

Preventing drop-out: how can post-primary schools best support students at risk of early  
school leaving?

by

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## Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree in this or any other University.

Signed Stephanie Shelly Date 28/4/06

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Go raibh míle maith agaibh!

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## Acronyms

CDVEC	City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee
DES	Department of Education and Science
ESF	European Social Fund
ESLI	Early School Leaving Initiative
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
JCSP	Junior Certificate Schools Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
NEFS	National Economic and Social Forum
NEPS	National Education Psychological Service
SCP	School Completion Programme
SPHE	Social Personal and Health Education
SSRI	Stay in School Retention Initiative

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

“Irish research has indicated that young people who leave school before the end of senior cycle are less likely to obtain employment and have limited access to further education/training” (Smyth 1999:85).

The Department of Education and Science recognises that education plays a key role in promoting a more inclusive society. While obtaining a Leaving Certificate does not automatically guarantee success, it is a requirement for many courses and jobs. It is believed that early school leavers are more likely to experience social exclusion and unemployment than those who do their Leaving Certificate. One of the targets of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy is to reduce the number of early school leavers, so that the number of those who complete senior cycle will have reached 90% by 2006. These are some of the reasons why the problem of early school leaving needs to be tackled.

The Education Welfare Act 2000 raised the school leaving age to 16 years or completion of three years post-primary education, whichever comes later. I feel this is limiting a student’s chance and they should be encouraged to stay on to complete their Leaving Certificate. So for the purpose of this paper the terms ‘drop-out’ and ‘early school leaver’ will be applied to students who leave school before completing their Leaving Certificate.

A number of studies have been carried out on the topic of early school leaving. They suggest that the issue of early school leaving is a complex one and is due to a number of factors. These include urban and rural factors, family background, socio-economic factors, school related factors, cultural differences between home and school and peer pressure. Boldt’s (1994) research supports this view. He based his findings on a series of structured interviews and focus group interviews with a group of early school leavers. O’Neill (1992) also supports this claim, citing a combination of factors including the

education system itself. Conaty (2002) points out that many of the students that leave school early are children of parents who themselves were educationally disadvantaged.

A wide range of measures have been introduced by the Department of Education and Science, aimed at addressing disadvantage and reducing the number of early school leavers. These include the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). The HSCL Scheme was introduced in 1990 to 55 primary schools in disadvantaged areas and was extended to 13 second level schools in 1991 and has continued to grow since. The HSCL Scheme targets pupils who are at risk of not reaching their full potential and of dropping out of school. It is based on the principle of building up partnership between the home, school and the community. The SCP focuses on young people between the ages of 4-18 years who are educationally disadvantaged and at risk of early school leaving. A number of schools both primary and secondary in areas designated disadvantaged are invited to participate in SCP. These and other government initiatives will be referred to during the course of my dissertation.

My interest in this topic arose since I have worked for nine years in a City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee school, located in a designated disadvantaged area. It has lower than average retention rates. There is a history of students leaving at or before the age of sixteen. During this time I have worked closely with parents and students at risk of early school leaving both as Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator and as a Class Tutor for eight years. The school was and still is perceived locally as being for students who are academically less able and who have both emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some students come from families with a history of long-term unemployment, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, family breakdown, crime, domestic violence and illness. These social problems and the impact they have upon the students are some of the challenges facing the school. I am very concerned about the problem of early school leaving and I see many

advantages to having schemes such as HSCL and SCP in the school. I believe that forming links between the home and the school plays a significant role in the retention of pupils at risk of early school leaving and I will continue to forge and promote these links in my school. I wish to see a more collaborative approach between the school, community and support agencies around the issue of early school leaving. We need to realise that we all have the interests of these students at heart and we must work together to ensure they stay in school.

The aim of my study is to evaluate the programmes in place in two post-primary schools to combat early school leaving. In order to do this I plan

- To explore the reasons students in these schools leave formal education early.
- To ascertain what programmes are in place in the two schools to combat early school leaving and to describe their operation, focusing in particular at the level of collaboration between the school, community and support agencies.
- To evaluate the programmes focusing on the perspective of key partners as to whether these initiatives are successful and whether future initiatives could further combat early school leaving:
  - How do the participating students evaluate the programmes?
  - How do school personnel evaluate the programmes?
  - How do parents and members of the community evaluate the programmes?
  - How do support agency personnel evaluate the programmes?

Interview participants include Principals, School Completion Co-ordinators, an Education Support Worker, a partnership representative, a Community Worker, parents, early school leavers and students at risk of early school leaving.

This chapter has explained the context and rationale for the study. Chapter 2 will review the literature concerned with early school leaving in order to examine the reasons why students leave school early and note ways of addressing this problem and possible solutions. Chapter 3 will summarise the methodology used in researching this topic. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative methodology was used including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. A list of participants is given and the reasons why they were chosen. A description of the sites involved is given and the fact that having two sites and a range of participants which allows for triangulation is mentioned. In Chapter 4 the views of those most familiar with the issue of early school leaving are analysed and the findings highlighted. Findings are categorised under three main themes: reasons for early school leaving, strategies in place for tackling the problem at present and possible future strategies. Finally Chapter 5 outlines my conclusions and future recommendations to tackle the problem of early school leaving both for the schools participating in this study and the education system.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I intend to review literature that explores the issue of early school-leaving. I will focus particularly on the factors associated with early school leaving and suggested measures for tackling this problem. There are different definitions for the term early school-leaver. Morrow (1987) cited in Morgan argues: “a drop-out is any student previously enrolled in a school, who is no longer actively enrolled as indicated by 15 days of consecutive unexcused absences, who has not satisfied local standards of graduation, and from whom no formal request has been received signifying enrolment in another educational institution” (1998:79). Morgan believes that local standards in designating early school leavers may differ from place to place and for this reason it is difficult to define the term early school leaver.

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) report 2002 refers to three priority groups which include school leavers who do not make the transfer from primary to post primary school, those who drop-out before sitting their Junior Certificate and those who leave school immediately after Junior Certificate without any effective examination results. Blaug (2001) makes the point that the term drop-out places the blame for early school leaving on the individual student and not on the system. This is just one of the factors which contribute to early school leaving. Murphy (2005) states that the term early school leaver applies to those who left school, with at most, lower secondary education. The Education Welfare Act 2000 raised the school-leaving age to 16 years or completion of three years post-primary education, which ever comes later. I feel that this is very limiting and that students should be encouraged to stay on to complete their Leaving Certificate. So for the purpose of this paper the

terms 'early school-leaver' or 'drop-out' will be applied to students who left school before completing their Leaving Certificate.

Firstly I think it is important to establish the context of early school leaving in Ireland. Fleming and Murphy (2000) argue that there is a long history and culture of early school-leaving in Ireland. While this is clearly the case, the literature also informs us that the problem of early school-leaving was only put to the forefront of the government policy in the late 1990s and that since then a number of measures have been introduced to address this problem. According to Ryan (2004) an effort was made in Ireland in the late '90s to reduce the problem of educational disadvantage and early school leaving. The NESF report argued in 2002 that their 1997 report succeeded in pushing the issue of early school leaving up the policy agenda.

However in spite of these in-roads the problem of early school leaving persists. According to Boldt and Devine (1998) the percentage of early school leavers has decreased. However the problem still persists. The NESF report informs us that, "Despite the progress highlighted above, and commitments made by successive Governments, the key priority to eliminate early school leaving has still not been realised. Indeed, the issue is becoming more complex as the marginalisation of those leaving school with no qualification is increased" (2002:5).

### **Factors related to early school leaving**

The Literature seems to suggest that there is no one factor that influences a student to leave school early, rather there can be a number of factors involved. According to Boldt

early school leaving is found to be a process which develops over time as a pupil progresses through school. It is a complicated process affected by many variables which influence pupils in varying degrees. There is no single course or factor which determines that a pupil will leave

school without a qualification; rather, there is a series of events and circumstances which contribute to this process and result in pupils dropping out of school (1994:vi).

Boldt based his findings on a series of structured interviews and focus group discussions with a group of early school leavers and people associated with them. The NESF (2002) states that the factors which contribute to early school leaving vary depending on whether one believes it is a result of individual failure or system failure. Factors may include under-achievement, low academic performance, poor self-esteem, bullying, school type, curriculum, pupil/teacher relationships, problems within the home, and drug/ alcohol abuse.

Granville (1982) suggests five significant indicators for leaving school early. These include poor attendance, poor school achievement, age variance, poor self-image and low motivation, and limited family support. Breen cited in Boldt (1994) identifies four variables related to early school leaving, namely social class, employment status, school type and region. Boldt and Devine (1998) and Stokes (1999) suggest that in order to tackle the issue of early school-leaving it is important to address the wide range of factors associated with the problem and not just to focus solely on the education system. This view is supported by Kellaghan et al. (1995), the Irish Vocational Education Association policy document (1999) and Rourke (1999).

According to Hannan et al. "since the earliest post-war studies of educational achievement and equality of opportunity, the central role played by family socio-economic and socio-cultural factors has been emphasised" (1996:13). This is supported by Coleman et al, (1966); Jencks et al, (1972); Hasley (1972, 1975); Karabel and Hasley, (1977) and Hasley, Heath and Ridge, (1980). Lareau (2003) believes that social group membership has a bearing on the direction ones life takes. Life opportunities are not equal for all, the family into which one is born matters quite a lot. It matters because some institutions are selective, building on some cultural patterns more than others. Certain institutional standards give some

people an advantage over others. O'Brien (2002) makes the point that the values and practices of schools normally reflect those of the dominant middle class culture in society. Children from more marginalised backgrounds are distanced from this school system and are placed in a position of disadvantage. Within schools there are specific structures which reflect and perpetuate dominant middle class ideas such as the curriculum and the culture of the school. Drudy and Lynch (1993) point out that the increase in educational expenditure since the 1960's has not eliminated class inequalities in educational participation and achievement. They believe that the middle class has benefited most from the expanded educational opportunities. A substantial proportion of children from marginalised backgrounds are still underachieving. They feel that poverty plays a big part in this and that low income has a bearing on a child's inability to participate fully in education. "If income and wealth differentials were eliminated, the problem of working-class 'failure' in education would be significantly reduced" (1993:163). Kellaghan et al. (1995) gives examples from the home, environment and school that contribute towards disadvantage e.g. how time and space are organised and used in the home and grouping practices in schools. O'Neill states

The reasons for low educational achievement in working or low-income areas are complex and involve a combination of factors, including the education system itself, schools and the cumulative social disadvantages caused by unemployment and poverty (1992:95).

It is clear from what the researchers say that there is no single factor which determines why a pupil will drop-out of school, however a number of common factors have been identified by researchers. The significant factors raised in the literature include: individual factors, urban and rural factors, family background, school factors, socio-economic factors, cultural differences between the home and school and peer group. I will now examine each of these factors separately.

### **Individual factors**

Some authors identify a number of individual factors associated with early school leaving. They include low self-esteem, academic ability and behaviour. Fagan (1995) believes some students reject school by engaging in oppositional behaviour and in so doing bring about their own educational failure. Boldt et al. (1998) tell us that there is a link between early school-leaving, attendance problems and disruptive behaviour. According to the NESF report (2002) students with learning difficulties and special needs are at a very high risk of dropping out especially if they go through the primary school system undetected. Boldt tells us that during interviews carried out by him “the view was also put forward that the majority of early school leavers are those who are ‘academically weak’ or ‘low achievers’” (1994:29/30). According to Smyth (1999) lower ability pupils exhibit a long history of absenteeism and this widens the gap between them and their higher ability peers.

Prendergast makes the point that “it is suggested that many young people suffer from low self-esteem and lack of confidence in their own abilities and talents..... Unstable home environment and lack of encouragement and support for achieving at school were identified as factors working against young people” (2002:4). Esktron et al. (1986) argue that young people who leave school early are known to have low self-esteem. Martin (1997) in her report on school discipline refers to a number of authors who believe that student dropouts generally suffer a lack of self esteem and are discontented with a school system which they feel cares little about them.

### **School factors**

School related factors are one of the main reasons for students leaving school early. They include teacher/pupil relationships, the curriculum, streaming of classes, school type, attendance and cultural differences between the home and school. According to Boldt “a general lack of resources and finances, inadequate remedial and specialist teachers and high pupil-teacher ratios were cited as the

main factors which work against pupils who eventually drop out” (1994:29). Following his interviews with early school-leavers Boldt (1997) stated that they felt school-related factors were the biggest influence on a student’s decision to leave school early. Fagan (1995) also interviewed early school leavers who said that what they specifically disliked about school was the curriculum, the teaching process and the teachers. Some of the students said that dissatisfaction with their schooling situation was their primary motivation to leave school. The NESF report (2002) refers to the ‘push-out’ model that puts the blame on the institutional make-up of the school and how it is organised. The main factors in this approach are school type, curriculum and pupil/teacher relationships. Boldt quotes Orr “Although the implication of the term DROPOUT is that the student has left school wilfully and without good reason, there is overwhelming evidence that many so-called dropouts leave because of the treatment they receive at school or the failure of school programs to meet their learning needs in effect, these students are forced out” (1994:8/9).

#### Teacher/Pupil relationships

Pupil/teacher relationships seem to be a significant factor in whether pupils leave school early or not. Boldt (1994) states that school related factors, particularly the relationship between teachers and pupils, are seen by early school leavers to contribute to their decision to drop-out. Some teachers interviewed by Boldt said that “bad experiences with teachers can often be the biggest reason why a pupil opts out of school” and “that teachers have to recognise that schools are failing ninety percent of kids who drop out and teachers are largely to blame” (1994:29). According to Smyth (1996) pupils who experience positive relationships with their teachers are less likely to think of leaving school early while the opposite can be said for those who report negative relationships. Boldt’s findings (1997) indicate that there was a broad consensus among his interviewees that most teachers did not care about them, did not understand them and could not relate to them. Fagan (1995) makes the point that the overall attitude toward teachers held by the early school-leavers is one of dislike or hatred, while some individual

teachers are described as 'okay'. According to Ryan (2004) schools and teachers can make a difference, ironically the difference can be either/ both negative and positive, a veritable double-edged sword.

