'A Road Less Spoken'

The experiences of Youthreach participants

Kathriona McHugh

B.Comm., H.Dip.Ed., PDPES, PDSEN, M.Ed.

Education Doctorate

National University of Ireland Maynooth

Faculty of Social Sciences

Education Department

Head of Department: Dr Rose Dolan

Department of Adult and Community Education

Head of Department: Josephine Finn

Supervisor: Dr Anne B. Ryan

June 2014

Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Figures:

Tables:

Abstract

This study explores the experiences and perspectives of early school-leavers in the West of Ireland as they try and progress their education through the further education provision of Youthreach. This research addresses the gap that exists in the current literature on early school-leaving by presenting the voices of participants, which offer unique and rich insights into this complex phenomenon. This study broadens the scope of thinking about early school-leaving by looking through the lenses of care, respect, recognition and mental health. The participating early school-leavers have not abandoned education and they are not viewed as dropouts; they have ambitions for the future and are interested in achieving their educational goals.

The acknowledgment of the voices of the participants is at the heart of this study and is reflected in the choice of methods. It is a qualitative investigative study focusing on the educational experiences of participants within four Youthreach centres in the Western Area Network. The study employs a combination of arts-based collage creation and individual semi-structured interview methods used to elicit the rich data. As a means of triangulation, questionnaires from coordinators within the network were gathered to establish their perceptions on the prevalence of mental health issues within the centres.

The participants' stories reveal that their mainstream schooling experiences had a damaging effect on their mental health. The findings show that Youthreach centres have become a necessary recovery space for many of the early school-leavers and serve an important role in the education system. The findings highlight the necessity for the creation of educational provisions that have care and respect as central concepts. The findings also reveal that participants' opportunities in rural areas are impeded by structural and resource factors. There also exists a degree of socially constructed embarrassment or shame about being a Youthreach attendee.

The thesis concludes that there is valid knowledge for educators and policy makers in the voices of these participants. Their voices should be listened to and their needs recognised. The thesis further concludes that students should not have to feel ashamed for attending Youthreach programmes and that, one way to achieve this is for Youthreach centres to be recognised as a viable and valid alternative to mainstream schooling.

Acknowledgements

I wish to sincerely thank all those who helped me reach my goals. There are many who provided good wishes, encouragement and practical help along the way and here I would like to especially mention some of those people.

I would like to thank the entire Ed D team at NUIM. I am extremely thankful to Anne B. Ryan for taking on the supervisory role at such a late stage and for providing such clear and efficient guidelines over the past few months. And a special thanks Anne, for giving me the confidence to complete the work. I would like to express my gratitude to Bernie Grummell, for all her help throughout the three and half years and for her insightful comments and guidance for this thesis. I would also like to thank Shauna Busto-Gilligan for her help throughout my time at Maynooth.

My fellow classmates for the many interesting discussions and the general good fun we had on the Thursdays. I would like to particularly mention Lisa Cuthbert, for her help and support and Martina Hegarty for her thoughtfulness. A sincere thank you to David Leahy, for making the journey to Maynooth that bit easier.

I wish to acknowledge and thank my two line managers and dear friends, Sorcha O'Toole and Theresa McLoughlin for their continued support, accommodation and understanding, throughout the whole process.

A special thanks to the Youthreach coordinators of the Western Area Network. In particular I would I would like to thank the four coordinators who facilitated the research process taking place in the centres. To the research participants who engaged willingly in the research. Thank you for your openness and honesty. I hope I have done justice to your accounts.

I am forever grateful to my dear friend Yvonne Croal, who gave both moral support and her time so willingly, to critically read and proofread the entire thesis – a heartfelt thank you.

I wish to thank Sinead Mannion for her belief in me and for her constant encouragement; it is your turn next!

Finally, I would like to thank my family for all their support and help. A special appreciation is made to my parents, Matt and Kathleen Mc Hugh, for their unending prayers and for helping out with the little things. I would like to acknowledge my sister Aibhilinn and my brother Matthew for always thinking of me and my brother Kevin, for just being himself. My husband, Colin Snow for his encouragement, patience and practical guidance that was much needed at times. For getting up in the early morning hours to make me breakfast, before I headed on the long journey to Maynooth. I really appreciate it. Now we can live again!

"The Road Not Taken"

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

List of Acronyms

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CDP	Centre Development Plan
CTC	Community Training Centre
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DETE	Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment
DOHC	Department of Health and Children
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
ERSI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair
FE	Further Education
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison Scheme
IAP	Individual Action Plan
ICE	Internal Centre Evaluation
IPRT	Irish Penal Reform Trust
JCSP	Junior Certificate School Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCVA	National Council for Vocational Awards
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
NESSE	Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training
NEWB	National Education Welfare Board
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NYCI	National Youth Council of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QFI	Quality Framework Initiative
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SCP	School Completion programme
SEN	Special Educational Need
SENI	Special Educational Need Initiative
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
SPHE	Social Political and Health Education
STTC	Senior Traveller Training Centre
TD	Teachta Dála
TUI	Teachers Union of Ireland
VEC	Vocational Education Committees
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
VTST	Visiting Teacher Services for Travellers
WHO	World Health Organisation
WRCsec	Work Research Co-operative (Social and Economic Consultants)

Introduction

(These are the words from all the collages that were produced by the participants in this research and assembled into a Word Cloud to produce the above. The larger the word the more times it has appeared in the collages. As readers progress through the thesis, they will have an opportunity to glance at these words and perhaps see something different as they start a new chapter. It is another way of viewing the participants' thoughts and ideas of being early school-leavers).

Introduction

This thesis sets out to explore the experiences of early school-leavers as they take an alternative educational path through Youthreach, a national programme of second-chance education and training in Ireland. In this research, it is my intention to hear the stories of the students that attend various Youthreach programmes in the West of Ireland. I start with the premise that the students' current societal position is not their fault, that haphazard life events have created a challenging path for them. Those who partook in this study have had a premature departure from mainstream education. Their feelings of rejection by the schooling system and society in general are not surprising. Brian, a participant in this study felt that in school the teachers "…didn't really pay attention to what I had to say, to how I felt and they didn't really care…" They have been marginalised and alienated. In leaving school early they are detached from their peers and societal norms. Their sense of identity has been diminished and their mental health perturbed.

In the literature early school-leavers have been described as educationally disadvantaged, presenting behavioural problems, convicted of criminal offences and suffering from alcohol and substance abuse issues. However, I feel that a deeper understanding of these students can be gleaned by looking at the situation from their perspective. It is important to consider that the current schooling system did not offer sufficient supports for these students and new ideas and approaches are needed to assist those who leave school early. Furthermore, those who leave school early and continue on in education should not be deemed as failures or dropouts as the current system did not suit their needs. As Damon, another research participant explains: "there is nothing wrong with leaving school. Some people aren't able for it. Some people get bullied and some people go off the rails…and some people don't want to finish school, they might have trouble going on at home like". There should be viable and recognised alternatives for students within the current educational system that enable smooth transitions and progression opportunities. In order to do this, there needs to be a direct focus on the people at the heart of the issue: the early school-leavers. This study recognises that the experiences of early school-leavers are often ignored within policy developments and their contributions to understanding the phenomenon are rarely considered. The research intently focuses on the voices

of the participants, in order to gain an insight into their perspectives of what helps and what hinders their educational progression.

Why this research?

This research study is set in Youthreach education provision. I feel it is important here to link my experiences with this research. I am a Youthreach tutor based in a West of Ireland centre, which is affiliated to the Western Area Network of Youthreach centres. For the past twelve years I have been working with adolescents who have felt marginalised by the formal educational system and who have sought an alternative educational path. I mainly work with students who are completing the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), a self-contained, two-year Leaving Certificate programme. My subjects include vocational preparation, leisure and recreation activities and computer skills. These subjects broadly revolve around teambuilding exercises, literacy supports and building links within the community. These links are mainly formed through work experience programmes and fundraising activities. While observing and interacting with these students I became very interested in their journey through the education system and their experiences of school and explanations as to why it did not work for them.

I cannot categorically say that I set out with the career intention of becoming a Youthreach tutor; however, I was certainly drawn to it when the opportunity arose. At an early age I was cognisant of early school leaving. Living in a rural area and attending a small rural school, only half of my small class of twelve went on to complete the Leaving Certificate. Also, my own brother, who is slightly older than me, left school after completing his Junior Certificate. He was very popular at school, played rugby, had an avid interest in history and was generally and still is a very rounded individual. Nonetheless, he never settled in school and had no interest in staying on. This was always something that stayed in my mind, a question that was left unanswered, 'why do some young people leave school and others stay, particularly within one family unit?' Although my brother progressed on in education over the years through various alternative routes, he always maintained that life would have been a lot simpler had he stayed on and completed school. This also made me question whether there should be only one main educational route for students who want to progress or should there be alternatives available to those who

do not fit into the traditional school system. Over the past six years I have carried out small-scale research on early school leaving with the hope of understanding the phenomenon from the students' perspective. I feel that students who leave school early are not offered an opportunity to tell their stories and this is what has led me to this research. My hope is to present their voices and shine some light on their experiences and create some new knowledge in this field which is often ignored or forgotten.

From my own earlier small-scale research (McHugh, 2008); I have discovered that many of the students that register on the Youthreach programme state that their reason for leaving school is that they 'didn't like it'. These students more often than not, felt rejected by the schooling system and society and tended to have a somewhat negative attitude towards education and life. Their issues with schooling stemmed from such factors as poor relationships with teachers and other students and the irrelevance of the curriculum in their lives. Furthermore, more recently, mental health issues have been perceived by Youthreach staff members nationally, as major obstacles in the lives of the young people who attend the programmes.

The story of each student is unique to him or her; their issues and challenges are multifaceted and cannot be directly categorised or easily depicted. Although the general factors that persuaded them to leave school are mainly the same, each case is different and each student brings forth a different perspective on early school-leaving. Their perspectives form their reality; for them, what counts is how they felt and what they believed to be the truth, as this is what they acted upon. I felt it was important to understand what did not work for them in school in order that it was not replicated within the centre. Also, I found it difficult to comprehend why many of the students were not able to succeed in school as they showed strong academic ability, drive and determination. These students were all very individual and varied on a number of levels: their age, gender, status, personality, academic ability, outlook, demeanour and background. However, they all had one thing in common, that they were attending Youthreach for a reason.

Throughout the time that I have been working on the programme an array of changes have taken place. These changes not only consisted of the category of learner now enrolling on the programme, but also programme design and structure. Earlier

research by McGrath (2006) indicated that many students that initially enrolled on Youthreach programmes were interested in vocational skills and apprenticeships. However, in recent years there has been an increase in students presenting to centres who have behavioural and emotional needs (CHL, 2006). Like Cian in this study who had a difficult upbringing and who felt that "it would sort of screw you up in the head…I have a really short temper; an awful, awful, short temper. I don't like my temper, I don't trust myself sometimes". It is evident from working in a Youthreach centre that many of participants struggle with varying degrees of mental health issues and that many of these issues were exacerbated during their time in mainstream schooling.

As 'Centres for Education', Youthreach has taken on new roles and responsibilities. Since 2006, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills have been evaluating and making recommendations for the improvement to the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the Youthreach programmes. For me as practitioner and researcher, this created a fundamental focus on which to base my study. This research seeks to highlight selected areas for improvement that the Inspectorate has identified as being within the capabilities of individual centres to address. Several key issues for improvement were presented in a report (DES, 2010a) which focused on attendance and retention, the programme content, certification and progression. These are important considerations for all Youthreach centres, in order to provide the best possible provisions for the learners. In order to do this, the learners need to be at the heart of the process. Although the report did not suggest or identify participants of the programme as a potential means of assistance in tackling the current issues that pertain to centres. It is clear however, that these issues could be addressed more effectively by acquiring the perspectives of the learners. There is a fundamental need to focus on the views of the Youthreach learners, to hear what they consider as important, what they feel will enable them to develop and what will set them on a path to a brighter future. The learners' viewpoints on issues that include participation, programme content and progression could provide valuable insights for Youthreach personnel as they strive to improve the programmes. This study is founded on a learner-centred research approach.

A study such as this is important for Youthreach programmes. Many of the participants in this study considered Youthreach as their final chance. Jodie expressed, "I know it is the last chance I have in doing anything". It is important that within the programmes the learners are offered the key supports that they need in order that they engage and remain on the programme. The importance of the learners' voices is critical in this regard, to provide an opportunity to share their stories and viewpoints and provide a platform from which to be heard. In particular, to consider what they deem as important in terms of attending the programmes and the educational attainments that are significant to them. Also, by creating a space for the learners to share their views, a focus on the individual and their sense of well-being can be encouraged in a natural way.

There is a dearth of research on Youthreach learners and their views of the programmes. This study explores these issues in detail; it has enhanced my comprehension of the wider context of issues affecting the study's participants. This research is particularly necessary as it presents the stories of a number of early school-leavers who try and progress without school. It identifies and affirms the Youthreach provision as an important element of the education system, which offer significant supports of care and respect to learners; aspects of education that learners felt were seldom attainable within mainstream schooling. This study is an important piece of research that focuses on learners' mental health. It initiates awareness of mental health and it opens up discussion on these issues that are becoming more apparent in the everyday proceedings of Youthreach.

It is my belief that the notions of care, respect and recognition of all learners need to be incorporated into all aspects of education provision. This thesis tries to contribute to the process of developing our current education system in order that it can effectively serve all students. It is my intention that the findings from the research will go towards the creation of practical recommendations, informing policies on equality, support and inclusion, that centres and educators may refer to in order to engage learners and support them through the programme.

The main aims of this research are to investigate the participants' perspectives of:

- Being early school-leavers.
- The benefits and difficulties they encounter throughout the Youthreach programmes.
- The status of their mental health
  and to,
- Identify key areas to assist in the improvement of Youthreach programmes.

In order to meet these aims, the data collection has been guided by the questions presented here by *Figure 1*.
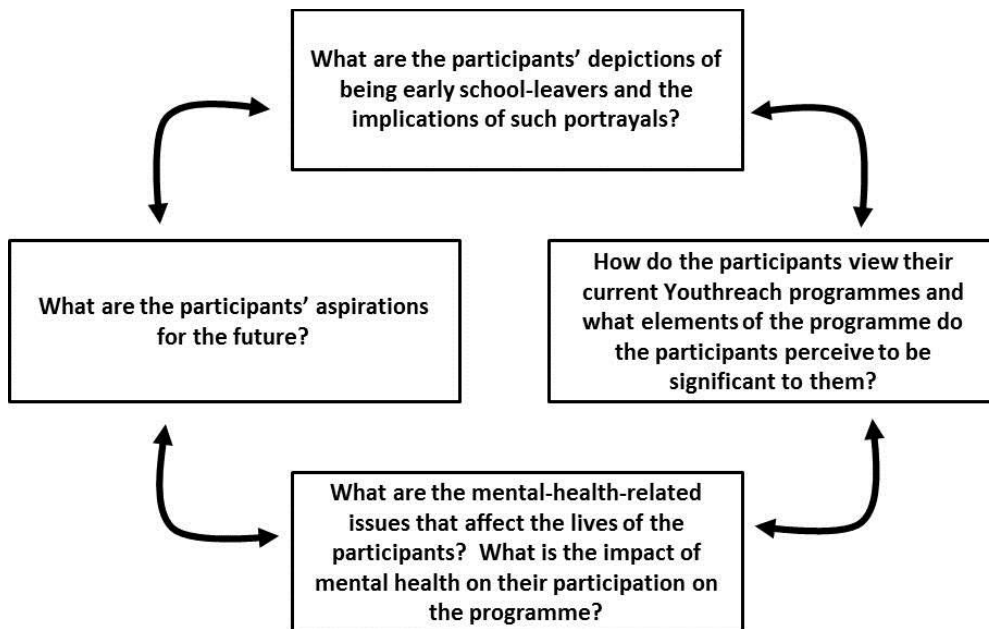
Figure 1: Research questions

This thesis sets out to explore the experiences of Youthreach students as they take an alternative educational path. In the diagram above the research questions are depicted as four interlinked elements. The journey of the students will not fit discretely within the confines of the four questions and the diagram highlights the interconnections that will exist. Therefore the questions are not regarded as fragmented stand-alone elements, the findings of one question may impact or overlap with the findings from another question. *Figure 1* above signifies the approach of this thesis, which aims to capture a real sense of the participants and their stories.

The current national context

Each year, almost 9,000 students, mainly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, leave school before completing their Leaving Certificate (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). There is little known of what happens to the majority of the 16% who leave school early, although Byrne *et al.* (2008) indicate that up to 60% are either in training or some form of employment, with the remainder either unemployed, emigrated or of an unknown status. A report by the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) (2001) indicates that many of these young people are likely to end up in a poverty trap. They are more likely to depend on social welfare and are more susceptible to a lifetime of dependency. This can often lead to an intergenerational lifecycle of poverty and dependency (Barnardos, 2009).

Youthreach

The Youthreach programme was initially set up in 1988. It is purposely designed to target early school-leavers ranging from the ages of 15-20 years and has continued to develop into a second chance national education programme. Youthreach programmes are located within the Further Education (FE) sector of the education system. There are over one hundred centres located around the country, mostly in disadvantaged areas. It is an inter-departmental initiative, funded by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE) and managed by the local Vocational Education Committee (VEC), (In 2013 VECs became Education and Training Boards (ETBs)). In 2000, under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, a quality framework initiative was established to develop quality standards for Youthreach. In 2004, Youthreach centres became designated as 'Centres for Education' under the Education Act, 1998 (DES, 2004a), and as such are recognised in terms of the current legislation, such as the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 and Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004. Each centre is unique as it reflects the social, economic and cultural environment from which it operates. The centres offer a wide variety of certified programmes to cater for the needs of the individual learners. The main objectives of Youthreach programmes are to prepare the young people for working life with an emphasis on core skills and the ability to transfer these skills into a variety of work and life situations (DES, 1995). The

emphasis is placed on personal development, such as improving self confidence and self-esteem. Based on recent figures by the Department of Education (2013a), there were 3,313 students enrolled in the national Youthreach programme in 2012.

Care and education

A contemporary notion of care in education is evident in the recent publication *'New Mangerialism in Education'* by Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012). This book presents the changing landscape of the Irish education system. It highlights that education is now more readily defined by a business model than that of a caring profession and is strongly propelled by neo-liberalism. The education system has adopted a market driven ideology where education has become a measurable commodity that is based on performance indicators and management. The impact of such marketization of education is clearly illustrated by Lynch *et al.* (2012, p. 199) as they describe the issue of "a conflict of values regarding the governance and purpose of education and the role of relational beings within this process". The focus on measurable outputs means that there is limited focus on inputs or process and the student gets lost in the system, they are not regarded as important, only the measurable outputs are of significance. This type of education system breeds competitiveness and breaks down solidarity as students and schools are continually measured and appraised against each other. In essence, it is simple economics, education is becoming a commodity that can be bought and sold and those with the ability to pay will inevitable succeed, which will lead to rising inequality. This is a foremost concern for students with limited financial means, what will become of them if they do not have the resources to progress?

This book presents an underpinning for this research and encourages a discourse on the impact of new managerialism on education. It provides a clear view as to why the voices of those on the margins need to be presented and heard, as currently they are being drowned out by an economic-driven education system. Lynch *et al.* (2012) strongly contends that a focus on love, care and solidarity as opposed to competition and self-interests is vital for the well-being of society. It renders this research apt and timely as an investigation into why participants of this study left school early and did not seem to fit in. The research of Lynch *et al.* (2012) delivers a compelling theory on the importance of care within education, highlighting that students are

relational beings who need to learn to care and be part of a caring society that recognises and respects them. My own view would be in allegiance with the research and I consider it a premise on which to develop this study.

Young people and mental health

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2012) predicts that by 2030 depression will be the main global health problem, with 20% of children and teenagers experiencing a disabling mental illness. This is particularly significant in terms of early school-leavers as the risk factors for mental disorders are exacerbated by social exclusion, peer rejection, poverty, isolation and low levels of family support (WHO, 2003). In today's society where young people are dealing with economic deprivation, family difficulties, bullying, academic struggles and other issues in their lives, it is more important than ever to consider mental health issues. Educators must ask themselves if they are doing enough for those who are experiencing difficult challenges in their lives. Governments have been slow to respond to the issues and seven years after the publication of the Department of Health and Children (DOHC) report (2006) *A Vision for Change* policy framework for mental health services, few provisions have been implemented. Currently, there is no research available that considers mental health issues as a possible basis for early school-leaving. Anecdotal evidence from the Youthreach sector would suggest that there has been a significant increase in recent years in the number of students enrolling on the programmes, who display symptoms of mental health related problems. Therefore the mental health focus of this study is both timely and appropriate.

'A Road Less Spoken'

> "I didn't think I was going back to education because I had such a downfall"
>
> (Elaine)

The voices of Youthreach participants are seldom presented: this research provides an insight into the challenges faced by these young people as they try to progress and achieve their goals. The title of this thesis *'A Road Less Spoken'* has been included as a means of expressing the silence that surrounds the participants in this study. Their voices, the issues of mental health and the programme that they attend are rarely considered or discussed within society. The title is an adaptation of Robert

Frost's poem 'The Road Not Taken'. It suggests that the participants of this study have struggled through a difficult educational path that was laden with a sense of shame and secrecy. This study provides an opportunity for the participants' voices to be heard and shared. It offers rare insights into the educational experiences of young people who have been previously left unheard. This study makes a contribution to opening up the conversation about mental health and Youthreach. It provides a new lens for understanding early school-leaving and provides concepts on which the current education system could be developed, to enable it to meet the needs of all students.

Methodology

The research procedures presented in this thesis are consistent with a learner-centred research approach. An arts-based method of participant collage creation has been utilised to gather information on the personal thoughts and feelings of early school-leavers. This method was uniquely designed to generate conversation among the young people. The collage pieces are supported by individual participant interviews, where a number of participants provide more in-depth accounts of their experiences. A third method of data collection was also employed as a means of triangulation. The coordinators of the twelve Youthreach centres in the Western Area Network were asked to complete a questionnaire in relation to the prevalence of mental health issues among the Youthreach attendees at the centres. This process was not analysed in detail in this thesis, instead it was used as a means of confirming what had been identified by the participants of the study and used to verify the issues that had been revealed.

Structure of the thesis

This chapter provided a brief overview of the rationale and relevance of this study. It gave an introductory summary of the current context upon which the thesis is based. It set out the aims of the study and the questions that guide the research. Below I indicate the content of the rest of the thesis.

Chapter One presents the context of Youthreach, from inception in 1988 to the present day. It focuses on the structure of the programme and its location within the FE sector. It details the profile of students that currently attend the programme and the web-wheel process. It provides a context for the Western Area Network of Youthreach centres which is pertinent to this particular study.

Chapter Two presents the conceptual framework for the research and focuses on some of noteworthy ideas which have significance in relation to working with early school-leavers within a Youthreach setting. The reviewed literature provides a general theoretical awareness of the broad issues and approaches that relate to early school-leavers and considers the disparities that exist within the Irish education system. Research in relation to educational disadvantage, early school-leaving and mental health issues are explored. This chapter also provides an overview of studies that conducted research using the voices of early school-leavers.

Chapter Three describes the research procedures. It outlines my epistemological and ontological assumptions. It provides an overview of the choice of methods employed including – collages and interviews and provides a detailed account of the data collection process and issues relating to the data analysis. It presents a brief outline of the eleven participants that engaged in the interview process. Limitations of the study are also presented.

Chapters Four and Five present the findings. In chapter Four the findings of the collages are presented and displayed. It provides a summary of the main findings that emerged from the collages and outlines seven participants' detailed accounts of their collage creations. It presents three in-depth participants' stories and their experiences of leaving school and joining Youthreach. Their accounts, feelings and stories are at the core of this study and I believe are vital for understanding the participants' experiences.

Chapter Five gives a more themed account of the participants' stories that is based on findings of individual interviews and collages. This chapter is divided into sections reflecting the four main research questions and the categories that emerged from the data collection process are presented: backward glance, new path – standing firm, road blocks and stepping stones – future focused.

Chapter Six discusses the main findings in the context of the literature and previous research. Issues such as care, recognition and respect are identified as key concepts in this discussion and are related to the relevant literature.

Finally, Chapter Seven delivers the main conclusions of the research. In this chapter a review of the research questions in relation to the findings are summarised. I reflect on the methodology and my engagement with the process. The contributions of the study are presented. The implications of the findings, the main recommendations and areas for further study are also included.

Chapter 1
Context

Introduction

In Ireland, in the late 1980s unemployment was at an extreme high of 16.9% (Kelly, 2004). There was an especially elevated level of youth unemployment. Students were leaving school at a phenomenal rate with very little education and bleak future prospects. For many, emigration was high on the list of few possibilities (Departments of Labour and Education 1989). Youthreach was developed out of a Social Guarantee initiative led by the Department of Education and based on a European Council Policy to assist young adults with the transition from school to working life. In particular, it focused on young people with minimal qualifications that had left education early (Departments of Labour and Education 1989). This chapter provides the context in which this research is based. It provides a detailed account of Youthreach, from induction through to current day operations.

1.1 The Irish Education System

The provision of education is divided into five main stages: early childhood, primary, post-primary (second-level), further education and training (FE) and higher education (third level) (DES, 2012a). Education in Ireland is compulsory from the ages of six to sixteen, or until students have completed three years in post-primary school (DES, 2012a). The terms post-primary, second-level and secondary education all refer to the same level and are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Primary and post-primary levels are regarded as formal or mainstream schooling and in this research 'mainstream' predominately means second-level education.

The Youthreach programme is positioned within the FE sector of the educational system. The DES (2004b, p.21) states that FE embraces education and training which occurs after second level schooling but which is not part of the third level system. In *Figure 2* overleaf, the FE sector is visibly positioned between the two levels, but the sector is not clearly defined and the range of programmes on offer are not evident. In particular, Youthreach is not illustrated in the diagram and the programme is not clearly explained by the DES definition of FE. Youthreach caters for students who leave school early and without qualifications. In Youthreach the students gain accreditations that are on par with the levels achievable in mainstream schooling. However, based on the diagram in *Figure 2*, Youthreach is not considered as a core element of the Irish education system and is not identified as an

alternative education programme for students who leave post-primary school early. This is the most current diagram that is available for the Irish education system structure. It requires updating. The FE sector should be clearly illustrated and Youthreach should be visible within the system as 'centres of education', that offer alternative education programme to students who leave school early.
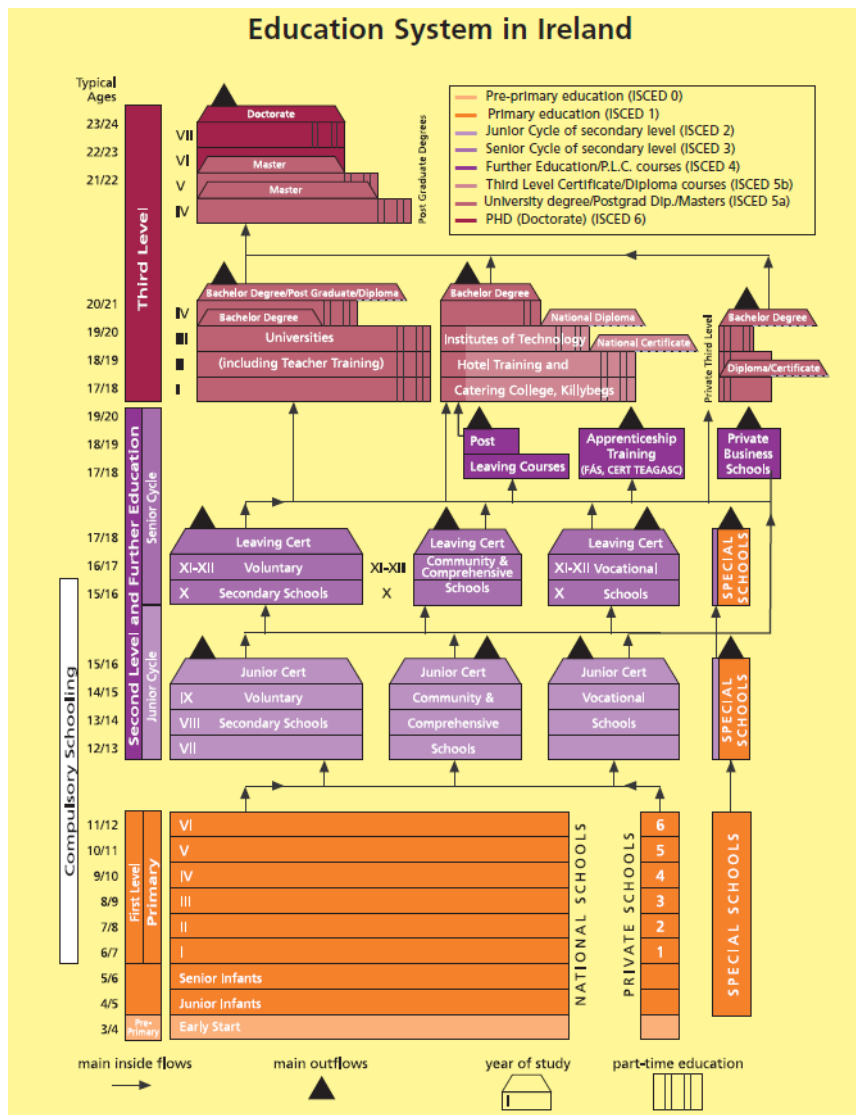
Figure 2: Irish Education System

Source: DES, 2004b, p. i

16

1.2 Formation of Youthreach

The Youthreach programme was officially launched in 1988, by both the then Minister for Labour (Bertie Ahern TD) and the Minister for Education (Mary O'Rourke TD). Initially, it was purposely designed, two year programme to target early school-leavers ranging from the ages of 15-18 years. The Youthreach Operators' Guidelines (Departments of Labour and Education 1989) outlined the concept of Youthreach:

> The aim of Youthreach is to provide participants with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to successfully make the transition to work and adult life. Youthreach is a guarantee of up to two years co-ordinated and integrated, training, work-experience and temporary employment for the most marginalised and disadvantaged early school-leavers.
> (Departments of Labour and Education 1989, p.4)

The Youthreach programme operated through four main strands: Youthreach centres and Senior Traveller Training Centres (STTCs) funded by the Department of Education and Science and managed by Vocational Education Committees (VECs); Community Training Workshops funded by Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS); and Justice Workshops funded by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and FÁS. FÁS was the training and employment authority in Ireland at the time and assisted those who sought employment (FÁS dissolved in October 2013 and its functions transferred to the new Further Education and Training Authority, (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) SOLAS). There were a number of FÁS training centres in operation in Ireland in the early 1990s, providing various manual apprenticeship programmes. Although Youthreach operated through the various strands, many of the policies and procedures of the earlier programmes resembled the then FÁS system. The young people that entered through the various strands were referred to as trainees and received a FÁS equivalent training allowance. The courses on offer were similar to the apprenticeships on offer by FÁS and many students from VEC Youthreach programmes, progressed on to FÁS apprenticeships. This progression option was made available through bridging measures that were introduced into FÁS in 1997 as a result of the lack of availability of national certification options at that time (Stokes, 2000).

Throughout the early 1990s pilot Youthreach centres were set up all over the country, with no structure in place and very little guidance. The hiring of staff was managed at a local level and many employees came from the surrounding areas. Initially, the staff employed hailed from industrial-type backgrounds, providing necessary skills in carpentry, metalwork and engineering; at that time the programme was very male dominated and orientated. This was apposite to Youthreach's vocational focus. External certification bodies were sought for the programme from outside of the state, such as City and Guilds and Pitman. However, in 1991, the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established in Ireland. And by 1995, new national qualifications suitable for Youthreach participants were in place (now known as Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)). Localised modules were developed by Youthreach staff to suit their individual participants' needs and were made available as resources for all centres. These modules were adapted and modified to suit each centre. However, the programme remained relatively unstructured until the late 1990s. It was at this time a full review of the programme was compiled, which included perspectives and ideas from all stakeholders. The report, *Youthreach 2000- A Consultative Process* was presented as a framework of proposals for the advancement of the Youthreach programme into a new challenging decade (Stokes, 2000). The recommendations from the report led to the current delivery processes of the programmes.

1.2.1 Current Provision 2000- 2013

Youthreach to-day is a recognised second chance, national response education programme, particularly targeted at young people aged between 15-20 years of age, who have left mainstream schooling early. There are 103 ETB Youthreach centres located around the country, mostly in disadvantaged areas (DES, 2010b). It is an inter-departmental initiative, funded by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE) and managed by the ETBs. There are also a smaller number of Youthreach programmes delivered in Community Training Centres (CTCs) and Justice Workshops that are funded by FÁS or the Department of Justice and Law Reform, or both. This thesis is wholly based within ETB operated Youthreach programmes and all references of Youthreach are in the context of ETB Youthreach centres only.

Youthreach centres vary in size; smaller centres are designed to cater for up to twenty-five participants, while larger centres can operate up to fifty participants. The centres operate on a full-time basis, 226 days per year. *Table 1* provides a breakdown of the age groups of the students attending Youthreach in 2011/2012. The records from the DES indicate that the enrolment in Youthreach centres for that period was 3,313 and that 45% of those attending the centres were aged between 16 and 17 years. There was a larger number of males (59%) attending than females (41%). This correlates with European figures which indicate that a higher percentage of males leave school early (European Commission, 2012a).

Age	Male	Female	Total
15	112	80	192
16-17	922	568	1490
18+	927	704	1,631
Total	**1,961**	**1,352**	**3,313**

Table 1: National Youthreach enrolment figures 2012

Source: DES, 2013a

1.2.2 Training Allowances

Students attending Youthreach are entitled to weekly allowances. As outlined in *Table 2* overleaf, students receive an age-related training allowance. In addition to this allowance students also receive a meal allowance (€4.00 per week) and travel allowance. Some students may also be eligible for accommodation and childcare allowances. The allowances are linked to attendance and in order for students to receive full payment they are required to be in attendance for 35 hours each week. There has been a considerable reduction in the training allowance over the past two years, as identified in *Table 2* on the next page. At present, these changes have left a disparity between some students' payments; as new entrants receive almost 60% less than peers who had entered into the programme pre-budget 2012. Although this issue will eventually phase out, it causes much frustration for the participants who are currently on lower rates than their counterparts.

Participants	Weekly allowance € as of 1/1/13 for new entrants	Old rates valid from December 2011
15 years	No payment	No Payment
16 years	€40.00	€75.70
17 years	€40.00	€94.60
18+ years	€160.00	€188.00

Table 2: Allowance payable to Youthreach participants, 2011 and 2013

Source: DES, 2012b (circular 0046/2012)

1.2.3 Management and Staffing

At a national level, the DES is responsible for Youthreach programmes operated by ETBs. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an ETB has ultimate responsibility for the operation of the programmes. The majority of ETBs have a Youthreach Board of Management or ETB sub-committee that operates to assist in co-ordinating and managing the programmes. At a local level, centres are managed by coordinators and resource persons. Most centres have a full time coordinator and one or more resource persons, depending on the size of the centre. The coordinators' duties are akin to that of a principal in a school and a resource person would have a similar role to that of a deputy principal. However, resource persons and coordinators, regardless of qualifications, are not recognised as school teachers and do not receive teachers' pay and conditions. They have their own pay scales and conditions that are more similar to those working in community training workshops (CHL, 2006). The coordinators and resource persons are contracted to work 35 hour per week, which includes up to a maximum of fifteen and twenty hours tuition respectively. Centres are allocated a pay provision of 4,200 tuition hours per group of twenty-five participants which enables the employment of full and part-time staff.

In a Youthreach setting staff are usually employed on the basis of learners' needs. There is no specified formal qualification requirement for employment within Youthreach centres and the staff hail from a variety of professional and vocational

backgrounds. In the original Youthreach Operators' guidelines, the stated prerequisite of staff was:

> Staff should bring to their work an understanding of just how troubled a young person can be at this time of her/his life, as well as an awareness of the broad social context in which the young people live, and which is usually a source of many of the difficulties they experience.

<div align="right">(Departments of Labour and Education 1989, p.16)</div>

The Youthreach programme requires the staff to be flexible, multi-disciplinary and experienced. They need a high degree of motivation and commitment to the learner centred approach (Departments of Labour and Education 1989, CHL 2006). The learners-to-tutor ratio in centres is generally not greater than 9:1 and seven is the average number of teaching staff in a centre that caters for twenty-five students (DES, 2010b). The part-time staff members are paid the standard part-time teaching rates and in recent years there has been an increase in the amount of qualified teachers entering employment in Youthreach.

1.2.4 Quality Framework

In 2000, under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, a quality framework initiative was established to develop quality standards for Youthreach (See Appendix I). The aim of the Quality Framework Initiative (QFI) was " to develop and implement a quality assurance model that would lead to continuous improvement in the services offered by centres and in a manner that meets the needs of learners, staff and management" (O'Brien, 2004, p. 9). The framework has four main elements:

- Quality Standards
- Centre Development Planning
- Internal Centre Evaluation
- External Centre Evaluation

These initiatives were put in place to improve the overall delivery and accountability of Youthreach programmes and centres. Also, it provided centres with opportunities to focus on the participants and place them at the core of the learning process, through evaluations, individual learning plans and reviews. Previous to this all policies and processes were of a discretionary ad-hoc nature.

The Centre Development Planning (CDP) involves an internal review of the centre's practice. This is mainly carried out by all the members of staff with the aid of an external facilitator. All areas of the programme are examined to identify gaps, highlight priorities and to select areas for improvement. Once the areas are identified a centre plan is designed to aid the implementation of changes and improvements over a three or five year period. The plan is a substantial document that is developed and reviewed in the form of an annual Internal Centre Evaluation (ICE).

The ICE is a two-day facilitated process of evaluation that is carried out with centre staff each year. The main purpose of the ICE is to evaluate the work that has taken place in the centre over the course of the previous year and to focus on a range of quality standards that are considered as important for programme improvement. Also quality areas may be reviewed on the basis of them being included in a current centre plan. The actions agreed on during this process are usually aimed to be carried out over the course of the following year and are reviewed during the subsequent ICE facilitation. In a DES (2010a) evaluation report it was viewed that the QFI framework aided the creation of a culture of planning and self- review in centres.

The third element of the QFI is the external evaluation. This is an evaluation of the centre by the DES. Since 2006, DES funded Youthreach centres have been evaluated on the quality of education and training provision by the DES inspectorate. The DES (2010a, p.74) evaluation report recognised that "Youthreach provided many learners with a secure and stable learning environment and that it succeeded in meeting the needs to a far greater extent than that achieved in a mainstream education setting". This was a noteworthy endorsement of the programme and highlighted the need for the continued provision of such a programme within the system. Similarly, the DES (2008) *Value for Money Review* stated that Youthreach was a viable programme that should continue to exist. However, the evaluations did reveal areas for improvement in attendance, literacy and numeracy development, health education and the implementation of individual learner plans. Also, it highlighted the need for centres to focus on progression opportunities for students. This is a difficult area to tackle as centres do not have provisions in place to work with students once they have left the programme. Any contact that is made is

provided by the goodwill of the coordinator or staff members who give additional support if required to participants who have left the centre. This may include helping them with college applications, letters of application for a job or help with assignment work from a course. There is a need for additional supports to be put in place that can assist students in their transition from Youthreach to employment or further education

1.2.5 Centres for Education

In 2004, Youthreach centres became designated as 'Centres for Education' under the Education Act, 1998 (DES, 2004a), and as such are recognised in terms of the current legislation, such as the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 and Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004. This was a positive development for the status of Youthreach centres. The centres were no longer to be regarded as temporary experimental programmes, but as a recognised structure within the Irish education system. Although Youthreach centres were recognised as alternatives to mainstream schools, the programmes did not receive any visible recognition within the Irish education system structure and they did not obtain the same entitlements under the new legislation in terms of special needs provisions or services delivered by the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB). This enactment led to the term 'learner' being used in subsequent documentation and policies, leaving 'trainee' as a former term. Throughout this document, the terms student and learner are used interchangeably.

1.3 Youthreach Programme Structure

The pedagogical approach of Youthreach is more closely aligned to adult education than mainstream schooling. The focus is on the young person with an emphasis on recognising and rewarding achievement rather than reinforcing failure (Stokes, 2003). The process used is both learner-centred and learner-led and the programmes reflect the learners' needs as is visible in adult education programmes. The staff and the learners are equal partners in the learning process. Originally, the Youthreach programme was designed around a two year programme, with two distinct phases: the foundation phase and the progression phase. In 2010, new draft guidelines for Youthreach centres were issued by the DES. These guidelines specified an extended four-phase plan and did not stipulate a two-year timeframe for a participant enrolling

on the programme (DES, 2010b). The four phase approach now includes induction/engagement, foundation, progression and transitions, as outlined by *Figure 3* below.

The 4-phase Learning Programme
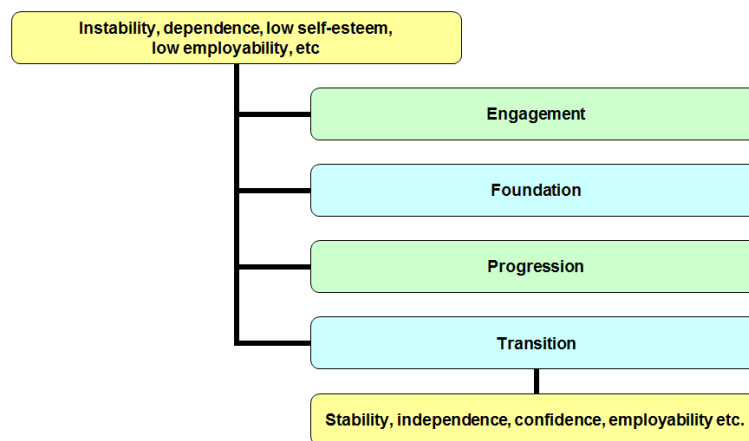
Figure 3: The 4-phase learning programme

Source: McSitric and O'Sullivan (2011)

The induction phase is intended to be a relatively short phase, mainly devised to allow the participant to settle into the programme. At this time staff can identify the particular needs of the student and by liaising with the student can devise a suitable learner plan. The majority of students find this phase a straightforward process and move swiftly on to the foundation phase.

The foundation phase focuses on two key areas: personal and social development and skills development. This phase aims to develop the learners' social skills and improve their self-confidence and self-esteem through various programmes and activities. Also there is a strong emphasis on skills development; this usually takes the form of taking part in various FETAC accredited modules suited to the needs of the particular learner. Typically FETAC/NFQ levels 2, 3 (see *Figure 5*, p.28) are employed.

Through the progression phase students can continue to develop their skills. There is an emphasis on employability skills and work experience is an important part of this period. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) two-year programme, if on offer in a centre, may become part of this phase for some participants. Those that do not join

an LCA programme may continue to improve their skills at FETAC/NFQ level 4 or occasionally at level 5, or continue with their current level, depending on the student and their particular needs.

The transition phase has been identified in the draft guidelines as a key phase in the programme; to assist students to progress effectively from the centre. However, this particular phase is currently not available to any major extent. There is no funding or resources in place to assist with the successful monitoring of learners when they leave the programme or centre. To date, there is no comprehensive study or statistics available on students who leave Youthreach or what they do after the programme.

1.3.1 Curriculum Provision

The curriculum provision in Youthreach centres can vary significantly as each centre develops programmes to meet the needs of their particular learner group. The main curricular elements include general education, vocational training and work experience. In addition to this a variety of complementary experiences exist that build students' confidence and broadens their horizons (DES, 2010b). The curriculum for Youthreach rests on ten building blocks as depicted in *Figure 4* below.

Figure 4: 10 building blocks of the Youthreach programme

Source: DES, 2010b

The curriculum framework presented on Page 25, *Figure 4* is chiefly delivered through two main programmes. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and modules accredited to FETAC make up the majority of courses on offer to learners within Youthreach. Also, some learners complete the Junior Certificate and a minority of learners complete the established Leaving Certificate.

Certification	Male	Female	Total
Junior Cert: 1-2 subjects	7	5	12
Junior Cert: 3-4 subjects	5	6	11
Junior Cert: Full Award	52	29	81
Leaving Cert Applied	143	149	292
Leaving Cert: 1-2 subjects	0	2	2
Leaving Cert: 3-4 subjects	1	0	1
Leaving Cert: Full Award	35	22	57
FETAC Level 1 Award	3	1	4
FETAC Level 2 Award	17	17	34
FETAC Level 3 modules and Awards	479	309	788
FETAC Level 4 modules and Awards	825	552	1377
Other	276	224	500
Total	**1843**	**1316**	**3159**

Table 3: Certified Awards Youthreach 2012

Source: DES, 2013a

In *Table 3* above, it is apparent that the largest certification in Youthreach is through FETAC awards at levels three and four. A full Junior Certificate is equivalent to a full award at level three and the LCA is equivalent to a full award at level four. Almost 10% of Youthreach students fully completed their LCA in 2012 and the DES (2013a) indicated that 371 students completed a full award at level four. The 'other' certification include some level five awards, European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), First Aid training and various other certification options that are available in different centres.

Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

The LCA programme was first introduced in 1995. It was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as an extension to the senior cycle provision. The programme is self-contained and distinct from the traditional Leaving Certificate (DES, 2001). It was designed as an alternative programme for students who did not intend to progress to third level directly or whose aptitudes and aspirations were not catered for within the traditional Leaving Certificate (DES, 2001, Lalor *et al*., 2007). It is a two-year programme consisting of a range of courses that are designed on a modular basis and delivered over four sessions, where each year is divided into two blocks. The programme is structured around three main areas:

- Vocational Preparation, focusing on the world of work and work experience.

- General Education based on general life skills.

- Vocational Education, which is concerned with practical skills, such as, IT and mathematical skills and other vocational specialisms chosen by the student.

The programme is based on continuous assessment over the two years and students can receive credits for completed tasks and modules based on the above three areas, as they progress through the four sessions. The students have final exams at the end of year two, worth 34% of their total credits. This is one of the main differences of the applied programme to the established Leaving Certificate, where the emphasis is not solely based on terminal exams at the end of the two years. The main aim of LCA is to provide a practical approach to learning, with a strong emphasis on vocational preparation, preparing the students for adult and working life (DES, 2001).

Banks *et al.* (2010) conducted research into students' experiences of the LCA programme within the mainstream setting. The study indicated that 40% of all schools provide the LCA and those that enrol on the programmes are mainly students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those who perform poorly at Junior Certificate level. The participants of the study indicated that they chose the programme as they deemed the continuous assessment less stressful than the

traditional system and regarded the subject application as more practical. However, many of the participants felt that there was a negative perception of the LCA within their school and poor awareness among the general public and employers.

1.3.2 Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)

FETAC was established in 2001 as the statutory awarding body for further education and training. It was enacted along with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (*Figure 5* below) under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. Currently, there is a major restructuring of all Irish qualification agencies, including FETAC and NFQ, which are been subsumed within the umbrella of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). As this is not fully operational at present the former terms will be used. FETAC is responsible for awards at Levels 1 - 6 on the ten step framework in *Figure 5* below. This framework displays how various qualifications correspond to each other in terms of knowledge and skills.
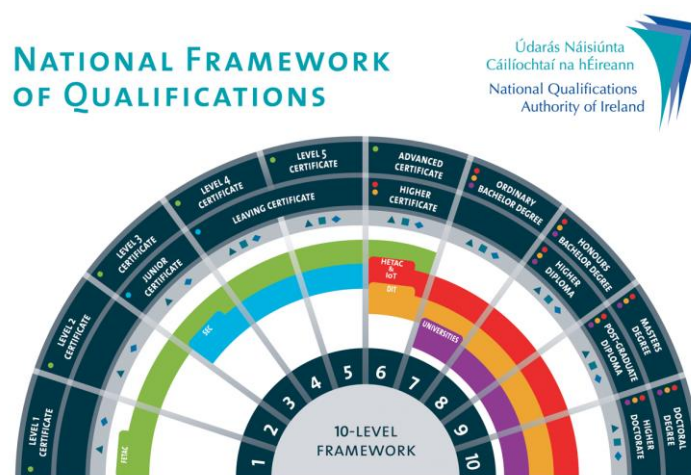
Figure 5: NFQ 10-level framework

Source: DES, 2011, p.79

Youthreach provides programmes based on Levels 1 - 4 through FETAC certification. Levels 1 and 2 cater for learners with very basic literacy and numeracy skills; Level 3 corresponds to Junior Certificate qualifications and Level 4 compares to the LCA. The main roles of FETAC include: producing and promoting awards; determining standards; validating programmes and quality assuring programmes and services. The programme modules and descriptors that are made available to FETAC quality assured providers, such as Youthreach centres, are very explicit in

terms of standards to be achieved by the learners. Modules are stated in learning outcomes, providing written intentions of what the learner should be able to do on completion of the module and an array of assessment techniques are also provided. *Table 4* below outlines the range of subjects and modules that are available in Youthreach centres.

Subject/Discipline	% of centres	Subject/Discipline	% of centres
Literacy	96.7	Woodwork	78.0
Personal Development	96.7	Drug Prevention Programmes	69.2
Numeracy	94.5	Catering/Tourism	63.7
Art and Crafts	94.5	Childcare/Community Care	63.7
IT Skills	94.5	Hairdressing	37.4
Communications	92.3	Construction Studies / Mechanics	35.2
Sport and Leisure	90.1	Metalwork	30.8
Health Education	78.0	Other	40.7

Table 4: Subjects and modules available in centres

Source: Gordon, 2012

Table 4 shows that personal development subjects are as widely available in centres as literacy and numeracy programmes. This indicates the important emphasis that is placed on student development and also the apparent need for such programmes to be available. Art and crafts are also very popular within centres and all students are encouraged to participate in these classes, which have been linked to a type of therapy for many students.

1.3.3 Profile of Youthreach Participants

The criteria for eligibility for Youthreach programmes has remained consistent over the past twenty-five years, with the exception of the increase in the upper age limit to 20 years, or above in certain circumstances. However, the profile of participants entering the programme has changed considerably over the same period. Throughout the boom period in Ireland (2000 - 2006) when jobs were in abundance for all, Youthreach enrolment continued to rise. The early school-leavers who joined Youthreach no longer consisted of those mainly interested in a trade or apprenticeship; but rather students who could not obtain employment due to varying degrees of personal or learning difficulties that hindered employment opportunities.

The consultancy firm CHL (2006) for the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) estimated that 80% of students enrolling on Youthreach programmes had special educational needs, which included emotional and behavioural needs. They suggested that the reduction of special schools brought about by educational mainstreaming has led to the increased numbers of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) applying to Youthreach (CHL, 2006, p.5). This has brought about the current shift in the category of learners that are presently attending the centres.

> Young people recruited to Youthreach typically suffer from economic and social disadvantage as well as educational disadvantage. Many experience severe problems in their homes and neighbourhoods. All have left, dropped out or have been excluded from mainstream schools and, almost without exception, they have become deeply alienated from schools and the formal education environment.

(CHL, 2006, p. 5)

A profile of the types of students now entering Youthreach has been illustrated by WRC Social and Economic Consultants (WRC-SEC) (2007) in *Table 5* below. It shows that 50% of participants came from dysfunctional family backgrounds: a collective term to describe various family issues, including: parents with mental illness, substance abuse issues, violence and abusive environments, child neglect and poor role models. 30% of participants needed psychological support and had literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Presenting difficulties of learners	Youthreach %
Literacy and numeracy	31.5
Substance abuse	27.6
Need for psychological support	30.3
Specific learning needs	17.9
Physical disability	1.4
Intellectual disability	5.0
Poor physical health	17.1
Cautioned by Junior Liaison Officer	17.6
On probation	5.3
Dysfunctional family background	50.3
Accommodation problems	-
Two or more of above	25.7

Table 5: Personal, Educational and Social difficulties experienced by students, 2005

Source: WRC-SEC, 2007, p.42

Although Youthreach has always catered for participants of this profile, there has been a sharp increase in the array of difficulties and issues prevalent among the participants. This is a major concern for many Youthreach coordinators and staff, particularly those who have been employed from the skills industry. These staff members are now compelled to deal with challenging situations on a daily basis, with very little training or skills sets for the difficulties that are emerging. These issues were brought to the fore through a crisis intervention project that was piloted in two Youthreach Centres in County Donegal in 2005.

> …the increasing burden of non-learning related issues …is proving to be a barrier to staff effectiveness in their day to day work with trainees. This burden is also a constant source of stress for staff in that there appears to be a consequent conflict around issues such as: how much time should be given to dealing with these human issues? Should an individual instructor/tutor be dealing with these issues at all? How can an instructor/tutor push a trainee to complete a project or portfolio when they know that this young person is in the midst of a personal crisis?
>
> (Brown, 2005, p.8)

This has become an ever increasing issue in the day-to-day operations of centres. Students are presenting to the centres with varying amounts of personal problems that they find difficult to cope with on a daily basis. The staff in the centres can often feel limited in their time and capacity to deal with all the needs of the students. However, centres have taken steps to provide personal development programmes for students to help them deal with some of the issues that dominate their lives. Such programmes include various issue based training: Social Political and Health Education (SPHE); Mind Out programme for mental health, Crime awareness 'Copping On' training; AIDS West; social education and leisure activities. Most centres also provide part-time counselling services and work with outside agencies for services that could not be provided in-house. These include: HSE - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) (this is a free national specialist service for children and adolescents with serious emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties); AWARE (an organisation to assist those affected by depression); Jigsaw (community based projects to help support young people's mental health); Drugs Task Force; addiction counselling services; local Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP) and Probation Services.

