjunction with Foroige, a youth work organisation. The ESRI Review of SCP in October 2015 identified many recommendations. It is hoped by all involved that the Blueprint for Educational Welfare will be published and that the Department of Education and Skills will be the final destination for this programme, in order for the employment issues which have marred this programme since its inception are finalised. This will lead to improved governance and guidelines. Re-clustering of SCPs as recommended by the ESRI as is ensuring that any changes to the structures and provision is seen in the context of DEIS (ESRI, 2015, p. 174) and from this the focus of SCP can continue to be on ensuring that the relationships which

SCP is so excellent at developing with its children, young people and their families as well as within schools and the community are at the core of all supports.

3.5 The Contributing Factors to Early School Leaving

The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop Report (2014) examined early school leaving and found that there are individual and family circumstances as well as education system related factors which influence early school leaving. Finally, there are also labour market related factors which affect early school leaving.

Table 8. Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving

Individual & Family Factors	Education Factors	Social & Political Factors
Adverse Childhood Experiences	Attendance and Participation in School	Community Education Ethos
Socio-Economic status	Educational Attainment	Education Policy
Ethnicity	School Environment/climate	Gang Culture
Family Background	Reduced Timetables and Suspensions	Economic Stability
Peer Engagement & Behaviour	Bullying	Societal Equality Status

Table 8 above gives a number of contributing factors to early school leaving ranging from individual factors such as ACEs, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and a family history of early school leaving and parental attainment (Cefai et al., 2015; Eivers et al., 2000; Heeran Flynn, 2017; Smyth, 2007). Peer engagement and behaviour, refers to the peers' engagement with school as well as their behaviour in school and in the community. What is meant by this

is that the young person whose friends do not attend school influences the attendance of their friends as does the behaviour of those young people in school and outside school - which is negatively perceived and is anti social (Magnuson et al., 2016; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Smyth, 2016). Adverse Childhood Experiences as discussed in chapter 2 heavily impact the success of participation and engagement in school (Bae, 2020; Perfect et al., 2016; Stratford et al., 2020; Yablon, 2020). Socioeconomic status, especially living in poverty as well as being part of a family with a history of early school leaving (particularly the mother) has a strong impact on educational attainment. Children and young people who grow up in poverty are more likely to leave school before completing the final exam years as well as missing significant periods of schooling (Garnier et al., 1997; Klein et al., 2020).

The educational system related factors are attendance and participation; educational attainments; school environment/climate, reduced timetables and suspensions and bullying. The first two issues are discussed below. School environment/climate, belonging and prevention of bullying allow for a child or young person to participate in school life freely and without fear. A wide array of academic and social outcomes have been associated with a sense of belonging.

Cohen (2006) indicates that research has found that there are eleven factors that define school climate: structural issues (e.g., size of the school); environmental (e.g., cleanliness); social-emotional and physical order and safety; expectations for students achievement; quality of instructions; collaboration and communication; sense of school community; peers norms; school-home-community partnerships; student morale; and the extent to which the school is an essential learning community.

Research finds that students reporting a greater sense of belonging at school tend to display higher academic motivation, self-esteem and achievement (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; OECD, 2013; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004; Wang and Holcombe, 2010), though these

relationships depend on the social desirability attached to academic achievement across social groups (Bishop et al., 2004; Fuller-Rowell & Doan, 2010). Students who feel they belong at school are also less likely to engage in risky and antisocial behaviours (Catalano et al., 2004), to have an unexplained and unauthorised absence from school and leave school early (Lee & Burkam, 2003; McWhirter et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2015), and to be unsatisfied with their lives (OECD, 2017).

Across OECD countries, the majority of students reported that they feel socially connected at school. For instance, three out of four students agreed or strongly agreed that they can make friends easily at school. However, students in socio-economically disadvantaged, rural and public schools were more likely to report a weaker sense of belonging at school than students in advantaged, city and private schools, respectively. This sense of belonging has effects on other parts of education and the young person's life. On average across OECD countries, students who reported a greater sense of belonging scored higher in the reading assessment, after accounting for socio-economic status. When there are higher levels of cooperation amongst their peers, this leads to a greater sense of belonging. Whereas students' perception of competition was not associated with their sense of belonging at school. This sense of belonging has an impact on future endeavours. Students who reported a greater sense of belonging were also more likely to expect to complete a university degree, even after accounting for socio-economic status, gender, immigrant background and overall reading performance.

The prevalence of loneliness and ability to make friends was also measured by the OECD. It found that 84 % of students disagreed or strongly disagreed that they feel lonely at school. 80 % of students disagreed or strongly disagreed that they feel like an outsider or feel left out of things. 75 % of students agreed or strongly agreed that they can make friends

easily at school. 71 % of students agreed or strongly agreed that they feel they belong at school (OECD, 2018).

Labour market factors are either pull or push factors, dependent on current national economy and levels of unemployment as well as family economic pressures (Eurydice & Cedefop Report, 2014).

“Early school leaving does not only present problems for the young people but it also has economic and social consequences for society. Education is the most efficient means by which to safeguard against unemployment. The risk of unemployment increases considerably the lower the level of education. This was a pattern identified in almost every Member State in 2010, as the average unemployment rate in the EU-27 for those having attained at most a lower secondary education was 14.2 %, far in excess of the rate of unemployment for those that had obtained a tertiary education qualification which was 4.9%” (Eurostat, 2011a).

Early school leaving is a complex problem throughout Ireland and Europe. It is a problem that has significant budgets allocated to it. The DEIS annual budget is €180 million (DEIS 2023) of which just under €30 million is given to the School Completion Programme. Due to the expansion of the DEIS programme in 2022 there are now 1194 schools involved in the programme, the most being post primary schools. There are 122 School Completion Programmes in the country working with these schools, which have a population of 240,000.

The cost of not investing in young people at risk of early school leaving, is calculated by Smyth and McCoy (2009). They estimate that the cost to the state in welfare payments for males who leave school before the Leaving Certificate is €12,300 and for females it is €16,300. They also give a cost for males and females in terms of lost tax revenue, due to

unemployment, is €17,000. The total cost of early school leaving for males is €29,300 and €33,000 for females.

3.5.1 School Attendance as an indicator of Early School Leaving

The research into school attendance problems (SAPs) falls into two categories (Sharpe et al., 2023). Sharpe et al. (2023) identify that there are two major contemporary approaches to the study of SAPs. An approach based on Kearney and Silverman's (1993) conceptual framework for school truancy behavior considers school avoidance and truancy together. The other approach distinguishes between types of SAPs and identifies them as school dropout, school exclusion, school avoidance and truancy (Heyne et al., 2019).

Dropping out of school and expulsion refer to parental and school-related absences. School avoidance refers to a child's reluctance to attend school and occurs with the knowledge of the parents.

Bryne, McCoy and Watson (2008) explain that truancy is a contributing factor to early school leaving for those students who leave before the Leaving Certificate. However, their research shows that truancy is more prevalent amongst the students who leave before the Junior Certificate. The more students are absent from school the more likely they are to leave school early. This is for playing truant as opposed to being absent for explainable reasons such as illness etc.

When schools are returning absences to the Education Welfare Service (EWS) the reasons given may fall into the following. Absence because of illness, urgent family reason, holiday, suspended, other and unexplained. The EWS operates a referral service that means despite the fact the schools report the number of absences to the EWS, a student will only be targeted by the Education Welfare Officer once the school has made a referral to the EWS. The reporting mechanism can only be used once several documented attempts have been

made by the school to improve the student's absences. It is also important to note that the EWS does not take referrals if a student is over 16 years old or has completed three years of post-primary school whichever comes later.

According to Kearney and Graczyk (2020), school attendance problems are key indicators of maladaptive functioning in children, regular school attendance is critical for adaptive functioning. In addition, studies have revealed long-term adverse consequences of absenteeism, such as poor academic achievement, economic deprivation, poor social functioning, relationship conflict, unemployment and psychiatric problems (Egger et al., 2003; Maynard et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2012). Due to the negative impact of school attendance issues, there is a need to develop early intervention strategies that reduce the emergence of chronic absenteeism (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Wood et al., 2012). However, as not all children's absenteeism can be attributed to the same causes, early detection is challenging (González et al., 2019).

3.7 European Council Headline Targets 2020

Early school leaving is defined by the European Union as referring to 'those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training' (European Commission, 2013, p. 6).

“Early school leaving does not only present problems for the young people but it also has economic and social consequences for society. Education is the most efficient means by which to safeguard against unemployment. The risk of unemployment increases considerably the lower the level of education. This was a pattern identified in almost every Member State in 2010, as the average unemployment rate in the EU-27 for those having attained at most a lower secondary education was 14.2 %, far

in excess of the rate of unemployment for those that had obtained a tertiary education qualification which was 4.9%”

(Eurostat, 2011a)

The rate of early school leaving in EU countries in 2012 was 12.7% of all young people, which amounts to 5.5 million people. The European Union has set a headline target to reduce early school leaving to 10% of all young people by 2020. The Labour Force Survey for 2018 showed that the average percentage of people aged 20-24 years who had stayed in education until at least upper second level schooling, in the European Union (28 countries) was 83.5%.

Most European countries have experienced a decrease in the numbers of students leaving school early. However, not all have achieved the headline target. Turkey has the highest rate, with 31.3%, followed by Iceland (21.5%), Spain (17.9%), and Malta (17.5%). The countries with the lowest rate of ESL were Croatia , Slovenia, Switzerland, Ireland, Poland and Lithuania, whose range was 3.1% to 4.8% (Eurostat, 2018). Ireland is one of the countries which experienced the largest decrease in ESL rates.

3.8 Rates of Early School Leaving in Ireland

The rate of early school leaving in Ireland has been decreasing since 2000, when the rate was 17.6%. The Irish Government aimed to reduce this rate to 8% by 2020. (ERSI, 2015). The rate for post primary schools in the year 2012-13 was 7.7%. Just over 90% of young people completed second-level education in 2014, with half progressing into third-level education, and a fifth into vocational training (DCYA, 2015). For the 2016 cohort the retention rate to the Leaving Certificate is 91.7%. The Irish Government's Action Plan for Education 2017 reiterated the target for retention rates through its action plan for DEIS

schools. Retention rates have continued to improve at second-level in DEIS schools, from their current rate of 82.7% to the national norm, 90.2%, by 2020 (Action Plan for Education, 2017). However, for the 2016 cohort the score is 85%. The difference between DEIS and non DEIS schools, known as the DEIS gap, is currently 8.4 percentage points (Department of Education, 2023).

Children and Young People from the Traveller and Roma communities have seen an increase in the retention rates. However, students from these communities still “continue to leave formal education almost five years earlier than non-Travellers” (Children’s Rights Alliance, Report Card, 2017, p. 71). The retention rate of female Travellers to the Leaving Certificate in DEIS schools is 33.1% and in non DEIS schools it is 39.3%. However, for males the number of young people from this community completing the Leaving Certificate is even lower, at 22.5% in DEIS schools and 31% in non DEIS schools.

The Leaving Certificate retention rates per county for the 2009 cohort show that Carlow (84.58%) has the lowest rates of retention to that level. This trend continued in the 2016 cohort with Carlow retention rates remaining below 90% at 89.4%.

The percentage of days lost in primary schools in Ireland increased and mirror the peak Covid -19 cases in Ireland. In 2018/2019 the percentage of days lost was 5.2% and this rose to 11% in 2021/2022 (Sharpe et al., 2023).

Retention rates in the three different types of post primary schools also differ with Education and Training Board schools faring the lowest at 89.5% completion to Leaving Certificate. DEIS schools average for the 2016 cohort is 85.0% which is a decrease from the 2015 cohort of 1.1%.

Table 9. Retention Rates, by milestones, by school type, by gender, 2016 cohort (Department of Education and Skills, 2023)

School Type	Gender	Entry Cohort	Leaving Certificate	Early School Leavers	Retention Rate (%)
	Female	17817	16775	1042	94.2
Voluntary Secondary	Male	16995	15674	1321	92.2
	Total	34812	32449	2363	93.2
	Female	5171	4796	375	92.7
Community & Comprehensive	Male	5631	4974	657	88.3
	Total	10802	9770	1032	90.4
	Female	8377	7696	681	91.9
Education & Training Board	Male	9919	8671	1248	87.4
	Total	16296	16367	1929	89.5

Socioeconomic status also shows differences between retention rates. Those young people who live in very affluent areas have a 97% chance of completing the Leaving Certificate as compared to a young person living in a very disadvantaged area being at 81% and in extremely disadvantaged areas it is only a 72% chance that they will sit the Leaving Certificate. Poverty and deprivation has a link to educational attainment as seen by the figures here.

The wicked problem of early school leaving can be clearly seen in these figures, DEIS is trying to mitigate this, with extra support and funding going to DEIS schools. However, for the 2016 cohort the results indicate that there is still a large gap, despite Ireland performing well in comparison to its European counterparts in ESL figures (Donleavy et al, 2019). There is no one size fits all approach to early school leaving and this complex issue

coupled with deprivation and disadvantage means that policies and practices need to be adept, flexible and reflective.

Students who miss more than 20 days of school must be notified to the Educational Welfare Service. This 20-day rule is seen as a deterrent to the majority of families, however, to the students who miss more than 20 days in the first term without consequence this is not a deterrent. If a referral is not made by the school to the Education Welfare Service there will be no consequences. Even if a referral is made, the number of Education Welfare Offices (EWOs) is not currently sufficient to deal with the numbers of students referred to them. For example in Ballymun, there is a half time EWO for 11 primary schools and 1 post primary school. The EWOs area extends to Whitehall and Glasnevin also. Indeed, even if Tusla, the Child and Family agency was to increase the number of EWOs, the number of referrals and work capacity of each of these professionals, it may not lead to increased prosecutions for Attendance Notices. It would be an interesting piece of research to examine the students who leave school before their Leaving Certificate, to look at the interventions which were put in place for those students and to see what effect, if any, they had, in the words of the student. This research could not only inform those working on the ground but also those developing the policies and legislation.

3.9 Policy Context

Educational disadvantage in Ireland today is being addressed in several different ways through policies which aim to equalise the difference between educational advantage and disadvantage. In order to look at problems at a local and national level we must first look at international views on education.

3.9.1 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has several articles which focus on learning and education, the most pertinent to this research is article 28 which states the following:

State Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular: (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all; (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need; (c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means; (d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children; (e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.

(UN General Assembly, 1989. p. 8)

These articles were ratified by Ireland in September 1992. The Republic of Ireland has free primary and post primary school provision. However, there are also fee-paying schools at both levels. Education is however, not free from some costs, such as uniforms, books, technological equipment and school trips and extra-curricular activities. For some parents the cost of going back to school at the start of each academic year is a struggle. The Charity Barnardos surveys parents each summer to investigate the costs of return to school. Each year this survey demonstrates the substantial costs to parents. Moves were made to ask schools to provide Book Rental schemes, use uniforms which are generic and do not need to be bought in specialist shops with a particular crest on it. Parents may find themselves having to borrow money for this expense. Often local charities provide help in this expense. In recent

budgets the Government of Ireland has provided free books for children in primary schools - this does not include photocopying, art materials or other sundry items associated with these costs. From 2024 junior cycle students will not have to pay for books, but this does not include the tablets needed in some schools. Parents whose children use tablets in schools must firstly buy the tablet and then the books in order to get the codes needed to log into the books online - this causes a huge financial burden on families.

Early school leaving does not start the day the young person does not come to school. It occurs because of a multiplicity of other factors which culminate into non-completion. Examples of factors are set out in the Guidelines on Identifying Young People at Risk of Early School Leaving for School Completion Programme, which include, poor attendance and participation in school; being in state care; family or young person's addiction; experiencing homelessness (School Completion Programme, 2006). A combination of these and many other factors are contributing factors to early school leaving. Schools which have DEIS status are being resourced to support students who have a multiplicity of needs.

However, under Article Number 28 countries were to develop different types of secondary education and ensure that young people have access to them. In Ireland, at Junior Cycle level, students are expected to participate in the Junior Certificate at the end of their third year. Different academic levels of the subjects can be taken: higher, ordinary and foundation level. The Junior Certificate Schools Project is provided by some schools for students who are struggling to stay in school. QQI Level 3 allows for students who have left the mainstream classroom to complete coursework in their new learning environment, such as iScoil and youth encounter programmes.

Currently, the Junior Cycle Reform is addressing the way students learn and assessment for learning. This was introduced in 2014 and is continuing to add subjects each year under the new framework. The aim of the programme is to reduce the focus of having

one end of curriculum examination because there is also continual assessment. There are short courses which students will be able to opt to take, thus allowing the student choice.

At Senior Cycle students can participate for two or three years. The fourth year is a Transition Year between the Junior and Senior Cycles and is not compulsory or in some schools is not available to every student. The Leaving Certificate is the end of school state examination which students sit after completing the curriculum for two years. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme facilitates interpersonal, vocational and technological skills. The Leaving Certificate Applied programme is provided in some schools. It is an alternative curriculum for students who may not wish to proceed to third level education and or for students whose needs, aspirations and aptitudes are not adequately catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes (Department of Education and Skills, Leaving Certificate Applied Programme Statement, 2018). Youthreach and Community Training Centres provide programmes to young people who have left mainstream education before the completion of the Leaving Certificate. QQI level 3-6 can be completed at these centres. At third level, there has been a widening of the availability of Post Learning Certificate Courses (PLCs), apprenticeships and more free third level courses. The most recent Government of Ireland budget (2023) shows significant expansion in recognition of the enduring contribution of this sector.

3.9.2 Young Ireland The National Framework Policy for Children and Young People 2023-2028

The Irish Government through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has done extensive research into designing policies and frameworks for youth policy. Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures is the predecessor to this current framework and was in place for 2014-2020. This new framework's vision is for 'an Ireland which fully

respects and realised the rights of children and young people’ (Government of Ireland, 2023, p. 8). It is underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of Children.

There are five national outcomes which the framework sets out for the children and young people of Ireland. These five outcomes are broadly the same as the predecessor framework. These outcomes should permeate every organisation and every policy which affects the lives of children and young people. For this policy there are three spotlights that are being focused on. Child poverty, mental health and well being, and disability services.

Active and Healthy

- They have the best possible physical and mental health;
- They make informed health and lifestyle choices;
- They enjoy leisure time, express themselves creatively and access nature and recreation.

Achieving in Learning and Development

- They are positively engaging with their learning and development from birth;
- They can successfully navigate life’s transitions and make informed choices around their future;
- They have the social, emotional and communication skills to achieve their potential and lead fulfilling lives;

Safe and Protected from Harm

- They have family and homes that are loving, connected, safe and nurturing;
- They are protected from violence, neglect, ill-treatment and harm;
- Everyone is alert to child protection issues and knows how to report a concern.

Economic Security and Opportunity

- They are protected from poverty and social exclusion;
- They live in stable housing that is affordable, warm and dry, in child and youth-friendly communities;
- They have pathways to economic participation and independent living.

Connected, Respected and Contributing to their World

- They are aware of their rights, and are civically socially and environmentally engaged offline and online.
- They are accepted, respected and valued at home, school and in their community.
- They have their own identity, connected to their culture, language and beliefs.

Figure 4. Five National Outcomes for Young Ireland, 2023-2028 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, November 2023).

The Young Ireland Framework and its predecessor are important for conversations about educational disadvantage and early school leaving because it looks at all aspects of the child or young person. It sets out Ireland's vision for the children and young people here. It is attempting to ensure that implementation is completed in order to ensure that the aims and goals are achieved thus making Ireland one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family (DCYA, 2014, p. viii). It is aspirational in its concepts, which has led to criticism.

Downes is critical of the policy because it focuses on the generic child. There is a lack of focus on specific groups of children and families with chronic needs such as addiction, mental health, domestic violence, bullying trauma, bereavement, aggression, children of prisoners, children in care or children experiencing homelessness. Downes also criticises the lack of strategy in the policy on differentiated needs (universal, selected, indicated). Meaning that not every child who receives a certain input will have the same result. Downes also criticises the policy for not mentioning the EU2020 headline target on early school leaving. (Downes, 2017).

The Young Ireland Framework provides government and state agencies with a framework to ensure that their stated aims and objectives are measured against the five outcomes and the three specific spotlights. This research will demonstrate in Chapters five

and six that despite having a robust framework there are children and young people who fall through the gaps. This framework and its predecessor are vital to ensure a baseline for protection and nurturing of the child and young person, however, it cannot do that for everyone, due to its generic nature and the extreme needs of some children and young people. This research demonstrates that despite the Government's robust policy and recommendations, not every child and young person is protected from harm and provided with an environment in which they thrive.