### Curriculum

Many of the authors argue that the curriculum in schools is irrelevant for certain pupils, particularly those at risk of early school leaving. According to Martin (1997) research has shown that one of the reasons young people become disenchanted with school is because the curriculum seems irrelevant and boring. Fleming and Murphy tell us that "there is also a recognition that the traditional secondary school curriculum does not always provide a meaningful or relevant response to the needs of those pupils who would benefit from a more vocational and practically oriented programme" (2000:19). The NESF report (2002) gives a list of comments from early school leavers on their reasons for leaving school. Most early school leavers felt that nine subjects were too many to deal with. Prendergast (2002) refers to Boldt's work and says that the data suggests the school curriculum was in many ways irrelevant to the needs, interests and abilities of the pupils. Fagan (1995) points out that the early school-leavers perspective on the curriculum is that it was 'boring', 'uninteresting' and 'irrelevant' and that the teaching and learning process was minimal, something which they reacted against and still get angry about. According to Boldt (1994) parents that he interviewed felt that many subjects and the way they were taught were of little or no use to their children. Some students felt that there is a need for more practical subjects in school and believe that if such subjects were available in their time it would have made a difference to them. He also makes the point that "the authors believe that schools and their curricula are structured in ways which have little relevance to the 'reality' experienced in communities and society at large" (1994:8). Freire (1970) rejects what he terms a 'nutritionist view' of knowledge and curriculum as alienating to learners. Freire advocates a pedagogy that treats curriculum as a dynamic structure that is central and relevant to both the social context and life experiences of students.

### Stratified ability grouping

Stratified ability grouping includes streaming as well as banding which is a weaker form of streaming. It is said that stratified ability grouping, especially streaming can be a contributory factor to early school leaving. Smyth (1999) makes the point that potential drop-out is higher in bottom classes within streamed schools and that this group are less likely to remain in school, if they do they under-perform academically. According to Boldt et al. (1998) the effects of ability grouping and grade retention on early school-leaving is well researched e.g. Gamaron and Berends (1987), Slavin (1987). They also state that “there is evidence that being in a lower stream results in worse school achievement than would be warranted by students’ ability. Given that poor school performance is a strong predictor of dropping out, it can be argued that streaming is a contributory factor. Certainly it is nearly always the case that students who drop out are found in lower streams.” (1998:92). Hargreaves (1967); Lacey (1974); Oakes (1985) and Boaler (2000) believe rigid grouping promotes a sense of alienation among those who are negatively evaluated and that those in lower streams are most likely to disengage from school. Hannan and Boyle (1987) found that streaming was linked to higher dropout rates from school. The NESF report (2002) notes that some early school leavers had negative experiences of streaming on the basis of entrance exams, some were put in with ‘a crowd of messers’ and knew they would never learn anything or were in high streams and were unable to keep up. Hargreaves et al. (1996) argues that the division of students into groupings based on “academic” ability creates alienation and disaffection.

According to Fagan

The educational system streams children into groups of high achievers and low achievers on the basis of IQ and performance. Before second-level education starts, the young people are allocated to low grade classes. Once inside these low-grade classes the young people quickly realize that they are in ‘a class for messers’ as they see it. The young people claim that no effort was made to teach them once placed in one of these classes (1995:98).

Boldt et al. (1998) cite Hannan (1987) who indicates that streaming has a negative effect on the levels of early school leavers in the first three years of secondary school and that in streamed schools students are more likely to drop out than those in mixed ability schools.

### School Type

Some authors believe that the type of school that students attend can have a bearing in whether they leave school early or not. Hannan (1986) and Boldt et al. (1998) believes that early school-leaving is quite prevalent in certain kinds of schools, namely those that cater mainly for children from working class families, children from small farms, from families of unemployed manual workers and vocational schools. According to Smyth “school type has a significant impact on drop-out, with pupils in vocational schools more likely to report intending to leave school early than those in other school types” (1999:95). Breen (1984) believes that vocational schools have a high percentage of students from working class families and students with low ability. He also stated that vocational schools recorded the highest drop-out rates. This view is supported by Sexton et al. (1988) and Fontes and Kellaghan (1977)

### Attendance

It is believed that there is a link between poor school attendance and early school leaving. Finneran makes the point that “it is felt strongly that non-attendance at school is one of the most visible factors through which one can identify those in the ‘at risk’ bracket of early school leaving” (2000:21). He also refers to a comment made by a teacher carried out in a survey he did “absenteeism is an attitude, which adversely sets the foundation of a disjointed educational path. Absence= work missed= struggle to catch up= feelings of failure= DROPOUT” (2000:4). Fagan (1995) carried out interviews with a number of early school leavers and she found that absenteeism was obviously noticed but was unchallenged. The system turns a blind eye to absenteeism among students from low socioeconomic

backgrounds. According to Boldt (1994) poor school attendance may be a factor in a pupil's decision to leave school early. Smyth (1999) points out that, students who have poor attendance records are more likely to intend to leave school early. Boldt et al. (1998) tell us that the association between absenteeism and truancy with subsequent dropping out is especially strong and consistent.

#### Cultural differences between home and school

It was also found that cultural and value differences between the school and students influenced their decision to leave school early. O'Neill (1992) states that many of the parents interviewed by her cite cultural differences between schools and working-class people as being an issue. She wrote that some parents felt that teachers do not understand working-class people and that some teachers look down on them and have no respect for them. According to Conaty "when children enter school they bring with them their 'cultural mapping' and when family culture and/or social class differs from that of the school we have seen that 'conflicts' may arise for the children in their academic and social adjustment"(2002:51). Martin (1997) tells us that data suggests that difficulties arise because there seems to be a clash of cultures between the home and school. Cullen (1997) says that "the emphasis on developing social and personal skills arises from teachers' perceptions that educational disadvantage reflects cultural and social differences between the school and home" (2000:27). Boldt (1994) stated that there is a difference in values and expectations between early school leavers and the school system. These pupils have low expectations and a lack of confidence. They live for the immediate and have no direction for the future. Pupils often value the opportunity to work no matter how temporary over staying in school, to obtain qualifications. Boldt et al. (1998) cite O'Brien (1990) who states that teachers have to be aware of the cultural and value differences which children bring into the classroom. They need to understand the importance of the community in pupil's lives and be attentive to the conflicts which may arise between the school and community. According to Fagan "the teacher's class

position, and their distance from the low financial and social status brings in its own way the exclusion from the school system of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds” (1995:102).

However it must be pointed out that not all teachers are negatively disposed towards their students, yet the gulf also exists between them and their pupils. This can be due to the cultural differences of the school and education itself. Teachers work within a system that fosters power and privilege for some groups while excluding others. Drudy and Lynch (1993) speak of the bias in the curriculum which favours the middle class child. Lynch (1989) believes that the examination system influences the programmes on offer in schools and that these programmes are valued because they have been legitimised by the dominant middle class society and not for their educational value. The curriculum is seen as the vehicle which transmits this knowledge. Even with the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied and Junior Certificate Schools Programme the mainstream curriculum is still regarded as highly academic and far removed from the experience of disadvantaged students. Fagan (1995) makes the point that the curriculum and examinations are completely aimed at the middle class or ‘white-collar’ class. It is removed from the reality of working-class young people. They do not see the link between the curriculum and work because work means manual work to them and this is not reflected in the curriculum.

McVerry (2002) believes that we need a more comprehensive education system where manual skills are also part of assessment. The present academic system benefits a group in society that are already advantaged. If the assessment of manual skills was introduced it would balance out the curriculum so that the disadvantaged would be on a more level playing field. He feels that the present form of assessment where a student puts everything into a final examination at the end of six years is not just an enormous and unhelpful pressure but undesirable. He also believes that a modular system would be more helpful to disadvantaged students. Bruton states that “the education system must move radically

away from the one route, one-yard stick approach that still dominates and is perpetuated by our rigid academic examinations. We need methods of assessment that value wider dimensions of the pupils achievement” (2002:13/14). The NESF report (2002) makes the point that students at risk of early school leaving are unlikely to be motivated by a certificate system which is based solely on a final examination. A shift to continuous assessment is seen as more desirable to potential early school leavers.

### **Home factors**

Much of the literature would suggest that in many cases parents are to blame for students dropping out of school as they have placed little value on the need for education and don't prepare or encourage their children to stay in school. According to the NESF report

Our current education system is based on a number of assumptions which include the notion that all children get support with their schooling from parents, that they have sufficient material comfort, that they have breakfast in the morning before they leave for school and that they have space and support to do their homework. However, the experience of community providers and organisations like the Saint Vincent de Paul confirms that some children often go hungry to school and do not have somewhere to do their homework (2002:79).

Hannan et al. (1996) make the point that significant differences arise in parental educational expectations and attitudes and that these become internalised by children at a young age. The later come to have substantial effects on their subsequent educational motivations and achievements. Lareau (2003) states that there were times when working-class parents encouraged their children to outwardly comply with school officials, but at the same time urged them to resist school authority. Conaty (2002) points out that many of the students that leave school early and that are not gaining maximum advantage from school are children of parents who were educationally disadvantaged. According to Martin (1997) many pupils come from homes where a number of factors such as unemployment, poverty, substance dependence, crime and poor levels of parental education combine to make their adaptation to and engagement in school very difficult. The pupils cannot and do not leave these problems outside the school door. Boldt states that

Difficulties in the home are often 'played-out' by pupils in school through their misbehaviour and indiscipline. Seeking attention or relief from their troubles at home, pupils often ignore their school work, 'hassle' their teachers and fellow pupils and/or miss from school which leads to further problems and frustration in school. In such circumstances school and education lose their value and meaning, and the decision to leave school becomes more attractive (1994:22).

A parent interviewed by Boldt said that there are many parents who are not fully committed to their children's schooling and in some cases they may not be educated enough to help them. According to Smyth (1999) maternal education also has a significant effect on drop-out, over and above that of social background. Breen in Mulholland and Keogh (1990) says that pupils' home circumstances are of crucial importance in terms of equality of opportunity. Astone and McLanahan (1991) found that young people living in single parent families or with step parents are more likely to drop out from school. Ekstron et al. (1986) state that family factors related to early school leaving include parents with low educational attainment, single parent families and a lack of learning materials at home. Fagan (1995) makes the point that early school leaving followed a precedent of early school leaving on the part of the rest of the family. Older members of the family usually left school early. Boldt cites Richardson et al., stating that "The family's economic status, the language spoken at home, age and marital status of the mother, and other characteristics, have all been considered by various educational agencies as indicators of future school failure" (1994:3). However, it must also be stated that many young people interviewed by Boldt did not state home background as being a reason for them leaving school early.

### **Socio-economic factors**

Socio-economic factors are often cited as reasons for students dropping out of school. Hannan et al. (1996) tell us that there are a number of reasons why social class has a significant effect on a student's educational achievements including a direct economic effect, with students from higher social classes better able to afford household and educational resources e.g. separate bedrooms, books etc. which facilitate better educational achievements. Different social class settings also generate different

personal habits and practices including ability to concentrate and study for long periods of time and the degree to which parents helped with and supervised homework. This had a huge effect on educational achievement. According to Ryan (2004) a lot of international research focuses on the relationship between social background and educational achievement. Some of it makes reference to the poor child's progress in the school system compared to that of his more privileged peers. It has been said that poverty is linked to poor educational achievements and prospects. Schorr (1998) and Kellaghan et al. (1995) support the view that poverty restricts and limits the educational chances of those who are marginalised both economically and socially. Lynch and Lodge (2002) make the point that students from low income working-class backgrounds cannot avail of the same educational advantages as middle class students because they cannot compete on the same terms as other classes for educational advantages. This is because of the unequal economic conditions between the classes. According to the European Social Fund (ESF) evaluation report "85 per cent of early school-leavers came from working class or small farming backgrounds" (1996:9). The report also indicates that the Irish education system is not doing enough for students from working class backgrounds. Conaty tells us that

The marginalised pupils are most likely to be children and teenagers who come from homes where poverty exists to such a degree as to preoccupy the family and to affect its ability to enhance life chances. They are generally young people from the families of the unskilled and un-employed working class with a history of educational failure (2002:19).

Smyth (1999) cites findings which have indicated that pupils from working class backgrounds have a higher rate of absenteeism and are at greater risk of dropping out of school. Orr (1987) found that economic backgrounds are major influences on a student's decision to drop out of school. Hannan and O'Rian (1993) point out that international literature has found that drop-out rates are higher for students coming from families of low economic status. Many authors such as Connolly (2004), Lareau (2003) and O'Brien (2002) refer to the work of Pierre Bourdieu who provides us with a context for examining the impact of social class position. According to Lareau

Bourdieu argues that individuals of different social locations are socialized differently. This socialization provides children, and later adults, with a sense of what is comfortable or what is natural (he terms this habitus). These background experiences also shape the amount and forms of resources (capital) individuals inherit and draw upon as they confront various institutional arrangements (fields) in the social world (2003:275).

Connolly (2004) points out that while Bourdieu believes that individuals are free to make choices, they can only do so within the parameters of 'what they know', i.e. the habitus they have internalised. They are shaped by the social structures that surround them. So while working class children for example are free to make choices, the range of choices available to them are constrained by their lived experience.

O'Brien states that

the values and practices of schools generally reflect those of the dominant middle class culture in society. Students coming from middle class homes and communities are likely to be familiar and already socialised to the dominant (middle class) views and practices. Students from more marginalised groups and we include the unemployed and working-class as marginalised in the social sense (Young 1990) have different lifestyles or "habitus" related to the economic restraints in their lives. They are therefore distanced from a school system dominated by middle class values and views and this places them in a position of disadvantage. The disadvantage arises not only from poorer economic circumstances but from life experiences and "dispositions" related to economic disadvantage (2002:28).

Many students leave school early because they have been given the opportunity to work or do training courses that pay. These young people often come from families where unemployment exists; schools cannot compete with the opportunity to earn a wage. Fagan (1995) found that the second motivation in the school leaving process was their interest in finding employment. Many of those who say they left school to earn money for themselves also include their parent's lack of money as an explanation. Their parents would not have money to give the children and they also welcome the extra cash. Boldt (1994) notes that when pupils who remained in school were asked why others had left school early, the most common response was that they left to get a job. The NESF report (2002) points out that there is an increased concern that part-time work can lead to students dropping out of school particularly those at risk of early school leaving.

## **Urban/Rural factors**

Where a student lives can sometimes influence them to dropout of school. Fleming and Murphy (2000) cite data compiled by Gamma from the 1996 census which suggests that Dublin fares far worse in terms of its history of early school leaving. According to Boldt (1994) research in the USA has found that students in urban areas are fifty percent more likely to drop out of school than pupils in rural areas. Hannan (1986) noted that early school leaving was most prevalent in large cities e.g. Dublin, Cork and Limerick. Conaty (2002) believes that families that portray disadvantage characteristics generally live in densely populated urban areas, although some can be found in rural communities but to a lesser degree. MacGreil analysed adult participation and achievement in education in Dublin and found that "...place of residence had been one of the most significant negative variables in that it has shown an imbalance of educational achievement between the various districts (in Dublin)" (1974:37). However Rourke (1994) argues that the problems experienced by disadvantaged youth in rural areas can often be worse than in urban areas. The NESF report believes that

in the rural context a range of other issues impact on early school leaving. These include the lack of sufficient numbers to avail of programmes and lack of choice regarding subjects on offer. It may also be difficult for rural schools to access non-traditional programmes such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme. Rural transport is also a key concern (2002:8).