The DES (2013a) Youthreach enrolment figures for 2012 indicate that 17% of participants are from the Traveller Community. Traveller students rarely complete compulsory education and many of them do not transfer from primary to post-primary. Research has indicated that issues relating to culture, poverty, oppression and low educational expectations are possible reasons for the concentration of early school-leaving amongst Travellers (Stokes 2004, Hourigan and Campbell 2010). The Irish Traveller Community is regarded as one of the most disadvantaged minority groups in Ireland (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010). *The Teach Report* by Hourigan and Campbell (2010) maintains that Traveller culture is closely linked to nomadism, gender roles, feuding and extended family obligations. It also suggests that Travellers' attitudes to education and work differ significantly from the culture and attitudes of the settled community. In particular, gender roles within the Traveller community conflicts with the education system structure and this creates major challenges for centres in terms of retention. For Travellers, family commitments take precedence over all other responsibilities. This includes education and Travellers are often absent for weeks at a time for family weddings and other occasions (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010).

Also, as part of their culture, teenage Travellers are expected to marry from the age of 15 years. Marriage signifies adulthood among Travellers. Female Travellers perceive marriage as their main career path and young male Travellers become the sole providers. Travellers tend to opt out of education at this stage in order to take up their new roles. They no longer participate in education and this creates a major obstacle for centres as they try to provide Traveller students with basic education. Although a full discussion on Travellers in Youthreach is beyond the scope of this study it is important to highlight the issues in relation to absenteeism and retention of Traveller students on the programmes. Youthreach centres require an intercultural focus that supports Traveller students' beliefs and provide an educational environment that improves Traveller participation and outcomes in education. There is a large proportion of Traveller students enrolled on programmes within the Western Area Network of Youthreach centres and thus has relevance to this study.

1.4 Western Area Network

The Western Area Network is a collective group of Youthreach centres located in the Western region of the country. It comprises of twelve centres which are located in Galway, Mayo, Roscommon and Sligo. The centre where I work and the other three centres that participated in this research are based within this network of Youthreach centres. There are nine regional area networks of Youthreach centres based in the country but not all centres are part of an area network. The network was a voluntary formation by the coordinators of the centres, with the idea of creating a support system for each of the centres. The centre coordinators meet at regular intervals throughout the year to discuss policies and plans. It is a means of support for the coordinators as they are able to work together and share ideas about how to operate the centres more effectively. Since 2008, the coordinators have organised an annual two-day in-service workshops for all the Youthreach staff in the Western Area Network. The workshops form part of staff continuous professional development and the two-day workshops are mainly based around a theme that the coordinators and staff have considered important. This year, 2013, the theme was improving literacy and numeracy in the classrooms and the year previous to this was focused on dealing with challenging behaviour. Also, the workshops are an opportunity for staff to network with fellow staff members from other centres and discuss programme ideas. This two day conference is unique to the Western Area Network group.

1.5 Mentoring within a Youthreach Setting

In 2006, a SEN Initiative (SENI) was piloted in twenty Youthreach centres nationally. Presently, these are the only centres that receive the SENI funding on an annual basis. The initiative, named the 'web-wheel process', is based on a mentoring process between a staff member and the participant. Although not all centres have received funding to implement the initiative, many centres have embraced the concept of mentoring and have included it as part of the programme. However, without the funding it is very difficult to fully incorporate the SENI into centres. The mentoring process provides an opportunity for a student to discuss their issues with a member of staff and the student is assisted in the setting of realistic short, medium and long term goals which they wish to achieve while attending the programme. In this section, the concept of mentoring and the web-wheel initiative is presented.

1.5.1 Mentoring

Mentoring is not a new phenomenon, the notion of mentoring dates back to ancient Greek mythology; stemming from this, the word mentor has been used to describe someone who imparts wisdom and shares knowledge. Pask and Joy (2008, p.8) simply define a mentor as "a person who helps another to think things through". Active listening is at the heart of the process, affording a person the opportunity to speak, to think about where they are at in their lives, with a focus on future goals. Although the term mentoring carries many definitions, the point is clear, it is a one to one relationship between two people (Rhodes, 2002, Pask and Joy, 2008, Brady and Dolan, 2009). In the context of the web-wheel model each learner is assigned a member of staff who will act as their key worker or mentor. The mentor meets with the learner on a regular basis and becomes the learner's main point of contact and support. Mentors within the Youthreach setting are not expected to act as counsellors, but rather to assist and direct the learner in order to help them to develop their own personalised learning plan. The mentors or key workers guide the learners through the programme; they act as mediators between the learners and other staff members and also coordinate with the home and other agencies and services as needed.

As mentioned, the mentor and the learner work closely together, this would indicate that the relationship would focus strongly in the success or failure of such a process. Research has indicated that poor relationships or a poor match of mentor and mentee can have a negative impact on a mentoring process (Rhodes 2002, Colley 2003, Brady and Dolan 2009, Komosa-Hawkins 2010). Also, it is the case that some young people, particularly those that met the criteria of a programme such as that of Youthreach, find it more difficult to form any type of relationship, regardless of the potential correct match of mentor (Colley, 2003).

1.5.2 Profiling the Web

The profiling web wheel intervention tool is specifically designed for Youthreach, Senior Traveller Training and Community Training Centres in Ireland by Mary Gordon Senior Psychologist, National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Further Education Section, Department of Education and Science. The web wheel consists of sixteen areas of assessment (See *Figure 6* overleaf) focusing on three main aspects: educational, personal development and practical factors. The process is carried out in an interview like scenario. The interviews are between the student and a key worker. The key worker is a member of staff who builds up a relationship of trust with the student over time. The staff members are given guidelines on various approaches to profiling and are expected to deliver this in a holistic approach, where they develop an inclusive interest in all relevant aspects of the student's way of life.

Each section of the web wheel has a rating scale of 1 – 5. Gordon (2007) outlines that the main purpose is to facilitate the participant to make an evaluation based on their own interpretation of strengths or challenges in the sixteen areas. The ratings range from: 5 – being a positive strength, 4 – a situation that is not causing problems, 3 – a mild problem, 2 – a relatively serious problem and 1 – a situation that is critical and needs urgent action. This process gives the student an opportunity to reflect on themselves and identify future goals. These goals are collated in an Individual Action Plan (IAP) that is unique to each student. The plan sets out how the student is going to achieve their goals and is updated regularly.

Gordon (2007) considers the process of profiling as holistic, where aspects of the learners' vocational, personal and social development are considered and any practical factors acting as barriers are identified and counteracted through various support agencies, both internal and external of the centre.
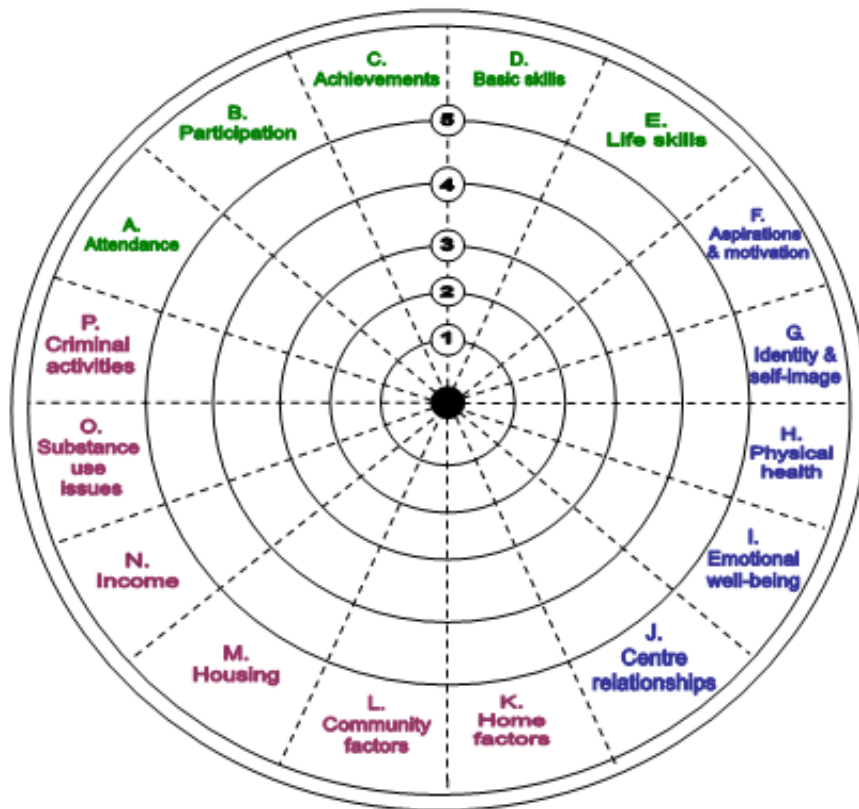
Figure 6: The Web-Wheel

The mentoring process has been operational in centres for over seven years and Gordon (2013) has evaluated the SEN initiative. The findings of the research suggest that there is clear and significant difference in the outcomes of learners across all aspects of the programme, in the twenty centres that receive the SENI funding. In particular, the report highlights that there is a noticeable difference in retention of learners in these centres as compared to other non SENI centres. Gordon (2013) also points out that the learners are more self-aware and the research findings indicate that the learners are better able to manage their emotions, acknowledge difficulties and to seek help. It is evident that this funding has been successful for these twenty centres; however, it would also imply that students not attending these particular centres are at a discernable disadvantage.

1.5.3 Soft-Skills framework

This is a new initiative that is currently being piloted in six Youthreach centres in County Meath with the support of Mary Gordon. The main rationale for this trial project is developing the well-being of Youthreach participants. It focuses on the importance of improving the life skills of participants which are regarded as being an integral part of programmes, but are rarely identified as achievements as they are difficult to measure or assess. These soft-skills are considered subjective and unique to each individual's needs. The skills may include the development of coping mechanisms, confidence, self-protection skills, assertiveness and the ability to deal with different social situations.

The main purpose of the Youthreach Soft-skills project is to identify non-quantifiable skills that are relevant to Youthreach centres, to identify effective teaching mechanisms for the soft-skills development and to provide a method for measuring and recording the progress in the development of soft-skills (Gordon, 2011). The framework comprises of three competencies and three skills, as outlined in *Figure 7* overleaf. It is envisaged that the development of these three competencies of confidence, responsibility and power will provide the learners with the capability to meet the complex demands of life. The enhancement of these competencies is achieved through learning various skills. The self-regulation, social and life skills are interwoven within the competencies. For example, the competency of confidence is linked to two skills: self-regulation and life skills. A detailed example of the framework is located in Appendix II.
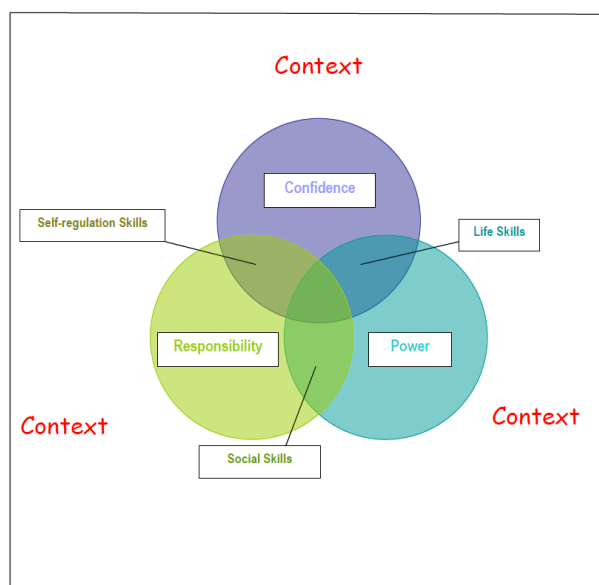
Figure 7: Soft-Skills Framework

Source: Gordon, 2011, p.10

The soft-skills of the learner will be evaluated by the staff within the centres. There is a rating scale and record form provided (See Appendix II). The ratings can be based on the overall performance of the learner within each competency area or by allocating two separate ratings to the two skills contained within each competency. The ratings are based on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the lowest level of competency rating and 10 being the highest. The scale is not based on 10 identical incremental stages; the progression from stage 1 to 2 is much greater than from stage 8 to 9. This is based on the idea that the first step to developing these skills will be the most difficult and after accomplishing the first step (moving from 1 to 2) other steps will be easier as the learner is gaining more skills as they progress. The rationale for such a programme is based on needs that have been identified in centres, by staff and through the use of the mentoring process mentioned earlier. The aims of the centres are not solely based on preparing learners for the labour market. There is a need to focus on a more holistic approach that incorporates enabling the learner to become an active citizen, an effective member of a family unit or community, to provide them with the capacity to live respectfully and be environmentally aware (Gordon, 2011). There is a clear need for the implementation of such a project within Youthreach centres. Many centres are already focused on providing a holistic approach to the students and this will provide a mechanism to evaluate and in some respects measure the outcomes of soft-skills development.

38

Conclusion

This chapter presented the nature and context of Youthreach. It provided an outline of the positioning of the programme within the Irish education system and it noted the absence of Youthreach on the diagram of the system presented by the DES (2004b). The history of Youthreach was explored and the rationale for the programme was provided. The chapter provided an insight into how the programme differs from mainstream school, both through its operations and the programmes provided. In particular, the centres cater for a smaller number of students. The smaller centres cater for up to twenty-five students and the largest centres will cater for up to fifty participants. The teacher-pupil ratio in the centres is very low 9:1 compared to 19:1 in schools. Also, the students receive a training allowance to attend the programme. Recently, the payment made to students under 18 was reduced by 60% and it now stands at €40 per week, based on full attendance. One of the major developments of the programme to date was the designation of Youthreach as 'Centres of Education' under legislation. This provided Youthreach with a defined status within the education system as previous to this, the programme was ill defined and experimental. The introduction of quality standards to the programme also enabled a more professional development of centres and Youthreach centres are now evaluated by the DES inspectorate.

To conclude the web-wheel initiative and the soft-skills project specifically designed for Youthreach was examined and relevant literature pertaining to the initiatives were considered. Also, I included the context for this research. This research is based within the Western Area Network of Youthreach centres, which comprises of twelve centres based in Galway, Mayo, Sligo and Roscommon. All coordinators were provided with an opportunity to contribute to the study and data collection took place in four centres in the network that varied in size, location and programme content.

My own view is that Youthreach is a worthwhile programme for the vast majority of students who attend. The programmes are student-centred and have a significant focus on personal development and I believe this is what makes the programmes successful. It helps the students to have belief in their own abilities and opens up possibilities that were previously shutdown in school. The programmes assist in the promotion of the self-confidence in students. The centre environment is a place

where students can achieve success and they are supported as they reconnect with the education process. However, I believe that the major problems for Youthreach centres are that they have a poor public image and there are limited progression opportunities available. Whatever success that the students feel they have achieved within the centres are often suppressed by outside influences. The good work that is being done in centres is not acknowledged or recognised as there is no continuity of provisions in place for students who leave the centres. These students find it very difficult to successfully progress on from the centres and can for a second time feel marginalised and isolated within education. There is a definite need for Youthreach centres to be recognised as a viable alternative within the education system and greater progression opportunities should be made available to those who complete the programme.

Chapter Two will present a review of the relevant literature in relation to this study.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter is divided into four main sections: my conceptual framework, the literature pertaining to educational disadvantage, early school-leaving, mental health issues and relevant research. The first section will provide an overview of my conceptual framework. The second section will examine the area of educational disadvantage and discuss its association with socio-economic groups, Bourdieu's cultural capital and Bernstein's language theory. It will also outline the DES initiatives that are currently in place and contrast this with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommendations for improving equity in education. In the second section the myriad of factors associated with early school-leaving will be discussed including home, school and personal factors. In particular, factors relating to young people and mental health issues will be explored. The notion of care in education will be presented. The final section highlights five relevant research studies pertaining to early school-leaving, all advocating the importance of participant voice.

2.1 Emerging Conceptual Framework

What is a conceptual framework and how should it be conveyed? Cohen *et al.* (2000, p.13) affirm that 'concepts enable us to impose some sort of meaning on the world; through them reality is given sense, order and coherence'. Concepts assist us in trying to understand what is happening around us: making sense of experiences. Therefore, how we view events will be influenced by the concepts we have at our disposal. A group of people may share similar concepts, however, individuals tend to have their own assortment of concepts that are used to explain their experiences and can often differ from other peoples' views of events. As identified by Cohen *et al.* (2000), concepts are needed to give a sense of order and lucidity to the research process. The researcher needs a conceptual framework to guide their research process, provide 'a set of general signposts' that connect to their field of study (Bryman, 1988, p.68). The conceptual framework is not straightforward and can adapt and alter as the research progresses. The most salient feature of a conceptual framework is brought forth by Maxwell (1996, p.35) who asserts that it must be 'constructed by the researcher not found', pieces may be borrowed to enlighten the study, but 'the coherence is something that you build on, it is not ready made'. My

conceptual framework is based on Maxwell's (1996) ideal and has been constructed from my own experience of working with early school-leavers who attend Youthreach centres and on examining the literature into what I believe provides an understanding of the phenomenon. *Figure 8* below provides a general visual overview of my conceptual framework. The diagram depicts a jigsaw puzzle image of ideas that are pertinent to this study. It gives a graphical glimpse at how the concepts and ideas intertwine to provide a conceptual image of the literature review presented in this chapter.
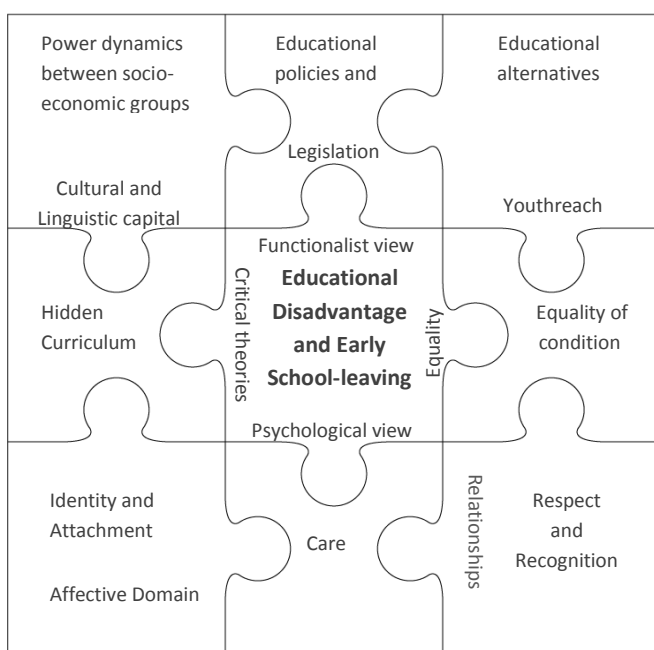
Figure 8: My Conceptual Framework

Educational disadvantage is a core concept in the framework. The reason I chose this concept is that it is defined within legislation as a means of explaining why some students do not succeed within the school system; it places a label on those who are not likely to succeed. However, it is a much contested term and is largely based on a deficit ideology. In other words, the student is considered 'deficient' because he or she does not meet the norms of the school system. The measures that are put in place to alleviate educational disadvantage are largely based on a functionalist perspective. A functionalist view of society is concerned with the issue of social order, how societies manage to persist, cohere and remain stable. The notion is that societies are striving to maintain unity around shared values and thus education would have a central role in this regard. Therefore, this means there is a view that there is

collective agreement within society on what is best in respect to education. Spring (2007) asserts that the collective view is made available by the dominant groups in society and that some groups do not benefit from this so-called collectiveness, namely lower socio-economic groups, whose voices are seldom acknowledged. The main aim of many of the measures in place is getting the students to a standard that meets the school system requirement rather than identifying how the school might change to suit these particular students. The concept of educational disadvantage is important for this study as the term is used to describe those who attend Youthreach centres and thus the concept needs to be explored in more detail to reveal whether it accurately depicts the research participants. The concept will be explored through a wider lens of education theories that include the critical theories of Bourdieu's cultural capital and Bernstein's language theory.

In addition to this, the concept of early school-leaving is an important consideration for this study. Those who attend Youthreach are considered early school-leavers even though they are continuing their education and partaking in programmes that are available in the mainstream schooling system. These concepts need to be explored to uncover or identify the reasons for early school-leaving and therefore understand why the system did not work for these particular students who are interested in gaining an education. There is much research available in terms of reasons for early school-leaving; however, I was interested in issues that have been identified by the Youthreach students when they make comparisons between mainstream school and Youthreach centres. The students highlight issues such as respect, relationships and feeling cared for as the main reasons that Youthreach works for them. These concerns will be considered through the work of critical theorist Axel Honneth and his recognition theory (Honneth, 2002); Erik Erikson's adolescence theory (Erikson, 1980) and Noddings' (2005) work on care in education. Also, based on my own experience for working in Youthreach, I believe that many of the students who join the programme are dealing with emotional and mental health issues. This is an important consideration for this study and it broadens the discussion on early school-leaving by including mental health related issues and difficulties in school relationships as key concepts for understanding the complex

phenomenon. The sections of this chapter relating to mental health and relationships are from a psychological perspective and provide a different viewpoint for understanding early school-leavers. The psychological perspective lens is used to broaden the context of the issues that impact upon a young person's education and helps to provide a more holistic view, encapsulating the wholeness of the young person. Care in education is examined as a means of providing an alternative version of an education that could be more inclusive for all students. The work of Noddings (2005) and that of Lynch and Baker (2005) provide a means of identifying the importance of equitable education that encompasses the whole person and the extension of a range of talents and abilities. Bowlby's (1990) attachment theory is included as a way of understanding the students' affiliation with Youthreach as opposed to the school system.

The concept of respect is explored through Axel Honneth's critical theory work on recognition. His theory provides a way of examining the processes of early school-leaving and the overall effects that it has on a young person's self-esteem. Honneth (2002) views self-esteem as being one of the most important aspects of existence and that it is built through the feeling of being respected. Being recognised is an important aspect of all social interactions including those within the school environment. A sense of recognition is developed through positive relationships with others and these affirming experiences enable a confident sense of self to emerge, which can continue to develop into positive feelings of self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth, 2002). However, if students are disrespected it can impact negatively upon their sense of identity and well-being in so far as they can feel stigmatised and isolated, as would be the case for many early school-leavers. Honneth (2002) identifies three interlinked forms of recognition: self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Self -confidence is developed within relationships of love and friendship, mainly by being recognised and respected by family members and friends. The experience of love helps the individual to self-love and a reciprocate love (Fleming, 2011). The denial of such experiences can lead to low self-confidence and can impact upon one's identity and emotional development. Self-respect is developed when an individual is recognised as a citizen and member of society and the absence of which can be the denial of a person's civil, social and

political rights (O'Brien, 2013). The third form of recognition is self-esteem and is based on loyalty and solidarity. Honneth (2002) asserts that self-esteem can be realised in a social community where values are shared and respected by others. In relation to education, when students' abilities and achievements are not valued, or the students are ignored or bullied, it will have a negative impact on their self-esteem and self-worth. This research is mainly concerned with the third form of recognition, self-esteem, and the forms of disrespect associated with it. Honneth's theory of recognition is an important means for understanding students who join Youthreach programmes as they will have experienced disrespect. The students' self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem will have been damaged by their mainstream schooling experience and by becoming early school-leavers.

Firstly, the concept of educational disadvantage will be explored.

2.2 Educational disadvantage

In the Irish literature, early school-leaving is closely linked to the concept of educational disadvantage. Tormey (2010) points out that it is a common term that is utilised in legislation, policy documents, literature and by teachers to describe the multifaceted events that can lead a student to disengage from education. Those who enrol on a Youthreach programme are considered to be educationally disadvantaged. Students who do not perform well at school, have poor linguistic skills, come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (see *Table 6*, p.54), and who are frequently absent from school, are often described as educationally disadvantaged. In the same way, a student with emotional or behavioural difficulties, poor social skills, members of the Travelling or migrant community or who live in a rural area, can also be described as educationally disadvantaged. Although educational disadvantage appears as a widely accepted term to use, there is no clear exact definition available and it is widely contested in the literature (Kellaghan *et al.,* 1995; Boldt *et al.,* 1998, Tormey, 2010). In order to critically assess the impact of these factors on second chance education, various features of the educational disadvantage debate need to be conveyed.

The Education Act (1998:32(9)) states that educational disadvantage is: "The impediments to education arising from social and economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in school". This legislative definition does not provide a clear understanding of the term and has been criticised by Haran (2004) and Tormey (2010) as being too broad. It does not offer any indication as to what is meant by 'appropriate benefit' or no attempt is made to identify the 'impediments to education'. Although Haran (2004) claims that the general understanding of 'appropriate benefit' is the opportunity for each student to reach their full potential. His explanation is also rather vague and there is the assumption that everyone has a similar understanding as to what constitutes a student reaching their 'full potential'. A more comprehensive explanation of educational disadvantage is presented by Boldt *et al.* (1998).

> …considered to be a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one's peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessment and expectations, which do not correspond to the student's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s)he been socialised.
>
> (Boldt *et al.,* 1998, p.10)

Therefore, one could contend that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds derive 'less benefit' from school as a result of their limited financial means and their non-school experiences being at variance with school demands and expectations. Students may not have the necessary financial resources to participate fully within the education system, ranging from not being able to afford uniforms or suitable clothing or paying for various items required for school and most definitely being unable to participate in many of the extra-curricular activities, which usually need to be subsidised by parents. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) describe this as a form of symbolic violence that the educationally disadvantaged are subjected to in schools. What separates them the most from the school system is not just the values and curriculum but their lack of financial resources to make the system work for them. This has been revealed by Tormey (2007) as a major issue within the Irish education system, where inequalities are embedded within education and it is those from lower socio-economic backgrounds that suffer the greatest inequality.

Power and Tormey (2000) identify two broad approaches used in Ireland and elsewhere, to define and measure educational disadvantage. The two approaches are:

- An outputs-led approach which focuses on setting minimum standards of attainment in education. The failure to meet these standards would result in one being deemed educationally disadvantaged.
- A comparative approach is where a comparison is made between different social groups, based on the likelihood of one group achieving the minimum standard above another group. This association can then be used to provide indicators of disadvantage.

Outputs- led approach

An example of setting a minimum standard of achievement could be reaching five passes in the Leaving Certificate. Those not reaching this minimum criterion would be considered disadvantaged. In addition to this, Kelleghan *et al.* (1995) consider that those who are poor and below this standard should also be regarded as disadvantaged. This model can be used in an effective manner by policy makers to target particular individuals and measure the levels of disadvantage in a quantifiable manner. However, there are inadequacies in such an approach. Firstly, this approach identifies an individual as disadvantaged. This approach assumes that the individual is at fault and distracts attention from the responsibilities of the education structure. Secondly, the aims of the measures in place are to reach this minimum standard; this may lead to many students not reaching their full potential. Also, it provides an opportunity for other social groups (the advantaged) to surpass the minimum, through additional qualifications (O'Sullivan, 2005). Thirdly, there is an automatic assumption that reaching the minimum standard provides protection from disadvantage. Those who obtain a Leaving Certificate may continue to be educationally disadvantaged, particularly if they are unable to access third level, due to limited finances. Fourthly, this positivist approach of assuming accurate measurement based on students reaching a minimum standard is too narrow a view and it is also the case that only the measurable outcomes of individuals will be addressed or targeted. Downes (2007, p.57) claims that there is a risk that the "most disadvantaged children and families may become filtered out of focus because it is these groups that are most resistant to measurable gains". If individuals are dependent on outcomes for funding, those who make the slowest progress or in the

most need of support may be side-lined for those who can match the outcomes more readily.

Comparative approach

This approach is not based on quantifying individual disadvantage, instead it characterises disadvantage based on a particular group's socio-economic status. Tormey (2010) identifies this as the evaluation used by many sociologists in Ireland to ascertain whether the government is successful or not in combating disadvantage. For instance, comparing the differences of participation and achievement between lower and higher socio-economic groupings, and those less likely to attain a minimum standard are considered disadvantaged. This approach is based on a functionalist view; it views individuals as having a given or fixed nature of ability that in turn will predetermine their educational requirements (Lynch, 1999). The level of achievement by the individual is deemed as fair and equitable, as these achievements are based on their 'natural ability' and effort. This measure does not consider the inequalities that exist within the system or highlight how the system is more unfair on lower socio-economic groups. Drudy and Lynch (1993) assert that this view has enabled the middle class to dominate the educational system.

These definitions and measures of educational disadvantage imply a deficit type approach to the issue, in that the circumstances of the students have led to their disadvantage in education. The presumed deficits include cultural differences, poverty, parental factors and neglect or abuse. These definitions offer a form of immunity to the education system, claiming that the impeding factors are external. This assumes that the education system is a perfect match for everyone and this may not be the case, as it is hard to argue that 'one system fits all'. The definition presented earlier by Boldt *et al.* (1998) implies that the school system suits some groups more than others. Disadvantage is a relative term, in that some students are deemed disadvantaged when compared to other students. Therefore, where there is disadvantage one can expect to find advantage. Derman-Sparks and Fite (2007, p.48) have suggested that 'advantage' is the ghost that lurks within the meaning of disadvantage'. They claim that disadvantage is a side effect of advantage. School systems are in place to serve the advantaged and the way schools are operated means that the advantaged will gain the most from them. If this is the case, how has the

education system continued to operate in such an unequal manner? It is the middle class in society that hold the majority of the power in terms of policy and change (Bourdieu 1986, Lynch 1990, Reay 2004, Tormey 2010). They are reliant on succeeding in education as a means of maintaining their privileges and power in society. There is much literature pertaining to the real objectives of the education system and not just those that are stated in educational documentation. Issues such as the hidden curriculum, ability grouping, essentialism and consensualism ideals are identified as major elements of the current education system.

The hidden curriculum consists of all that is learned during school activities which is not part of the official curriculum. It is what is conveyed about the role of the student and the role of the teacher, the relationships between students and teachers, attitudes towards learning and expectations of students. The phrase was first used by Jackson (1968) in his American based research on 'Life in classrooms'. He assumes that the school promotes the goals, cultural values and attitudes of the wider society. That is, students have to learn to conform not just to the formal rules of the school but also to the informal rules, beliefs and attitudes perpetuated through the socialisation process. Lynch (1989) does not agree with his functionalist viewpoint and points out that he does not take into account that these goals and functions of society maybe more unequal for some than others. It is the case that those who are deemed educationally disadvantaged are the type of students that Jackson (1968) did not consider. For educationally disadvantaged students the hidden curriculum can contain many elements that are in conflict with their own values and beliefs. The manner, in which one is expected to conduct oneself (Bourdieu, 1986), or the language used in the school, may be at variance to that of the home (Bernstein, 1972; Smyth, 1999a; Cregan, 2008). All of these embedded elements of the curriculum can have significant long- term, negative effects on how students' view themselves and their attitudes to learning.

The hidden curriculum is evident within the Irish education system and has managed to exist through a consenualist or functionalist view. It has been highlighted by Drudy and Lynch (1993) that the main result about functionalism in Ireland is maintaining the status quo. Societies, in particular the middle class, remain cohesive in order to maintain themselves from one generation to the next. This has continued

through the use of consensus language within policies and documentation (Drudy and Lynch, 1993 and Tormey, 2010). Spring (2007) draws attention to the fact that the collective view is provided by the dominant groups in society; those who are educated, and thus, are working for the betterment of all. However, it is clearly noted that those from lower socio-economic groups are not deriving equal benefit from the system. An example of such consensus language used by policy makers can be found in the above mentioned definition of educational disadvantage in the Education Act (1998:32(9) and in the broad approaches used for measuring educational disadvantage. Also, the greater allocation of funds to third level by the government favours the advantaged in society. Disadvantaged students are less likely to attend third level institutions and would receive no value from this substantial investment in third level education. McKeown and Clarke (2004) point out that the state provides a considerably higher per capita payment for third level as compared to primary and secondary level (no comparisons to the FE sector are made). In 2007, expenditure per student in third level education was 1.8 times greater than that of a primary student (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). This indicates that resources are disproportionately allocated to those most advantaged in society, and further impeding those who are disadvantaged.

This functionalist view has enabled the ideals of essentialism and meritocracy to exist within the education system. The essentialist view is fundamentally that individuals have a given and fixed nature of ability that will in turn predetermine their educational requirements. The level that students achieve to is perceived as fair as these achievements are based on 'natural' ability. The inequality within this is justified by basing the view on the belief that economic success depends on the possession of ability and the appropriate skills. It is based on meritocratic ideals, where it is believed that effort and ability will lead to success, regardless of socio-economic status. This view is the key to maintaining consenualism as any other theory would lead to a conflicting approach (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). However, it is clear that social class is a major determinant, as opposed to innate ability, of the level or kind of education that an individual is likely to receive (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Students from lower socio-economic groups do not perform as well as other students in the Leaving Certificate. Tovey and Share (2007) state that only 4% of

students from lower socio-economic groups leave school with five or more Leaving Certificate honours compared to over 50% of those from middle to upper class groups.

Based on the above essentialist view it is assumed that 'ability' can be appropriately assessed within the confines of the curriculum and thus students are placed in different groups or streams based on their perceived 'ability'. It is common to have three different streams to correspond to the level at which examinations are held; students can be placed in higher, ordinary or foundation streams. Students in higher streams are more likely to take subjects at higher level, while students in lower streams typically sit examinations at ordinary and foundation levels. Drudy and Lynch (1993) state that due to this understanding of ability as innate; teachers believe that certain students will have certain limits. Numerous studies confirm that lower streams have exceptionally higher allocations of students from lower socio-economic groups as compared to the higher streams that contain a higher proportion of middle-class students (Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Lynch, 1999; Smyth, 1999a; Lyons, 2003; Dunne, 2010). The literature is imbued with justifications for such allocations, in particular that the system is fair and just as it is based on 'ability' level. Lynch and Lodge (2002, p.49) have argued the point that "'ability' is just a euphemism for class" and that it is utilised to perpetuate privilege.

This suggests that the background of individuals is as important as their aptitude in relation to streaming practices. This makes it very difficult for the students in lower streams, namely the lower socio-economic groups to effectively gain from the meritocratic ideology. Those in lower streams do not tend to sit examinations at higher level and this limits their opportunities for progression to third level. This may be the least of their worries as many of the lower streams drop out of the system after completing the Junior Certificate and never complete the Leaving Certificate. What is most disturbing is Toomey's (1974, p.36) assertion that "schools have the power to label children in a way that profoundly affects their life chances and the large majority of children and parents accept this labelling process". His statement suggests that certain groups feel like outright failures and accept it as fate and believe others deserve to succeed more than they do. Students in these lower streams often feel like failures, they tend to have a poor self-image and have lower expectations of

themselves as a result of being placed in lower streams (Lyons, 2003). While schools are embracing the concept of mixed ability classes, it has proved difficult for teachers on a practical level. The examination structure is based on different levels as opposed to a common level and teachers and schools are under pressure to achieve good academic results (Kinsella, 2009). The principles of mixed ability classes conflicts with the exam-driven nature of the current education system.

Although the middle class students dominate within the Irish education system, the justification for maintaining the current education structure has been more difficult to sustain. Research carried out by the Educational Disadvantage Committee (2005) recognises that the use of policy informed by the deficit model of disadvantage as a strategy is inadequate and obsolete. This vision is supported by Spring (2007, p.8) affirming that "the call for a radical shift in how we approach tackling educational disadvantage requires fundamental restructuring of the education system". One of the first steps she outlines is the removal of the deficit language associated with disadvantage from policies and practices. She advocates the use of more positive type language as a means of tackling inequality in education. The use of positive language, such as 'equity in education' is becoming a more popular choice of terminology utilised in some policy documentation (Field *et al.,* 2007). Although, Drudy and Lynch (1993) advocate equality of opportunity for all within the education system, they have contention with the manner in which the terms are utilised. They assert that the interchangeable use of the terms 'equity' and 'equality' has led to "ambiguity and differences in interpretation" throughout policies and documents (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p.35). The terms are often used in reference to a functionalist perspective that inequality is a normal part of society and therefore the problems of equality are not adequately addressed. While the use of more positive terms to address the inequality in education is an important step, there is a need to transform the manner in which the system operates and create a more holistic approach to equality.

Equality of Condition

Lynch and Baker (2005) present the concept of 'equality of condition' as an approach to creating a more egalitarian education system. In their view, equality is considered as a means of making people as equal as possible in all conditions of their lives.

> Equality of condition is not about trying to make inequalities fairer, or giving people a more equal opportunity to become unequal, but about ensuring that everyone has roughly equal prospects for a good life.
>
> (Lynch and Baker, 2005, p.132)

This equality of condition as outlined above is based on five key elements: resources; respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning. Equality of resources is not only defined by economic capital but by having all the necessary resources that help promote a better life: income, social and cultural capital, healthy living and clean environment. The elements of respect and recognition are closely linked to the ideals of Honneth (2002) and the notion of the individual being respected and recognised regardless of their background or origin. Lynch and Baker (2005) focus on the affective domain and discuss the significance of love, care and solidarity becoming an integrated part of the educational experience. They consider the importance of creating caring environments and teaching young people to become more caring and relational beings. The importance of being cared for also resonates with the works of Honneth (2002) and Noddings (2005) and is considered particularly vital for the emotional and mental wellbeing of young people. Their views focus on the emotional aspects within education and make a case for the inclusion of emotions into the curriculum in order that students can become more caring individuals within society and have a sense of solidarity as opposed to solely focusing on academic achievement.

The fourth element of equality of condition considers the reduction of the power imbalance that exists among different social groups within society and schools. The disparity of power is evidenced within the education system by the value placed on material and cultural resources which are unequally distributed to those from upper and middle class groupings (Bourdieu, 1986). The work and learning

element is also an important consideration for improving equality and is intrinsically linked with the other four elements. Lynch and Baker (2005) make the point that everyone has the right to some form of work that is enjoyable and can create a sense of satisfaction. This can empower people and improve their overall sense of self. In addition to this, creating a learning environment that engages young people in the joy of learning, and does not solely focus on preparing people for work is viewed as a necessary condition for improving equality.

The concept of equality of condition provided by Lynch and Baker (2005) is a broad reaching approach that considers restructuring the current inequitable education system into a system that neutralises social class groups. It has a concerted emphasis on preparing students to become active members in society, in addition to preparing them for academic achievement. Equality of condition is moving away from the traditional assessment of 'ability' by means of mathematical and linguistic intelligences and is progressing towards a system that will embrace a wide range of intelligences and abilities that the current system does not value or assess (Gardner, 1983, Goleman, 1996). Lynch and Baker's work provides a convincing case for a more holistic education system that is not just about enabling greater access and participation to an unequal education system but is about restructuring the system so that it becomes more inclusive for all groups. Reay (2012, p.587), within the United Kingdom context, refers to this as creating a 'socially just education system". She stresses that:

> Tinkering with an unjust educational system is not going to transform it into a just system. What we need are totally different ways of envisioning education, ones that enable a move beyond narrow secular self-interests and economic ends.

<div align="right">(Reay, 2012, p.589)</div>

There is a need to move away from confining education to one type of school system, the way we think about participating in education needs to change. The school system cannot continue to deem students as educationally disadvantaged because they do not meet the criteria defined by the upper social classes. Schools should not have the power to value some students more than others.

2.3 Indicators of educational disadvantage

Educational disadvantage continues to be a contested term within the context of the Irish education system. However, for this research, the term 'educational disadvantage' will be maintained in order to describe the inequities that exist in the system. The ideas of Lynch and Baker (2005) and Reay (2012) are not visible within the current education system in Ireland and are overpoweringly hindered by the following factors pertaining to educational disadvantage: socio-economic status and poverty; cultural capital and language barriers. I do not contend that these are the only factors, but I consider them to be a selection of the prime factors associated with disadvantage that are pertinent to this study and have been identified throughout the literature.

2.3.1 Socio-economic Status

National and international research findings clearly indicate that it is predominantly students from lower socio-economic groups that do not succeed within education (Anyon, 1981; Mehan, 1992; Kellaghan *et al*., 1995; Boldt *et al*., 1998; Boldt, 1997; Tett and Crowther, 1998; Lynch, 1999; McCoy *et al.,* 2007a; Paterson and Iannelli, 2007; Barnardos, 2009; Smyth and McCoy, 2009; Byrne and Smyth, 2010; NESSE, 2010). The central statistics office (CSO) (2013) provides socio-economic groups and social class as two main classification criteria. Social class is divided into seven main categories. The occupations included in each of these groups have been assigned in such a way as to bring together, as far as possible, people with similar levels of occupational skill. Socio-economic grouping describes those with similar social and economic statuses on the basis of the level of skill or educational attainment required. Illustrated in *Table 6* overleaf is a common division of social class used in Ireland. The researcher has subdivided the seven categories into two main divisions; upper-middle class grouping and lower socio-economic grouping in order to aid readership throughout this study.

Social class groups		Socio economic groupings
1	Professional workers	Upper and middle class grouping
2	Managerial and technical	
3	Non-manual	
4	Skilled manual	
5	Semi-skilled	Lower socio-economic grouping
6	Unskilled	
7	All other gainfully occupied and unknown	

Table 6: Ireland's social class grouping

Source: CSO, 2013

The correlation between socio-economic status and educational outcome is frequently depicted using measures such as; parents' level of education, their occupation and the household income (Kelleghan *et al.,* 1995; Byrne *et al*., 2008, Smyth and McCoy 2009). *Table 7* below represents the highest level of school attainment based on parents' socio-economic position.

	No Qualification	Junior Cert.	LC Est.	LCA	LCVP
Farmer/agricultural	2.0	9.1	47.0	5.2	36.8
Higher/lower professional	1.1	5.4	68.5	1.2	23.8
Employer/ Manager	0.3	7.8	74.4	1.1	16.4
Intermediate/ other non-manual	2.3	15.2	58.0	4.8	19.7
Skilled/ semi/ unskilled manual	2.4	13.6	49.0	6.9	28.1
Unemployed	12.3	21.3	30.5	7.1	28.8
Other/Unknown	3.7	15.6	52.6	6.4	21.7
Total	*2.2*	*11.9*	*58.2*	*4.2*	*23.5*

Table 7: Stage left school by socio-economic background, 2007 – by parental occupation

Source: Byrne *et al.,* 2008, p.12

Table 7 on Page 57 clearly shows that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to leave education without completing a Leaving Certificate. In particular it shows that students from lower socio-economic groups are twice as likely to leave school without a qualification as compared to those from upper or middle-class groupings. A large proportion of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are noted as completing the LCA. Students who complete the LCA cannot progress directly to third level. They would have to follow the Post-Leaving Certificate route. This could reduce the likelihood of some students entering third level. Those that do complete the Leaving Certificate established are less likely to take higher level subjects, which will once again limit their future options (Byrne *et al.,* 2008). The Leaving Certificate examination is structured to benefit those with the greatest wealth and other forms of capital. Students from middle and upper class groups are up to six times more likely to achieve five or more Leaving Certificate honours as compared to students from lower socio-economic groups (Tovey and Share, 2007; Byrne *et al.,* 2008). The middle and upper classes have the resources to 'buy' the education required to achieve success in terms of private schooling and extra tuition in the forms of grinds and grind schools. The parents see this as an investment in their child's future, gaining them the comforts and lifestyles to which they have become accustomed. While the students from lower socio-economic groupings often do not have the economic resources to fully participate in the educational process and would not be in a position to avail of additional tuition services.

The lack of income and resources is evident among lower socio-economic groups. People are said to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in Irish society (Walsh, 2007). In recent austere times, poverty has become a reality for many families. Severe budget cuts in family allowances and school supports have hindered families that were already struggling to provide for their school going children. The right to be provided with education is embedded within the Irish Constitution 42.4 (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937) and the Government's Investment in Education Schemes made provision for the availability of free education up to third level (Cheney, 2005). However, the 2012 school cost survey compiled by

Barnardos, provides a rather different view of the free education system (Barnardos, 2012). This survey claims that parents spend on average, €355 per annum, for a child in senior infants and up to €770 per annum, for a child entering first year at secondary level on school books, uniforms and voluntary contributions. The term voluntary contribution is regarded by many of the parents in the survey as more of a compulsory contribution and not paying it may mean that their children may be excluded for various activities. These hidden costs of education are a clear example of what Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) referred to as a form of symbolic violence that is being done to those who have low incomes and can detach them from the system. Whereas the cost of spending €11 per school week on a child may not seem excessive, it can in some cases be the difference of not being able to afford the essentials. Children may be malnourished in the home in order for a parent to manage their school expenses. However, this is not a long term solution as the issue intensifies as the child progresses through the system; often leading to ill health, absenteeism and early school-leaving, substance misuse and crime (Flynn, 2007). In that respect, the initial sacrifices made for the child's education would be considered worthless as the end result would be unchanged.

Education is viewed as a means of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. In order for this to happen, these groups need to be able to participate and succeed in education. Flynn (2007, p.92) contends that targeted investments are needed "from the cradle" for the long term development of children living in poverty. Early childhood education is asserted as a key component in tackling poverty and social deprivation and in turn educational disadvantage (Sweeney, 2007; Field *et al.,* 2007; Barnardos, 2009). The provisions of adequate supports for various students' needs must be in place at the outset. Primary education is the foundational basis for all other education and without it, students will continue to struggle, feel alienated from school and early school-leaving will persist. Reay (2012) contends that education cannot solve the problems of society and there needs to a clear focus on reducing the gap between the rich and poor in order for schools to become more socially just for all.

2.3.3 Cultural capital

> 'No child fails to learn from school. Those who never get in learn that
> the good things of life are not for them. Those who drop out early learn
> that they do not deserve the good things in life. The later dropouts learn
> that the system can be beat, but not by them. All of them learn that
> school is the path to secular salvation and resolve that their children shall
> climb higher on the ladder than they did.'
>
> (Reimer, 1971, p.15)

Everett Reimer's and Ivan Illich's ideas on alternatives in education in the 1960s and
70s still bear resonance in Irish schools today. Illich (1970) asserted that universal
schooling cannot meet the needs of everyone and it will ultimately result in serving
the most affluent groups in society. Illich (1970, p.6) claimed that "even with
schools of equal quality a poor child can seldom catch up with a rich one", they don't
have the understanding or the educational opportunities that are available to
wealthier families. This is linked to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital,
which provides an explanation for educational performance as linked to family
culture.

Bourdieu (1986, p.17) utilises the term cultural capital to "explain the unequal
scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by
relating academic success…to the distribution of cultural capital between the
classes…". He claimed that cultural capital was not evenly distributed throughout
the population and that dominant social classes possess much greater quantities.
According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) children of higher socio-economic status
backgrounds have a cultural understanding that is on par with the educational system
which gives them an advantage over the lower socio-economic groups, who are
inevitably at a disadvantage. This leads to significant inequalities in terms of
educational outcomes, as is the case in the Leaving Certificate examination.
Although Bourdieu (1986) does not provide an exact definition of the term 'cultural
capital' he asserts that there are three main forms: the embodied state; the objectified
state and the institutionalised state. The embodied state constitutes the visible
indication of one's social class that is transmitted from one generation to the next,
dispositions of mind and body, such as linguistic abilities, tone, accent and ways of
holding one's body. These are usually passed on from one generation to the next.
The objectified state which includes material objects, such as books and art

appreciation that are made available to children and valued within the education system. The institutionalised state includes educational credentials which are recognised as essential in maintaining social status, an example of which may include attending a renowned private school or completing third level education in 'Trinity'. According to Bourdieu (1986) schools reward the possession of cultural capital which makes the system unequal for students from lower socio-economic groups and therefore it makes it very difficult for them to succeed in education.

The educational attainment levels and economic status of parents can be observed as significant in regards to children's educational performance (Breen and Whelan, 1996). McCoy *et al.* (2007a) note a strong correlation between those who leave school early and whose fathers are unemployed; this is particularly the case among young males. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) suggest that the educational achievement of parents is the chief indicator of cultural capital that a family can bestow to their children. The more closely the cultural experience in the home matches the school experience, the more likely a student is to succeed in school. One must consider that the school system is designed by the dominant groups who define what counts as important; the system accords to the forms of cultural capital highly valued by these groups (Giroux, 2001). Students whose family backgrounds do not concur with this valued cultural capital are at a discernible disadvantage. Bourdieu (1986) proposes that the student's 'habitus', their way of being and knowing, will impact on their success or failure within the 'field' or in this case the school system.

> …when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted.
>
> (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127)

Students from lower socio-economic groups often feel like 'fish out of water' in school and cannot contend with the disparities that exist. However, this should not be considered as a deterministic case for all, as some students from lower socio-economic groups can transform and change, allowing the new setting to become part of their evolving habitus (Giroux, 2001). Also, it may be the case that students would decide to resist or rebel against the system. Willis (1977) presents the concept of resistance theory. His study is of twelve working class boys who rebel against the

schooling system. The boys resist the school culture and the probable future that it holds for them. They drop out of school early to take up low skilled employment and with that, they believe that they have made their own choice for the future rather than the school making it for them. Willis (1977) suggests that the working class boys are more inclined to resist the educational system, as they deem that the basis of the system is flawed, and conclude that regardless of effort or ability they will not be able to succeed. Smyth and Hattam (2001, p.406) refers to these types of students as "self-assuredly assertive in challenging what they perceived to be the academic injustices of schooling" that have been imposed by the dominant groups. The ideals of Willis' boys resemble the participants of this study who felt that mainstream schooling did not represent any part of who they were and what they wanted to become. The participants resisted the process and sought an alternative route in Youthreach. These are the types of students that are not being represented by the current education system and their voices and views are needed in order to reach towards educational equality.

Language as part of cultural capital

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital incorporates the idea of linguistic capital. Language is an integral part of culture; it is how one communicates and presents thoughts and ideas. It is an important element within education and much academic achievement is based on linguistic ability. However, not all linguistic abilities are valued within society and some are regarded as inferior language variations. The underachievement of many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds has often been connected with the students having inadequate language skills (Clegg and Ginsborg, 2006). These students tend to come to school and feel as though they do not fit in, as the language used in the school varies considerably from their 'habitus': the language styles of their home environment.

Bernstein (1974) proposed that there are two main forms of language, the restricted code and the elaborated code. The students from lower socio-economic backgrounds mainly have restricted code type language, which consist of simple statements and questions. It may often be the case that these students are not familiar with reading books or it may be the case that their parents cannot read or write. Therefore the parent cannot help the child to develop their language and this may cause a language

delay problem when a child starts school. Whereas their middle-class counterparts and the school system makes use of the more elaborated language code, which is richer and possesses more advanced logical operations. Bernstein (1974) believed that the school required this elaborated code and students would not be successful if they did not use or understand this type of language. Also, it may be the case that teachers consider these students less able, due to their restricted code type language and thus leading to lower expectations, both by the student and the teachers.

Mac Ruairc (2009) in his research on linguistic variations in primary schools critically assessed the results of standardised tests in relation to the attainment levels of different social groups. He noted that the tests bore resonance with the middle and upper classes and the majority of students from lower socio-economic groups struggled with the linguistic requirements of the tests. The same tests, Drumcondra reading tests to grade literacy levels, were used by Smyth and McCoy (2009, p.9) on first-year secondary school students. The results indicated that there was a significant variation in the literacy levels among the different socio-economic groups. Students from lower socio-economic groups had a mean score of 25 and 28, while those from higher professional backgrounds had a mean score of 43. The DES (2011) report supports this point, specifying that one in three children from disadvantaged backgrounds has serious difficulties with reading or writing. The report also states that even though additional resources have been put in place, the figure has remained virtually unchanged over the past thirty years. Mac Ruaric (2009) contends that the school code is consistent with the dominant group and that they gain advantage over the lower socio-groups. He claims that this process has prevailed as being legitimate through a functionalist view, as the schools are testing what should be tested (Mac Ruairc, 2009, p.133). However, it is the case that this is a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977) that is imposed on the lower socio-economic group by the dominant groups by deeming the criteria for testing linguistic capabilities as fair and equitable. Also, it is the case that the linguistic variations of the lower socio-economic groups are not valued or recognised within the school system and this has cultural and identity implications which can lead to disengagement from the schooling process.

Language is a main part of who a person is; it is the main means of communication throughout life, from infancy throughout our life cycle. One must question whether it is fair and equitable to expect students to change their sense of identity and their linguistic style in order to meet the demands of a school system that has been designed by a dominant group and which bears no resemblance to the student? Mac Ruairc (2011) stresses that conforming to one particular language style has a negative impact on a student's sense of self and can lead to outright disengagement from the school process. Therefore, the sole use of elaborated codes in schools has the potential to disadvantage students as opposed to students being disadvantaged by not having the elaborated language codes. In order to make the schooling system equal there needs to be respect for a range of language variation and not just those of the dominant group in society. This correlates with a study carried out by Cregan (2008) who states that there are language variations in school and this is how they should be regarded - as variations.