3.9.3 Traveller Education Strategy

The Government of Ireland published its strategy for Traveller Education from 2002-2005 it stated that it aimed to have several measurements of success by 2010. They are that in 2010 Travellers will:

“obtain access to all mainstream provision; participate as equals, achieve their full potential, and have outcomes similar to those of their settled peers; be participants in an education that is changing and evolving into an inclusive system ; gain qualifications, obtain access to mainstream employment, aspire to promotion and participate fully as members of society, live in suitable accommodation and have health characteristics similar to those of the settled community; respect and be respected for their culture and identity in an Ireland where diversity, equality and interculturalism are the norm and reciprocally respect other cultures and identities; contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development”

(Department of Education and Science, p. 99 2002).

Regarding Traveller children in post primary education the aim was to see an increase from 85-100% of children transferring from primary to post primary school and that all of these pupils should stay in school until after they have completed the Junior Certificate. Following this the aim is that 50% of these young people will continue to complete the

Leaving Certificate. All of this should be in the context of acknowledging and respecting Traveller culture and identity.

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 brought about significant change for Traveller identity. On the 1st March 2017 Travellers were recognised as an ethnic minority. Traveller organisations had been advocating for this recognition for several years. The Strategy focuses on several aspects however, of significant importance to this research is the education section. There is a 13 point action plan in the education section. There are statistics that demonstrate the disadvantage that Traveller children and young people experience when compared with the general population. 13% of Traveller children complete second level education compared to 92% in the settled community. Of those Travellers who leave second level education early, 55% have left by the age of 15. The number of Traveller children who progress to third level education represents just 1% of the Traveller community. The majority of Travellers (70%) have only primary or lower levels of education. The policy expresses that the lack of education of parents has an impact on the future education of their children.

In this research one of the factors for inclusion was having a parent in prison as an adverse childhood experience. This policy shows that Traveller children and young people are more likely to have a parent in prison than settled children. The Irish Prison Service Traveller Census (2008) estimated a Traveller population of 320 (299 male prisoners and 21 female prisoners). This number represents 8.7% of the prison population, even though Travellers represent less than 1% of the total population. Based on estimates from the Irish Prison Service, the risk of male Travellers being imprisoned was 11 times that of the general male population while Traveller women were 22 times more likely to be imprisoned than non Traveller women.

In 2019 the Irish Traveller Movement made a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on issues affecting the Traveller community in relation to education. They state that there is a need for ongoing work in this area and as Census 2016 showed, six out of ten male Travellers (57.2%) had only primary-level education; four times higher than the general population (13.6%). Just 13% of Traveller girls completed second-level education compared to 69% of the settled community. Of those who left second-level education early, 55% by the age of 15. There are twelve recommendations from this submission, including data collection and use, Traveller specific education strategy; that the education system recognises and celebrates Traveller culture, identity and historical contexts; that there is increased funding for several aspects of education strategy (Irish Traveller Movement, 2019).

In July 2024 the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science published the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024-2030. The Strategy is a key action under the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2024-2030 (NTRIS II). The vision statement set out in this strategy states that “We want a high quality, inclusive education system that is open and welcoming to all, irrespective of background or ability; an education system that meaningfully engages learners of all ages in a positive learning environment where equality is upheld, and diversity respected, and where every individual is valued and actively supported to reach their full potential” (p. 7). The Strategy sets out four strategic pillars and strategic actions that have mid point goals. These pillars have been designed to ensure Traveller and Roma children and young people reach their full potential in education. The pillars are participation and experience, access and outcome, partnership and delivering change.

3.9.4 UN Sustainable Development Goal number 4

There are 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. Quality Education is number four. The data provided by the UN in 2020 shows the stark educational inequality which exists globally. “Before the coronavirus crisis, projections showed that more than 200 million children would be out of school, and only 60 per cent of young people would be completing upper secondary education in 2030. Since the Covid 10 pandemic the cost to education can be seen in 4 out of every 5 of the 104 countries surveyed.

Before the coronavirus crisis, the proportion of children and youth out of primary and secondary school had declined from 26 per cent in 2000 to 19 per cent in 2010 and 17 per cent in 2018. Currently the main challenges are that despite having a target of raising the percentage of students attaining basic reading skills by the end of primary school is projected to rise from 51 per cent in 2015 to 67 per cent by 2030 there will be an estimated 300 million children and young people will still lack basic numeracy and literacy skills by 2030. (UN Sustainable Goals, 2024).

The second challenge is that “economic constraints, coupled with issues of learning outcomes and dropout rates, persist in marginalised areas, underscoring the need for continued global commitment to ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all. Low levels of information and communications technology (ICT) skills are also a major barrier to achieving universal and meaningful connectivity” (UN Sustainable Goals, 2024).

Having these global goals allows governments to set targets and try to ensure they are providing the best chance possible for their children. Enrolment in primary education in majority world regions reached 91% in 2015, up from 83% in 2000. In the majority world regions, children in the poorest households are four times as likely to be out of school as those in the richest households. Globally, the number of those living in extreme poverty

declined by more than half, falling from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015, with most progress occurring since 2000. In 2015, 57 million children of primary school age were out of school. In countries affected by conflict, the proportion of out-of-school children increased from 30% in 1999 to 36% in 2012. Early school leaving is to be recognised as a culture-relative concept. In high economic resource countries, this typically means not obtaining higher qualification than lower secondary education.

3.10 Systems Gap

Education support structures are in place in Ireland, headline targets are set throughout Europe, despite Ireland doing well, there are still young people leaving school early. There are a number of system gaps which contribute to this. Systems gaps lead to policy gaps.

The structure of the education system needs to be addressed. Examples of where that might occur is the transition from primary to post primary. Students leave the primary school at 11/12 years of age, they then attend post primary school which has a different format. That transition is seen as a fragile move for certain students who may be at risk of early school leaving (Smyth, 2007). In other countries the transition to middle school is at 10 years of age. It is outside the scope of this study to compare the two systems. However, with hormonal changes, new curriculum and the transition this is often a challenging time.

The Post Primary system is broken into Junior and Senior Cycle. Junior Cycle is the first three years and this is followed by a transition year and then a two-year Senior Cycle which culminates in the Leaving Certificate. The vast majority of students participate in this traditional system. There is the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme as well as the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. There are also programmes through the Quality and Qualifications Ireland awards. The National Framework of Qualifications has levels 1 to

10. Leaving Certificate can be achieved through those traditional methods as previously outlined or through QQI level 4 or 5. These programmes are offered in YouthReach Centres, Community Training Centres (CTCs), colleges of further education.

At European level a recommendation is to have second level education which is both vocational and more academic in nature, to facilitate all types of learners. In Ireland that system is on offer, but because it is offered outside mainstream school there are challenges to it being recognised as equal to the traditional system. Although outside the remit of this study would it be more beneficial to have a mixture of both in every school so the stigma of one over the other system is extinguished. The apprenticeship system as rolled out in other countries is also part of this shared educational system. Educating parents and schools on the dual systems has been discussed by the Department of Further Education since January 2021.

The issue of homework and the ability of poorer families to be able to facilitate this learning is challenging. In areas where there are DEIS schools there are homework clubs. These clubs facilitate this learning through academic support for the students. There is also the social and emotional support as well as the provision of food. These clubs also help throughout summer time to prevent the summer slide, which is when students are not in school and their gained learning in literacy and numeracy skills declines over the holiday period. Not all students have access to these supports due to family reasons, or availability.

This lack of support further alienates the child from educational attainment. At second level, particularly for exam students, in these areas the lack of access to additional educational support for homework and study is stark. Students accessing these supports often cite lack of quiet places to study, not having a desk, access to wifi, not being able to purchase additional study aids. This became evident during the Covid -19 pandemic with schools and other services providing support to students, such as wifi and laptops.

Students who have experienced trauma need to have access to support. Having these supports provided as part of a multidisciplinary team in school would ensure that the student can attend the support as well as being part of a wraparound service. Having emotional counsellors is commonplace in other European countries. Downes et al. (2019) argue that Ireland needs to provide such support in school. The benefits of supports such as counsellors being in school is that attendance at the service would be high. The same is true of Speech and Language Therapists appointments. Parents who are experiencing challenges often find the stress of attending such meetings too much, therefore the child misses the appointment and when this is consistent the service is withdrawn and the issue is not resolved.

The curriculum and the focus of learning has been revised at primary and post primary level, the most recent being the Junior Cycle Reform. However, through the Global Covid 19 Pandemic calls have been made to reform the Leaving Certificate. The system around which it is based is also something which is being called to change. Calls that it is no longer fit for purpose were strong in the media, social media during 2020, probably due to the global pandemic and the cracks which became illuminated on the education system and has continued into 2021. Although it is outside the scope of this study to examine alternatives, it must be said that there are still children in 2024 who will be the first in their families to sit the Leaving Certificate. This is an indicator that second level education may be free, but it is not accessible to all.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations on the fifth and sixth periodic report of Ireland have many points to make in all aspects of a child's life in Ireland where improvements can be made. In the area of education, the Committee recommends, to name a few, the provision of financial support to cover the hidden costs of

education, developing guidelines for the use of suspension and exclusion in schools, collecting data on several areas such as ethnicity, use of reduced timetables and participation in after school activities in order to develop policies and programmes to ensure equality of access. This committee also has several recommendations for children who are in care, in the different forms that it may take, such as voluntary care, kinship care and also including aftercare.

The EU uses a combination of factors to measure poverty or being at risk of social exclusion. Firstly, at risk of poverty, material deprivation and low work intensity. The at risk factors for poverty in terms of income is based on a certain percentage of relative availability of income in comparison to others. If one's income is only 50 per cent of the median income that is calculated as being in deep poverty. A further two levels of 60 and 70 per cent also measure the depth of poverty. What is of importance here is that Ireland has made some gains in the last five years or so, however, there are a number of areas in which it needs to improve. Children are more likely to experience deprivation (Russell et al., 2010). This is demonstrated by the items which children do not have access to because their household cannot afford it. These items include, a warm coat, substantial meal, presents, shows, roast meal, warm home, heating, clothes, going out/entertainment, entertainment friend/family and furniture. When these basic needs are not met, other factors like school can become lower on the list of priorities for families. However, school can be a place of safety and security for many children and young people as well as a support for parents.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter examined the education landscape in Ireland, the policies and practices developed by the state to tackle educational inequality. The chapter discussed the contributing factors which may lead to a child or young person leaving school early. The policy

frameworks national and international were contextualised and there was a brief discussion on the systems gaps that permeate the education system in Ireland.

Throughout this research there is an emergent theme of the failure of initiatives, strategies and policies to capture the children and young people who are falling through the gaps of the support structures. The Bio Ecological model that Bronfenbrenner presents, there is a lack of focus on those who do not fit neatly into that nested system, they fall through the model like that model is made of sand, they slip through. There are system gaps that persist and the complexity of early school leaving and adverse childhood experiences are labyrinthine, multifaceted and require sensitive, sensible and timely responses.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to look at the phenomenon of early school leaving through Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It will look at the child, his/her family, the community in which they live/belong to and the wider society. The focus of the work is the experience of the young person as told by them. This thesis aims to address this gap in the voices of young people from North Dublin and their experiences of early school leaving. The Irish Joint Oireachtas Committee Report on Early School Leaving (2010) observed the link between trauma and early school leaving (Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science, 2010). This thesis will expand the growing body of research which focuses on adverse childhood experience(s) and early school leaving.

The research has two central questions:

1. What is the perceived impact of adverse childhood experiences on 10 young people living in a North Dublin urban area, aged 16-20 years and how has it affected their decision to leave mainstream school before the completion of the Leaving Certificate?
2. What support systems did the young people have in their lives? What influence did the support systems (eco-systems), such as family (microsystem), peers (microsystem), community (macrosystem), schools (microsystem) have in their lives which tried to or could have helped with their decision making process to leave mainstream school before the completion of the Leaving Certificate?

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this research. Section one outlines the philosophical considerations which underpin the decision to use the methodology. Section two presents the methods used in this research.

4.2 Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell (2007) there are five philosophical assumptions that lead a researcher to choose qualitative research. They are ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical and methodological. The researcher will align herself/himself with each of these in order to establish the type of research design and the methodology they will use. The table below examines what the assumptions, questions, characteristics and implication for practice the researcher may consider. These in turn, help the researcher to align with a paradigm of research, or worldview which the researcher takes. They are postpositivism, constructivism, transformative (previously advocacy/participatory) (Creswell, 2007) and pragmatism (Creswell, 2014) These will be discussed in further detail following the table.

Table 10. Philosophical Assumptions with Implications for Practice (Creswell, 2007, p. 17)

Assumptions	Question	Characteristics	Implications for Practice (Examples)
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is subjective and multiple, as seen by participants in the study	Researcher uses quotes and themes in words of participants and provides evidence of different perspectives
Epistemological	What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?	Researcher attempts to lessen distance between himself or herself and that being researched	Researcher collaborates, spends time in field with participants, and becomes an “insider”
Axiological	What is the role of values?	Researcher acknowledges that research is value laden and that biases are present	Researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes his or her own interpretation in conjunction with the interpretations of participants
Rhetorical	What is the language of research?	Researcher writes in a literary, informal style using the personal voice and uses qualitative terms and limited definitions	Researcher uses an engaging style of narrative, may use first-person pronoun and employs the language of qualitative research
Methodological	What is the process of research?	Researcher uses inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design	Researcher works with particulars (details) before generalisations, describes in details the context of the study, and continually revises questions from experience in the field

4.3 Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, it involves large philosophical questions regarding what knowledge is and how it is that that knowledge is gained. Researchers strive

to create research questions in order to make sense of the information they collect and use this data into knowledge. In this process they draw on a set of beliefs or epistemological assumptions called paradigms, these may be called upon implicitly or explicitly (Morrison in Briggs & Coleman, p. 19, 2007,). These paradigms (often called epistemes in educational research) are positioned differently depending on their ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (relationships between the research and what is being researched). axiology (role of values), rhetoric (language of research) and methodology (process of research) (Creswell, 2007).

The ontological and epistemological stance of researchers being explicit in first chapters allows the reader to understand the positionality of the researcher. Ontology is about the nature of the social world and how reality is constructed within it (Klingner & Broadman, 2011; May, 2001). Ontology is the study of being (Crotty, 1998). The ontological principles lead to the epistemological assumptions. Epistemology is concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge (Cohen et al., 2007) or ‘how what is assumed to exist is known’ (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). Epistemology and ontology influence the research methodology used. Kuhn’s (1970) prominent use of the term ‘paradigm’ was referred to as ‘a cluster of beliefs and dictates which for scientists in a particular discipline influence what should be studied, how research should be done, how results should be interpreted’ (Bryman, 1988, p. 4). It often helps the researcher understand the type of research methodology which could be undertaken. Helping the researcher to figure out in research language what worldview most applies to them. As previously stated, Creswell demonstrates four worldviews: postpositivism, constructivism, transformative and pragmatism. This researcher identifies with the transformative worldview.

4.3.1 Transformative Worldview

The transformative worldview ‘holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression...’ (Creswell, 2014, p. 9). Furthermore, the research needs to be used as a tool to empower, halt inequality, oppression and alienation. This research provides a voice for the participants and a platform for the use of the research findings to elicit change. Mertens (2010) Creswell says it is hard to define the groups of researchers who align themselves with this worldview but he identifies Freire to be amongst those who are drawn upon by this worldview. The focus of the research will focus on the needs of marginalised or disenfranchised groups or individuals in society.

Freire (1972, 1985, 1994, 1998) and his transformative worldview closely informs the researcher’s vision for transformation of the education system by removing system blockages (Downes, 2014). Freire’s work informs the positionality of the author. Freire’s work on emancipatory education of the people in Brazil was hugely influential when the researcher was involved with youth drama and as a youth worker. His critical pedagogy allowed the researcher to investigate with the young people she worked with, the ideas of freedom, empowerment and also challenged them on their decision to leave mainstream education and not continue elsewhere in their learning and support the young person in engaging with social justice and involvement in the democratic system. Freire gave a language to her as a youth worker trying to understand choice, lack of freedom and the banking system of education which was driving students to disengage from education (Freire, 1996; Irwin, 2012) . Of importance now is the involvement Freire had with phenomenology.

Merten’s (2010) describes the transformative paradigm as a framework of belief systems that directly engages members of culturally diverse groups with a focus on increased social justice (Harris et al., 2009; Mertens, 2010). “I make the argument that the

transformative paradigm has relevance for people who experience discrimination and oppression on whatever basis, including (but not limited to) race and ethnicity, disability, immigrant status, political conflicts, sexual orientation, poverty, gender, age, or the multitude of other characteristics that are associated with less access to social justice. In addition, the transformative paradigm is applicable to the study of the power structures that perpetuate social inequities (Mertens, 2010, p. 474). This research explores the lived experience of marginalised young people who left mainstream education before the Leaving Certificate. Two of the participants were from ethnic minorities, four experienced poverty as noted in Mertens list above. But her list is not limited and therefore the participants of this study also had experienced other social injustices or inequities. The transformative paradigm looks to identify and delve into this reality. Mertens sums up that “there is not one single context of social inquiry in which the transformative paradigm would not have the potential to raise issues of social justice and human rights (Mertens, 2009, p. 4). The values of ethics of transformative worldview holds that the research should do something about this - it should be used to inform policy and practice which elicits change. It is political at its core.

It should be noted that the reason that the constructionist paradigm was not chosen by this researcher as being the closest to her worldview is because it did not go far enough in using the knowledge gained to try to effect change, to bring about a resolution of long standing social problems (Mertens, 2010). The approach of this researcher meant that she did not only want to collect data and write about it but she also wanted to use the data to effect political change. The researcher has worked in the area of youth theatre, youth work and school completion programme since the late 1990s. She met young people who are being failed by the education system. One of the goals of this research provides a voice for the participants and a platform for the use of the research findings to elicit change in the system blockages. Working with young people, most especially in the context of adverse childhood

experiences and the attendance existential and educational difficulties which arise, is inherently political.

The social justice aspect of transformative worldview in research (as grounded particularly in the Freirean educational framework of problem-posing) closely aligns to the researcher's (professional) paid and voluntary work with young people and their families, this is the attitudinal approach to this research. The fundamental right to be free from oppression, exclusion, and violence (Fromm, 1942, 1993, 1997; Freire, 1970, 1985, 1994, 1998) is central to the work the researcher's voluntary and paid work.

The aim of this research is to focus on the participants' knowledge and interpret it to understand and comprehend it. The transformative paradigm provides the researcher with guidance regarding ethics and values and then linking to the capacity of doing something about the work, the political element of research cannot be removed. It means the researcher needs to critically examine their role in allowing the injustices to continue and the power imbalances and oppression to continue (Mertens, 2021). It will be important to recognise this bias and to look to ensure that it does not affect the interpretation of the data. Journaling is a method used in phenomenological research to reduce this risk and it will be discussed in the next section and developed further in the chapter on data analysis.

4.4 Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Approach focuses on the lived experience of the participants of research. It explores how those people make sense of that experience (Smith et al., 2009). The methodology was developed by Johnathan Smith (1996) and draws on phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. This thesis does not have the capacity to delve into each component that led to the development of the methodology. A figure from Charlick et al.(2016) regarding how each of the three areas helped to develop IPA is available in the

Appendix. The focus of this research is on the interpretation of the lived experience of the young people who participated in the research. The methodology used in this research focuses broadly on phenomenological approach and using the IPA data analysis tool.

Smith et al. summarise how these theoretical underpinnings influence the development of IPA in 1996. It aims to conduct research in a way which as far as possible enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems. It encourages the researcher to suspend their own perspective and perceptions and instead to focus on what the perspective and perceptions of the participants are.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience (Charlick et al., 2016 & Smith et al., 2009). It provides the researcher with a repertoire of ideas about how to examine and comprehend lived experiences. There are two major approaches to phenomenology: one is descriptive and the other is interpretive. Both approaches influence IPA. Descriptive phenomenology focuses on the lived experience without giving meaning to it. Interpretive Phenomenology wants to uncover and interpret the meaning which is embedded in a lived experience (Charlick et al., 2016 & Smith et al., 2009). Bronfenbrenner was influenced by Lewin's work (1931, 1935) on phenomenological approach; it informed his early work on ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Phenomenology is an educational qualitative research method (Creswell, 2013; Diaz, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Ponce, 2014). Phenomenology has its origins in the philosophy discipline. "It is a philosophical approach to the study of experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). It is being used in many disciplines now such as education, health and the social sciences.