## **Peer Pressure**

Peer Pressure can also contribute to a pupil's decision to leave school early. Boldt (1994) found that peer pressure is seen to contribute in varying degrees to a pupils' decision to drop out of school. He found that "a pupil's peer group has a wide influence on behaviour and considers it to be 'one of the major causes of dropping out'" (1994:28). Some Community workers and Principals interviewed by Boldt believe that peer pressure has a part to play in early school leaving. When there is little parent support at home the peer group can become a major influence and support network for the young person. Rumberger (1987) makes the point that there is evidence to suggest that many of those who leave school early have friends in school who have also left. It is important to note that while Boldt

(1994) recognises the influence the peer group has on pupils to misbehave and mitch, the decision to leave school is much more important and is influenced more by home environment than by peer pressure. Smyth (1999) argues that the social–class context of the school has an impact on the school ethos and pupil outcomes, including early school leaving. Schools that are less socially mixed and have a greater proportion of socially excluded students as part of their overall student body are impacted on by this. Working class pupils in predominately working class schools have a higher drop-out rate, higher absenteeism and lower exam results than their middle class counter-parts. This is part of a wider way of understanding the peer group to which students belong. It isn't only their immediate friends and classmates but the peer social context of the whole school which can influence whether they stay in school or not.

## **Gender**

It is important to note that many authors have made a link between gender and early school leaving. Lodge and Lynch cite McCoy et al. (1999) who state that “Early school leaving is heavily concentrated among students of both genders from working-class backgrounds, although it is especially strong among young men from such backgrounds. Of those who drop out early from school without qualifications almost two-thirds (64 per cent) are male” (2004:14). The NESF report (2002) notes significant gender differences in school participation and early school leaving. It says that “findings from the most recent school leavers survey show that more males completed the Junior Certificate before leaving than females and also that more left with no qualifications than females” (2002:32). According to Smyth (1999) girls are more likely than boys to report their intentions to stay on to do their Leaving Certificate. Fleming and Murphy (2000) make the point that almost two thirds (64%) of all those who leave school early with no qualifications are male. Breen (1984) found that a group which did not continue to their Inter Cert contained a higher proportion of males.

## **Measures to address the problem of early school leaving**

Much of the literature read has suggested measures which could be put in place to address the problem of early school leaving including the integration of services, developing home/school links, revising the curriculum, providing opportunities for teacher professional development, pre-school interventions and more resources for schools. It is believed that no single intervention is likely to solve the problem fully. There must be a variety and combination of approaches to the issue.

### **Integration of services**

The integration of services is seen as an important preventative aspect of early school leaving. Fleming and Murphy tell us that “it is difficult to find written material on early school-leaving and preventative education that does not refer to the issue of integration at some stage. It is often accompanied by a focus on partnership between sectors and agencies, particularly at the local level” (2000:11). According to the NESF report “A range of Government Departments and Agencies deliver initiatives and programmes designed to address disadvantage but these are often without adequate reference to each other. A more integrated approach is therefore needed to better support young people at risk and to reduce fragmentation in the structure and delivery of these support services” (2002:10). Boldt (1998) recommends that efforts be made to develop networks, to support collaborative approaches and to address the needs of young people. This could be done through the establishment of links between schools and with other initiatives.

A number of policy measures such as those mentioned in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness 2000, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Operational Programme for Local, Urban and Rural Development cited in Fleming and Murphy (2000) show a political will to tackle the problem of early school leaving. The main approach taken at national level to tackle this problem is “developing

partnerships and co-ordinating government services, targeting and restructuring resources and provision within the formal education system” (2000:11). It has been suggested that a number of agencies who are working with and providing initiatives to encourage young people to stay in school should come together and co-ordinate their approach as this might have a much better result.

An Irish Vocational Education Association policy document (1999) points out that it is important to have an integrated approach to programmes and interventions so that they will not be duplicated or fragmented. According to Boldt (1994) schools can't do it all and community initiatives are seen as constructive ways to assist the work of the schools by addressing issues directly or indirectly related to schools. Ryan (2004) makes the point that schools *per se* cannot solve society's problems alone and advocates a more multi-disciplinary approach. According to Murphy (2005) the Department of Education and Science has developed a number of measures to tackle the problem of disadvantage and early school leaving e.g. Breaking the Cycle, 8-15 Early School Leaving Initiative (ESLI) and the Stay in School Retention Initiative (SSRI). Many of these initiatives require the integration of services and the collaboration of agencies working with the young people at risk and their families.

All of these represent a wide range of initiatives aimed at targeting schools and individual children with a view to needs identification, in-school and out-of school support services, parental involvement and development and the integrated delivery of the services of collaborating agencies to young people and their families. Of particular note is the School Completion Programme. This programme subsumed the ESLI and the SSRI and was set up with a key component of the Department's strategy to respond to early school leaving.....Schools and other key local agencies/groups are required to work with parents to devise a collaborative programme of in-school and out-of school actions-the Retention Plan- that will prevent early school leaving and support young people with characteristics and behaviour indicative of real risk (2005:4).

### **Home/School links**

Home factors are one of the reasons given for pupils leaving school early, therefore the development of home /school links is seen to be a significant factor in retaining pupils at risk of early school leaving.

We are told by the Irish Constitution that the family is the primary and natural educator of the child.

This implies that the family needs to be involved and consulted about their child's education. Martin (1997) informs us that the White Paper on Education *Charting our Education Future* (1995) gives attention to the role of parents in the education system. She also says that where good home-school partnership exists there appears to be positive outcomes for the school, students and parents. According to Conaty "the more parents know about the school the more they can contribute to their children's schooling. The committed pupil remains in school to graduation spurred on by internalised goals emanating from the home, the school and wider society" (2002:26). Boldt (1994) states that any initiative taken to tackle the problem of early school leaving needs to involve and consider the view points and experiences of parents. The Department of Education and Science (DES) recognises the importance of parental involvement and support and introduced the Home School Community Liaison Scheme in 1990. This scheme is a preventative strategy targeted at parents, school staff and relevant community agencies in disadvantaged areas. The main aims of the scheme are to involve parents in the school, particularly the parents of students at risk, to promote co-operation between the home, school and community and to keep students in school. According to the DES cited in Fleming and Murphy, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme "is concerned with establishing partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers in the interests of children's learning. It focuses directly on the salient adults in children's educational lives and seeks indirect benefits for the children themselves" (2000:16/17). The scheme and its success are supported by Coolahan (1994), Kellaghan et al. (1995), Devine (1999) and the ESF (1997). Conaty (2002) believes that parents need to be consulted as they are an important resource to their children and the wider community. Parents know the strengths and weaknesses and the likes and dislikes of their child; this can be helpful to the school.

## Curriculum

It is believed that curriculum reform may help to reduce the number of pupils leaving school early. The curriculum needs to be broadened to include non-academic subjects, subjects that are relevant to the pupil's lives and more involvement of extra-curricular activities. Martin (1997) stated that more interesting relevant courses are factors that would keep alienated students in school. Boldt (1994) believes that there is a need for subject choice to be broadened, with an emphasis on more practical subjects. A number of changes have taken place to the curriculum both at primary and secondary level. At primary level the curriculum focuses on the child as learner and aims at providing a holistic approach to the students' development and education. At second level the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) have been developed to provide a more vocational and practical based programme in an attempt to make the curriculum more relevant to pupils. O'Brien (1999) states that the idea of JCSP is to help students to benefit from their time in school and to enjoy the experience of success. According to the NESF report (2002) "Flexibility in assessment should be introduced at both junior and senior cycles, drawing on elements of good practice within the Junior Certificate Schools Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied" (2002:14). Smyth (1999) believes that schools should be encouraged to adopt programmes such as the JCSP which are aimed at reducing early school drop out. It is felt that being involved in extra-curricular activities in school helps a student to stay in school. Spady (1997) points out that High School students without major extra-curricular interest were much less likely to have college aspirations. Hargreaves et al., (1996) recommends that involvement in extra-curricular activities can allow teachers and pupils to interact in a less hierarchical fashion, thus providing the opportunity to develop a more caring teacher/pupil relationship. Beacham (1980) cited in Morgan (1998) found that over 60% of High School drop-outs were not involved in any extra-curricular activities. McNeal (1995) discovered that participation in certain activities e.g. sport, reduced the likelihood of a student dropping-out of school.

## **Professional development**

Teachers need to be given the opportunity to part-take in continuous professional development. Teachers especially those working in schools in disadvantaged areas need to be given training to provide them with the skills necessary in teaching students who are at risk of early school leaving and who may have behavioural and learning difficulties. Teachers need to be trained to be sensitive to the problems faced by these students. According to Lareau (2003) policies need to be developed to help teachers learn how to be more sensitive to differences in cultural practices. Boldt (1994) makes the point that there is need for certain teachers in certain schools to be given the opportunity to understand better their pupils and to consider how their current practices assist their pupils in learning. "It is recommended that a carefully designed programme, perhaps of a nature quite different than what is usually available from in-service courses, be offered to teachers to address these needs" (1994:57). The NESF report states that "Modules on educational disadvantage should be an integral part of pre-service and in-service training of teachers at both primary and second level" (2002:16). According to Martin (1997) the White Paper (1995) along with the National Education Convention lends support to continuing professional development of the teaching career. Conaty (2002) believes that teachers could also be trained in ways of forming good home/school links. Teachers must also be trained to teach the new programmes on offer e.g. the LCA. Recommendations have been made by the Department of Education and Science's Education Disadvantage Committee in relation to teacher supply and staffing in disadvantaged settings. They recommend that teachers be supported to take part in post-graduate programmes and in-career development, especially in the areas of up-skilling teachers on appropriate learning methodologies, behaviour management and conflict resolution. They also recommend the introduction of a sabbatical year which would allow teachers to engage in up-skilling and to avoid burn-out.

### **Pre-school and primary school interventions**

Suggestions have been made that interventions should be made to target and support students at risk of early school leaving at pre-school and primary school level. The NESF report (2002) stated that a more comprehensive early childhood education programme should be developed for disadvantaged children. Boldt (1994) makes the point that efforts need to be made to address the problem at primary level because by the time they get to secondary it is too late. The Department of Education cited in Fleming and Murphy stated that “the nature of the opportunities and supports provided for a child’s development during the formative period and the quality of the educational experiences over this period, can have far-reaching effect on the individual’s long-term development and prospects” (2000:10). This is supported by Kelleghan et al. (1995). According to Fleming and Murphy (2000) most of the research emphasised the positive influence of early interventions on future retention levels.

### **Resources for schools**

Boldt (1994) makes the point that many of the principals and teachers interviewed by him spoke about the need for extra resources including smaller class sizes, specialists in areas of counselling and remediation to address personal and academic difficulties. The NESF report (2002) also mentions the need for smaller class sizes especially in disadvantaged areas, more training places for psychologists should be made available and the number of learning support teachers should be increased. Martin (1997) mentions the extension of existing interventions including the school psychological services, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, the provision of remedial teachers and guidance and counselling personnel.

## Conclusion

From my reading of relevant literature on the topic of early school leaving I have found that there is no one factor that influences a student to leave school early, rather there can be a number of factors involved. These include:

- Individual factors such as low self-esteem, academic ability and behaviour.
- School factors including pupil/teacher relationships, irrelevant curriculum, stratified ability grouping especially streaming, school type, poor attendance and cultural differences between the home and school.
- Home factors such as poor levels of parental education, unemployment, poverty and substance dependence.
- Socio-Economic factors. Students from working class backgrounds are at greater risk of leaving school early.
- Urban/Rural factors
- Peer Pressure
- Gender Factors. A higher proportion of males leave school early.

A student may decide to leave school early due to the influence of one of these factors but in many cases a combination of the above factors are involved.

The issue of early school leaving is not a new phenomenon; there is a long history and culture of it in Ireland. However it has only come to the forefront of government policy since the 1990's. Since then some measures have been introduced to try and combat the problem. The literature read has highlighted some of these measures which include the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, the School Completion Programme and the development of the Junior Certificate Schools Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied both at second level. A number of suggestions for addressing the problem of early

school leaving have also been made, such as the integration of services, revising the curriculum, pre-school interventions, providing opportunities for teacher professional development and more resources for schools.

It is clear from the literature that the issue of early school leaving is a complex one which needs to be addressed by all the partners in education, school, parents, community and legislators.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The overall aim and purpose of my research is to evaluate the programmes in place in two post-primary schools to combat early school leaving. I hope to identify strategies that can be used in schools to help students at risk of early school leaving to stay in school. This chapter describes the research sites used and outlines the methods adopted in the study.

The author teaches in a City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee (CDVEC) school, which is one of the research sites. I have worked in this school for nine years, during this time I have had several roles including Class Tutor, Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator and I am a Special Duties post holder with responsibility for the Student Council and Student Awards. I have worked closely both with parents and students at risk of early school leaving and it is as a consequence of this that my interest in the topic arose.

A sample of people most familiar with the issue of early school leaving took part in interviews and focus groups. Participants include the Principals, the School Completion Programme Co-ordinators for both schools, the CDVEC Education Support Worker and a representative from the Local Partnership, a Community Worker, students and parents from my own school and early school leavers.

### **The participating schools**

The participating schools were chosen because they are both located in designated 'disadvantaged' areas and would have a long history of early school leaving. They are both part of the Home School

Community Liaison Scheme and are involved in the School Completion Programme in their respective areas. The author also teaches in one of the study schools, which is useful and desirable as it provides easy access to a lot of the participants. There is also a pre-existing trust with groups of students or parents who could be quite suspicious of unfamiliar professionals.

### **School 1**

St. John's (all names used are pseudonyms) is a CDVEC school. It was established in the early 1960s as an all boys vocational school, but it became a co-educational school approximately twenty-five years later. The school is located on the north side of Dublin, in an area developed in the 1950s. The area has grown from a small rural village to a large sprawling suburb with a population of approximately 33,000. Currently the school is the only one of five post primary schools in the area that is co-educational. It is designated 'disadvantaged' and has lower than average retention rates. There is a tradition of students leaving at or before the age of 16.

St. John's does not have a history of selection. The school was and still is perceived locally as being for students who are academically less able, as well as those with learning difficulties or who have emotional difficulties. The students often say that it is nicknamed by students from other schools as the 'thick tech'. However it is also recognised for its pastoral ethos and its success with students with learning difficulties. For this reason primary school teachers often refer students with learning difficulties, behavioural and emotional difficulties to it. The school tries to cater for these difficulties, whilst simultaneously providing a positive school environment for all its students.