> To 'ignore the difference that differences make' can only compound disadvantage. Difference, if acknowledged, accepted, celebrated, and incorporated into children's experience of school, can only liberate.
>
> (Cregan, 2008, p.189)

This links in with Lynch and Baker's (2005) equality of condition where all students' capabilities should be valued and recognised. In order to help students, schools should not just focus on literacy development but readily engage with the development of oral language skills. A similar sentiment is also suggested by Corson (1988) who suggests that oral language can compensate for the lack of written skills and that students should be given the opportunity to engage in talk. He also states that students' oral language can be more advanced than their reading and writing skills and therefore it would be beneficial to focus on that. It can open up the world to the students and as Corson (1988) points out, the development of oral language is strongly connected with personal growth and potential. These ideas for possible changes in the education system consist of a broader conceptual framework than that currently envisaged by the DES, where the measures to alleviate educational disadvantage are too narrowly focused (Mac Ruairc, 2009).

2.4 DES initiatives to improve educational disadvantage

In Ireland, since the 1960s *Investment in Education,* the DES has developed numerous policies and provisions to address educational disadvantage and ultimately early school-leaving. The main measures are undertaken at primary and secondary level, however, in recent years provisions have been made through second chance education (Boldt *et al.,* 1998). The measures are mainly based within a functionalist, meritocratic perspective and therefore are focused on improving students' participation in school rather than considering the wider complexities of the issue of educational disadvantage (Mac Ruairc, 2009).

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

In 2005, the DES launched an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. This led to the introduction of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) in 2006/2007. This is one of the main initiatives, operational in 200 second level schools and 680 primary schools nationally, to combat educational disadvantage. Previous initiatives such as Disadvantaged Area Scheme, Breaking the Cycle and Giving Children an Even Break, Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and School Completion Programme (SCP) were subsumed into the DEIS (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). The aim of the DEIS is a continuation of these previous approaches: additional financial investments to programmes; increased curricular choice; professional development for staff; supporting school attendance; improving literacy and numeracy levels and on-going review and monitoring of initiatives (Lalor *et al.,* 2007).

Schools that are identified as 'disadvantaged' in terms of the student profile, receive additional teacher allocation and extra funding per student. Eligibility for DEIS provisions are evaluated according to socioeconomic characteristics and educational variables of the students attending a particular school. These factors include unemployment, housing, medical card holders and literacy and numeracy levels (Weir, 2011). However, this initiative has received some criticism in the literature. Smyth and McCoy (2009) claim that criteria for targeting DEIS schools are an issue. In particular, principals may not have all the socioeconomic information of the students and therefore have to estimate the numbers of students that match the various categories. This could lead to over/under estimating in some cases. While

the DEIS initiative is largely based on functionalist ideals of getting students to reach a minimum standard of education, the approach for doing so was a more flexible approach that enabled schools at a local level to have some autonomy over how they would plan and implement the measures (Mac Ruairc, 2009). This was an important consideration, as there was sense that different schools needed different measures, for instance urban and rural schools may need different resources to help students achieve in school. Although DEIS schools have been praised for their success in providing greater opportunity for students, there are some negative connotations associated with being designated as a disadvantaged school.

There has been concerns over the "ghettoisation" of DEIS schools in comparison to non-DEIS schools (Barnardos, 2009, p.12). In recent years, principals of schools designated as DEIS have witnessed a reduction in numbers attending the schools and a change in the profile of students that enrol (Barnardos, 2009). DEIS schools are more likely to have a higher percentage of students with physical and learning disabilities, behavioural difficulties and students from the Traveller and migrant communities, than non DEIS schools. Many non-DEIS school are oversubscribed, while DEIS schools can accept all who apply. The large proportions of students with difficulties in these schools are deemed to have an impact on educational development and school climate (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Also, Smyth and McCoy (2009) assert that not all disadvantaged students attend DEIS schools. These particular students are therefore not receiving any additional supports at second level and are more susceptible to early school-leaving.

National Education Welfare Board (NEWB)
The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 introduced legislation to govern attendance in school. In 2002, the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) was established to try and tackle the issue of poor attendance. An Education Welfare Officer (EWO) is to intervene if a student's attendance level falls below a threshold of twenty days. The NEWB places the onus on parents to ensure that their child attends school. High levels of student absenteeism may result in court proceeding for the parents involved (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). In 2009/2010 academic year, almost 60,000 of students' surveyed missed more than 20 days. And students in DEIS designated schools were almost twice as likely to miss 20 days or more than students from other schools

(Millar, 2012). Initially, the function of the NEWB solely focused on the days missed by students and did not consider the possible root of the problem of poor attendance. Students continued to miss days and the approach was considered to be largely ineffective. In 2009, the NEWB proposed a more holistic approach to student attendance, retention and participation. The remit of the NEWB now extends to the HSCL, SCP and the Visiting Teacher Services for Travellers (VTST).

- Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) was introduced in 1991 to support students and their families. The HSCL teachers' work with parents to assist them in becoming more involved with schools and with their children's education by organising local activities such as homework clubs. The HSCL teachers also assist students with any problems they may be having in school, home or wider community (NYCI, 2001).

- School Completion Programme (SCP) has been in existence since 2002. It provides additional resources in and out of school to those most 'at risk' of leaving school early (O'Dwyer, 2004). The SCP is a collaborative response which works alongside the HSCL and other relevant voluntary and community bodies to provide necessary supports for students to remain in school. Although, almost 20% of all students in primary and secondary level are participating in this initiative there has been no evaluation of the programme (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Also, recent government cuts had a direct impact on this programme, which will have a bearing on its overall effectiveness.

One year after the launch of the integrated approach, government cut backs removed the HSCL and VTST services. This has been a regressive step for the NEWB, which will mean that the board will continue to be understaffed and underdeveloped. The NEWB will only be able to operate as a reactive measure, dealing with crucial cases and overlooking many students (Barnardos, 2009).

Curricular innovations
Over the past 17 years the government has introduced two programmes aimed at targeting educationally disadvantaged students, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) and the LCA. The JCSP was introduced in 1996 with the aim of providing an alternative Junior Certificate programme for those who are at risk of

leaving school early. It is available in all DEIS schools, a number of special schools and detention centres and it has also been introduced to some Youthreach centres nationally (Cassidy, 2012). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2010) purports that the programme was designed to provide a more flexible, student centred approach, to teaching and learning. The aim of which is to improve the students' experiences of school. It is primarily focused on literacy and numeracy development with an additional emphasis on the development of a student's social and personal skills. There has been no complete evaluation carried out on the programme and therefore it is difficult to gauge its effectiveness. However, findings from Cassidy's (2012) doctoral study on the impact of the JCSP literacy indicated that there was a significant improvement in reading ages of students. The improvements were found in schools that fostered a whole school approach to developing reading.

The LCA programme (as outlined on page 27 of this study) is in place since 1999, to offer an alternative route to students that are not served by the traditional Leaving Certificate (Lalor *et al*., 2007). The approach to teaching and learning in the LCA is similar to the JCSP. Those that complete the JCSP would be more suited to follow the route of the LCA at senior cycle. However, the LCA programme is not available in all schools that offer the JCSP and this can pose a problem for those students progressing to senior cycle. The traditional Leaving Certificate will not meet their needs or resemble any of the elements of the JCSP. Therefore, these students may not be able to cope with the different approach and as a result, end up leaving school. Also, those that progress through the LCA are at a disadvantage. The LCA programme does not have the prestige of the traditional Leaving Certificate and does not fulfil the requirement for entry to third level (Lalor *et al*., 2007). Therefore, these students can then be further disadvantaged by having limited options available to them.

Alternatives to School

Youthreach is regarded as the only DES alternative to school. It was set up in 1988 to cater for students who left post-primary education without qualifications. The main aim of the programme is to offer support and qualifications to early school-leavers, to increase their employment opportunities and further education prospects

(Stokes, 2000). The various advantages and disadvantages of the Youthreach programme are highlighted and discussed throughout this study. However, it is worth noting again here, that Youthreach is regarded largely as a reactive measure that caters for students who leave mainstream schooling early and is not considered a true alternative to school or identified as a significant element within the education system. Students who attend Youthreach centres continue to be regarded as early school-leavers and this alone devalues the programme and the students' achievements and successes.

These initiatives provide an overview of the Government's attempt to alleviate educational disadvantage within schools. Many of the initiatives have been noted in the literature as being partially successful in helping students overcome issues relating to educational disadvantage in schools (Barnardos, 2009; Smyth and McCoy, 2009; Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Cassidy, 2012). However, some of the programmes have not been fully reviewed and evaluated and the overall impact of these programmes remains unknown. Also, it is the case that not all students who are deemed educationally disadvantaged are targeted under these initiatives and therefore the overall impact cannot be fully assessed. The recent government cuts removed some of these programmes, like the HSCL scheme, which will have a further negative impact on the continuity of provisions for students. Also, Barnardos (2009) indicates that the programmes lack a continuity of support, which can be damaging to a child when they do not receive on-going support throughout their schooling years.

The fragmented nature of the programmes is less beneficial to the students than a more holistic approach to tackling educational disadvantage. Much of the programmes in place are based on quantitative measures, providing extra funding and resources to schools without ever looking at or investigating the real needs of the individual students or focusing on making the schools more inclusive. The term 'educational disadvantage' continues to exist as a contentious phrase within the literature. There has been very little research in Ireland dedicated to defining educational disadvantage; much of the research has focused on identifying factors that relate to educational disadvantage and proposing measures to alleviate the perceived problem. All of which have fallen short of reaching 'equality of condition'

(Lynch and Baker, 2005) or to becoming 'socially just schools' (Reay, 2012). One must question how a problem can be solved without fully clarifying what that initial problem entails.

The alleviation of educational disadvantage is an international focus. The OECD introduced a ten step framework in 2007 to help countries work towards overcoming school failure. The recent cuts to education in Ireland could have a detrimental effect on achieving the aims of the proposed plan. These proposed measures have a broader perspective than the above functionalist approach to targeting inequality within the Irish context.

2.4.1 Current OECD recommendations for equity in education

Recent policy recommendations in the OECD report by Field, Kuczera and Pont (2007) '*No more failures'* provide ten key steps to equity in education. Although the framework omits a vital focus by not explicitly identifying the emotional elements associated with early school leaving as a key step, it proposes some essential changes for the current education system (Downes, 2011). The ten steps are understood to be founded on the basic principles of fair and inclusive education and are more aligned to the ideals of Lynch and Baker's (2005) equality of condition presented earlier. In that, the personal and social circumstances of a student should not be an impeding factor in their educational experience and that each student should attain a minimum standard of education. The policy centres on three key areas of development for education systems: design, practices and resourcing (Field *et al.,* 2007). Presented below and overleaf is an outline summary of these ten measures.

Design

• *Step 1*: *Limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection.* Reduce ability groupings in early secondary education, providing comprehensive education for all up to the age of 15.

• *Step 2: Manage school choice* as more school choice selection leads to greater social separation.

• *Step 3: Develop inclusive upper secondary education* – smooth transitions between the different levels of education, availability of more alternatives to mainstream schools and enhanced mobility between different educational tracks.

Provision of a more flexible and diverse curriculum. Better links with the world of work and more guidance and counselling services.

• *Step 4: Provide second chances and remove dead ends* – a focus on lifelong learning and removing blocks to continuing in education. Provide recognition for prior learning (RPL) for skills gained by adults outside of educational settings.

Practices

• *Step 5: Help those falling behind* – reducing year repetition by students, provide more formative assessments and reading strategies in the classroom, with extra training and support for teachers.

• *Step 6: Reach out to homes*

• *Step 7: Respond to diversity and provide for the successful inclusion of migrants and minorities within mainstream education.*

Resourcing

• *Step 8: Give priority to early childhood and basic education*

• *Step 9: Direct resources to needy areas and schools*

• *Step 10: Target equity particularly related to low school attainment and dropout*

This framework is focusing on a more equitable education system and a move towards more socially just schools (Reay, 2012). The focus of the OECD recommendations is on changing the current school system structure, transforming the practices in place and adjusting the methods of resourcing. Step 3 proposes the development of a more inclusive upper secondary education that provides more alternatives to mainstream and enhances mobility between different educational tracks. It also proposes a more flexible and diverse curriculum with greater links with the world of work and more guidance and counselling services. This measure provides an approach that would open up the current system and provide more opportunities and outlets for students than that which is currently available. It identifies clearly a significant element which is missing from the current Irish education system: viable options within upper mainstream education. The DES engaged with the OECD recommendations and provided a policy response to the proposed framework.

2.4.2 Irish response to overcoming school failure document

In 2011, the DES published a policy response to the OECD ten steps framework. Three new actions measures are identified: discussion paper on school enrolment, intercultural education strategy and universal free preschool year, as presented in *Table 8* below. Other measures that are identified as meeting the OECD framework have been present in policies prior to 2007, with only minor adjustments being made to these measures. Although Field *et al*. (2007) did not refer to Ireland as a definitive example of providing equity in education in their report, Ireland's response has been relatively minimal. Also, what may be considered challenging to justify is the DES' recent decision to cut the guidance and counselling services provided in second level schools. The decision is puzzling as guidance and counselling was explicitly identified in step 3 of the framework as a measure to alleviate inequity in education.

OECD Steps	Irish policy response
1 and 2	Discussion paper on a regulatory framework for school enrolment (2011)
3 and 4	Youthreach, Back to Education Initiative (3,000 additional places in 2011), Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), SOLAS (replacing FÁS), Post Leaving certificate (PLC) programme (1,000 additional places in 2011) and Adult literacy and community education.
5, 6, 9 and 10	DEIS action plan for educational inclusion (2006)
7	Traveller education strategy (2006) and Intercultural education strategy (2010)
8	Universal free preschool year in early childhood care and Education (ECCE) (2010)

Table 8: DES response to OECD 10 step framework

Source: DES, 2011, pp. 60-72

This response by the DES appears to be more of an attempt to match existing programmes to the criteria presented by the OECD than endeavouring to improve educational disadvantage. Furthermore, the framework and the response are largely

focused on educational attainment. Barnardos (2009) indicates that little is being done to focus on the child's emotional and behavioural problems. Although the initiatives introduced are worthwhile, there is a need for a more integrated approach to dealing with early school-leaving. The concept of early school-leaving will now be discussed in more detail.

2.5 Early school-leaving

Early school-leaving is closely linked to educational disadvantage. While it may often be described as an indicator of educational disadvantage one must similarly consider early school-leaving to be a detrimental effect of being disadvantaged. In this section issues pertaining to early school-leaving will be discussed, drawing on the theoretical framework of educational disadvantage delineated in the previous section.

Byrne *et al*. (2008) School-leavers' Survey Report for 2007 indicates that each year in Ireland, more than 9,000 students leave school without completing their Leaving Certificate. Approximately 1,000 students do not transfer from primary school, 2% (1,400) of these students leave school with no qualification and 12% (7,400) leave with just a Junior Certificate qualification. From those that complete their Junior Certificate, 6% (446) receive less than five passes in their examinations. The report also shows, as is highlighted throughout the literature (Kelleghan *et al.,* 1995; Boldt, 1997; Lynch, 1999; Smyth, 1999b) that a large proportion of the students who leave school early or perform poorly in examinations are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Also, the report indicates that early school-leaving retention rates have remained problematic, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The levelling off of retention rates within post-primary schools over the past ten years is a notable finding, if one is to consider the amount of resources and investments that have been initiated to combat early school-leaving. For example, the setting up of the NEWB, Educational Disadvantage Committee, HSCL scheme, JCSP and DEIS. Although, all of these have been extremely important and necessary initiatives in maintaining a consistent level of 79-83.5% Leaving Certificate completion rates for over a decade, the fact still remains that over 20% of students

from lower socio-economic groups leave school without a Leaving Certificate. However, as indicated in the previous section there is an explicit need to focus on a more holistic approach to dealing with educational disadvantage and thus early school-leaving (Lynch and Baker, 2005; Mac Ruairc, 2009; Reay, 2012). Early school-leaving is a complex issue and there is no simple explanation as to why some students do not complete post-primary schooling. This has been part of the problem in trying to find solutions to the on-going challenges faced by those within the realms of the education system. The European Commission (2011) published an agenda for 2020 with a focus on reducing early school-leaving across Europe to less than 10%, in addition to this the hope of having 40% of that particular cohort in third level education or equivalent. This seems over aspirational if one is to consider how little impact the recent initiatives on tackling early school-leaving have had on retention rates for students from lower socio-economic groups. While recent Government figures (DES, 2014) highlight that an average of 90.14% of students now sit a Leaving Certificate examination in Ireland, the figure is not representative of DEIS schools, which have an average of 80.4% students sitting Leaving Certificate examinations. The report does not indicate if the students completed the established Leaving Certificate or the LCA and it does not indicate whether the students passed the examinations, as it only refers to them sitting the examination. It appears that the figures are used in a type of skewed manner to reach the EU targets and are not fully reflective of retention rates of students from lower socio-economic groups Also, it is the case that students from lower socio-economic groups will be further disadvantaged by the increased charges and costs associated with third level. Regardless of whether they sit the Leaving Certificate examination the costs of third level will inevitably have an impact on student entry and therefore limiting their progression route options.

2.5.1 Foundations of early school-leaving

Early school-leavers are not a homogenous group and thus a thorough representation of the causes of early school-leaving can be a difficult task. The literature outlines three models to interpret the main causes of early school-leaving. The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) (2002) identify these three models as the *deficit* model, the *push-out* model and the *rational choice* model.

As previously indicated, educational disadvantage has become synonymous with the deficit ideology. The deficit model is based within a functionalist perspective and places the blame on the student's personal factors and deems the student a drop out or failure. Due to the student's own 'deficit' they are unable to appropriately benefit from the education system; deeming the student's background, culture and experiences as the main risk factors. Problems with underachievement, low self-esteem, poor health, family circumstances and bullying are all considered as reasons for early school-leaving (Spring, 2007).

Conversely, the push-out model pinpoints school factors as having a part to play in causing students to leave school early. The general composition of the school, the ethos, relevance of the curriculum, disciplinary procedures, ability groupings and teacher-pupil relationships may create an unwelcoming environment for some students. Early school-leaving is complex with both individual and institutional factors being identified as reason for student's disaffection with school (Boldt *et al.,* 1998; Smyth, 1999b; Stokes, 2003; Downes *et al.,* 2006; Stearns and Glennie, 2006).

The rational choice model is where students actively decide to leave school; normally to take up employment and thus placing little value on their education. The students' perceive the curriculum as irrelevant and believe that they would be better off earning money. The immediacy of money is considered more important than any long term benefit of education. This has been regarded as the pull of the labour force, apparent in Ireland during the boom years, where work was in abundance and qualifications were not essential. Erikson and Jonsson (1996) suggest that it is more than likely that the parents of these students may also have dropped out of school and the cycle of early school-leaving is perpetuated. Money is a basic survival need and thus is considered more important than any long term benefit of education. Reay's (2012) point on reducing the gap between rich and poor is pertinent here, as many families may not have the financial resources to pay for the costs associated with school.

These three models provide different ways of explaining early school-leaving, all largely from a positivist perspective which sets about categorising early school leaving into three specific forms. However, early school-leaving is complex and is often the result of an intricate web of reasons that may include elements of all three

models (Stokes, 2003). Early school-leaving should not be considered as an isolated event that can easily be defined or quantified. It is the manifestation of an entire range of events of students' encounters of school, typically negative experiences, such as continuous failure, little family support, poverty and low aspirations coupled with minimal motivation. The Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and training (NESSE) (2010), which advises the European Commission, provide a more comprehensive approach. This approach is aptly named the 'all factors framework' which details causes or risks relating to early school-leaving. It outlines five key levels of indicators: family and community, schooling, students and peers, the education system and employment and training. Within these five levels there are 42 major categories and 190 sub categories. This report identifies early school-leaving as a multifaceted issue. It suggests that understanding the interactions between all the factors is fundamental to finding ways to alleviating early school-leaving.

The report identifies individual and school factors as having the greatest impact on early school-leaving. In particular, the NESSE (2010) claim that the main individual factor noted is the difference of parental education between those who leave school and those who remain. This report confirms a strong correlation between early school-leaving and low levels of parental education attainment. It specifies that a mother's educational level has a greater impact on a girl's educational direction. The NESSE (2010) do not suggest that parental practices are the sole reason for subsequent early school-leaving. In fact, they consider a parent's aspirations and expectations for their child's education as being more influential than their own educational status. The NESSE (2010) suggest the implication of initiatives to improve adult educational standards and engaging more parents in the educational activities of their children may assist in the mitigation of early school-leaving. Although the previous section would indicate that this approach alone with not suffice. The power imbalance between social groupings in schools will need to change so that all social groups' visions and abilities are respected. Only then will the engagement of parents from lower socio-economic groups begin to have any real positive impact on the educational outcomes of their children.

The NESSE (2010) also indicate that institutional factors impact significantly on a student's decision to leave school. The main school related factors that were identified in the report and perceived to adversely affect an educationally disadvantaged student's experience in school were teacher-pupil relationships, student peer relationships and school composition and size. According to Devine (2009, p.58) student's social interactions in school influence their learning and achievements, "as they position themselves along a continuum of positive-negative affiliation towards school". When a student has a sense of belonging in school, it has a positive impact on learning and motivation, however, if a student feels isolated from the group this can lead to disaffection from school life. Other factors identified within the Irish context include curriculum and methods of assessment, ability grouping, cultural and societal issues, racism and other institutional factors (Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Fagan, 1995; Lynch, 1999; Smyth, 1999; Lyons, 2003).

Byrne *et al.* (2008) research findings highlight four interconnected areas that are seen as reasons for students leaving school early, with more than one factor being chosen by most of their research respondents. These factors include school and home factors, economic and work factors and health factors. According to Byrne *et al.* (2008) school factors are the prime reason for early school-leaving, with 62% of their respondents considering this as the salient feature in their decision to drop out of school. This is followed closely by economic and work reasons which similarly show a high proportion of students (60%) choosing work over school, with much smaller but significant figures relating to family matters (14%) and 5% of respondents recognising health factors as an issue (Byrne *et al*., 2008). School factors have continually been revealed throughout Irish studies as the dominant rationalization for students to opt out of school early (Fagan, 1995; Boldt *et al.,* 1998; Lynch and Lodge, 2002).

It is clear that schools can become isolating places that are irrelevant to the needs of young people, in so far as the only viable option left is to leave early (Smyth and Hattam, 2001). It is difficult to identify which school factors have the deepest impact on a student's ultimate decision to leave the system. It is not possible to present all the factors in this review. However, it is apparent that the operations of power by the dominant groups and the lack of recognition of different social groups

within education give rise to many of the issues of educational disadvantage and early school-leaving. The complexity of early school-leaving triggers the need to move beyond critical education theory and sociological perspectives and intertwine elements of a psychological framework (Downes, 2011). The use of a broader lens will help to illuminate the issues that are faced by early school-leavers and the Youthreach participants in this study. The areas that are considered significant to this study and early school leaving are relationships in education and mental health issues. These issues will be discussed from a psychological perspective and underpinned by the works of Lynch and Baker (2005) and Honneth (2002).

2.5.2 Teacher- Student Relationships

The school is a social environment that connects the students to the school, both to the teachers and other students. The more successful a student's adaption is to this social environment the greater the possibility that the student will succeed in school. In particular a strong teacher-student relationship is regarded by Aspelin (2012) as a fundamental element of student achievement. OECD (2011) findings suggest that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who have more positive teacher-student relations tend to achieve more and have fewer disciplinary issues. Conversely, poor or negative relationships may inhibit learning and disengage students. According to Devine (2009) schools are both physical learning environments and social spaces that students navigate in order to form their own social identities. Therefore, social interactions and relationship forming in schools should be considered important elements for creating positive educational experiences for young people.

Negative teacher-student relationships are found in both Irish (Boldt, 1994, 1997; Fagan, 1995; Lynch, 1999; Smyth, 1999a; Cullen, 2000; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Stokes, 2003; McGrath, 2006; Downes and Maunsell, 2007; Byrne and Smyth 2010) and international (Johnson and Legg, 1948; Rumberger, 1987; Pomeroy, 1999; Cox, 2000) contexts as one of the major factors associated with early school-leaving. A major concern highlighted by students is the issue of not being treated fairly or with mutual respect by teachers. Lynch and Lodge's (2002) research findings indicate that over 50% of the students they surveyed felt that unfair treatment by teachers was a major issue. In particular, participants felt that teachers exercised too much power

and authority over their students. Other significant issues within the school setting relate to teachers' and students' attitudes towards each other. The literature reveals that it is predominately students from lower socio-economic groups, who experience poor relationships with teachers, with students claiming their teachers did not listen to them, looked down on them, embarrassed them and ultimately did not care about them (Boldt, 1994, 1997, Fagan, 1995; Lynch, 1999). The school system does not offer any recognition for the background culture of students from lower socio-economic groups and therefore the students will feel disrespected, devalued and controlled (Honneth, 2002 and Lynch and Baker 2005). The power relations within the school arena are more obvious for these particular students as they realise that if they want to succeed they will have to lose a piece of who they are, suppress their identity and become a replica of the middle-class image that is acceptable (Reay, 2004).

While some students may feel that the teachers do not care about them, Boldt *et al*. (1998) state that many teachers do not understand the backgrounds and different cultures and upbringing of educationally disadvantaged students. Research has indicated that the majority of teachers hail from middle-class backgrounds and may not possess an understanding of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and culturally diverse groups and are unable to be empathetic towards them (Devine, 2005 and Leavy, 2005). The structure of schooling is based on upper and middle class ideals and these are far removed from those of students from different social class groupings. Teachers are focused on getting students to reach the required standards of the curriculum, regardless of the students' backgrounds. Students who do not meet the standards or act in a way that is considered inappropriate are considered deficient in some way. The teachers may find it difficult to relate to these students, they may ignore or treat them differently or even label them as disruptive or troublesome or academically weaker in comparison to other students. Based on this, one may discover that it may not be a lack of care per se that the student is experiencing but rather a lack of insight into their needs. Also, for the teacher in the classroom, there is no merit in empathy, as this will not get a student through the system and this may be part of the reason that students' feel that teachers do not care about them. The concept of care needs to be incorporated into the curriculum and

through all aspects of the education system (Noddings 2005 and Lynch 2008). In addition to this, the predominant need to recognise and address the needs and wants of all social groups within the education system is very evident here. A school ethos without the inclusion of such concepts presented by the works of Honneth (2002) and Lynch and Baker (2005) in relation to recognition will continue to have students who consider negative teacher-student relationships as one of the foremost reasons in influencing their decision to leave school early.

The power of poor relationships between students and teachers to disengage students can be related to Bowlby's attachment theory in a psychological frame. He identifies the first relationship between the child and the mother or the main caregiver, as a model for future relationships. Bowlby (1990) suggests the notion of a parent providing a 'secure base' for their child as being central to the child's development. Children who have a secure base, will feel assured in their endeavours to discover the outside world as they know they can return to their safe base. He maintained that a positive attachment at an early stage was crucial for future healthy social development of the child, or in reverse, a negative attachment could lead to an unhealthy social development of the child (Bowlby, 1990). Both Fleming (2008) and Riley (2011) indicate that attachment theory has implications for education. Fleming (2008) suggests that early patterns of attachment can impact on how adults interact in a new environment, such as in education. It will have implications on how they deal with the new situation, interactions and whether they decide to stay within the particular educational environment. Although, early school-leavers are not considered adults, they are adolescents and Fleming and Riley's work appears to provide a better understanding of these particular students by extending Bowlby's ideas which are more relevant to younger infants and children. According to Riley (2011) the idea of the secure base is relevant to adults who may not need a physical secure base like a child, but rather, they need some form of emotional security in their surroundings. They need to feel at ease with the people that surround them and have a sense that those people actually understand them. This would be similar to a student in school who may feel uneasy with teachers if they felt that they did not understand them or their background. This correlates with Ainsworth's (1989) claims, which suggest that problematic issues in adulthood stem from attachment

deficiencies in early childhood. It has been argued that adolescents who have had strong parental attachment are less likely to drop out of school early or show signs of anti-social behaviour (Santrock, 2006).

Bowlby (1990) describes each person/child as having an Internal Working Model (IWM) or framework that is developed over time and is based on each person's experience and expectation of the attachment process. In effect, how each person views the world, their beliefs and expectations of how he or she will be treated by others is based on their initial experience in the home. Bowlby's (1990) model identified a child to be either securely or insecurely attached. This model was adapted and advanced for adults by Bartholomew (1990) cited in Riley (2011) to provide a four quadrant model of adult attachment as outlined in *Figure 9.*

MODEL OF SELF
(Dependence)

	Positive (Low)	Negative (High)
Positive (Low)	**SECURE** Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy	**PREOCCUPIED** Preoccupied with relationships
Negative (High)	**DISMISSING** Dismissing of intimacy Counter-dependent	**FEARFUL** Fearful of intimacy Socially avoidant

MODEL OF OTHER (Avoidance)
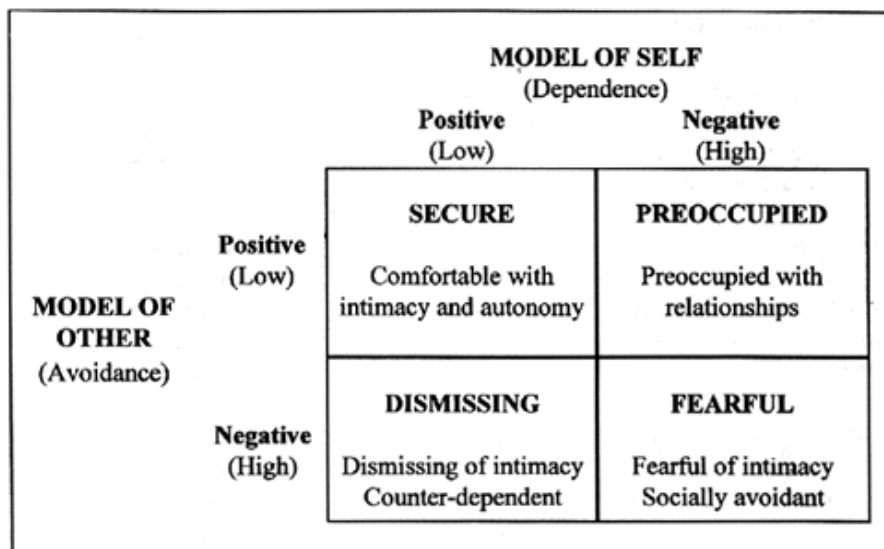
Figure 9: Model of adult attachment

Source: Riley, 2011, p.25

This model suggests that there are four main attachments styles: secure, preoccupied, dismissing and fearful. These form the basis from which an adult may judge future interactions and the workings of the world. A person who is secure has low anxiety with being in new surroundings or forming relationships. Preoccupied behaviour is noted in a person who has an intense need for acceptance by others, they become consumed with the need to feel accepted. Dismissive behaviour rejects the need to feel attached; a dismissive person may seem aloof and inaccessible. Fearful type behaviour is similar to preoccupied behaviour in that the person feels the need to be

81

accepted by others but would not overtly be vying for that attention and would need the other person to seek them out. For instance, Riley (2011) states that a clear example of a student who has an insecure attachment internal working model is one who has difficulty forming relationships, tends to be defensive and is unable to accept or feel worthy of praise. Many students from chaotic family backgrounds would not be familiar with praise and encountering such in the classroom would make the world more unpredictable and therefore less of a safe place. In many cases the student may be unaware of how to respond to elements of praise and thus can become defensive. Fleming (2008) notes that providing a secure attachment for these particular students is extremely important as it will facilitate their motivation for achieving their goals. If the students continue with an insecure internal working model they will continue to be anxious and avoidant, which will have a negative impact on their motivation. It is suggested by Riley (2011, p.39) that the classroom is an emotionally charged environment for students and teachers as "they become acculturated to the system of education" and the classroom is full of "needs, wants, motivations and drives to affiliate, belong, grow and develop". The complexities of the classroom can hold lasting impressions. Many people can recall powerful positive or negative emotional influences that teachers have had on them, many years after leaving school. This may be particularly true for students from lower socio-economic groups who cannot associate with the schooling environment as it appears alien to them.

These elements of Bowlby's ideas may help in understanding early school-leavers. Their backgrounds, behaviours and their relationships with their main care givers may have had an impact on their decision to leave school. The student's internal working model may guide their behaviour and expectations for future relationships; it is their perspective on relationships. Not only may it be important to identify a student's socio-economic background but suitable consideration should be given to the young person's attachment style. This idea is extended further by Fleming (2008) when he suggests that it is also pertinent for tutors to be mindful of their own attachment style in order that they can facilitate a secure base for the student. The school environment may be the only opportunity that some of these students may ever receive of a consistent secure attachment in their lives. It is important to

consider that students should be able to associate with the schooling environment and develop some type of attachment with it in order for the school process to be engaging for them. This may be in the form of being recognised by the system or feeling respected as outlined by Honneth's (2002) theory; the schooling environment should create a sense of community or belonging for the young person. These students need to be able to experience a sense of belonging, recognition and inclusion in school and this may go some way toward motivating them (Devine, 2009).

2.5.3 Student-Student relationships

Student-student relationships are an important aspect of school life for all learners, particularly young adolescents. This aspect is of equal importance with teacher-student relationships, in relation to student's overall performance and achievement (Sabatelli and Anderson, 1991; Staff and Kreager, 2008). The interactions in the school environment form part of the process of the student's social development, where interaction with peers will have a strong influence over self-concepts and self-esteem. It is often during this adolescent stage that a student's sense of self emerges and their experiences during this phase of development can become part of their future identity (Paul and Cillessen, 2003). The adolescent stage is a pinnacle stage for the young person as they try and form an identity (Erikson, 1980). As part of this identity formation students can place strong emphasis on peer rankings: what group they are part of and how popular they perceive themselves to be among their peers. The more popular a student feels, the more likely they are to enjoy school, even if they do not have considerable interest in academic success; peer acceptance is their main aspiration. On the other hand, a student who is not accepted by peers is more inclined to fade into the background by not getting involved in school activities or participating in classroom activities (Staff and Kreager, 2008). Poor or negative relationships with peers may have the potential to detrimentally affect a student's well-being as well as their educational attainment (Devine, 2009).

Negative student-student relationships may take many forms; however, they are most widely depicted as forms of bullying or victimisation. Although a discussion of this is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to highlight some aspects of negative peer relationships that students encounter as it has been identified as being

closely linked to educational disadvantage (DES, 2013b; Farrelly, 2007; McCoy *et al*., 2007*b*). Research indicates that students may be bullied because of their social class background, or considered different from the norm (Devine, 2009). Devine (2009, p.59) describes the school environment as 'an arena of struggle' for students as they try and position themselves with others, and are positioned by other students by being either included or excluded based on what is considered as being normal. If a student is considered different to others this can often lead to exclusion of that student and bullying often ensues. Devine (2009) highlights that racial prejudice is common in Irish schools and students who are different from the 'norm' are treated differently by the dominant groups. This is evident in the case of minority groups such as Travellers and immigrant students who may become victims of bullying in schools. Also it is worth considering that many students from lower socio-economic groups may also be considered different than the dominant group and this may create exclusions and other forms of bullying.

A historical notion of bullying centred on a student being repeatedly attacked, both physically and verbally in the school yard. It was distinctly overt and was often considered as part of the growing up process. It was easily identifiable, easier to reprimand the offenders and was not considered as a major issue in many schools. Nowadays, the notion of bullying is much more complex and there is awareness that it can consist of many issues that may be overtly recognised, or covertly concealed. Barnes *et al.* (2012) suggest that covert bullying is often subtle and hard to determine and is described as any form of bullying that is hidden to others, especially to adults. Findings presented by Cross *et al.* (2009) outline examples of these hidden elements to include hand gestures, facial expressions, breaking secrets and gossiping, exclusion of a person and damaging their social relationships. Additionally, covert bullying has been facilitated by the advancements in communication technologies. The availability and popular use of text messaging, email, instant messaging (IM) and social networking websites, chat rooms and video recording and sharing among young people has led to the onslaught of cyber bullying. It is described as a constant accessible platform for bullies to reign over and harm their peers (Cross *et al.,* 2009).

A recent report on cyber bullying in Ireland by O'Neill and Dinh (2013) provides evidence that levels of bullying are above average in Ireland compared with 25 countries in the report, suggesting that a quarter of the 9-16 year olds surveyed experienced online and offline bullying. The report indicates that online bullying is more likely to involve reciprocal bullying; those that are bullied online are more likely to respond with equally harmful comments. This two-way process could be problematic in terms of identifying the bully or distinguishing between what may be described as 'banter' and something more sinister. It may lead to many issues going undetected, much of which could lead to seriously harmful events for those involved. What is particularly alarming about the findings is that over two thirds of parents surveyed were unaware that their children were victims of bullying. The lack of openness about the issues of bullying is a worrying feature, considering the impact bullying can have on a student's life.

Bullying has the potential to dominate the life of the victim, requiring them to be constantly on high alert for the next act to ensue, leading to stress, anxiety, lack of sleep and difficulty functioning at school (DES, 2013b). This constant barrage of bullying can lead to poor attendance at school which reduces the student's contact time and may lead to them falling behind in their work, losing interest and possibly the teacher giving up on them. McCoy *et al.* (2007b) claim that poor attendance has a downward spiral effect, often leading to a student's complete withdrawal from the system. Also they suggest that girls are more likely than boys to leave school early as a result of bullying. In addition to early school-leaving as a concern, self-harm and suicide ideations have been associated with bullying (DES, 2013b and Egan, 2012). Recently, Ireland has witnessed an increase in suicide rates among young people. Cyber bullying has been linked as a factor in these tragedies, implying the destructive effects such public displays of bullying and victimisation can have on an individual.

The DES (2013b) *Action plan on bullying* is a necessary addition to understanding and bringing the issue of bullying in Irish schools to the fore. It presented issues in relation to defining bullying and the complexities involved and concluded that many previous definitions are now out of date and need to be reviewed.

Bullying is repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical conducted by an individual or group against others. Isolated incidents of aggressive behaviour, which should not be condoned, can scarcely be described as bullying. However, when the behaviour is systematic and on-going it is bullying.

(DES, 2013b, p.17)

This definition was first presented by the DES twenty years ago and is too narrow in its scope to deal with the intricacies of bullying in today's society. At present, the DES is in the process of providing an updated definition of bullying and recommendations for specific inclusions in the definition have already been made. These include: all forms of relational bullying to include deliberate exclusions and malicious gossip, cyber bullying, sexual bullying and identity based bullying in line with factors laid out in the Equal Status Acts (DES, 2013b). The inclusion of these recommendations should broaden the scope of what constitutes bullying and provide new directions for policy implementation. Again here, there is clear indication of the need to create an egalitarian education system which keenly focuses on recognition and respect as core concepts.

2.6 Mental Health and Young People

The topic of mental health has been gaining considerable attention in policy discussions and recommendations of late. The study conducted by Byrne *et al.* (2008) outlined that health factors were only identified as an issue with 5% of the cohort surveyed. However, Dooley and Fitzgerald's (2012) recent *Headstrong – My world survey* conducted on approximately 15,000 young people aged between 12-25 years across Ireland, estimates that at any one time, one in five young people are experiencing mental health issues. According to a European Commission report (2012b) mental health difficulties are considered to be one of the predominant health related problems among school children in the European Union. Furthermore, national (DES, 2013b; McEvoy, 2009; O'Brien, 2008; Downes and Maunsell, 2007) and international (Bøe *et al.*, 2012; Cornagli *et al.,* 2012; ROA, 2012; Downes 2011) literature suggests that there is a strong correlation between mental health issues and early school-leaving.

The term mental health is used to stigmatise people. Mental health issues are rarely mentioned and often considered in the negative. However, mental health is an

important factor in every person's health and should be considered as important as their physical health. The Health Service Executive (HSE) (2007) provides a straightforward definition of mental health that encapsulates the essence of wellness;

> Mental health describes how we think and feel about ourselves and others and how we interpret events in everyday life. It also relates to our ability to cope with change, transition, significant life events and the stress that often comes our way… the emotional resilience to be able to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness…
>
> (HSE, 2007, p. ii)

A broader definition is given by the WHO (2005) to include the ability of a person to work productively and to make contributions to his or her community. Overall, the definitions focus on mental health being all encompassing to our everyday functioning. Thinking has moved on from previously held beliefs that regarded good mental health as the nonexistence of a mental disorder (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012 and HSE, 2007). Mental wellness is not a consistent factor in any person's life and some issues can have a negative impact on their overall well-being. Many effects are hard to overcome, especially in the absence of support. This can be especially true for young students, who may not have a deep understanding of mental health or how to deal with particular issues that impact upon it. O'Brien's (2008) research on *Well-being and post-primary schooling* clearly illustrates that the challenges faced by young people are ever increasing and school systems need to respond to these issues as a matter of priority. Similarly, Lynch and Baker (2005) and O'Brien (2008) contend that emotional dimensions of education are equally as important as academic elements and schools are prime settings for nurturing students' self-esteem and mental health.

2.6.1 Factors that hinder mental health

Many young people struggle with their mental health on a daily basis. They deal with issues of family strains and traumas, school factors and bullying (as previously addressed), concerns with self-image and identity, amongst many other pressures. Whilst early school-leaving presents as a complicated problem, similarly, the issue of poor mental health is equally as complex. There are no simple answers or solutions to poor mental health and the issues are multifaceted. McEvoy (2009) presents findings from an Irish study of young peoples' opinions on what helps and what

hurts in terms of mental health. In the report the following eight key themes emerged from the discussions as having a negative impact on well-being: self-image, bullying, school pressure and exam systems, family, death, peer pressure, isolation and issues surrounding relationships with boyfriends and girlfriends. Although these were not the only issues identified, they were they most noted by the majority of those surveyed and therefore formed the basis of that research. What is interesting about the results is that many of the factors that hindered mental health were also identified as aiding good mental health such as family, relationships with peers and self-image. This could imply that mental wellbeing is in part, finding a harmonious medium between these factors, which would require consistent effort. This becomes the difficulty as many of the issues are interdependent and a problem in one area has an impact upon another. This can become too challenging for the person to cope; matters pertaining to the home could be understood as one such interlinked factor. Three such issues that can have a particularly significant impact on young people include: family structure, bereavement and identity.

Family structure

In today's society the concept of family structure has become a complex domain, where divorced, separated, unmarried, remarried, lone parent, households of same sex couples and multicultural family units have become more customary. Although the dynamics of the structure has changed, the notion of a marital two-parent household is still viewed as the norm. Dooley and Fitzgerald (2012) have found that up to 80% of the young people surveyed live within a two parent household, 10% live with a lone parent and the remainder of the group live in various family units. The idea of the standard family may not offer a safeguard from mental health related problems or provide an ideal living arrangement. However, the complexities of diverse family units may cause greater distress to many young people already trying to cope with being a teenager. These difficulties could include difficult family breakups, the loss or introduction of new family members, racism, and homophobic bullying due to family structure.

In their findings McKeown and Haase (2006) provided an insight into the mental health of children in Ballymun. This research views the child's mental health as largely determined by the health of their parents. The report finds that 60% of the

families consist of lone parents, which is much higher than the national average. The vast majority of the mothers are early school-leavers and are positioned in the lowest socio-economic status grouping, with several suffering huge financial strain and being vulnerable to poverty. The report indicated that many of the mothers try and cope with their financial stresses through substance misuse, which impacts upon the psychological well-being of the children. The children are more likely to suffer hyperactivity, behavioural and emotional problems (McKeown and Haase 2006). While Ballymun may be considered an extreme case, as it is commonly identified as one of the most disadvantaged areas in Ireland, this research does provide an indication of some of the more widespread problems that exist in Irish society and are faced by school going children on a daily basis. As previously highlighted by Reay (2012) poverty creates a clear divide in educational outcomes between the rich and the poor and has negative effects on a person's well-being.

The HSE (2012) findings observe that the most common mental health disorders or problems prevalent among children and adolescents are hyperkinetic disorders which include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), depression and anxiety problems, conduct disorders, eating disorders and psychotic disorders. Other less prevailing problems include deliberate self-harm, substance abuse and gender role/identity disorders. It is estimated that close to a thousand young people, twice as many girls as boys, present to accident and emergency rooms each year with deliberate self-harm injuries (HSE, 2007). In addition to this, there has been an alarming increase in the rates of suicide among young people in Ireland. According to Eurostat (2009) figures, Ireland has the fourth highest suicide rate among 15-24 year olds in the EU and the third highest amongst young men aged 15-19 years. This clearly signifies the enormity of mental health related problems experienced by young people in Irish society. However, the issue of mental ill health is not identified as a major concern within the education system, with inadequate focus placed on it within policies and practices. The latest HSE (2014) report indicates that there are 17,116 children, up to the ages of 16 availing of CAMHS. In the West of Ireland, there has been a 21% increase in the number of referrals in one year. There are over 690 children awaiting appointments, with a significant amount of these waiting for extended periods, of one year or more. The services that are currently

available are not adequate to meet the needs of these young people. At present there is very few links between schools and services such as CAMHS; only 3.7% of child referrals that were made to the service in the West of Ireland came through educational institutions (HSE, 2014). There needs to be an integrated approach to helping to deal with the onset of mental health difficulties, in particular schools should become part of the agenda.

Within an Australian context, Raphael *et al.* (2009) identify a range of family issues that may impact upon a child's mental health. Adverse life events such as poverty, lower socio-economic status, dysfunctional families, extended periods of poor quality parenting, family breakup, mental illness and substance abuse among parents, and violence in the home are considered as some of the key family related factors pertaining to poor mental health amongst young people in Australia. The most disturbing element of mental health problems relate to violence and abuse in the home including sexual, emotional and physical abuse. Raphael *et al.* (2009) contend that these have the most long term impact throughout adolescence and into adult life, leaving many sufferers with anxiety disorders and depression and others who are unable to cope, taking their own lives. In context to this, a US study by Kessler *et al.* (2005) reported that 75% of all mental health disorders emerge between the ages of 14 and 24 years.

The US and Australian research provide an alarming array of child diagnosable disorders including ADHD, anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, depressive disorder, substance abuse disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The child disorders common to both Kessler *et al.* (2005) and Raphael *et al.* (2009) are not dissimilar to those in Ireland. This reveals the challenges for schools and society in terms of targeting potential mental health problems at an early stage to minimise the emergence of long term disorders into adulthood. The stigma attached to the use of the term mental health needs to be eradicated and dealing with mental health needs to become part of the primary curriculum. The development of mental health is as important as developing physical health and children need to start understanding about their own mental health from an early age, in order that they can deal with issues in their lives. In particular, the loss of someone close can happen to any person, at any age and the impact of that can have an enormous effect on mental

health. Children have to be taught how to deal with bereavement and how to express their emotions. Otherwise these children will become adults who cannot deal with everyday issues and who do not have any coping mechanisms.

Bereavement

Death is an inevitable event; nevertheless it is often considered a taboo subject and a topic that is usually avoided, if at all possible. This is typically the case in relation to children, when the matter of a death is often hidden from them. They are regarded as too young to understand and are provided with a false explanation as to the departure of someone close (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The absence of the person will still remain and the child will be left with an intensified sense of loss, which may validly be described as traumatic. These children, adolescents or adults or anyone unacquainted with death can find themselves unprepared for dealing with the loss of someone close. This not only includes death, but also loss due to divorce or family breakup. They are often unaware that dealing with a death or loss is a process and may involve many stages of bereavement. In her book *On Death and Dying* (1969), Elisabeth Kübler-Ross presents five stages of grief that someone is likely to endure. The stages include: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This provides us with some indication of the depth and complexity of the grieving process. However, it should be noted that the stages may not happen in such a uniform manner, some stages may be shorter than others and not everyone will go through all of the stages.

Research has indicated that bereavement is particularly difficult for young adolescents. This may be due to them being at a transition point in their lives and are unsure if they should rationalise the loss like a child and ask questions or be more 'adult-like' and internalise their emotions. This can make the adolescent more confused and could lead to a more extended grieving process. Grief can be evident in a person's life for up to two years and signs of distress, anxiety, guilt, withdrawal, loss of concentration, apathy, stress and family problems are not uncommon (Abdelnoor and Hollins, 2004). It has been suggested by Holland (2008, p.412) that "the impact of loss is not straightforward or predictable, nor is it always recognised by others". People will deal with loss in different ways and families can be distraught by the loss of income and stability, all of which could be exacerbated in

the case of disadvantaged or vulnerable children. It is evident that bereavement has a profound impact on the mental health of a young person. Issues that are unresolved or avoided may lead to an escalation of negative outcomes, aggression and other behavioural issues, substance misuse, self-harm and often disengagement from school. In large schools with high numbers of pupils it may be difficult for teachers to keep track of students who may be grieving for up to two years or more after their loss. Students may not fully understand that they are grieving and may find themselves in trouble and feeling lost in school. Including traumatic life events, such as bereavement into the framework of understanding early school leaving provides us with a clear view of the vastness of the issue and the serious need to broaden the scope around understanding the phenomenon (Downes, 2011). There needs to be greater awareness and supports available for students and dealing with bereavement is an issue that needs more attention within health education programmes like SPHE.

Identity and self-image

In research conducted by McEvoy (2009) self-image was identified by the young people as the most prominent theme that can impact negatively on their mental health. The participants of the study were particularly concerned with how they were judged by others, specifically in relation to "weight, beauty, clothes or stereotypes" (McEvoy, 2009, p.15). The media culture that surrounds these young people would be highly influential in their lives. They are now visible at all times by means of various social networking sites. Young people rely on acceptance via their Facebook page; striving for the most thumbs up 'likes' in relation to their newest profile picture. Erikson (1980) maintains that adolescents are more preoccupied with what others think of them than with what they actually think of themselves. Therefore this may invariably lead to the adolescents continually changing and vying for ways to be accepted. It can be extremely difficult for many adolescents to keep on trend. The participants in McEvoy's research stated that they found it difficult to meet the many expectations placed on them by society and that the pressure to conform created much distress. Adolescence can be a time of upheaval for many as they struggle from childhood into adulthood in order to find their place in society (Lalor *et al.,* 2007).

Erikson (1980) suggests that the adolescent stage of development is predominately focused on identity formation, where the individual endeavours to discover who they are and where they are going in life. The adolescent stage is very experimental as they grapple with forming their own identity and have varied ideas of how they will fit into society. This stage can be particularly difficult for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as their sense of self is challenged by the lack of recognition that they encounter on a daily basis within the school setting. Commonly, individuals change their appearance, form allegiance with different cliques, experiment with drugs, alcohol and sex and try out other risky activities. As the young person tries to form their identity there is the danger of identity confusion (Erikson, 1995). While identity or role confusion at this stage is commonly identified in terms of confusion over sexual identity, Erikson (1995, p.235) claims that "it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs individual young people". They are anxious about their future and who they will become. Similarly, Demir, Kaynak-Demir and Sönmez (2010) assert that identity confusion is the inability of an adolescent to form a rational and enduring sense of self, in terms of their potential roles, values and life choices. Their research indicates that adolescents who are struggling with their identity are more susceptible to mental health disorders, including eating disorders, depression, substance misuse and behaviour problems. In this respect, based on points presented earlier on the school environment and the power of the dominant groups and culture, it is decidedly reasonable to expect that students from lower socio-economic groups will have identity formation issues as they try and make their way through the system.

The school setting is the main outlet for students to form their identity. Reay (2004) indicates that students from lower socio-economic groupings have to lose a part of 'who they are' if they want to be academically successful as they have to conform to the ideals of the dominant group. Although their identity formation may be affected in school, their decision to leave will have a critical impact on their identity. Early school-leaving creates a crisis in relation to a young person's identity. They will be looked upon differently in the eyes of their peers and by society in general. They will be removed from the main route to occupational prospects. Even if school was particularly difficult for the student, or if they felt they could not succeed, they are

suddenly alone without a future plan or daily structure. Depending on what has led to their decision to leave school they will no doubt be dealing with mental distress in terms of their identity, both who are they now and who they will become. Much of the distress can lead to many of the mental issues outlined previously. Their issue as an early school-leaver will be trying to form a different identity, ultimately an identity which will deliver acceptance. Smyth and Hattam (2004) define this as 'becoming somebody without school'. They utilise Wexler's (1992) 'becoming somebody' as a means of presenting the process of identity formation that young people go through when they leave school early. Wexler (1992) suggests that the struggle of the young person to form an identity is not that they become nobody, but is a struggle in order to be 'somebody'. If this is the case, there can be greater pressure on an early school-leaver to succeed and this can be difficult as they have left the main route to both identity and prosperity. Struggling with trying to become someone and having limited options can impact negatively on the young person. Those who join Youthreach programmes struggle with identity issues as they continue their education without the sense of normality that is associated with mainstream schooling.

2.7 A move towards a more caring focused education system

The disengagement from school and the development of mental health problems among young people can have a destructive effect on society. Issues relating to drug abuse, adult crime, antisocial behaviour, unemployment and poor physical health are not uncommon among these factions in society (WHO, 2005). Findings conveyed in the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) (2012) show that 80% of the prisoners surveyed had left school before the age of sixteen and over a quarter of the sentenced men and more than half of the women prisoners have at least one diagnosed mental illness. The substantial cost associated with each prison place is estimated at close to €100,000 a year (Barnardos, 2009). In addition to this, the Oireachtas (2012) Spotlight issue on wellbeing indicates, that based on 2006 figures, the cost of poor mental health in Ireland is approximated at three billion euro per annum.