It is, however, noted by the researcher the warning which Keen (1975) gives as quoted in Hycner (1985) that 'unlike other methodologies, phenomenology cannot be reduced

to a 'cookbook' set of instructions. It is more an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture with a certain set of goals' (Hycner, 1985, p. 279). Phenomenology has many approaches. This research uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a methodology.

As previously discussed the researcher aligns herself within the transformative worldview. The methodological approach for transformative researchers uses semi-structured interviews which allow for open ended questions. The methodology is interviewing people "at some length to determine how they have personally experienced oppression" (Creswell, 2014, p. 9). Meaning will be collected from the participants, there will be a focus on a single phenomenon. The context and setting of participants is as important as the interpretation of the findings and the validation of these findings. The findings will lead to the creation of an agenda for change or reform and at all times there will be collaboration with participants. The researcher will at all times be cognisant of her positionality (Creswell, 2014).

4.5 Data Collection

IPA studies are conducted on small sample sizes. The sample size must be small because the data analysis is done on an individual basis and this is time intensive. Smith et al. (2007) describe the idiographic mode of inquiry which IPA employs creates the ability to say something about the individuals involved in the study. IPA does not want to create generalisations to the general population. It is theoretical transferability which is being created as opposed to empirical generalisability (Smith et al., 2012).

4.6 Sample size

IPA is labour intensive in its analysis of the data. Therefore the sample sizes tend to be small. But they also tend to be a homogenous, purposive sample (Smith et al., 2007). IPA

requires a fairly homogeneous sample, although recognizing that determining the criteria for this homogeneity is itself an interpretative issue (Smith et al., 2022). This is because the phenomenon being researched must be something which the participants are experiencing. It is a representative sample, people who are experiencing a phenomena which is the subject of the research question/s. Creswell (2013) furthers this point by stating that it is useful to have a range of perspectives on the phenomena, therefore not every participant must be experiencing the same situation exactly. In this study we could interview a parent, teacher and young person who are all linked to the phenomena of adverse childhood experiences and early school leaving and take their perspective on their lived experience. However, it was decided that the lived experience of the young person is the phenomenon that is of most importance and the central focus of this research. Smith et al. (2012) guidelines to Professional Doctoral researchers is four to ten interviews, not participants. It could be four participants interviewed twice. This research interviewed seven participants, one of them twice. The following section outlines the sampling process.

4.7 Sampling

Participants in IPA research are usually recruited via referral from gatekeepers, opportunities as a result of the researchers own contacts or through snowballing, which is referrals coming from participants (Smith et al., 2009). Purposive sampling is used because the research is looking at a particular perspective on an experience in a particular context. IPA researchers endeavour to find an homogeneous sample. The sample will relate to the research questions in a meaningful way. Their perspective does not need to be homogeneous but the way in which their experience is framed is similar. Another important facet of IPA sampling is that the participants give the researcher access to a particular perspective on the

phenomenon being studied, however, they do not represent the population at large, but a perspective on a particular phenomenon.

The following criteria was used to identify participants. They must live in Dublin, be aged 16-20 years of age. They should not have completed the Leaving Certificate or equivalent in mainstream school, but they must currently attend an alternative education centre. All genders and ethnicities could participate.

Table 11: Criteria for all Participants.

Location	Age	Educational Attainment	Gender	Ethnicity
Live in Dublin	16 -20 years	Did not complete Leaving Certificate or Equivalent in Mainstream School	Any Gender	Any Ethnicity
		Is Currently in Alternative Education Centre		

Further to reaching the above criteria the participants would also have to have experienced one or more of the following adverse childhood experiences. Death of a parent, a parent in prison, have grown up in care, parental separation or homelessness and poverty.

Table 12. Participants ACEs criteria.

Death of a Parent	Parent in Prison	Growing up in Care	Parental Separation	Homeless and Poverty
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In this research the participants were identified in their place of education through the head of the education centre. In centre one, Griffin Centre, the researcher gave a

presentation to the staff regarding the research criteria, the consent requirements, the support available to the young people via the centre, should they be upset after an interview, as well as explaining about confidentiality. The staff subsequently informed the young people who they 'key worked' about the research. They approached young people who met the criteria set out in the research and asked them if they would like to participate.

The researcher then met with the potential participants to explain the research to them, to give them consent forms, either for them to complete themselves as they were under 18 years of age or to give them assent forms and parental consent forms and the plain language statements for both categories also. The researcher made several visits to the centre over the following weeks to get returned consent and to meet other young people who were absent during the most recent visit. However, due to the nature of these hard to reach (Shaghghi et al., 2011) young people it was labour intensive and also time consuming to attend the centre on more than 15 occasions. During the course of the visits the researcher was visible and therefore became more familiar to the young people. This had the advantage of young people becoming used to the presence of the researcher which meant that young people became more comfortable about volunteering to participate in the research. Two male participants participated, however, there were 2 females identified who did not meet the criteria because they had completed the Leaving Certificate, and further two males were identified but did not return the consent forms.

The second education centre, named here as the Phoenix Centre, identification of potential participants was somewhat easier than the first. Five participants were identified, one female and four male. The researcher visited this centre over 15 times to meet potential participants, to give the relevant information and paperwork, to collect the paperwork and to undertake the interviews. A very warm welcome was given to the researcher, including tea

and scones made by the cooking teacher. The positivity of the interaction between the centre and the researcher allowed the young people to come forward to participate. In one case, one young man recruited his friend, and their lived experience will be described in the next chapter. The researcher tried to recruit three more participants, particularly females, however, despite the staff approaching people there were no further volunteers. At that point the researcher decided to stop the recruitment process.

The participant profile is set out in the table below. There were 7 young people, 6 males and 1 female. The age range is 17 to 19 years. The participants were identified on the basis that they have experienced an adverse childhood experience, such as being in care, the death of a parent or guardian, a parent being in prison, parental separation or childhood homelessness and poverty. The table below demonstrates that four of the participants were identified based on their experience of poverty. Two were in care and one had experienced the death of a parent. Although only one experience of the ACEs was necessary to participate, it became evident in the interviews that some of the participants had experienced other ACEs or had other factors in their lives which were central to their education experience.. They are a family of history of early school leaving, experiencing mental health difficulties, experiencing domestic violence, child abuse and parental drug use. The participants have been given Irish language names, which are not their own names.

Table 13. Overview of the Participants

	Participant*	Age	Gender	Identifying Criteria	Other Criteria	Centre*
1	Seán	17	Male	Poverty	Family History of ESL	Phoenix Centre
2	Micheál	19	Male	Poverty	Mental Health	Phoenix Centre
3	Liam	18	Male	In Care	Domestic Violence	Phoenix Centre
4	Séamus	18	Male	Death of a Parent - Mother	ADHD & Mental Health	Phoenix Centre
5	Brigid	17	Female	Poverty	Family History ESL	Phoenix Centre
6	Tadhg	17	Male	Poverty	Parental Drug Addiction	Griffin Centre
7	Fionn	18	Male	In Care	Child Abuse	Griffin Centre

*Pseudonyms used for all centres and people

4.8 Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model influence on Methodology

Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model influence on the methodological approach can be seen in the following way. The child is the participant. The microsystem describes the face to face, direct relationships the child has with significant people in their lives, like parents, teachers and friends. This interaction becomes more complex and interrelated over the course of the child’s life. The mesosystem it is a system of two or more micro-systems, it is a system of microsystems, for example the relationship between the family and the school. The exosystem which is a system where the child does not occupy, but which influences the child. For example, the child’s parents' workplace and/or pressure from their workplace. Important to note that any social institution that makes decisions that ultimately affect conditions of family life can function as an exosystem. The macrosystem is where the belief systems, the social systems and the cultural norms of the society in which the child is growing up are located. Policies and laws are also a part of this layer. Norms about school

attendance may be formed in this system. The chronosystem refers to environmental events and patterns of transitions that impact during a person's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998, 2006). It identifies that the experience and reactions to experience often change over time (O'Toole, 2016). The influences on the systems may be proximal, but others are also indirect. Influences on each level are bi-directional, and they change over time due to reasons ranging from individual development to societal change.

The interviews were set up to focus on several aspects of the participants' lives as influenced by Bronfenbrenner. Questions were based on individual factors, current education and returning to education, experience of school and school attendance, services, family factors, and if they were the Minister for Education. The table below outlines the overlap of the bioecological model systems and the questions developed to explore this phenomenon with the participants. Chapter five outlines the data analysis and explores the overlap of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model and demonstrates that because young people are human and have very unique lived experiences, this model is restrictive and does not necessarily explore the messiness of life. Not all young people fit into the neat nested systems like Russian Dolls. Young people who have experienced ACEs also tend to live in more chaotic environments, therefore Bronfenbrenner's model seems a little linear, but this will be discussed in the next chapter.

Using this framework to examine the lives of young people, the researcher knew that Bronfenbrenner provided a tool to explore this topic. Bronfenbrenner's reflexivity in the development of his theory over decades was a contributing factor as to why this theoretical framework was chosen for this research. What this research adds to theory is the phenomenological approach used in this research through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. Bronfenbrenner's work is about young people - this work is about what young people said, in their words, this is something that extends Bronfenbrenner's work. Bronfenbrenner's

bio-ecological model could be expanded to include a stronger focus on loss and adversity for children. This research would be an addition to Bronfenbrenner’s model that focused on the child and the world surrounding that child. It creates a discourse on the systems blockages that are in place that prevent the young person thriving and being secure in their family, school, peer group and community.

The interview questions are designed on an extension of Bronfenbrenner's model. It extends his model because the interviews allowed for the gaps in support - the holes through which the young people fell. The bio-ecological model presents a solid structure, however, when the data was analysed what could be seen is that the model is like sand - the young people fall through the sand, there are holes in the model, there are gaps in the model. Downes (2012, 2016, 2020) uses diametric spaces to describe “systems blockages” (Downes 2014), this research extends both Downes and Bronfenbrenner in its ability to see the models and structures being used as fixed and not penetrable, or porous - the findings in this research show the penetrability and porous nature of real life and therefore of the model - a model that is not solid and structured.

Table 14. Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-Ecological Model and the Interview Question Types

Question Type	Bio-Ecological System
Individual Factors & Decision to Leave	Microsystem/Chronosystem
Current Education & Returning to Education	Microsystem/Macrosystem/Chronosystem
School Experiences & School Attendance	Microsystem/Mesosystem/Exosystem/Chronosystem
Services	Microsystem/Macrosystem/Exosystem/Chronosystem
Family Factors	Microsystem/Mesosystem/Exosystem/Macrosystem/Chronosystem
Minister for Education & Future	Macrosystem

4.9 Interviews

Research must be able to demonstrate its ‘fitness for purposes and methodological soundness’ (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 105). Interviews in qualitative research are prevalent and have demonstrated the rigour needed to ensure that the methods used to collect data are robust. Semi structured interviews were conducted to collect the data. The benefits of using this type of interview is that it can quickly build a rapport with the participants and develop trust and empathy in the seeking of data (Smith et al., 2012). It also allows for freedom to examine areas in more depth which arise in the course of the conversation. Semi structured interviews allow the researcher to obtain “descriptions of the life world of the interview in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 6).

The interviews were semi structured. They were conducted in the participants' place of education. The interview was recorded on the researcher's mobile telephone. The audio recordings of the interviews were stored on Google Drive (transferred from phone) until the transcription process was completed and then they were deleted. The transcripts are saved in a password protected folder in the other researcher's password protected DCU Google Drive account. This process was approved by DCU's Research ethics committee in the summer of 2022.

The participants were comfortable in the environment because it was their space. They had met the researcher several times over the preceding weeks, while she collected consent forms. The environment being comfortable for these young people is important, because they are speaking about topics that may have caused them upset. However, no participant became upset during the course of the interviews. It should be noted that the interviewer found the content of two of the interviews particularly difficult. After the last interview the interviewer had external supervision which is a normal part of her day job, she was able to explore the challenges she felt of hearing the young people's stories. Journaling

was another mechanism that she used to process the interviews. It allowed her the time and space to work past the sadness, anger and despair she felt for the participants in order to code and analyse the data.

The interview started asking about their name, age and address. Thanking them for completing the consent or assent forms, whichever one was relevant, depending on their age. The ability to stop the interview at any time was explained in the information sessions the researcher held in the two centres, either in small groups or individually when the participants were given the plain language statement and consent/assent forms. This was then reiterated at the start of the interviews. The participant was also reminded that their education centre had agreed to provide support to them should they require it during or after the interview. No participant ended the interview early nor did they seek the support mechanisms established after the interviews.

The questions started with a description of the current education centre they attended. This was followed by questions about their family. Experience of school was next and attendance was integrated into this. The next part focused on their reason for leaving mainstream school before the Leaving Certificate. Questions about the types of services they may have been linked to followed that. If it was not already covered, there were three questions about the individual which focussed on their stresses, dreams and supports. To end the interview in a positive way, the participants were then asked to describe their return to training or education. Lastly, they were asked to indicate what they would like to see or do if they were the Minister for Education. Appendix 5 sets out the interview questions.

The interviews were conducted in a way that was like a conversation. It was important to ensure that there was a rapport between the researcher and the participant (Smith et al., 2009). The questions were there to prompt the researcher to ensure the topic was covered. The difference between a normal conversation and a semi structured interview is that there

are silences, there needs to be clarifications to questions. The pace of the interviews varied as is the timings. But the tone of the interviews was important in order to put the participant at ease when there was in depth conversation about the more sensitive topics.

4.10 Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis sets out six steps to conduct data analysis. The six steps are: reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes or patterns across the cases, searching for connections across the emergent themes, then moving to the next case and finally looking for patterns across all cases (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 1: Reading and rereading the transcripts

The first step is to fully immerse oneself in the data. To read and re-read the transcripts. When the interviews are being transcribed from the audio file it is time consuming and all consuming. It allows for a rich and deep immersion in the data. It allows the researcher to listen to the information given fully, when conducting the interview the researcher is focusing often on the mechanism and ensuring that the interview achieves the desired results of collecting data. Listening back to the interview while reading the transcript allows the researcher to be a participant and spectator of the interview. A similar experience to the forum theatre of Augusto Boal, as the spect-actor. Where the person is a spectator and an actor to create meaning. In IPA the researcher wants to interpret meaning.

Step 2: Initial noting

This step is run in tandem with step one, initial thoughts and notes are made in the listening and reading of the transcripts. Notes were made in a separate file to the transcript mostly noting things which struck the researcher as being important or potentially important. Particularly of interest to this research was the use of laughter and pauses and checking in with the participants that they were comfortable delving into a topic or moving on from one

area to the next. Listening to the tone of the language was something which was noted in this part.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes

In this step the transcripts were colour coded in order to see what theme they matched to. The transcripts were printed out and highlighters were used to colour code each section. The questions asked were sorted into colour codes and the answers given by the participants were coloured in to match the question. The table below outlines the colours and the question types which they relate to.

Table 15. Colour Codes for Themes

Colour	Question Type
Pink	Individual Factors & Decision to Leave
Orange	Current Education & Returning to Education
Yellow	School Experiences & School Attendance
Green	Services
Blue	Family Factors
Purple	Minister for Education & Future

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes

This system was then moved to a large excel spreadsheet which had seven tabs, one for each participant and also had the questions types colour coded. As well as having the printed out transcript that were physically colour coded, there was also the soft copy which was used to copy and paste the relevant parts of the transcript into the excel spreadsheet. This allowed for each section to have participants' words coded into the themes.

Step 5: Moving to the next case

When steps 1-4 were completed for a participant it was important to move onto the next participant and repeat the process. The first participant took significantly longer to complete than subsequent participants. However, some interviews were easier to code than others - in the seventh interview, the interview which was the most emotional to do, the answers given could fit into several themes - therefore there were duplication of comments in different sections of the excel spreadsheet.

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases

The excel spreadsheet allowed for the visual representation of the themes - although it is a large document it provided the researcher with clear and concise information. Some themes emerged quickly and easily while others were more opaque and took time, especially during the first few steps of the IPA process. More themes emerged than this thesis can delve deeper into, but the themes which will be discussed in the next chapter are the ones which the researcher felt gave justice to the participants and their stories.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

Ethical research approval was sought from the Dublin City University Ethics Research Committee due the research topic. Following a full committee review approval was granted in July 2022. The nature of the research topic and interviews is sensitive. The participants are between 17 and 19 years of age. They have experienced adverse childhood experiences, such as the death of a parent, they may be in care, they may have grown up experiencing poverty or homelessness. Their parents may be separated from one another or a parent may be in prison. They all left mainstream education before the Leaving Certificate or

equivalent. Cohen et al. (2015) identify three main areas of ethical considerations, “informed consent, confidentiality and the consequences of the interview” (p. 442).

Informed consent was obtained by those over the age of 18 years of age. Assent was obtained from those under 18, as well as parental consent. All participants and their parents were given plain language statements relevant to them. That means that each plain language statement was written with the reader in mind. There were three different statements provided, one for parents, one for young people under 18 and one for young people over 18. At all times the language was kept simple and also as jargon free as possible, while still ensuring that all information was given. These statements are in the Appendix.

The second area for ethical consideration is confidentiality. When researching with young people confidentiality can be broken into different elements. Firstly, the need to ensure that the statutory obligations on Child Safeguarding is followed to ensure the safety of the young person. In the planning for the research the Research Ethics application outlined that “If there is a current or historic child protection concern this will be raised with the Designated Liaison Person of the education centre. The young people will be made aware of this before they participate in the interviews. The information can only be protected within the limitations of the law”, however, this was not needed during the research.

Another element of confidentiality is ensuring that the data collected does not identify any participant. The area in which the young people live and where they went to school will not be identified in the research. The young people’s names were not mentioned in the audio recording or transcripts. Each participant was given an identifying code which was used during the recordings and the key to deciphering the code to the participants was kept separately. Any schools, education providers or individuals will be anonymised and they will be renamed. All specific details which could lead to the identification of the young people will not be included in the thesis; but only the more general aspects will be retained.

The storing of the electronic data (the re-coding of the interviews) was stored on a folder in the other researcher's Dublin City University (DCU) Google Drive account which is encrypted, password protected and under the control of the university. The audio recordings of the interviews stored on Google Drive (transferred from phone) were deleted when the transcription process was complete. The transcripts are saved in a password protected folder in the other researcher's password protected DCU Google Drive account. The printed transcripts used for physical coding are stored in a locked cabinet. All of this was explained to the participants in the Plain Language Statement.

The final element of ethical consideration is the consequences of the interviews. At the end of each interview, after the audio was turned off the researcher checked how the participant felt the interview went. An informal chat was had which allowed the researcher to enquire about the mood of the participant. The researcher brought the participant back to their classroom and then gave feedback to the head of centre about the young person's engagement in the interview, meaning that the young person seemed calm, relaxed and not upset about the interview. The researcher encouraged the head of centre to ring the researcher if that changed. The researcher met a number of the participants after the interviews at an awards ceremony and thanked them for their time and story. The researcher returned to the centre a number of months later with a thank you note for each participant and for the centre.

Chapter 5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings of the research. Four themes emerged in the research. Firstly the concept of time and memory. The participants' concept of time was a challenge at times. Some found it difficult to remember when events took place or why. It was at times challenging for the researcher to get the timelines of events in order to understand the life experience of the young person and why and when events occurred. The concept of time also includes the time in the young person's life when the event happened. For the young people in this research, the global pandemic Covid-19 was occurring when most of them decided to leave school, as well as their experience of being out of school during the pandemic.

Secondly, the theme of 'who cares?' Loss of the mother figure and the importance of friendship emerged. Some participants experienced loss of the mother figure either through death, the participant being taken into care or through parental addiction. The question regards who cared about them or for them if it is not their mother? What were the effects of this loss on attachment and belonging? Not every participant felt loved, nor did they have a stable base. Friendship was also spoken about by six of the seven participants. Two participants in particular demonstrated the importance of their friendship - in their own words, independently of one another.

The third theme is about the school structures. What were the barriers and protective factors that hindered or encouraged participation in mainstream education. What is the difference between mainstream education and the education setting they currently attend?

Lastly, the theme of support structures that the young people and their families engaged with and the effectiveness of the life of the participant. The themes that emerged from the research can be put into the following table.