It is estimated by the school that 70% of the student body are two or more reading years behind their chronological age and in need of learning support. In relation to their social background, some students come from families with a history of some or several of the following difficulties: long-term

unemployment, poverty, alcohol and other substance dependence, family breakdown, domestic violence, crime, abuse, illness and poor parenting skills. These social problems and the impact they have upon the students are some of the challenges facing the school. In spite of these the school prides itself in being a positive experience in the lives of many of its students.

The ethos of the school is pastoral orientated, which is significant in the way it responds to the needs of its pupils. Staff are appointed to positions with clearly defined roles and specific responsibilities e.g. Principal, Deputy Principal, Year Heads, Class Tutors, Pastoral Care Co-ordinator, Guidance Counsellor, Psychologist, Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Student Council Co-ordinator, LCA Co-ordinator and JCSP Co-ordinator. The Class Tutors and Year Heads gain a knowledge and understanding of the students, their families and background. This forms the backbone of the pastoral care system.

The school offers a full range of subjects and courses, which are provided to meet the academic needs of pupils. These include Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme, Leaving Certificate, Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). A growing number of students are participating in the LCA programme. The school is also part of the School Completion Programme.

There is an emphasis on extra-curricular activities in the school, including adventure sports and school tours.

## **School 2**

St. Brendan's C.B.S. (pseudonym) was established in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A new building was added to the school within the last decade and is equipped with a modern Home Economics room, a Computer room, a Guidance room, a Technical Drawing room, a language laboratory, eight general classrooms as well as new administration offices and meeting rooms. It is

located in an urban area experiencing severe social and economic disadvantage. Enrolment in St. Brendan's is declining and has halved in the last 20 years. The main reasons for the declining enrolment are a combination of demographic factors and the shrinking of the school's catchment area. Issues such as poor attendance, the lack of educational motivation, severe discipline problems and early school leaving are among the many challenges and difficulties faced by the school.

The school's ethos is promoted through its pastoral care structures. Classes are looked after by Form Tutors who in turn assist Year Heads in caring for their year groups. The school also has a Guidance Counsellor and Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator. St. Brendan's is part of the School Completion Programme and a 'Pathways through Education Programme'. The latter programme is run in conjunction with a girl's secondary school in the area, the community links programme and the Dublin Institute of Technology. This programme works in partnership with the pupils, teachers and parents to enhance student self-esteem. It also fits into the overall curriculum of the school by delivering the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme.

The school offers a full range of subjects and courses including the Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate Schools Programme, Transition Year, the traditional Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied. At present St. Brendan's employs approx twenty permanent teachers, approximately a quarter more on regular part-time contracts and two full-time special needs teachers.

## **Research Participants**

I chose my research sites because they are both located in designated disadvantaged area and would have a high proportion of students leaving school before completing their Leaving Certificate. Denscombe tells us that "people tend to be chosen deliberately because they have some special

contribution to make, because they have some unique insight or because of the position they hold” (2003:172).

My research group consisted of the Principals of both schools, two School Completion Programme Coordinators, a representative from a local partnership, a Community Worker, an Education Support Worker, parents with children who left school early, some early school leavers and some students who have remained in school after their Junior Certificate but who would be at risk of early school leaving. I chose to interview them because I felt they would be able to give me an insight into the needs and issues of pupils at risk of early school leaving, the reasons why students drop out, programmes that are in place to tackle the issue and suggestions on what could be done to prevent students leaving school early.

### **Design of the Research Study**

One of the sites used for the research is the school where the author is a teacher. Anderson et al. (1994:2) use the terms ‘practitioner research’ or ‘insider research’ to describe this type of research i.e. research undertaken by those who use their own site (classroom, school, community) as the focus of their study. There can be both strengths and weaknesses to this. One of its strengths is existing knowledge of the site and one of its weaknesses is that things can be taken for granted. Arising from this is the question of researcher bias. The author needs to be conscious of the need to remain objective. To do this it is important to keep the research aims and focus in mind at all times. It is also intended that the methods of data collection will assist the author in eliminating such subjective bias. It is widely acknowledged in much of the literature related to educational research that the researcher can influence the data collected (Blair, 1998; Denscombe, 1998). It is impossible to guarantee neutrality in interpretations and analysis as we all have histories and we are influenced by where we come from. It is

not possible for us to change who we are i.e. our gender, race or class but we can acknowledge these factors and the role that they might play in researcher bias. Acknowledging these factors helped the author when conducting interviews.

To gather the data it was decided to use a combined methodology approach which included semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Two different sites were also involved and different perspectives were sought i.e. those of schools and state initiatives but also parents, early school leavers and students. This allowed for triangulation, which increased the validity and reliability of the study. Cohen et al. (2000) cite Campbell and Fiske (1959) who tell us that “triangulation is a powerful way of demonstrating concurrent validity particularly in qualitative research” (2000:112).

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and also the power difference between the author and some participants (i.e. students and parents from working class backgrounds) the author took some precautionary steps to ensure these participants felt comfortable with being interviewed. In preparing the participants for interview they were assured of the confidential nature of the research and were encouraged to provide honest answers. The author ensured the participants of their right to withdraw from the study if they wished. Interviews were conducted in a room in the school known as the parents’ room. This provided a more informal setting allowing participants feel more at ease.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Cohen et al. state that “it is unwise to think that threats to validity and reliability can ever be erased completely; rather, the effects of these threats can be attenuated by attention to validity and reliability throughout a piece of research” (2000:105). With this in mind the author endeavoured to ensure attention was given to the validity and the reliability of the research she carried out. We are told by

researchers such as Cannell and Kahn (1968) that when interviews are used as a method of data collection validity can be a persistent problem. The cause of this invalidity they say is bias. The sources of bias can be the characteristics of the interviewer and the interviewee and types of questions and the way they are asked. The author was conscious of the risk of bias and took steps to remain objective. These include keeping the aims and focus of the research in mind and following an interview schedule. To gather the data a combined methodology was used i.e. semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Two separate sites were studied and a wide range of participants familiar with the research topic were interviewed such as Principals, Community Workers, parents, students and early school leavers. This allowed for triangulation which helped to increase the validity and reliability of the study.

Cohen et al. cite Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) who “observe that if the researchers are known to the interviewees and they are peers, however powerful, then a degree of reciprocity might be taking place, with interviewees giving answers that they think the researchers might want to hear” (2000:123). The author was conscious of this as some of the participants were colleagues and others were students and so to try and eliminate this happening she encouraged the participants to be honest with their answers and guaranteed confidentiality.

To ensure reliability time was taken when preparing the interview schedule and similar questions were asked to all participants. The participants chosen were those who had experience of or were familiar with the issue of early school leaving. The data was then analysed under themes which had emerged from the interviews. The findings were similar to existing research in this area which the author had reviewed.

## Consent

Cohen et al. cite Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992) who say that "Participants should know that their involvement is voluntary at all times, and they should receive a thorough explanation beforehand of the benefits, rights, risks and dangers involved as a consequence of their participation in the research project" (2000: 50). With this in mind I made contact with each of the chosen interview participants either by telephone or face to face and explained what my research project was about and why I wanted to interview them. I asked for their consent to participate in the interview and to record this interview on audio-tape but also assured them that their participation was voluntary and if they preferred not to take part that I would respect that. When I received their verbal consent I followed this with a letter of confirmation outlining the date, time and place for the interview (See Appendix 2). With the parents who took part in a focus group I contacted each of them by phone and explained who I was, what my research was about, what a focus group was and asked if they would like to participate. When they agreed I also asked for their consent to record the interview on an audio-tape. I then sent a letter to each of the participants outlining the date, time and place for the focus group (See Appendix 2).

Cohen et al. make the point that "Seeking informed consent with regard to minors involves two stages. First, researchers consult and seek permission from those adults responsible for the prospective subjects; and second, they approach the young people themselves" (2000:52). I wished to carry out focus group interviews with two groups of students who had remained in school but who were at risk of dropping out. I firstly asked the Principal for permission to approach the students. I then spoke to the students individually about my research and my wish to interview them. When the student agreed to take part, I explained that because they were under eighteen I would also have to get the permission of their parents/guardian. I sent a letter to the parents/guardians of the participating students explaining

what my research was about, in language easily understood and asking for permission to interview their child, explaining that their participation was voluntary and strict confidentiality was assured. The parents/ guardians were encouraged to contact the author in relation to any aspect of the research being undertaken. I enclosed a consent form which they were to sign and return to me (see Appendix 2). Denscombe also emphasises the importance of seeking consent before conducting any research and advises that gaining permission can take time, a factor which needs to be built into the research study. With the early school leavers I interviewed that were under eighteen I also sent their parents/guardians a letter of explanation of my research and asked for permission to interview their son/ daughter (See Appendix 2).

### **Design of Interview Schedules**

Cohen et al. tell us that the preparation of the interview schedule “involves translating the research objectives into the questions that will make up the main body of the schedule. This needs to be done in such a way that the questions adequately reflect what it is the researcher is trying to find out”(2000:274). The author firstly considered the aims and objectives of the research, the length of time she had to carry out the research, whether she was dealing with facts, opinions or attitudes, who the participants were and their level of education. Having taken these into account it was decided that open-ended questions would be used. Cohen et al. cite Kerlinger (1970) who said open-ended questions are “those that supply a frame of reference for respondents’ answers, but put a minimum of restraint on the answers and their expression” (2000:275). This type of question would allow the interviewer greater flexibility and the possibility to probe so that she may gain more depth and insight into the topic. They can also result in un-expected or un-anticipated answers or ideas which the author may not have considered. Questions were based around themes which arose through the author’s engagement with literature and other studies that investigated the issue. The sequencing of questions was organised in

such away so that the easier and less controversial questions were asked first. This put participants at their ease and allowed them to become comfortable. Interview schedules were compiled for semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews (See Appendix 1).

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

“Interviews enable participants - be they interviewers or interviewees - to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view” (Cohen et al. 2000:267). Considering the topic I am researching I decided that I would gain more insight into the issue from carrying out semi-structured interviews with a select group of people familiar with the topic rather than administering a questionnaire. Denscombe tells us that “the use of interviews normally means the researcher has reached the decision that, for the purpose of the particular project in mind, the research would be better served by getting material which provides more of an in-depth insight into the topic, drawing on information provided by fewer informants” (2003:164). It is suggested by Oppenheim (1992) that interviews get a higher response rate than questionnaires and are also better for handling difficult and open-ended questions. I was aware of the importance of the sequencing and framing of questions and for this reason I asked the easier and less controversial questions first in order to put participants at their ease. I chose to use semi-structured interviews as this allowed for more flexibility and I also asked open-ended questions as these allow participants to answer questions in their own way, to give me their own view point and to probe deeper into their answers if I needed to. Cohen et al. point out that

“open-ended questions have a number of advantages: they are flexible, they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up any misunderstandings, they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondents knowledge; they encourage co-operation and help establish rapport; and they allow the interviewer make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes” (2000:275).

I was conscious of the fact that interviews can be prone to subjectivity and bias on the part of the interviewer and to minimise this I made sure that I had a list of questions in front of me and only interrupted the respondent if I needed to probe deeper or for clarification.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

I used focus group interviews with two groups of students who are at risk of early school leaving but who have remained in school to complete their leaving certificate and with a group of parents. Cohen et al., speaking of focus groups, state that they “are contrived settings, bringing together a specifically chosen sector of the population to discuss a particular given theme or topic, where the interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes” (2000:288). I decided to carry out focus group interviews with these particular participants because I felt that some of them might feel reluctant to speak in an individual interview as they may feel under pressure and also because it is less time consuming. Due to the fact that this is a small scale research project with time constraints I would have been pushed for time to interview each of these participants individually. Denscombe tells us that focus groups “can excite contributions from interviewees who might otherwise be reluctant to contribute and, through their relatively informal interchanges, focus groups can lead to insights that might not otherwise have come to light through the one to one conventional interview” (2003:169). One of the student groups consisted of fifth year students and the other group were sixth year students. Each group was made up of male and female participants and they were all acquainted with someone who had left school before completing their Leaving Certificate. The focus group for parents was all female and each of the parents had a child who had dropped out of school before sitting their Leaving Certificate. It was felt that these participants would broadly represent the range of views relevant to the research. The focus group discussions were guided by issues arising in the course of the literature review. I felt that focus groups would be useful to triangulate with the more traditional form of interviews which I had carried out.

## **Administering the Research Instruments: Semi-Structured Interviews, Focus groups**

Firstly I made a list of the people I wished to interview. I chose these people based on their work and knowledge of the research topic. Prior to interview each of the participants were approached and the majority agreed to take part. However two of the early school leavers that had agreed to take part did not show up for interview and when contacted by phone failed to answer. This did not hamper the research as I was able to interview four early school leavers in total. I followed this initial approach inviting participants to take part with a letter of confirmation. The times of interviews were made to suit both the author, as I have a full teaching timetable, and the interviewees. The settings where the interviews took place were chosen because of their convenience for the interviewee e.g. two interviews took place in the interviewees offices, one interview in a coffee shop and the rest in the researcher's own school. Permission was requested to make an audio tape recording of the discussions and all agreed to this. Kane (1995) speaks about interviews and says that many things can influence the quality of an interview these include: your tone of voice, manner, gestures, your personal characteristics and those of the interviewee, the presence of others and interruptions and so it is important to record as much as possible the circumstances of the interview to get it in context. Denscombe warns of the limits of audio tape recording "it captures only speech, and misses non-verbal communication and other contextual factors" (2003:176). For this reason the author wrote up notes on her interviews after they took place. The author was also aware that her position as a teacher and also the presence of an audio tape recorder might have a bearing on the freedom with which people speak so she urged the participants to be as frank and honest as possible.

Before organising the focus groups permission was sought from the school principal to interview students and parents. In preparation for the focus groups with students the author approached students

who had remained in school despite being at risk of early school leaving and who also knew people who had dropped out of school early and all agreed to take part. A permission letter was then sent home to their parents outlining the research project, what would be involved and they were asked to sign a letter of consent (See Appendix 2). Interviews took place during the school day.

Prior to the focus group with parents a number of parents were approached however not all agreed to take part. With one parent it was due to the fact that she worked during the day and the other parent just didn't want to participate. In the end four parents took part in the focus group. Letters of confirmation were sent out to each parent. With the focus groups I was conscious that my position as a teacher in the school may inhibit discussion. I therefore spent considerable time prior to the interviews reassuring participants of the voluntary and confidential nature of the discussions and encouraged them to be honest in their responses. In order to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere the focus groups took place in the parents' room of the school and refreshments were provided. The areas explored in both semi-structured interviews and focus groups included: the reasons why students leave school early, what is being done at present to tackle the problem of early school leaving and what strategies could be put in place. The author recognised the importance of showing her appreciation and so she sent each of the participants a thank you card.