Ireland appears to be lagging behind in its approach to identifying mental health as a major determining factor of early school-leaving. Currently, the government budget spending on mental health is 3% less than the recommended 8.2% (Oireachtas,

2012). Although in the DOHC report (2006) *A Vision for Change,* schools were recognised as the ideal setting for the promotion of mental health, the government's response to the ten step framework for addressing inequity in education does not include specific measures in relation to targeting mental health in schools (DES, 2011). Conversely, in 2013 the DES launched guidelines for post-primary schools for mental health promotion and suicide prevention (DES, 2013c). These guidelines offer schools a method of approaching mental health through a whole school process. However, it may be difficult for schools to fit these methods into their programmes. At senior level the programmes would be additional to the examinable subjects and time constraints may give health promotion less importance than the compulsory subjects. In order for mental health promotion to work effectively in schools it needs to be fully integrated into the formal curriculum, it will not be effective as a stand-alone programme.

This idea correlates closely with the work of Nel Noddings and her focus on the need for caring environments within education settings. It is quite possible that many of the students who leave school may have come from dysfunctional family backgrounds and may not understand the premise of care. They may not have the knowledge of how to care for themselves, for others or the world in which they live. Noddings (1995) highlights the importance of empathetic care towards the students, in order that they feel cared for, but also, the need for themes of care to be included into the curriculum. Noddings (1995, p.676) emphasises that caring "is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likable" nor does she consider it to be "anti-intellectual" but rather an ideal of education that would "demonstrate respect for the full range of human talents". Noddings' approach is much more 'organic' than the approach produced by the DES (2013c) above, she implies that good mental health arises when the overall conditions are right. This view contrasts with the notion that it can be 'taught'. If a school has an overall ethos and practice that respects the full array of human talents, good mental health is only one of the beneficial outcomes. Likewise, Lynch (2008) asserts that it is vitally important to recognise all human potential in education not just academic and acknowledge the diversity of human capabilities. In an ideal scenario all human capabilities would be

respected and education would be much more than economic prosperity, it would involve social inclusion, personal fulfilment and better health.

Noddings' concept and Lynch's ideas contain an important critique of the systems and powers that operate in education. They focus on introducing elements of care into the curriculum in order to create a schooling experience and a system that is more holistic in its approach, enabling students to find meaning in an often fragmented curriculum. Students, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds find the curriculum in school irrelevant and overloaded and cannot make connections with what they are learning in school to their home environment (Smyth, 1999a and NCCA, 2004). The curriculum and assessment in school disseminate the importance of logical mathematical and linguistic intelligences (Gardner, 1983). The more vocational and practical intelligences are often ignored, which may be more appealing for some students, such as Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences and Goleman's (1996) emotional intelligence as a means of empowering students through a range of abilities. Post-primary education is geared towards assessment. Students who feel that they are not succeeding derive very little benefit from this type of education. They are often in a predicament that they are pushed to pass an exam for the sake of it, they often have no interest or understanding in what they are doing, they are drilled for examinations. This is not to discredit the hard work that teachers do with these students, instead the contention is that the student may pass the Junior Certificate but have attained no life skills. This does not constitute real learning and when the student has completed the assessment they are not prepared for everyday living.

The concept of introducing elements of care into the curriculum moves away from the tradition of the school environment being driven by economic objectives. It moves toward students becoming active citizens who are environmentally aware and promote care and solidarity with their communities (Lynch and Baker, 2005; Lynch, 2008).

> Today in the name of equity, we force all children- regardless of interests
> or aptitude into academic courses and then fight an uphill battle to
> motivate them to do things they do not want to do.

(Noddings, 2005, p.157)

There is a need to create a curriculum around wider interests that do not have such a keen focus on the academic. Students need to connect schooling to real life and how the learning objectives in school link into their own interests and plans (Noddings, 2005). Similarly, Cohen (2006) claims that the excessive emphasis on mathematical and linguistic learning is restrictive and misguided. He suggests that in order for students to become lifelong learners, schools need to focus on four key areas: social, emotional, ethical and academic teaching and learning.

> It is essential that all children, particularly the disadvantaged and the poor, have the opportunity to develop the social-emotional competencies and ethical dispositions that provide the foundation for the tests of life, health, relationships, and adult work.

(Cohen, 2006, p.226-27)

Based on earlier challenges faced by young people it is essential to consider that the biological and social needs of students are as important as educational needs. Noddings (2005) suggests that when we insist on the inferred needs of education that are assumed as important, the expressed needs of the students are often ignored, leaving students unhappy and resistant to the educational process. When a student's basic needs are not attended to, when they are in pain, afraid, sick or worried, there is a significant chance that schoolwork will not be on their list of priorities. However, if they feel cared for or listened to within the school environment, all the processes of school may become more manageable as the student may feel more of a connection or attachment to the school environment. It is the failure to listen to the voices of students that alienate them the most from schools (Lynch, 2008).

In the next section I review other studies that have researched the voices of students.

2.8 Perspectives of early school-leavers

The perspectives of students who have left school early have become a significant focus in attempting to attain a more egalitarian education system. Nobody is in a more relevant position to explain the realities and causes of early school-leaving than those who experience it first-hand. Within the Irish context Boldt (1997); Stokes (2003); McGrath (2006) and Byrne and Smyth (2010) and within the Australian context, Smyth and Hattam (2004) conducted in-depth studies with students who left school early from different approaches. Their findings clearly indicate the

competence of these students to articulate their stories and present their explanations for leaving school early. These studies are pertinent to this thesis as they provide insight into the voiced research that is available in relation to early school-leavers. These studies have provided a starting point upon which to build this current study. The analysis of these research reports has enabled the identification of gaps in the knowledge that is currently available from early school leavers' perspectives and these gaps have assisted in developing the focus of this research and in presenting my conceptual framework and the subsequent findings.

2.8.1 Hear my Voice

Hear my Voice (Boldt, 1997) developed out of a small scale research project carried out by Boldt (1994) with nineteen North Dublin early school-leavers. Boldt realised the potential benefit of listening to the voices of young people on their experiences of leaving school early. The 1997 research extended to one hundred and thirty seven participants from Dublin, Edenderry, Dundalk and Kilkenny. It was the first qualitative large scale longitudinal study that focused on the post school experience of early school-leavers. The participants in the research ranged from those who left school after primary school to those that completed their Junior Certificate and entered into senior cycle but left school before completing their Leaving Certificate. The interviews for the research took place mainly in the homes of the participants and comprised of two to five interviews per student, over a course of four years. The methods employed by Boldt consisted of semi structured open ended interviews for the first interview. These first interviews were not taped or noted during the interview process and no direct quotes exist. He believed that it was important to build up a relationship with the participants and recordings were not taken until the second and subsequent interviews which consisted of more specific questioning.

The report unveiled the complexities of early school-leaving. It highlighted that the biggest factor from the participants' perspectives for dropping out of school related to their negative experiences of the schooling system, with only 15% of those interviewed expressing regret at their decision to leave school. It presented four detailed participants' stories on their experiences of leaving school early and their pathways thereafter. Many of the pathways include enrolling on training programmes, such as Youthreach, Community Workshops and FÁS apprenticeships.

The majority of the participants that joined the programmes found them beneficial and different from school. Some, however, found the programmes unsatisfactory. There is a keen sense that many of the participants were interested in finding gainful employment.

This report is valuable in that it was the first in depth research that identified the fundamental importance of listening to the voice of early school-leavers. It provided some insights into the lives of early school-leavers and acknowledged the diversity of each story. Boldt highlighted the need for on-going career guidance to be made available throughout all stages of second level schooling and not just during senior cycle. He emphasised that the school system may not suit everyone and other training programmes should be considered as valuable alternatives. It gave a general overview of Youthreach, indicating that the programme is meeting many of the needs of early school-leavers. However, it clearly indicated that progression routes from Youthreach are narrow and there is a need to maintain contact with those who leave the programme to aid their transition onto the next step. This idea is present in the current the DES (2010b) Youthreach Guidelines. However, to date, no resources have been made available to accommodate this recommendation.

The report fulfilled the aims of the research. It was limited in that it only focused on the eastern region of the country and isolated rural areas were not considered. In rural areas where the stories of early school-leavers may be somewhat different, as there would be less employment opportunities and training provisions. There was a missed opportunity in not recording initial interviews and thus not including direct quotes from the early school-leavers which may have provided richer detail. Nevertheless, this research provided a solid platform for further qualitative studies and highlighted the overall importance of building relationships with participants in a study of this kind.

2.8.2 Early School-leaving in Ireland – The matrix of influences explored

Dermot Stokes (2003), the then national Youthreach coordinator, wrote a doctoral thesis on early school-leaving. The main aim of his study was to examine relevant literature to identify possible reasons for early school-leaving and provide and then test his findings through a series of biographical case studies. The participants of his research were early school-leavers who were attending Youthreach centres, however, he did not focus on the programme and his main concept was identifying causes of early school-leaving. Based on national and international literature, Stokes identified four overarching categories relating to early school-leaving, which he termed the 'matrix of influences'. These consisted of individual factors which included gender, intelligence, special educational needs and ethnicity; contextual factors including family and school functioning; developmental factors, such as transitions and turning points in a young person's life; mediating factors, which included risk factors such as alcohol and drug abuse and protective factors to include family warmth. Stokes' research is more keenly focused on the causes of early school-leaving as opposed to Boldt (1997) who mainly focused on the participants' experiences after leaving school. Stokes provides an illumination on the causes of early school-leaving and gives valuable insights into the lives of early school-leavers. Similar to Boldt, Stokes recognised the uniqueness of each of the participants' stories and surmised that all the stories contained various elements of the matrix of influences, but no one story held the same combination of elements or no one element was evident in all of the stories. However, he did suggest that social class and poverty had an overall general influence on early school-leaving. The complexities of the causes of early school-leaving did not enable Stokes to explain why one child leaves school and another does not. However, such work provides some reasoning as to why general government initiatives, which mainly focus on a large collective group as opposed to more individually targeted initiative, fail to effectively alleviate early school-leaving.

This research suggested that the participants had not given up on education, as they had all joined a Youthreach programme. However, it does not provide any insight into their experiences of the Youthreach programme. This study affirms the changing pace of society and the need for ongoing research work in the area of early

school leaving and Youthreach participation. His thesis is now a decade in existence and many factors that currently impact upon early school-leavers did not exist then. In particular, his study did not address the issues of mental health as being a probable cause for early school-leaving. It presents a case that the complexities of early school leaving are so vast that we continually need the voice of those directly involved to be heard. It is clear from this research that what is best for early school-leavers should come from the young people; they need to be able to voice opinions on the matter.

2.8.3 "Everything is different here…"

McGrath's (2006) viewpoint of this report differs from the two previous research pieces in that it focuses intently on participants' experience of a Youthreach programme. It is not as guided by reasons for early school-leaving although some similar themes emerge throughout the research. The main concepts identified by McGrath focus on social inclusion and how educational inclusiveness is practiced within Youthreach. McGrath (2006) presents a case study of the experiences of fourteen participants attending a Youthreach programme in a rural setting. The research highlights the changes that have occurred in relation to enrolment on the programme since its inception in 1989.

The findings indicate that previous attendees on the programme in McGrath's study mainly consisted of seventeen year old males from farming backgrounds with interests in metal and woodwork or a trade. In more recent times, the cohort average age was nineteen and consisted equally of males, from backgrounds other than farming, and females, including young mothers (DES, 2010a). Although in the report the participants viewed their training allowance as a major incentive for attending the programme, they also indicated the importance of establishing trusting relationships with the members of staff on the programme. The participants focused on the practical advice, guidance and emotional support they received from the staff and identified the importance of being able to be individual and to feel comfortable in the small groups. The positive encounters with the programme were compared to their negative schooling experience.

In this study, three main findings were highlighted in relation to the positive experiences that the participants encountered on the programme. Firstly, the participants viewed the curriculum in Youthreach as more relevant to their needs; one which they felt prepared them for everyday life. They also felt that they were given an opportunity to uncover their creative talents. Secondly, the participants appreciated being treated like adults and they felt that this enticed them to work harder and cooperate more effectively. Thirdly, they identified the importance of the strong relationships that existed between the tutors and students.

This research is successful in presenting the compelling words of the participants; it manages to portray the flexibility of the programme in terms of curriculum and approach, to suit the needs of those attending Youthreach. In the conclusion, McGrath (2006, p.611) states that "while institutions such as school have lost connectivity with many young people's biographies, there is a stark need for the kind of institutions, where connectivity can be regained". He provides a compelling case for the need for alternatives to education to be in place to support those who have been marginalised from mainstream school. However, he asserts that the nature of the current school system to limit some members of society should not be ignored. It is worth noting that the utopian view of the Youthreach programme presented in this study is not generalizable and the omission of any negative experiences or issues is evident. The notion of how the Youthreach programme is regarded by society is not examined and there is no account of any negative experiences of the programme presented from the perspectives of the participants. Also, there is no mention of mental health issues or behavioural problems amongst the young people, which would indicate that these issues have become more prevalent in recent years and perhaps less stigmatised. Nonetheless, this report is noteworthy in its endeavour to publicly highlight positive experiences encountered by participants on a second chance Youthreach programme. It illustrates the fact that students have for some time, been highlighting the importance of having positive relationships and sense of belonging in an educational setting. McGrath's (2006) analysis of the participants' experiences in Youthreach bears strong resemblance to Smyth and Hattam's (2004) concept of early school-leavers who try to 'become somebody without school'.

2.8.4 No Way Back?

'No Way Back? The Dynamics of Early School-leaving', Byrne and Smyth (2010) for the NCCA and the DES is a recent report that is relevant to this research. This report is more current than the previous reports outlined. It presents the first mixed method longitudinal study of early school-leavers in Ireland. It was based on twelve case study schools, consisting of one thousand students surveyed and twenty five young people interviewed. This research set out to examine the views of young people while in school and after leaving school before the completion of senior cycle. The longitudinal nature of the research enabled it to present a prospective and retrospective view of early school-leavers as they were engaging in school and as they made their decisions to leave and their reflections and accounts after leaving school; rather than the traditional retrospective views of early school-leavers that are present in most studies. This study is very interesting as it closely correlates with my own research and provides opportunities for comparing and contrasting the findings. In particular, it suggests that the pattern of early school leaving amongst lower socio-economic groups is significant and reveals the substantial inequality that exists in Irish education and society in general. The issue of inequality in education needs to be continually brought forward and the inclusion of the voices of the young people that have been affected is a powerful means of expressing and identifying the issues that need to be addressed within the system.

The study provides a current overview of both national and international literature pertaining to early school-leaving. It highlights that much of the literature pertains to a deficit perspective; that early school-leaving is attributed to the young person or their families. While this is not new, it highlights how other issues relating to early school-leaving have largely remained uncontested. It focuses on issues in relation to streaming and ability, and recognition, both of which have already been addressed in this literature It claims that longitudinal studies have indicated that early school-leaving is normally a gradual process and those most likely to leave early are often easily identifiable. It emphasises the persistent issue of early school-leaving among those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and it highlights that males are still more likely to drop out than females. The findings of 'No Way Back?', reproduces similar results, however the analysis is extended to understanding the difference

between the gender gap. The report indicates that males are more likely to drop out if they are allocated to lower ability classes where it is common for them to have negative relationships with the teachers and they often act out in class.

Similar to 'Hear my Voice', 'No Way Back?' presents accounts from early school-leavers of their school experiences; noting the importance of the voices of those who are often silenced. However, the findings of 'No Way Back?' resonates more with Stokes (2003) findings than directly relating to Boldt (1994). With the main findings indicating that students had difficulties at transitional periods, the classroom environment, teacher-pupil relationships, academic struggles and negative peer interactions. Byrne and Smyth (2010) indicated that poor literacy skills and falling behind in their work were core reasons why students were dropping out of school. Also, the report details post-school pathways of those who had left school early. It presented four common pathways: continuous employment, fragmented routes, persistent unemployment/inactivity and participation in further education. In regards to Youthreach as an option, the report indicated that the students who had chosen this pathway considered it a more suitable learning environment than school. However, findings also show that many of the young people had regarded Youthreach as an alternative to the labour market, rather than a direct choice. This was an interesting point for this study, it warranted further examining into what the participants' thoughts were of Youthreach as an alternative educational setting.

This report 'No Way Back?' has exceeded other earlier reports in relation to identifying the causes of early school-leaving from both prospective and retrospective viewpoints. However, it is wholly an urban study, based entirely on twelve schools located in the heart of Dublin and has missed an opportunity to engage with other centres and schools throughout the country which may have highlighted other significant factors. Also, this report manages to overlook the Youthreach programmes as a viable second chance option both in terms of excluding it from the main conclusion and implications of the report and in terms of the name of the report 'No Way Back?' indicating that there are no valid alternatives back into education once a young person leaves school. This report draws attention to the hierarchical view of education progression within the current education system. This again reiterates the importance of investigating the concept of Youthreach and the

provision of the programme as an alternative education route from the perspective of the young people.

2.8.5 'Dropping out', Drifting off, Being Excluded

This book, authored by Smyth and Hattam (2004) details the experiences of 209 students within an Australian context from 1997-1999. Although this is quite an old study in comparison to 'No Way Back?' it bears much resemblance to many of the issues faced by young people today, within the Irish context. While this study was a longitudinal mixed method research, including both quantitative and qualitative methods; the resulting book focused solely on the qualitative aspects of the study. It provides powerful insights into the experiences of young people as they explain why school did not work for them. I was very interested in the method used to present the experiences of the young people as I found it very compelling and raw. The participants' own words are used to tell their stories, in what Smyth and Hattam describe as 'portraits'. These are similar to the stories found in 'Hear my Voice'; presented without interpretation, enabling the sole voice of the participant to be heard. Also, it bears resemblance to the ideas of Byrne and Smyth (2010) who advocated the use of 'voiced research' in their study. This correlates strongly with my vision for this research: providing a genuine space for the participants to reveal their stories.

The study indicates that many of the participants felt that leaving school was the best option to take considering the way they felt they were treated in school. Smyth and Hattam described that issues relating to teacher-pupil relationships, peer interactions, identity formation, alienation and school structures all had an impact on the participants' decisions to stay on at or to leave school. In particular, a noteworthy finding was in relation to friendship being a key reason why many of the participants remained in school; this may imply that negative peer interactions were a reason why they left early. Furthering on from this, the research reveals that many of the participants claimed that they were not driven by credentials; in many cases it was shown that they found finishing school to be irrelevant to their aspirations. This may match with the Irish context, where many students leave school after their Junior Certificate and do not work towards the high stakes examination, the Leaving

Certificate, as the points system is too stressful and not considered beneficial for many students.

What is very apparent in this study is the ability of the young people to reflect on their experiences of school and provide remarkable insight and clarity into what worked and did not work for them within the school system; providing clear implications for policy makers. The book concludes with the concept of the participants 'becoming somebody without school'. Also, it makes suggestions towards how things can be done differently in schools. The conclusions are generalizable and have something to offer to the Irish education system. In particular, it is my contention that the system needs to attend to youth identity formation and the transformation of the school culture in order that it becomes a supportive environment for young people and a place where each young person can experience success.

Summary

The five research approaches presented above have assisted in the theoretical advancement of my own research thesis. The studies have substantiated the need to encompass a psychological framework as a broader lens for understanding the participants. In order to fully understand the complexities of early school-leaving there is an explicit need to focus on the young person as a whole and consider all aspects of a young person's life as having a bearing on educational experiences. The ideas and concepts outlined by these studies have aided the development of the research questions. The perspectives and power of voiced research evident in these studies have confirmed my choice of methodology, for I believe that this is the best way to get to the heart of the issues and opening up opportunities for exploring the experiences of early school-leavers and their journey through the education system.

Conclusion

This literature review has highlighted the main concepts used in this study. Educational disadvantage and early school-leaving have been examined in detail. These two concepts are at the core of this study, the participants in this study are early school-leavers who are regarded as educationally disadvantaged. Throughout the review a dual perspective of these concepts has occupied the space to provide an analysis of the foci that surrounds the available literature, with particular reference to the Irish context. In particular the literature reveals that it is predominately a functionalist view that permeates the operations of the education system and that policies and plans are implemented based on these viewpoints. In order to offset these hegemonic assumptions which are persistent within the Irish educational discourse I presented additional viewpoints from critical education theories, psychological and equality frameworks. These theories provide a broader approach in consideration of educational disadvantage and early school leavers and provide a more holistic means of conceptualising educational processes.

The bulk of the literature pertaining to educational disadvantage and early school leaving which is available is very consistent in terms of providing a restricted view as to how the educational system can and should operate. The policies, practices and legislative definitions that are put in place to potentially safeguard and reduce the levels of early school leaving and combat what has been coined as 'educational disadvantage', provide very logical and rational ideals and solutions as to what is best for those who are attending school. The practices are legitimised by focusing on the ability of students to attain certain achievable standards. The nonattainment of such standards is regarded as a reflection of the individual student's deficiency as opposed to failings of the education system structure. However, I oppose such a view and consider that the system that is at fault and that it only makes sense to those for whom it has been designed and can gain from it, as they know how the system operates. The initiatives which are in place are not overtly considerate of economic, cultural or affective issues that impact upon individual students and largely regard all students as a homogenous group with equal opportunities to succeed. The education system is not designed with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in mind and falls short of making any substantive changes for these students. I consider

that this is a design feature of the education system and it appears justifiable by maintaining a deficit ideology for those who cannot attain success. However, what needs to be considered is that what is 'achievable' is out of the reach for many of these students before they even begin, they are being set up for failure.

Critical perspectives presented in the literature spanning over two decades (Lynch, 1990; Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Smyth, 1999; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Lyons, 2003; Lynch and Baker, 2005; Spring, 2007; Mac Ruairc, 2009) would concur with my view and strongly contend the legitimacy of such an educational approach, and have identified the utilisation of 'educational disadvantage as a façade to enable the dominant groups to succeed within society. The work of Lynch and associates imbues the literature review and provides a strong basis on which to view the inadequacies of the current educational system in Ireland. She presents powerful insights into how the education system is dominated by middle-class values and how ideals of essentialism, meritocracy and consensualism form key features of the system. Lynch's (1989) work on the hidden curriculum characterises schools as places that solely value the fundamental ideals and beliefs of the dominant groups. I believe that students from lower socio-economic groups may be correctly described as disadvantaged, not in terms of lacking ability but because the dominant groups are advantaged by how the system operates and the only option for these disadvantaged students is to learn the rules of the game, if they want to succeed.

MacRuairc (2009) has similar views to Lynch and provides a clear overview of how persistent patterns of educational inequalities are prevalent between socio-economic groups particularly in relation to the cultural practices that are perpetuated in schools. His work strengthens Lynch's work on the hidden curriculum by highlighting how standardised linguistic testing in schools is reflective of the middle-class range of language and discredits any other linguistic code. He contends that schools become a cultural struggle for those from lower socio-economic groupings as their way of being is invalidated. Similar views are asserted by Devine (2009), Cregan (2008) and Reay (2004), which focus on the negative outcomes of such suppression on young people, mainly from lower socio-economic backgrounds. I view that Mac Ruairc (2009) presents a very clear picture of the struggle of many young people in school who try and battle a system which validates the culture of the dominant

groups and stigmatises and marginalises all others. The following words of Albert Einstein aptly surmise the impact that such a schooling experience has on these students: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid". An important consideration for this study is the acknowledgement of the culture and beliefs of students from lower socio-economic groupings and the need for such to be recognised within the schooling system.

This is not a new phenomenon or unique to the Irish context, theorists such as Bourdieu (1986) and Berstein (1974) have considered the issues of cultural and linguistic capital as having an overarching impact on educational success and emphasised how the system is more unequal for some than others. Others such as Illich (1970) and Reimer (1971) were also keenly aware of the injustices of the schooling system in relation to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, it must also be considered that failure is not predestined for all students from lower socio-economic groups, as students do succeed within the system or decide to resist the system, as is presented in the writings of Giroux (2001) and Willis (1977). This makes it more difficult to fully contest the current system as to some extent it backs up the notion of meritocracy, if you make the effort and have the ability you will succeed, regardless of socio-economic background. In recent times, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who have succeeded in mainstream education, have been presented with new obstacles that hinder their progression, with the removal of free third level tuition fees. It appears that this is just another means of providing the dominate groups advantage through their economic capital and as greater numbers of students from lower socio-economic groupings learn how to succeed within mainstream they are once again disadvantaged by not having the financial means to progress. The literature reviewed clearly highlights that the clandestine objectives of the Irish education system are a minefield for many young people who are not well served by the process and are left with no other option than to leave the schooling system early.

The concept of early school-leaving is central to this study. The research shows that it is a complex phenomenon that cannot easily be described or categorised. Over the past decade of working with early school leavers I have come to understand what it is

like for them not to succeed in school, their feelings of failure, and their sense that the school did not care for or offer anything that was real or relevant to them is candidly evident in their stories. I have uncovered that if we are to truly understand the reasons why they left school we need to listen to their stories. In this review I have presented five research studies that concentrate on the perspectives of early school leavers (Boldt, 1997; Stokes, 2003; Smyth and Hattam, 2004; McGrath, 2006, Byrne and Smyth, 2010). These studies confirm the importance of inclusion of participants' voices as a means of understanding early school leaving and provide greater insight into the phenomenon than those presented in reviews such as the NESF (2002) *Early school-leavers* report. Nonetheless the research presented on early school-leavers is now largely outdated due to the changing nature of society and there is a clear need to identify other issues relating to early school-leaving which have received little attention in the existing literature on Irish education. Based on my own experience of working with early school leavers, it is becoming more apparent in my everyday work that many of the students that I am working with are dealing with mental health related issues. These issues stem from many factors, such as home and societal influences, however, many of their issues emerge from circumstances surrounding school experiences. Mental health issues have not to date been identified in research as a major contributing factor to early school-leaving. The term 'mental health' has only started to appear in educational research in the past six years. The literature indicates that there is stigma attached to the term and my experience suggests there is a compelling need to bring the issue to the fore. I believe that a focus on mental health issues is essential for understanding early school-leaving and should be considered through a broader lens than a sociological approach, a lens that incorporates a psychological perspective.

In the literature I make links between identity formation and recognition issues in school as relating to the onset of mental health related issues. This association is supported by a psychological perspective that is evident in more recent educational discourse on education and schooling (Lynch and Baker, 2005; Smyth, 2006; Lynch, 2008; Reay 2012). To further the analysis I have included traditional associations to the psychological framework and have identified the works of Erikson (1980), Bowlby (1990) and Honneth (2002). This has been applied as a means for

understanding how students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are affected by being negated within the current system and it provides insight into negative perceptions of attachment, identity and recognition formation with school. Overall, the blending of these insights deliver a progressive means of highlighting the importance of relationships and respect as fundamental elements of what is required and needed by all students within education. O'Brien's (2008) study on wellbeing and capabilities gives useful theoretical insight for understanding the issues of mental health and the importance of inclusion within educational discourse. Her work is an example of the type of progressive research and approach that is needed within education and is a move towards creating a more caring environment.

The concluding part of the review encapsulates the notion of an equitable education system that provides more opportunities for students from lower-socio-economic backgrounds. Lynch's (2008) work is prominent here and there is a chronological evolution apparent in her research, which now focuses on identifying approaches for improving the educational system as opposed to highlighting the inherent problems of the system. Lynch's ideas are strengthened by Noddings (1995, 2005) and Cohen's (2006) writings and their focus on the importance of developing the affective domain dimensions within education. I believe that this is a key focus for education particularly as more market-driven views come to dominate the field. We cannot develop healthy and well-rounded young people if we solely focus on the outputs of education and forget about the processes involved.

The review of the available literature has uncovered some gaps that need addressing and in turn have helped to refine my questions. In particular, I consciously decided to refine my questions to include a question on the theme of mental health and make it visible within the research questions. Also, I focus the research on the provisions of the Youthreach programme and how the participants regard the programme. There is no key research available on the Youthreach programme and this has initiated this thesis. In addition to this, the majority of research available in terms of early school-leaving has an urban dimension and the rural element is often neglected. This study will try and address this gap and provide a rural perspective from early school-leavers.

The literature suggests that the life chances of students who leave school early are greatly reduced. Those who attend Youthreach programmes and wish to further their education are still regarded as early school-leavers. Do these students consider themselves as early-school-leavers? What are their aspirations for the future? And is there a need to address the current status of Youthreach, namely, should those who attend be regarded as early school-leavers? And how do the students view the Youthreach programme provision? These are all questions which are considered important in this research and are addressed through the participants' voices.

The next chapter will present the research procedures for this study and identify the methods used to illuminate the research questions.

Chapter 3
Research Procedures

Introduction

This study is a small-scale, qualitative investigation into the experiences of Youthreach participants, aged between 16 and 21 years, from four centres within the Youthreach Western Area Network. It seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the participants' depictions of being early school-leavers and the implications of such portrayals?
- How do the participants view their current Youthreach programmes and what elements of the programme do the participants perceive to be significant to them?
- What are the mental health related issues that affect the lives of the participants? What is the impact of mental health on their participation on the Youthreach programme?
- What are the participants' aspirations for the future?

In this chapter the rationale and choice of the main methods employed in the research are presented. An exploration of my ontological beliefs, epistemological assumptions and reasoning for a qualitative approach is offered. I provide a detailed account of the data collection process and describe how the data was analysed. Issues pertaining to access to participants, ethical considerations, confidentiality and anonymity are highlighted. Triangulation, the role of researcher and the limitations of the study are also considered.

The investigation is based on arts-based research. Thirty-eight participant collages on thoughts about early school-leaving are presented, with eleven of those participants sharing deeper insights into their personal experiences of being early school-leavers. The research also includes an open-ended questionnaire designed to investigate the insights from the Western Area Network of coordinators on student mental health. The use of these multiple-method choices was necessary in order to uncover the data and to provide a trustworthy account of the findings.

This research process was guided by Robson's (2011) practical checklist of seven key factors to consider before embarking on data collection. I used the checklist presented overleaf in *Table 9* as a guide throughout the research process and found the information useful and noteworthy. Although, I did not adhere rigidly to the order of the checklist when organising this chapter, all seven elements were present.

1. **Know what you are doing before starting the data collection.** *Research aims, questions, methods and procedures*
2. **Negotiating access**
3. **Get yourself organised- devising a schedule for interviewing**
4. **Pilot if at all possible – important to have a trial run**
5. **Work on your relationships -**
6. **Don't just disappear at the end-**
7. **Don't expect it to work out as you planned** – *not everything will run smoothly, be flexible and take note.*

Table 9: Seven steps to data collection

Source: Robson, 2011, p.399

3.1 The Researcher's Viewpoint

Firstly, it is fundamental to discuss what has influenced my view. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that one's ontological beliefs generate epistemological assumptions which further give rise to one's methodological considerations and data collection procedures. With this viewpoint in mind, I critically reflected on my ontological and epistemological stance that impacted upon this research project.

The students whose stories are presented in this thesis are attending Youthreach centres in the West of Ireland. As previously outlined, these students have left mainstream schooling early and for a variety of reasons. They are regarded as educationally disadvantaged, early school-leavers, who have bleak future prospects. The circumstances surrounding their early departure from school mainly associated with the students being at fault or deficient in some way. These students left school with the impression that they were not good enough to make it through the system. They are now attending Youthreach programmes and are working towards their future goals yet they are not receiving any recognition for their achievements as they are continually regarded as school dropouts. Ontologically, I view that these students are not to blame for their early departure from school. I deem that the education system was not designed to cater for their needs, that their background or culture was not recognised within the system and as a result these students' felt marginalised and alienated. I believe that students who leave mainstream schooling early have a difficult choice to make, the results of which have significant implications for their mental health, both how they are judged by others and by themselves. It is my contention that society has a lot to learn from these young

people and they should be given an opportunity to provide their perspectives. I work from the premise that everyone looks out their own window. They see things in their own particular way and that is what is of value to them. It is how they make sense of the world and therefore in order to gain a full understanding of a person it is important to hear their story, their views and perspectives. This is my epistemological view, which has a firm grounding within the interpretivist paradigm. This is neither a good or bad feature; instead it is my understanding of how knowledge is created and meaning is discovered.

The interpretivist approach looks at the whole picture, it focuses on the people and has the view that social reality is surmised from the individual's perception of events and these views may differ from one person to another or from one setting to another (Gall *et al.,* 2007). Knowledge is created by finding meaning, understanding human thoughts and feelings at a much deeper level (Berry, 1998). Characteristics of this interpretivist approach have been identified by Greene (1994) as focusing on peoples' opinions and viewpoints, where the people enlighten the researcher through an interactive process, sharing their voice on the matter. For instance, if participants in this study provided an account of leaving mainstream, it is their perspective of the event. This may be regarded as their reality, their point of view. No one can guarantee for certain that their perspective is incorrect or less valid than another. A perspective is one person's view of reality, constituted by the way they interpret or see reality (Charon, 2001). There is no one set reality that can be tested across the board or one that can be tested with theory but rather multiple realities that are created through peoples' beliefs, understandings, assumptions and feelings and from this, meaning and understanding is created and theory can be developed. Myers (2000) maintains that it is about presenting a perspective of a situation that accurately captures what has actually occurred. In essence, Creswell (2013, p.24) suggests that "the goal of research then is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation". Overall, the research becomes a snapshot of events at a particular moment in time, in a particular setting and describing the events that unfold. The aim of this study is to focus on the unique perspectives of Youthreach participants in the West of Ireland who have left school early and to provide an insight into their world, their versions of events. The purpose of which is to create rich data that can

produce valuable findings and give a greater understanding of issues that are faced by these young people. This new knowledge will be created in the hope of improving the participants' educational experiences.

The students of Youthreach are at the heart of this study and this is reflected in the research questions, as outlined on Page 114. When the research questions had been determined it was clearly evident that a quantitative approach would not meet the objectives of this study. While I am interested in the reports and figures that are available in terms of early school-leaving and Youthreach participants, the questions are more concerned with understanding the participants' experience of the world. This study required a fuller involvement by the participants and me, the researcher. I needed to delve deeper, find out the reasons for the results, giving the participants an opportunity to discuss their experiences. Therefore, having considered the goals of the research and taking into account my ontological and epistemological assumptions I believed that due to the nature of this study a qualitative approach was best. The use of this approach enabled the voice of the participants to be heard and the findings presented.

3.1.1 Participant voice

Voiced research has become an important element of educational research. In Chapter Two, many of the studies highlighted contained elements of voiced research as part of the methodologies (Boldt, 1997; Stokes, 2003; Smyth and Hattam, 2004; McGrath, 2006; Byrne and Smyth, 2010). All of these studies indicated the importance of the inclusion of the young person's perspective as it can often be excluded or silenced from research pertaining to early school-leaving. Smyth (2006) asserts that the young people should be seen as a source of knowledge and expertise. Their stories and understandings of what has led them to disengage or leave school is what is needed so that educators and policymakers can have a chance of succeeding in making a difference in their lives.

In order to get a full picture, one needs to delve deeper, those who have experienced early school-leaving, their perspectives are needed to fully understand the event. This could entail, listening to the stories of students and trying to form new understandings and creating new knowledge based on their narratives. This may

provide an insight into the lives of these participants and develop new understandings of them and what has led them to their current situation. It is from these nuggets of information that new knowledge is created, used and developed into some worthwhile objective, which would hopefully lead to more appropriate educational provisions. The attainment of knowledge can be unassuming and modest. It is about making sense of the world in order that you can use this knowledge in a practical way.

The values and claims made by the participants may not be shared by all young people that leave school early. While some views may converge with the views of others, some will deviate and all views would be considered as subjective. However, within a qualitative study there is much subjectivity; the researcher and the participants' biases form part of the research (Hennick *et al.,* 2011). Each person brings their personal feelings, thoughts and beliefs to the research process and these often become apparent during data collection and analysis. Flick (2009) concurs with this, stating that the researcher and her subjectivity are as much an integral part of a qualitative study as the participants and their subjectivity. The use of the participants' voices are somewhat influenced by my views of the world and the perspectives I have in relation to these young people.

The use of participant voice is an interpretivist approach and is not a favoured by all; in particular, it goes against the positivist view. This view considers that there is one reality out there to be measured and that the results of research should be able to produce objective knowledge and render objective truths (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, knowledge already exists independent of the knower. There is one reality and in order to explain this, it is a matter of being able to objectively research it, measure it and draw relevant conclusions based on scientific theories and experiments. This positivist approach dismisses the idea that knowledge can be created from people. People and knowledge formation is complex and lives cannot easily be explained by using a positivist view of knowing (Ryan, 2006). The participants of this study have their own distinctive stories to offer that are unique and varied and do not fit neatly into a pre-existing phenomenon. Their stories provide an insight into the multifaceted events that have made them early school-leavers. Their reality is being interpreted in this study.

An important consideration for this study was how best to capture and present the voices of the participants. From my own experience of working with the young people in Youthreach I was aware that the students communicate using a variety of means. In particular, many students prefer to engage with processes through visual means as opposed to just the conventional modes of speaking or writing. My data collection options were evaluated based on the best means of reaching out to the students. I believed that the research methods needed to be creative and inclusive. I was also conscious of the willingness of the participants to openly discuss issues and felt that the methods needed the inclusion of an opportunity for them to communicate on a one-to-one basis. I deemed that more than one method was required in order to yield the richest data. I investigated the use of an arts-based approach as a means of initially engaging the students in research processes.

As part of the data collection planning process I also considered how the findings could be presented to adequately reflect the voices of the participants in a credible manner. Silverman (2000) stresses the importance of having qualitative findings that are a true reflection of all the data rather than a few well-chosen examples. He refers to using some well selected examples as 'anecdotalism' and identifies it as being a temptation for qualitative researchers when presenting findings. He states that it has the potential to put the validity of the findings into question. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of this research I decided that the participants' findings would be presented using different approaches to reduce the trap of an anecdotal approach. The approaches included the presentation of three participants' accounts and seven descriptions of their collages, with minimal interpretation. This approach emulates Smyth and Hattam's (2004) study and I felt that it was an important element that would enable the distinct voices of the participants to be expressed throughout the findings.

3.2 Methodological triangulation - Data Collection techniques

The creation of a suitable methodology is an evolving process that is continually being tweaked in order to develop the best possible approach for a research study. In this study, the strategies and approaches that I started out with changed and developed until I felt I had applied the most appropriate methods that operated in harmony with the research aims and the participants' data.

Initially, I had considered that the needs to this research would be best met by utilising a case study strategy. I was informed by Punch (1998) who considered that a case study was a small scale, in depth investigation of one particular case, and this seemed to meet the primary conditions of this research. The idea was further advanced by Cohen *et al.* (2011, p.289) view that 'a case study provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than presenting them with abstract theories and principles'. I deemed that a case study would enable me to exhibit the participants' stories from their perspective and this strategy was employed at the outset. However, as the research progressed, I considered that the data and the research matured beyond the parameters of a case study and I wanted to open it up and enable the data to breathe and not refine it to a case that was defined by boundaries (Punch, 1998). The study was liberated, as such, into a qualitative investigative study.

In *Figure 10* overleaf I present a visual image of the methodology employed in this study. The image shows that the research procedures draws on the spirit of, and is influenced by a case study strategy, but is not solely defined by it. The case study strategy is part of this study and it is possible that there are remnants of it filtering through the study and thus creates this distinctive eclectic design that illuminates the research themes and creates a qualitative investigative study that incorporates a mixed methods approach.
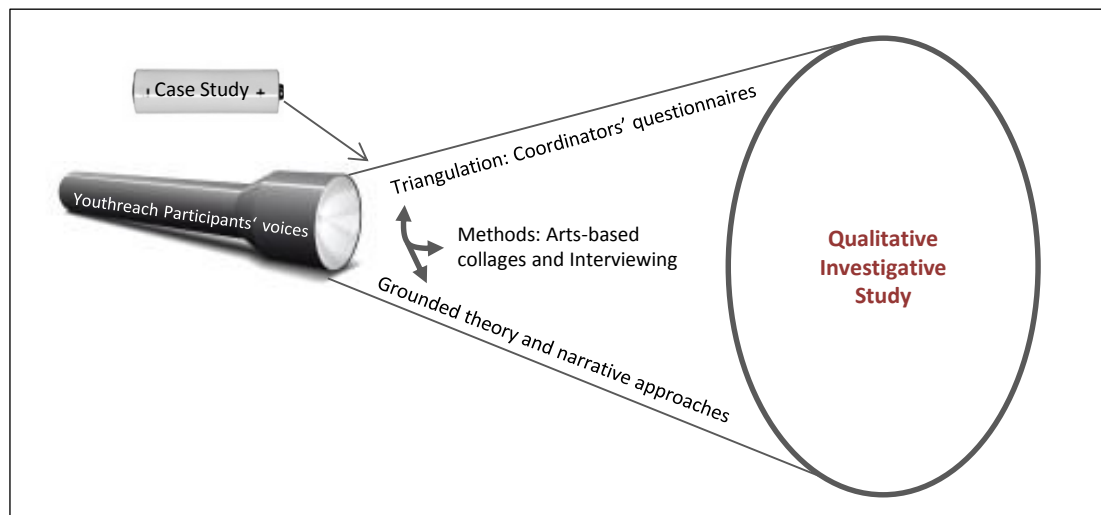
Figure 10: Research Design

A mixed method approach is commonly identified as a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods (Robson, 2011; Gall *et al.,* 2007) and is often referred to as a means of triangulation. Flick (2009) refers to triangulation as the use of several different methods to substantiate the issue under study. Hennick *et al.* (2011) asserts that mixing methods should be broader than the above definition and can incorporate the combination of different qualitative methods.

In this research, I used two main qualitative methods for the data collection process. The methods employed were an arts-based method, which included the creation of collages followed by semi-structured interviews. I considered that the sequential use of these two methods enhanced the data collection process. It provided me with an opportunity to build rapport with the participants and enabled them to reflect and genuinely engage in the process. These research procedures provided the means by which I could exhibit the participants' stories from their perspective. The small scale nature of this study provided me with an opportunity to immerse into the experiences of the participants and to uncover details that may not have become apparent through less in-depth research (Denscombe, 2003). This is at the heart of the qualitative tradition and allows the reader to understand more clearly the experiences of these participants by revealing "what it is like" (Cohen *et al*., 2011, p.290) for them. Also, I employed a third method, open-ended questionnaires that were administered to Youthreach coordinators, to aid triangulation and provide a more complete view of the issues under study. The research also includes the use of theoretical perspectives to support the interpretation of the research in the discussion chapter (Cohen *et al.,* 2011). Each of these methods will be discussed in turn.

121

3.2.1 Arts-Based Methods

Firstly, I used an arts-based method approach. This is a qualitative approach designed to engage the participants in the process, through artistic means. Leavy (2009) provides a list of approaches that may be subsumed within this method, including visual arts, music, performance, dance, literary writing and film. It is a creative process that has been defined as:

> …the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both the researcher and the people that they involve in their studies.
>
> McNiff (2008, p.29)

As indicated earlier, I felt that this approach related positively to the participants, as from my own experience, many Youthreach participants express their experiences through artistic means. This is expanded further by Coholic (2010) who asserts that creative methods are often essential for some young people, who have had considerable life challenges, as it is the only means by which they are willing to express their thoughts and experiences. It is regarded by Leavy (2009) as a highly effective means of communicating the emotional aspects of a young person's life. My experience of working within the Youthreach context would concur with these statements and I emphasise the importance of using different modes of communication when engaging with the young people. Prosser and Loxley (2008) affirm that those who find words and numbers difficult do not perform well in interviews or questionnaires. Therefore, I considered this method as a relevant preparatory process to engage the participants.

I was interested in gaining an insight into the participants' experiences by using a visual arts approach. I decided on the use of collage creation and drawing as a means of engaging with the participants. Collage is a creative technique that involves the pasting of different materials, artefacts and objects onto a surface to create an artistic display of a particular topic or theme (Leitch, 2008). Pragmatically, I considered the selecting of images and phrases from newspapers and magazines to be the most accessible material by which the collages could be produced. Also, I encouraged the production of drawings or art pieces by the participants during the process. However, I did not consider drawing as the main option as young people can be

sensitive about their artistic ability. Leitch (2008, p.44) describes this as 'adolescent plateau' in artistic development, in that the young people can be resistant to drawing tasks as they are fearful of what others may think of their work. The use of collage creation reduces this risk of possible resistance from the participants as it is not dependent on the demonstration of artistic talent.

The use of collage creation matches the aims of this study. It provides the participants with the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions. It places the participants at the heart of the process, they are regarded as the experts on their own world and the focus is on what they consider as significant. It is a practical process that requires the immediate involvement of the participants. It is a relatively safeguarded means of expressing thoughts and opinions for the participants. They are selecting available words and images that are symbolic to them, rather than openly articulating their feelings. Leitch (2008) refers to the collages as acting as a 'safe container' for the participants, a way that enables them to be creative and to open up about personal experiences in a non-judgemental fashion.

The reference to the collages as a 'safe container' was important for this study. It highlighted the significance of the collages in becoming an integral part of the research process. Leitch's (2008) diagrammatic presentation overleaf in *Figure 11* demonstrates the potential dynamic that the collages can create. The collages are tangible pieces of work that become a powerful third element of the process, on par with the researcher and the participant. Much of what happens throughout the process will be influenced by the collage piece. This diagram indicates the importance of creating a space in which the participants are able to feel secure to interact with the researcher about their collage pieces. This was an important consideration for this study, where I as researcher could provide a safe environment that enabled the participants to tell their story of the collages and allow the meanings of their work to emerge.
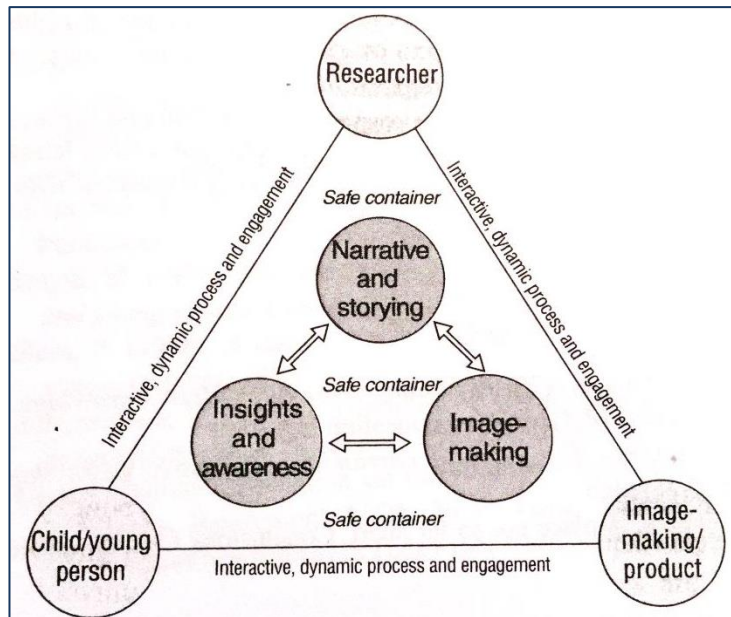
Figure 11: Creative research dynamic

Source: Leitch (2008), p.54

The use of collages also changes the power dynamic in the process. The participants had power over the process. In this study the participants were provided with the freedom to depict, in whatever ways they wished, their thoughts on being early school-leavers at this particular point in their lives, what it means to them, how they see themselves. Although, this may seem to be an unstructured approach it enabled the participants to have autonomy over their work and the interview and enabled them to create something without the fear of being judged. I made it clear to them from the outset that there were no right or wrong answers and that each participant's piece was of value. I was aware that this research would inevitably create opportunities for reflection, for me and for the participants. The intention of this process was to enable them to reflect on their overall experience within Youthreach, discuss it during interview and consider their future hopes and ambitions. A more detailed description of the collage creation is available on Page 144.

I found the collage creation to be a new and challenging approach, I had moved out of my comfort zone into the unknown. Initially, I was apprehensive about the method and whether I would be able to accurately depict the data collected. However, I was optimistic about the potential of the approach to produce rich, insightful material (Leitch, 2008; McNiff, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Smithbell, 2010).

3.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Face-to-face qualitative interviewing was the second method that I utilised for data collection. The collage pieces that had been created by the participants became an integral part of the interview process. The participants' collages were used as a starting point for the interviews, as a method of engaging the participants in the process and providing them with an opportunity to reflect on their educational experiences. Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006, p.84) claim that "by inviting participants to create things as part of the research process, it is a different way into a research question…and engages the brain in a different way, drawing on different kinds of response". The collages acted as a form of support for the participants during the interviews and helped to initiate the conversation. It was much easier for the students to discuss their thoughts and feelings when they had something concrete to talk about rather than starting the conversation from scratch. It was up to the participants to discuss what the collages meant to them. They were empowered by having the collages with them during the interview, as they owned the data; it was their piece, they were the 'expert'. I felt that this resulted in a calmer more relaxed interview process as it did not appear that I as the researcher was in charge or that I had power over the interview process.

Interviews were considered as an appropriate means to further engage with the participants about their experiences. Denscombe (2003, p.164) points out that interviews are used to obtain "material which provides more of an in-depth insight into the topic, drawing on information provided by fewer informants". Fontana and Frey (1994) also adopt this view, stating that interviewing is the most common means by which we can gain insight into the minds of participants. This was the main reason for selecting this method; as indicated previously, the emphasis in this study was on exploring the participants' perspective. The nature of the interview process also provided a safe and secure environment for the participant to discuss their collage and experiences of being an early school-leaver.

Interviewing is a commonly used method of data collection and it has been described as a specific type of conversation (Robson, 1993; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The word "conversation" can be misleading as there is almost the assumption that interviews are a chat that you might share with someone. As Denscombe (2003)

asserts, interviews are considerably more than mere conversations, they require much planning and preparation in order to be successful. For this study, it was important to make the participants feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible during the interviews. The interviews needed to feel like conversations, but structured in a way that met the requirements of the investigation.

In order to make the most out of the interviews, they needed to be planned. Firstly, the type of interview needed to be considered. There are three main types of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured interviews are more commonly associated with quantifiable type data and larger sample groups. This type of interview was considered too rigid for this study, as it limits response options and limits the interviewer's ability to delve deeper or move beyond a predetermined format (Robson, 1993). While at the other end of the spectrum, unstructured were considered limitless and relied heavily on the skills of the interviewer. This type of interview is participant lead and does not necessitate predefined questions. Robson (1993) indicates that the interviewer actively listens to the participant and asks questions based solely on what is referred to by the participant. In order to meet the aims of the research and address the research question, some interview structure was required. Semi-structured interviews were considered as a suitable approach and are described by Gillham (2010) as an important form of interviewing that has the potential to yield rich data in a qualitative type research.

Based on a semi-structured interview approach a guideline of key questions was prepared prior to the interviews (See Appendix III). However, within this method there was flexibility, to modify the question structure or sequence during the interviews, and the participants could be probed for more detail and also they had greater scope to expand on their responses (Fielding, 1993; Robson, 1993). This was particularly important in this research, as I could adapt the interviewing style to suit the respondents and their level of comprehension and style of articulation. Fielding (1993) provides words of caution in relation to probing and highlights the potential of probing to lead the participant into a particular response. He identifies probing as a particular skill that requires practice and should be used whenever the interviewer deems the participant's response to be vague. I have outlined the questions below as

key guiding questions for the interviews with the participants and a detailed explanation of the interview process is provided on Page 145 of this chapter.

- Tell me a about your collage/drawing piece?
- Are you surprised by what you put into the collage? Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Tell me a little about yourself?
- What was secondary school like for you?
- How did it happen, the leaving school? When did you feel that school was not for you? Or how did it come about?
- What did it feel like when you made the decision, were you thinking about it for a while?
- Looking back now, how do you feel about your decision?
- How do you feel about telling someone that you left school early?
- If someone was thinking of leaving school, what advice would you give them?
- Describe to me what Youthreach is about – in your own words.
- How do you feel you are getting on in Youthreach?
- Do you feel you made the right decision joining Youthreach?
- Can you think of anything that stands out for you since you started Youthreach?
- Are you looking forward to finishing the programme?
- In terms of education or life, if you had a remote control, what would it do?
- How do you feel about being a young person growing up in Ireland at the moment?

3.2.3 Questionnaires for centre coordinators

The questionnaire became the third data collection method used in this research. This was decided upon after the interviews with the participants were completed and mental health issues had emerged as a predominant feature in the findings. As researcher, I chose to further investigate the prevalence of mental health issues in the centres, from a coordinator's perspective. Although the main aim of this research was to provide the participants with a voice, the addition of this element became a worthy inclusion. It did not detract from the aims or remove the focus from the participants' voices. Instead it provided necessary insights from coordinators on what was currently happening in centres from their perspective in relation to mental health.