Table 16. Themes of the Research Data

Theme 1	The Concept of Time and Memory
Theme 2	Who Cares? Loss of Mother figure & the Importance of Friendship
Theme 3	School structures
Theme 4	Support Structures

The participant profile is set out in the table below. There were 7 young people, 6 males and 1 female. The age range is 17 to 19 years. The participants were identified on the basis that they have experienced an adverse childhood experience, such as being in care, the death of a parent or guardian, a parent being in prison, parental separation or childhood homelessness and poverty. The table below demonstrates that four of the participants were identified based on their experience of poverty. Two were in care and one had experienced the death of a parent. Although only one experience of the ACEs was necessary to participate, it became evident in the interviews that some of the participants had experienced other ACEs or had other factors in their lives that affected their education experience. They are: family history of early school leaving, experiencing domestic violence, experiencing mental health difficulties, child abuse and parental drug use. The participants have been given Irish language names that are not their own names. The names of the centres are not their real names to protect anonymity.

Table 17. Overview of Participants

	Participant*	Age	Gender	Identifying Criteria	Other Criteria	Centre*
1	Seán	17	Male	Poverty	Family History of Early School Leaving	Phoenix Centre
2	Micheál	19	Male	Poverty	Mental Health	Phoenix Centre
3	Liam	18	Male	In Care	Domestic Violence	Phoenix Centre
4	Séamus	18	Male	Death of a Parent - Mother	ADHD & Mental Health	Phoenix Centre
5	Brigid	17	Female	Poverty	Family History of Early School Leaving	Phoenix Centre
6	Tadhg	17	Male	Poverty	Parental Drug Addiction	Griffin Centre
7	Fionn	18	Male	In Care	Child Abuse	Griffin Centre

*Pseudonyms used for all participants and centres

5.2 Themes

5.2.1 The Concept of Time and Memory

The concept of time was difficult for some of the participants - trying to ascertain when events happened and the sequence of events was challenging at times. The interview was semi structured but as part of hearing the lived experience of the participants the researcher asked questions about when events occurred, including what age the participant was at the time. This was not easy for some of the participants. Some were uncertain of when things happened. If events occurred when they were very young (like Séamus and Fionn) their age may have played a part in their memory of events. Beyond the scope of this research is the loss of memory as a protective factor in child abuse and neglect.

Researcher: Did your Mum die when you just started secondary school?

No... oh actually no. She died when I was in Fifth Class actually.

Oh when you were in Fifth Class?

Yeah, and then I did Sixth Class and then I went into secondary school. So I went into secondary school when I was 13.

(Séamus)

Séamus was talking about when he left school and when his mother died. Séamus explained that he was having trouble concentrating and learning in school because he had ADHD and also because he had anger issues. Séamus said his mother went into the school to advocate on his behalf to ask for support for his behaviour. He said that his mother took him out of school then, towards the end of the school year. Later in the interview he said that it must have been 5th class that happened because his mother died when he was in 5th class.

I actually didn't even leave because of the school..so I was just in my bed one day and I... my sister was leaving the house, and I didn't... oh yeah, she thought I was pretending that I was asleep. She was trying to wake me up and I was just in a deep sleep, and I seen she was walking out of the house and I was like 'Oh I'm just going to do this every day then. I'm just going to act like I'm asleep and she's going to leave for work' and then I just did that for like a whole month, and then I got too comfortable and I just never went back.

(Séamus)

Séamus realised that he could feign being asleep until his sister left for work and when she left he could stay at home and not go to school. He said he played video games all day for 14 hours a day and ended up gaining a lot of weight, he says he did 'Fuck all, got fat'. Séamus found it difficult to recall who encouraged him to return to education and what agency they were from.

Well no I just... I... what's it called? What them... School Completion Officers or something? They came to my house, like *loads* of times, trying to get me into a load of different things, and then this...I don't know. It was some girl. No wait, was it? Yeah, it was a girl. I forget actually now. That's mad. It was a girl and... It was just someone that brang me here and got me in...But I wasn't even going to give her a chance. I was just like 'Ah, this is just another person and I'm just going to tell her now.' And I was like 'Alright, I'll come here just to act like I'll do it' and then I just joined out of nowhere, because my mate joined.

(Séamus)

He knew he left school in second year, he was not certain when, but he was 15 and it took him a while to figure out when he came to the new education centre. However, he came when he was 18. Someone from either the School Completion Programme or the Education Welfare Officer came to encourage him to go to the current education centre. Séamus was at home on his Play Station for three years. By that time Séamus gained weight and struggled with social anxiety but when he started in the Phoenix Centre he joined the gym and has lost a lot of weight and feels much better in his health, mentally and physically.

Just my stomach would be in bits and all. Like I felt sick to my stomach. I'd be like 'Nah, I need to go home...' And then with the time I put in I just got used to being out again.

(Séamus)

I wouldn't be able to tell you that, not because I don't want to, because I don't know

(Fionn)

Fionn grew up in the care system both in Ireland and the UK. His memories of when he went into care are not forthcoming to him. He is unsure of things through his own memory but instead has relied on others to tell him about his past. He first thought he went into care when he was 6 years old but through talking out the timelines he changed to thinking it must have been 7 years old. He was also uncertain about what services may have supported him throughout his childhood.

I wouldn't be able to tell you that, not because I don't want to, because I don't know... Because ever since I have like learned to understand things, I have tried my best to like block out my childhood... Because of a load of like horrific things that shouldn't have happened to me, did happen, and I don't... want it to be... I don't want that to be able to come back and haunt me one of the days, so I've tend to just like block that all out of my life...

(Fionn)

Fionn explained that he does not want to remember things that happened to him in his childhood because they were so 'horrific'. He says he has blocked them out and tries to live in the moment. He said he tried to find out what happened to him but no adult was about to explain to him what happened to him.

“because I was searching for a long while to try and find answers to why it all happened, but no one could ever give me an answer, so I just came to be at peace with the fact I'm never going to get answers, that I should just forget about...I... as I say to many people, I tend to live by the day – not the year, not the minute – the day, because one... yesterday I could say that I'm going to go swimming today, today I might want to go to the cinema. Like things could change...

(Fionn)

Fionn told the researcher after the interview as she walked him back to his classroom that he is used to telling his story. He does not feel anything in telling the story, because it does not affect him anymore. He said he knows that people are more affected than he is by the story.

The Covid -19 pandemic may have played a part in the concept of time for the young people. The participants struggled to remember when they left school and some struggled to remember if they had done the Junior Cycle Examinations. This confusion could have been because during the pandemic the students in 3rd year in 2020 were given the certificate of completion and a report from the school because the state examinations were not held that year. The students have that certificate for 2020 Junior Cycle Examinations.

The element of time in Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Concept-Time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) highlights the micro, meso and macro time. The macro time (previously called chronosystem) regards what was happening at the time of the event in society at large. In this case, the Covid 19 pandemic. Participants spoke about the distortion of time and memories of events that occurred during the pandemic.

Blocking out memories may be utilised as a coping mechanism for people who have experienced adversity in childhood (Maté, 2011, Perry, 2017, Siegel, 2020, van der Kolk, 1994, 2014). Van der Kolk (2014) explains that people who have experienced adversity may have the ability to block that experience from their conscious memory as a protective factor for survival. "Some people simply go into denial: Their bodies register the threat, but their conscious minds go on as if nothing has happened. However, even though the mind may learn to ignore the messages from the emotional brain, the alarm signals don't stop. The emotional brain keeps working, and stress hormones keep sending signals to the muscles to tense for action or immobilize in collapse...the body continues to keep the score" (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 46). Van der Kolk highlights the body's inability to forget but the mind may go into denial.

Adverse childhood experiences and the person's ability to remember the time and the events adds to Bronfenbrenner's work. Bronfenbrenner does not explore ACEs nor does he explore that in relation to time. He does however, look at the person and the context, for some participants the Covid 19 pandemic is a context that should be considered. This research adds to the growing body of research on the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic on time and memory. (Droit-Volet et al., 2023 & Pawlak et al., 2023, O'Toole & Simonvska, 2022).

5.2.2 Who Cares? Loss of the Mother and Importance of Friendship

Throughout the interviews the theme of who cares about the young person came up in tandem with the loss of the mother due to death, addiction, abuse or domestic violence. Four out of the seven young people's attachment was not secure for the duration of their childhood. However, not all participants shared this view. Young people also talked about the importance of friendship. The second finding examined the effects of the loss of the mother figure and the importance of friendship. Bronfenbrenner holds that relationships are key to development of the child (Bronfenbrenner 1974, 1977, 1979, 1986, 1998, 2005).

Seán described that it was his family who he can trust and talk about his stresses to. He describes that he has a very good relationship with his family. He explained that when he lived on the halting site it was great fun to have his family, especially his cousins around him.

It's good when you are around your own people and your own cousins, like friends. It kind of brings a little bit of life, a spark. I was very young when my grandmother was living there, see there is a little alleyway at the bottom of the site, there is houses, she was the first house. I think there was 30 bays, and in each bay you could fit two trailers, maybe only one if it is very long. But in mine, in patches over years, one trailer of my parents, and the other with my sister until they left and then my older

brothers, until he got married. On the day we left I was actually crying. There was a boy living in the bay next to me. I had a bike and I gave it to him.

(Seán)

Micheál explained that although his parents would listen to him about his problems or thoughts he does not want to share them with his parents.

“Like I wouldn’t be able to turn around and talk to any of the family. Like I know they would, everyone says they can, but I don’t want...it doesn’t feel right in my head. Like everyone says you can but I know myself, no one’s going to say you can’t’.

(Micheál)

Liam went into the care system when he was 16 years old. He had grown up with his parents until then. His mother left his father and went into a refuge when Liam was 15. Liam was allowed to stay with his mother in the refuge. When they were moved to another area in a supportive housing project for people who have experienced domestic violence Liam found it difficult to cope with his mother’s depression and ill health. He explained that she was unable to care for him. He asked the key worker he had to help him find stability. He went into Care at 16. He described his relationship with his father as being very difficult and at the point when the interview had taken place Liam had not seen his father for two years. Liam had moved around many times when he was a young child and when he went into care he continued to move frequently in order to find a suitable placement. Despite going into care Liam and his mother have a good relationship now and had recently been on holidays together. His mother comes from another country and Liam visits his grandmother in that country in the summers. The grandmother also accompanied Liam and his mother on the summer holiday.

Researcher: How would you describe your relationship with your mum now?

It's good, yeah. Went on a holiday together with my ma and nanny over the summer.

Did you go to (country of origin)?

No, we went to Spain and Portugal.

(Liam)

Fionn was taken into care when he was six. He had several placements both in Ireland and the UK. He now lives in aftercare - which is where young people over the age of 18 go to leave, because their foster placements are no longer available as they are 18. The two young people who were interviewed explained about this type of living and this will be discussed later. Fionn explained that he has been able to see both of his parents and siblings at all times since returning to Ireland. Below he explains about when he can visit his Dad and the reception he gets when he visits.

I just don't bother going down to him, because it's... a far journey on a bus, because I have to take two buses down there, and because it's not really worth my while, so yeah, I don't really go down. When I say that I mean that when I do go down he's not really doing much, he's not really a talkative person. Like he was like me a couple of years ago. He just likes to sit down, do his own thing, and he doesn't like to be bothered. So if I go down I tend to be either sitting there, just minding my own business on my phone, or talking to my sister if she's there, but she's never ever there.

(Fionn)

This young man really wanted to have a relationship with his family despite the absolutely 'horrific things that shouldn't have happened to me, did happen'. The secure attachment and sense of belonging may be something that this young person does not feel in

this interaction with his father. Throughout his interviews he did not express a connection to any other family members, caregivers or friends.

Tadhg is 17 and returned to the Griffin Centre after being excluded for behavioural issues the first time he attended when he was 15. At the time of the interviews Tadhg's brother was excluded due to his behaviour but was hoping to return also. The family background is one where there is addiction. Tadhg explained that his mother is absent most of the time due to her addiction. He said that it was only in the last few years that it was explained to him about his mother's addiction. He said he did not really understand it before that but that he would get comments in school about his mother, but he never understood what they were talking about. In contrast to Micheál, Tadhg said that he feels supported by 'me girlfriend, me da, and me two brothers probably' (Tadhg). His family supported him when he was getting bullied in first year in secondary school. They went into the school but also told him to fight back, something which he did not know how to do then but he asserts that he does now. He had a broken tooth that he explained in the course of the interview, and was broken in a fight. Experiencing violence is something that Tadhg experienced in school and also currently. Exposure to violence is not unusual for children and young people who experience ACEs and live in lower socio economic areas (Barlett et al., 2018; Downes, 2020; Finkelhor et al., 2015).

Séamus' mother died when he was 12 as described in the previous section. Death of a parent was measured by the original ACEs study and subsequent studies (Felitti et al., 1998; Anda et al., 2004; Murphy et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2011,2018). Séamus had a positive relationship with his sister's Dad and his siblings. His family make up was complex and took a while to explain who everyone was. When Séamus' mother died he moved in with his eldest sister who became his legal guardian. However, his sisters' Dad continued to play a pivotal role in his life. Séamus left school in second year and his sister tried her best to get him to

continue in school. But he had decided he did not want to go and she had to leave to bring the children to school and go to work herself so that is what allowed Séamus to stay at home. He said that she tried her best to get him to go, she even got him a prize of a Play Station remote control, but he still continued to spend 14 hours daily on the screen. It was his friend Liam who finally convinced him to get back into education. This story will be told in the section on theme four, friendship and being loved. The researcher asked Séamus whether it was at that stage his sister was his carer?

Yeah, she was my guardian. Yeah, she was the eldest. Now this is not the one now. I lived with a different sister in [redacted] for four years, five years. So I moved out of the house when my Mam died. Yeah, then I moved out literally like that day. Went to live with my sister, because she's the oldest... she went to court and got my guardian all sorted.

(Séamus)

The mother figure being absent was told by four of the young people. Although the absence of their mothers was for varying reasons and times. When designing this research the death of a parent was one of the factors that used to identify potential participants. It was not predicted that the theme of the absence of a mother through addiction or being taken into Care would emerge in the manner which it did for some of the participants described in this section. Although these participants describe their mothers absence they also describe that there were other family members, such as siblings, fathers or grandparents, who supported them. Only one participant (Fionn) did not describe any person as a support for him, even his mother, who he was able to visit throughout his childhood in Care.

Two young people who took part in this research were friends. Their relationship was key to them re engaging with society, returning to education and to becoming active and

healthy. They were not interviewed together but both of them spoke about one another. They knew they would both participate in the research through speaking with one another. Their support of one another can be seen in two aspects of the story.

Liam went to live in a refuge when he was fifteen years old. Witnessing domestic violence is classified as an adverse childhood experience (Felitti et al., 1998; McCutchen et al., 2023). He was relieved that he could stay with his mother because he was older than most children who go to a refuge. He maintained his friendship with Seamus throughout this time and despite moving homes several times. They played football together in the local club. Both Seamus and Liam were thankful to the coach for continuing to encourage them even when they did not always turn up for training. When Liam was in the refuge he did not attend school but he tried to get to training. The refuge did not approve of him going to training alone because it was a far away journey for him on the bus alone. His mom was not able to accompany him due to her own health. But he kept going as often as he could and he would meet Seamus there. Friendship is an important protective factor in ACEs (Smyth, 2016), the friendship between Seamus and Liam was a force of positivity and support.

Yeah. No matter what. Even if the refuge were telling me that I can't, I still went. Because I'd be back home for 11/midnight. They weren't too happy about that. I just ended up going. They were saying it was too late for me to come back by myself. Because I wasn't 16 at the time yet. And they said that until 16, you're not allowed to be by yourself anywhere, to be honest, in that refuge. So, yeah...But I still ended up going most of the times.

(Liam)

However, Seamus stopped going to football due to the team splitting up and it was at the same time his mother died.

My team split up and I just stopped playing, and started playing my game. I was going to join that team. I was playing for that team. Yeah, and I then just didn't, because my other team asked me to go up to the higher league, so I just done that instead.

(Séamus)

It was at the point when he moved into his sister's home. He stopped going to school, despite her protests and bribes to get him there. The only thing he did was play games all day long. He put on a huge amount of weight and became unable to leave the house without feeling panicky. At the same time this was happening there was a worker (either EWO, SCP or Social) visiting him to encourage him to attend school. This did not help motivate him. The reason he decided to go to the Phoenix Centre is because Liam had gotten a place there and said he was excellent. Liam had found out about the place from Séamus' worker and decided to try it out.

The only reason why I'm here is because of Liam*, to be honest... So, my mate, Séamus [not his real name], proposed this course for my social worker. Then I looked it up and then I eventually ended up in [redacted] and I was like 'Why don't we just come here together?' So, we joined together. I know Séamus since I was in 3rd class, primary.

(Séamus)

Liam kept up the pressure on him to go. Telling him that there is a gym, he would get paid and that the people there aren't that bad. Liam stayed overnight with Séamus one night and he explained that he just dragged Séamus to the Phoenix Centre.

But that... I didn't come in. And then I was meant to come in and I didn't come in for like a month, and then Séamus started going in and he told me it was actually good,

and then he stayed at my house one day... I was literally never going to come in, and he stayed over and he was going into here in the morning, and he woke me up and he just dragged me out of the bed and he was like 'Come on, will you? You're coming in.' I was like 'Alright.' Yeah. So he's the reason why I'm in here. I actually wasn't going to go in. I was telling him to 'Fuck off' and all. He was trying to wake me up and I was like 'Get out of my fucking room' and then I just came in.

(Liam, p. 13)

Seámus said he found being outside very difficult for him psychologically - he felt panicky and that he could not breathe, especially on the bus. On his first day at the Phoenix Centre he met lots of people and said the teachers were very welcoming. He decided to go back the next day despite the panicky feeling. As stated earlier both are doing very well in their courses and Seámus has lost 13 stone.

And I had like bad social anxiety and all, because I was staying in for years... Oh it was bad... It made me... I just felt sick every time I'd leave far away from the house and all... Actual sick. Well not sick, just... yeah, a bit sick... Panicky and... Just my stomach would be in bits and all. Like I felt sick to my stomach. I'd be like 'Nah, I need to go home.'... And then with the time I put in I just got used to being out again.

(Liam)

These two young men have one another to thank for motivating each other to attend and continue to engage in the learning centre but also sport. They are firm friends and spend time together in the Phoenix Centre, at sport and socially. They have been friends since they were in 3rd class, they were both 18 at the time of the interview. That is a friendship of approximately 10 years - more than half of their lives. Relationships are key to ensuring recovery from traumatic experiences (Mulholland et al., 2021; Treisman, 2017).

Brigid mentioned previously that her lack of friendships in school was not easy for her. Micheál also mentioned his lack of friendships. Tadgh talked about being bullied at school because of his mother's addiction and that he would like to have gone to another school where his friends were going. Seán mentioned his friendships both inside and outside school - particularly mentioning the role of his cousins in his social life. The only participant who did not mention friendship was Fionn.

Being loved was something that the young people spoke about in several different ways. They described people who looked after them and who were there for them in certain situations but who were not blood relatives. Like for example Séamus speaking about his mother's partner who looked after him after his mother died.

Séamus: Well he was my guardian basically, but he wasn't a legal...

Researcher: He was looking after you.

Séamus: Yeah.

Researcher: But your legal guardian was your sister?

Séamus: Yeah, because he looks after everybody, even though they're all 20.

(Séamus, p. 8)

Although Séamus' guardian was one of his older sisters he said that his mother's partner was really kind and caring towards him. He had children of his own and Séamus mother and him were supposed to be getting married but then she died. Séamus also spoke about how much his sister tried to do the best for him. She had two children of her own and she worked. He described how she tried to encourage him back to education or training, how she tried to get services involved and how she even tried to bribe him into going to school with a gaming remote control.

In contrast Fionn did not have a relationship with his siblings. His siblings had not been taken into State Care and were living with his mother when he returned from living abroad. He said he spoke to his older sister at his father's home but only if she was there and she was not there very often.

The two that are my mother's, yes they... yeah, they live with my Mum and my full brother lives with my Mum. But my other half sister lives with my Dad. So if I go down I tend to be either sitting there, just minding my own business on my phone, or talking to my sister if she's there, but she's never ever there.

(Fionn)

Liam did not have any siblings, but he spoke about the positive relationship he had with his mother and grandmother. He went into Care because his mother was no longer able to care for him following a period of time spent in a domestic violence refuge. However, at the time of the interviews Liam was three years older than when he went into Care and he had frequent contact with his mother and grandmother.

Seán described how close family members are to him, especially when he was living on the halting site. He said when he was leaving the site to live in a house in another area he cried the day they left. He said he missed his cousins because they were the same age as him. He said in his new area he did not have friends there - but that people would say hello. He describes how where he grew up was a happy place to grow up.