## **Analysis of Data**

- (1) The transcription of individual semi-structured interviews were written up as soon as possible after the interviews. Cohen et al. point out that transcription "is a crucial step, for there is the potential for massive data loss, distortion and the reduction of complexity" (2000:281).

(2) Due to the fact that I was doing the transcribing myself and I was very inexperienced I realised that it was a better option for me to familiarise myself with the focus groups through repeated listening and note taking.

(3) Comments obtained through open-ended questions were collated under the following headings and themes:

**(a) The reasons for early school leaving,**

examples of key themes here include

- Home (socio-economic background)
- Bullying
- Individual factors (low self-esteem, academic ability, behaviour, attendance)
- School (pupil/teacher relationships, boredom, irrelevance)
- Jobs
- Peer Pressure

**(b) Strategies for tackling the problem of early school leaving at present**

**(c) Possible future strategies**

(4) Answers were then compared to identify similarities and differences. The author noted the differences in the emphasis of the participants i.e. between parents, students and early school leavers and people working in schools and government funded projects. The process of triangulation was used to get the different perspectives from a whole range of people familiar with the issue of early school leaving.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the various methodologies used in conducting the research namely semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A brief description of the research sites and the participants

involved was given along with the reasons why these sites were chosen. The fact that the research was based around two sites and the author interviewed a range of participants allowed for triangulation. The author was conscious of researcher bias due to the fact that one of the research sites was her own school and steps were taken to eliminate this. She was also aware of the importance of gaining the consent of participants and in the case of minors not only their consent but also the consent of their parents/guardians and the School Principal. The steps taken to gain this consent are outlined above. The author was conscious of the need to ensure the validity and reliability of the research and tried to address this. Interviews with participants were carefully designed. Care was taken to ensure that participants felt at ease and comfortable during interviews. Confidentiality was assured at all times. Open-ended questions were used which allowed for flexibility and also for the interviewer to probe if she wanted clarification or to go into more depth. It was decided to conduct focus group interviews with certain participants as the author believed these would be more at ease speaking in a group situation rather than an interview. Scheduling and location of interviews were arranged to suit both participants and the interviewer. A small number of people who had agreed to take part in the research failed to participate but this did not affect the outcomes. The author explained the methods by which the data was analysed for all interviews. The following themes emerged from the research, the reasons why students leave school early, strategies in place at present to combat early school leaving and possible future strategies. Information gathered from participants will be collated under these themes in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: The Research Findings

This chapter describes the experiences and views of some of the people most familiar with the issue of early school leaving, namely Principals, SCP Co-ordinators, a partnership representative, a Community Worker, parents, early school leavers and students who remained in school to complete their Leaving Certificate but were at risk of early school leaving.<sup>1</sup> The data from semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews was examined in order to highlight the similarities and differences in participant's views. The researcher was interested in documenting strategies identified by the participants which are in place at present to tackle the problem and also to look at possible future strategies which could be implemented to combat this issue. Findings were categorised under three themes

- Reasons for early school leaving.
- Strategies in place for tackling the problem at present.
- Possible future strategies.

These themes are similar to previous research findings documented in the literature review.

It is acknowledged in the literature that the percentage of early school leavers has decreased. However the problem still persists (Boldt and Devine 1998), this view was supported by one of the school principals interviewed.

*It wouldn't be that great in recent times, we were one of the first schools involved in the Stay in School Retention Initiative a pre cursor to the School Completion Programme obviously we would have been in that based on an intake from first year that were tracked to their leaving cert, it was a very big problem youngsters used to leave practically on their birthday once they reached school leaving age like. But that has changed; we would lose very little before junior cert now and only a handful prior to leaving cert. (Principal Sch B)*

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<sup>1</sup> The following codes were used to identify each participant: School Principals- Principal Sch A, Principal Sch B, Partnership Representative-P. Rep., Community Worker-C.W., School Completion Co-ordinator- S.C.P. A, S.C.P.B, Education Support Worker- E.S.W. and Early School Leaver-E.S.L.

## **Reasons for students leaving school early**

Research shows that students leaving school early for numerous reasons. It suggests there is no single factor that influences a student to leave school early but rather a combination of factors is involved (Boldt 1994, Granville 1982 and Rourke 1999). These factors include home factors, individual factors, school factors and peer pressure. The majority of interview participants agreed with this point

*What I actually think is that in my experience it is never just one factor it is a combination of factors see and if the combination to drop out is right then they go. (Principal Sch B)*

It was noted that Principals, SCP Co-ordinators and Community Workers mentioned home factors as a major influence, while parents, early school leavers and students who remained in school emphasised a dislike for school and finances as reasons for dropping out.

### **Home factors**

Much of the literature would suggest that home factors are significant reasons for students dropping out of school early. The argument is made that, in many cases it is the parents' fault, as they do not see education as a priority (Hannon et al. 1996, Lareau 2003, Conaty 2002), a principal agrees with this.

*Support from the home is a huge thing that if the parents allow it or give up very easily, condone the absenteeism and then the dropping out of school, I would say that is a huge thing. (Principal Sch A)*

Home factors include socio-economic background, substance misuse and a history of early school leaving in the family. These factors were also mentioned by interview participants.

*Family circumstances seem to be the main one and that varies from the family have no, there is no culture of finishing school within the home but also that things just happen within the family and for the child to continue in education it's just not possible or it's not an option really. They may leave to go out to school, there is no support at home for the child to continue to go to school and at the first hurdle they kind a fall and the parents go sure look I didn't finish school it didn't do me any harm. That seems to happen a lot. (S.C. P. B)*

Fagan (1995) makes the point, that early school leaving becomes part of a family life cycle. Family structure was mentioned; especially the lack of boundaries at home and the problems created when there was very little support.

*They come into school and cannot just take the structure. I think with a family in crisis, the school can only do so much when they come into school. (S.C.P. A)*

It was suggested that early school leavers can be exposed to social problems outside school which they do not have the coping strategies to deal with. These include issues in their home such as drug or alcohol misuse, domestic violence, poverty and bereavement. Also noted were a range of issues such as poor relationship with fathers, abandonment by a parent, poor bonding between parent and child and child abuse. The lack of family counselling and therapy was an area highlighted.

*The family I did mention it before but there is also a lack of counselling of family counselling/therapy. But if the family doesn't want to go, certainly in a lot of cases they can't afford to go. There isn't enough of it available in the community for them to access. (P.Rep.)*

Research shows that a family's socio-economic circumstances can influence whether a student stays in school or drops out and that students from working-class backgrounds are at a greater risk of dropping out of school early (Hannan et al. 1996, Ryan 2004, Lynch and Lodge 2002, Lareau 2003). This view was also expressed by a number of participants.

*A huge issue first of all from the fact if the family can't afford to pay for assessment it's a huge problem to start off with. The more assessments a school gets the more hours they get so obviously if you can pay for private assessments that goes in the schools favour. If a family doesn't have the resources to pay for private tuition or grinds that's another pitfall and also if there is no money in the family that can put pressure on the student to work. They might start off working part time but the part time means working evenings and Saturdays and Sundays and then their school work is falling behind they feel that without school I am earning two hundred or three hundred euros a week which is a huge amount. (P. Rep.)*

The point was made that some boys leave school to financially support their family because their parents are having financial difficulties.

*You know it is something that went on back in our grandparents time really, you don't think it is happening but it is I have come across it a couple of times.(S.C.P. B)*

Fagan (1995) made the point that those who leave school to earn money for themselves also include their parent's lack of income as an explanation.

Some students who remained in school but who had considered dropping out cited family circumstances as being a reason.

*Because there was a couple of days when I came in and I was pure stressed out of my head over things that were after happening at home and all and then I just felt like just walking out of this school. (Male Student)*

### **School factors**

The literature acknowledges school related factors as another influence on whether a student remains in school. The factors mentioned include poor pupil/ teacher relationships, cultural differences between the home and school and curriculum (Boldt 1994, Fagan 1995, O'Neill 1992, McVerry 2002). Interviews and focus groups also identified these factors. The discipline system in the school was cited by some parents as a reason for early school leaving. A parent said that her children left school early because the school was too strict. School suspension was mentioned as another issue that can influence students to leave school early.

*And I do think that suspension is a major problem, that schools are coming up against because the students are reacting in unacceptable ways within the class and the only real way we have of punishing them is to suspend them and then sure they are on the streets and they are getting jobs and they are hanging out with older boys so why wouldn't they cause trouble in school and I know it is something all the schools have recognised in our cluster especially but their options are limited to what they can do about it you know and they tell you that themselves. They would love to do something but for various reasons there is very little else open to them, you know except suspension. (S.C.P. B)*

School factors including school rules, class size, lack of resources and a lack of access to psychological assessments for students with special needs were mentioned by participants.

*School rules to a certain extent, if a student is finding work difficult, if they have ADHD, if school doesn't suit them, if they can't conform they are going to have problems with the rules. (P.Rep.)*

Students who remained in school said that some of their siblings and friends left school early because they disliked their teachers, the school rules and syllabus.

*My sister didn't like it. She just didn't like the LCA course. (Female Student)*

*They got sick of school, being in it every day, being in the same uniform, teachers wreaking their heads. (Female Student)*

Boldt (1994) supports this view. He stated that school factors, particularly pupil/teacher relationships, are seen by early school leavers to contribute to their decision to drop out.

The point was made that some students feel disconnected to the school and the school system and they do not see the relevance of school. A Principal expressed the view that people are inclined to believe that the present school structure suits everybody and it doesn't. Fleming and Murphy (2000) make reference to the fact that the school curriculum is not always meaningful and relevant for all students.

Transition year was another reason given for a child dropping out.

*I think she just got the year of dassing and then when it came to go to fifth year she said I am not going back to school and that's it. She couldn't get her head around to settling down. (Parent)*

Reference was made to the cultural differences between the school/teachers and students. It was considered that schools and teachers are outside the boundaries of the student's home life. O'Neill (1992) states that many of the parents interviewed by her cite cultural differences between the home and the school as being an issue.

*Do you know sometimes teachers and the kids don't have that much in common and there is different expectations as well particularly with the traveller children as well so I think that teachers may be focusing on just getting them to school getting their class done for the forty five minutes or whatever the child is there for the day and they are going into different classes and meeting different types of teachers and teachers themselves are only human, they are people they have had their own experience outside the school, they have their own experience of living their life being brought up what ever has made them be the person they are and they can be prejudiced.(C.W.)*

It was also noted that some teaching styles are not conducive to teaching certain students i.e. that some teachers put a big emphasis on the learner, forgetting about the human being and that instead of

listening they dominate. The role of the teacher historically is one who has unquestioning authority over students. Some teachers can be offended if this is not recognised as they feel they are not respected. The point was made that there are some teachers who have a rapport and an ability to listen but that they are in a minority. The need to update teaching methods was mentioned.

*We are still teaching now in the same way we were taught ourselves. It is the curriculum, it's the teaching methods. Kids still sit behind desks in rows, looking at the blackboard listening to someone talk.....Kids are bored, very frustrated just sitting there. (E.S.W.)*

Two early school leavers mentioned that they left school because the work was too hard and they couldn't cope with the pressures.

*The overall pressures of trying to get your marks up and then you're just going to have a constant breakdown like trying to get your school work done cause the teachers are putting pressure on you, you have to have it in by this time or you just don't get the marks, if you don't get it in by that time you don't get your marks and if you don't get your marks you don't pass your leaving. (Male E.S.L.)*

### **Individual factors**

Previous research has identified a number of individual factors associated with early school leaving. Namely low-self esteem, poor academic ability and behaviour (Fagan 1995, Boldt et al. 1998, Smyth 1999, Martin 1997). Similar factors were highlighted by interview participants as reasons for dropping out of school.

Low self-esteem was noted as a significant issue by respondents.

*Most of the students I would have met that have left school would have very low self-esteem. (P.Rep.)*

*And I think they jump from junior cert to leaving cert, a lot of kids can't bridge that and then the low self-esteem takes over and failure and once they have a sense of being a failure its easier to opt out. (Principal Sch A)*

A Community Worker stated that she had come across numerous teenagers with low self-esteem. She related this to the absence of role models and the lack of visible success stories. An Education Support Worker commented that some students lack emotional language and skills and have little or no practice

in using them. They have about four words for dealing with emotions e.g. happy, sad, angry and bored. They lack the ability to communicate and articulate emotion and lack inter-personal skills.

Poor attendance is another factor which seems to have a bearing on whether a pupil drops out of school or not. This was noted as a big problem in both schools that participated in the study. The point was made that once attendance drops off, then a pupil's ability suffers and they fall behind. This is exacerbated for those pupils who already have a leaning difficulty.

*Based on our own experience, whenever I have been talking to a student it tends to be that they have been absent from school for long periods throughout primary school and second level. (P.Rep.)*

Smyth (1999) supports this view she points out that, students who have poor attendance records are more likely to intend to leave school early.

Behaviour has been cited as another individual factor. One early school leaver expressed the desire to complete his education but unfortunately he was not allowed back to the school because of his behaviour. He also knew of other students who had left school because of their behaviour. A parent mentioned this factor as the reason for her eldest son's early school leaving. She said he had not attended school since he was thirteen. Some students who remained in school knew people who had been suspended or asked to leave school because of their behaviour.

*I have a friend who left over throwing a rubber; she got suspended, so she is not coming back. She was very brainy she got into an A class. (Female Student)*

A Community Worker made the point that some students misbehave because they are frustrated. They may not have the skills to participate at second level. A Principal expressed the view that behaviour is a big influence on early school leaving especially after junior certificate.

*Behaviour is a big thing and I think that's when parents tend to opt out as well. Whereas up until junior cert they will support the school and the individual but really after that they have had enough because if it revolves around suspensions and things like that, I suppose we all become less tolerant as well because we expect them to have grown up and you know you do*

*your best to keep them till junior cert but after leaving cert there is so much teacher time taken up with dealing with those kids who have behaviour problems that teachers don't have the time and patience to work with the kids at leaving cert level as much on a personal level as well. (Principal Sch A)*

An SCP Co-ordinator believes that suspending students for misbehaviour acts as a reward for some students, as it gives them the freedom to wander the streets, which is what they want to do. Boldt et al. (1998) tell us that there is a link between early school leaving and disruptive behaviour.

A student's ability can have a huge influence on time spent in school. Some participants mentioned a link between students with learning difficulties and without access to educational assessment to attendance problems, behavioural problems and early school leaving. The fact that some students have specific educational needs which have not been assessed and diagnosed was highlighted.