The questionnaire was designed mainly as a way of checking the coordinators' thoughts on the issues that had been raised by the participants during the interview process. Also, it was considered as a method of triangulation (Cohen *et al.,* 2011) and to assist with the discussion and analysis of the findings. Triangulation is an important part of the research process. It enables the data to be looked at by the researcher from different perspectives and methods. Flick (2009, p.445) claims that it can "produce knowledge on different levels" which suggests it can go further than the knowledge that can be created by one method and thus promoting the quality of the research. In this study I have aimed to improve the validity of the research by using various methods to achieve triangulation. Firstly, the two methods of collage creation and interviewing were employed which enabled a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study and provided the reader with various examples of the findings. Secondly, the questionnaire was devised to provide Youthreach coordinators' perspectives of mental health issues that they considered prevalent in the centres. This provided a more comprehensive grasp of the issues of early school-leaving and mental health issues.

The questionnaire was simple in design and consisted of twenty-three open ended questions (See Appendix IV). It was important that the questionnaire was short enough to engage the coordinators and comprehensive enough to gain an insight into their perspectives. The questionnaire was piloted on one coordinator before it was distributed to all. The piloting was beneficial and changes were indicated. For

example, the question on pre-entry information of students was suggested by the coordinator and was considered an important addition. The questionnaires were distributed in June 2013, by email, to the twelve Youthreach Centre coordinators of the Western Area Network. Although, I indicated a two-week response deadline, I received nine responses over a three month period, receiving the ninth response in September 2013. On reflection, the layout of the questionnaire in word format did not seem to suit all the coordinators and some found it difficult to enter their answers in the allocated boxes and others had missed some questions that had moved onto other pages. This resulted in some questions been missed by the coordinators and it may have resulted in the non-completion of the questionnaire by three of the coordinators. Although I did not include a full analysis or discussion of the findings of these questionnaires in this study I believe that the information received was useful for me as researcher to identify the seriousness of the issue of mental health within centres and obtain some necessary contextual information.

3.3 Data Collection plan

The planning involved in the data collection process became as important as the methods employed. The planning for the data collection was very time consuming and tedious. There was much preparatory work involved in producing the schedule that is presented overleaf in *Table 10*. The selection of suitable dates to carry out the research in each of the centres, proved to be a particularly difficult task, with the date in one centre needing to be rescheduled numerous times.

Dates	Centres	Number of participants
26th November 2012	A (pilot study)	4 collages 1 Interview (1 male) 3 males and 1 female
28th February 2013	A	5 collages 1 interview (1 Male) 1 female and 4 males
7th March 2013	B	10 students present – 8 collages and 4 interviews (2 males and 2 females) 4 males and 6 females.
14th March 2013	C	12 students present 11 collages and 4 interviews (4 females) 6 males and 6 females
17th April 2013	D	9 students = 9 collages – 1 interview (1 male) 4 males and 5 females
10th June 2013	A	2nd Interview – 1 student
24th June 2013	All Western Area Network	Questionnaires emailed to 12 coordinators

Table 10: Data collection Schedule

The data collection process took place over an eight month period, however, much planning and preparation was required before this process began. Initially, I informally contacted the Youthreach centres in May 2012 to ask the coordinators if they would be interested in the research taking place in the centres. The response was positive and in June of 2012, I was invited by a coordinator to visit a centre and attend a planning meeting. This was very useful as I was able to meet the staff members and gain an insight into the centre's operations. Also, I had an opportunity to share my research ideas with the staff members and receive constructive feedback in relation to my proposed methods. Following on from this, I prepared a formal request letter to the coordinators and the board of management of four centres. I was mindful of the issue of gaining access and the potential gatekeepers involved in the research process: co-ordinators of each of the centres; the Board of Management; and parents of the participants. In order to carry out the research, I used an 'overt' approach as conveyed by Maykut and Morehouse (2001) that is, being as open and honest about the process as possible. This process conveyed the potential benefit of the research and I was provided with a positive response about the research. The letters to the Board of Management were distributed after the ethical approval had been sanctioned and the centre coordinators had granted their approval (See Appendix V-VII for consenting documentation).

3.3.1 Ethical Considerations

All participants that attend Youthreach centres would be considered vulnerable, based on age and circumstances. My main goal as a tutor who has worked with Youthreach participants on a daily basis for the past 12 years and as a researcher was to prevent harm to any participant. My aims were to promote a good, positive, safe environment of all participants, in particular, those involved in the research. This ideal concurs with Denzin (1989, p.83) who declares that 'our primary obligation in research is to the participant and not the study to be conducted'. I felt confident during the process that I had considered the safety and well-being of the participants in all aspects of the research design. I focused on gaining access to the participants by wholly informing them of the process and providing the security of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process. The following consenting documentation was sent to each of the four centres who participated in the research.

- Letter to Coordinator of each centre
- Letter to Board of Management
- Letter for parents/guardians
- Letter for participants

As part of the feedback and discussion with the centres' coordinators it was decided that the most efficient means of gaining access to parents of participants under the age of 18 would be by the coordinators contacting the parents. I prepared the consent forms and forwarded them to the coordinators. The coordinator of the centre informed the parents/guardians of the process close to the date that the research took place in each centre. Each parent and guardian was presented with a form that was user friendly and the coordinators were mindful of any literacy difficulties and in which case the consent forms were discussed orally (See Appendix V). The coordinators presented me with the original copy of the signed forms and maintained a copy for their own records. This reduced the administration burden on my part and the process worked very efficiently. Also, the participation forms were discussed with the students prior to my arrival in the centre and this provided the potential participants with time to consider whether or not they wished to participate in the research.

A consent form was requested from all the students, regardless of age (See Appendix VI). The same scenario was applied to the students, the forms were presented and discussed with the students prior to the research taking place, and on my arrival I went through the consent forms with the students, to ensure that they understood the process. It was made very clear to the students that their participation was voluntary and that no pressure would be involved in opting in or out of the process. In the lead up to the data collection I had not fully considered the participants as being potential gatekeepers to the extent that was uncovered during the research process. Many of the participants were willing to partake in the collage creation, but unwilling to express their opinions on their creations, others refused to create the collages or be interviewed and others did not want to be recorded. I found this difficult at times but I accepted their right to opt in or out of the process at any time.

3.3.2 Pilot Study

According to Robson (2011) the first stage of data collection should consist of a pilot study. The pilot study is the first chance the researcher will have of putting their method design into action and to find out if it will work or not. A pilot study was conducted in November 2012 in order that I could test the data collection methods and gain some insight into the arts-based method and interviewing process. The pilot took place in the centre where I am based. The four participants that took part in the pilot were from the same group, three males and one female; they were all over the age of eighteen and had been in the centre for over a year. I felt that these participants would take the task seriously and provide feedback on the process. The pilot took place on a Monday morning and two hours were allocated to the study. This allocation of time worked effectively and was used as the guide time throughout the rest of the data collection process.

Collage pilot

The pilot was conducted in the art room in the centre and this facilitated with setting the tone for the collage/painting/ drawing element. Firstly, the participants were provided with the consent forms. I read the details of the consent forms and the participants found the forms easy to follow and understand. I described my intention of the research and the planned method to the participants. I explained that they were to use a collage creation or a drawing or art piece to depict their thoughts on

how they felt about being early school-leavers at that present time. At first, they seemed a little unsure of what I meant and I refined it to include any thoughts they had about being in Youthreach or about how they were feeling about their future. I left it open to their interpretation as I didn't want to provide examples or ideas of things they might include as I wanted the ideas to come from them. I emphasised that it was their own opinions that counted and that there was no correct or incorrect answer, solely their views. At this pilot stage, I did not give them a timeframe, as I wanted to see how the process would progress and how long it would take them to get settled in and ready to produce a piece of work.

The room was equipped with paint, colouring utensils, magazines, newspapers, glue, scissors and paper. I had gathered a mixed collection of magazines and newspapers from family and friends over the previous months. It took the participants a while to get involved in the process, seeming a little unsure of what they were required to do, asking extra questions and almost trying to ensure that they were doing the task correctly. I found this interesting and realised that I would have to make it clear to other groups that it was their feelings and there was no correct way to produce the collage, all approaches and ideas would be accepted. They focused on the magazines and newspapers and started cutting out words that had meaning to them. I was surprised that none of the participants decided to draw or include any visual items in their collages. I knew that two of the participants were very artistic yet all the participants used only words and no pictures or drawings. When I queried them after the process, they claimed that they were not in the mood. This made me realise that Monday morning may not have been an ideal time to conduct the research as all the participants were quite sluggish and not fully engaging with the process.

I used A2 paper under the advice of the art tutor, as it was her experience that the students associated smaller sized paper with junior level drawing and painting. However, in this case some of the participants felt that the A2 paper was too big for them in preparing their collages. Eventually, I realised that the size of the paper was off-putting and three out of the four opted for smaller sized paper, which worked more effectively. This was interesting as it was the three males that opted for smaller paper and they were slower to progress with the task than the female participant. Previously, I had not considered that the male participants would not like this process

or find it difficult to complete and I was concerned that this may become a problem in all centres.

In the planning stages of designing the arts-based approach I had envisaged that an open discussion about the pieces would take place, adapting the open space technology as expressed by Owen (2009). The pieces of art would be collected and I would randomly present the art pieces on the wall, in no particular order or relation. The participants would then be invited in and a type of open discussion forum would begin. The participants would be asked to discuss the pieces or relevant topics associated with the pieces. However, during the pilot study I became aware of the participants' vulnerability in their collages; their nervousness about other participants commenting on their pieces and their preference to keep their collages confidential. It was clear that they didn't want to share their thoughts amongst each other. The whole process became very quiet as the participants focused on the task. This was a very surprising find, as the participants had known each other well and had often discussed personal topics openly in class. On reflection, I realised that some of the participants had left school for some time and it may have triggered some negative memories or that it was their first chance to reflect on events since their departure. When the participants finished their pieces, I spoke to them individually about their pieces, in order that I could understand what their collages meant to them. This process did not take long and the participants did not go into too much detail. I then decided to interview one of the participants to test the questions and to ascertain how the process would work.

Pilot interview

One participant was interviewed as part of the pilot study, I chose him as he was first to agree when I had asked all four if they would like to participate. He was interviewed directly after he created his collage. The interview took place in a classroom and the collage was left on the table along with a small digital recorder. The interview was set up in an informal manner and we sat at one of the student's desks in the room. When the participant sat down, he seemed comfortable having something tangible in front of him and he spoke freely about his collage and what he thought of the process. He had advanced on what he had said earlier and I then realised that I would have to create a more private space for students to talk about

their collages when I would go out into the field. He claimed that he didn't mind the process of making the collage. However, at the start of the interview, I sensed that the participant was aiming to please me and was answering the questions based on what he thought I wanted to hear. I had to interject and explain that the process was not about pleasing me but rather a chance for him to tell his story, in his words. As I was quite familiar with this participant, I moved through the interview schedule quite quickly and the interview concluded after fifteen minutes. As I was transcribing the pilot interview I became aware that I had made a poor attempt at interviewing. The interview schedule was followed too rigidly and that didn't allow for an opportunity to probe or to listen intently to what the participant had actually said. Also, I noticed that the responses from the participant consisted of numerous monosyllabic 'yes' and 'no' type answers and with very little probing, this resulted in many missed opportunities to delve deeper into the participant's answers. I was very disappointed with this pilot and realised that I had a lot to do before I was ready to interview another participant.

I listened back over the recording a few times and reflected on the process. An important consideration leading on from this process of reflection was the potential for bias during the interviews. Robson (1993) maintains that biases are hard to rule out and therefore it is important to acknowledge the fact that they exist. I was aware that bias existed in the pilot interview. I realised that I would need to discuss the interview more clearly with the participants at the start of the interview. I needed to inform the participants of my role as researcher and not that of a tutor and their role in the process. Another area of concern is presented by Bell (1999) which suggests that bias may appear in the way a question is asked. She claims that a certain emphasis or tone can totally transform the meaning of a question and it is important to be as objective as possible when asking questions. I became mindful of this throughout the interviewing process in order not to guide the participants. I found this challenging at times, especially in the latter interviews as I was aware of what other participants had said and was looking for correlations in the data.

Lessons learned from the pilot

The pilot study was a necessary and very worthwhile task and it highlighted some factors that needed to be reconsidered before commencing the data collection. Following on from the pilot study outcomes, I realised that I needed to concentrate on my interviewing skills and change the way the collage discussions would be conducted. I decided to carry out short recorded individual discussions with the participants about their pieces. This would commence immediately after the collages had been created with the students that would not be participating in the interviews. Those that were participating in the interviews would discuss their collages during that process. This would give all the participants an opportunity to describe their piece and what it meant to them.

Following on from the pilot study, I settled on the following data collection process:

- Data collection would not be scheduled on Monday mornings or Friday evenings.
- An art room environment would be used where possible.
- The arts-based method would mainly focus on collage.
- Two hours would be allocated to the collage creation and explanations.
- A variety of magazines and newspapers would be provided, with a range of paper size options presented to the participants, pencils, colouring markers, crayons, scissors and glue sticks would also be made available.
- I would spend time explaining what the participants would be required to do, both at the start of the collage creations and when introducing the interviewing.
- Each participant would be given an opportunity to discuss their collage in private.
- The collages would form part of the interview process.

Following on from the pilot study the interview schedule was reviewed and expanded to include more open-ended questions and additional probing questions were added for each section.

3.4. Research sample

Purposive sampling is primarily associated with qualitative research and was used to guide the selection of participants in this study (Denscombe, 2003). It is not designed to achieve population validity, but rather a representation of itself and is chosen for a particular purpose. The intent is to achieve an in-depth understanding of selected individuals, not to select a sample that will represent accurately a defined population (Gall *et al.,* 2007, p.178). For this research I chose a sample from the Youthreach Western Area Network. I decided to choose four centres from the twelve; a representative sample of the group. The sample provided a mix of Youthreach centres by locality, size and programme content. Two of the groups consisted of participants who were completing year one and two of the LCA. One group consisted of a mix of participants from LCA and FETAC levels three and four and the final group consisted of participants from a FETAC Level four programme. *Table 11* below presents information on the centres that participated in this study.

Centre	Location	No. of Students	Programmes
A	Rural	40	FETAC and LCA
B	Small rural town	25	Junior Certificate, FETAC and LCA
C	Large rural town	20	LCA
D	Urban / city	30	FETAC Levels 2-4

Table 11: Centres that participated in the research

I was aware that in many Youthreach centres the ages may vary within one class/classroom. For example, participants may be in the same programme and ages may vary by up to a four year gap. Therefore, I felt that is was important to include participants under the age of 18 as they needed to share their views as much as those over the age of 18. Also, these participants work alongside each other on a daily basis, it may affect the dynamics of the group if they were asked to separate or were excluded from being involved.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

For each of the centres and the participants the following efforts were made to preserve the confidentiality of the students and the centre:

- Code names/numbers were assigned to each participant and these were used on all researcher notes and documents.

- Notes, art work, audio/video files, discussion transcripts, and transcribed notes and any other identifying participant information would be kept in a locked file cabinet/secure computer in my personal possession. When no longer necessary for research, all materials will be destroyed.

- Information from this research to be used solely for the purpose of this research and any publications that may result from this study. All participants involved in this study would not be identifiable and their anonymity would be maintained. However, to ensure that the process remains anonymous, the participants' data would not be returned once it has been submitted.

- Each participant had the opportunity to obtain a transcribed copy of the discussion and this was made clear at interview.

- I undertook to keep the participant data confidential excluding any legal obligations I had in relation to reporting specific incidents.

- All audio/video material is stored in my home on my personal computer which is password protected. Audio/video material will be kept for the duration of the research and the full completion of the doctoral programme. After which time the material will be permanently deleted from the researcher's computer.

- All paper documentation pertaining to the participants will also be retained for the entire process of the doctoral programme in my own home, in a locked filing cabinet that is only used by me. The paper material will be destroyed by means of shredding when the programme is complete. Except in the case, where I have sought permission to hold on to certain pieces, if the case may arise. However, it is noted that no identifiable information will be present on these said pieces.

3.4.1 Interview participants' pen pictures

Eleven students, six females and five males, from the four centres participated in the interviews. Their ages ranged from 16 years to 21 years of age. Ten of the participants were completing their LCA and one participant was completing a FETAC Level four programme. Six of the ten LCA participants were in their final year and were planning to progress on from Youthreach that year. Below I present brief descriptions of the eleven participants that were interviewed.

Damon

Damon is 21 years old. He was influenced by drink and drugs at a very early age and this impacted upon his time in secondary education. Damon left school after completing his Junior Certificate exams. He has attended two Youthreach Centres and is in the current centre for the past two years, completing his LCA. Damon lived with his grandparents for the majority of his childhood. His mother, a single parent, lived in the town nearby. Damon's mother now lives with her husband and Damon has two younger step brothers; he does not have much contact with them. He now resides in rented accommodation, two hours from his grandparents' home. He states that his life can be stressful as he suffers from poor mental health.

Alan

Alan has just turned 18. He lives in a small town with his mother and his eldest brother. His parents are separated and his other older brother lives with his father in the town. Both of his brothers attended Youthreach and completed their LCA. Both of his parents are unemployed and his father is in receipt of disability benefit. Alan hated school and left immediately after his Junior Certificate exams. He is now in his second year of the LCA and has full attendance on the programme. He has no immediate plans for the future; he is content with the fact that he will obtain good results in his LCA.

Cian

Cian is 17 years old. He lives with his parents; they are in receipt of social welfare. He has an older brother and a younger sister. He states that his family struggles financially and are finding it tough to pay for the upcoming state examinations fees. He has attended eight primary schools and two secondary schools before joining Youthreach. Cian attended his first secondary school for about a year and a half. He was expelled at the age of 14. He attended a second school for four months, where he was allowed to sit his Junior Certificate exams, his results were poor. He is currently finishing his LCA and aims to achieve good results; on completion, it will be the longest engagement that Cian will have had, with one educational institution. Cian proclaims that he will be the first ever member of his whole family to have completed education to a Leaving Certificate standard.

Neven

Neven is 16 years old and is an only child. He lives with his parents in a very rural location. Both of Neven's parents attended second level school and are currently in employment. He was continually bullied at second level to a point that he considered suicide as his only option. He is very content attending Youthreach and feels that it meets his needs. Neven does not have much confidence in his academic ability and claims that he is better with practical subjects. He is in first year of the LCA programme and enjoys the vocational aspect of the course. He has a clear plan for the future and feels he now has the confidence to move forward.

Laura

Laura is 17 years old and in first year of the LCA programme. She lives with her mother and has eight younger siblings. Primary and secondary were difficult for Laura, she felt that she did not fit in and was constantly bullied by others. She was rarely in attendance at school and missed 52 days in one school year. Laura explained the difficulty in keeping up in class at school after such poor attendance and the embarrassment she felt in class when asked a question. Laura is happier in Youthreach as she doesn't feel like she is being judged and finds the programme less stressful. However, she regrets not being able to stay on in second level schooling.

Michelle

Michelle is 19 years old and a member of the Travelling community. Both her parents had very little schooling and are deemed illiterate. She has been attending Youthreach for the past three years and is currently completing second year of her LCA. Michelle had a very frustrating educational experience as her dyslexia went undiagnosed and unrecognised for many years. She found it difficult to cope in school and resolved that expulsion was her only option as her parents would not let her leave school. Michelle has found Youthreach to be suitable to her needs and is constantly working on her numeracy and literacy skills. She is now more confident in her ability and is looking forward to continuing her education.

Orla

Orla is a 19 year old expectant mother. She left school in her final year as she was not prepared for her Leaving Certificate, due to poor attendance. Orla states that this was due to helping out her mother, who found it difficult coping with three young children at home. Although Orla's mother was keen for her to complete her schooling, Orla felt obliged to help her mother. Orla remained at home with her mother for a year, during which time she became depressed. She heard about the Youthreach programme from a friend and joined the LCA programme. Although she is expecting her baby in summer 2013, she is keen to continue on and complete the second year of the LCA.

Jodie

Jodie is almost 20 years old and has three siblings. She believed that Youthreach was her last chance to gain a qualification. She has attended schools in Ireland and in England; both of which hold negative experiences. Jodie found school very difficult and gave detailed accounts of the bullying she endured from primary through to secondary education. Jodie stated that if she was not getting paid in Youthreach she would not be able to attend. She explained that her father had left and she had to help her mother to support the family.

Elaine

Elaine is nearly 19 years old, she is in her final year of the LCA programme in Youthreach. She talked explicitly about her mental health issues and how she deals with them on a daily basis. She has had very difficult times throughout her education and continues to struggle on the Youthreach programme. She has been hospitalised for attempted suicide, but hasn't considered it an option in over a year. Elaine currently has a career path in mind and is focused on progressing on in her education after completing her LCA.

Sandra

Sandra is 21 years old and is currently completing her second year of the LCA programme in Youthreach. She felt that she was not cared for in school and was bullied constantly. As a result her attendance was very poor and she found the workload very stressful and was unable to keep up with the class. Sandra claimed that she was happy to have found Youthreach as she has been able to work through many of her personal issues. She regrets having to have to leave school and believes that the school should do more to support students who are having difficulties.

Brian

Brian is 17 he is currently completing a FETAC level 4 programme. Brian is originally from Poland and has been living in Ireland for the past seven years. He found the transition difficult, as he could not speak the language and was bullied by the other students. He felt he had no support from the school, he was unable to communicate and often he felt angry and retaliated against the bullies. He was in constant trouble in secondary school, for what he describes as sticking up for himself against bullies and in certain circumstances against teachers. He felt the teachers did not care about him and that he was always getting into trouble for small things and did not learn from his mistakes. He now feels he is making progress in Youthreach and looks upon it as his last chance to succeed.

3.5. In the field

The main part of the data collection activity consisted of individual visits to four Youthreach centres within the Western Area Network, over a three month period. It was envisaged that this part of the research would commence in January 2013, after I had piloted the research approach in the base centre. However, due to assessment pressures within the centres the research did not commence until late February. I allocated one full day to each of the centres for data collection. This was not a straightforward process and numerous changes to dates and plans were made to accommodate the research in each centre's schedule.

In the week prior to my scheduled visit to the centres I contacted the coordinator to ensure all was in order and the consent forms had been issued to the parents and students to give them a chance to consider the research. Also, I requested the use of the art room in the centres. However, this was not possible in one case where the data collection took place in the participants' dedicated classroom. Having worked with Youthreach students for over 12 years I was aware that many participants prefer to express their thoughts and opinions through artistic means. One of my main aims throughout this process was to obtain the information from the participants in a manner in which they were comfortable presenting. It was important for me that the participants felt comfortable and were able to express their opinions in the best possible manner for them. The collage creations took place in four groups, a group from each centre. In total forty participants took part, thirty eight completed collages and twenty eight participants commented on their collage piece in detail.

3.5.1 Fieldwork

The participants were selected, based on their willingness to join the research and those who had filled out the consent forms. A cohort of ten to twelve participants participated in the research process from each centre. This was a large proportion of the participants from each centre and was a suitable sized group for the process and the room size. The first part of the process involved an induction phase, where the participants and I were acquainted with each other. At this stage I explained the research and provided details of what was required of the participants. In three of the centres I was not familiar to the students and they were very interested in knowing why I was there and where I was from and what would happen to the information. I

was surprised at their level of curiosity and later considered that they were somewhat suspicious of me. Their wariness seemed to diminish when they understood that I worked in a Youthreach centre and they had an opportunity to ask me personal questions, for example, where I was from, what age was I, was I married, did I have children? All which I answered and which I believe helped to create a more trusting environment. This process was important and it gave the participants an opportunity to discuss the research and ask questions in relation to the process and the research in general. On average, this process took thirty minutes and in some centres the coordinator stayed in the room until the participants had made their decision to opt in or out. Some participants decided to opt out of the process; some stated that they did not want to be recorded and others did not provide a reason. It was mainly males that opted out of the research and one female participated in the collage but did not want to be interviewed.

Instructions for collages

Similar to the pilot study, I equipped the room with paper, magazines and newspapers, and the required amount of scissors, markers, pencils and glue. In three of the centres we had access to art supplies but these were not used. The materials were spread around the room and there was an abundance of magazines and newspapers available. Also, I purchased some daily newspapers on the day of the data collection as I thought some students may associate with recent headlines. At the beginning of the collage creation in each centre I explained to the participants that the collage was their creation and they could put into it whatever they wanted in relation to their thoughts on being early school-leavers and how they were feeling at that point in time. The choice was left open to them they could look back or forward, to pick an aspect of early school-leaving that was significant to them or to display how they were feeling on that particular day in relation to Youthreach. Each group had two hours to complete this process. This was sufficient for most groups, however one group needed additional time and one group were constrained on time due to timetabling and centre requirements and we could not exceed the allotted time. The collages did not take two hours to complete, but the students needed time to settle into the process, some browsed through the magazines and papers for a while and others read an article that was of interest and then came back on task.

Each student approached it differently. Some students cut all their words or pictures out first and then decided how they were going to place them on their page and then glued them. Others just glued the words as they went along, some added words to the piece by writing it in and some students asked others to keep a look out for a particular word or letter that they needed. I walked around as the students were preparing their pieces, some students asked me more questions about myself and others were interested to know what I thought about their piece as they were going along. In each case, the students were slow to start, but once they got into it, it was apparent that they were interested in the piece and that it meant something to them. In three of the centres, we had a break directly after the collage creation and this worked well as the participants had time to consider their piece.

Following on from the collage creation, the participants were asked about discussing their collage further and the willingness to participate in the interview process. All participants were given the opportunity to discuss their collages with me. This element was recorded in private, where many of the participants provided a quick overview of their collage and many felt that it spoke for itself and did not need explanation. Some of the participants were more willing and able to display their thoughts than to describe or discuss them. This process took three or four minutes to complete with most participants and I did probe them on various aspects of their collages in order to get an understanding of them.

The Interviews

I provided a general criterion for the interview: those that were willing to tell their stories, in particular those that found attendance on the programme difficult, and those who had been out of school for more than a year. The interview ranged from fifteen minutes to over one hour in duration. In total there were eleven participants interviewed. One participant agreed to a second interview to discuss issues from the first interview. It was the first interview after the pilot and I felt that it wasn't as fluid as the other interviews and some key points were not addressed during the initial interview. I aimed to interview participants from each centre as I deemed this to be the best means of sampling. I had one full day in each centre and I had a set time left after the collage creation. This allowed the completion of approximately three interviews in each centre. On average the majority of the interviews were forty

minutes in duration, however, two participants were close to an hour and one participant's interview was seventy minutes in duration.

I felt that the interview process went smoothly as the participants had built up a form of rapport with me during the collage creation phase and had felt more at ease during the interview. Also, I noted that the participants seemed to accept me more willingly when they realised that I worked in a Youthreach centre. The interviews were held in the room that we used for the collage creation and this created the right atmosphere as it was comfortable at that stage and we sat at one of the tables. I arranged an interview order with the participants and they waited in their classroom until they were called. I held onto all the collages and during each interview the collage was set between the two of us. To initiate the interview I encouraged the participants to lead the discussions by explaining their collage. This process naturally led into topics for the interview and although the schedule was not followed in order, the interview flowed easily in most cases. At certain intervals the interview was brought back to the collage and areas were highlighted that matched with the issues uncovered during the interview. As the interviews progressed I became more aware of Robson's (1993, p.232) guideline of "*listen more, speak less*", which afforded the participants the opportunity to delve deeper and reflect on issues that for some seemed to have been avoided for some time.

Two participants became quite emotional during the interview and shut down and moved away from the questioning in relation to their time in mainstream school. When I had met these two participants earlier, one male and one female, I had not anticipated that this would happen. I told them to take some time out and asked them if they wanted to stop altogether or whether they wanted a break. They seemed fine after a short while and we continued with the interview, one participant asked if we could skip over that part and so we did, the other continued from where we had left off. After each of these interviews I mentioned to the coordinators what had happened and told them that I was concerned about the participants and how they might be feeling. The coordinators said that they were aware of their issues and that they would have a word with them and check that they were feeling okay after the interview. The thoughts of these students becoming so upset over their school experience had a profound effect on me and I thought about the research that I was

doing and what impact it would have on advancing our understanding of how the current education system creates such negative experiences for some young people.

General field-notes on the process

Throughout the data collection period I kept notes of the events which provided an overview of the process. Being an insider was an important element in this research. I do not think it would have worked as well if I was from outside the Youthreach sector. When I entered each centre, the students were wary of my motives and why I was there. They asked many questions in relation to my study and about me. In the first centre I was not totally prepared for that and found it strange at first, it was almost as if I was the person being researched. I realised that I had to be as open and honest as possible about myself as a person and the research. When I later reflected on it I realised that Youthreach participants are not willing to accept every outsider, they have criteria by which you will be accepted or not and I had not realised that closed community existed. Also, the students were quite boisterous when I was with them, they were moving about the room and were very unsettled at the beginning. This could be very off putting for someone who was not familiar with a Youthreach setting and I was amused afterwards at how relaxed I felt. While I was interacting with the participants and getting to know them before the collage creation I asked them how long they had left school, why they left and how long they were attending Youthreach. Those that had newly entered were less willing to cooperate or engage in any of the process and were the first to opt out. Overall, more boys withdrew than girls, they may not have liked the idea of collage, however some withdrew when I asked to record them. It is possible that they had association of recordings with criminal activities, or worried that they might say something that may put them in jeopardy, one male said that 'no one is going to be recording me and that is for sure'. In one of the centres a participant gave me a drawing she had completed the night before. She said that she used drawings to express her feelings and found it a good way of dealing with issues. This was my first visit to a different centre and it felt that my choice of research method had been validated.

3.6 Analysing Data

According to Creswell (2013) the analysing of qualitative data can be a difficult task. He claims that it is much more than analysing text and image data. It involves organising the data, conducting numerous transcript readings, coding and organising themes or categories and creating an interpretation of them (Creswell, 2013, p.179). Richards (2005) point concurs with this and states that it is not the production of qualitative data that is the challenge but being able to turn the data into information that is relevant and beneficial to the research. Likewise, Denscombe (2003) and Miles and Huberman (1984) maintain that data analysis involves looking at the data obtained and trying to break it down to produce a meaning. In this research I analysed data throughout the research process; at stage one, during the pilot study and in the field I analysed the visual arts methods and interviews. The process of analysis was informed by elements of a grounded theory approach.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define grounded theory as simply a strategy to generate theory from data. It is an inductive process where the theory arises out of the data rather than existing prior to it. Grounded theory commences with the data, this is then analysed and evaluated in numerous processes in order for the theory to be generated from it (Cohen *et al.,* 2007). Grounded theory is a simultaneous process of collecting and analysing data; the researcher is continually analysing the data, long before the process of collection is complete (Goulding, 2002). I utilised the coding techniques of grounded theory to enable categories to be identified and developed and these assisted in the development of the subsequent theory that emerged. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.13) regard the process as "both science and art"; science in that the analysis involves rigor and creativity in the ability to appropriately name categories and filter through the vast quantity of raw data.

3.6.1 Coding process

Coding is a qualitative analytical technique that involves combining the data into smaller categories of information, matching other relevant data to the category and assigning labels to pieces of data in order to describe what the piece is actually about (Huberman and Miles, 1994; Punch, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006, Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013) it is a long process that requires the researcher to consistently sift through the data, assign codes, match relevant data, decide on what information is needed and what is to be discarded. Richards (2005) elaborates on this point further, asserting that coding in qualitative research is not purely about applying labels to data, but also about gathering the data together in order for it to be examined, enabling the researcher to gain further insight into the data. There is a sequence of analytical stages of coding that are essential in order to generate meaning from the data. The two main types of coding associated with grounded theory and applied in this research are: open and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Open coding is the breaking down of data into discrete parts, which is closely inspected, compared and contrasted and from which concepts are identified. Selective coding is the combining and refining of the concepts identified in the open coding process and selecting and employing the most significant and/or frequently occurring ones (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). The process of coding began with exploring transcripts of the interviews for broad, emerging themes that would enable me to understand the participants' interpretations of events. This was a beneficial exercise as it provided a starting point and allowed for the identification of broad similarities and differences between the participants' transcripts.

The next step was line-by-line coding. Charmaz (2006) identifies this as a type of open or initial coding practice where each line of the transcript is labelled with a short descriptive explanation. I created a large right hand margin when transcribing the interviews to enable this process. Initially, it felt like a pointless task as many of the lines did not seem to contain any relevant data and there was an abundance of transcript pages that had to be filtered through. However, the outcome was surprising, as new themes and ideas were uncovered that did not transpire from the general analysis of the transcripts. This process compelled me to remain open-

minded about the data; the concepts and categories started to emerge from the data and clear links between the data became apparent. During this process of coding I kept written memos of any ideas that were striking and of any terms used by the participants to explain an event (in vivo codes) (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). The process of producing memos during data collection and analysis was invaluable; they created formats for the findings and triggers for the discussion chapter. The open coding process resulted in an array of concepts and themes to be reviewed. Through the process of selective coding a number of these concepts were selected and presented at the next phase of coding.

The next phase included grouping all related concepts and themes under broad headings as categories. I used Microsoft Word to create landscape table formats based on these categories and the cut and paste facility was used to group and regroup the relevant statements from the coded transcripts. The constant comparison method was used throughout; where transcripts were constantly compared and contrasted. This is regarded as an essential process in the development of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This method is a repetitive process throughout the analytical stage, where sets of data, and emerging concepts, are consistently compared and contrasted. Firstly, comparisons in the data and concepts from the interviews were made and later data and concepts from the collages were compared for similarities and differences.

Correlations between the categories emerged and smaller categories were incorporated into broader categories. The broader categories were then divided into sub-categories. Such a procedure is indicative of a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.161) state that "a theory that is grounded in data should be recognisable to participants, and although it might not fit every aspect of their case, the larger concepts should apply". *Table 12* overleaf presents the categories and sub-categories that emerged from the data analysis process. The categories and sub-categories are aligned with the four research questions.

Research Questions	Categories	Sub Categories
What are the participants' depictions of being early school-leavers and the implications of such portrayals?	**Backward Glance**	• Mainstream unrest – bullying, rules, attention and stress • Helping out at home • Leaving – missing out on being 'normal'
How do the participants view their current Youthreach programmes and what elements of the programme do the participants perceive to be significant to them?	**New path - Standing firm**	• Last chance – Youthreach as an alternative • Support – financial and emotional • Level playing field • Programmes/curriculum
What are the mental health related issues that affect the lives of the participants? What is the impact of mental health on their participation on the Youthreach programme?	**Road Blocks**	• Mental health issues • Youthreach image
What are the participants' aspirations for the future?	**Stepping stones – Future focused**	• Work Experience programme • Confidence • Progression

Table 12: Outline of categories and sub-categories emerging from data analysis

Analysing the collages

There were four groups of collages, from each of the four centres. Firstly, I photographed all the collages and uploaded them to the computer where I organised them into four groups. As the collages were mainly based on words, I typed all the words that the participants used in the collages into an online Word Cloud formatting application. This produced the results that are visible at the start of each chapter in this thesis. This provided me with a glimpse of the words that were most common throughout the collages and the more frequently used words are denoted by the larger size. I then transcribed all of the participants' accounts of their collages in the same manner as I produced the transcripts for the interviews. From this, I followed a similar procedure of coding as above. I used the constant comparative method of

initially comparing the collages to each other and extending this to comparing the collages with the interviews. When this was completed I was able to identify and develop categories.

3.7 Reflections and Considerations

The issues pertaining to a qualitative approach need to be addressed. There is a parallel between the benefits of a quantitative study and the potential limitations of a qualitative study. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) assert that one of the salient features of quantitative research is objectivity; producing objective knowledge by means of a detached 'outsider' researcher. This is particularly relevant to this research as the researcher is regarded as an insider researcher.

An insider researcher is a researcher who studies the particular area in which they work (Robson 2002). Brannick and Coghlan (2007, p.66) regard the researcher as being wholly immersed within the organisation and an "actor in the processes being studied"; that the researcher is a member of the group that they are studying. However, Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) advocate that the twofold approach of 'insider' and 'outsider' is very simplistic and restrictive and it is extremely difficult for someone to completely fit at either extreme. Instead they describe a continuum that ranges from either end of the two points, in what Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p.60) express as the "the space between" being an insider and outsider. In this respect, I may not be regarded as a 'true' insider, as I am not part of the actual student group being studied and I am not familiar to three of the sites in which the research took place. Nevertheless, I am a tutor working with some of the participants in the study on a daily basis and I have insider knowledge on how the Youthreach system operates. I consider that I might be best described as fitting into 'the space between'. I am outside the experience of being an early school-leaver, immersed in the data and transcripts and trying to see inside.

There are number of unique benefits from being in this 'in-between' space. Firstly, the researcher has greater potential access to the participants and other information relating to the study that may not be available to an outsider. Although, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) note that negotiating access may still be an issue, there is a greater likelihood that an insider would have an advantage in this regard. The status

or role of the researcher may also provide an opportunity to gain rich data as they may be more easily accepted by the participants. This has been regarded by Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) as a good starting point in the research process as the participants are more likely to trust the researcher and provide open and honest accounts. I found this to be the case when I entered the three centres, many of the participants became more relaxed and spoke more freely when they realised that there was common ground between us, in that I worked in another centre. However, this familiarity can also be considered a limitation. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) assert that participants might assume that the researcher understands what they mean and may not provide full explanations and there is a danger that the researcher may make assumptions and not seek clarification. This would be particularly relevant at the interview stage, where familiarity may impact on what the participant says and what the interviewer may hear. This was especially relevant for me, as I continually had to be conscious of my bias throughout the interview process.

The awareness of being a type of insider and acknowledgement of such is an important aspect of qualitative research. Flick (2009) ascertains that it is necessary to document and incorporate the researcher's thoughts, feelings, positions and observations, into the study. This is regarded as researcher reflexivity; where the researcher mindfully engages in reflecting on her influence on the research process (Hennick *et al.,* 2011). In this research, I need to understand that I am part of the social world that I am researching and to be attentive to my management of the study. Already, I have reflected on my background and stated that I work within the sector that I am researching and I that I bring my own ontological perspectives to the study. I have included other personal reflections in this methodology chapter and throughout the thesis in order to provide the reader with a candid view of this research process (Hennick *et al.,* 2011). Other limitations of this qualitative study will be discussed below.

3.7.1 Limitations

A concern for all researchers is to demonstrate that their research is valid and reliable. The terms validity and reliability are more commonly associated with quantitative work; however, the terms are also used in qualitative research (Cohen *et al.,* 2011).

Reliability refers to the consistency of results; the extent to which another researcher would replicate the same findings as the first researcher (Gall *et al.,* 2007). This can pose a problem for most researchers. There is no guarantee that the data collected will be identical or indeed yield similar findings. LeCompte and Geotz (1982) contend that human behaviour is constantly evolving and changing and it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to recreate an identical interaction between the participants and the researcher. The best possible approach is to be as transparent as possible throughout the entire research process. To aid reliability of this study, I provided a detailed account of the research process and the data analysis procedures. According to Flick (2009, p.387) this "assists the dependability of the data and procedures, which can be grounded in the specificity of the various qualitative methods". The presentation of a detailed methodological approach provides a guide for others if they wish to replicate the same procedures and follow a similar means of data collection.

Validity refers to the accuracy of the data. Silverman (2000) maintains that the researcher needs to strive to present accounts that are accurate, correct and true. In essence, validity is concerned with trustworthiness, depth and objectivity. Previously in this chapter, I have acknowledged my potential bias in relation to the study and have considered my objectivity throughout the data collection methods and in the reporting of the findings. Overall, I tried to keep a full and accurate account of the entire process and I continually reflected on my position as researcher.

The main limitation for this study was the timeframe. The practical side of gaining entry into the centres, fitting in with their schedules and travelling to centres during the working week created a lengthy process. At the time of the research one of my major concerns was that the students would not want to participate in the study or that there may be relationship issues about letting me in, trusting me, their

willingness to share their experiences. Poor attendance was another factor that had the potential of limiting the research. It is difficult to capture the experience of those that find the educational process most difficult, if they are not in attendance when the research was taking place. In two of the centres, the coordinators mentioned students who were poor attenders and were missing on the day of the data collection. These are the students whose voices most need to be heard.

The research may not be considered generalizable due to the size of research, involving four centres out of possible hundred and three centres nationally. Although it is a small study, I feel that the participants' experiences from this research will yield valuable information that will relate to other participants in Youthreach centres nationally and provide a valuable insight into the issues and challenges encountered by early school-leavers. Similar complex cases may be present in other centres, in relation to participants living in rural areas, dealing with mental health issues and those faced with limited progression opportunities. It would have been beneficial to carry out a longitudinal study of the participants, from initial entry into the programme up to their completion or exit from the programme, but that was not possible for this particular thesis. This research may be beneficial in terms of social and developmental programme planning, initial screening on entry to the programme or in the preparation of policies and procedures for centres in relation to mental health.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed overview of the methodological approach of this study. An interpretivist approach was identified as the most appropriate research paradigm based on the research questions and my ontological beliefs and epistemological stance. The collage creation and interviewing methods employed were creative and considered the best means to elicit the voices of the participants. A comprehensive overview of the pilot study and fieldwork are presented to add to the trustworthiness of the research. To aid triangulation within this study a questionnaire was administered to the twelve coordinators with the Western Area Network and questions in relation to mental health were examined.

The participants were purposively selected from four centres within the Youthreach Western Area Network, which included the centre where I work. The aim of which is to use the information gathered from the research to improve the professional practice within the centre where I am based and other Youthreach centres. Although the findings may not be generalizable to all Youthreach centres it should provide some key insights and policy development concepts for Youthreach centres within the Western region. It may also act as a reference for other centres nationally.

The chapter delivered a comprehensive account of the process of data collection and the issues that arose in relation to accessing the participants and the ethical considerations involved in the process. The procedures for analysing the data were presented and the categories and sub categories that emerged were depicted. In conclusion the limitations of the study were identified and discussed.

The next chapter will present the main findings that emerged from the collage creations and provide detailed stories of participants' experiences.

Chapter 4
The Findings

Introduction

This chapter is divided into three main parts. The first section presents an in-depth view of three participants' stories of their educational experiences. These three stories were purposely selected to provide a synopsis of what life is like from the perspective of an early school-leaver and to highlight the uniqueness of each participant's story. In the second section the collages are displayed and the main findings are conveyed. In the final section, seven participants' detailed accounts of their collages are portrayed. Again, a range of the collages and the stories behind the pieces are presented to provide the reader with a sense of these participants and to share their interpretations of their educational journey.

In order to identify the participants and the collage being referred to, the following procedures was used. Firstly, random names were chosen for the eleven participants; examples of the pseudonyms selected were: Elaine, Damon and Michelle, as presented in this chapter. At times, the participants are referred to using the first initial of their pseudonym, at other times their full pseudonyms are employed. Secondly, each line of all transcripts were numbered and in presenting the findings the first initial of the pseudonym will be used and the line or lines from the interview. For example,

E400-03 signifies: Elaine, lines 400 to 403 were used in the description presented.

The collages are presented in four groupings, representing each of the four groups that took part in the research. The collages are grouped as collage group one, two three and four; each participant's collage is identifiable with a letter A, B, C, D, E, F and so on. For example,

1A signifies: Group one, Collage A as depicted on Page 177.
4J signifies: Group four, Collage J, as depicted on Page 180.

4.1 Three participants' accounts

In this section, detailed profiles are provided for three participants. I strongly felt that it was necessary to present the participants' accounts in this manner, in order to give the reader a real sense of the experiences of early school-leavers. These accounts are not intended to be generalizable; the three profiles were selected from the eleven participants that were interviewed to provide an example of the unique educational experiences of early school-leavers. I have included my own thoughts and interpretations of their accounts and these have been included in the text as a note in italics.

4.1.1 Elaine's Story (Collage 1G)

Elaine left school in the middle of her final year. She had been attending the school for four and half years and was preparing for her Leaving Certificate exams. "I left in the middle of sixth year as I knew that my mental health wasn't ok and they would not help me" (E16-17).

Note: *Leaving school less than six months before she was due to finish gives some indication to the strain that Elaine was under at that time. Also this suggests that although Elaine seemed aware of her mental health, there was no assistance provided.*

She felt she never had an opportunity in school to prove herself, that she was judged on one incident when she was in first year "I was mitching from school, but I was hanging around with the wrong crowd and I was fourteen and trying to fit in" (E137-38). She claims that this just happened once and after she got caught "me Mam talked sense into me and she grounded me for three months, so I learned my lesson and never did it again". However, she felt the school's trust in her diminished:

> And then they just judged me and if I missed a day they would ring and see if I was mitching or something like. And they never believed me or what I said…they never let it go…they never realised I had grown up since then" (E 140-49).

Elaine was unhappy with the class groupings in the school, that her year was divided into six groups "depending on your results of the Junior Cert or throughout the year results… everyone knew that [Group 6] was the highest". She states she was in

the "third lowest , that was the fourth highest… and it wasn't nice cause the people in the high class laughed at you and made little of you because of the class you were in" (E152-57). This caused a lot of distress for Elaine "I was getting bullied in school and I suffered from depression" (E 6-7).

Note: *Elaine's reference to being streamed into different groups is a negative experience. She regarded it as a ranking of ability and she was four ranks away from the top. There is a strong theme of being judged arising from Elaine's account and other participants' descriptions throughout this study. There is a clear sense that the participants were mainly measured by their mistakes rather than by their progress and they felt that they were unable to redeem themselves, despite their efforts.*

Elaine found that it was very difficult to attend classes while she was in school, she spoke with the principal about her issues, however she did not see any improvements in her situation " it came to the stage where I was sitting in the toilet by myself and no one even noticed" (E -303-04). She was certain that the school was not supporting her, so she decided to leave "I wasn't coming in and they didn't ring home. Eventually I got it into my head that they did not care whether I came in or not, so I just left…so I didn't feel like I was cared for" (E-305-08). For Elaine, the worst part of these events was that she had made the decision to leave school, however, the bullying continued "it didn't stop even when I left school…the only way they couldn't get me was if I sat at home" (E 345-49). These events exacerbated Elaine's mental health issues to such an extent that "I will never be the girl I used to be. I was happier when I was fourteen but I know I will never be that girl again, because I still struggle sometimes" (E 470-72).

Note: *The issue of not feeling cared for in school is prominent here. Elements of care are a consistent theme in many of the participants' stories. In particular, in this story, not being cared for is in the form of the principal not listening to Elaine's story. Also, the story indicates the onset of mental health issues that seem to have been magnified by the bullying that Elaine experienced.*

Mental health upheaval

The bullying started for Elaine when "she fell out with one girl" in her group and it eventually led to her whole group of friends abandoning her. "…one girl went with her and then two of them started lying about not being able to hang out with me…and all the rest of them joined them" (E- 360-63). The bullying consisted of both physical and mental abuse "it started then by my phone and then by the internet. It just started getting worse and worse until I had no social life whatsoever…they would be beating me up and getting me no matter where I was" (E -345-51). Elaine explains how it had grown so out of control that they "were attacking me and throwing cigarettes at me, and roaring abuse at me mam". It caused Elaine so much torment that she left home, "I had to travel to get away" and lived with her aunt for four months in another part of the country. However, the abuse did not stop and Elaine's mother convinced her to return home and "face up to it" (E 391). Elaine could not cope and felt she had no options left.

> I tried to take my own life…I was in hospital for a week on drips and stuff. They were worried [the doctors] about what I would do. I said 'if you let me home, you will never see me again'. Because of the pain, cause I was getting messages saying "if we get you we are going to end up in Mountjoy for killing you" and saying stuff about my family. (E397-403)

Note: *Bullying is identified as the prime reason for Elaine's early departure from school. The bullying endured by Elaine consumed her whole life, there was no escape. It is difficult to comprehend that this can exist without repercussions for the perpetrators. This story signifies a clear link between bullying and mental health problems. Also, it displays Elaine's awareness of mental health issues and reveals her willingness to share her traumatic story.*

Elaine believed that her "mental health made me such an evil person" (E 412). She found it extremely difficult after she was discharged from hospital. She recalls blaming her mother for the pain she was experiencing. "I used to be down on my hands and knees pulling at her leg, saying "just let me die and stop being such a selfish woman" (E 407-08). She acknowledges that she couldn't understand that her family were trying to help her, "'what did you do for me? You brought me into a life I didn't want to live…' I blamed everyone else who tried to stop me from going" (E

411- 14). Elaine states that the bullying has since ceased "they have stopped like after two and half years, after they ruined my life" (E 392-93).

Note: *This suggests that Elaine's family were her main support and were dealing with her mental health issues with little assistance. There are many families that would not be able to assist in such a manner and it is worrying to note what might happen to a young person in such a situation.*

Attending Youthreach

Elaine was encouraged by her mother "to do something". Elaine's friend was attending a Youthreach centre at the time and enticed her to go and do the LCA. "He would bring me for the first year, as he would be gone when I was in second year" (E 10-11). She was very apprehensive about attending "I didn't think I was going back to education because I had such a downfall" (E-13). Elaine found it difficult to settle in "it was just like being in school because of the state of mind I was in". Her attendance was poor in the beginning "I missed a lot last year, once every week like and I am not like that this year" (E499-501) and she found it difficult to settle "some mornings I come in and I don't want to be here, I don't want to listen to anybody" (E 503-4). She found it very difficult to trust any of the students or to make friends "I might get my feelings hurt again". Also she felt like she was picked on when she first arrived as she was not from the town "I lived in the countryside, I thought people were going to slag me off and make fun of me. They did at the start, people called me 'hillbilly' and stuff like that" (E 24-25). However, she felt she got good support from the staff "anytime I had a problem I went to them [the staff] and they settled it" (E 31). She affirms that it is important to be "civil" to other students in the centre, but the best method for her to survive is "to come in here and keep to yourself". Elaine does not mix with the other students at the break periods, she eats the provided breakfast and lunch with the group and "I go to the car for the rest of my break". On occasion, she might return from her car early "I come in for five minutes early and sit in the centre and I might talk to someone, but I wouldn't be friends with them" (E 71-73). Elaine states that it might be "weird" to some people, nonetheless, it is her "decision" and she doesn't mind "because at least you can't get yourself in trouble" (E 78-9).

Although Elaine has cautiously refrained from creating friendships with other students, she feels quite positive about her experience in Youthreach "I was lucky in a way that I got a place here and I am glad I will finish my Leaving Cert…they helped me so much, like the staff and the way the stood by ya…they were always there and they understood" (E107-114). Elaine is now focused on the future, "became a bit better in my mental health" and has met someone and is feeling "happy" (E 51-2). She wants to train in social work and continue on to be a counsellor, and help out in places like "Jigsaw" that has helped her through "difficult times" (E 445). (Jigsaw is a support project that is available in some communities across Ireland, to help and support young people's mental health and wellbeing). Elaine regrets that she couldn't complete her education in school "if things didn't change the way they did I would have liked to be able to get a normal Leaving Cert and maybe not have done an extra year in college for it" as she will now as she cannot directly transfer to third level "because I did the LCA" (E 484-87). She feels that "it is horrible that it goes that way" but on reflection she believes "there is different ways that I mightn't have liked to come here, but if that didn't happen to me [bullying], I would never have come here and maybe in a way it is good it did, it has made me a better person and has changed my personality as well" (E 494-96).

reference to wanting a 'normal' Leaving Certificate outside of Youthreach implies that the programme is regarded as something other than normal. There is a sense that Elaine has mixed feelings about her time in Youthreach. On the one hand, she seems to appreciate her time in Youthreach and believes that the experience has helped her, however, it is also apparent that she would have preferred to have stayed in school, if things were different. This highlights that Youthreach is not viewed as a viable alternative to school for the participants and they tend to justify their reasons for attending the programme, indicating that Youthreach is somewhat of an undesirable route.