Ohh yeah, definitely. Especially when you have your friends and your cousins and the people you know from young is definitely a positive, do you get me?...On the day we left, I was actually crying... Yeah, crying, and there was a boy living in the bay next to me, I had a bike and I gave it to him.

(Seán, p.2a)

Participants in this research said that they felt the place of education they were currently attending was welcoming and a positive place in comparison to their previous mainstream school. They expressed that the teachers and staff in the centres spent time explaining things, making sure they understood and not putting too much pressure on them to get work done. They felt confident in their learning and the ability was not measured to a curriculum but to themselves, meaning that they could do at their own pace, it was learner centred.

As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, Holmes and Rahe (1967) five highest ranked stressors were used to identify what the stressors are: death, divorce, marital separation, jail term and personal injury and illness. Doyle & Byrne found that the first four of these stressors were most significant to their study. The findings of most relevance here is that those stressors affect the children and young people's ability to participate or attend school because 'education comes second to surviving' (Doyle & Byrne, 2018, p. 13). The researcher visited the centres on numerous occasions to explain the research, to obtain consent and to carry out the research. Each time she visited, she was welcomed by staff and students. She observed a calm atmosphere in the classrooms, corridors and communal areas. Students appeared to be happy, comfortable and at ease with staff and one another.

The protective factor of secure attachment in the development of children and young people was discussed in the literature review chapter (Bademci, 2017; Poole et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2020). This finding demonstrates the necessity for positive relationships in order to be able to endure adversities at any age group but particularly with the developing mind of a child or young person. Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time model highlights the role each of these elements has on the development of the child. The loss of the mother and its effect on the person and in the context in which that loss was experienced as well as the

time in which it occurred. The lived experience of the participants in this section is framed in this bio-ecological model.

5.2.3 School Structures

Theme three can be divided into the following sections: uniforms and rules; relationships and learning. Participants experienced the focus on uniforms was an unnecessary waste of time. Participants felt that some of the school rules were unnecessary to their learning. The relationships that young people had in school were key to the length of time the students stayed in mainstream school. Relationships with other students and also with school staff were discussed. Participants described the difference between their current learning centre and schools and stressed the way they were currently being taught as the way that they preferred to be taught. In this section the things which the participants would change if they were the Minister for Education will be described.

In Chapter 3 it was discussed that Cohen (2006) indicates that research has found that there are eleven factors that define school climate: structural issues (e.g., size of the school); environmental (e.g., cleanliness); social-emotional and physical order and safety; expectations for students achievement; quality of instructions; collaboration and communication; sense of school community; peers norms; school-home-community partnerships; student morale; and the extent to which the school is an essential learning community.

Micheál had mixed experience of school but one thing that really annoyed and frustrated him was the arguments over the school uniform. He explains that he would get ‘pulled’ for wearing the wrong thing, wrong shoes, not having a tie. He said a lot of time was wasted being in the storage room looking for replacement items of uniform which he may not have had with him in the morning. He was not allowed to go to class until the uniform was correct. He said it would ruin a normal school day.

Primary school was grand, normal. And then secondary school was like I don't know, it was like being in a bleedin prison after a while. Like it was.... They were just strict about everything...Like uniform, come in with like no tie on or something and they'd try send you home and all. Like after a while, like they just gave up trying with me because I didn't care. I wasn't even going to argue, I just sit there and be like okay, no bother.

(Micheál)

Micheál explained that if he did not have the correct items of uniform on that he would have to spend time looking for the correct thing in the storage room which wasted a number of hours of the school day, he was not attending classes because he was in the storage room.

Not even go home, just like get sent down to the principal's office or something random like that or they'd try send you... get new clothes and then that'd take like an hour or two. They have like a storage room with all spare stuff, but like there was loads of... one of the things people give out about school. But the uniform was... that really annoyed me.

(Micheál, p. 5)

Micheál explained that he 'got sick of wearing it' in around 4th year, which was a relaxed year in his school experience.

I just got sick of wearing it. Like I was grand for like, I think it was like 4th year, 4th year was just majorly laid back and then I think it was a bit... not a bit too laid back but it was good, the trips were good and everything. But I don't know, I just got used to not doing stuff. But I don't know, I just don't like... Like I don't like wearing something if someone says I have to wear it, you know what I mean.

(Micheál)

The researcher asked Micheál would it have made a difference if he did not have to wear a uniform and he initially answered that it is one less thing to have to think about but then he changed his answer to say that this is not a problem the rest of the week.

Yeah, it's one less thing to think about. Like people make the arguments like oh but then you have to get up and worry about what you're wearing that day and it's easier just to have that set thing. But like it's like any other day, why would you have difficulty getting dressed every day, you know what I mean like? What's the difference?... It wasn't like a major in trouble thing either, it was just frustrating.

(Micheál)

Micheál explains that it was frustrating because he would just get 'pulled' on the corridor for not having the correct uniform.

Just like you'd be walking through the hall and you'd be just pulled automatically, like randomly out of the blue. Just after going the whole day grand in a good mood and then that just pissed you off because it's in trouble for nothing. Like I'd get, like if you're wear something mad that's different, like if you come in with I don't know, a tank top on or something that'd be a bit weird. But like within reason, I just didn't see the point in getting in trouble for...

(Micheál)

For other participants the issue of uniform was not as strongly disliked as Micheál has expressed. However, it was noted that in comparison to mainstream school in the current education setting that the participants now attend there is no uniform in either education centre.

Brigid found school hard because of her lack of relationships. She explains here about the difficulties she experienced in managing her behaviour.

I was kind of a bit like cheeky. I can be cheeky in a way as well but when I see someone like keep picking on me, so I'm going to like keep picking on them and keep in their bad books. So, like I was a bit of a blaggard as well but sometimes people can say things and you'd be looking at them like, like just always my words was, 'Is it just because I'm a Traveller, is it just because I'm a Traveller?'

(Brigid)

Brigid said that she would get the blame for things that she did not do, she found this challenging. She continued:

'No, it's not because you're a Traveller', but like a few times like I got blamed for things I didn't do. And one time I got sick of it, I got blamed for bullying when I never did that, I wasn't even in the same day. And I got suspended and my mother had to go down to the school and like she sorted it out like, and like to be honest I didn't like it at all.

(Brigid)

Brigid explained that she found school to be difficult because she did not have positive relationships with people in her class and her interactions with teachers were not positive either. The Government's newest Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2024-2028 seeks to challenge such interactions in its action plan (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2024)

No, it wasn't even about the building nor the uniform, it was just about like I was never getting along with the people in my class neither. The only ones I was getting

along with was my friends from like home. I was never getting along with other people like, I was always arguing with them and then always giving out to teachers and they were giving out to me.

(Brigid)

She said that once the pandemic happened she pleaded with her mother to allow her to stay at home and not return to school. The timing of the pandemic allowed Brigid to stop going to mainstream school.

It just wasn't good and then I said to mommy when the COVID came, I said, 'Mommy I don't want to go back to school', and she goes 'Brigid, you're still only young', and I said, 'Yeah but mummy when I turn like a certain age, I can go and do something but I just don't want to go back to that school', I had to beg her for a couple of weeks and she ended up saying, 'Right fair enough', we ended up getting, was it a year off for COVID, around that time.

(Brigid)

Brigid also explained that she found learning quite challenging because she thinks she has dyslexia. It is not diagnosed formally though. She reflects on her challenging behaviour. When she was asked if there was support given to her in school, she said that she would not have trusted anyone to help her. She said there were people there but she did not want to listen to them.

No...Like there could have been support if I needed it but I just didn't – I wouldn't trust anybody...Like as I said like I was like kind of bold myself ...I should have just put my head down and did my work but I didn't and...Looking back if I was told to wait on in school I'd be like, 'No, I'm leaving school at 16, I'm leaving, I'm leaving, I'm not waiting on.'

(Brigid)

Brigid continues to explain that she regrets this decision to leave school at 16 years of age, she wishes she had stayed on, because it would have meant that she could do more than she did.

But like looking back now, no, I said that wrong, looking back at my younger self and me saying 'I'm leaving school at 16', I'm just looking at myself like, 'You're stupid, you should wait on like there's more to live than staying at home doing nothing', like if I waited on, I could have done the leaving, junior cert, I could have more, I could have done a lot of things but I choose to leave at 14 which was wrong.

(Brigid)

Brigid's ability to reflect on her behaviour and its effect on her participation in school was interesting. She demonstrated an ability to comprehend the role her behaviour had as well as the pressures she felt to stay or leave. Her advice to young people to stick it out and stay in school was reflected by other participants in the research.

The participants were asked what they would do if they were the Minister for Education. What would they change? For some young people they did not know what the Minister's role is or what power is held by that office but once it was explained they were able to explore.

Seán would like to shorten the school day, starting slightly later in the day and changing the half day, usually taken on a Wednesday to a Friday. He would also like to have football tournaments in the school day as well as more sports in general in school. In his new education centre, the Phoenix Centre, there is a lot of sport available which has been hugely beneficial to the participants physical and mental health.

Since I am a big fan of football, more induction of football tournaments or and anything around football and sport. More induction to sport.

(Seán)

Michéal had explained throughout his interview that he feels some rules are pointless and do not help with learning. If he was the Minister he would change that. He echoed Seán's suggestion of more sport. Micheál also said that he feels there should be less stress in schools to preserve young people's mental health. He said that he would encourage young people to stay in school for as long as they can. He also explains that some of the rules that are imposed in schools are pointless and do not affect the school work.

Like keep the basic structure, just be way less strict on rules that don't impair learning. Like stuff that doesn't matter. Like the uniform and shit and like I don't know, sitting in a different seat or something, you know what I mean...I don't know, like rather than the little things that just don't matter at all and they're just putting it there just to kind of control you that bit more for whatever reason, I don't know. But like never stopped you from doing your work or anything, you know what I mean.

(Micheál)

Micheál continued about the type of pressure and stress on students.

Like I'd kind of merge the LCA and the normal, just because I think the LCA is a good system. And like it'd just make it easier for everyone but still have the same level of work within that format. And then just do everything you can to relieve the pressure off everyone because it's a stressful enough environment you know, and throw in exams and all that shit on top of it. Like you know the way it's like projects and like it's not like you sit there and do the exam? I think that'd take so much pressure off people that are in the normal Leaving Cert, that they'd end up doing better.

(Micheál)

Micheál spoke about the stress from exams and that it seemed unnecessary to him. He explains that there are discussions about mental health and yet there are young people who are stressed about the format of learning and assessment.

Yeah, an end of the year exam but I don't think it should be like all stressful, you don't pass this you're done, you're not getting a job, you know what I mean. That was the way it was painted. It was like if you don't get this, it's the end of world, same shit. But LCA always seemed like you do your projects throughout the year and then by the end of the year there's your cert. It's like almost guaranteed to be there. It's worth a lot less because it's LCA for some reason. The format change would relieve a lot of stress and that's all everyone's raving about today is mental health. So, if there's less mental health problems, more time to focus on work.

(Micheál)

Micheál agrees with Seán that there should be more Physical Education in school time. He says there should be exercise every day in school. He thinks it is a good idea to have it as a Leaving Certificate exam.

They're doing it... I think a better way to do it would be instead of whatever it was, one session a week of PE, add in like even just a half an hour every second day or something small even, like one walk, anything, just something. But instead of you're in this classroom for an hour, sit out if you want, here's a ball, go ahead and do what you want, you know what I mean. But they're doing it right now though because it's a Leaving Cert thing, but I think it's optional.

(Micheál)

Micheál agrees with Brigid that young people should stay in mainstream school.

Like if you get past the Junior Cert, what is the point in leaving? Like especially if you're into like rules you know what I mean. Like there's no point in leaving. It is like... you think you're like saving, if that makes sense. Like saving a year. Like going I'm not wasting this year doing this or whatever. But I don't know. Like it's like one of them, you don't know you'll miss it until you're out of it, you know what I mean and I do because it was just constant jokes all day with your mates and sitting around. That was the best thing going.

(Micheál)

Liam is 18, he went into State Care when he was 15 due to his mother not being able to care for him. He lives in After Care now. If he was the Minister for Education he would get rid of the uniforms because he found the uniform uncomfortable and said no one likes uniforms. He agreed with Micheál regarding uniforms. He explained that it was hard for him to concentrate in class for the full the length of a class, especially if he was not interested in the subject.

Get rid of the uniforms... Yeah. Just uncomfortable. No one likes them... School is too strict... Yeah. Can't talk in class, just sitting there for 45 minutes, eight hours a day. Getting little breaks because you have to go to the lockers in between. You're just going from class to class going around just sitting in a class for 45 minutes doing something you're not interested in. And then just find yourself getting in trouble, not going into school, going on the mitch.

(Liam)

Liam agreed with Micheál and Seán about sports being a positive part of the school day. He also said that his enjoyment of the subjects often rested with how he got on with his teachers and what style of teaching they had. The difference between having a strict teacher and non strict teacher affected how well he did in Maths.

I enjoyed Maths, Geography, obviously Sports. Yeah, I enjoyed a few of the subjects, but I felt like me enjoying the subject was more up to the teacher than to the subject. So, it was just you get the strict ones, you get not the strict ones. You get different teachers. So, yeah, the teacher has a lot of influence if you're going to enjoy the subject or not. So, I personally enjoyed Maths a lot and then got split into higher and lower level, but went to higher level with a very strict teacher and then started doing bad at Maths. Went down from getting As to barely passing. Because I never enjoyed the class. I caused trouble.

(Liam)

He was extremely positive about his current place of education and he would highly recommend it to younger people who are not sure about staying in education. He describes this in more detail below. Liam and all the participants recommended their current place of education to others.

I'd say do... Yeah, I'd definitely recommend to join a course like this... Don't know, just I do sport fitness in the mornings, do the nutrition and the theory part of it, then going to the gym for an hour and a half. Go on big break, have your showers, and then during the day just doing a little bit of whatever the course, the modules that need to be finished. Anything from safety awareness to communication modules, anything like that. And then go home and repeat.

(Liam)

Brigid was very eloquent in her desire to ensure that young people from the Traveller community stay on in school until the Leaving Certificate. She thinks Traveller culture should be discussed in schools. She thinks Travellers are not listened to in schools. She strongly encourages young people to stay in school to get an education and to be able to provide for themselves and not have to depend on their husbands.

I'd change the fact that Travellers leave school early like, you have to do your Leaving Cert before you leave and I'd let Travellers have a say...I don't think Travellers have a say, I think they just get like in one ear out the other...I just don't think schools listen to Travellers like the first impression from a Traveller, you look at a Traveller and think, 'Oh he's going to probably rob me', and like not all Travellers are the same and Travellers are just people.

(Brigid)

Brigid thinks that education about Traveller culture and life is something that should be taught and discussed in schools. (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024).

I think a Traveller should get up and talk and do it because that actually, like even if it's once a year or something, in every school around. I think at least one Traveller should go in and talk about their life and talk about everything, like how Travellers get on and that not all Travellers are the same and give people a different view of Travellers because people have obviously they all have their own opinions and everyone's allowed their own opinion but people do have different views on Travellers.

(Brigid)

Brigid agrees with Seán and Micheál that young people will regret leaving mainstream education before their Leaving Certificate.

You'll regret it...Because you need all these certificates to get a proper job and some people will say, 'Oh my husband will do it for me, my husband', you can't keep depending, you need to have your own independence, that's the way I look at it. So,

that's why I keep trying to get myself a job, keep myself going so I can pay for my own things and do my own stuff.

(Brigid)

Tadhg attends the Griffin Centre and he explains that when he struggled in school he did not find the teachers to be helpful. He found them to be impatient and shouted at him if he did not understand something. He would also like to stop bullying in school had he a magic wand to change things. He said that he regrets leaving school before the Leaving Certificate and looking back he should have perhaps changed schools to where he had friends.

It's like, more easier to do, you'll do the work in class, instead of bringing it home and doing it there, and then... like, the teachers are less strict, so they talk to you like a normal person, instead of giving out and telling you this and then you'd forget. So, they help you... Yeah, because the classes are smaller, so it'd be easier for them as well.

(Tadhg)

Regarding being the Minister for Education Tadhg said he would change the bullying and the useful subjects.

Probably the bullying – I don't know if that would stop, but... try stop the bullying and the... probably subjects, just don't study certain subjects that we wouldn't really need or use... I don't know, I didn't like religion in school... I just thought there was no point of really religion. And we had French, and I just thought there was no point to that either, because I wouldn't really need French for anything.

(Tadhg)

Tadhg said he would like to do less subjects and would have probably just prefer to have done the subjects he liked. But he said that he would like to change how the teachers

behaved towards him.

Teachers, people that would actually help you instead of giving out all the time. I don't know what else I'd change - that's all I can think of.

(Tadhg)

Tadhg was asked about what he would say to young people thinking about leaving school before the Leaving Certificate - he said he would encourage them to stay in school and that if they were having trouble to consider changing schools to where their friends are in school.

Probably stay in school, because I regret it, and then I don't... I just wish I probably moved to a different school, because I would have liked to have gotten me Leaving Cert. It'd be easier to get a job, instead of... Yeah, probably if it was too much going on, try and move to a different school that... where you have friends or where it'd be easier.

(Tadhg)

Fionn had a clear understanding of the learning needs that some people have and what type of learning environment might suit them. He had decided to seek out a YouthReach centre before he came to his current learning centre because it would best suit his needs. He compares the learning styles and atmospheres from mainstream schools and Youthreach. He was able to explain why Youthreach would be a good choice for some young people.

People that are trying to do their own thing, and go their own path, but still try and teach people education and give them what they need to get through. Like QQI programme is one thing that I'm talking about. That like QQI programme is going its own way, it's doing its own qualification, but it still gets you to where you want to go.

(Fionn)

Fionn explains that if people were able to do subjects they liked and were good at, they should be introduced after third year, while ensuring that the basics are covered.

Like something like that, but of course everyone still needs to know the basics from all the course, so if... now that I say that, if I was to change anything, that I'd leave everything the way it is, but in third year, after your Junior Cert, you can choose to drop whatever you want and just do the two things, or the two, three, four, five things that you really want to do.

(Fionn)

The fact that someone likes the subject and is good at it means that they will stick with the subject and will be enticed to stay in education.

I think we should just do what we're good at, or what we like doing, rather than what we have to do, because personally if there's a responsibility of having to do something, it just makes it so much worse, but if I'm doing it because I want to, or I like it, that makes it better in every way, it'll make me more enticed to want to go, it'll make me more enticed to do it, because I enjoy it and like I'm good at it.

(Fionn)

Fionn says that because young people cannot express themselves through the things they are good at we could potentially be missing the next Picasso.

It just puts you in that mindset, but if you're doing it because you like it, it puts people in a mindset of 'I'm doing it because I want to, not what other people think or care about.' Because in that way it would help a lot of things, like it would show off so many different types of talents, so many different quirks within people, and who knows, there could be the next feckin' Picasso out there that we don't know about, because they're not allowed to express themselves...

(Fionn)

As discussed in Chapter 3, research finds that students reporting a greater sense of belonging at school tend to display higher academic motivation, self-esteem and achievement (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; OECD, 2013; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004; Wang and Holcombe, 2010), though these relationships depend on the social desirability attached to academic achievement across social groups (Bishop et al., 2004; Fuller-Rowell & Doan, 2010). This theme echoes that research.

5.2.4 Support Structures

The level of support services that were engaged with the young people and their families varied. Some participants' level of need was more complex than others, therefore there were more services involved. If a young person's basic level of needs are not being met by the family unit there are services which can help the child and family during that period of time. Resilience in the context of this research is seen as not counting on what the child can do to prevent harm or continued stressors or their personality traits. This research asserts that it is the responsibility of the people surrounding the child in their microsystem as well as the macro system that are vital to the protection of children through safeguarding, policy, and education.

Yule et al., (2019) examined the effects of individual factors as well as community based protective factors. The “value of prevention and health promotion efforts that seeks to strengthen supportive relationships across ecological contexts including families, schools and communities, and for the potential benefit of school based programs that foster self-regulation capacities” (Yule et al., p.423, 2019).

The young people explained that there are many services, in some cases, working with them. It appears that some young people slipped through the cracks of services and were indeed not engaged with services during the global pandemic. The follow up supports were

not speedy regarding re engaging young people in education. This mirrors the Department of Education Social Inclusion Unit Review of Out-Of-School Provision (2021).