*A lot of times there is specific education needs, they either haven't been addressed, they have been diagnosed and there isn't the resources in the school or they haven't been diagnosed and the student doesn't know why they don't like school, maybe it is ADHD, maybe dyslexia, often there is an issue there and from day one the child hasn't been able to engage in school properly and that leads to a whole series of problems and eventually early school leaving. (P.Rep.)*

A Principal mentioned that some student's with learning difficulties who decide to do their Leaving Certificate drop out because they are unable to cope with the pressure and that in many cases the resources they had up to Junior Certificate were withdrawn post Junior Certificate. Reference was made to the fact that in certain cases learning difficulties can often trigger bad behaviour.

*They can't keep up with the work, they can't understand it, rather than say they can't understand, they don't know, it will manifest in anger, kicking out and get frustrated. (S.C.P.A)*

### **Peer Pressure**

Both literature reviewed (Boldt 1994) and a number of participants acknowledge the fact that peer pressure can contribute to a student's decision to leave school early.

*Yea, peers are a huge factor on it as well and you would find a lot of our students are hanging around with older boys, a lot of our target students are hanging around with older boys who have left school anyway so it is perfectly normal for them to leave school. (S.C.P.B)*

Rumberger (1997) states that there is evidence to suggest that many students who leave school early have friends who have already left. A parent mentioned that she believed her daughter left school because of her friends; they all left so she didn't want to be the only one of her group still in school. A Community Worker commented that friends have a huge bearing. A Principal believed that sometimes there is an element of peer pressure as well; somebody comes back to school because their friend comes back and likewise they drop out because their friend drops out.

### **Bullying**

Bullying was mentioned by two of the early school leavers as being a reason for why they and some of their friends left school early.

*They left school because of bullying; she left right after her junior cert. She was horribly bullied; they just wouldn't let it go. (Female E.S.L.)*

Another boy said that everyone was always teasing him and calling him names like 'sleeping bag'. It must be noted that none of the other participants cited bullying as a reason. In fact one Principal did not see this as a possible reason for early school leaving.

*Like bullying I wouldn't think so, people like to think that someone dropped out of school because they were being bullied right. I don't think so any instances of bullying that has ever been reported we have always checked into it and have resolved whatever was going on. (Principal Sch.B)*

### **Jobs**

The opportunity to join the workforce and earn money was highlighted as a reason for students leaving school early. Some parents stated that the reasons why their children left school was because they wanted financial independence.

*My daughter came back to do transition year and she went out on work experience and she never came back, she got the wages you see. (Parent)*

Some students who have remained in school are aware of some people that had left to seek employment and others that had gone to FAS because they would get paid there.

*The availability of work obviously is a huge thing, that they can get jobs very easily.  
(Principal Sch A)*

### **Current strategies for tackling early school leaving**

Participants identified a number of strategies currently in place for tackling the issue of early school leaving. Some of these strategies are Department of Education and Science Initiatives such as the HSCL Scheme, SCP, the Education Welfare Board and NEPS. The literature acknowledges the implementation of these schemes by the Department of Education and Science and explains why such initiatives are needed (Fleming and Murphy 2000, Martin 1997, Conaty 2002). Other strategies mentioned by participants include the pastoral ethos within the individual schools and Partnership and Local Initiatives.

#### **Pastoral Ethos**

In the interviews with personnel from both schools it was clear that they saw their pastoral systems as important, this involves having a Year Head and Class Tutor system in operation.

*The main thing is we have a very strong pastoral ethos and always had that and that is built into the whole structure of the school from our class teacher. Ok a lot of schools have the class teacher, class tutor but I think the role in our school is different it is more a caring role and likewise the year head. (Principal Sch. A)*

Care Teams consisting of the Principal or Deputy Principal, the Counsellor, Psychotherapist or Psychologist, HSCL teacher and Learning Support teacher meet once a week. At these meetings students that are considered to be most at risk are discussed. An intervention plan is identified that may assist the student e.g. referring a student to a child guidance clinic. The team may liaise with any service or agency the child is involved with outside the school.

A Discipline Committee is also in operation in one school.

*We also have a discipline committee who look at incidents of behaviour. (Principal Sch.B)*

The importance of extra-curricular activities and sport including trips abroad was highlighted.

*We would have school tours we alternate it every year between a European tour and an English football tour, they are very good for bonding between students and teachers who travel, it creates a good atmosphere. (Principal Sch.B)*

*I remember when I was here there was an exchange programme up to Belfast and trips. There was a week of activities when the people were down from Belfast, plays and everything and discos. (Female E.S.L.)*

A parent of an early school leaver made the point that her daughter loved going on school trips.

A programme is in place in one of the schools for first years aimed at getting them to assert themselves, improve their self-esteem and motivation and develop team work skills.

*It is trying to get them to see that they are working with us as distinct from that they are doing something special and we just happen to be sitting by looking at them. We are all in this together right it is also getting them to understand relationships, getting them to understand feelings because quite often boys are not good with feelings they are not good with expressing themselves, something could be bothering somebody and their way of dealing with it is to punch somebody it is aggression were as we have to try and work on that you know. (Principal Sch.B)*

A big emphasis on making the school a welcoming place for parents was mentioned. Both Principals spoke about the great openness they have with parents. One of the schools has devoted an A post to Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), the Principal believes this shows its caring approach and the commitment of the school to pastoral issues.

### **Department of Education and Science and CDVEC Initiatives**

SCP is a Department of Education and Science initiative targeting students at risk of early school leaving in an effort to combat the problem. It replaced the SSRI and is area based rather than school based. It targets students at risk of early school leaving and draws up a list of criteria to assess who is at risk.

*We target, we look at who is at risk of early school leaving with various criteria and then they are the students we mainly work with. We do some whole school or whole class approaches also but are main focus is on those at risk of early school leaving. (S.C.P. B)*

Both clusters have key workers that work with certain students needing extra support and some one to one attention. SCP runs a range of activities in the schools mostly outside school hours in which they try to involve the at risk students. These include breakfast clubs, drama programmes, art programmes, summer programmes, anger management and personnel development classes. They also fund attendance monitors and counsellors. A transfer programme for students moving from sixth class into first year is operating in one of the clusters.

*We also have started a school completion programme, we have chess club at lunch time two days a week, we have two pool tables so we have pool tournaments after school, we have guitar lessons after school we don't do music in school so we have guitar lessons after school, our basketball is run after school again while we do play a couple of matches it is not necessarily the competitive element of it, it is the team it's the whole thing but also what it is it allows say some older students to feel that they are helping with younger students so there is a bit of that that goes on as well. (Principal Sch .B)*

According to the partnership representative interviewed SCP has been successful in her area. Some of the students interviewed who remained in school spoke of their involvement with SCP.

*School completion they help you, see if you do the completion you have to be in school and all, say you're suspended or not in school you can't go .(Male Student)*

*Yes I think the breakfast club is very good. I definitely work with the school completion in this school. I had a serious expulsion case and they worked out a time table and worked with him before his junior cert for three months whereas he would have been kicked out. (E.S.W.)*

HSCL is another Department of Education and Science initiative aimed at working with the parents of those students most at risk of early school leaving. The role parents play in their child's education is considered very important. Boldt (1994) states that any initiative introduced to tackle the issue of early school leaving should involve parents. There is a HSCL Co-ordinator in both study schools and the Principals spoke very highly of their work.

*I think home school liaison is very important, it is something very non- threatening for parents. Whereas the home school liaison teacher would often go out to homes as the attendance monitor but she is not the attendance monitor. But I think to have some one involved there before we involve the official attendance monitors makes a huge difference. I think it is just wonderful to have that link with parents and to really harness that and there should be other things coming from it as well you know from getting parents involved in parenting courses or other courses just some support courses and the parents council there are a lot of things that*

*can happen through the home school liaison teachers that wouldn't happen that easily otherwise. (Principal Sch. A)*

The invaluable role played by the HSCL Co-ordinator was highlighted as the co-ordinator gains an insight into the home background of students as well as supporting parents by providing courses e.g. in personal development and parents in education for them.

*The supports they are giving to the parents really work well, because the parents change their attitude towards what they thought school was about and they might as well go back into school to do their own programmes. They can see that education is important for themselves and their children, that's having a huge impact. (P.Rep)*

The Education Welfare Board was mentioned by participants; this is a state initiative in place aimed at improving attendance and encouraging students to stay in school until they have reached the age of sixteen or on completion of their Junior Certificate. The board has appointed officers to enforce the Education Welfare Act. However it was criticised by many as they feel that it is under-resourced resulting in failure to enforce the penalty for absenteeism. Both Principals mentioned that very little has been done to deal with students who are out of school for more than twenty days.

*You have a twenty day rule that is not being implemented and once you go beyond twenty they will all be seventy- one, eighty- two, they know that nothing is going to happen so therefore in affect all that you have done is put more reporting procedure on the schools but you haven't actually tackled the problem. (Principal Sch. B)*

Many students who are at risk of early school leaving have social and psychological issues that are beyond the scope of teachers. This is where counselling and the psychological services have a role to play. Participants spoke about current services available. The services in one study school include a full-time Guidance Counsellor and a Counsellor funded by SCP who visits once a week. The CDVEC Psychologist and Education Support Worker also visit weekly. The second study school has two Psychotherapists working with first years and also has access to NEPS. SCP funds counselling supports within their respective schools for students. They also make funds available to pay for family counselling as well as putting families in touch with outside counselling organisations.

*We have counselling in place in every school. So about two hours minimum, maximum is five hours a week. (S.C.P.B)*

*We also say in our budgets that children's problems don't just start at the beginning of term and end at the end of term. If required the Counsellor can work with the young person during the holidays. It is constant and not just within the school academic year. (S.C.P.A)*

Counselling and Drama therapy projects are also funded by a local partnership. The fact that all this counselling is available shows the huge need for such supports and yet we are told that more is needed.

Both the literature and participants referred to a number of changes that have taken place within the curriculum since the 1990s including the introduction of the JCSP and the LCA (O'Brien 1999 and the NESF Report 2002).

*We run all the programmes like the JCSP and the LCA which is not easy in a small school. (Principal Sch. B)*

In relation to learning support one study school outlined how it tries to cater for all learning needs in a broad way by putting in learning supports, resources, having special classes and by adjusting the curriculum.

### **Local Initiatives**

Participants in the research highlighted a number of local initiatives aimed at tackling early school leaving. Students spoke about the 'Breakthrough Programme' which they had taken part in. It is aimed at getting students to believe they can achieve things and tries to build up their confidence.

*Breakthrough that was good, that's to build up your confidence, saying what you are able to do. If you keep thinking in your head saying over and over you can do it. There is no such word as I can't. Say I will get a distinction in my leaving just keep saying it in your head and it will happen for you if you put the work into it and all. (Female Student)*

Youthreach was mentioned by a number of the participant. Both study schools try to get places for students who want to leave school early in FAS, Youthreach or Community Training Workshops. They encourage students to attend these courses rather than see them drop out of the system completely.

*We hold people within the system until a more appropriate educational system geared for them is available example Youthreach or a training workshop or whatever it might be. (S.C.P.A).*

*Sometimes they want to go to FAS, Youthreach or they will want to go to someplace and like if it hasn't worked in school I would much prefer to organise that for a young lad and have him still in the education system then have everybody fighting with him and him dropping out.  
(Principal Sch.B)*

Some programmes funded by a Partnership included homework clubs, therapeutic supports such as art, drama and language therapy, supervised study, tutorials, after school programmes, transition programmes for sixth class pupils, first and second year intervention programmes, anti-bullying workshops and breakfast clubs. The programme offers advice and support to students and parents on their options if they do drop out of school but where possible they encourage the young person to stay in school.

*The programme presents a range of practical supports to primary and second level students. It aims to maximise the achievement of young people while at school, to reduce early school leaving and improve education training and attainment levels. (P. Rep.)*

### **Possible future strategies**

Both the literature reviewed (Fleming and Murphy 2000, Ryan 2004) and interview participants suggest a number of measures that need to be implemented in order to address the issue of early school leaving. They include revising the curriculum, providing opportunities for teacher professional development, pre-school interventions and additional resources. It is believed that no single intervention is likely to solve the problem fully, there needs to be a combination of approaches. Interview participants also highlighted the need for counselling and family supports, proper implementation of the Education Welfare Act, learning supports, units for disruptive students, more parental involvement and mainstreaming of programmes. Other possible strategies were also mentioned by individuals which will be also be discussed.

The importance of ongoing professional development and training for teachers was voiced by many; it was felt that teachers do not have adequate training to cope with some of the issues and needs that

students might have, especially students at risk of early school leaving. Training teachers in new methods of teaching which would enable teachers to reach these types of students was suggested.

*I would retrain in an interactive way. I would make them use modern methods. (E.S.W.)*

Boldt (1994) supports the idea of professional development; he states that certain teachers in certain schools need to be given opportunities to understand their pupils better and to look at how their current practices assist their pupils in learning.

As well as ongoing professional training an Education Support Worker mentioned that teachers need to be given support and be monitored. Support sessions should be built into the timetable allowing them the opportunity to discuss how they are getting on with difficult students. Peer supervision should be introduced and more professionals such as psychologists employed to make sure that supervision is successful.

*Teachers need a lot of training as well around early school leaving and around working with families and kids and some time out to do it like not just to do it during the summer or during holidays. (S.C.P.B)*

A Principal suggested that teachers require training in behaviour management and teaching students with special needs. A Community Worker would like to see more being done in this area at University level when teachers are being trained.

*I would say the teacher training colleges really need to put things into place because I think they are doing a disservice to themselves, to the teachers they are training and then to the youngsters that they expect these young people to go out and teach within the school. (C.W.)*

The need for more counselling services and family support services was suggested by some participants. Although there is counselling already provided it was felt that this is inadequate. It is believed that some families are not coping very well and this affects how children behave in school and whether they stay in school or drop out. One Principal who has an Education Support Worker working in her school one day a week would welcome this service on a full time basis, this would allow schools to challenge troublesome behaviour.

*I think what happens an awful lot in Youthreach as well, you know were kids are, they do a lot of group work, they do individual work they are challenged about their behaviour and that there is some programmes there in behaviour management and changing behaviour.  
(Principal Sch. A)*

The need for family supports and early interventions with families was emphasised. Reference was also made to the introduction of family literacy programmes.