4.1.2 Damon' story (Collage 4I)

Although Damon describes his relationship with his mother as close, he lived with his grandparents for the majority of his childhood. His mother is now married and has two young children. He continues to have a solid relationship with his mother, who often looks after him, especially if he is in need of financial assistance. He doesn't feel he has any connection with his two half-brothers at present, or with his step-father. He has his impressions of the two boys 'one is stuck up and the other is spoiled rotten' (D 376) and of his step-father, 'I don't think he is that gone on me too much' (D 393)

Note: *This illustrates a very complex family background situation. However, Damon is not alone, many of the participants shared comparable stories in relation to their family structure. Damon was essentially an outsider, who witnessed his mother forming a family unit without him. This must have been difficult for Damon to comprehend when he was growing up and may have had a negative impact on his mental health. He was unable to have a solid attachment with his mother and regarded his grandparents as his main family.*

Damon is originally from a large town. He moved to the countryside to live with his grandparents, there he attended a small rural school; which catered for approximately one hundred students. He described his first educational experience as difficult; 'I had a rough time in primary school. I was the black sheep of the class. I was always the black sheep growing up like'. (D 263-64) When probed further, he explained that he was singled out because he came from a one parent family;

> Well everyone else had a father and of course I was the only one in my class that didn't have a father and of course, some parents would tell their children that his father left because he was bad.
>
> (D 278-80)

He believed that they didn't understand his situation as it "was all happy families" in school. He had a few friends in primary school, but not that many, "I wasn't Mr Popularity" (D 294-95). One of his main friends was a girl who transferred from primary to secondary with him. "She was the only one, her mother and father had a rough relationship, they were verging on divorce. So we were kind of in the same boat" (D 298-300). He felt he could relate to this girl and they understood each other. Damon recalls his eagerness to progress to secondary school. Here he believed, there would be "a chance to change" and there were "going to be all different people" there. (D 305-06)

Note: *It is clear that Damon had difficulties with the family arrangements from a very young age and found it difficult to cope in primary school as he considered that everyone had 'normal families'. The depiction of feeling like outcasts in school is a pronounced factor in many of the participants' stories. There is a sense that the participants were unable to relate to the way the school environment operated and as a result they felt marginalised and alienated.*

Secondary School

He spent his first year settling in "I was as sweet as pie, I was nice and all that" (D 308). However, he explains that this manner dissolved in second year; "I took off, I went out of control. I spiralled out of control. I was popular" (D 309-10). At this stage Damon was fourteen, " there was drink and drugs and everything involved [I was] very young to be influenced by all that stuff like, …, do you know, I got sucked right in too, I just went out of my mind like" (D 310-19). He deemed himself as a "wild child" that was "suspended every day of the week from school" (D 328-30). The suspensions were mainly due to such things as "smoking and fighting. But I got caught smoking a good few times between classes and mitching is another one I got caught for". It almost sounds as if there was a lot more, but these are the only ones for which he was reprimanded. At one stage he was expelled, but was able to "reapply" for school. He explains how his mother had to get involved. His grandparents "were not able to keep up with me" (D 350).

Note: *The transition to second-level school provided an opportunity for Damon to start again and take on a new identity. He was involved in risk-taking behaviour and had no clear goals and seemed to be searching for acceptance by his peers.*

Damon does not recall having any major issues with the teachers while attending school. However, he describes himself as "fiery" and most of the time it was "grand, I had no trouble, like… I got on well enough with the teachers; if they were cross with me I would fuck them out of it" (D 408-15). He recollects one teacher, his English teacher; she sticks out in his mind as having confidence in him:

> Oh my God she saw something in me, when others turned their back she saw something. She recommended me out of the whole class for honours English. It kind of kept me going. I should write her a thank you letter. She always sticks in my head, she drove me. I really didn't have anyone else that saw that much potential in me. Between fighting with the other teachers and I did get on with them but if they said something and I wouldn't like it, I would fight back, do you know that kind of thing?   (D 417-24)

Note: This indicates the importance of students having someone in their lives that encourages them and identifies their potential. The words of this particular teacher had a lasting positive impact on Damon and it appears that it was the first person that had faith in his ability.

Damon claims that it was this teacher's belief in him that helped him realise that he could achieve something "I didn't end up like the rest of them" in his gang (D 426). However, this ideal did not take hold of Damon immediately. He recalls having a lot of power in secondary school, being involved in a gang. This seemed significant for Damon and he contrasts it with his time in primary school "when I was growing up I didn't have power" (D 434). He believes that the power was his downfall:

> …I got power when I didn't need it, which is ironic…I totally took advantage of the bad [power]. If I had taken advantage of the good I could have done a lot better. I could have been in college, doing a great job by now. No, I had to be greedy with my power.

    (D 435-39)

Note: His search for acceptance is noted from his earlier statement about not being Mr. Popularity in primary school and then his discussion on being popular in secondary school. This highlights the power dynamics that can exist between

students in schools. Damon possessed power, while Elaine was without any form of power during her time in school.

Emotional breakdown

Damon left school after completing his Junior Certificate. He moved out of his grandparents' home and moved into an apartment in the nearby town and joined the Youthreach programme. After six months of living with a group of friends he had "a major falling out", and was "torn apart" by his then friends. Damon could not cope with what had happened, "couldn't face the world" and returned home to his grandparents and locked himself in his room (D2 5-8). "I shut down completely; emotionally more than anything else and physically, I wasn't doing anything like. I wasn't eating properly or even washing properly" (D2 35-37). He describes his time in the room as traumatic:

> …half the things still haunt me that I was thinking. Insomnia was a big one…I could sleep but I wouldn't sleep during the night. I would wait for the sunrise to come up before I went to sleep…I was extremely paranoid. I thought someone was looking in my window all the time and I had the curtains closed. I would just sit there…my mind would be constantly going on one thing like. I was just repeating things over and over again. I didn't know what to do with myself. I did consider suicide, there is no point beating around the bush about it, I thought about it a lot.
>
> <div align="right">(D2 88-103)</div>

Damon states that he spent four months in the room with very little outside contact. His grandparents became increasingly worried "they didn't know what to do, or to say to me. They didn't want to hassle me as I was half volatile as well, I could turn very easily" (D2 46-7). His mother enticed him out of the room a few times, but he retreated again. It wasn't until one of his "good" friends continually persisted in contacting Damon's home and encouraged him back that Damon regained the courage to "face the world" (D2 6). Damon returned to Youthreach and received "support" and was "consoled" by his "real friends" which enabled him to return to himself (D2 137-8). "They were giving me that drive that I needed to be what I was again like. But I became more than that, what I was, because I went through so much in the room" (D2 140-1). Looking back Damon realises that his time in his room had more to do with his earlier past than just the fight with a group of friends. "It was years before, the things that had happened in my childhood that I didn't deal with at all and it was all just an emotional build up really" (D2 68-70).

Although Damon has not been fully assessed, he believes he suffers from bi-polar disorder. "Doctors have told me that it is bi-polar that I have. I have been to three doctors and they have all given me medication for it… They have given me mood stabilisers and Lexapro for depression and they gave me Xanax in between to keep me calm" (D2170-8). Damon claims that he is now very conscious of his mood swings "I can feel it in my system if it is going to happen. I just get awful chills and my stomach turns" (D2 190-1). His major concern is "I hear another voice in my head" that is always full of negative thoughts "what are you actually doing with your life…why are you here" (D2-199-201). He explains that it is his voice "but it is not me saying it" that it is "a recorded negative thought of my own and it plays over then on occasion". Damon finds it "very disturbing" and tries to deal with it. He feels that he needs constant support and "understanding" to get through the "mood changes" (D2-208-09).

Youthreach

His regret at not completing his time in secondary school is clear. Nevertheless, almost six years after leaving school he is very philosophical about his life events. Damon believes that he wouldn't have met the people that are now very important in his life, his best friend and his girlfriend.

> I think it was the right mistake, if that makes sense. Cause I don't know if I would have stuck it out. Cause I know fifth year is tough enough and they recommended me for TY [Transition Year] as I needed another year to grow up. So I went off and did Youthreach in [his local town], but I don't think that did me any good. It kept me busy and I learned a lot out of it. But I don't think it was what I needed to go forward. Now, I am going forward, major forward. I am like a missile going forward at this stage. I got side-tracked too much when I was growing up.

(D 449-56)

Damon highlights the fact that the two Youthreach centres that he attended were very different, not alone in the programmes provided, but in the overall ethos of the two centres. He feels this was mainly to do with the teachers "the teachers were too close knit there for their own good, do you know that sort of way. They were often caught giving out about students" (D 579-81). In his current centre "there is a warmth to it. You feel after a while you become part of a family here; it is like you do feel kind of secure and safer here" (D 500-01). Although things are looking brighter and Damon can see a future in store for him, he still struggles on a daily basis. "Like I was mad on drugs last year, I was just stoned every day" (D 588-9). He also struggles with depression; it is unclear whether or not this has something to do with his drug intake.

> Well, sometimes I feel life has treated me unfairly and other times I get the best of both worlds. I have a good life and a bad life. When stress gets me I struggle, like anyone else, do you know that kind of way? I might have had a rough start but I have power through the rest, I battled off any depression, do you know that sort of way?
>
> (D – 602-06)

He has discovered that using art as a means of expression has helped him immensely. "My art is dark, very dark. It is kind of a way of speaking; it is usually what I am going through at that point in my life. It kind of gets smeared onto the page" (D 585-7). He deems the SPHE (Social Political and Health Education) programme a good medium for talking about issues that concern young people. "It is kind of a doorway to open up more thoughts…, I just think that if students had their own way of putting things out there, for me it is art, for others it is a different outlet". He also feels that he has benefited from the mentoring programme that he has encountered while attending the Youthreach centre. "Everyone has their problems and it is hard to get to them sometimes…or they mightn't go to the counsellor… but the mentor is there… but I think it should be jumbled up a bit, sometimes I need someone that can relate to

my life… and sometimes I need someone that is future driven, than looking at my past" (D 513-18).   Damon is now looking forward to continuing on with his education after completing his LCA, "…lately I will do whatever I need to do. I am dedicated to getting my degree now" (D2 248-9).

Note: *Impressions of confidence, motivation and ambition are present here. There is a sense of Damon feeling supported and able to deal with his issues in a positive way. He has developed coping mechanisms. Damon has an attachment to the Youthreach centre and those within it; he regards it as a family like structure. This piece reveals the absence of such an environment from his childhood and his yearning to be connected to somewhere that cared for him and he could feel supported.*

4.1.3 Michelle's Story (Collage 3A)

Michelle is part of a large family; she has five older and six younger brothers and sisters. She recollected moving around a lot as a child, however, her family have settled in one particular area for the past number of years. In her interview, Michelle talked about her time in primary and secondary school; what is has been like attending Youthreach and a general overview on her thoughts on being part of the Travelling community.

Primary and Secondary school

As far back as Michelle can remember, she recalled having difficulties in school, "I was in primary school for three years and didn't know how to read and write" (M 11-2). She remembers being about seven years old "…and trying in the class like, I couldn't catch up with the class like" (M 29-30). Michelle did not understand why it was so difficult, she was in school with her sister and "she was flying it" (M 97). She claimed that she did not get any help from the teachers and was essentially ignored, "Sure I was only a child at the time, obviously I didn't know any different" (M 31-2).

> like if I was in class and I couldn't do something, there was no such thing as trying to help me to do something, like a teacher is supposed to do. Well, if I was in the class it was like if 'Michelle' couldn't do something, 'leave her'. They would leave me playing with jigsaws or colouring. Then I loved it, but now I hate it, looking back.
>
> (M 122-6)

Michelle maintained that the school did not take any notice of her "skill problem" (M 49) for many years and it wasn't until "my mother was in the school asking about it" that "they got me assessed" (M 101). Michelle said that she was diagnosed with dyslexia in primary school, "but there wasn't much done about it" (M 102).

Note: *This highlights the issue of large classes and how easy it is for students to fade into the background and not get the supports that they need. It also identifies the importance of screening of students at an early age and the development of teacher awareness of skill difficulties.*

Michelle had completed two years of secondary school before her family moved to their current residence. When she started in her new school, she was placed in first year. "I was the age of third year, but I was actually put back into first year" (M 16-7). She claimed that "it was basically the same old story" (M56) as in primary school and she felt like she was completely abandoned. "I was given headphones and put into the hall" (M 57-8). She stated that "it was very hard to be interested" in school when "the class would be doing stuff and I didn't know how to read and write" (M 18-20). She was often absent from school as a result "I was in a day out a day" (M 17) and recalled that she tried to explain to the principal that she had a problem, "I remember going to the principal and I was trying to explain, even though I was so young, I still tried to explain I had a problem, but no, they didn't really listen to me" (M 86-8). Michelle "wanted to be able to read and write" (M 170) but was not able to master it in school and this also impacted on her home life.

> Like I would be at home and I would see my sisters buying magazines and stuff like that and it would annoy me, cause they were all younger and some older. And then if something would come on telly, like on Sky, I would say, 'what is that? What is that thing called?' Like they would be saying, 'sure you're not that stupid, that you can't read it'? It was the stupidest thing, a childish thing, like I would say, 'what does that say'? It was so annoying having to ask everyone.
>
> (M 169-77)

Note: *This illustrates the long term problems of missing out on basic literacy and numeracy at primary level. The student is left behind and will not be able to catch up within a standard second level system. Also, it highlights the daily challenge faced by Michelle in every class and in each day she attended school. Students with similar difficulties as Michelle will have difficulties with every subject and the school*

experience quickly becomes frustrating and alienating. What is also interesting to note, is Michelle's feeling of not being listened to by the principal. This equates with Elaine's story and the lack of care and recognition that she also experienced in school.

Michelle had really given up on school but her parents wanted her to keep going, even though it was a struggle to get her to go in "there would be a big fight in the house and they would make me put on my uniform and bring me to school and I was forced like" (M 223-4). Michelle believed that her only way out was to cause trouble in school and get expelled "I used to mess about and try and get myself into trouble. Like, I wanted to get myself kicked out" (M 224-6). Michelle became very "depressed" (M 768) and "felt that everyone was laughing at me in school" (M 226-7), so eventually her parents gave in as "one day, I burnt the uniform and I wouldn't go back. And my mom knew that was the end of it and I said it was too hard and whatever" (M 243-5). Michelle's mother then started looking for an alternative "My mom was searching around and someone told her about Youthreach, so she rang and made an appointment and then I went" (M 23-5).

Note: *An alternative understanding as to why a student may be acting out in class, they are looking for a way to exit the system. This is a view into how the education system has failed this particular participant. The theme of family support is running through all the stories and indicates the importance of such supports in the lives of each of the participants presented. There is a suggestion that the family, particularly mothers, played a significant role in helping the participants to progress on with their lives.*

Youthreach

Michelle did not know anything about the Youthreach programme and was very apprehensive about attending, " Like the first day I was going to Youthreach, I said to my mom, this is basically another school, I don't know why you are doing this like" (M 64-6). She recalled that within two weeks "I kind of knew the difference straight away" (M 67) between Youthreach and school "for the first week I was still figuring out stuff and you know and then within two weeks I don't know what happened, I wanted to go every day and I was up myself" (M 278-80). She finally

felt that she was making some headway with her reading and writing "like, I still find it very hard to be honest with ya, especially certain stuff, but compared to what I was, it is unbelievable" (M 143-5).

Michelle claimed that the small classes makes it easier for her "if someone is stuck on something you are helped straight away and stuff like that…the stuff is broken down and explained" (M41-4). She does not feel self-conscious about asking for help in the class "if you were in class and you were stuck for something, I wouldn't pretend. If I was stuck for a word or a spelling I wouldn't mind saying that I can't spell that or whatever" (M 73-6). She claimed that this is mainly due to the fact "that I got to know everyone" in Youthreach and "you realise that everyone is going to Youthreach for a reason, like they were finding it hard in school. So I wasn't really that bothered then" (M 201-04). She believed that "no one didn't care about" what she had or that she couldn't read. "Everyone just basically helped everyone" (M 206-7).

Note: *Michelle's view of Youthreach reinforces Damon's and Elaine's claims of it being a supportive environment. It is clear that within Youthreach they feel listened to and respected.*

Michelle reflected on where she would be now if she "didn't get Youthreach when I did" (M 248). She imagined that "I would be at home; I wouldn't be able to read and write or spell my name. I wouldn't be looking forward to looking for courses in September" (M 248-50). She felt that she is ready to move on and that Youthreach had given her the start she needed; that which she had been longing for, "I think it will be ok. Like I have the basic stuff, like reading and writing and how to figure out stuff and use the computer and laptop and stuff like that" (M264).

A Traveller girl

Throughout the interview Michelle makes reference to her Traveller culture and believed that some aspects should change with regard to female Travellers. She respects her culture but feels she wants more out of life. Michelle claimed that it is standard for Travellers, male and female to drop out of school to get married, "Their dates come in between…(Youthreach term time) there were two here that got married in February and they … were doing so well. Then problems started to come, like money problems and they had to drop out and get a bit of work" (M 468-72).

Michelle believed that if she hadn't come to Youthreach "I would probably be married by now, kids, do you know? (M 600). She claimed that there "is more to life basically" (M 602). She felt that Traveller girls "don't wait long enough in school" and therefore they "don't look for jobs and just sit at home" (M 252-3). Michelle stated that she "had no problem getting married and all, it is my tradition" but felt that it was "in no one's tradition" to be deprived of education (M 602-04). Michelle has postponed her own wedding until she has completed her LCA this year and claimed that she will continue on and do other courses after she is married. Michelle states that "it might be in my tradition to get married young, but you don't have to have babies so young…sure you are still only a baby yourself" (M740-43). She believed that it was "very good for Traveller girls to get up and go places and talk to people" (M 418) as in the past "girls had no life, it was just staying at home minding kids and I know you love your kids and stuff but your life is not ended at eighteen" (M 433-5). Michelle claimed that traditionally, the husband would be "controlling" (M420) of their wife, but she thinks "of stuff as being fifty/fifty. If he wanted to do something he can do it and if I wanted to do a course I will go" (M 438-9).

Michelle felt more confident as a result of being able to read and write and is hopeful of getting "somewhere" (M528). She claimed that she can now relate to and "communicate with people from the settled community, with girls and talking to them and stuff" (M 483-4). She believed that as a traveller girl she "didn't know what kind of world they were in cause they could read and write and work computers and stuff like that. Now you feel you are in between" (M 486-8).

Note: *Michelle's story highlights the importance of parents being involved in their child's education. Her parents provided her with the drive she needed to go forward, they wanted her to have an education. The confidence that she has gained from her education has enabled her to strive for more in her life than what is traditionally expected. She is moving away from the customary Traveller culture by seeking out additional educational opportunities and is aiming for equal rights as a female Traveller. It is interesting to note the divide and power imbalance that existed between Michelle as a Traveller girl who could not read and write and that of settled girls, who Michelle felt understood the world and society much better than she did.*

Summary

These three accounts provide an insight into the challenges faced by the participants and emphasises the complexities of early school-leaving. It is clear that each story is unique and each participant illustrates their own particular reasons for leaving mainstream early. However, these participants share a common objective in aspiring to progress in their education. This is not regarded as a straightforward task, as the participants describe the challenges they faced in restoring their self-confidence and recovering from previous negative educational experiences. Each of the participants identified the Youthreach programme as having a positive impact on their overall recovery and has enabled them to believe that they can succeed. The importance of being listened to and recognised is a common theme that runs throughout these three stories and among the stories of other participants. This theme equates with the theme of care, which for these participants, appeared to be absent within the school environment and was more evident within the Youthreach setting. Also, the theme of mental health issues was apparent in these stories and the importance of family support as being the main source of help and assistance for the participants.

The next section provides further insights into the participants' experiences which are revealed through their collage creations.

4.2 The Collages

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, an arts- based method was used to gain some initial insights into the educational experiences of the early school-leavers. Although I was familiar to one group, the creation of the collages was the first contact that I had with the other three groups. It provided an occasion to open up discussions on the participants' thoughts on being early school-leavers by offering a medium that was accessible by the groups. It also provided me with an opportunity to engage with the groups and to build a rapport before the interviews took place. I maintain that this enabled a more open and honest discussion with the participants during the interview process. The chosen methodological arrangement was an important contribution to this thesis and enabled the process of participants' narratives to be used throughout the findings presented.

Firstly, the collection of collages is displayed in order for the reader to capture the essence of the pieces. Secondly, the reader is provided with a synopsis of some of the main points emerging from the collages. Finally, a selection of seven participants' thoughts and explanations of their collages are presented. This will enable the reader to understand the power of the collages and the meaning that the participants were expressing in their piece. Many of the participants felt that their collages were self-explanatory and did not provide any further explanation. Two participants placed first names in their collages as they wanted to make it more original; however, the names used are pseudonyms. It is worth noting again here, that the majority of participants used words in their collages. I envisaged that there would be more pictures used in the pieces, as the instruction I gave in each centre did not specify that words were to be used, in fact, I asked them to present their thoughts and ideas in whatever form they wanted. However, the majority used words and as the depictions below reveal, every word on each collage was explicitly meaningful to the individual participant.

4.2.1 Collage Groupings

Initially, the collages were used to initiate discussion and to create a starting point for interview, however throughout the research process they became an integral part of the study and I felt it was necessary to award them the appropriate consideration. The collages are combined to form four groupings; based on the four groups that participated in the study. The illustrations offer a visual representation of the thoughts and feelings of the participants in relation to being early school-leavers. The collages are unique to each participant (except for collage 1I, which was a combined effort), with similarity of themes within and across the groups; some of which are presented in the next section.

Collage Group 1

Figure 12: Collage Group 1

Collage Group 2

Figure 13: Collage Group 2

Collage Group 3

Figure 14: Collage Group 3

Collage Group 4

Figure 15: Collage Group 4

4.2.2 Overview of the collage pieces

There was mixed emotions when the participants were asked to present their thoughts on how they currently felt about being early school-leavers. The majority of the participants chose to make comparisons between how they were feeling in their lead up to leaving school and their current feelings about being early school-leavers. A summary of the main findings of the collages are presented below. Three main themes emerged from the collages. Firstly, many of the participants focused on how they became early school-leavers and they reflected on their time in school. Secondly, parts of their collages centred on Youthreach and elements of the programme that they considered significant. And finally, many participants focused on the issues of mental health and wellbeing in their collages.

A look to the past

The collages varied, depending on how long the participants had left school; the more recent school-leavers portrayed more words of discontentment or blame, while those that had been out of school longer seemed more reflective and future focused. Those that were less than five months out of school used the word 'hate' (1A, 1B and 1C) to describe their experience of school. Two participants did a combined effort of displaying the word 'teachers' (1I) on the one collage; claiming teachers were the reason that they both had left school. Another participant claimed that you 'end up alone' in school; she describes feeling isolated and ending up on your own (3E). Other participants who had been out of school longer, described school as 'going from bad to worse'(2B and 4G) before they left; another indicating that it was hard to bear, 'I'm not made of steel' (4E) and one feeling they had reached 'rock bottom' (2E). While another was 'down without a fight' (2D), displaying a lion in a cage, indicating that school was too strict and prison like; while Youthreach was described as being a bit restrictive at times, but it was never as bad as school. One student stated her 'disappointment' (1E) in having to leave early, another was 'angry' (2I) over what happened in school and a further participant felt like an 'outcast' (2G) who did not fit in while in school. Three participants claimed that 'gossip' (1C, 1E and 1G) and bullying were one of the main reasons that they left school.

Three students felt remorse about their time in school, one claimed that he made 'bad choices in life' (2C) particularly in school, where he always selected the wrong

course of action when dealing with problems. Another was apologetic 'sorry for being bad' (2A), but felt he never got a 'chance to change' or prove himself, as he was earmarked as a troublemaker. Thirdly, a participant had an awareness of 'behaving badly' (4C) in school and reflects on, 'what if' things were different, where would she be, would her life be much different than it is now? She regrets not being able to get on at school. She is worried about her younger brother who will be starting secondary school soon and has advised him not to be too excited about school in case he will be disappointed, like she was. Many claimed that their troubles in school were a 'past life' (2F) and it is a case of 'out with the old and in with the new' (1A). One participant claimed that early school-leaving is 'the bitch' (4E), "it's good, it is the happening thing" and another participant felt that leaving school was 'hands down my best idea ever' (4G).

Note: There is a feeling that those that have recently left school appear very angry about what has happened and are trying to get to grips with understanding why it happened and are in a state of mourning. Others, who have been out of the system longer, are more reflective and accepting of leaving school early. They appear more confident and there is a sense that they have recovered from any angry feelings they may have had and are moving on and more focused on their future.

New beginnings

The majority of the participants were optimistic about being on the Youthreach programme, claiming that it is like 'starting over' (2E and 3D), that it is a 'new chapter' (4F) and a 'new era' (3C) in their lives. In particular, one participant was 'coola boola about being in Youthreach' (1A). Many believed that it was 'another chance' (2C and 3A), an opportunity to 'make a clean start' (3G) in order to get the education that they needed; claiming that they were 'ready for take-off' and it was a 'start for life' (4H). One participant felt that she was 'back on her feet' (3E) again and could think about moving forward and making plans for the future. However, some participants struggled on a daily basis and hoped that they could 'keep the new start going' (2E), and one participant 'didn't think I would stay here' in Youthreach (1G) and found it difficult settling in and even more difficult to make friends, so she spent most of her time by herself, which she felt was her choice and the best option.

Many of the participants claimed that they 'enjoy' (4J and 3B) attending the centres and that they have become more 'independent' (1H, 3B and 4E) since they started the programme. Some of the participants related their independence to having their own money. Seven members of group four made reference to 'money' and emphasised the importance of getting paid. One participant (4B) added part of his payslip to his collage and maintained that receiving the money was essential. Another made reference to having issues with money for 'survival' (4B) to pay for 'rent' as she had to move out of home in order to attend the programme. Participants from other groups also made reference to 'money' (1H), and that they could 'save money' (3F) while on the programme, which would help them when they go on and do another course. Also, it was gleaned from the participants during the creation of the collages that 'food' (3E, 4A and 4F) being available in the centres was a major bonus for them.

Many of the participants who had completed more than a year on the programme were contemplating their future. Some participants were 'think[ing] bigger' (2B, 2F and 3E) and had a 'goal to succeed' (1G), 'ambition' (3G) and a view of a 'brighter future' (3F). Others were 'looking forward' (1E and 2C) and 'getting serious' (2C). One participant 'can't wait to move' (1E) away from home and start a new course. A participant that had no direct plans (4B), placed an image of a college advertisement and 'computer courses' in their collage, indicating that they are interested in the idea of furthering their education. Another participant wanted to 'find a job' (4E), while one participant was not sure 'what's in store' for the 'future' (4C), she had applied for courses but indicated that she would also have to get a 'job'.

Note: The participants give the impression that Youthreach is a more adult like environment and that they enjoyed being more independent and having their own income. Also, it is apparent that for some, the money received was necessary in order that they could attend the programmes. This is mainly a rural dilemma and is an added struggle for those who leave school early and try to find alternative educational routes.

Sense of wellbeing

Throughout the collage creations there was a sense that many of the participants were working through difficult psychological issues. One participant claimed that there was a 'need to forgive' and 'think positive' (1G) about life, another felt a sense of 'recovery' (3C) after their bad experience in school. Other participants believed that they were 'less stressed' (1H) and were currently in a more 'peaceful' (2C) place and 'in control' (4A) of what was happening in their lives. Some of the participants considered the importance of 'a helping hand' (3G), 'talking' (4H) to someone, getting 'support' (1A and 1G) and realising that 'people care' (2E) as positive steps to becoming a more 'healthier happier you' (2F).

Overall, there was the impression of optimism emerging from the participants' collages, where words such as; 'enjoy' (4J and 3B), 'happy' (1G, 2E and 3B), 'over the moone' (3A) 'amazing' (3E and 4C), and 'fantastic' (4H) were used by some to describe their current life situations. In particular, a participant deemed that it was 'a good day every day' (2E), while another felt 'brave and stronger' (IC) about things in her life and one participant felt it was important to keep going and 'never give up' (2I).

Note: There is a sense that Youthreach has become a recovery space for these participants. That they have been strengthened by the processes of the programmes and that they have received a second chance. This indicates that Youthreach is much more than an alternative route to educational progression, but something much more for these participants who are dealing with issues other than limited educational qualifications.

Summary

The participants focused on three main areas to depict their thoughts and experiences on being early school-leavers. Some participants made contrasts between their past experience of school and their current experience of Youthreach. Other participants focused entirely on the past and some others solely focused on the present. It was interesting to note that it was mainly students who had left school in the previous six months that were focusing mainly on the past. The phase immediately after school leaving school early could be considered a type of grieving period. The participants seem unable to immediately come to terms with what has happened and show signs of anger. Those that continue on in the Youthreach programme appear to recover and transform into students that seem much happier attending Youthreach and have a more positive outlook for their future.

4.2.3 Participants' descriptions of their collages

In this section seven participants' accounts of their collages are presented. These collages were selected from the four groupings to provide an impression of the varied thoughts and articulations offered by some of the young people that participated in this study. In order to gain a real appreciation of the seven collages the unique voices of the participants are presented. As researcher, I considered it important that what the participants said about their own creations in this study be presented without rephrasing. My research questioning has been removed to aid readership and there was some minimal editing, none of which detracts from the voices of the participants. At the end of each collage I have included my own reflective notes.

Collage 'C' from Group 1

Figure 16: Collage 1C

This is Orla's collage. The collage is divided into two parts "half is about now and the causes why I left. The 'causes' were mainly family related. Cause there was lots of kids in my family and I used to feel sorry for Mammy and wanted to help her. I'm the oldest and felt a bit responsible. It was never really about me, like there was a lot of bother going on and I wasn't in school a lot cause I was at home with Mammy helping her and that. But there was talk and that and just a lot of stuff being said about me when I was in, so that is the 'gossip' bit. They didn't really know what was going on. The teachers as well I suppose, would put a lot of pressure on cause it was sixth year when I left and they had a lot of pressure on me about my Leaving Cert and all that, cause it was my last year. I did a month in sixth year and left at the beginning of October I think, and I stayed at home, just under a year. And the following September I came in here [Youthreach].

'Doesn't matter who cares', well, that is there cause it was never really about me, there was no focus on me, cause it was all really about Mammy, in my head anyway, that is how I felt. She wanted me to keep going to school and finishing and everything. It was my own decision. When I left [school] I sort of didn't want to do anything, I was a bit depressed and felt 'sad' for a while cause I was at 'home' and had nothing to do all day, I felt like I was going to go 'crazy'. And when I came in here [Youthreach], things seemed to be a bit better.

So, this is like a 'new' start for me and I get 'support' in here. And I have 'happy mum' there, I am sort of ready for it [becoming a mother] cause I know what it is

186

like. And I plan on finishing here. But my mam plans on helping now; she wants me to stay at home, like live at home and she can mind it while I am coming here".

Note: *This collage gives the impression that home factors had a large part to play in Orla's decision to leave school. Similar to Elaine's story earlier, Orla left school in her final year, a dramatic decision so close to completing her Leaving Certificate. The home factors took priority over school and it was not long before Orla fell behind in her school work and the pressure of staying in school was too much. Orla felt that her role as the eldest daughter was to stay at home and help her mother who was struggling to cope on her own. It is interesting to note whether the case may be different if the eldest was a male, would he have felt the same obligation to stay at home and help out? In this vignette, Orla's decision to leave school had a negative effect on her own mental health. In Orla's story there now appears to be a role reversal taking place at home, where her mother will now become her support as she approaches single motherhood.*

Collage 'G' from Group 2
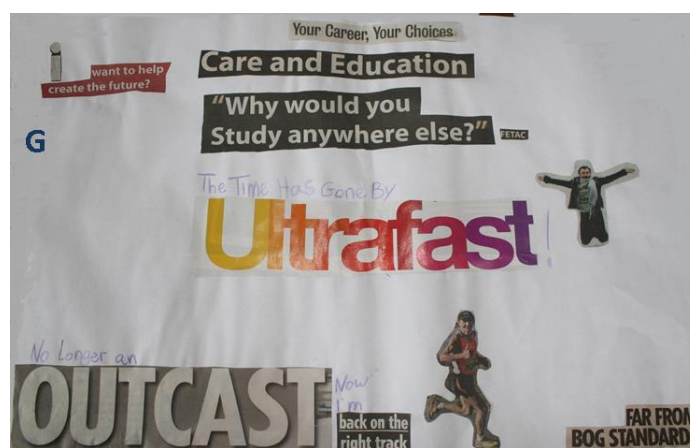
Figure 17: Collage 2G

This collage was produced by a Youthreach student who did not participate in the interview. He did however provide an account of his thoughts on his collage.

"I am no longer an 'outcast' and now I am on the 'right track'. When I was in school I lost interest half way through first year. I kind of went in there with a good view but I just got bored of school and the whole system and I wasn't getting enough attention. Plus, I was dyslexic and I was undiagnosed, so that gave me problems that

I never knew. I was intelligent enough, but some aspects I just didn't get and I didn't know why. Then 'Care in Education', you have to care about who you are teaching, it just has to be there. My 'time here has gone by ultrafast', I am nearly finished here now and hoping to go on to college and do radio and sound production. I feel I have pushed myself more now in the past few months; I wasn't really great before that.

I put in 'far from being bog standard' as a way of describing Youthreach. Just the whole path here instead of going through school is far from standard. I think it is good for some people, it doesn't suit everybody. There are people that could have done good in school but didn't and then there are some that need a place like Youthreach. Like, just they have the intelligence for school, but because they came from a different country they might not fit in or something, nothing to do with school. I didn't believe you got paid to come here. But it is an incentive for those that are not interested in education to come in and then hopefully gain a bit of an interest while they are in here. Like, I wouldn't have stayed here at first if I wasn't getting paid, but now I would, do you know that kind of way? It is 'your career, your choices' it doesn't matter if you are going to end up in the same place, how you get there [college]".

Note: *This participant was very philosophical about his decision to leave school, noting that he is able to progress without school. His outlook favours the case for alternatives in education, that there should be more viable progression paths. He provided some interesting insights into the school system and how it does not necessarily work for some students irrespective of their academic capacity. The theme of care is evident here and he identifies care as the missing element in the traditional school setting. His reference to feeling like an 'outcast' is comparable to Damon's description of being the 'black sheep' or the odd one out in school. There is a compelling link in these findings between a student not being able to form an attachment with school and their subsequent decision to leave. This participant's collage story highlights the importance of having the payment incentive available in Youthreach. It appears that students would not be interested in joining the programme if the payment option was not in place. It seems to be a type of bribery, a way of enticing the student back into education, after their previous damaging experiences.*

Collage 'C' from Group 3

Figure 18: Collage 3C

Neven provided the following detailed account of his collage.

"I put 'casual' in because it has a more relaxed approach. And 'recovery' then if you are like, did bad in school it gives you a chance to start again. 'Ready', leave [Youthreach] ready to go into a job, or going to college or whatever. 'Community' and 'family' are like the one thing, it is like one big family in here, cause there is so few of us. 'A new era', we'd say, a different approach to education than what was done before; 'On track for greater things'; helping us to go onto college. 'Fresh', new ideas on teaching and learning and things like that. 'Access', they[the tutors] are great, they help you with things, like getting my theory test and things like that, they helped me out with that. 'Gifted', I don't know why I put that in, I guess it helps you realise what you are good at, and they work with ya and not against ya. That is why I put 'alliance' in. 'Potential' is, no one is a failure in here. Everyone is equal, but they do different things differently and that sort of thing. 'Ingenuity', is the creativity a lot of people would have in here. 'Under Review', is the LCA thing, we are always being recorded and tracked and that sort of thing so. And it is 'fun'.

Note: *Neven identified and placed an extended vocabulary of words into this collage to describe his experience of Youthreach with each word having a deep and personal meaning. His clear articulation of his happiness in attending the Youthreach*

189

programme leaves us with the impression that is former experience was less than positive. Neven appears to be in a state of recovery and is looking forward. The use of the word 'alliance' is very striking and this links in with the notion of care being an important element of the educational process for the participants. The term 'alliance' suggests equality of voice between the tutors and the students in Youthreach. Unlike many of the other participants he does not reflect on or mention his school experience in his collage, but identifies Youthreach as a 'new era'. There is a strong sense emerging that Youthreach is not a standardised package in the way that the traditional school experience is and appears to offer somewhat more to these participants.

Collage 'F' from Group 2

Figure 19: Collage 2F

This Youthreach participant was not interviewed; however, she provided a detailed account of her collage.

"'Past life', I put that there as my past was different to when I was here. I hated it [school] it was just like constantly getting picked on by the teachers for no reason like. I couldn't stick it anymore like, it was horrible and they had no respect for you, therefore you had no respect for them. But in here everyone has respect for one another and they listen to you, whereas you are not listened to in school. I just didn't like school, there was no respect and I hated being told what to do. It is not like that here, I like coming here, my attendance is a hundred per cent.

'Pain has nowhere to hide', I put that down because there is a counsellor in here and you don't hide away and you will be listened to. 'Clearing the air', just if you have stuff going on you can clear it when you go in here, you can tell people or whatever. There is a bit of a community feel about it. You can go and talk to [the counsellor] and clear your head so that is good. You don't feel alone here, there is always someone you can turn to. It wasn't like that in school, you couldn't talk to anyone or tell them anything. 'Going somewhere' as I am going to the [Further Education College] next September, so I am going to be moving on from here. 'It's going to be an exciting year, with lots going on' cause there will be lots going on and I am looking forward to it. I now know what I want to do; I am going to do a one year nursing course and then go on to be a paramedic and work with the National Ambulance Service. I went to the open day and spoke to the lady about the course, so I am happy about it.

'Life is an open door' I put that down as there is always somewhere to go in life and it is just a matter of finding out where it is. 'Success', I put that down because I am getting somewhere, and 'think bigger' about where you are going and stuff, and what you are going to do after here. 'Anyone can change everything' I put that down cause, like, there is something for everyone and you can change it no matter what. And a 'healthier happier you', cause I am happier now that I am here".

Note: *The importance of feeling supported is a strong theme that appears in this collage. As others indicated previously, she highlights the importance of being listened to and respected as important elements that were missing from her school experience. The participant related school factors as the main reason for her departure from mainstream. As indicated by others, she reveals the importance of being provided with care and support which has had a positive impact on her mental health. Similar to the point made in collage 2G she believes in alternatives in education and finding a route that suits her needs. Similar to Neven, her collage has a positive tone.*

Collage 'F' from Group 3

Figure 20: Collage 3F

This participant uses drawing and pictures to reveal her feelings; she presented one of her drawings after she completed the collage. It appeared from her drawing that this method is used to help her to cope with what is happening in her life. The following is her description of her collage.

"I don't do words really –pictures make much more sense. When I try to speak sometimes, the words don't come out and I am left with my mouth open. I am not really good at explaining stuff. School didn't really suit me, it's all about books and words. That's why I put maths in here [the collage] as I don't like maths. If I have a problem or I am thinking about it, I draw. I was going to draw something today, but I decided to cut out the things instead.

There is a tiger in here for strength and power and whatever as I think you need to have strength and courage to come here and not to be worried about what people say and stuff. Sometimes, I don't feel great and I think that 'nobody gives a f**k', I don't think they care and that is when I draw like, when I feel like that. I know they do care, but I feel nobody knows me sometimes. I am glad I found Youthreach. I am sad to be leaving this year. But like I am going on to do photography, the 'brighter future' thing and I am looking forward to it. I like the idea of taking pictures, they mean more than words. And it is important to 'save money' for things like doing the course and food and stuff".

Note: *This collage illustrates the importance of celebrating different intelligences. This participant is a visual learner and found school difficult as she is not logical-mathematical or linguistic orientated. This highlights that Youthreach is not a standardised package and can open up possibilities for students that are often shut down in school and not recognised. She is able to identify her talent here and identify a future based on her artistic ability. Her use of the tiger for strength provides us with the view that it can be difficult for young people to attend the programme. Her depiction alludes to the view that Youthreach has a poor public image and that student are often stigmatised for attending.*

Collage 'H' from Group 2
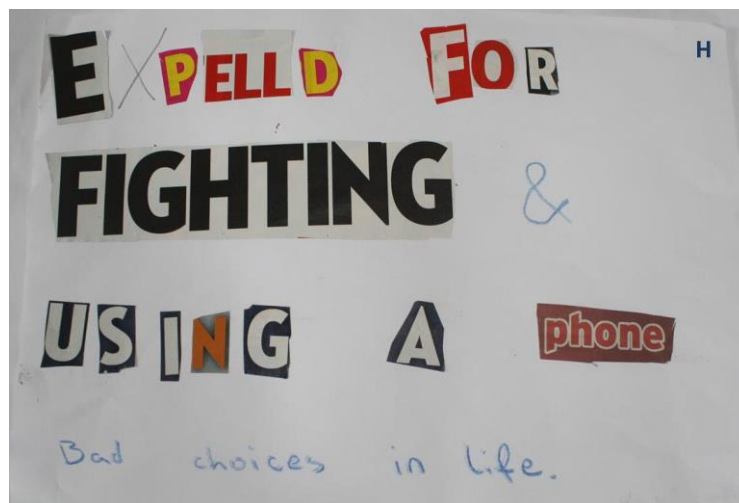
Figure 21: Collage 2H

This collage was presented by Brian who participated in the interviews.

"It is basically what it says here, 'I got expelled for fighting and using my phone in class'. 'Bad choices in life', I made so many bad choices. I got so many chances and I just wasted them. Cause I thought I was going to be good without using anyone's advice, I thought I was going to be good on my own but I didn't manage to do that. I got plenty of chances, I got chances from teachers, from the principal to my parents to cop on, but I didn't cop on. The 'fighting', that was in first year. I was just fighting over a girl really. That was in town, that wasn't in school, but the school got involved because I had my uniform t-shirt on. They said the video was recorded, it was up online on YouTube, "you were seen fighting with another

student" and I just got in trouble for that as well. That was really a stupid mistake, fighting over a girl.

Some parts that I regret, but I am happy that I am here like. I get what I want in here. I get attention, I get good, I get taught pretty good in here like. Not like in previous school I got, basically I was a walkover. Teachers just could do whatever they wanted to me. If I said something in class, it was like detention or do whatever they want. Like there was an accident in class, my phone fell out of my pocket and I just picked it up and the teacher accused me of using my phone in class and I had to hand it up and that was my very last chance. And I didn't want to waste it so I just handed the phone up and the teacher blamed me for using the phone and I was supposed to get a stage [disciplinary action step] for that. And when the teacher said that I was going to get expelled for using my phone, cause that was my last chance I just went mad and I pushed the teacher and she fell at the board and fell down. I got my phone and walked out of class and then came back in two weeks with my parents and got called into school. I got threatened that the Guards were going to get involved for assaulting a teacher. So I didn't want the Guards to get involved so I went to the school with my parents to sort it out. The principal was soft and he kind of let me off and he said 'don't ever do it again' and I was put on a report sheet and I had to get it signed by teachers every day; every class, I had to get it signed.

After two years a new principal came and he thought that case was very bad and he decided to kick me out for that, two years later. He brought up my reports, he doesn't like my attitude and he said he was going to look at my file and sort it out if there was anything missing and sort out any problems the other principal didn't do. I felt like being hated by all the teachers and then I got help from the social worker to get in here, in Youthreach. And I am very happy in here and I don't want to go back to my previous life. I just want to forget about it and move on".

Note: *This participant focused on the aspect of respect. He indicated that he was not respected in school. He is reflective and there is clear evidence of personal growth in his story. However, it is apparent that this student believed that he was let down by the system and in particular that he was not listened to in school. There is also the issue of the delayed judgement by the second principal which indicated that any good behaviour from Brian in the two years following on from the incident was*

not acknowledged. He was not given a second chance. This is a consistent assertion from many of the participants in this study and appears to have a strong bearing on their decision to disengage from school. Like Elaine, there is a sense that he was continually judged for past mistakes and was not given any opportunities to prove himself or that he was capable of change. Similar to so many of the other participants he appears positive and is future focused. It reveals that Youthreach is as much about improving a participant's self-confidence as it is about providing them with the educational opportunities to progress.

Collage 'I' from Group 4

Figure 22: Collage 4I

This is Damon's description of his collage.

"Well, the top 'just released', is just released from school. Obviously, the choice was mine but it was like that. And then I put in 'not exactly life changing is it'. There is not much you can do, do you know that sort of way? Does that make sense? It was big relief but at the same time it didn't make a big difference to me at that time, there wasn't any value out of it [leaving school]. That is at the top as there was a gap from everything else. Then there was 'make yourself never give up on your dreams' so that was like, I went through a phase of forcing myself to get back into it and you know, carry on. And then 'blink and you will miss it' that is kind of blink and your chances will be gone. Do you know that kind of way? As you never know

195

what is passing by ya. You have options but you have to be focused. But you can't take every option as you will get side tracked.

And that [pointing to the collage] was my quick fix there, 'looking for a, the perfect instant relief'. Obviously there was no such thing, nobody was going to whisk me up and take me away and sort everything out! But I wasn't doing much to help things at the time. And then 'roar' that was one of my favourite words, I just found that and thought I have to put that in. I remember I went through a kind of break down time about that time there [empty part of the page] and I always said I came back roaring like a lion. So I always use that word 'roar'. And then 'whatever your pleasure, satisfaction guaranteed'- I don't know, so whatever your pleasure, make the most of it! And then 'success'- that's the way I feel right now, a 'pure legend'. I have a sense of accomplishment and confidence as well.

I wanted a bit of a story. I picked similar sizes for the top and the bottom words. It was the idea for the top to be empty. I knew there was going to be a gap there [pointing to collage], as there was nothing really happening then, I was just wasting time really. And then everything else altogether, there was a lot more going on, so this is like a good time in my life".

Note: Damon portrays an image that many participants can identify, a void in their life after their decision to leave school. Although many of the participants feel that they have been freed from the confines of school they can become more isolated. By going to school they have a daily routine and some friends. However, at home, they can struggle with mental health issues. Youthreach is a support for students, a social outlet and in Damon's case it became a place where he could regain his self-confidence and focus on the future. Some participants used aspects of 'a lion' analogy to identify their thoughts. There is the impression that the lion represents a form of inner strength that the participants deem as vital in order to deal with their daily struggles.

Summary

The collages and excerpts provide a glimpse into the lives and thoughts of the participants in this research. The themes identified provide an awareness of the struggles of many of the participants as they deal with leaving school and their endeavours to continue on to find their own path to fulfilment. In particular, the themes of care, respect and recognition are apparent in the participants' narratives. The stories strongly indicate that Youthreach is not a standardised approach. It is notable that Youthreach becomes a recovery space for the participants who are dealing with early school leaving and then creates an environment that enables participants to identify and develop their talents and abilities.

The use of collages in this research provided a way in, a way of opening up discussions with the young people, which aided a more relaxed interview atmosphere. The inclusion of the participants' own stories of their collages, affords them with an opportunity for their voices to be heard. It offers the reader a chance to gain an understanding of what life is like from the perspective of early school-leavers who have not abandoned their education or their ambitions. Also, the inclusion of the voices of the participants makes us keenly aware of the ability of these young people to articulate their thoughts and feelings and make sense of what is happening in their lives and what they need in order to succeed.

The next chapter presents the findings that emerged from this study. The findings are categorised under the following four main research questions:

- What are the participants' depictions of being early school-leavers and the implications of such portrayals?
- How do the participants view their current Youthreach programmes and what elements of the programme do the participants perceive to be significant to them?
- What are the mental health related issues that affect the lives of the participants? What is the impact of mental health on their participation on the Youthreach programme?
- What are the participants' aspirations for the future?

Chapter 5
Themes from the research

Introduction

In this chapter the main themes from the findings of this study are presented. The findings are primarily based on the participants' interviews; however, findings from the participants' collages and coordinators' questionnaire are included to provide a more comprehensive account. The findings are categorised in relation to the following four main research questions and each research question corresponds to a main category heading:

- What are the participants' depictions of being early school-leavers and the implications of such portrayals?
- How do the participants view their current Youthreach programmes and what elements of the programme do the participants perceive to be significant to them?
- What are the mental health related issues that affect the lives of the participants? What is the impact of mental health on their participation on the Youthreach programme?
- What are the participants' aspirations for the future?

These four questions equate with the four main categories: backward glance, new path, roadblocks, and stepping stones. The category names are symbolic and relate to Robert Frost's poem and the title of this thesis 'A Road Less Spoken'. The categories present the notion of the participants travelling down an unfamiliar educational path and provide a sequencing of their journey and the challenges encountered. As outlined in Chapter Three, the themes presented in each category have emerged from the data and as a result of the analysis have been identified as significant features in the participants' accounts. These themes appear to be strongly connected to the reasons why the participants considered their educational journey to be so complex and are presented here as a means of providing a different way of understanding the intricacies of early school-leaving. Each of the categories is further divided into subcategories; see *Table 12* on Page 151. This provides a more detailed consideration of the issues that have impacted upon the participants of this study.
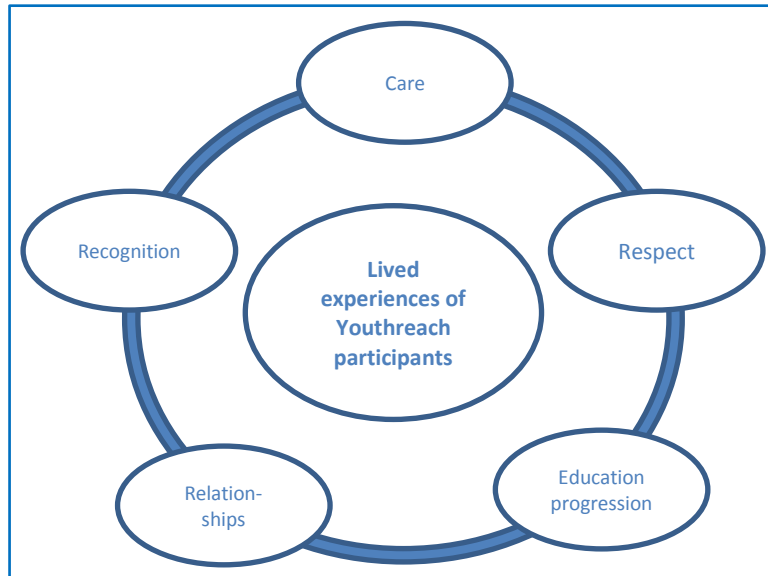
Figure 23: Key Themes

The diagram above presents an overview of five key themes that are present in the participants' stories and are visible in this chapter. The five themes are incorporated into each section under the four main research questions as these key themes overlap and intertwine all the categories. I felt that this type of presentation would provide a more holistic view of the themes that emerged from the study and would aid readership. This chapter is sectioned in relation to the four research questions and each question together with the category and the sub categories are now explored in detail.

5.1 What are the participants' depictions of being early school-leavers and the implications of such portrayals?

This question was categorised by the term 'backward glance' as many of the participants described their experience of being an early school-leaver by recalling the past. They explained why they left school early and how they felt as a result.

Backward Glance

This signifies the participants' reflections on their experience of mainstream schooling as they glance back and recall the reasons for their departure and how they felt as a result. This category is divided into three main subcategories:

- Mainstream unrest (bullying, stress and lack of attention)
- Helping out at home
- Missing out on being 'normal'.

5.1.1 Mainstream unrest

Many of the participants identified issues relating to their school experience that are best brought together to construct a theme indicating that their mainstream schooling experience created a sense of unrest. All of the participants had difficulties in second level and for some; it was an extension of their ill-fated primary experience. Damon felt like the "black sheep" in his primary school and couldn't wait to move to secondary school "it was going to be a chance to change. There was going to be all different people. I was nervous, but excited as the same time" (D1 305-06). Neven was also looking forward to moving on from his small rural, thirty pupil, primary school. He had a positive primary school experience and was interested in the prospect of moving to a larger school and meeting new people "I just went from being a big fish in a small pond to the other way and thought that this was going to be grand. Everyone was going to be nice to you and all this, but it was always something from day one" (N 43-46). As with Damon and Neven, bullying and exclusion came to the fore quite quickly for many of the participants.

Bullying

Bullying was highlighted as a major feature of the participants' everyday experiences of school. Laura encountered bullying on a daily basis:

> In first year, I really didn't get on with people they were too snobby and stuff. And in third year I was kind of getting bullied. Lads in class would always break into my locker and throw stuff out of it everywhere. That was happening for a few weeks and everyone would stare and call me names and shit, and stuck up girls. (L 16-22)

Jodie recalls the utter torment bestowed onto her by others "I just got bullied and stuff" (J 85), originating in primary school and continuing onto second level. "In primary school everything got flushed down the toilet and the teacher wouldn't say nothing. Like, I was crying, everything thrown into the toilet: my bag, my jacket …everything" (J 90-93). Jodie claimed that "it was grand; you get used of it all". However, it was much harder to deal with the physical bullying she encountered in secondary school.

> It wouldn't be just normal bullying, like you are this or that, the verbal. It would be proper kicking and pushing. They would trip me up and get me books and whack them off me head. The teachers would not care. They would not care. (J -274-77)

Also, Elaine was a victim of physical bullying "four of them came along and beat the crap out of me… like I had bald patches all over my hair and do you know like, bruises and scrapes" (E 422-26).

The bullying was described by Sandra as "bitching"; she attended an all-girls school and found it very difficult. She depicted her feelings about being bullied through her collage, using the word "gossip". She claimed that there was "a lot of gossiping…among the girls", they would be "making up mean stuff and spreading rumours" (S 54-5). Sandra felt that bullying should have been noticed by the school "someone is getting bullied when people are constantly talking about them for no reason" (S 25-6). To counteract the bullying Sandra moved to a mixed secondary school. Sandra decided to hang out with the boys as "there is never really any issues; there is no bitching". However, this created more "slagging" from the girls in the school and as a result Sandra bowed out of school (S 117-19). Elaine's and Orla's experiences would concur with Sandra, who both found it difficult to cope "there was just a lot of stuff being said about me" (O 10) and "people in the higher classes laughed at you and made little of you" (E 157-8).