There was only one participant, Seán, whose family did not have support services working with them. However, this young person described that he lived on a halting site which had services there like a creche and other support workers. He was not aware if they were linked into his family.

I think there are 30 bays, and in each bay you could fit two trailers, maybe only one if it is very long. But in mine, in patches over years, one trailer of my parents, and the other with my sister until they left and then my older brothers, until he got married.

(Seán)

Seán: There's a little centre, before you go to primary school?

Researcher: Kindergarten? Playschool?

Seán: Yeah one of them and one of them. A basketball hoop just behind that. You see the thing was in the middle of the site.

Researcher: The creche? The kindergarden

Seán: Yeah. It was in the middle.

Researcher: Is there a playground

Seán: Playgrounds everyone, just play wherever you want, all over the place. But just have to be careful what you're doing with the cars coming in and out.

(Seán)

Brigid's family also did not have support services involved in her family. However, in school she was on the target list of the local School Completion Programme (SCP) and she met with the Project Worker each week to help her with social and emotional support as well

as school attendance and participation. She explained that she did not trust anyone to speak with them about her worries. Although there was the guidance counsellor who was available to support her until she went on maternity leave.

Like there could have been support if I needed it but I just didn't – I wouldn't trust anybody. There was like one of them counsellor teachers but she left... Miss Kelly* (not real name), yeah. I think she left and I'd feel weird talking to somebody about my problems because I don't want to put them upon somebody else and I'd rather just keep them to myself and deal with them myself.

(Brigid)

Brigid explained what she did with the project worker from the School Completion Programme.

We used to have like a little group on, I think it was Fridays and she was – I can't really remember... I think so, and it would be like 9 o'clock in the morning to a certain time. And then we used to go to her, but she was cool like she was good, when she'd like take you out and like you'd forget about everything else and you'd just be there with your friends and it would be like better than doing work to be honest...

(Brigid)

When asked what she thought were the benefits of going to this group Brigid responded.

Honestly, like it was better than being in a classroom stuck with people you couldn't really get along with, and like I could only get along with my own friends and it was all of us in a group so...

(Brigid)

In March 2022 schools in Ireland closed due to the rising levels of infection from Covid 19. School communities were resourced to provide computers, wifi, food and other necessities to families.

No, she just dropped the food parcel off and run.

(Brigid)

The work of delivering this was shared with Home School Community Liaison staff and the School Completion Programme in the area where Brigid lived. However, for Brigid it was the HSCL who arrived at the site to drop the package each week. Brigid said this person did not stay, that she just dropped the package and left. There was no interaction between that person and the family.

Micheál said he did not remember support services being involved in the family. But he did remember when he engaged in several services to support his mental health over a number of years. Micheál expressed his frustration about having to talk to people and answer their questions. The researcher noted his tone at this stage of the interview and clarified if this interview process was still comfortable to him, he confirmed that it was. Micheál was involved with Pieta House, CAMHS, the local youth service and eventually that led to him joining a sporting organisation. He engaged well with the youth services and said he really enjoyed it but he did not like being in Pieta or CAMHS and he explains why and the differences between the types of services.

Yeah, when I was... remember I was saying I got referred up to the counsellor in like 2nd year?...Yeah. What's it called? He sent me to Pieta House and then they sent me to CAMHS and they sent me to Jigsaw and then I was kind of fed up of talking to people.

(Micheál)

Micheál explains that he did not like answering so many questions, but clarifying he did not mean the interview he was doing with the researcher.

Kind of like too many questions, I hate too many questions. Like not this, not this...But I was literally just like... it was one of them where I was walking in and how have you been? Grand, grand, fine. You know what I mean. And then I just felt like they talked to me like I was four and there was like toys all around and I was like this is for kids, you know...I was probably near the end of 2nd year, nearly 3rd year by that time...they tried to send me to Jigsaw and I just was like no... I'm not great at talking, I'm not great at explaining myself or... It just didn't work. It just didn't work for my head.

(Micheál)

Micheál said he found the guidance counsellor in the school unhelp and he did not build a relationship with that person for the following reason.

There was a guidance counsellor but, like I went up to him but I don't know... it was like he was bleedin reading off a script, you know what I mean? Like literally it was like he was reading off a script because my mate came in one of the days after talking to him and he literally recited the exact same shite he said to the other ones.

(Micheál)

Micheál said that he went to the local youth service because all of his friends went there. He participated in music and football. He said that now that he is older he does not go to the youth service but that he sometimes sees the youth workers who work in the local parks and areas where young people hang out. He explains that because of these outreach workers that he got involved with MMA which led to free gym membership.

That does be fun. They do it in the Park and then around the corner around [redacted]. I always go around there and see them. That's what got me into, I think it was MMA because they were doing like a little boxing workshop or something. Like out in the, the same thing where the... all the little kids were playing little games and it was like about 15 lads standing around in a circle while one of the Reco lads was holding the pads, punching them and all.

Micheál goes into further detail about the steps he took to become part of the MMA sport.

It was like a programme that was... like you had to sign up for it and say... I don't know how many there was, say there was about eight of us and they sent us up to [redacted] I think it was like once or twice a week. And then it was like an MMA beginners class basically and then they pick, I think it was one or two people to get like kind of a... basically, a free membership.

(Micheál)

As spoken about earlier Séamus was involved with the Education Welfare Service and Social Worker. He said over the time he was out of school lots of people visited him to try to get him back to school but that he did not care. He said he only wanted to play his games and be left alone. He said he was in a homework club and attended CAMHS because he has ADHD. He expressed several times throughout the interview that he hated counselling. The researcher asked him if any professionals visited his home when he was growing up.

Just school people. My teachers came to my house once. My Year Head and all. I was like 'What the fuck?' They were trying to get me back in...I had an SNA. She came as well. Yeah. But she was sound. I liked her. I just told them 'I'm not going back.' That's all I said and I just laughed.

(Séamus)

Séamus explained about the interaction he had with the school staff.

It was so awkward it was. They just came into my room and I was just looking at them, laughing. Nah, they came into the sitting room. It was just funny. They only came once. I literally told them 'I'm not going back, so no point coming back.'

(Séamus)

Seámus expresses here the importance of the relationship and trust that a young person has for the adult worker trying to support them. He particularly liked his SNA who kept trying to support him via his sister. But his Maths teacher was someone who was a barrier to Seámus returning to school because he did not like him. The influence of the relationship with the teacher is significant to young people's enjoyment of the subject and school in general, this was mentioned by other participants.

And I just never went back. But my SNA kept texting my sister asking about me and all, like everyday. It was weird. Because I told her I was never coming back. Ah no, I actually I was planning on leaving anyways. I remember that now. My Maths Teacher was very annoying.

(Séamus)

Tadhg remembers Social Workers visiting the home because of his mother's addiction. He came to understand that his mother used drugs in a problematic way, when he was in secondary school. He said before that he was shielded from this by his father, but that did not stop other students in his secondary school in first year bringing it up. He describes the intervention with the Social Workers as being because of Tadhg and his brother's behaviour, and becoming known to the local Gardaí and being referred to the Garda Youth

Diversion Programme. They were both given a mentor from the youth diversion programme, which Tadhg said was positive but that person left and no one replaced them.

The social work initial interview is usually done to assess the risk to the child following a referral to the Duty Social Work team. Tadhg described that there were several visits over the years, but not by the same people. This may occur if there are several reports of welfare concerns sent into Tusla.

Tadhg: Tusla came a few times about us.

Researcher: Is that social workers?

Tadhg: Yeah, social workers, yeah. That was really the people that came to visit the house.

Researcher: Did they come to do an initial assessment to see if you were alright?

Tadhg: Yeah. A few times over the years, a few times. There'd be different ones – wasn't the same ones. Yeah – I think, yeah. And I think of us as well, about our behaviour and missing school.

(Tadhg)

The supports that Tadhg described are high needs interventions for young people at risk of antisocial or criminal behaviour. The programme takes referrals from the Garda Juvenile Liaison Officers. There is a lower risk referral process such as from a school, school completion programme or youth service. Siblings are often supported together and the mentor that Tadhg describes was a family support worker from the Garda Youth Diversion Programme.

I was there most of the time. I got put in there for... over the garda, keep me out of trouble...they'd be bringing us on trips, and I got like a mentor, and we'd go on trips

as well...So, I'd meet up with them in town or something, and we'd go out for food or to the pictures for an hour or two, and just talk about anything...Just kept me company, really, or just gave me something to do, instead of going out and messing, or sitting in all day. An activity, went out and done that.

(Tadhg)

Liam was involved in domestic violence services when he was 15 because his mother was in a violent and coercive relationship with Liam's father. Following time in a refuge, Liam and his mother were moved back to North Dublin into an assisted living housing estate. Liam had a key worker on site and his mother had key workers and other support workers there too. But her mental health deteriorated to a point where Liam knew she was not able to look after him so he asked his key worker to help him to be put in Voluntary Care. Liam spent time in Care living in group housing and with families. He is now 18 and is living in After Care. He describes the support and responsibilities he has in such a setting.

So, in primary I used to live with my ma and da. And then I went into the Care system when I was 16, I live in After Care now... it's just like a house in [redacted], just three floors. And there's six young people in it...they are all 18. There's two, or rarely three {workers}. The manager, if she's on, then she's there. But yeah, there's always two, they do 24 hour shifts and they switch over.

(Liam)

Liam explains how the house functions.

We share a kitchen and then there's landings, it's a town gaff so it's just stairs and stairs up. So, every landing has a toilet, so, yeah, it's a shared toilet. Then we have a tiny kitchen in our rooms, but no one really uses them. We get dinners in the gaff if we pay a tenner a week. And other than the dinners, it's up to ourselves to get food.

(Liam)

Liam explained about the money he gets now that he has turned eighteen years of age. His interview took place a week after his birthday. He used to get €120 when he was 17 years of age. But since his 18th birthday he now gets €208 per week as well as an additional payment because he is in After Care, which is €300 per week. In total Liam gets €508 per week. In After Care he did a budgeting training session to help him manage his money. He now pays €40 per week in rent and if he buys the dinners they provide that is another €10. He explained that he is managing his money well and that he does not find it hard to do so. Liam will continue to receive the €508 as long as he is in education. He plans to continue in education to do a Post Leaving Certificate course when he is finished in his current place of education.

Fionn was taken into the Care system when he was very young and remained in Care until he reached eighteen years of age. He then moved to After Care. He is not in the same setting as Liam and they are not known to one another as far as the researcher knows. Fionn described the place where he lives, in After Care.

The After Care place what I'm in is a semi-independent living quarters, where you have majority of the main responsibilities of living on your own, where you have to pay rent, you have to pay bills, you have to buy your own food, you have to cook for yourself, you have to clean up, you have to do all the main responsibilities, but you

have staff members there to guide you along if you need help with any activities that you're stuck on, because you won't know what the hell you're doing like [laughs].

(Fionn)

Fionn explained that he has been living in After Care for just over a year. He said there are other people who are living in the same place as him, he said they are not friends but that they respect one another's space.

Fionn spoke about the support offered to the young people in the After Care setting. He described that the workers would help him with emails, phone calls etc. They also helped with a food package if he did not have the money to buy something. He also spoke about the cost of his rent and for what else he was supposed to use his money.

Like you're not able to turn around and say 'I need help with this' because the... like depending on the staff team, they *might* turn around and help you out, sit you down, give you a few like walk-throughs, but some staff teams will just give you the number, give you the email to said place or person who can help you out, and you would have to do it yourself.

(Fionn)

5.3 Discussion Conclusion

The themes that emerged from the research have been added to the table from Chapter Four, Figure 9. Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model and the Interview Question Types. The themes could sit into several of the bio-ecological nested systems. For example, theme two and four are closely related and are microsystems. They fit into both the individual and family factors questions that were asked. The school structure theme is both a microsystem and a mesosystem, not forgetting the passage of time (chronosystem) and how it affects

decision making. The global pandemic Covid-19 was the backdrop to many participants' lives as discussed by them in the course of the research. This macrosystem caused restrictions on access to school and learning due to Government directed closures of education facilities for a number of months, several times over a two year period. Exosystems are where a person may not have direct experience but they may be influenced by that system.

The Bio- Ecological model provides a lens for examining developmental changes in individuals over a period of time. The interrelations between individuals and their environment (Tudge et al., 1997; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; Rosa and Tudge, 2013) have also been identified through the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Tudge et al., 2009; Rosa and Tudge, 2013). Proximal processes are explained as human development being reciprocal interaction between evolving persons and their environment, over a period of time and that are frequent. This study is not a longitudinal study and therefore it is with hindsight that the participants are looking at their experiences.

Table 18. Question Type, Bio-Ecological System and Emergent Themes

Question Type	Bio-Ecological System	Theme
Individual Factors & Decision to Leave	Microsystem/Chronosystem	The concept of time and memory Friendship
Current Education & Returning to Education	Microsystem/Macrosystem/Chronosystem	School Structure
School Experiences & School Attendance	Microsystem/Mesosystem/Exosystem/Chronosystem	School Structure
Services	Microsystem/Macrosystem/Exosystem/Chronosystem	Support Structures
Family Factors	Microsystem/Mesosystem/Exosystem/Macrosystem/Chronosystem	Who cares? Loss of mother figure
Minister for Education & Future	Macrosystem/Chronosystem	

The table below demonstrates the themes that emerged from the research. Each participant is colour coded with a theme. The gaps in the service, strengths in services as well as the school supports are tabulated. The solutions to these are then in the last column. Questions for further research are also indicated in the table under various headings. Through the research there appears to be a suspension of engagement. A period of time, when the young people for one reason or another, as outlined in the table below, did not engage in education, social activities, sporting or creative. A time when they suspended all engagements with family, friends, school, extracurricular activities. There appears to have been loneliness in their lives during this period. Whether they were socially isolated, physically alone and mentally disengaged from the outside world. This finding is reflective of Leahy et al. recognition of the ‘role of context in a young person’s life is a vital one, within

each system from the micro to the macro, opportunities for positive growth and development can be lost or gained' (Leahy et al., 2015, p. 124). Their engagement with their current education centres seems to have reactivated their interests, social network and their interactions with family, friends and education providers.

This research highlights the multidimensional needs of this group. The support response for these young people needs to be multifaceted, multi-agency and have the resources and personnel who are consistent, persistent and have the capacity to ensure that young people do not fall between the gaps in services and support. On a macro level, the policies and practices that agencies and support workers are following need to be realistic and based on the most at risk young people. There needs to be a recognition at policy level, that particularly as highlighted in this research, young people in Care and young people who are experiencing such multidimensional trauma are at the forefront of realistic policy decisions, not just in education but in all policy areas that affect their lives.

Table 19. High Level Summary of Findings.

Theme	Gaps in Service	Strengths in Service	School Supports	Potential Solutions
Seamus Loss of a parent	Seamus did not attend bereavement counselling because he hated it	TESS worker visited Seamus to get him back into school or education	The school sent teachers and SNA but Seamus did not want to see them	One worker dedicated to working with this young person from one agency on behalf of all agencies
	Why did no one chase him up?			
	Covid may have been a factor also			
Tadhg Loss of parent	Different social worker every time they visited the family	They visited to ensure children were safe	School sent in referrals to Tusla	Tadhg did not understand who the people were.

	Tadhg said his behaviour was challenging. No referral to support agency for such support			Tadhg's family could have been linked in with family support services focusing on the addiction in the family home. There are services for partners and children.
	No family support for the Dad other than visits from Tusla			
Liam	Not being supported to go to school where he was from when he was in the refuge	Service supported Liam go into Care when his mom was not longer able to care for him after moving to supported housing after being in the refuge	Liam did not successfully return to school and there does not appear to be links maintained between him and the school when he was in the refuge	Liam explained that he lives in After Care housing now. He explained that receives a large amount of money each week.
	Not being supported to keep up soccer when he was in the refuge	Liam had a worker who brought him out to do things, but that broke down during covid		Liam has access to different workers each day in the house he lives in. There appeared to be a lack of one adult to guide him in the supported housing he is living in. Who fills the emotional gap? Where is the relationship with the

				workers?
		After Care provision is supportive to him		
Fionn	Fionn does not appear to have a relationship with any worker in any service he has been a part of.	Fionn was in State Care from early childhood. He is now in After Care housing.	Fionn continued in education through his childhood and now into his adulthood. His preference was the type of centre he currently attends	There appeared to be a lack of love in Fionn's life from his description of his Care settings and contact with parents. Who fills this emotional gap? Where is the relationship with workers?
Seán	Was not aware that there were services in the halting site, although did know they were there, he did not think his family were involved in it.	When Seán left school it does not appear that any statutory agency followed up on his attendance	The school did not follow through on his attendance at school.	Could an agency have supported Seán with the transition from main stream school to alternative learning centre?
Brigid	Support in covid time was lacking from the school	Brigid was linked in with two services in TESS, the School Completion Programme and the HSCL but in covid time the deliveries of food was provided by the HSCL who did	Brigid was linked in the guidance counsellor in school, but she went on maternity leave	Covid allowed Brigid to take the break from school she wanted to take. She did not have to sit the JC as she got the certificate of achievement provided by schools at that time.

		not engage the family, just dropped the food.		Follow up post covid on her return to school by TESS services.
Micheál	Does not appear to have built a relationship with any adult in counselling or supportive role - this is demonstrated by his frustration of being asked questions - which usually happens at the start of the process of building a relationship in therapeutic support services	Micheál was referred to several mental health support services and was seen by professionals	Micheál explained that the supports in school by the guidance counsellor was like the person was reading from a script.	The building of a relationship by support services is of vital importance to the success of the person returning to the services on multiple occasions. Asking lots of questions does not appear to have helped Micheál to build trust. Thus he discontinued this support.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

This chapter will conclude the study by summarising the key research findings in relation to the research aims and the research questions, as well as the value and contribution of the research. It will also review the limitations of the study and propose opportunities for future research, as well as making a number of recommendations.

This research explored the lived experience of 7 young people living in North Dublin who left mainstream education before the Leaving Certificate. These young people have returned to full time education in an alternative education setting where they are undertaking QQI level qualifications in general learning, constructions, sports and catering. Each participant had self-reported experiencing one of the following adversities in childhood. Death of a parent, a parent in prison, have grown up in Care, parental separation or homelessness and poverty. There were additional factors also reported such as a family of history of early school leaving, experiencing mental health difficulties, experiencing domestic violence, child abuse and parental drug use.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the young people who were aged between 16-20 years to gain an understanding of what factors led them to leave mainstream school early. The phenomenological inquiry allowed the researcher to look at an issue as part of uncovering meaning. The research has two central questions:

1. What is the perceived impact of adverse childhood experiences on a number of young people living in a North Dublin urban area, aged 16-20 years and how it affected their decision to leave mainstream school before the completion of the Leaving Certificate?
2. What support systems did the young people have in their lives? What influence did the support systems (eco-systems), such as family (microsystem), peers

(microsystem), community (macrosystem), schools (microsystem) have in their lives which tried to or could have helped with their decision making process to leave mainstream school before the completion of the Leaving Certificate?

The four main themes of this research have implications for policy, practice and future research. The findings can be identified under the following categories: the concept of time and memory; who cares? The loss of a mother figure and the importance of friendship; school structures and finally, support structures. The overarching contribution to knowledge this research has is that through the life experiences of these young people loss is verbalised and discussed. Loss is found in several areas of the young person's life. It is complex and compounded. Firstly, the loss of the concept of time and memory described by participants. Secondly, there is the loss of the mother figure, whether through death, being taken into Care because of addiction. Thirdly, loss can be seen in the loss of friendships in the young people's lives. Fourthly, there is a loss of relationships in school, through disengagement and attrition. The loss of relationships in school are both between young people and also with staff.

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model could be expanded to include a stronger focus on loss and adversity for children. This would be an addition to Bronfenbrenner's model that focused on the child and the world surrounding that child. It creates a discourse on the systems blockages that are in place that prevent the young person thriving and being secure in their family, school, peer group and community.

6.1 The Concept of Time & Memory Implications for Policy, Practice & Further Research

The concept of time and memory loss threaded through the interviews with the participants. This research adds to the growing body of research on the effects of the Covid

19 pandemic on time and memory. (Droit-Volet et al., 2023 & Pawlak et al., 2023).

Participants could not remember events, such as whether they had completed the Junior Certificate if it occurred during or before the pandemic. A recommendation for practice is that students should be reminded of the reports of their achievements in Junior Certificate subjects awarded by schools under the Department of Education revised arrangements for the Junior Cycle, announced in April 2020.