*Basic supports even in terms of calling up and making sure that families have the money for the child to start school again in September, making sure that there is someone to get the child up in the morning, making sure they understand the relevance of them going to school and I mean the home school liaison do an awful lot of that but they can't do the basic stuff of actually going up and getting that child up in the morning to come down to school, you know they just can't do that, of making sure the parents are up they just can't do that. (S.C.P. B)*

The Education Welfare Act and the Education Welfare Board which was set up to implement the act were mentioned as strategies put in place by the government to tackle the issue of early school leaving. However the fact that it is not being implemented properly due to a lack of resources was also pointed out. People suggested that as a possible future strategy, a better commitment needs to be made to implement the Act.

*The Education Welfare Act needs to be implemented without a doubt we have students who have dropped out and if they had been caught properly at the start they wouldn't have I don't think anyway. Some of them were up to eighty days and they never heard anything from the Education Welfare Board.....It is not the education officers fault it is the lack of resources and it is disgraceful. (S.C. P. B)*

The point was made that a Welfare Officer should have no more than five schools to look after and they should spend one day a week in each school where they would liaise with the staff.

The need for extra resources and learning support was highlighted by some participants and is supported by Boldt (1994). These included special needs assistants or teachers and practical resources such as computers, literacy programmes which should be put in place in primary schools and then at second level if required. It was felt that a student should never commence secondary school unable to read or write. It was emphasised that more child psychological assessments should be available and that there should be no waiting list for assessments.

Class size should be reduced to a maximum of fifteen.

*In a school like this I would shrink it way down, somewhere between eight and twelve. (E.S.W.)*

The need for extra resources and learning support at senior cycle was also mentioned

*maybe more resources for senior cycle kids as well because when they go to senior cycle I know we have a block lump of resources but that has to go I think to first, second and third years to making our classes smaller and we get you know quite a lot of extra resources but still it never seems adequate and definitely something like the Leaving Cert Applied as well if there was something in there for kids who have learning needs that they can get credits for or something built into the system because the very nature of it obviously there is a lot who can't even get their credits so that causes difficulties. More resources for something like Leaving Cert Applied where you can put in more team-teaching, things like that would make a big difference. (Principal Sch. A)*

The idea of establishing units for pupils with behavioural difficulties and pupils who are not coping within the mainstream system was put forward by a Principal and an SCP Co-ordinator. Reference was made of the need to tackle the issue of disruptive behaviour in schools because it affects all students and teachers. A lot of teaching time can be wasted when trying to sort problems and when trying to establish discipline in the class. It is not just general discipline; sometimes it is pretty serious aggression and maybe threatening behaviour. A suggestion was made that some kind of unit in schools or the locality preferably attached to the school should be set up.

*Somewhere where they would have the core subjects alright but where there would be a lot of work done with young people around self-esteem, around building confidence, around anger management, aggression, counselling as well and that they would not necessarily always be out of school but that maybe they would go in for a year even and then go back into the mainstream class or whatever. I really feel very strongly about it now, that has to be addressed. (Principal Sch. A)*

An Education Support Worker emphasised the need for more parental involvement and better communication between schools and parents. She felt that parents definitely need to learn parenting skills. She suggested that courses for parents could be run especially in the evening. One early school leaver said that before he left school there was no contact from the school with his parents to discuss his plans.

*So if somebody is leaving school you should ring up the house and bring in the parent.*

*(Male E.S.L.)*

The role of parents in their child's education is one that needs to be constantly encouraged and developed; this view is supported by Conaty (2002) and Martin (1997).

The need to mainstream programmes was highlighted so that co-ordinators would not have to apply for funding regularly i.e. yearly or every three years. This would include Partnership Programmes, SCP and Barnardos initiatives.

*I think early intervention is the biggest factor in preventing early school leaving. But I suppose the problem there that we see time and time again is that programmes aren't mainstreamed at all, they should be mainstreamed at primary level to tackle it but they aren't and even at second level any of our programmes we don't know they aren't mainstreamed and we are only here for a year, we have to see our budgets every year. (P.Rep.)*

A Community Worker also recommended that programmes that work with students at risk of early school leaving need to be mainstreamed. She felt that it is very difficult to plan for the next year when you are unsure that you are going to be funded for it or if the programme is going to be allowed to refill a post or if you can continue on with a piece of work. She also believes that for SCP in disadvantaged areas, there is no point in just giving a particular amount of funding for a particular length of time, it has to be standardised and it has to be mainstreamed for these areas.

Research suggests that interventions should be made to target and support students at risk of early school leaving at pre-school and primary level (NESF 2002, Boldt 1994). This point was also raised by some participants who felt that strategies should be in place before the child reaches secondary school, so that the earlier the intervention the better. An SCP Co-ordinator recommends that these interventions should definitely be put in place in primary school or even before at the pre-school stage. A partnership representative believes that early intervention is the biggest factor in preventing early school leaving, a Principal supported this.

*I would love to see huge resources put into the primary now as a secondary school principal you were expecting me to say that I want money in secondary. No I would love to see it done in primary because as a secondary school we would better function if the lads come into first year and you can say wouldn't it be great if they could all have a reading age of twelve if we were starting from there think of what we could do. (Principal Sch.B)*

### **Other possible strategies**

A number of other possible future strategies were mentioned by participants. One Principal said that it is essential to provide a curriculum at a level that you know pupils are academically able for to reduce early school leaving and that there is no point in ordering textbooks if the reading age is above the student's ability. He believes schools need to consciously work at differentiating the curriculum. An early school leaver would also like to see subject supports introduced. She found maths difficult and she feels that students who have a difficulty with certain subjects should be taught in smaller groups.

The need for schools in disadvantaged areas to be funded differently was highlighted.

*If I was in a large school in an upper middle class area where I would have 650/ 700 students I would have two and half times the capitation that I have here. So really that what I am saying if the money was provided I am not looking for huge sums of money but I am looking for recognition of the fact that because of the area that we are in schools in upper middle class areas can all have there "registration fee" of 150 euro which everybody brings in where as we don't have that so we are being doubly disadvantaged. So that is my main wish that it has got to do with like the little extra payments that you could do for students if you had more money the little bonus the little prizes the little sort of things that make a difference I think. (Principal Sch.B)*

A Principal suggested that there should be better links between schools and community services as there can be outside agencies dealing with the same students and families. She finds liaising with some Community Services very difficult as there is no continuity of staff, it is very hard to get feedback and referrals are very slow. This view is supported in the literature by Fleming and Murphy (2000) and the NESF report (2002). An early school leaver recommends circle-time. She had experience of this in a Youthreach programme and thought it was helpful. Payment for students in school was a point mentioned as an incentive for students to remain in school.

*Well I think any kid that hits about fourteen or fifteen the government should pay them to go to school, like a pocket money kind of thing through the week so they wouldn't be leaving school, a grant of some kind. (Female E.S.L.)*

Restricting the school timetable was suggested

*Restricted time-tables for students would be lovely. If you could get that for a lot of students where they could work a little bit and come to school, I think you would get a lot more of them in. Something that fitted in well with them, for a lot of students that would make it more attractive, it would make them more connected to school it sounds nearly the opposite but it would make them more connected to the school. (S.C.P.B)*

The view was expressed that the idea of SCP is very good but that the cluster they are in is very big and the number of schools should be reduced.

*I think maybe if we were on a smaller scale it would probably be a bit easier for us to operate maybe even the second level schools. (Principal Sch. A)*

The Principal would also like to see it incorporated into the school so that staff with skills and expertise can also be involved in delivering the programmes. She does however admit that the time element involved would prove a difficulty. It was suggested that each school should look after its own budget

*I would prefer a situation where by schools were allocated funds themselves to deal with their own situations right. You know like if I need, if I through my teams here said that a child needs a Psychological report, I should be able to just write a cheque and go get it instead of having to go through the hoops to get it. (Principal Sch.B)*

## **Summary**

This chapter has outlined the experiences and views of those most familiar with early school leaving.

Findings were categorised under three main themes,

1. The reasons why students leave school early.
2. Strategies in place at present to tackle the issue.
3. Possible future strategies.

It is clear both from the literature reviewed and from analysis of the interview data that there are many factors influencing students to leave school early. These include home factors, school factors,

individual factors, peer pressure and bullying. It is suggested that no one factor causes a student to drop out early it is usually a combination of factors.

A number of strategies in place to combat early school leaving at present were mentioned by previous researchers in the literature review and by participants in interviews and focus groups. These include Department of Education and Science initiatives such as SCP, HSCL, the Education Welfare Board and NEPS. SCP and HSCL are in place in schools in disadvantaged areas. Other strategies mentioned by participants were the schools pastoral ethos, curriculum and learning support, partnership and local initiatives.

Some valuable possible future strategies were suggested in the literature review and by participants including continuous professional development, establishing units for disruptive students, mainstreaming projects, encouraging parental involvement and early intervention programmes. One Principal summed up clearly what is essential if we want to tackle early school leaving.

*Providing a happy caring place, where they feel positive about themselves but where they know if they come in and do something wrong somebody will take issue with it because sometimes taking issue is showing you care. (Principal Sch.B)*

Arising from my analysis of data both in the literature reviewed and the interviews and focus groups held a number of issues have emerged. These issues will be categorised under the following themes

- Continuous Professional Development
- The Importance of Resourcing
- Building up Relationships
- School Curriculum

These themes will be discussed and explored in the next chapter and recommendations will be made on strategies that could be put in place to combat early school leaving in the future.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

It is clear both from my analysis of the literature reviewed (Boldt and Devine 1998, the NESF report 2002) and my findings that early school leaving continues to be an issue in Ireland today. It is noted that the problem has decreased to some extent as efforts have been made to tackle it; however it is acknowledged that more measures are required. From my analysis of the literature studied and my findings a number of themes have emerged. These themes include the need for continuous professional development, the importance of resourcing, building up relationships and the curriculum. I will discuss each of these themes separately.

### **Continuous Professional Development**

The need for continuous professional development was suggested both in the literature reviewed and in the findings of my study as a measure to combat early school leaving. It is felt that training at the initial stage of a teaching career was not enough and that teachers should receive continuous training throughout their careers, allowing them to keep up to date with teaching methods. The findings of my study and others (e.g. Boldt 1994) argue that teachers working in disadvantaged areas where a high proportion of students are at risk of early school leaving require training to provide them with the necessary skills to teach these students. It was felt that there can be a cultural clash between the values of the school/teachers and the students and that the teacher needs to gain a greater understanding and insight into these differences and learn to develop a more non-judgemental attitude.

The time element involved in continuous professional development was also noted and it was felt that teachers should be facilitated within their timetable to participate in training courses. An Education

Support Worker stated that as part of their professional development teachers need to be given support and that they need to be monitored.

### **The importance of resourcing**

The issue of resourcing is very broad and a number of areas will be discussed including class size, learning support, early intervention, units for disruptive pupils, mainstreaming programmes, funding, psychological services, counselling and the Education Welfare Board. It is acknowledged that resources have already been put in place to tackle the issue of early school leaving; however both my findings and others (e.g. Boldt 1994, the NESF report 2002, Martin 1997, Fleming and Murphy 2000) argue that inadequate resourcing is presenting a difficulty.

The need for smaller class size was suggested as it was felt that when classes are smaller students receive more attention. The need for the provision of more resource teachers, learning support teachers and special needs assistance was highlighted. Due to the fact that an emphasis is being placed on the integration of students with special needs into mainstream schools I would consider this form of resourcing a priority. Targeting and supporting students at risk of early school leaving at pre-school and primary level was mentioned. It was felt that resources should be allocated to primary schools in order to address the problem at an early stage as sometimes it is too late by the time these students transfer to secondary school and unfortunately some of them don't even get to transfer, they drop out. In today's society it should not happen that a student reaches secondary school unable to read or write and has not had an educational assessment. Unfortunately this is still the case.

It was acknowledged that some students have huge behavioural issues and are not coping within the mainstream system. Some of these students may be aggressive and exhibit threatening behaviour which

affects all students and teachers. Many of these students will leave school early or be expelled if a system is not put in place to cater for their needs. It was felt that these students may benefit from establishing special teaching units which would have smaller class size, one to one tuition, programmes centred on anger management and building up self-esteem as well as studying the core subjects. None of the literature reviewed made reference to the provision of this type of units.

There are a number of programmes in place in the community aimed at working with young people at risk of early school leaving such as Barnardos and Partnership Programmes. Unfortunately these programmes have to apply for funding annually or every three years. This requirement creates uncertainty for their future which has implications for planning. It is suggested that the funding for these programmes should be permanent and mainstreamed as part of the government's policy on early school leaving. It was also suggested that schools in disadvantaged areas should be allocated more funding than schools in middle class areas. As many of the schools in these areas do not receive the same registration fee as schools in middle class areas they have little spare cash and therefore should be given extra funding to pay for rewards and prizes. It is hoped that rewards and prize giving would provide students with a positive reinforcement of their educational experience and help to build up their self-esteem and hopefully keep them in school.

The need for the extension of existing interventions including the psychological services was acknowledged as this would reduce the huge waiting lists for students needing psychological assessments. Many of the students who leave school early do so because they are not coping within the system. This failure to cope may be due to the fact that they have behavioural and learning needs that have not been identified through psychological assessment. Students require assessments, especially up-to-date ones, so that the appropriate resources can be put in place to meet their needs. It is acknowledged that some of the factors related to early school leaving include social problems in the

home, bereavement and low-self esteem. It was felt that students who receive counselling might be better able to cope with such problems. It was suggested that extra counselling services should be provided and that there is a huge need for family support in certain areas. It is recognised that there is a link between poor attendance and early school leaving. The Education Welfare Act 2000 which addresses the issue of attendance established an Education Welfare Board to enforce the Act. Officers have been appointed to work with the schools especially in the area of poor attendance. Unfortunately there is a lack of Education Welfare Officers. If this act is to be properly implemented the number of Education Welfare Officers needs to be increased.

### **Building up Relationships**

Building up relationships is a recurring theme both in the literature review and in the findings chapter. Mention was made of the need to build relationships between the home and school. Research studied (Conaty 2002, Fleming and Murphy 2000) and interview participants acknowledge the key role played by the HSCL Scheme in building up links between the home and school and see the HSCL Teacher as an invaluable resource. In many cases home factors have a huge bearing on whether a child stays in school or drops out. The findings of my study and others (e.g. Boldt 1994) call for more parental involvement.

Forging relationships between the school and community was emphasised. Both the literature studied (Fleming and Murphy 2000, Boldt 1998 and the NESF report 2002) and the findings of my study suggested that the integration of services is an important aspect of tackling the issue of early school leaving. Many of the students at risk of early school leaving are often linked with other services such as Child Guidance Clinics and Social Services. For this reason links between the school and other

community services that work with these students need to be established in order to ensure lines of communication are opened and that no overlapping of services occurs.