Brian recollected feeling the pressure of bullying in primary school, not long after moving to Ireland:

> I just moved and I couldn't speak any English whatsoever and I was
> getting bullied cause I was wearing glasses and I was from a different
> country and people were thinking they could just pick on me
>
> (B 98-101)

Brian revealed that his inability to converse in English made him react negatively to his perpetrators, "someone threw a book and then I just kind of burst out and I went to the guy to hit him and I got suspended for a week" (B 101-3). Brian claimed that things would have been much more difficult for him if he didn't have "really good friends" who helped him when he was being bullied. He stated that they moved from Poland and Lithuania "around the time that I came here. They knew how I felt and they struggled through the hard times" (B 114-6). Similarly, Michelle fell victim to racial bullying while attending school "you would be walking through the corridors and people would be calling you Traveller and stuff like that in secondary school and primary school" (M 729-32). Also, she claimed that the teachers would often make

bias remarks towards the Travelling community "sometimes like if you didn't do something the teachers would be like, I heard them over talking and saying 'it is no harm for them [Travellers] anyways, as they are not going anywhere in life from it" (M 732-5). These accounts provide an insight into how bullying can be manifested within the school environment and how it can impact on each participant differently. Bullying can have a serious effect upon the victim, and in particular it can have a negative impact on a person's self-esteem and mental health. These issues will be discussed further under mental health issues in Chapter Six.

Stress

Much of the stress identified by the participants was directly or indirectly linked to their bullying experience and much of which had a negative impact on their mental health. Many of the participants had high absenteeism as a result of bullying and therefore found school extremely stressful when in attendance, as they were constantly behind in their work. Laura highlighted that she missed fifty two days in one year and as a result "I didn't know anything then…I wouldn't go in 'cause I didn't know it and then in Irish, I never knew Irish, so she would always make me say it or read stuff and I wouldn't know what it was" (L 39-41). Laura felt completely embarrassed in the classroom environment "everyone would be staring at you and laughing as they were all brainy boxes" (L 44-5). This caused much unrest for Laura and she claims she spent much of her time "mitching" or "hiding in the locker room" (L 42). Orla had a very similar portrayal of her time in school "you are just meant to catch up…like if there are nine classes a day and you are missing so many of them, you can't keep up. There is no hope" (O 93-5). Orla was often in trouble for "mitching", but felt there was "no point" in being there as "I didn't know what was going on" (O 81-2). In addition to getting bullied, Neven found the demands of school very challenging. "You wouldn't believe the immense pressure it has on you, just like you have to go and study" (N 130-1). He claims that in school "I was awful bad with stress and it wasn't for all I was doing" (N 147-8). Neven claimed that he missed "sixty two days in the last year" (N 87) of attending secondary school. Similarly, Sandra felt that the workload required in school was strenuous, "when you were in school and you would have five hours study it was so hard like. It was so much stress, do you know?" (S 105-7).

Brian felt that he was not cared for in school "they didn't really care; they just treated me like an item, throwing me around the place, just giving me detention or punishing me for really small things"(B 75-7). He felt that he never got a chance to show his true self and would continually "have bad reports" from school and his parents "used to ground" (B 67-8) him all the time. He claimed that due to his treatment in school he was living in complete turmoil:

> I was stressed out all the time. I was walking around shaking and couldn't stop thinking about school, I was thinking about school after, even when I was going to sleep, I was thinking about the next day and what was going to happen. (B 69-72)

Lack of attention

Many of the participants stated that they did not receive enough attention in school, this equates with the absence of care in schools that many of the participants identified in Chapter Four. Cian believed that he had very little assistance in school, "you could be waiting the whole class for the teacher to get around to you. It is just annoying and they would be bitching at you cause you didn't do your work" (C140-2) and he often acted out because he was "bored" (C 86). Comparably, Jodie was often "bored in school", she claimed that she would often "try and do something" but felt the teachers were not interested:

> They have a schedule, and they know what they have to do, and they do that to get their money out of the day and like they don't care if you understand or not. And then I would sit there, and I would be bored and I would get sick of it all the time. (J 254-7)

Jodie found many of the subjects in school difficult, she claimed she tried to understand "business" as "Ma said it would be good and would help with maths" (J 279), however, Jodie claimed that "every time I asked for help on it, she [the teacher] would scream at me, 'your life is shite, all you are going to do is flower pot making when you are older', she would totally down ya" (J 281-3). She concluded that it was at that time she made her decision to leave school "I decided I can't be arsed with it anymore. I would be better off going into work, put me head down and be quiet" (J 184-5). Neven claimed that "teachers in secondary school, you would ask them a question, they would say,

'You have to learn to do it yourself', like, but they wouldn't show you how"
(N 176-8). As previously mentioned in her story, Michelle indicated that she
received very little help from the teachers in school; she claimed that the
teachers were often angry with her for not doing her work even though she had
asked for help "I had nothing done in my copy and she was giving out to me
and I said 'it is impossible for me to do it when I can't do it like'. Then she said
'Why are you here in school if you can't do anything?' and I said 'You are
basically supposed to be learning me'" (M82-6). Likewise, Sandra maintains
that "they wouldn't explain, if someone didn't know something, that was it
like" (S 69-70).

However, Sandra indicated that this was not the worst part; she felt that
teachers should have had more compassion and understanding for the students
and paid more attention to what might have been going on in their lives,
"teachers should ask them the reasons…they are in a certain mood or why they
didn't do something…instead of saying you are on detention, you didn't do
your homework" (S 85-7). Michelle stated that school was her only means of
getting any support "I think it even helps when one parent knows what school
is about and education. They learn you, 'cause if you come home and you
have no help with your homework, you are lost" (M 779-82).

These findings begin to indicate a pattern of events. The participants'
perceptions of the absence of care within their mainstream schooling
experience have a negative knock-on effect on their mental health and relate to
their early departure from school.

5.1.2 Helping out at home

Helping out at home was not identified by any of the male participants. However,
for the female participants that recognised it as a factor, it had a pronounced effect on
their schooling. Jodie claimed that part of her responsibility was to help take care of
her family, "…try to support the family, 'cause we have, like, no money at home". (J
121-2) Although she claimed that Youthreach was her "last chance" (J 12), the
programme formed a dual purpose:

> And the whole thing is, the whole reason I do Youthreach is, I know I has ta. And the whole family is off the rails kind of thing. Like me da, he has done a bunker and there is only me ma, and like she is crippled and she has to take care of two other kids. Like I live up here now 'cause I can't hack it at home. So, like, I send her down money. Sometimes I send her €50 or €100, so I might have €50 plus the rent to live up here. The only reason I am doing this is 'cause I has ta! And once I am finished and have a little more money, I have more money to send home.
>
> (J 22-30)

Jodie maintained that if she wasn't getting paid she would not be able to continue with the programme, "I would try and find a job somehow" (J 198). Jodie mentioned that her sister wanted to leave school and join Youthreach to help to support the family "she would get paid €40, she said like it would help for the family and all that" (J 118-9). Jodie was insistent on her sister staying at school "cause she fits in, in secondary, so there is no point disturbing her" (J 116-7) and concluded that she felt it would be a shame for her to miss out on her education "I said to her you are better off staying there, I will support the family, that sort of thing" (J 122-3).

Similarly, Orla believed that helping out at home took precedence over her attendance at school. Orla felt sorry for her mother and claims "it was never really about me…it was all really about Mammy" (O 29-30). Throughout secondary school, Orla continually missed days in order to stay at home to offer her mother assistance with her three younger siblings, "there is ten or eleven years between me and the next one…and at the time…they were just babies" (O 37-9). Orla maintained that she could not "catch up" in school and "like I couldn't stay after school or that, 'cause I had to go home to help out or whatever" (O 97-8). She concluded that it was "my own decision", her mother wanted her to finish school but there was "no point in doing it and failing" the Leaving Certificate, that she "was better off doing something instead that was helpful" (O 24-6).

Michelle highlighted the difficulty of trying to complete homework amidst a large busy household, where homework might not be part of the schedule "…for me to sit down for a hour doing homework, I wouldn't be able to do that, cause you would have all the kids around you and would have to be making them food and cleaning up" (M 356-9). As she is now attending Youthreach and does not have homework she tries to provide an opportunity for her younger siblings to complete their homework as she wants them to do well at school "…they have little bits to be doing

and one of them might have to clean something and I would say, 'I will do that, you do your homework' as she should get a chance to do her homework" (M 345-8). There appears to be a shift in attitude in the home, Michelle, understands the importance of completing homework and is 'making space' for her younger siblings to carry it out, an opportunity that she did not have. She recognises the pressure of school and the necessity to keep up with the rest of the class and also the overall importance of obtaining an education.

5.1.3 Leaving school – Missing out on being 'normal'

All of the participants in this study have left mainstream education: they are no longer following the standard educational route. For many of them there is a sense of regret of not being able to stay on in school; they felt they were left with no option, but to leave. In her collage, Sandra felt that having to leave school as she did was a big 'disappointment' (1E). As already revealed, Elaine would have liked to have stayed on in school "…if things did not change the way they did, I would have liked to be able to get a normal Leaving Cert" (E 484-6). Likewise, Cian would have "liked to have got a proper Leaving Cert rather than an LCA one. But that is how life put it on me so. So I might as well get the LCA besides getting nothing"(C 10-2). Laura "would have liked to have stayed and to do my Leaving Cert. It is just I didn't like all the stuck up ones" (L 191-2). Laura claimed that she missed some aspects of school life "sometimes I miss having the uniform and having a big crowd in school. But I wouldn't go back" (L 78-9). There is a sense that Laura misses being part of the crowd and having a uniform that would affiliate her with the rest of her school going peers.

The use of the word normal was visible in many of the participants' accounts. Laura, Cian and Neven all claimed that looking to the future if they have children they would want them to stay on in school and follow the 'normal' path in education. Neven reveals that:

> I would want more for them than Youthreach, not that there is anything bad about Youthreach, I would like to see them go on and get six hundred points in the Leaving Cert and all that. That is what my parents wanted for me and it didn't really happen, so…   (N 370-3)

Cian would "want them in normal schools" (C 359). Similarly Laura "would make them stay in school, unless they were getting bullied, then I would go in and sort it out and then I would move them to a different school. But I would make sure that they stayed in for the whole years" (L 199-202).

Alternatively, Damon is philosophical about leaving school "there is nothing wrong with leaving school; some people are not able for it. Some people get bullied and some go off the rails… some people don't want to finish school, they might have trouble going on at home like" (D1 382-7) and he doesn't think it matters in the grander scheme of things:

> I don't think any less of me…some people have the pride and joy of having a Leaving Cert…but I see no real difference to be honest. I am still a human being, I have the qualities of any other person…I still have the drive that other people have so you know just because I don't have a Leaving Cert doesn't mean that I'm not going to be a good worker…or make a life. (D 466-79)

Jodie suggested that Youthreach "should actually be a 'normal school' for people who secondary schools are too much pressure" (J 150-1). The connotations of term 'normal' are an important consideration for this study and the usage of the term by the participants is connected to the concept of recognition in Chapter Six.

5.2 How do the participants view their current Youthreach programmes and what elements of the programme do the participants perceive to be significant to them?

This question was considered under the heading of 'New path-Standing firm' as many participants described Youthreach as a fresh new start for them. They thought that they were fully settled into the programme and felt confident that they could complete the programme and in the case of one participant, he was 'standing firm'.

New Path – Standing Firm

This is the second main category identified, as emerging from the findings. In this section the participants' thoughts and experiences of the Youthreach programmes are presented. The use of the term 'standing firm' indicates that the participants have made a commitment to completing their education within a Youthreach setting. Much of the findings revolve around the participants comparing and contrasting

Youthreach to the formal schooling system. This indicates the kind of power that the formal schooling has over the participants and that it acts as a gauge by which Youthreach is measured. The contrasts provide some understanding as to why some to the participants felt impeded in the school environment.

This category is sub divided into four parts:

- Last chance – Youthreach as an alternative
- Level playing field
- Support
- The programme content

5.2.1 Last chance -Youthreach as an alternative

In his collage Cian revealed that he was 'starting over' and 'standing firm' (3D), he claimed "going from normal school into Youthreach you are starting new. And standing firm is because I have been kicked out of two schools and I haven't been kicked out of here!" (C 3-5). Cian was hopeful that Youthreach was his chance "to get the Leaving Cert [LCA] done" (C7). For many of the participants Youthreach was described as their last chance. Jodie stated that she knows "it is the last chance I have in doing anything" (J 11-2). Brian believed that:

> Youthreach is my very last chance, and I definitely won't mess it up cause I really like it in here; people respect me and I respect them back so. I don't really see the point of going mad at the teachers or about giving out about stuff, like really small things. Like that is what I used to do before, like small things would bother me.
>
> (B 58-64)

In Laura's description, Youthreach is perceived as "a second chance to be able to make your life better for your education. You get to learn, if you couldn't read or write before, you come here and pick it up quick" (L 292-4). Jodie believed that it was important not to miss the opportunity of attending the programme as "usually you don't get a second chance in life and this is [a second chance] like" (J310-1) and:

> …it is up to us. Like they [Youthreach staff] know it is our last chance of getting the education, they are not going to be like here, 'you have to do this; this is your last chance' kind of thing. They will help and guide us, we are all adults now, we all made our decisions to leave school, or whatever happened and now it is our decision to get back and get the education. (J 177-82)

Sandra claimed it is "a second chance for those that genuinely want to go ahead and do something with their lives and pick themselves up" (S 339-40). Michelle described it as "a big chance like. It gave me a chance in life to get on, to be able to do stuff basically" (M414-6).

Neven found it easy to settle into Youthreach and reflected on his contentment after his first day "everyone welcomed me with open arms…if you told me anything in the world; you couldn't have wiped the smile off my face! Seriously, it was good" (N 324-8). He claimed that it "was just the atmosphere, there is no tension" (N 124). Cian claimed that Youthreach "is not too bad, you're not major controlled" (C108) and it was not like school "…it's easy going, that is what it is. It is better, 'cause you will work, because you are not forced into it. They tell you, if you don't want to do the work you don't have to work…I don't like being forced" (C122-6). He maintained, as many other participants did, that that the school system was too strict:

> They expect you to be robots in them schools, expect them all to be the same. There is no such thing, everyone is not the same, everyone is different like. But they expect everyone to be perfect. Like sheep in a pen like. That's what it is like. All controlled. (C 102-5)

Jodie also indicated that the schools that she attended were "too strict". Damon made comparisons between the atmosphere in the school he attended and the Youthreach setting:

> …the school is cold; cold is the best word for that. But here [Youthreach] there is warmth to it. You feel after a while you become part of a family here, it is like you do feel kind of secure or safer here. I might be fighting with someone in Youthreach but you are not fighting with everyone in Youthreach, do you know that kind of way? (D 499-503)

There is a sense that the formal school system was too strict and standardised for many of the participants and Youthreach was more tailored to the specific needs of individual students. Other participants from the different centres also made reference

to Youthreach as a family type structure. Laura claimed that it was "nice and homely (L 287) and Cian stated that "in here it is like basically a big family, everyone likes everyone" (C 262-3). Although Elaine does not trust any of the other students in the centre "friend wise" (E 65) she claimed that "Youthreach made me a stronger person and to be quite honest, I wouldn't be here without it and I wouldn't change it [attending] for the world" (E 479-81).

Orla considered that Youthreach was a viable option for anyone that had left school "even if they didn't want to come in to get their education, it is better than sitting around at home. Like they will end up making friends, it is just better in the long run" (O 186-88). Sandra would fit Orla's description; she had been out of school for over six months and was doing nothing with her time. Although Sandra was going through a rough patch at that time "I was all over the place then" (S 168) she said that she came to the realisation that she needed to do something "what was the point wasting my life?", and "wanted to pick myself up again and start again"(S 172-3). Sandra maintained that she had seen "too many" (S 173) wasting their lives and that she did not want to end up like them. The Youthreach programme appears to be offering the participants a chance to make changes to their lives, a prospect that was unavailable to them in mainstream schooling.

5.2.2 Level playing field

I used this term to encapsulate the thoughts of the participants in relation to the equality of voice that they deem existed between tutors and students in Youthreach. Many of the participants revealed that the positive relationships between the students and the tutors were fundamental to their sense of ease within the Youthreach setting. Neven identified "the fact that you are able to go to class and call the teacher by their first name" (N169-70) as of notable importance to him, as he "can relate to them on a one to one level" (N 171). Neven was content in the notion that "everyone is treated the same" (N 216) in Youthreach. Michelle described the tutors as working to the same level as the students "they don't make themselves look like they are any smarter or better than us, they help us like, but they won't do the work for you" (M 683-5). Michelle felt that the teachers were "more like a family than teachers…they can be strict obviously…only certain levels [of messing] you can take but we all understand it and respect it" (M 677-80). Damon felt that there was a "connection

between the teachers and students, there is not an emptiness between them, it is kind of 'how are you today?', there is a connection" (D 495-7). Jodie liked the fact that "when you start here you can talk to anyone. It is not 'Sir' or 'Miss' here, everyone is a friend" (J 295-6). Laura claimed that this is due to the fact that there "is less people" in the class and the "teachers have more time for you" (L 296). These accounts tend to contrast strongly with the findings that were presented earlier in this chapter, in relation to the student-teacher relationships that the participants encountered in mainstream schooling.

Throughout the interviews, the participants emanated compelling views on being judged by people; in particular when they were attending school. Sandra recalled that because of her address, she would have been "picked on" by the vice principal: who in Sandra's opinion was "judgemental" and was "kicking people out of school 'cause of where they were from" (S 125-6). Similarly, Damon also felt that he was "judged everywhere I went; I wasn't a GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) student so I wasn't going to get special attention, do you know that sort of way?" (D 505-7). He believed that the mentoring in Youthreach was beneficial in this regard, people can "relate to your story, it is all about empathy" (D 507-8). Orla claimed that she was not anxious about meeting a new group of students when she started in Youthreach as:

> I knew that… they all have problems, they all left school for a reason, the same as myself…it was sort of the same situation for everybody. And they know what it is like to be judged for what they have done, or who they are, or do you know?"   (O 66-72)

Sandra was also aware of the point "at the end of the day everyone is in the same boat here" (S 93-4). Michelle believed that everyone was respectful of each other:

> Like people come from hard homes like, money wise and stuff, they come in with clothes like and no one makes fun of anyone. I know one of the girls came in with her pyjamas on, ... In your own head you be thinking 'your pyjamas?' and you would go home and you would kind of realise … at least they have tried their best and they are in; they want to be better like. But it is not their fault that's the way their parents reared them up.   (M 720-7)

Laura felt that she was accepted in Youthreach and she could be herself "there is no bitching in here, you don't feel out of place. Like if you came in with blue hair [as she did]…they don't care here" (L 97-8). However, she claimed while she was in

school "first you would be made take it out of your hair, you'd get made fun of and shit" (L 98-9). Elaine stated that Youthreach was completely "different to secondary school" as "no one judges you in here" (E 163). She felt that in her previous school everyone was judged and placed into different groupings "they just compare you…and it wasn't nice" (E 159-61). Likewise, Laura felt disdain about being judged "I hate people that judge ya when they don't know ya" (L 107-8). Michelle noted that there was no competition in the centre "everyone kind of helps everyone…in school they wouldn't help you, they wanted to be better than you" (M 710-15). These ideas demonstrate connections to the concepts of care and recognition that are present throughout the findings and that are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

5.2.3 Support

This term equates strongly with the concept of care and here the participants identify manifestations of care that they experienced within Youthreach. All of the participants felt that they were supported within the Youthreach programmes; while many of them focused on the emotional supports, many also made reference to the importance of financial support. These participants revealed the significance of feeling supported in Youthreach. For Sandra, being provided with support was one of the things she most appreciated about the programme. "The support and the time they take out to help us…no matter what it is, you will always have someone to talk to and they will help you deal with all that other stuff" (S 158-60). She stated that "it is nice to know that someone cares…if you come in here [Youthreach] and you look down, someone will automatically call you out and says 'are you okay, or what is wrong?' (S 285-8) Sandra claimed that had she received support like that in school she may have been able to stay "I was in such a bad time back then as well, other stuff in my life and it was really hard" (S161-2). She believed that in school:

> All they see is that you missed days and your work is poor, but who knows what you are going through. Like they automatically think it is the child's fault… it may have something to do with their parents. Like if a child is looking after themselves all the time as a kid, that is their parent's fault as well and teachers would look at it as the child's fault…and other students would be looking as well and saying 'look at her, not even trying' but they go home to a good family…
>
> (S 289-97)

Similarly, Neven felt that he was cared for "you can tell they care about you like" (N 201). He claimed that if he turns up at the centre in "bad form" the coordinator would ask how he was feeling and would allow him to take time out during the day, "if you need to take a walk or something, fire away" (N 205). He also made comparisons to life in school and believed that he would have been told "to shut up and put up and go to class" (N 206). Likewise, Elaine, Michelle and Orla felt that the staff in Youthreach were sensitive to their needs, Michelle said that "you always have someone to talk to…it kind of makes you feel that they care really and you were kind of an important person like" (M 692-7) and Orla affirmed that "the way they act toward you, they know you are going through something or not, they understand…like if you are having a bad day and don't really want to be going into class…you can say it and they understand (O 116 -9). Equally, Elaine recognised being supported "they would never let anything go by, if they had a sad face on them [a student] or they weren't cooperating as usual as they would, they wouldn't [the staff] let it go by (E 328-31). Others, such as Jodie made reference to the staff "they are not there to judge you" they "just help you" (J 184-6). She felt that "they take care of you. Like they give us food and everything here and you don't have to pay for it like in other schools. It helps which isn't too bad" (J193-5). And Laura likes that fact that the staff "are understandable" and "if there is a student that needs something, it is sorted straight away" (L 127 -53). These findings provide some insight into what these participants considered as important aspects within their educational experience. They needed to have felt cared for and to have felt a sense of belonging.

Laura, Jodie and Michelle made explicit reference to receiving extra support for literacy and numeracy development. Michelle claimed she could not read and write when she started the Youthreach programme, "I tried to write but I basically wouldn't understand it…they started to break everything down for me. The classes were brilliant" (M37-9). Laura maintained that her "writing is okay, but my reading is not as good like with the spellings (L 170). Laura said that she was receiving help at the start but now uses her "phone for the dictionary and that works" (L 175). Jodie finds the support helpful "if you don't understand something they will literally sit beside you for half an hour and explain it until you can do it" (J 189-91). Jodie

stated that her younger brother was recently diagnosed with dyslexia and believed that his traits are similar to hers, and that they received the same treatment in primary " if he didn't get it they [the teachers] would just say you can draw it or attempt it" (J 76-7). Jodie thought that she may also be dyslexic:

> Like I have a problem with the reading, but I understand some of the words. You just dumb it down and it is grand, I will understand it. Like, I asked [the coordinator] to see if they could do a test to see if I does have it. I don't know, or is it just lack of education, the reading part of it and all that.   (J 79-83)

In terms of financial support, many of the participants highlighted their training allowance as of considerable importance in relation to their ability to attend the programmes. As previously revealed, Jodie needed the money from her allowance to help support her mother and her younger siblings. While Michelle, Elaine, Laura, Cian, Damon and Neven revealed that much of their allowance goes towards the costs associated with attending the centre; mainly travel and accommodation expenses. Many of the participants live a considerable distance from the centres which can make attending difficult. They are based in rural locations which are not served by adequate transport services and have to rely on their own means of transportation. Elaine stated that "I don't think I would have been able to come here if I wasn't getting money, because of the travel, but if it was nearer I would have went to it. But I need at least sixty euro just to pay my petrol" (E 264-6). Cian had a very similar scenario "just for me to get up here every week costs sixty euro diesel" (C 209). Michelle's payment subsidised her travelling expenses "like Mum asked about a bus and there was none, not from where I am from. So, I had to pay someone every week…when I was getting eighty euro it didn't cover me fully, but it was good for me to be getting it" (M 639-43). Similarly, Laura claimed that "it helps with the fuel" (L 87). She also deemed that attending was "not about the money...I didn't know about the money when I came…like you wouldn't mind not getting paid. 'Cause it is good here, the atmosphere is good" (L 87-92).

Michelle also contended that she was unaware of receiving payment while attending Youthreach "Like I didn't know I was getting paid, the guy said I need a bank account and stuff like that, and I asked why?" (M 637-8) Jodie claimed that it was "not easy money, you have to use your brains, but they make it easy for you" (J 199),

and that it operates differently to school "like we don't get summer holidays, we don't get homework, we don't get the extra force on us" (J 206-7). Neven felt that getting paid "is a big incentive to come in" (N 108). He also stated that "it costs a lot of money to be heading in and out of here every day" (N 256-7). Damon believed that the money was not the main incentive:

> If I lived here and knew this spot was doing the Leaving Cert and I didn't get paid I'd still be here. But at the moment I need the money to be here, to survive, if that makes sense…For the education, that is what I want now. It is a catch twenty-two; you can take your money and make use of it in the right way or take advantage and use it in the wrong way. I do both so, I pay the rent, food and electricity and then I go off and bust the rest of it on stuff.   (D 625-32)

Cian stated that his family is just about surviving on their income and are finding it difficult to pay for the upcoming state examinations fees, which are due for his Leaving Certificate Applied and his sister's Junior Certificate exam. He maintained that his lapse in attendance in Youthreach was due to the fact that he has "other things to do…if I was off somewhere else making more money, I wouldn't be in" (C 388-9). He claimed that receiving money was a good idea "whether they are just in here for the money, either way they are learning something like" (C 203-4). Neven and Elaine believed that it makes them more "independent"; with Neven stating that "it gives you a bit of money management skills" (N 260). The concept of support is a key finding and provides an understanding of the types of supports that are needed by the participants. In particular, it appears that the sense of being financially supported is as important as being provided with particular learning supports. It is clear that the need for financial assistance is essential for those in rural areas in order to pay for the transportation costs involved in attending the programmes. These issues are discussed further in Chapter Six.

5.2.4 Programme content

The participants in this research are from four different Youthreach centres; each varying in design and programme content. However, the participants provide some key insights into various elements of those programmes. The option of no homework was identified by the majority of the participants as a positive attribute of all the programmes. Neven claimed that "it was such a relief just to come in [home] and know your day is done…you have nothing to worry about" (N 144-5). Sandra

216

also felt that the programme was less stressful as they don't "…get a lot of homework" and therefore that made it easier to attend "…when you go into the classroom the next day, there is no real excuse not to come in" (S 96-8). Similar to Neven, she claimed that "we do what we need to do and it sits there more easier…it is better in a way cause you have time to yourself and you can do your own thing in the evenings" (S 99-104). Likewise, Orla, Elaine, Jodie and Laura enjoy not having to worry about "homework"; Orla said "it is handier, especially if you have stuff going on at home" (O 156) and claimed that when she does get homework "it is not loads and loads of work, it is fair, you can get it done" (O 161-2). While Elaine maintained that "we spend enough time in here and I think it is nice, it is like freedom when you step outside the door you don't have to come back until tomorrow morning" (E 251-3).

Cian revealed his disappointment with the poor recognition of the LCA "if you went to a place [looking for a job] with the LCA compared to the Leaving Cert. you would be more likely to get it with a Leaving Cert (O- 14-6). Equally, Elaine disliked the fact that she had to complete an extra year in college for sitting the LCA as opposed to the traditional Leaving Certificate (E 486). Also, Cian and Elaine stated that they missed "science" as a subject; Laura claimed that she "would like them [Youthreach] to have more science and business" (L 214). She felt that the timetable can be boring "'cause the same subjects every day is boring, 'cause it is just English, Maths, Art and Home Ec., that's all there is really and Spanish on Friday (L 218-20). Alan liked that most of the subjects were "more hands-on classes" and "like not just sitting" (A 118-20). Comparably, Jodie relished the fact that there was some variety in the timetable "we are not stuck in the classroom all day" (J 220). Neven felt that learning "makes sense" that the maths is more practical, while in school "it didn't really become clear…what you needed these things for…decimals…fractions, you need them all" (N 332-7). Similarly, Cian believed that the programme in Youthreach was more relevant to his needs "it's not all this poetry and stuff like that. Not big Shakespeare's things where you have to read a whole book or anything like that". (C 149-51). Orla thought that the continuous assessment process in the LCA was more beneficial for the students:

I think it is good that you are judged or assessed over the whole period of time and the effort you put in and not just the end result. It is a lot fairer, it is a lot better. It gives you a chance to actually try and get it done and to put in effort and actually show that you are actually hard working, instead of having to study constantly just for one exam.

<div align="right">(O 147-52)</div>

Many of the participants appreciated the small groups, Sandra considered "it's an advantage" (S 144), and Michelle claimed that the "small classes" were one of the main benefits of the programme (M 184). Cian believed that the small classes created a meaningful learning environment "you learn a lot easier like, not just one-to-one, but easier. You learn a lot quicker" (C 291-2). Damon claimed that there was no magic formula in succeeding but rather that everyone had to put in the effort, " anyone that is making an effort is developing from it and anyone that doesn't make the effort is staying to what they were" (D 641-3). In the findings Youthreach was emerging as something much more than just the standardised package that was available in schools. The ethos of the programme appeared more in line with adult and further education than with the traditional schooling system. The participants believed that they were treated more like adults within Youthreach and that this was a positive aspect of the programme.

5.3 What are the mental health related issues that affect the lives of the participants? What is the impact of mental health on their participation on the Youthreach programme?

Mental health issues were identified as an important aspect of this research. As a tutor I was aware that many of the students that I work with would be dealing with varying degrees of mental ill health, and as a researcher I was interested in investigating this issue further. The findings illustrate that mental health related issues are prominent amongst the Youthreach participants in this study and have an impact upon their participation on the programme. The question is categorised by the term 'Road Blocks' as it signifies that the mental health issues make the participants journey more difficult, but that they can generally be regarded as only a temporary delay. There is a need for measures to be in place, that aid good mental health and that help students to work through their immediate problems. It is

important that mental health issues are dealt with as early as possible to try and prevent more critical issues occurring in the future.

Road Blocks

This is the third main category arising from the interview findings. All of the participants have made reference to issues that have adversely impacted on their educational experience. In this section I have identified and presented two key concerns that were prevalent in the findings:

- Mental health issues
- Youthreach image

These two, seemingly unrelated sub-categories, emerged from the findings as interconnected elements and are presented here in such a manner. Whilst the participants travel along a new educational path, concerns relating to their mental wellbeing continue to weigh heavily on their minds; as they persist in trying to cope with current and past difficulties. One of the major difficulties identified by the participants is the contradictions that exist between their positive feelings about the programme and the perceived negative public view that exists. The lack of recognition and respect that is publically afforded to the Youthreach programme appears to exacerbate the participants' mental health issues.

5.3.1 Mental health issues

As part of this research the coordinators were asked to provide their insights and knowledge on the prevalence of mental health issues within the centres. Nine coordinators responded to the questionnaire and each is referred to by the initial 'C' and a number from one to nine. All coordinators provided a comprehensive understanding of the term mental health; interpreting it to be all encompassing to a person's life "the ability to manage stress" (C2), "emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing" (C1) "adapting to a range of demands" (C8) and "to generally feeling content and happy" (C6). They considered that the level of mental health issues were significantly high in some centres, with many of the coordinators viewing the issues as a critical situation. The most prevalent issues of mental health identified by the coordinators consisted of low self-esteem, depression, anger management issues, anxiety, self-harm, substance misuse, eating disorders and what

was termed "significant event hang ups" (C6), which included family issues, bereavement, bullying, violence and abuse. The coordinators indicated that a significant amount of their daily schedule was occupied with mental health related issues; "an on-going basis, open door policy" [allows the students to enter the office whenever they have a problem] (C1), "70% of the time" (C5), "some days very little, other days it dominates, but it would be encountered everyday" (C2). This brief outline for the coordinators' questionnaires makes the point that mental health issues are an ever present feature of the daily operations of the centres.

Some of the participants spoke explicitly about their own mental health issues, while others focused on particular issues they had found difficult in their lives and did not suggest a link to mental health. The mental health issues identified by the participants were consistent with much of what had been described by the coordinators. These included: stress, bullying, depression, mood disorder, insomnia, paranoia, anxiety, suicide, risk-taking behaviour and aggression. In reference to mental health, Damon believed that "it is a darker age in Ireland. A lot more goes on behind closed doors" (D 538-9).

Many of the participants made reference to issues in their home as having a severe impact on their wellbeing. Michelle acknowledged that last Christmas was a particularly difficult time for her family "depression and things like that and it came out very bad in my family" (M 396-7). Jodie claimed that the stress at home was one of the main reasons she couldn't deal with school; she "couldn't cope with all the stress, with the money issues at home and like stressful things at home…it would do anyone's head in" (J 289-92). She stated that she was drinking at the age of fifteen, "I was mixing with the wrong crowd and I would be drinking and messing with drugs" (J 266-67). Also, Damon actively engaged in risk-taking behaviour, at the age of fourteen he maintained that "I spiralled out of control...I went out of my mind…like there was drink, sex and all that like" (D 309-18). Damon recognised that he struggles on a daily basis; specifically he mentioned that he thinks he has bi-polar disorder.

Cian and Sandra also found family related issues difficult to deal with; Sandra did not explicitly talk about the actual problems in her family but claimed that there was much turbulence in her family life "stuff that happened to me in my past and it was

really hard, some of the things that I went through" (S 168-9). Cian was also anguished by his upbringing. Similar to Sandra, Cian did not disclose his history in any detail; however, it was clear that his difficult upbringing still impacts on him today. When asked if there was anything he would like to change about his life, he stated that he would like the chance to go back to 'day one'.

> I would go a mile back and change lots of things. There are a lot of things that could be changed in my life…My childhood and stuff. I would change all that, 'cause that does fuck your head up then, for the rest of your life. So I would change all that. (C 466-71)

Cian maintained that his past attributes to his current state of mind "it would sort of screw you up…I have a really short temper, an awful, awful, short temper. I don't like my temper; I don't trust myself sometimes" (C 478-80). While Cian stated that he would "never go off and kill me self or anything" (C 482), he claimed that he would need to do something to release his pain "I don't take it out on anyone, I just go mad altogether. I'd jump through a window just to take the anger out. And you just have to break something or anything at all. I just get a really bad temper like" (C 489-92).

Sandra, Jodie and Elaine appeared to be continually struggling from the impact of previous school bullying. Elaine had difficulty socialising with other students on the programme; she felt that she could not trust others after the bullying ordeal she experienced in school "I kept to myself and minded my own business, so I couldn't get into trouble, or upset myself, or hurt myself" (E 66-8). This was similar to Jodie's approach "I am used of keeping my head down and do what I need to do kind of thing. So, I don't hang out that much" (J 304-6). Elaine claimed that this was the best way to handle the situation "I did that for two years and I got on grand" (E 36-7). Sandra felt that being bullied "makes you a different person…you are just so vulnerable" (S 373-4). She stated that she "suffers with anxiety" (S 373) and found it very difficult to cope with much of the class interactions "I just couldn't deal with people" (S 354), when she first started on the programme; "like sometimes people in here can just slag you and if that starts I just back out and won't come in…I don't like listening to it I can't deal with things like that" (S 229-33). Jodie claimed that being bullied "triggered" off her aggressive attitude "like if anyone says anything now I just spark off without meaning…like if anyone said anything about my accent

I would trigger off and push them" (J 94-8). However more recently, the three participants believed that they were "a lot stronger now" (S 357) but they "still struggle sometimes" (E 472), while Jodie stated that she "was trying to control it [her temper] I need to buckle down" (J 96). On reflection, Sandra considered that "people also need to be aware of their actions, what they say to someone else" (S 380-1).

Elaine, Sandra and Neven were all victims of bullying; these three participants together with Damon all disclosed that they considered suicide as a means of escaping their unrest. As previously mentioned in their personal stories, Elaine was hospitalised after a suicide attempt and suicidal ideation was part of Damon's thoughts while he confined himself to his room. Elaine also disclosed that she was so distraught about the bullying that she felt like shooting someone:

> One day I remember I was in school, my old school and I said if ye don't leave me alone I am going to come in here with a gun tomorrow and shoot ye all. And I was dead serious, I was, that was the way I felt, that was the only thing that would make it go away.   (E 417-20)

Neven claimed that he was so depressed that he felt suicidal. He found it very difficult to talk about that particular period in his life and acknowledged that it still "hurts a bit, but we will stay out of that" (N 311). Sandra also had suicidal thoughts "I wanted to do it myself [commit suicide] at one stage in my life because of the way other people were and having to go out there every day, with someone being smart or whatever. I couldn't cope with it" (S 377-80). The coordinators of the Western Area Network all indicated that more needed to be in place to deal with the issues. Although no student had committed suicide while attending the centres, they indicated that "four students this year have made serious attempts at suicide and two have expressed suicidal ideation" (C4) "two students have confessed that they were suicidal" (C6). In particular, one coordinator stated that the waiting lists to see a psychologist are too long "there are children in seriously risky situations that are not being helped. This can have a devastating effect on their mental health" (C4). The participants' descriptions of their mental health issues provide a glimpse of their everyday struggles and the need for supports to be in place that can serve and help these students. The extensive waiting list highlighted by the coordinator is another

concern as the participant's mental health issues will continue to intensify if the issues are left unattended for a prolonged period of time.

Throughout the course of the interviews many of the participants identified their thoughts on mental health issues in general and provided some insights into how they deal with their issues on a daily basis. Some of the participants concluded that the males in the centres were less willing than the girls to talk "young people are so afraid to talk and that is the main problem, boys and girls; but especially boys I'd say they…are so afraid that people would laugh at them or that they wouldn't care, but there is genuine people out there that do care" (S 366-70). Similar to Sandra, Damon believed that "some people won't talk regardless…all the boys are old fashioned here, where they won't talk until they can completely trust someone and even then I'm not sure they would talk. Girls are more able to talk; there are a few boys but not many" (D 555-9). Linking in with Damon's idea, Cian maintained that he does not like talking about his problems, particularly with "counsellors" as "I went to a lot of them when I was younger. It doesn't work anyway" (C 501-2). Cian has issues with trusting people "'cause you know when someone else knows, you are going to be worried whether they are going to tell someone else" (C 508-9).

Many of the participants regarded the care that they receive in the centres as invaluable, for many it is the only help available as there are no external support services in many of the rural locations where the participants reside. As identified earlier, some of the participants relied heavily on family support before they attended the Youthreach programmes and it now appears that Youthreach has taking on the role of helping the participants on a daily basis. Fortunately for Elaine and Orla they obtained some external support. There is a Jigsaw project in operation in the local town, near the centre and they were able to visit it and get the much needed assistance "they are really good…you have no bother talking, it is all up to you…it has only opened recently" (O 251-3). Both Damon and Sandra have discovered art and poetry respectively as outlets for dealing with their mental health issues "I am writing poetry at the moment…it is my way of getting out my feelings, everything that happened" (S 221-4). They also mention, along with others that having a partner in their lives has had a positive impact on their well-being, Sandra finds her partner supportive "he is so nice, different than anyone I ever met…my boyfriend is such a

great support and everything to me" (S 350-61). Similarly, Elaine claimed that when she became a bit better in her mental health, "I met the love of my life, you could say and then I became happy" (E 50-1). Damon and Cian also rely on their partners for support, Cian claims that if he has an issue he talks to his girlfriend of three years and Damon maintains that his girlfriend is very supportive and she will hopefully "just bear with me…it is going to be a rough ride" (D 620-1).

The coordinators indicated that they run additional programmes in their centres to deal with mental health issues and enlist the help of various outside agencies as the needs arise. However, they claim that more needs to be done in this area in terms of staff training, extra supports being made available and definite plans in place as currently "each case is dealt with in an ad-hoc manner" (C6). The coordinators stated that they had recently received training in 'Critical incident planning' and are in the processes of creating plans for their centres. When asked if a mental health policy would be needed by the centres, some coordinators felt it was not necessary as other policies currently covered these areas (C3, C7), others felt that it was "a matter of urgency" (C4), that "it would be a necessary" and a "welcome addition" (C1, C5) and that it would enable "a common approach to be adopted by all staff and would give consistent and logical guidelines to staff" (C6).

5.3.2 Youthreach Image

The participants of this study highlighted the importance of the Youthreach programme in the development of their mental health. However, it was also identified as hindering their mental well-being. The majority of the participants in the study regard Youthreach as having a poor public image. Laura used the words 'gangsters' and 'jailhouse' (3E) in her collage as she felt "people think we are in here for bad stuff" and stated that "we are real people we are not criminals or anything" (L 6-10). Many of the participants claimed that they were often jeered at and were looked upon negatively as a result of attending the programme. Some of the participants claimed that their parents did not want them to attend Youthreach, Neven said "Mam and Dad didn't really approve of Youthreach" (N 64) and Elaine's parents "didn't want me coming here; they thought I was too bright" (E 164). While Jodie stated that "my ma said she didn't want me going to Youthreach at the start 'cause it is in the name Youth –reach, it doesn't sound great" (J 228-9).

Cian believed that "people have their ideas on it, and they hear the word 'Youthreach' and there is a bunch of gobshites in it, pure wasters like. Sure I got it loads of time getting off the buses coming in here" (C 19-21). Jodie believed that "everyone thinks it's for down and out junkie kids...and loads of kids from messed up families go there, so it is going to be messed up" (J 227-31). Laura stated that she is constantly being judged "just because you come to Youthreach" (L 108). She claimed that when she stated she was attending Youthreach on her Facebook site, she received the following comments; " they say 'is that not where all the druggies go and people from jail?' and I would say 'no' and they would be making smart comments, because you get paid to go to Youthreach, 'are you that thick like?!'" (L 111-9). Elaine claimed that she "still gets 'slagged' off for coming here" (E 163):

> It was LCA and the fact that we were getting paid for it. People thought you are so stupid, that is why you are going there, you can't do anything else, so that is why you are doing LCA... even in my old school there is LCA and people passed off LCA as being stupid, people that couldn't do the normal Leaving Cert...the fact that Youthreach is mostly based on the Traveller community, or someone has problems or they are always getting into trouble and they have nothing else to do. That is what people base Youthreach on. But little do they know it is not all about that.
>
> (E 120-8)

Cian also felt that the general public associated Youthreach with the Travelling community "people straight away have an image of it as having Travellers and they know there is loads of them in here so it doesn't matter who else is in here because they are in here, everyone has a bad name for them like" (C 268-72). Orla claimed that before she attended the programme she was told "like a few people said that it was rough and that was the general idea of it, and it was just a bad place" (O272-3). She said she decided to make up her own mind and "thought it can't get any worse than what I am doing now" (O 274). Similarly, Jodie believed that Youthreach has to be better "than standing on the side of the road selling drugs or breaking up your car going down the road; doing nothing at all, just grabbing the dole" (J 237-41).

Most of the participants ascertained that the general public had negative opinions of Youthreach participants. Elaine claimed that she experienced this when she was selling candles in a shop as part of her mini-company activity: a person "came over to me and was like 'If I buy a candle will you stay out of trouble?'. That was what

they thought, that is why I went to Youthreach that I was a trouble maker and I was always in trouble. And it is not nice and people don't realise" (E 98-101). Likewise, Jodie claimed that when she was selling candles in the shop "we would tell people that it was for Youthreach and people would just run from us, like we were hooligans" (J 222-3). Cian claimed that it was particularly difficult to find work experience, "firstly, they would be alright with it and then they would ask 'Where do you go to school?' and I would say 'Youthreach' and then they would say 'I don't think we have any spaces'. A few shops actually said to me that they won't take Youthreach people like" (C 186-90). Sandra believed that it is "because they don't know enough about Youthreach and that is the image they get…like anywhere you go, someone did something one time and that is how it has been seen since. But that doesn't mean that everyone is the same" (S 151-6).

Sandra was of the opinion that "people automatically think that students from Youthreach don't go to college. Similarly, Elaine claimed that she was dismissed by a woman at a college open day "this woman made little of us…she was in the middle of telling me about the college and she asked me where I was from and I said Youthreach and she put her eyes up to heaven and walked off and didn't finish what she was saying to me" (E 187-91). Elaine said that she had experienced this on numerous outings from the centre:

> That is everywhere you go, everywhere. Like everywhere we go, people say, 'Oh, they're bold, they're bold, they're bold'. There might be one or two in a group that would kind of make a show of ya or something but we're not all like that. And that is what she did to me…I felt like crying. I felt that I was disrespected just because of where I was"   (E 191-7).

All of these negative feelings and perceptions of Youthreach will undoubtedly impact negatively upon the participants' mental health and wellbeing. An intrinsic part of good mental health is about being respected and recognised by others, neither of which is evident in the participants' portrayals of the public image of Youthreach. Laura and Neven felt that if the programmes received more media attention, people may look upon them more favourably, Neven felt "if there was like an hour special on the telly, like, just to explain it... would be grand for people just to realise that it is not just a place that rough people go" (N 286-9) and Laura suggested that "maybe if it was broadcasted more, that is it just young people, it is just normal things that

happen, like in school. It is not like for special people or anything" (L 117-9). Elaine stated that she "would never be ashamed to say that I came here. If someone asked me I'd say I went to Youthreach, 'what about it?'" (E 588-9). A further discussion on the concept of recognition is presented in the next chapter.

5.4 What are the participants' aspirations for the future?

This fourth question is in relation to the participants ambitions for the future. It is categorised by the phrase 'stepping stones'. This has been used to depict the factors that the participants considered important in relation to reaching their future goals.

Stepping stones

This is the final main category to emerge from the interview findings. The participants' aspirations are supported by the work experience opportunities that are available within the Youthreach programmes. And many participants made specific reference to the importance of engaging in the work experience module in order to sample different career opportunities. Most of the participants were optimistic about their future; with some clear pathways being identified. In this section, the two sub categories; work experience and progression will be presented.

5.4.1 Work experience

The participants indicated that partaking in the work experience modules helped them discover their potential career options. Cian claimed that they get a good chance to try out different jobs "we get three of them…twice during the year and in the summer holidays" (C 172-4). Orla thought that "we get a long enough time to know what it is really like…over the weeks you are getting an actual experience, you actually know what it is like" (O 224-8). Orla enjoyed her work experience in a playschool and "afterwards it sort of put it into my head about maybe doing that" (O 236). Sandra felt that "it gives you an idea, 'cause if you don't like something you won't do it again" (S 195-6). As was the case for Elaine, who claimed that her work experience made her review her options:

> I first started off wanting to work with kids with disabilities and I went there and I absolutely hated it. I felt that people were cruel and they didn't feel sorry for these children, so then I realised, that it is the way you have to work. I then went to a few childcare places and eventually gave up and said I didn't want to do that. (E 453-8)

Elaine believed that work experience was an important part of the Youthreach programme "it does help you through life a lot, and it helps you decide what you want to do when you leave, and you are not just jumping into something that you think you will like and then you realise you don't really like it" (E 571-5). Similarly, Jodie felt that work experience prepares you for life, "in July we do work experience for the whole month…it gives you a taste of what you actually want to do. It is not like in school; this is what you are going to do and then you hit there and this isn't what you signed up for" (J 210-7). Laura said that she enjoyed the summer work experience "I like the summer one, 'cause you get into it more, 'cause you get loads of days of it" (L 166-7). Neven deemed that the block work experience was more worthwhile:

> You get to see all the different aspects of it. Like, the last place I was cleaning, I was welding, I was grinding…I was doing it all like. So there is lots of things there that you would only see once a week. (N 270-3)

Michelle maintained that as a Traveller she finds it very difficult to get work experience "like if I went looking for work experience I would barely get it, never mind get work" (M 646-7). Work experience was considered particularly difficult to obtain by participants who were living in rural locations, where much of the work available was seasonal. As previously mentioned Cian also found it difficult to obtain work experience "it is really hard to get work experience, awful hard" (C 183). He claimed that the staff in the centre can help in organising work experience for those that are unsuccessful in their own pursuit. Whereas, Jodie expresses the initial importance of "finding your own work" and then the staff will "go and check it so that it is safe and sound and you are not going to go in there and do something thick like" (J 211-3).

5.4.2 Progression

Many of the participants have ambitions for the future and are working towards their goals. The participants portray a sense of accomplishment in succeeding within the Youthreach programme; revealing signs of enhanced confidence. Sandra wants to be a journalist and has applied to a further education college "Not so long ago I wouldn't have went for it 'cause I was afraid to leave home and I don't know, I was afraid of being out there on my own; but they encouraged me [Youthreach staff] not to put them barriers up and to get over it" (S 199-202). Many of the participants had similar concerns as Sandra about moving away from home. In particular, many of the participants who lived in more isolated regions were concerned about the cost of supporting themselves when they move and no longer having the backup that they have had in Youthreach.

Although Neven is from a small rural area, he felt confident about moving on "knowing that I am able to this, it will push me on to do something else. That is what I am hoping" (N 340-1). Similarly, Laura believes that she will succeed "like I failed my Junior Cert. [in school] and passed it here, so I will definitely pass my Leaving Cert. here…and hopefully get one of them courses…in nursing or social care" (L 160, 184-8). Currently, Jodie and Orla are focused on getting through their first year of their LCA and progressing onto their final year. Orla is expecting her baby this summer and hopes to continue with the programme, with the support of her mother. Cian too acknowledges his achievement "I am proud of me self that I actually could do it" (C 453) and surmises "looking back I could have done a proper Leaving Cert. You can do anything you want, when you put your mind to it" (C 523-4). Cian is interested in becoming a mechanic and at the time of the interview was receiving help from his "careers teachers…she is helping me with the Back to Education Allowance and all that stuff" (C 416-8).

In conclusion, Elaine deemed that she was ready to progress:

> I am old enough now, I will be nineteen when I finish here…'cause
> sometimes in secondary school at seventeen you are not old enough to go
> out there and go to college or get a job. I am ready now". (E 592-5)

She has a clear progression path identified " I am going to do social studies for the first year and then I am going to go into social working with families…and then I am

229

going to work on and be a counsellor. I don't want to be a psychiatrist, as I don't want to assess anybody" (E 440-3). There is a clear indication that Youthreach has opened up possibilities for these participants, where many of their ambitions would have been shut down in school and not realised. The participants appear optimistic about their future and yet realise that their journey could have been less cumbersome if they were initially catered for in the formal system.

Summary

The findings were presented in relation to the four main research questions. The four main categories identified 'backward glance, new path-standing firm, road blocks and stepping stones' are phrases used to illustrate the participants' journey along their educational path.

The first category was concerned with the past experience, a 'backward glance' before they described their new path. The participants identified a combination of school and home factors as the main reasons for their early departure from mainstream. In particular issues relating to bullying and dealing with home and school pressures were identified as powerful deciding factors. Also, the participants revealed that not receiving adequate support from teachers; the absence of care and lack of recognition were pronounced reasons for leaving school early. Helping out at home was expressed by some of the female participants as the main reason that they became early school-leavers. Overall, the participants claimed that missing out on being normal was the most difficult part associated with leaving school early.

The second category was in relation to the Youthreach programme and was regarded as a new path, a fresh start that was different to their previous negative experience. It was viewed as a last chance by many and by some as their only real chance. The participants described this route as more favourable to their needs and they felt comfortable in the Youthreach environment. The themes of recognition and care are present here also, but in a more positive sense than outlined above. They regarded Youthreach as supportive and many enjoyed the practical nature of the programme. Some participants would have liked subjects that were similar to the school curriculum but overall they were more content with the approach on offer.

Youthreach appeared to provide a more customised package for the participants as opposed to the more standardised school package.

Mental health issues were classified as major road blocks along the participants' paths. The participants believed that Youthreach had a poor public image and their positive view of the programme was contradicted by the negative public view. The participants were conscious of their own mental health issues and spoke candidly about their experiences. The findings indicated that the poor public image of Youthreach had a palpable negative impact on the participants' mental health. Also the coordinators considered mental health issues as a major worry and were concerned about how all the issues could be dealt with in an effective manner.

The final element of the findings was in relation to the participants aspirations for the future. This was categorised as stepping stones along the new path. Various stepping stones were required to enable the participants to progress. These included a work experience module that gave the participants an opportunity to try out their desired career choice before they committed to a further course of study. Youthreach was identified as a place that created possibilities for the participants.

In the next chapter the main findings will be discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Chapter 6
Discussion

Introduction

In this chapter the research findings will be discussed with particular reference to the relevant literature. It will specifically examine how this study corresponds to other research presented in the literature review chapter and how it advances understanding within the field. Certain key sections of the four main categories of the findings will be examined and discussed under the following headings: mainstream unrest and missing out on being normal; level playing field; mental health issues and support and progression. These particular elements were chosen for the discussion as they were strong themes that emerged from the data and were presented in the findings. They were selected in consideration of the aims of the research, presented on Page 7. These findings are significant in terms of contributing to the knowledge about early school-leavers, in particular, by including a broader perspective on related issues, specifically in the context of students who participate in Youthreach programmes. This discussion also draws attention to the experiences of the Youthreach participants with the prospect of identifying possible areas for development and improvement within the current educational system.

6.1 Overview of the main findings

This study is a small scale qualitative research that explores the educational experiences of early school-leavers within Youthreach. The four research questions focused on the participants' voices by asking for their perspectives on being early school-leavers; their thoughts on the Youthreach programme; their mental health status and their aspirations for the future. The main findings based on the perspectives of the participants in this study are that mental health issues are remarkably prevalent among early school-leavers. The research in this study indicates that there is a compelling link between leaving school early and the onset of mental health issues. Even if the issues are already present, the process of early school-leaving exacerbates these mental health problems. This finding is relatively unique to this study and has not arisen to the same extent in other studies on early school-leaving. Some issues relating to well-being are present, however, the term 'mental health issues' is not present and is not considered as a significant cause or consequence of early school-leaving. However, factors such as bullying have been

linked with mental health issues and to having a long term negative impact on participants' mental health.