Blocking out memories is a coping mechanism for people who have experienced adversity in childhood (Maté, 2011, Perry, 2017, Siegel, 2020, van der Kolk, 1994). This coping mechanism allows the person to be able to survive in the present. The participants in this research described how they coped with previous life events which they no longer want to remember, for some they actively sought not to remember the events as it was too painful.

I wouldn't be able to tell you that, not because I don't want to, because I don't know...Because ever since I have like learned to understand things, I have tried my best to like block out my childhood...Because of a load of like horrific things that shouldn't have happened to me, did happen, and I don't... want it to be... I don't want that to be able to come back and haunt me one of the days, so I've tend to just like block that all out of my life...

(Fionn, p. 10)

The support structures for young people who are using a repression of memory mechanism to cope must understand the implications of such a mechanism. There must be strategies in place to assist the young person, particularly in the education system in order to support how they can function academically. The education system, particularly during exam years, relies on students being able to memorise and retain information in order to perform well in exams. If the young person is experiencing adversity during this time would this loss of memory impact on their ability to retain information? This is perhaps an area of further

research. Schools and education centres understanding the importance of trust and relationships with students being the forefront of every interaction is a recommendation of this research.

This finding adds to the research already done in the area of adverse childhood experiences. For example, Murphy et al. (2019) study of the educational needs of homeless men did not identify time and memory loss in their research. The cohort of participants had similar experiences and were a little older than the participants in this research. That research did not identify the second finding from this research as being a central theme.

Implication for Policy

Policy development to take into consideration the coping mechanisms used by people who have experienced adverse childhood experiences.

Implication for Practice

Service providers to be trained and have tools to support people who have experienced adverse childhood experiences.

Implication for Further Research

Future research in the area of the concept of time and memory loss could include retrospective exploration with a wider group of people than in this research.

6.2 Loss of the Mother Figure & the Importance of Friendship Implications for Policy, Practice & Further Research

The second finding examined the effects of the loss of the mother figure and the importance of friendship. Bronfenbrenner holds that relationships are key to development of the child (Bronfenbrenner 1974, 1977, 1979, 1986, 1998, 2005). This finding adds to the areas of growing up in Care and not having a close relationship with one's mother through loss, whether that is death, addiction, violence or being taken into Care (Mayock, 2023). The

system of Care in Ireland was described in Chapter 5 by the participants, Fionn and Liam. They identified gaps in the provision of service. Mainly a lack of relationships and love. There was physical care, the young people were provided with somewhere to live, money and food. But what did not appear as being central to their placement was care, love and relationships with key workers. Echoing Mayock et al. (2008) this research finds that young people could benefit from transitional support as they move from young people to adult services. The elongation of the transitional support could improve outcomes of engagement in education as well as supporting other life choices young adults make between the ages of 18-24 years.

Throughout this research the importance of friendships was highlighted. Smyth (2016) used data from the Growing Up in Ireland study to examine social relationships in the transition to secondary school. Smyth found that friendships have a profound impact on not only the transition but also the self confidence of the young person. “The quality of the friendship network has a significant effect, with those who were alienated from their friends becoming less self-confident while those who trusted their friends grew more self-confident” (Smyth, 2016, p. 471). This research adds to the body of knowledge in this area.

Implication for Policy

Regarding policy development for children growing up in Care who are navigating the education system, there should be practical and multifaceted policies that specifically focus on this marginalised and vulnerable group. These policies should ensure that these children receive more support than what is currently available to them. The safety net that the system provides them needs to ensure that no child falls through the cracks.

Additionally, it is important that Child Care services are extended to age 25, to ease the transition from child to adult services.

Implication for Practice

Organisations working with families need to engage with families in a professional and respectful manner, in order to build a trusting relationship. This would enable organisations to provide consistent support and ensure the family's needs are met throughout the time of engagement with the service.

Implication for Further Research

Future research ought to further explore the care needs of young people in Care in Ireland, particularly in terms of their emotional and psychological needs, in addition to their physical, financial, and educational needs.

6.3 School Structures Implications for Policy, Practice & Further Research

Relationships are key to ensuring recovery from traumatic experiences (Mulholland et al., 2021; Treisman, 2017). Downes (2018) explains Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) 'accentuation of proximal processes, as microsystem interaction such as relationships offers an apt initial framework for further accepting this truism that relationships matter' (Downes, 2018, p. 124). Finding number three identifies that there are system blockages (Downes, 2018) within the mainstream education system regarding relationship building in schools. A key recommendation from this research is to adjust the structures in schools to allow for the development of trust, respect and the formation of positive relationships between staff and students as well as between students.

The young people all expressed their praise for their current learning centre, that the staff built relationships with them. They said they could talk with the staff and discuss what

they did not understand, or if they were not having a good day. The staff would not put pressure on them but support them to navigate their way through. This finding adds to the work on second chance education settings and their relational focused approach to the learners which creates a positive school environment (Cohen, 2006; Hickey et al., 2020; Vaz et al., 2015). In contrast to this approach, mainstream school was described as a place where pressure was put on them, where the focus was on rules that did not affect the way they learn. Some staff who were support staff did not seem to engage the young people in the manner that the staff in the learning centres did.

The concept of care in our education system is something which is beyond the scope of this research, however, it is a sub theme of the data findings. It links broadly with trauma informed education and services, which are beyond the scope of this research. The loss of the mother can never be replaced by an agency. The staff who work in agencies are professionals who develop and nurture relationships with children and young people in order to support and nourish them. The education system needs to remind itself that education is about nurturing and nourishing the child and young person in order for them to become fully engaged members of our society. This research highlights from the perspective of the young people who participated that failure to have security, relationships and nurturing in schools leads to disengagement and exiting from mainstream education. The young people expressed clearly the support, care and kindness they receive in their new education centre. It encourages them to attend, to accept and learn from challenges, to not give up and to become members of the education community and further into the society around them. This research recommends that the Department of Education invests in a system which allows for care to be at the centre of all teaching and learning.

A question of how mainstream schools could model the approach taken by the alternative education centres which is based on relational approaches could be an area of

further research. The staff in the current education centres of the participants of this research, put the learner's needs before everything else, for example, rules that do not infringe on learning or health and safety, or indeed the curriculum. A trauma informed approach is applied in both the centres this research took place in. The extension of this model into mainstream education could mean that schools become more caring and child centred.

There is a dichotomy between trauma and school engagement. When a young person is actively in a traumatic existence it may be difficult for them to be able to engage in their learning because their focus is on survival. The stabilisation of the body and mind to be able is vital to the ability to learn. Learning can be seen as a luxury of stability. The young people in this research expressed their focus was on getting support at the time it was needed and at a later time they were able to return to education when things had become more stable for them.

School staff can be engaged in learning to recognise signs and symptoms of trauma in students in order to assist the young person. Downes (2018b) asserts that 'an emotional well-being agenda, supported through multidisciplinary teams linked with schools, is a key issue for early school leaving prevention' (Downes, 2018b, p.158). This research adds to the growing body of work in research as well as school practices in becoming more aware of the effects of adversity on the developing child. The Department of Education over the last number of years has introduced wellbeing into schools, and nurture classrooms are steadily being introduced in schools, both primary and secondary. There will be a pilot of free counselling services for primary school children in seven counties starting in 2024. However, this is a short term, 8 week intervention for children. The lived experience of the young people in this research highlight the need for timely, intensive and consistent support. This support is months and years in length.

Implication for Policy

This research recommends that the Department of Education invests in a system which allows for care to be at the centre of all teaching and learning in all education settings.

Implication for Practice

A key recommendation from this research is to adjust the structures in schools to allow for the development of trust, respect and the formation of positive relationships between staff and students as well as between students.

Implication for Further Research

Trauma informed practices in education centres particularly in schools with challenging retention rates.

6.4 Support Structures Implications for Policy, Practice & Further Research

Theme number four explored the types of support young people received and the systems gaps that appeared. The young people described being involved in several services, such as Tusla Education Support Service, CAMHS, Garda Youth Diversion Programme, youth services, social work, domestic violence support service and After Care services. The young people explained that there are many services, in some cases, working with them. It appears that some young people slipped through the cracks of services and were indeed not engaged with services during the global pandemic. The follow up supports were not speedy regarding re engaging young people in education. This mirrors the Department of Education Social Inclusion Unit Review of Out-Of-School Provision (2021). It highlights that there is no clear tracking system in place to monitor students who have disengaged from mainstream school therefore proving difficult to fully evaluate the number of young people not receiving an education.

Families and young people need agencies to advocate for them. There needs to be

tighter referral processes between agencies with follow up from referral agencies to ensure the family and young people are actually engaging with the new services. A positive step in this is allowing staff who have the relationship with the family and young person to help with this transfer, in order to ensure a higher chance of the family and young person remaining in the new service as a relationship has been facilitated by the previous worker and the new service.

All of the findings focused on the lived experience of the young people who participated in the research. Young people expressed in various ways that they did not feel listened to. One young person spoke about being asked the same questions by therapeutic support services (Micheál) which led to him being tired of that and disengaged from the service. Brigid spoke about her frustration of Travellers not being listened to by anyone. That their voice was not heard and that they are not represented. One of the striking omissions that the researcher noted was at times from participants there was a sense that there was no point in trying to get their point across because no one was listening to them.

Young people have opinions and ideas. The education system needs to allow space in the day for that to be created, developed and explored. It struck the researcher throughout the sections on school that there was no space in the curriculum for this to happen. This body of work adds to the increasing number of publications such as Darren McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* (2017), Senator Lynn Ruane's *People Like Me* (2018) and Dr Katriona O'Sullivan's *Poor* (2023) that aim to bring a voice to the child who was not heard in the education system or any system. Children who were left to figure it out themselves with the help of a few adults. The young people in this research have had similar experiences to the adults who have written their stories for people to understand that not everyone is born equally and the system is certainly not built to ensure there is equity. This research has documented their experiences and it reflects experiences expressed by McGarvey, Ruane and O'Sullivan but it is less

retrospective due to being younger than McGarvey, Ruane and O'Sullivan who are all much older than the young people in this research. Those authors give keynote speeches at events. They inspire people working with young people at risk, whether they are teachers, youth workers, social workers, to do better on behalf of those children and young people who need extra support. Perhaps in twenty years the young people in this study will still be alive, thriving and inspiring people to do better for those children and young people who are experiencing adversity in childhood.

Implication for Policy

Policy makers to develop policies that seek to ensure that the most marginalised in our society are identified and specifically targeted in policies developed.

Implication for Practice

There needs to be tighter referral processes between agencies with follow up from referral agencies to ensure the family and young people are actually engaging with the new services. There needs to be suitable and fit for purpose tracking systems for school engagement between state agencies.

Implication for Further Research

Future research could focus on how the lived experience of children and young people in the education sector could be reflected in policy and practice.

6.5 Limitations of this Research

This research used semi structured interviews with young people. Unfortunately one of the limitations with this study was not being able to expand the sample to include semi structured interviews to family members, education providers and other professionals involved in the young people's lives. It would have enhanced the perspective given by the

young person. This research relies on the recollection of the participants. It was outside the scope of the study but it may have added another dimension to the themes that emerged. The focus could also have been on agencies resources, policies and procedures and their effect on the young people.

The type of methodology used in this research was interpretative phenomenological approach, using semi structured interviews. This determines the sample size. The sample in this research was 7 young people. Perhaps a longitudinal research study with an expanded team and methodology could mean a further deepening and richness of data collected. The importance still remains that it is the young people's lived experience which brings the impact of this research and its uniqueness to the development of research and knowledge in this area.

The scope of the research participants was based in one area of North Dublin in two different alternative education centres. There were 6 males and 1 female participant. Future research could benefit from expanding this sample size, making it more diverse to represent the population in the education system.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

Adversity in childhood affects the child on multiple levels and in all aspects of their lives. The young people in this study all left mainstream school before the Leaving Certificate because of the effects of loss and adversity and the system's inability to support them at that time. There was a suspension in their engagement with services, social activities and education for a period of time. However, these young people have returned to alternative education centres to continue their learning as well as reengaging with services and social activities. The findings in this research point to policy and practice implications to develop an education system that is inclusive and supportive with a focus on the social and emotional

needs of the students so that they can academically reach their full potential. Focusing on the whole young person as a lifelong learner and participant in society is holistic and as Fionn eloquently stated if we focus on the wrong thing, we will miss the potential and hope...”and who knows, there could be the next feekin’ Picasso out there that we don’t know about, because they’re not allowed to express themselves...”

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Appendix 1 Ethical Approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



Prof. Paul Downes
School of Human Development & Educational Disadvantage Centre

11th July 2022

REC Reference: DCUREC/2022/129

Proposal Title: The lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. A phenomenological examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences.

Applicant(s): Prof. Paul Downes, Dr. Jones Irwin and Jennifer Cummins

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to full committee review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. As part of DCU REC's ongoing monitoring process, during your research you may be asked to provide DCU REC with a progress report. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr. Melrona Korrane'.

Dr. Melrona Korrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee



Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
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Appendix 2 Plain Language Statements

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY Plain Language Statement For Parents

Research Study Title: The lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. A phenomenological examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences.

University: DCU Institute of Education, Dublin.

Principal Investigator: Professor Paul Downes
Research Investigators: Dr Jones Irwin and Jennifer Cummins

Dear Parent & Student,

My name is Professor Paul Downes from the School of Human Development in Dublin City University and I would like to invite your child to participate in a study on the lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. An examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences. I will be leading this project, with assistance from another researcher, Jennifer Cummins (Doctorate Student at Dublin City University).

Before you decide if you want your child to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, you can find all of our contact details below. Take time to decide whether or not you wish your child to take part. I hope that this sheet will answer any questions you have about the study.

Why has my child been asked to participate in this research?

This research study aims to explore the educational experiences of young people who left mainstream school before the Leaving Certificate. It is about asking young people who left school before they finished the Leaving Certificate why they left school and also to try to understand if there were supports that could have been put in place to help them stay longer in school. This research focuses on the experiences of young people who may have experienced the death of a parent, a parent in prison, growing up in care, parental separation or childhood homelessness and poverty.

If I agree to my child taking part in this research, what will be involved for them?

If you agree for your child to take part in this research, they will be asked to sign a consent form to show that they agreed to us talking to them. Young people will be invited to participate if they left school before they sat the Leaving Certificate.

Participation in this research study will involve two interviews where a number of questions will be asked. The questions will be made up of open-ended questions. It will take approximately 30 minutes to complete each interview. Interviews will be audio-taped and young people will not be named to ensure privacy of participants.

Questions will be asked about previous school experiences, support from different agencies, family background and hopes for the future.

Does my child have to take part in this study and what happens if I want to change my mind about their involvement?

Your child does not have to take part in this study; it is completely voluntary. If, after your child has started to take part, you or they change your mind, just let us know and we will not use any information about them in our writing. Any data that we had previously collected about your child would be destroyed immediately.

Storage of Data and Confidentiality

The researcher and investigators will have access to this data and personal data will be safely recorded in the Personal Data Security Schedule (PDSS) in accordance with the Data Privacy and Retention Policies (DCU). Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

Interview participants will be given an identifier code which will be held separately to the list of participants in locked storage. Interview transcripts will not include participants' names. The researcher will be available to answer any questions you may have concerning the interview process. The researcher will seek to verify direct quotations with the participant for contextual correctness. Interview recordings will not be played in any public forum and the identity of the participant will be protected. Transcript copies will be password-protected. The confidentiality of information provided can only be protected within the limitations of the law and inadvertent discovery of illicit activity may be reported.

The information will be used for the Doctorate of Education thesis which is the reason for gathering this information. But it may also be used in conference presentations, peer-reviewed academic journals and in other relevant publications. All information gathered will be safely disposed of three years after the completion of the research project.

Where will I be able to find the data?

The data will be analysed that is collected from your child and will appear in a dissertation which Jennifer is writing. You will receive a copy of the findings when the research is complete. It is anticipated that the results of the research will also be published in an international journal which you will be informed of and will receive information on how to access.

Independent parties to contact if you have any questions/concerns.

Please feel free to contact us at any time if you have a question about the research. Our contact details can be found below. If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact

an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

If you have any concerns or questions regarding the storage and confidentiality of your child's data for this study and wish to contact an independent person, you can contact: The Data Protection Officer, Data Protection Unit, Room A145, Albert College Extension DCU Glasnevin Campus, Collins Avenue Extension, Dublin 9, D09 V209. Tel- 01-700 6466 or data.protection@dcu.ie

Thank you for giving your time to reading this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Paul Downes
Dublin City University,
St. Patrick's Campus,
Drumcondra, Co. Dublin.
paul.downes@dcu.ie

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DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Plain Language Statement
For Participants

Research Study Title: The lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. A phenomenological examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences.

University: DCU Institute of Education, Dublin.

Principal Investigator: Professor Paul Downes
Research Investigators: Dr Jones Irwin and Jennifer Cummins

Dear Student,

My name is Professor Paul Downes from the School of Human Development in Dublin City University and I would like to invite you to participate in a study on the lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. An examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences. I will be leading this project, with assistance from another researcher, Jennifer Cummins (Doctorate Student at Dublin City University).

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, you can find all of our contact details below. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. I hope that this sheet will answer any questions you have about the study.

Why have I been asked to participate in this research?

This research study aims to explore the educational experiences of young people who left mainstream school before the Leaving Certificate. It is about asking young people who left school before they finished the Leaving Certificate why they left school and also to try to understand if there were supports that could have been put in place to help them stay longer in school. This research focuses on the experiences of young people who may have experienced the death of a parent, a parent in prison, growing up in care, parental separation or childhood homelessness and poverty.

What will this entail for the students?

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to sign a consent form to show that you agreed to talk with us. You will be invited to participate if you left school before you sat the Leaving Certificate.

Participation in this research study will involve two interviews where a number of questions will be asked. The questions will be made up of open-ended questions. It will take approximately 30 minutes to complete each interview. Interviews will be audio-taped and you

will not be named to ensure your privacy. Participation in this research is completely voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time, including when it has started. All that data will be deleted and will not be used in the research.

Questions will be asked about previous school experiences, support from different agencies, family background and hopes for the future.

Storage of Data and Confidentiality

The researcher and investigators will have access to this data and personal data will be safely recorded in the Personal Data Security Schedule (PDSS) in accordance with the Data Privacy and Retention Policies (DCU). Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

Interview participants will be given an identifier code which will be held separately to the list of participants in locked storage. Interview transcripts will not include participants' names. The researcher will be available to answer any questions you may have concerning the interview process. The researcher will seek to verify direct quotations with the participant for contextual correctness. Interview recordings will not be played in any public forum and the identity of the participant will be protected. Transcript copies will be password-protected. The confidentiality of information provided can only be protected within the limitations of the law and inadvertent discovery of illicit activity may be reported.

The information will be used for the Doctorate of Education thesis which is the reason for gathering this information. But it may also be used in conference presentations, peer-reviewed academic journals and in other relevant publications. All information gathered will be safely disposed of three years after the completion of the research project.

Where will I be able to find the data?

The data will be analysed that is collected from young people and will appear in a dissertation which Jennifer is writing. You will receive a copy of the findings when the research is complete. It is anticipated that the results of the research will also be published in an international journal which you will be informed of and will receive information on how to access.

Independent parties to contact if you have any questions/concerns.

Please feel free to contact us at any time if you have a question about the research. Our contact details can be found below. If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

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Thank you for giving your time to reading this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Paul Downes
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DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Plain Language Statement
For Gatekeepers

Research Study Title: The lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. A phenomenological examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences.

University: DCU Institute of Education, Dublin.
Principal Investigator: Professor Paul Downes
Research Investigators: Dr Jones Irwin and Jennifer Cummins

Dear Gatekeeper,

My name is Professor Paul Downes from the School of Human Development in Dublin City University and I would like to invite your child to participate in a study on the lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. An examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences. I will be leading this project, with assistance from another researcher, Jennifer Cummins (Doctorate Student at Dublin City University).

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, you can find all of our contact details below. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. I hope that this sheet will answer any questions you have about the study.

Why have I been asked to participate in this research?

This research study aims to explore the educational experiences of young people who left mainstream school before the Leaving Certificate. It is about asking young people who left school before they finished the Leaving Certificate why they left school and also to try to understand if there were supports that could have been put in place to help them stay longer in school. This research focuses on the experiences of young people who may have experienced the death of a parent, a parent in prison, growing up in care, parental separation or childhood homelessness and poverty.

If I agree to take part in this research, what will be involved?

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to sign a consent form to show that you agreed to us talking to you. Young people will be invited to participate if they left school before they sat the Leaving Certificate.