Both the literature reviewed and participants interviewed cite dislike for teachers and poor pupil/teacher relationships as being reasons for young people dropping out of school (Fagan 1995 and Boldt 1994). This suggests a need to build up relationships between teachers and students. An emphasis needs to be placed on forging good pupil/ teacher relationships in schools and by doing this students may feel valued and respected.

## **The Curriculum**

My findings and others (e.g. Fagan 1995, Boldt 1994, O'Brien 1999) argue that the curriculum should be reformed as many students leave school early because they find it irrelevant and boring. It was suggested that schools should introduce the JCSP and LCA programmes which were developed to provide a more vocational and practical method of learning giving students a wider choice. It has also been suggested that there is a need for continual assessment rather than everything hinging on a final exam as many students drop-out before their Leaving Certificate because of the pressure it causes (McVerry 2002). Involvement in extra-curricular activities was found to be a factor in reducing early school leaving (MacNeal 1995) and should be encouraged.

Having identified key themes and their relevance to the issue of early school leaving, I now plan to outline recommendations that may help to combat the issue. Some recommendations will be for the participating schools while others will be for the educational system.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for change within participating schools

- Staff should be encouraged and facilitated to participate in continuous professional development. Opportunities for collaboration between colleagues on ideas for best practice should be encouraged and provided.
- It is acknowledged that students who have a positive experience of school are less likely to drop out. This can be achieved in the following ways: I suggest that the schools should continue to foster their pastoral ethos. The physical environment of the schools needs to be welcoming. Students work and achievements should be visible and class photographs displayed. Teachers should focus on student's positive behaviour. Where appropriate students should be given opportunities to be consulted on school matters and their opinions listened to. This can be achieved by the setting up of a student council and a special duties post holder should be given the responsibility for overseeing this. A special duties post should also be allocated to promoting and rewarding student achievements.
- The school curriculum should be as inclusive as possible so that it caters for students of all abilities. A choice of practical subjects should also be provide for students of less academic ability. Students should be encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities and the principal needs to ensure that a range of activities are provided. The success of these activities can sometimes depend on the goodwill of teachers. It is important that the Principal acknowledge this. Personnel development programmes which are already in operation in the schools like "Break-Through"<sup>2</sup> and "Pathways" should continue to operate. In order to facilitate such programmes school management will need to do some creative timetabling. Students need to be encouraged to think about their future and to set goals for themselves. I

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<sup>2</sup> Breakthrough a programme developed by the Pacific Institute specifically aimed at addressing the concerns of 16 to 21 year olds.

would recommend that past pupils who have gone on to be successful be invited back to the schools to talk to students about their careers and to offer advice. This may make the students realise that anything is possible and that they can also be successful and so may choose to stay in school.

- Home/School links should continue to be fostered. I would suggest that the HSCL teacher should give a presentation on their role at a staff meeting and should share information with teachers where appropriate. This may give colleagues some insight into the backgrounds of their students and offer suggestions on how they could link in with the home. Regular contact should be encouraged between teachers and parents in the form of letters and phone calls. Parents need to continue to be encouraged to take part in classes and courses such as parents in education, personal development and parenting skills. Parent involvement in these courses can often have a positive impact on their children and they may be less likely to support them in their decision to leave school early. The Principal should ensure that a parent's council is established and that parents are consulted and involved in policy formulation in order to promote a real sense of partnership. Parents should be kept fully informed on issues to do with the school.
- I would recommend that better lines of communication be established between SCP and school staff to alleviate any overlapping and misunderstanding.

## **Recommendations for changes within the current educational system**

- Continuous professional development should be made compulsory and part of a teacher's contract. There are a range of issues that need to be explored around the development of CPD. These include areas of funding and time allocation. We also need to decide what constitutes continuous professional development? Who would be responsible for ensuring that teachers partake in it and how will it be monitored? What role should the Universities have in ongoing professional development? Teachers should also be able to apply for a sabbatical if they wish to study full time. During this period they would receive their full salary. For teachers participating on in-service courses funding should be available for substitution.
- Early identification of children at risk of early school leaving needs to be prioritised so that resources can be allocated at an early stage in an attempt to combat the issue.
- Better integration of community and school services aimed at the marginalised is needed. There should not be 'a them and us' situation; we are all working to help the same students. A co-ordinator who will take responsibility for building up these links needs to be appointed.
- More Education Welfare Officers need to be appointed and more resources given to the Education Welfare Board to ensure that the Education Welfare Act 2000 is properly implemented. The Department of Education and Science needs to extend the NEPS service provided by recruiting more psychologists. Access to more counselling services is very important and needs to be extended. The CDVEC needs to extend their Educational Support Service so that an Educational Support Worker is available on a full time basis.
- A reduction in class size is necessary particularly in disadvantaged areas.
- Therapeutic units need to be established to cater for students who have serious behavioural issues such as extreme aggressive and threatening behaviour. The pupils would be taught the core subjects but would also receive in-put in terms of counselling, psychological intervention

and anger management. I would not see students being placed here long term but hopefully being integrated back into the mainstream system with the necessary supports provided. Specific referral guidelines should be drawn up. I would recommend that the Department of Education and Science carry out further research in this area to look at the feasibility of such units.

- The senior cycle curriculum needs to be reformed so that one's educational achievements are not based on the pressure of a final exam but on continuous assessment throughout the two years.
- Local based initiatives i.e. Barnardos initiatives and Partnership Programmes which work with students at risk of early school leaving need to be mainstreamed.
- The provision of the resources mentioned depends greatly on funding. Resourcing is a very political issue and decisions will have to be made in relation to what government departments are responsible for making this funding available.
- I would recommend that further focused research should be carried out on the issue of early school leaving and that it would include consultation with a range of interested parties.

In conclusion I have identified four main themes which have emerged from my analysis of the literature reviewed and of my research findings and I have explained their relevance to the issue of early school leaving. Subsequently I have made recommendations for changes both within the participating schools and within the education system. In making these recommendations for change I have endeavoured to be cognisant of the management/leadership aspect.

I wish to acknowledge the good work that is in place at present in schools to combat the issue of early school leaving. However from the above recommendations it appears that more needs to be done. If in

our society how people do within the educational system is to be based on merit rather than the social class you are born into these recommendations need to be addressed. I realise that schools alone cannot tackle the problem of early school leaving without changes taking place within the educational system. I feel that if the government is serious about addressing this issue they need to show their commitment by making the funding and resources available. I also believe that when dealing with pupils at risk of early school leaving they should not be seen in isolation but a more holistic approach needs to be taken.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview Schedules**

### **Interview Questions for the CDVEC Education Support Worker**

#### Area 1: Personal

1. How long have you worked as a CDVEC Education Support Worker?
2. Describe the main focus /key areas of your job?

#### Area 2: Early school leaving

3. (a) Do you work with early school leavers?  
(b) What type of contact do you have with early school leavers?  
(c) What are the key issues and needs of the young people you work with?
4. What are you doing to support young people to stay at school?
5. What are the factors which you believe contribute to a young person's decision to leave school early based on your own experience?
6. To what extent does the following influence a person's decision to leave school?
  - school factors
  - their family
  - their friends
  - socio-economic factors
  - opportunities to work
  - individual factors e.g. self-esteem, ability, behaviour

#### Area 3: Strategies to prevent early school leaving

##### *Current strategies*

7. What is being done at State and Department of Education and Science level to tackle and prevent early school leaving?
8. How effective are these strategies in your opinion?
9. Arising out of your own work experience, (a) what in your opinion have been the most successful strategy to tackle early school leaving and indicate why; (b) what else needs to be done?

## Interview Questions for a Community Worker

### Area 1: Personal

1. How long have you been involved in community work?
2. Describe the main focus /key areas of your job?

### Area 2: Early school leaving

3. (a) Do you work with early school leavers?  
(b) What type of contact do you have with early school leavers?  
(c) What are the key issues and needs of the young people you work with?
4. What are you doing to support young people to stay at school?
5. What are the factors which you believe contribute to a young person's decision to leave school early based on your own experience?
6. To what extent does the following influence a person's decision to leave school?
  - school factors
  - their family
  - their friends
  - socio-economic factors
  - opportunities to work
  - individual factors e.g. self-esteem, ability, behaviour

### Area 3: Strategies to prevent early school leaving

#### *Current strategies*

7. What is being done at State and Department of Education and Science level to tackle and prevent early school leaving?
8. How effective are these strategies in your opinion?
9. Arising out of your own work experience, (a) what in your opinion have been the most successful strategy to tackle early school leaving and indicate why; (b) what else needs to be done?

## Interview Questions for a partnership representative

### Area 1: Personal

1. How long have you worked with the Partnership?
2. Describe the main focus /key areas of your job?

### Area 2: Early school leaving

3. (a) Do you work with early school leavers?  
(b) What type of contact do you have with early school leavers?  
(c) What are the key issues and needs of the young people you work with?
4. What are you doing to support young people to stay at school?
5. What are the factors which you believe contribute to a young person's decision to leave school early based on your own experience?
6. To what extent does the following influence a person's decision to leave school?
  - school factors
  - their family
  - their friends
  - socio-economic factors
  - opportunities to work
  - individual factors e.g. self-esteem, ability, behaviour

### Area 3: Strategies to prevent early school leaving

#### *Current strategies*

7. What is being done at State and Department of Education and Science level to tackle and prevent early school leaving?
8. How effective are these strategies in your opinion?
9. Arising out of your own work experience, (a) what in your opinion have been the most successful strategy to tackle early school leaving and indicate why; (b) what else needs to be done?

## **Interview questions for Principals**

### Area 1: Early school leaving

1. (a) Do you have many students who leave school early?  
(b) What are the key issues and needs of the young people in your school?
2. What is your school doing to support young people to stay at school?
3. What are the factors which you believe contribute to a young person's decision to leave school early based on your own experience?
4. To what extent does the following influence a person's decision to leave school?
  - school factors
  - their family
  - their friends
  - socio-economic factors
  - opportunities to work
  - individual factors e.g. self-esteem, ability, behaviour

### Area 2: Strategies to prevent early school leaving

#### *Current strategies*

5. What is being done at State and Department of Education and Science level to tackle and prevent early school leaving?
6. How effective are these strategies in your opinion?
7. Arising out of your own work experience, (a) what in your opinion have been the most successful strategy to tackle early school leaving and indicate why; (b) what else needs to be done?

## **Focus Group Interview questions for a sample group of parents**

### Area 1: Personal

1. What was your own experience of school?
2. Did any of your children leave school before doing their Leaving Certificate?

### Area 2: Educational History

3. What does/did your son /daughter like/dislike about school?
4. What are the main reasons for your son/daughter staying in or leaving school?
5. What do you think could have encouraged your child to stay in school or return to school?
6. Are your children or were your children involved in any programmes aimed at encouraging them to stay in school? If yes, what were they and did they help?

## **Focus Group Interview questions for a sample group of students who remained in school**

### Area 1: Personal

1. Did any one in your family leave school before completing their Leaving Certificate? If yes, why?

### Area 2: Educational History

2. Are there things you like about school?
3. Are there things you don't like about school?
4. Have any of your friends left school early? If yes, Why?
5. Have you ever considered dropping out of school? Why? Why have you stayed?
6. What do you think about programmes that help students to stay on in school?
7. Are there benefits to staying in school?

## **Interview questions for early school leavers**

### Area 1: Personal

1. How many children are in your family?
2. Where do you come in your family?
3. Did anyone in your family do their Leaving Certificate?
4. What year were you in when you left school?

### Area 2: Educational History

5. Describe your experience of school?
6. What subjects and activities did you like in school?
7. What subjects and activities did you dislike in school?
8. How did you get on with your teachers?
9. How would you describe a good teacher?
10. How would you describe a bad teacher?
11. Did you ever get in trouble in school? Can you remember why? Did it happen often?
12. How did you find doing lessons in school? Did you generally do your homework?
13. Did anyone in your home help you with your school work?
14. Did your parents have much contact with the school? How did you feel about that?
15. Why did you leave school?
16. Were you involved in any programmes aimed at encouraging students to stay in school?
17. Did anyone speak to you about your options before you left school or try to encourage you to stay in school?
18. Do you know anyone else who left school?
19. Do you have any regrets about leaving?
20. Do you think students could be helped to stay in school?
21. If yes, what do you think could be done to encourage them?

## **Appendix 2: Letters and forms of consent**

### **Letter of consent for students who remained in school**

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am at present undertaking some study in N.U.I Maynooth. As part of my work, I am doing some research into the area of early school leaving.

I am asking your permission to allow your son/daughter take part in a focus group interview in order to help me with my work.

It should take no longer than forty minutes and will take place in \_\_\_\_\_. Your child's involvement is of course voluntary and their answers are strictly confidential. Their name will not appear anywhere in my final report.

If you agree to allow your son/daughter to take part in a focus group interview, please sign the consent form on the following page and return it to me by \_\_\_\_\_.

If you have any questions about this please contact me at the school number.

Yours sincerely,

**Consent form for students who remained in school.**

**Parental Consent Form**

**Student's Name:**

**Class:**

**I agree to allow my son/daughter to be interviewed.**

**YES**

**No**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Parent/Guardian**

## Confirmation letter for early school leavers

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed, I really appreciate it as it will be a great help to me in my research. I will see you in \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. The interview should take no longer than 40 minutes. With your permission I will record this interview on audio-tape, this will be for my use only. Would you please get the consent form signed by your parents and bring it with you on the day.

Looking forward to seeing you on \_\_\_\_\_,

Kindest regards,

## Letter of consent for early school leavers

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am at present undertaking some study in N.U.I. Maynooth. As part of my work, I am doing some research into the area of early school leaving.

I am asking your permission to allow your son/daughter take part in an interview in order to help me with my work.

It should take no longer than forty minutes and will take place in \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Your child's involvement is of course voluntary and their answers are strictly confidential. Your child's name will not appear anywhere in my final report. With your permission I will record the interview on audio-tape, this will be for my use only.

If you agree to allow your son/daughter to take part in an interview, please sign the consent form on the following page and return it to me by \_\_\_\_\_.

If you have any questions about this please contact me at the school number \_\_\_\_\_.

Yours sincerely,

**Consent form for early school leavers**

**Parental Consent Form**

**Son/Daughters Name:**

**I agree to allow my son/daughter to be interviewed.**

**YES**

**No**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Parent/Guardian**

## Confirmation letter for interview participants

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by me as part of my research on early school leaving. I am writing to confirm that the interview will take place in \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. If you have any problem with this date and time please contact me.

With your consent I would like to record this interview, if you have any objections please don't hesitate to let me know.

The areas that my questions will be based on are

- The causes of early school leaving.
- Interventions that are in place at present to combat early school leaving.
- Interventions that you would suggest or like to see in place to combat early school leaving in the future.

I am looking forward to discussing this issue with you.

Yours sincerely,