Participation in this research study will involve two interviews where a number of questions will be asked. The questions will be made up of open-ended questions. It will take approximately 30 minutes to complete each interview. Interviews will be audio-taped and young people will not be named to ensure privacy of participants.

Questions will be asked about previous school experiences, support from different agencies, family background and hopes for the future.

Do I have to take part in this study and what happens if I want to change my mind about my involvement?

You do not have to take part in this study; it is completely voluntary. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let us know and we will not use any information about you in our writing. Any data that we had previously collected about you would be destroyed immediately.

Storage of Data and Confidentiality

The researcher and investigators will have access to this data and personal data will be safely recorded in the Personal Data Security Schedule (PDSS) in accordance with the Data Privacy and Retention Policies (DCU). Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

Interview participants will be given an identifier code which will be held separately to the list of participants in locked storage. Interview transcripts will not include participants' names. The researcher will be available to answer any questions you may have concerning the interview process. The researcher will seek to verify direct quotations with the participant for contextual correctness. Interview recordings will not be played in any public forum and the identity of the participant will be protected. Transcript copies will be password-protected. The confidentiality of information provided can only be protected within the limitations of the law and inadvertent discovery of illicit activity may be reported.

The information will be used for the Doctorate of Education thesis which is the reason for gathering this information. But it may also be used in conference presentations, peer-reviewed academic journals and in other relevant publications. All information gathered will be safely disposed of three years after the completion of the research project.

Where will I be able to find the data?

The data will be analysed that is collected from you and will appear in a dissertation which Jennifer is writing. You will receive a copy of the findings when the research is complete. It is anticipated that the results of the research will also be published in an international journal which you will be informed of and will receive information on how to access.

Independent parties to contact if you have any questions/concerns.

Please feel free to contact us at any time if you have a question about the research. Our contact details can be found below. If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

If you have any concerns or questions regarding the storage and confidentiality of your staff's data for this study and wish to contact an independent person, you can contact: The Data

Protection Officer, Data Protection Unit, Room A145, Albert College Extension DCU
Glasnevin Campus, Collins Avenue Extension, Dublin 9, D09 V209. Tel- 01-700 6466 or
data.protection@dcu.ie

Thank you for giving your time to reading this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Paul Downes
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St. Patrick's Campus,
Drumcondra, Co. Dublin.
paul.downes@dcu.ie

Jennifer Cummins
Dublin City University
St. Patrick's Campus,
Drumcondra, Co. Dublin.
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Appendix 3 Informed Consent and Assent Forms

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY Informed Consent Form (Parents)

I. Research Study Title: The lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. A phenomenological examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences.

University: School of Human Development, DCU Institute of Education, Dublin.

Principal Investigator: Professor Paul Downes

Research Investigators: Dr Jones Irwin & Jennifer Cummins

II. Clarification of the purpose of the research

This research study aims to explore the area of early school leaving. It is about asking young people who left school before they finished the Leaving Certificate why they left school and also to try to understand if there were supports that could have been put in place to help them stay longer in school.

III. Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Information Letter to Parents/Guardians (or had it read to me)	Yes/No
I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes/No
I understand the information provided	Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes/No
I am aware that my child will be invited to complete a questionnaire	Yes/No
I am aware that my child's interview will be audiotaped	Yes/No

IV. Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

Participants may withdraw from the research study at any point. Please notify the researcher on the details below and to request withdrawal of your child. If you or your child would like to withdraw all data which was collected will be immediately deleted. The information given will not be used in any way for the purpose of the research.

V. Confirmation of arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations

The principal investigator and research investigators will have access to the information

provided. Interviews will be audio-taped and young people will not be named in the recording of interviews to ensure their privacy. Interview transcripts will not include participants' names.

Transcript copies will be password-protected.

I am aware that the confidentiality of information provided can only be protected within the limitations of the law.

VI. Confirmation of arrangements regarding retention/disposal of data

All information gathered will be safely disposed of three years after the completion of the research project.

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent for my child to take part in this research project.

Parents Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent Form (Young People Over 18 years)

I. Research Study Title: The lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. A phenomenological examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences.

University: School of Human Development, DCU Institute of Education, Dublin.

Principal Investigator: Professor Paul Downes

Research Investigators: Dr Jones Irwin & Jennifer Cummins

II. Clarification of the purpose of the research

This research study aims to explore the area of early school leaving. It is about asking young people who left school before they finished the Leaving Certificate why they left school and also to try to understand if there were supports that could have been put in place to help them stay longer in school.

III. Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Information Letter for Participants (or had it read to me)	Yes/No
I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes/No
I understand the information provided	Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes/No
I am aware that I will be invited to complete a questionnaire	Yes/No
I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped	Yes/No

IV. Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

Participants may withdraw from the research study at any point. Please notify the researcher on the details below and to request withdrawal from the research. If you would like to withdraw all data which was collected will be immediately deleted. The information given will not be used in any way for the purpose of the research.

V. Confirmation of arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations

The principal investigator and research investigators will have access to the information provided. Interviews will be audio-taped and young people will not be named in the recording of interviews to ensure their privacy. Interview transcripts will not include participants' names.

Transcript copies will be password-protected. I am aware that the confidentiality of information provided can only be protected within the limitations of the law.

VI. Confirmation of arrangements regarding retention/disposal of data

All information gathered will be safely disposed of three years after the completion of the research project.

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Parents Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

Informed Consent Form for Gatekeepers (Head of Centre)

I. Research Study Title: The lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. A phenomenological examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences.

University: School of Human Development, DCU Institute of Education, Dublin.

Principal Investigator: Professor Paul Downes

Research Investigators: Dr Jones Irwin & Jennifer Cummins

II. Clarification of the purpose of the research

This research study aims to explore the area of early school leaving. It is about asking young people who left school before they finished the Leaving Certificate why they left school and also to try to understand if there were supports that could have been put in place to help them stay longer in school.

III. Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I voluntarily agree to help facilitate this research study.

Yes/No

I understand that even if I agree to help now, I can withdraw at any time without any consequences of any kind.

Yes/No

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

Yes/No

I understand that I will assist with the distribution of the Plain Language Statement to my staff.

Yes/No

I understand that all data collected in this study is confidential and is pseudo-anonymous and I understand that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

Yes/No

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Yes/No

I have been made aware that the results of this research may be published in an international journal of education in the near future.

Yes/No

IV. Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

Participants may withdraw from the research study at any point. Please notify the researcher on the details below and to request withdrawal from the research. If you would like to withdraw all data which was collected will be immediately deleted. The information given will not be used in any way for the purpose of the research.

V. Confirmation of arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations

The principal investigator and research investigators will have access to the information provided. Interviews will be audio-taped and young people will not be named in the recording of interviews to ensure their privacy. Interview transcripts will not include participants' names. Transcript copies will be password-protected.

I am aware that the confidentiality of information provided can only be protected within the limitations of the law.

VI. Confirmation of arrangements regarding retention/disposal of data

All information gathered will be safely disposed of three years after the completion of the research project.

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Gatekeeper's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals _____

Witness: _____ **Date:** _____

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Assent Form for Participants (Young People under 18 years)

I. Research Study Title: The lived experience of young people who left mainstream education early. A phenomenological examination of what schools and communities can learn from these students' experiences.

University: School of Human Development, DCU Institute of Education, Dublin.

Principal Investigator: Professor Paul Downes

Research Investigators: Dr Jones Irwin & Jennifer Cummins

You are being asked to be part of a research study with other young people who are a similar age to you. We are asking you to take part in this study to learn about young people's experience of leaving school before the Leaving Certificate and coming to a place of learning like the one you attend.

We are researching the journey young people took in their education and about the reasons why they moved to this type of learning place. We are interested in understanding what were the challenges young people may have had and also what helped in their education move.

What will you gain or lose from this study? There is nothing you will gain or lose from this study other than the time you take to be part of the interviews. But your experience will help the researchers understand the experiences of young people who left school early.

Your answers will be kept confidential. We will not share any information about whether you did or did not take part in this study. Also, no one will ever know how you answered any of the questions, except the person who is doing the interviews, Jennifer Cummins.

Taking part is voluntary. It is your choice if you would like to participate in this study. You can also decide to stop participating in the study at any time, even if you have already started.

If you have any questions you can talk to the person in charge of this study, Jennifer Cummins. You can also talk to the Head of the Centre, _____, or your parents, and they will answer your questions or contact Jennifer Cummins to get more information.

I have read the information above, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I agree to take part in the study.

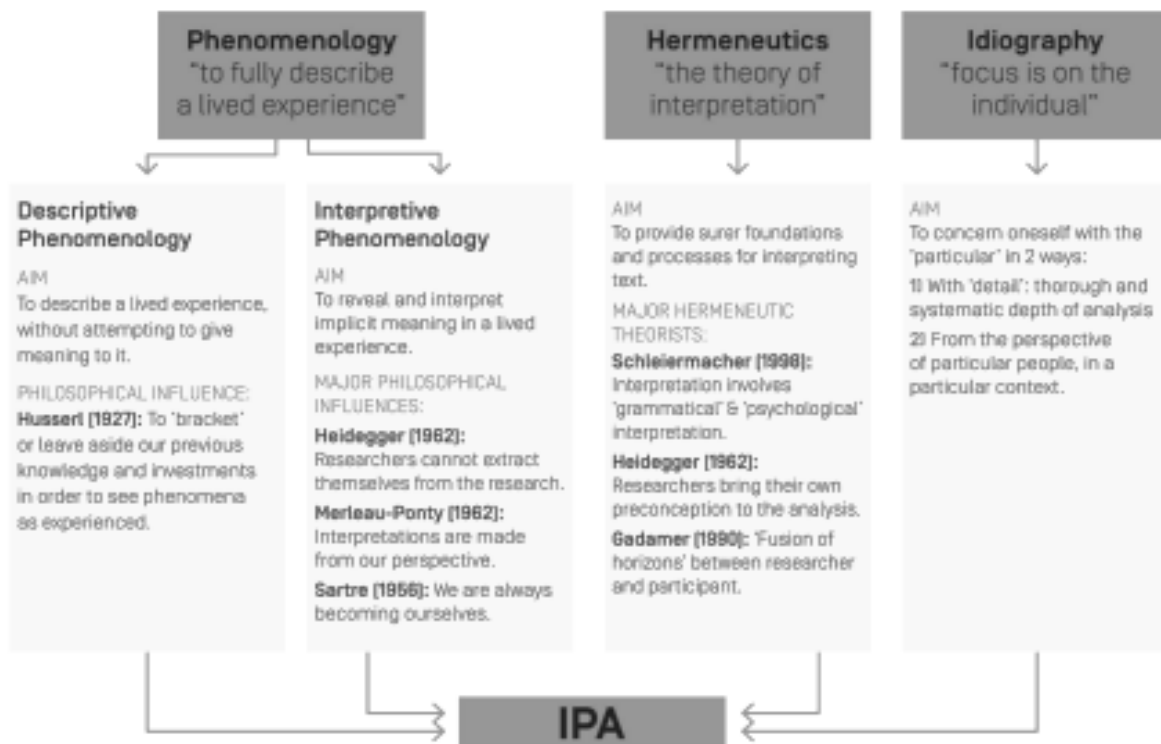
Your signature: _____

Your name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 4 Interpretative Phenomenological Approach

adapted by Charlick et al., 2016



Appendix 5 Interview Questions

Young Person Semi Structured Interview Questions (To be completed over two interviews if necessary)

Thank you for taking the time to help me with this research. If there are any questions you do not understand please let me know and I can help to make it clearer. If you do not want to answer any of the questions that is okay also.

Current Education Centre

We are meeting here in the XXX Centre, how long have you been a student here?

What are you studying?

What do you like about it here?

What is the difference between here and school?

Questions About Family

1. Tell me about who was caring for you/looking after you when you were in primary/secondary schools? Is that different from now?
2. Tell me about the people who were important to you when you were in primary school/secondary school and why? What about now?
3. Where did you live when you were in primary school/secondary school/now? Can you please describe the neighbourhood?
4. Tell me about the relationship you had with your family when you were in primary school/secondary school/now?

Experience of School

1. Tell me about your primary school/secondary school and any other place of education you attended before you came here?
2. What did you like/dislike about primary school/secondary school?

3. Was there anyone in school you felt you could talk to about problems, if so tell me about this person/people?
4. What would you change in your school if you had the power?

School Attendance

1. Tell me about your attendance at school. Did you miss many days? Why?
2. When you missed days, who came looking for you?
3. When you were off school what did you do to fill the time?

Leaving School Before the Leaving Certificate or Equivalent

1. When you decided to leave school before you did the Leaving Cert what were the main reasons you decided to leave?
2. What was the length of time between deciding to leave and just leaving? Or was the timeline a little different than this description? If so, can you describe that?
3. What did you do with your free time when you left school?

Questions about Services

1. When you were in primary school/secondary school did you/attend appointments in health centres or clinics, e.g. CAMHS, Speech and Language therapy, counselling etc. Tell me about these? Do you still attend? What services did you benefit from and how?
2. Did you attend any groups, after school clubs when you were in primary school/secondary school? Tell me about them?
3. Did your parents or anyone in your family attend local services when you were in primary school/ secondary school? Tell me about this?
4. Did any workers from services ever call your home when you were in primary school/secondary school? Tell me about your experience of people calling to your home?
5. Tell me about people who worked with your family during this time?

Questions about the Individual

1. Do you have anyone who you can trust and talk to about your stresses?

2. Do you have any dreams for the future? What do you think you will be doing in the future?
3. Do you think anyone understands you either now or in the future?

Returning to Training or Education

1. When did you decide to come to this Education Centre? Why did you choose to come here?
2. Who encouraged you to come here?
3. What is the main difference between school and where you learn now?

If you were the Minister for Education

1. If you were the Minister for Education what would you like to see change in schools/education?
2. What would you say to people younger than you who are thinking about leaving school before the Leaving Certificate? Any advice?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research. The data will be anonymised and you will not be identified through the data.

Appendix 6 Examples of Transcripts

Brigid

Researcher: What you change about your school that you went to, if you had the power?

Participant: To demand people to wait on.

Researcher: To what?

Participant: Tell Travellers mostly to stay in, try and keep them in and do more about it, because honestly Travellers are just sitting at home literally Googling, they should be in school learning more things because some of them are dyslexic as myself. I don't think they should pressure on you just like try and get you to wait on and do more because there's more to life than staying home, cooking and cleaning. So, I think they should have done that but I don't think they like Travellers anyway so.

Researcher: Would it have made a difference if there was somebody from the travelling community in the school encouraging you to stay on?

Participant: Yeah.

Researcher: Does it matter if the person is settled or a Traveller who is encouraging you?

Participant: Looking back if I was told to wait on in school I'd be like, 'No, I'm leaving school at 16, I'm leaving, I'm leaving, I'm not waiting on'. But like looking back now, no, I said that wrong, looking back at my younger self and me saying 'I'm leaving school at 16', I'm just looking at myself like, 'You're stupid, you should wait on like there's more to live than staying at home doing nothing', like if I waited on, I could have done the leaving, junior cert, I could have more, I could have done a lot of things but I choose to leave at 14 which was wrong.

Researcher: Tell me was your attendance in school

Participant: No, to be honest I used to just take days off like I'd have, you'd have to be really sick for mommy to say, yeah, I'd have to fake a sickness and like, 'Oh, I feel I'm going to collapse', and then or sometimes I'd walk over to the bus and then I'd be like, 'Oh mommy I can't, I feel very sick', and then I'd come home and she'd be like, 'Go into bed', so I'd be like get a day off school, lovely I got away with it but then when you go into school you're like, why are you off sick and like I just have to do it to get the day off.

Researcher: Would there be other people off that you could hang out with like?

Participant: No, I just like, I liked to take my days off and relax and just watch films or something. It made me very lazy. Like when, the COVID time left, it made me really lazy but in the summer time obviously like I got up and like did walking and whatever but like you just never wanted to get out of bed, you just always just wanted to lie there and better off being there than being stuck in the school, at that time I was thinking.

Fionn

Researcher: How long have you been going to this centre?

Participant: This particular centre I've attended for the past three or four months now, but I have been attending a similar programme in [redacted] for the past few years now. So altogether I'd say about three and a half years I've been with a such a programme.

Researcher: So you're 18 and a half, so since you were 15?

Participant: Yeah.

Researcher: Okay. And were you in school before that?

Participant: I was in many different schools actually.

Researcher: What are you studying in this centre then?

Participant: Nothing in particular, just mainly all the core subjects, like just to complete a QQI level four.

Researcher: Oh you're doing QQI level four, okay.

Participant: Yeah, because when I was in [redacted] I completed the QQI level three, and so I'm doing the level four now, and it's... if you might know, it should be a two-year programme. After that I wanted to do accountancy, but now that I'm getting older, I'm like 'Do I really want to be doing that?', so...

Researcher: Okay, yeah, what's changed then? How come?

Participant: I don't know. It's just I'm getting older now and I'm just thinking more properly about what I want to actually be doing, because when I was younger I used to have the mindset that 'Oh accountancy is going to be great. I'm going to get a lot of money. I'm going to have a good job.' Like I'm good with my numbers and all, so it wouldn't be like a pain in the arse to do, because it would all like come simple to me, but now over the past like month or two now I've been thinking 'Is that really what I want?' Like I know I've said I wanted to do that for a long while, but is it actually what I want? Because I also do like being hands-on with stuff, so I am more leaning towards a trade of some kind, like being an Electrician or something.

Researcher: I think you also have to be good with numbers as an electrician, do you?

Participant: You need to know a little bit about measurements, but not... nothing compared to being an Accountant or a Mathematician or anything like that, but you would need to know your way around like a measuring tape and a few other measuring tools, but apart from that you wouldn't really need to know much. The same with construction and plumbing and all that, because that's the environment of trades that I'd be looking into if I was to go down that path.

Researcher: So you've a lot... so you're kind of three or four months into this QQI level four, so you've got like another year and a bit to go until you're finished that. So then you'd do an apprenticeship afterwards, would you?

Participant: That's the goal, that I want to be aiming towards, yes. I want to stick towards apprenticeships and courses, because I just have a better experience within courses and stuff like that, because when I was in mainstream I just didn't like being in a big class.

Researcher: Uh huh, so that was actually my next question – what's the difference between being in this centre and being in mainstream?

Participant: The difference I think is that in this centre in particular the classes are smaller, and you... one thing I really like about the fact the classes are smaller are the fact that you're not able to muck about, meaning when I was in mainstream school there would always be like a group of young people at the back of the class messing about as do the messers.

Researcher: And would you have been in that group?

Participant: No, I wouldn't. I was the person that would just go in, sit down, do his work, and go home, because I didn't really like school altogether.

Researcher: Oh right, okay.

Participant: Because I just don't like being told what to do, to be for... to be honest. I hate being told what to do. That's...

Researcher: Do they not tell you what to do in this centre?

Participant: Not really, because they just... they tell you how it's done, and then they just hand it to you and say 'Here, do it yourself' but at mainstream it's like you either... listen to what you're told, or you don't have a clue what you're doing, because there's no like wiggle room to try and figure your way out, because it's... I don't know how to say it, there's just... in my opinion there's no way to try and figure it out by yourself without having some form of guidance in it, and within Youthreach like they'll tell you what to do, but in a way that's not... how would I say it? I don't want to use the word aggravating, but that's probably the closest word I can get, meaning that they're not coming at you with an attitude that if you don't listen you're going to be like messed up and you don't want to do, that there would

be... there'll always be assistance if you do mess up, not like I ever do want it or need it, but...

... it's there, and that's another thing, that if there was ever a situation that even if I just wasn't on a good day and my head was just not with it, and I was listening or learning properly, I could easily simply go back and be like 'Hey, I didn't hear properly, could we go over this in another class maybe?' and...

Researcher: And would they say 'Yeah'?

Participants: Most of the time they would try and squeeze it in somewhere, or even in the next class they'd sit with me and go through it again.

Researcher: And would that have been your experience in school, that that was possible, or...?

Participant: You see, my experience with school was very different for like many different reasons, because when I first left primary school I wanted to go to [redacted]. I've... went to many primary schools, but that was only because of the said location I was based within the times of... I was in different primary schools.

Researcher: Did your family move a lot, or did you move a lot?

Participant: I moved a lot.

Researcher: You moved a lot.

Participant: Like there was times I was in primary schools in [redacted], there was times I was in primary schools in County [redacted]. I was in many different primary schools.

Researcher: Okay, and are you in care?

Participant: Yes.