The participants of this study considered that Youthreach was a homely environment that provided them with the support, care and recognition that they needed. The findings suggest that the participants had formed attachments within Youthreach and that they felt secure and comfortable in the surroundings which differed greatly from their experience of mainstream schooling. However, the participants revealed that their positive impression of Youthreach was undermined by the perceived negative view from the general public about the programme. This creates a major life contradiction for the participants which intensifies their mental health issues and makes it more difficult for them to progress. The status of Youthreach within the Irish education system has not previously been identified as a negative factor for early school-leavers. However, within the findings of this study it is evident that the undefined status of the programme has had a detrimental impact on the participants and their future prospects. Also, this research brings into focus the rural experience of early school-leavers. In particular, it highlights certain problems that are wholly applicable to participants living in rural areas. The distance of the commute and the travel costs are excessive and the commitment to progressing onto further education is often hindered by the physical distance. These points will be further discussed below.

6.2 Mainstream unrest

The participants in this study depict school related factors as significant to their early departure from mainstream. Their reflections concur with many issues highlighted in the literature. Issues relating to being "bored", lack of "attention" (J 253, C 86, 2G), "stress" (B 69, J 289, L 39, S105, N 147) and academic struggles were common threads throughout their stories. Bullying is a strong theme that emerged from the participants' interviews. It is evident from the findings of this research that being bullied created many knock-on effects of absenteeism, skipping classes and not being able to keep up with schoolwork, like in Jodie's case where she felt "I can't hack this anymore" (J163-4), and making the ultimate decision to leave school early. As discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two, other studies have reflected bullying as a prominent issue (Boldt, 1994; Stokes, 2003; Smyth and Hattam, 2004;

Byrne and Smyth, 2010). In the context of this research, the impact of bullying will be discussed later in the chapter under the heading, mental health issues. However, it is worth noting here that bullying disrupted some participants' school life both socially and academically, it was all encompassing and led to their early departure from school.

The findings in Byrne and Smyth's (2010) '*No Way Back*' echo many of the justifications for early school-leaving depicted by the participants in this study. Included in both studies are the participants' experiences of their struggles in the classroom and their battle with trying to keep up with schoolwork. These were all deemed significant in terms of reasons for early school-leaving. There are various reasons why a student may not be able to keep up in the classroom and one of the main causes is that they actually do not attend school and fall behind. However, it is important to reflect on why the student is not attending. The literature demonstrates that some students may have inadequate language skills (Bernstein, 1974; Clegg and Ginsborg, 2006) and significantly lower literacy levels than others (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). In particular, the literature primarily associates these issues with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, thus being relevant to the participants in this study.

These students may have serious difficulties participating in class and have difficulty comprehending what is required of them. This may be understood by Bernstein's (1974) description of the language used in school as being an elaborated code that is distinct from some students more restricted type language capabilities. Michelle and Jodie had serious difficulties in class and had appalling school experiences. The school setting did not resemble anything that was real for them, with Jodie stating that if someone "dumbs it down [sentences] and it is grand" (J 79). They claimed they didn't understand much of what was going on, and this may be attributed to absenteeism but the origins of these non-attendances must also be considered. The issue is that the teachers may not be aware of the language variations that exist and tend to use language that is deemed 'school appropriate' which does not echo any element that reflects some students' linguistic range. The relevance of Bourdieu's (1986) idea of embodied cultural capital, as in linguistic capital, is noted here, which pointed out that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have a cultural

construction of language and communication that matches the requirements of the education system. This gives them a discernable advantage over those from lower socio-economic grouping who will undoubtedly miss out as they do not understand or possess the attributes that are awarded in schools. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have greater difficulty comprehending subject matter and have to spend more time focusing on what is required within the texts and in understanding what the teacher is asking them to do. In so doing, the students start falling behind in class and they have to work much harder than others to reach the basic requirement levels. This struggle may turn into a losing battle for many and they decide to give up the fight. For instance, Cian believed that the curriculum in school was completely irrelevant to his needs; he could not see the point in "focusing on poetry and …Shakespeare's things where you have to read a whole book" (C 149-50). The school curriculum did not match with Cian's 'habitus' as it was diverse from his way of knowing (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Cian did not place any value on learning poetry or reading 'a whole book' this was not something that he considered as ordinary, particularly when the content was regarded as meaningless.

The main concern with the exclusive use of the elaborated codes in schools was presented by Mac Ruairc (2009) who contends that it creates a linguistic bias within schools and those who match the school linguistic requirements, the dominant classes, are considered the elites, while others are pushed towards meeting a minimum standard that may enable them to progress through the system. This means that the cultural aspects of what these students understand to be real for them are not recognised, either they aim towards fitting the school criteria or they will be considered failures. This is a major injustice that is bestowed upon these particular students and is a classic example of the type of prejudice that exists within the education system (Mac Ruairc, 2011). It also has resonance with the work of Honneth (2002) and Lynch and Baker (2005) on the importance of recognition of students within the schooling environment. This recognition is pertinent to students' self-esteem and should come in the form of appreciating and accepting the language variations that exist (Cregan, 2008). However, this is not the case, it appears that students are expected to have the particular linguistic prerequisites in place before they ever attend school and school becomes a place where these attributes are then

further developed and accredited. Therefore, school is not a place for initial linguistic discovery as Michelle revealed when she described an incident in class when she couldn't do her work and needed help "she [the teacher] said 'why are you here in school when you can't do anything?' and I said 'you are basically supposed to be learning me'" (M 84-6). What is most disturbing about this is that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are very rarely going to be in a position to succeed and many will consider that it is their own fault, as schools are presented as places that provide equal opportunity to all through a meritocratic system. These students will have ongoing difficulties with their self-confidence and the belief in their ability to succeed.

Students who become aware of considerable differences in their own use of language or literacy skills may become self-conscious or embarrassed and this could inhibit them from participating in class. Michelle and Jodie dreaded their classroom interactions with the teachers as they claimed that they "would totally down ya" (J 283) and made Michelle feel "childish and that I wasn't kind of good enough" (M 179). Or in many instances, in order to mask the problem, the students act out in class, become the trouble-makers and thus the emphasis is not focused on their ability but rather their behaviour. This relates to Cian and Michelle's stories, where they stated that they would often "mess" in class. Either way, these students are more than likely to remove themselves from this environment; by 'mitching' or absenteeism, like Orla, Jodie and Laura. It has an escalating negative consequence for the students as the more they miss, the harder it is to catch up and the harder it becomes, the more they avoid it, finally leading to their withdrawal. This concurs with McCoy *et al.* (2007b) assertion that poor attendance has a downward spiral effect. The findings presented in this study add the participants' perspective to the notion of absenteeism. They revealed that they did not want to miss out on class and considered it to be a difficult decision. The participants would have preferred to have been able to stay in school and attend classes. Their stories portray a convincing impression that the school structure was not meeting their needs. There is an evident need to transform the way that the current educational system operates. Lynch and Baker's (2005) ideas on equality of condition are valuable in this respect. Students need to see merit in what they are learning, it needs to connect with their

own world, not a world that is prescribed by others and which has no meaning for them. This continually goes back to the notion of listening to the students, looking at the issues from their perspectives and finding ways to create an equitable education system for all. A student like Elaine should not have to feel belittled in school as other groups in higher streams make fun of her, or Laura should not feel out of place and regard others as 'snobby". These students should not be judged for not meeting a standard which was not designed with them in mind.

To some extent, all of the above, presents the notion of 'survival of the fittest' within the classroom environment; indicating that those who are unable to "keep up" often wither out before the high stakes examination period, the senior cycle. As in Laura's situation, she claims that "you end up alone in school; you get isolated" (L 3-4). Other examples in the findings include similar thoughts by Orla who believed that "you are just left in class…you are just meant to catch up" (O 92-3), while Michelle claimed that the teachers "expect the same level as everyone else" (M 233) and Jodie felt that the teachers in school "have a schedule and they know what they have to do and…they don't care if you understand it or not" (J 254-6), with Orla concluding that "there is no hope" (O 95). These participants and others perceived the classroom as an inhospitable environment that marginalised and alienated them. Is it fair to consider that this should be the natural order of things? That these students are not academically capable and that is the reason for their withdrawal, or that these students have missed out on much schooling over the years that they cannot, as Orla described, "keep up" with the rest of the class? In this respect, it may be suggested that it is the student who gives up and not the system that is at fault.

The literature is imbued with such deficit ideology (Spring, 2007; Byrne and Smyth, 2010); implying that due to the student's particular background, culture and experiences, their own 'deficit', that they are unable to appropriately benefit from the education system. In the literature this is referred to as 'educational disadvantage' and is defined within the Education Act (1998:32(9)). It has become a bandied about term, a type of panacea for all things related to early school-leaving. The participants in this study do not use the term educational disadvantage and they do not identify it as a reason for their early departure from school. They may allude to "think bigger about your life and what you can do" (L 5), possibly indicating that

they should think 'bigger' than what is expected of them, but it may also be in the context of having left school and not having to give up on their previous dreams. Many of the participants stated that their parents had left school early, but indicated that their parents wanted them to stay in school and therefore did not imply this as being a reason for leaving. Contrary to this, the NESSE (2010) contends that there is a strong correlation between the low educational attainment levels of parents and early school-leaving. Considering the NESSE (2010) view, there may be merit in distinguishing between parents wanting their children to go to school but being unable to support them in the process. For example, Michelle's parents were adamant that she went to school, they "forced" (M 224) her, but she claims that she was often lost in terms of homework as there was no one at home that understood. In Michelle's example it may be concluded that her parents' educational levels were related to her leaving school, however, it may also be concluded that homework was given, on the expectation by the school (teachers), that the parents would undoubtedly be in a position to support the child and provide the space and time to complete homework assignments. In Michelle's case her parents may not have understood about homework as it is now Michelle who is creating the learning environment for her siblings, in the home. It is evident throughout the findings in this research that the participants did not consider that their background or culture related to their leaving school early; instead they blamed the school system and how it was responsible for their "downfall", Elaine (E 14).

It may be the case that the participants are not aware of the clandestine operations of the education system and the importance of possessing a certain amount of cultural capital in order to succeed in school. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) point on parents' educational achievement being the main indicator of the type and amount of cultural capital that they can pass on to their children, is relevant here. The closer a family's cultural capital resembles the school environment the more likely it is that the child will succeed. Therefore the parents' educational attainments may be a main indicator as to whether a student will complete their education or not but it may not reflect the parents' desire for their children to succeed. It may not be the case that the parents have no interest or value in education, but instead are impeded by not understanding the system and by not possessing the cultural capital or financial

resources that will enable their children to succeed. In the literature, this was described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) as a form of symbolic violence that is done onto those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and no matter what their aspirations are the education system will not favour them. Step 6 in the OECD recommendations for equity in education, relates to creating links between schools and homes to enable parents to help their children to learn (Field *et al.,* 2007). Although some schools do provide after school homework clubs, this was not suitable for the students in this research as they needed to get home, or they lived too far away from school and had no transportation available to them. There needs to be stronger links with parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may not be confident enough to engage with schools, they need to be supported in order that they can support their children. However, in order for greater equity to exist in schools, other elements of the system also need to change, including, curriculum content, assessment approaches and grouping practices (Lynch and Baker, 2005). Educationally disadvantaged can function as a term used to describe parents and students who are unable to attain benefit from the system, as they are disadvantaged in terms of not having the cultural capital or means to succeed. However, it needs to be understood that the system's operations have actually caused the disadvantage and not that those concerned are 'deficient' or at fault in some way. The term 'educational disadvantage' is cleverly used as it does reveal those who are having educational difficulties. However, the measures taken to alleviate the difficulties are not directed at changing the system but at the individual and thus continually masking the real issues that exist, in that the system structure creates the disadvantage for some groups (Mac Ruairc, 2009).

Consequently, what benefit is there in knowing that these students are educationally disadvantaged if they still leave school early? The literature in Chapter Two reveals that the categorisation of those mainly from lower socio-economic backgrounds into a defined grouping creates a climate of consensus language and meritocratic ideals within policies and documents (Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Lynch, 1999; Tormey, 2010). This provides plausible reasons why particular students do not succeed; even when initiatives have been put in place to alleviate the issues of educational disadvantage. The fact that early school-leaving still remains a serious policy issue

(Byrne and Smyth, 2010) suggests that other methods of ameliorating the issues need to be considered. In such a context one must ask the question would investment in changing the school structure be more valuable than striving to position students in line with the requirements of the current incompatible school structure.

The participants in this study provided many insights into how they felt the school system could be improved and these concurred with ideas in the literature on ways of improving the current system. Sandra maintained that if the school had a more caring environment "if they had them support things in school there would be a lot of difference with the student" (S 76-7) being able to attend and stay on at school. Support and ultimately care, were prominent issues in the findings. The participants highlighted the necessity of care in education and contrasted their positive experiences of the Youthreach environment based on the presence of care with their negative experience of school based on the absence of care. This point is linked to the ideas of Lynch and Baker (2005); Noddings (2005) and Lynch (2008) as they purport the need for the concept of care to become an integral part of the educational ethos and system. Another relevant issue was identified by Neven, using mathematics as an example, he believed that schools should be more practical and there should be a purpose to learning, "it didn't really become clear in secondary what you needed these things (element of maths) for" (N 332-3). Neven's opinion connects to the views of Gardner (1983) and Goleman's (1996) notion of embracing and acknowledging a wider range of talents and abilities that would relate to a broader group of students.

This would mean a move away from the emphasis on mathematical and linguistic abilities which would favour students from lower socio-economic groups and open up more possibilities for them. Also, Elaine claimed that the school should not "just compare you" (E 161) by placing students in different class groupings as "it wasn't nice" (E 159) as she felt that the school ignored her class which "was the third lowest/fourth highest" (E 151). Streaming students into different classes based on perceived 'ability' is a contentious issue in the literature and has being described by (Lynch and Lodge, 2002) as a means of perpetuating privilege for the dominant class with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds losing out in the 'points' race. What is even more problematic than that is the long term effect of been labelled,

judged and ranked based on assumed 'ability'. Elaine and Laura were very conscious of being judged in school and the feeling of being judged, weighed heavily on their minds. Lyons' (2003) work revealed that students who are placed in lower streams tend to have a poor self-image and this in turn can have a negative impact on their mental health.

Other literature in Chapter Two also accords with the ideas of these three participants, in that guidance, curriculum reform and reductions in ability groupings all form part of OECD policy recommendation for the creation of equity in education (Field *et al.,* 2007). These ideas all represent a change to the way the current education system operates. It is difficult to sway the powerful dominant groups as they have perfected the system as it works for them. However, research such as Lynch and Baker (2005) and Reay (2012) make compelling claims for these required changes and the presentation of the voices of students who have been negatively impacted by the current system is one way of helping to bring about change. The presentation of the ideas and voices of the participants is not new; Boldt (1994); Smyth and Hattam (2004) and Byrne and Smyth (2010) all use and value the idea of presenting the voices of early school-leavers as a means of working towards a solution. However, the voices of early school-leavers need to be continually represented, in the hope that they will be heard. Early school-leaving will not be eliminated by the current measures that are in place. The participants in this study did not want to leave school and they were all disheartened that they had to leave, the result of which is that they now feel that they missed out on their chance of being 'normal'.

6.3 Missing out on being 'normal'

The participants of this study have left school before completing their Leaving Certificate, they are regarded as early school-leavers, but they have not left education early. They are students that have continued their education within Youthreach with ambitions for the future and who are working towards their goals; with reference of such highlighted throughout the collages and interviews. The participants portray many signs that they are happy and content within the Youthreach setting and they deem to be "coola boola about being in Youthreach" (1A) and "enjoy" (4J, 3B) attending the centre. In general, they appear very pleased that they have found a place like Youthreach. However, they infer a yearning about fitting in and not being able to complete 'normal' school.

Laura, Neven, Elaine, Orla and Cian regularly use the term 'normal' when describing mainstream school and Cian and Elaine would have liked a 'normal' Leaving Certificate (E 486, C 516). Many of the participants are completing their LCA in Youthreach. While Orla mentions that the continuous assessment is "a lot fairer and better" (O 149), Cian and Elaine are disappointed with the recognition of the LCA compared to the traditional Leaving Certificate; in terms of poor employment opportunities and being unable to progress to third level. This relates to Bourdieu's (1986) description of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds not having the necessary forms of cultural capital to attain educational success. These participants did not possess a clear understanding of how the education system operates and as a result are learning from the experience of completing the LCA programme that they will not gain any educational progression opportunities upon completion of that programme. This is what Bourdieu (1986) was referring to when he described institutionalised cultural capital: these participants will not be able to use the success of the LCA for economic or educational gains. Similar sentiments were expressed by students in McCoy *et al.* (2010) implying that it is a problem for those who complete the LCA. The LCA was designed as a measure to alleviate educational disadvantage in schools but as one can see from the findings that does not appear to be the case.

Students who show keen commitment over the two-year programme, in attendance, the completion of seven externally examined tasks, numerous class key assignments

and a final examination receive no external rewards for achieving high results. They are not awarded any entitlement to enter third level and they receive no recognition in the media or by the DES when the results are published in August of each year. There is very little incentive to aspire to do well in the LCA and the poor recognition and progression routes may only compound disadvantage by further excluding these students. The concepts of recognition presented by Honneth (2002) and Lynch and Baker (2005) is pertinent here and provide a means of understanding how the participants are feeling due to the apparent lack of recognition of the LCA. These participants feel that they have not been respected, that their efforts for achievement have not been recognised and this has a direct impact on their self-worth. Lack of recognition has disempowered these young people and one may consider that Youthreach did a disservice to these participants by offering them the LCA as a programme option. However, it could be more aptly construed that the programmes were on offer as a means of getting these students back into learning again, with the hope that by achieving success in the LCA it would give them the confidence and desire to progress on in education, even though the path is longer and more cumbersome. The LCA is an example of the type of programme that the OECD were referring to in step 4 of the framework for equity in education, presented in Chapter Two. They recommend removing such programmes from the system in order to have smoother transitional options and a focus on lifelong learning (Field *et al.,* 2007). However, it must be noted that the LCA has many positive aspects: continuous assessment, student focused approach and an emphasis on work experience. All of which could be deemed as a more beneficial adaptation for the current established Leaving Certificate programme.

There is also the case that the participants in this study are still regarded as early school-leavers even though most will complete their LCA. This adds to the participants' sense of not being recognised or respected for their achievements. Should there be a difference between completing an LCA in Youthreach as opposed to a mainstream setting? Currently, the DES regards everyone who leaves mainstream before completing the senior cycle, as early school-leavers. However, those who complete the equivalent of senior cycle qualifications by other routes are not termed as such by the European Commission (McCoy and Smyth, 2010). This

may be a way forward for defining early school-leaving in Ireland and would be advocated by many of the participants in this study, as highlighted by a participant when he explained his collage "it doesn't matter if you are going to end up in the same place, how you get there" (2G). This would mean that Youthreach students would be able to gain a form of recognition for their achievements on the programmes and that centres would be regarded as a true alternative to mainstream schooling.

The consistent use of the term 'normal' school is interesting as it implies that in some way that Youthreach is 'abnormal'. There seems to be a conflict between how the students feel about the centres and how they sense it is perceived by the general public. The participants paint a rather grim picture of how Youthreach is regarded. In describing how they believed that others portrayed the centres they used words like: "gangsters", "junkies", "down and outs", "gobshites", "pure wasters" "hooligans", a place for "stupid people" or "where Travellers go". They provided vivid accounts of feeling rejected by the general public and in Elaine's example, from a member of another educational institution. Honneth's (2002) idea on being respected and the importance of positive affirmation from others is an important viewpoint here. It appears that these participants are being continually rejected and marginalised and based on Honneth's (2002) view, it destroys their self-confidence and self-esteem. All of these bad experiences will inevitably have a negative impact on the participants' mental health. My own experience would concur with the views of the young people. I am frequently asked would I not 'like a nice teaching job instead?' or equivalent comments, and I recall a particular time when a mother of school going children remarked on my clean car and I informed her that the local Youthreach students were running a carwash enterprise and she responded "and you let them near your car?". This is not unusual and many colleagues would have similar stories. Although there are no explicit references in the literature research to accord with the participants' beliefs there are some undercurrents present. The fact that there is very little published research available on Youthreach may be an indicator that policy makers have little interest in the actual programme, that it is insignificant and would not warrant funded research. It is observable from the findings that Youthreach has been a highly important factor in the recovery from

school for many of these young people and has provided them with hope for the future. This should warrant the consideration of the programmes being a viable option for young people and being recognised as a valuable element within the education system.

In research studies, where one may expect to find reference to the programme, little or none is available (Smyth and McCoy, 2009; Byrne and Smyth, 2010) and often it forms a type of appendage at the end of a sentence or as a reference for possible future research. In Byrne and Smyth (2010) '*No Way Back'*, there is very little evidence of Youthreach being regarded as a second chance programme or an alternative to mainstream for those who leave school early. Moreover, it appears to be disparaged within the report by mainly identifying critical points about the programme. It focuses on the findings of the research where participants indicated that they did not regard the programme as a choice but only as an alternative to the labour force and also highlighted the limited progression routes that are available in Youthreach. The report fails to mention Youthreach in the conclusion under the heading of second chance training. Although some of the comments may be fair in terms of the poor trajectories from Youthreach, the absence of the programme from the report created a resounding impression. Also, the DES (2004) did not include Youthreach in their representation of the Irish education system. This strongly indicates that it is not considered as a main element of the education system since it can so easily be omitted from the education system structure. There is a sense that Youthreach is a type of secret, it appears as if the DES does not want to publicise the programme. This may be due to the fact that students receive a payment to attend and the DES does not want to commend the programme as it may result in a larger influx of potential participants, which in turn would cost more money. Therefore, it is extremely difficult for Youthreach to ever be considered as an alternative to mainstream if it does not have the backing of the DES.

In 2004, Youthreach centres were designated as "centres of education" and were recognised as these in education legislation. This was deemed a positive step for Youthreach as centres now had legislative standing, as recognised educational institutions. However, there still remained a significant difference between the services and supports that were available to mainstream schools and those available

to Youthreach. Many of the supports available to SEN students in mainstream do not exist for Youthreach and they do not transfer with a student if they leave school to attend the programme. And as an earlier point notes, those who attend and successfully complete the programme to a senior cycle equivalent qualification (NQF Level 4 and 5) are still referred to as "dropouts". This may be one of the issues as to why Youthreach is looked upon negatively within society; the term 'dropout' implies other negative terms, such as 'failure' or 'waster', 'irresponsible' or 'delinquent' (Smyth and Hattam, 2004).

These issues may be strongly linked to the participants' use of word 'normal' to define mainstream school as it seems to be accepted by everyone while Youthreach appears to be a relatively unconventional pathway. This point is captured by participant (2F) with her depiction of a tiger in her collage "there is a tiger in here for strength and power…I think you need to have strength and courage to come here and not to be worried about what people say and stuff". This notion is further represented in Elaine's reflection upon her time in the centre, maintaining that she "would never be ashamed to say that I came here" (E 588). Elaine's comment suggests that there is some form of indignity about being part of a Youthreach programme. Some of the participants mentioned that they would not like to see their children attend Youthreach, claiming that they "would want more for them than Youthreach". They want, as Reimer (1971) describes, for their children to go further than they did themselves. There is a dominance of this 'normative' unquestioned assumption about school evident here. Having one school system which is dominated by the middle and upper classes and used to perpetuate privilege for those groups should not be considered as a measure for 'normal'. Reay (2004) referred to this in the literature, stating that in order for students to be considered 'normal' in school they need to lose a part of who they are in order to fit into the system. In the findings the participants were continually comparing and contrasting Youthreach to the schooling environment as school was considered the norm. These participants did not fit in with the norm and are left feeling unaccepted or 'abnormal'. Illich's (1970) ideas on 'deschooling' society are worth considering in this regard. Currently for the participants who leave school early there is a need to cleanse or 'deschool' them. They need to unlearn all of which they have learned about themselves in

school and then start to build up a sense of who they are and what they can achieve in the future. In a way they need to recover from their schooling experience. This is not a mentally healthy process and should not be the case. When students initially attend Youthreach, they need time to heal from the damage that has been caused by their formal schooling experience. This brings into focus the need for society to 'deschool' (Illich, 1970). There needs to be a move away from the monopoly type provision that is currently available to more options of recognised and viable alternatives being available to students.

An example of the need to reform the way the current system operates is extended here. These participants feel that the Youthreach centres are rated as their last option. If this is the case, what effect does it have on the participants' emotional development? The continuous rejection that they encounter creates much instability in their lives. Firstly, they are rejected by mainstream and then by society as they struggle to progress through an alternative path. In Chapter Two it is described by Erikson (1995) as role confusion and can have a damaging effect on a young person's mental health as they struggle to form an identity in their current situation. Similarly, Smyth and Hattam (2004) refers to it as 'becoming somebody' without school. For many of the participants this may be difficult, their progression options from Youthreach are limited and many may be dealing with other issues in their lives. In the case of Elaine, she claims that she "still struggles sometimes" (E 470). While Michelle seems more optimistic and has provided some indication that she is forming a new identity, making reference to the traditions of her culture and how she hopes to do something different as there is "more to life basically" (M 605). While Jodie believed that Youthreach "should actually be a 'normal school' for people who secondary schools are too much pressure" (J 150-1). Youthreach needs to be recognised as an alternative to mainstream and identified as an integral part of the education system. The progress made by students within Youthreach should not be overshadowed by feelings of inferiority.

6.4 Level playing field

There was a sense of solidarity emanating from the participants' stories of their encounters within the Youthreach setting. This was in terms of other students, and also in the links between tutors and students. They provided a cocoon type image of the centres, an enclosed setting within which they felt safe and away from any possible judgement. This would be in total contrast to how they perceived to appear to the world outside Youthreach, including their previous schooling experience.

Sandra noted that "everyone is in the same boat here" (S 93-4). Neven claimed that everyone has "'potential,' no one is a failure in here. Everyone is equal but they do different things differently… you realise what you are good at" (N 12-6). This is an indication that Neven did not feel like he was succeeding in school or that he was in a position to demonstrate skills that he felt were worthwhile. Neven is interested in practical subjects, in his interview he made reference to welding and engineering and working with his hands, he was aware that this is his talent and what he is interested in for his future. Likewise participant (3F) demonstrated artistic attributes, maintaining that school "didn't really suit me, it was all about books and words". The literature supports the participants' viewpoints that the school curriculum is predominately based on linguistic and mathematical intelligences, with little or no emphasis on multiple intelligences (Mac Ruairc, 2009; Lynch and Baker, 2005; Smyth, 1999; Goleman, 1996; Gardner, 1983). The Youthreach approach is different to formal schooling, it is more student focused as opposed to being led by the teacher or the content of the curriculum. The approach is more in line with adult education than the traditional schooling pedagogy and appears to be more fitting to the needs of these participants.

It has been highlighted by the NCCA, (2004) and Smyth, (1999) that it is mainly students from lower socio-economic groupings who find the schooling and the curriculum irrelevant. This is further expanded by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) who assert that these students are unable to make sense of the purpose of schooling and therefore find little value in it. They feel like an "outcast" (2G). It may be the case that many of these students are interested in furthering their education, but are not interested in the race for high points, or in high level academic courses; they may wish to pursue other options that do not require the same entry level requirements.

The focus in classrooms on obtaining high points can discourage these students from the learning process or the school environment, it becomes too stressful. There is a need to focus on practical skills and subjects that are more relevant to their needs; this is recognition for the need for viable alternatives to mainstream (Field *et al.,* 2007). There was positivity in Neven's descriptions of the skills he was able to demonstrate in Youthreach, a sense that all forms of talents and aptitudes were accepted and celebrated. This is what needs to be nurtured in a schooling environment, a sense of purpose and accomplishment for everyone. Noddings (2005); Lynch and Baker (2005); Cohen (2006) and Lynch (2008) all bring this view of a more equitable education system into focus in the literature. They advocate an education system that is more holistic in its approach and demonstrates respect for a full range of talents and capabilities. They contend that creating a broader educational approach is economically more viable and will have a greater positive impact on more students. This will not happen without a fundamental restructuring of the current system, which would include more alternatives being in place, as one system, will not meet the needs for all.

The following provides further evidence for the need to move towards a more caring, equitable education system that encompasses a wider focus than academic teaching and learning. Cohen (2006) highlights additional key areas such as social, emotional and ethical areas that are necessary in education and which would enable students to become lifelong learners. The literature in Chapter Two makes reference to national and international research on the issue of negative teacher-pupil relationships and how it pertains to early school-leaving. In particular, Boldt (1994); Fagan (1995) and Lynch (1999) reveal that it is primarily students from lower socio-economic groups, who experience poor relationships with teachers and that the students in their research generally felt disregarded, humiliated and uncared for by the teachers. The participants of the study echo similar sentiments. One participant, when describing her collage said that she had a "horrible" school experience and that the teachers continually singled her out for no reason; she didn't feel listened to or respected (2F). In a similar manner, Brian's main issue was that the teachers "didn't really care" (B 75) and he didn't feel respected. He described being "treated like an item" and that he was consistently punished "for really small things" (B 76-7). And Sandra felt that

there was "no understanding" (S 34). Although Damon described some turbulence with his teachers in school, his prime memory was of one teacher who believed in him "she saw something in me, when others turned their back…I didn't really have anyone that saw that much potential in me" (D 417-22). It appears that these students are just looking for some positive reinforcement, understanding and an empathetic ear. These findings continually bring into focus the need to feel respected and recognised within the education system.

This closely correlates with the idea of mentoring highlighted in Chapter One of this research. The web-wheel model intended for all Youthreach centres is based on a mentoring process between participants and tutors. The participants are able to build up a relationship with a significant adult and discuss in confidence, aspects relating to educational, personal, social and practical issues in their lives. This approach facilitates students in working through any issues that may be highlighted by offering additional internal or external supports (Gordon, 2007). The inclusion of such a method within mainstream schools may be a worthwhile consideration for some students that are struggling. An element of care is embedded in this type of approach and may go towards helping students who feel that they are not listened to or not recognised in schools. It could be recognised as an example of what Noddings (2005) and Lynch (2008) were advocating in terms of including themes of care into the curriculum. However, in order for this to work in schools, additional training for teachers would be required and the students would need to be in the position to choose their own mentor.

As distinct from their school experience, the participants in this study found the atmosphere in their Youthreach centres appealing, with Neven claiming that "there is no tension" (N 124) and Laura indicating that "you don't feel out of place" (L 97). Many of the participants associate this ambiance with their positive student –tutor relationships. The participants regard the tutors as understanding and down to earth "they don't make themselves look like they are any smarter or better than us" (M 684-4), "there is a connection" (D 497), "it is not 'sir' or 'miss' here, everyone is a friend" (J 296). The literature suggests that many mainstream teachers hail from middle-class groupings and may not have an understanding of students from lower socio-economic groupings (Devine, 2005; Leavy, 2005) they may not be able to

relate to them and this may be part of the reason for poor relationships. However, tutors working in Youthreach centres may come from a myriad of different backgrounds, including industry, craft, mainstream and youth work. The diversity creates a different mix of training, ideals and backgrounds, some of which may be more appealing to the students; "you can relate to them on a one to one level" (N 171). The ethos and operations of Youthreach centres appear to correspond more readily with the 'cultural capital' of the participants (Bourdieu, 1986). The culture of the centres is less formalised than schools and does not require the same level of uniformity. The participants feel like everyone is equal "in the same boat" (S 93), there is no hierarchy present or ability groupings and the participants feel more at ease. This also relates to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of 'field' and 'habitus'. Youthreach as the education 'field' operates at a level that is on par with the participants' views, it matches their 'habitus' and they do not feel the need to resist it. The participants were not giving up on education when they left school early. They were giving up on that particular system of education. The Youthreach approach could provide many valuable lessons for schools: the positive relationships that are formed between tutors and students; the sense of belonging that is created in centres and the opening up of possibilities for the students.

There is no magic formula why the Youthreach style and ethos seems to work for these participants. The key is that it has to be different from school, if a centre tries to be a school it doesn't work. The centres strive for a happy medium between a school structure and the ethos of an adult education centre. The participants in this study indicate that the significant component is "respect"; with one participant maintaining that "in here everyone has respect for one another and they listen to you" (2F), and as Brian explains "I really like it in here, people respect me and I respect them back so I don't really see the point of going mad at teachers" (B 60-2). The concept of respect equates with recognition and Brian's thoughts on the need for respect creates further compelling links with the works of Honneth (2002) and Lynch and Baker (2005) presented in Chapter Two. The importance of recognition for the participants of this study is insistent and should not be ignored. Participants who join Youthreach are dealing with the feeling of being disrespected and they need a great

deal of support in the form of loyalty and solidarity in centres in order to rebuild their self-confidence and self-esteem (Honneth, 2002).

The participants are not trying to portray Youthreach as a utopia; instead they are trying to make the point that there is a stark contrast to their negative school experiences. Youthreach becomes a type of level playing field for the students within it as they construe it as their final chance. Brian deems that it is his "very last chance and I definitely won't mess it up" (B59-60) and Jodie claims that "it is our last chance of getting the education….we are all adults now, we all made our decisions to leave school or whatever happened and now it is our decision to get back and get the education" (J 177-82). In this scenario, the participants are less likely to act out in class, they have a different outlook on their education and they may not feel the need to resist it, as they did in school. The essence of the resistance theory presented by Willis (1977) is not as relevant in this case and this may be the case that the approach in Youthreach is more within the realm of adult education and follows a more learner-centred approach. This point is highlighted by Cian who concludes that "it is better, 'cause you will work, because you are not being forced into it. They tell you, 'if you don't want to do the work you don't have to'…you are not being forced. It is when you are forced" (C-122-5) that you rebel.

6.5 Mental Health Issues

According to Dooley and Fitzgerald (2012) a fifth of young people are experiencing mental health issues at any one time. This may be greatly increased within a Youthreach setting as national (Downes and Maunsell, 2007; O'Brien, 2008; McEvoy, 2009; DES 2013c) and international (Downes, 2011; Bøe *et al*., 2012; Cornagli *et al.,* 2012) research suggests that mental health issues are linked to early school-leaving. All of the participants interviewed in this study indicated either directly or indirectly that they were dealing with varying levels of mental distress; highlighting that the figure could be significantly higher than one in five among those who leave mainstream early. The coordinators of the Western Area Network also confirmed that poor mental health was significantly high among the students attending the centres.

Bullying was identified by participants as a key explanation for their early departure from mainstream. In the findings of this study, most of the female participants regarded that being bullied was the ultimate deciding factor in their decision to leave early. This concurs with McCoy *et al.* (2007b) assertion that girls are more likely than boys to leave school due to incidents of bullying. Sandra, Orla and Elaine made reference to "gossiping" when describing the bullying they endured in school. Sandra, felt that the teachers should have been more proactive in dealing with the bullying "obviously someone is getting bullied when people are constantly talking about them for no reason. It is not something that you are going to go straight to and tell your teacher about" (S 25-28). This type of bullying is linked to what is described in the literature as 'covert bullying' (Cross *et al.,* 2009; Barnes *et al.,* 2012). According to Barnes *et al.* (2012) this type of bullying can be the hardest to detect, particularly by adults, as it consists of gestures, whisperings and excluding the victim from groups. All of these can seem insignificant in isolation; however, the accumulation of such can have an overwhelming impact on the young person at whom it is directed.

The arrival of modern communication devices and the widespread connection to social networking sites and forums have exacerbated this issue, adding the additional element of virtual or cyber bullying to the mix of possibilities for perpetrators. Although this may be viewed as overt bullying the technologies enable anonymity for those that require it and bullies can subtly make fun of their victims or exclude them from events that can be as equally damaging. Elaine claimed that the bullying was everywhere "it started then by my phone and started then by the internet. It just started getting worse and worse and I had no social life whatsoever" (E 347-9). Also, it is evident from the participants' accounts that some experienced physical bullying during their time in school. Jodie, Laura and Elaine provided descriptions of the incidents that they encountered, some of which had continued on from primary school. Jodie and Laura maintained that they informed the principals of their schools about the issues, but felt that the principals made no attempt to solve it. This form of overt bullying is easier to detect, however, the overlooking of it had led to the two girls' final decisions to leave mainstream.

Research from the DES (2013b) suggests that bullying has the potential to dominate the life of the victim throughout the event. However, the participants in this research assert that the effects of bullying can be much more prolonged; overshadowing much of their lives long after the bullying has dissolved. Elaine claimed that she was unable to return to school after the bullying and believed that she would never be the same person again, it has been two years since the bullying ended, but she felt that she still struggles with depression. Similarly, Sandra claimed that "it makes you a different person, getting bullied, you are just so vulnerable and issues. Like, I suffer with anxiety" (S 373-4). All of the participants showed signs of reduced self-esteem and they now find it more difficult to form relationships with their peers. Three participants disclosed that they had tried to commit suicide as a result of bullying. These participants' stories are not believed to be exaggerated and would concur with the coordinators' view in Chapter Five and the DES (2013b) views on existing correlations between bullying and suicide. All of these issues indicate that more must be done in relation to combating bullying in schools. This year the DES (2013b) launched an action plan on bullying for schools; with an emphasis on anti-bullying procedures and claim that they are working towards zero tolerance of bullying. Although Youthreach centres were not included in this plan, the centre policies would reflect similar campaigns. However, based on the participants' stories it is worth considering that bullying recovery programmes are as necessary within the Youthreach setting as anti-bullying programmes. The participants in this study need on-going support and guidance to work through the aftermath of their bullying experiences.

The coordinators of the Western Area Network highlighted anger management issues as a dominant mental health issue in the centres. In the collages, participants used some vehement words to describe their past feelings of school, such as; "hate", "angry" "ruthless" and "grudge". In some of their descriptions, there was a sense of deep resentment for the way they felt they were treated in school. Cian and Brian were expelled from school. Cian was angry and disappointed that he was "kicked out of two schools" (C 4). Cian claimed that he has an "awful short temper" (C 479) and finds it difficult to contain it. Brian had a lot of repressed anger from his poor relationships with students and teachers through primary and second level schooling.

And Jodie and Damon describe themselves as volatile. Anger was a response that many participants claimed to adopt in a difficult situation. Elaine and Michelle were angry at the school for the way they were being treated and at their parents when they tried to help. The ability of these participants to recognise their issues with anger is positive. However, aggression can be a difficult issue to gauge, especially pent-up anger and it can be one of the more difficult issues to deal with in the centres; as it may be deemed a health and safety issue. Students need to be taught how to deal with difficult issues in their lives, school programmes need to focus on integrating mental health promotion into all aspects of the curriculum, as Goleman (1996); Cohen (2006) and O'Brien (2008) highlight, there is a need to focus on emotions as part of the learning process in schools.

Stress and substance misuse seemed to share a common thread in many of the participants' stories. Many of the participants regarded their life circumstances as very stressful. Jodie and Sandra claimed that their home life was stressful and they found it difficult to come into school and deal with another stressful environment. Many of the participants claimed that they received too much homework in school and found it difficult to mix schoolwork with their home environment. Elaine and Neven were relieved "to know your day is done" (N 144) and "freedom…you don't have to come back until tomorrow morning" (E 254). Elaine claimed that smoking has become her release from stress. Jodie maintained that she was drinking and taking drugs at the age of 15 instead of going to school. Damon stated that he started to go "out of control" (D 309) at the age of 14, however, at the age of 21 he still uses drugs as a form of release "last year…I was just stoned every day" (D 588-9). Cian spoke a great deal about drug use, but did not reveal that he was taking drugs and Laura claimed that it was common for young people to take drugs. Substance misuse was identified by McKeown and Haase (2006) as a coping mechanism for stress by the vulnerable adults in their study. Although stress is not the only factor to contribute to substance misuse, this research highlights that this type of interrelationship may be a common approach for people to deal with difficult issues in their lives. It may be learned behaviour on the part of the young person, that stressful issues are managed through substance use. It indicates that students need assistance and training in how to deal with stress and positive coping mechanisms

that can be utilised as opposed to relying on the use of various substances. It also indicates the need for Youthreach centres to provide programmes on drug awareness. Gordon's (2011) soft skills framework is a much needed addition to the Youthreach programme and would assist many of the participants highlighted in this study. Initiatives such as this are needed in both Youthreach centres and mainstream settings in order that young people are able to effectively deal with daily life challenges.

Many of the participants in this study appeared very aware of their own mental health issues; they did not seem apprehensive or uncomfortable discussing their daily struggles. However, they were keenly aware that many of their peers would not reveal their problems or seek help. They stated that males were far more reluctant to talk than females, they "are so afraid that people would laugh at them" (S 369). In Ireland, mental health was and to some degree, is still a taboo subject. A person would not divulge information regarding the state of their mental health in public as it would be regarded as a mental disorder and all things related to that person from there on in, would be made in reference to that particular disorder (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012). Damon's description of the males "being old fashioned" (D 555), links in with this idea of not discussing mental health issues in public. Damon claimed that the young males would have to "completely trust someone" (D 557) before they consider talking. This relates with Cian who felt that he would not talk to someone as he could not trust them "it nearly works out worse for yourself telling somebody" (C 510-1). This may correlate with the higher rate of young male suicides as they would be more unwilling to reveal their problems to others who may be able to help them. All of the available literature on researching mental health, is in most cases, less than six years old, which suggests that the acknowledgement of such matters are still very much at an infancy stage. Mental health issues within the centres are a growing concern for many of the coordinators in the Western Area Network. All of which indicates that mental health issues are a serious matter that warrant considerable urgent attention. Reports by the HSE (2012, 2014) indicate that the current services that are available nationally for children and adolescents are not meeting the demand levels. There needs to be a community-wide, integrated approach to dealing with mental health issues and schools and centres need to

become part of the response plan. Curriculum reform and school system structures need to change in order to deal effectively with mental health issues. Schools need to become more caring and supporting environments for young people (Lynch, 2008). Students that are currently waiting for over a year for professional help need to feel supported and schools and centres are ideal spaces for providing such needed assistance.

6.6 Support

Noddings (1995) and Lynch (2008) advocate the importance of care and support in education. Noddings (1995) maintains that students should feel cared for in schools and that elements of care should be included as mandatory components of the curriculum. In alliance with this notion, Lynch (2008) suggests that schools should not solely focus on preparing students for educational and economic advancement; instead, they should include an ardent emphasis on social inclusion, personal fulfilment and better health. Many of the participants in this study would support the ideals of Noddings and Lynch. One participant claimed that care should be synonymous with education "you have to care about who you are teaching, it just has to be there" (2G). Others were aware of the absence of care in the schools that they had attended. Jodie felt that the teachers did not "care" (J 252) when she was unable to understand something in the classroom and that they "would not care" (J 277) when she was being overtly bullied in the school. Similarly, Elaine and Sandra felt that nobody really cared about them and Brian believed that the teachers did not care about any student individually. It is clear from the findings that many of the participants did not feel supported within mainstream schools; their issues were not prioritised or understood (Devine, 2005; Leavy, 2005) and as a result they were unable to form any meaningful attachment to the school environment. Lynch (2008) claims that students' disaffection with school can be caused by the lack of priority that is given to their expressed needs. This appears to be the case for many of the participants in this study, who had other pressing issues in their lives that needed to be attended to before they could focus on academic work. This has been identified by Noddings (2005) as a weakness in formal schools where there is no emphasis on the expressed needs of the students. Youthreach on the other hand was identified as providing the appropriate supports for students and that this was one of the salient

attributes of the programme. This highlights the importance of listening to the voices of the participants and working from their perspective, what they consider to be significant.

The participants in this study maintain that they are satisfied with the support that they received in the centres. Jodie claimed that "they support and care for you" (J 193-4) and Sandra notes that it is a "supportive environment" (S 396). The participants stated that they "don't feel alone" (2F), that there is always someone there to listen and that "pain has nowhere to hide" (2F). The participants rely heavily on the support of staff and in particular the guidance and counselling services that are provided. The participants claimed that there wasn't enough availability of such services in mainstream, "in school, there are more students in class, they haven't got the time basically, or no counsellors" (M 406-7). Recent budget cuts have resulted in additional reductions in the services available in schools, which will further impact upon the students who are in need of such supports (Mac Ruairc, 2009).

Laura claimed that the numbers in Youthreach are smaller and this could be a contributing factor to the support that can be made available. The participants describe the setting of the programme as "homely" and a family type structure. This indicates that the secondary schools were too big and overwhelming for many of these participants. Many of the participants attended smaller rural primary school and the Youthreach centres would resemble many of the qualities of these small primary school settings. Bowlby's (1990) theory of attachment can be applied here when linked to the ideas of Riley (2011) and Fleming (2008) where Youthreach can be described as a secure base for the participants. The participants feel comfortable in Youthreach, the setting and the ethos of the centres, resemble an environment that it similar to their own home environment. There is evidence in the participants' descriptions that they have formed an attachment with those within the centre, they feel cared for and supported, which has a positive impact on their mental wellbeing and their self-confidence. Youthreach, acting as their secure base, enables them to try out new educational possibilities, it supports them in discovering their talents and abilities and provides a platform from which they can re-engage with learning. The creation of a secure attachment, a sense of recognition and belonging, can facilitate participants' motivation to succeed as they are happier and have a more positive

sense of self (Fleming, 2008; Devine, 2009). However, this type of environment can get too comfortable for many of the participants and this can make transitions more difficult.

There is a need to have a more staggered approach for students who are exiting the programmes; a slower process of detachment to enable them to progress on from the programme more confidently and successfully. Field *et al.* (2007) proposed that there should be smoother transitions between different levels of education. It is possible that this was one of the supports that were missing for the participants when they attended a secondary school after leaving primary school. The school (teachers) were unaware of any background issues that may impact upon their learning and as a result the students felt that "nobody seemed to really care" (S 10). Students should be able to form attachments within the schooling environment, they should be able to consider the school as a secure base where they feel confident to explore their skills and develop as a young person. However, this will not happen unless the students are acknowledged and their talents and abilities are appreciated. The findings repeatedly convey the need to consider alternatives to the current education system. As suggested by Reay (2012, p.589) in Chapter Two, "what we need are totally different ways of envisioning education, ones that enable a move beyond narrow secular self-interests and economic ends". Education should not be confined to one system; new ways of delivering education opportunities need to be created.

The participants of this study receive support in the form of a training allowance for participation on the programme. It may be questioned whether it is a good design to provide payment for education. The students need to be provided with some form of motivator to ensure initial attendance. The centres have to offer something that is different and unique from the schools, otherwise these students will not be interested in attending. They will consider it to be, as Michelle did, "basically another school" (M 65). One of the key aims of Youthreach as outlined by the Departments of Labour and Education (1989) is to provide the students with the skills that will enable them to make the transition to the working world. The payment that they receive is attendance related, so this encourages attendance and time keeping, something that is necessary for them to learn for the world of work and further education. Attendance would have been an issue for many of the participants in

school and the payment encourages them back in. Participant (2G) claimed that he couldn't "believe that you got paid to come here", but also insisted that he "wouldn't have stayed here at first if I wasn't getting paid", he considered that the payment acts as an incentive for those who "are not interested in education to come in and then hopefully gain a bit of interest" (2G). Likewise, Cian and Neven regarded as an incentive, with Cian stating that "whether they are just in here for the money, either way they are learning something like" (C 203-4).

The participants' claimed that they work for their money, "it is not easy money, you have to use your brains" (J 198-9) and they don't get the same holidays as secondary school. They are required to complete an additional 42 days per year. The training allowance was particularly important for participants living in rural areas, claiming that much of their allowances were utilised on transport costs to and from the centres. These participants asserted that they would not be able to attend the centres if they were not getting paid as they would not be able to afford the cost of transport. In the case of these participants the training allowance was a necessity that enabled them to progress their education. The alternative of not continuing with education is also a consideration in the matter of providing a training allowance. The literature indicates that early school-leavers are more likely to resort to crime or end up in prison (Barnardos, 2009). The cost of this is substantially greater to society than the expenditure on training allowances. Although Youthreach is not a safeguard against crime or anti-social behaviour it does provide greater opportunities for students to progress onto employment or further training. Also, as Jodie pragmatically indicates, "it is better than standing on the side of the road selling drugs…doing nothing all day, just grabbing the dole" (J 238-40).

6.7 Progression

The participants in this study were eager to achieve their goals and to progress further in their education. They regarded the work experience component of the LCA and the other opportunities within Youthreach to gain experiences of different working environments as significant. The participants felt that this was a major advantage of completing the programme as it provided them with an opportunity to sample different workplaces. It also gave them the opportunity to trial a potential career choice before committing to completing a course in that particular sector, "it

gives you a taste of what you actually want to do" (J 211). The findings in this study concur with the OECD recommendations which advocate the development of links with the world of work (Field *et al.,* 2007). Students should be given an opportunity to gain work experience before they make choices for future careers. This would provide a more holistic approach to learning in schools and as indicated by the participants in this study, who did not find school suitable, believed that work experience was invaluable.

Although the participants had a clearer idea of potential career options they were keenly aware that their path to success would be much more difficult as a result of leaving school early. In particular, as identified earlier in this chapter those who were completing their LCA were disappointed by the progression routes that were available to them. Their commitment and dedication to the two-year LCA programme, that requires 90% attendance, does not enable them to progress any further than if they had completed an award at FETAC Level four within one year. While the participants are made aware of this at start of the LCA programme, it is not until they begin to do well and have the ambition to achieve that they become dismayed at the progression options available. The LCA was designed as a measure by the DES to alleviate educational disadvantage by offering an alternative to the traditional Leaving Certificate (DES, 2001) within schools. Those who remain on in schools and complete the LCA may have otherwise left the programme if it was not available and in this regard has reduced the numbers leaving school early. However, it has not made the participants any less disadvantaged as they are unable to automatically progress to third level. And as many of the participants indicated, the LCA programme is regarded as a poor alternative to the established Leaving Certificate.

This relates to Mac Ruairc (2009) and his view that measures like the LCA are based on a functionalist perspective and are merely in place to improve students' participation as opposed to making any meaningful changes to how the system operates. Similarly, Lynch and Baker's (2005) ideas on equality of condition and Reay's (2012) views on socially just schools are relevant here. They point out that improving the education system is more than allowing greater 'access to' and 'participation in' an inequitable education system, it is making the system more equal

for all. It is important to reiterate again here that there should be more viable alternatives for young people that enable them to progress successfully through the education system. Currently, the students in Youthreach and particularly those living in rural locations have few or no options available to them. For instance, if they complete the Youthreach programme at the age of 19 or earlier, they are not eligible until they are 21 years of age to progress to the next level of full time courses, provided by the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), available through the ETB. The remaining options available would include part time courses or to move to a location that provides Post-Leaving Certificate courses.

For many of the participants in this study progression is not an easy step. Those that are living in rural areas are constrained by the costs involved and some are inhibited by their mental health issues. Although many of the participants in this study clearly indicated their proposed progression paths, they may find it difficult to achieve when they leave the centres as they will not receive the same support on other programmes. In order for the participants to be successful in progressing onto further education or training they need additional support. The DES (2010a) Inspectorate recommended that students should be supported in progressing from centres and should be monitored after they leave the centre. Currently, the DES does not track students who leave Youthreach; there is no data available on where the participants go after they leave the programme. Although, the Youthreach centres indicate to the participants that they are welcome to return if they need support after they leave, many participants do not avail of this offer and there is no remit for staff or coordinators to provide such a support service. This is a major challenge that warrants considerable attention. We cannot expect that the participants that finish the programme after two years will successfully progress unaided. This is particularly true for participants in rural areas who do not want to move away from home. There is a need for an intermediary support for these young people. Each centre should have an advocacy worker who would be responsible for monitoring, encouraging and supporting those who progress from centres, up to two years after they leave. Otherwise we may be setting the participants up for failure.

Conclusion

This chapter brought forward a number of the key findings in relation to this study and discussed them in the context of the relevant literature. This chapter reveals the compelling links between all the categories presented and the emergence of matters pertaining to the concept of recognition and respect. It is evident that being respected and recognised by others are significant for the participants in this study and should be considered as a key factor in understanding why the formal school system did not suit their needs. It is apparent that a broader educational lens that includes an emphasis on social and emotional issues is required in order to generate real changes in the current education system.

This study draws close parallels to earlier studies on early school-leaving and highlighted the significance of school and home factors on the decision of students to withdraw early from school. In particular, this study indicates that the participants were unable to form an attachment with school and they felt like outsiders. They did not possess the cultural capital that was necessary to achieve in school. Also, this study draws attention to the significant impact that mental health issues have had on the participants. It opens up the conversation on mental health and draws attention to it as a major contributing factor to early school-leaving. This issue is not well documented in Irish educational literature and necessitates further investigation. The dynamics of society has altered in the past decade, mental health awareness has become more prevalent, and this cannot be sidestepped within the education sector. Currently, the DES (2013b) are implementing action plans to prevent bullying in school and this is regarded as a positive step, although it may be too late for some students. In this study, being bullied in school had an alarming effect on the participants' overall well-being and these participants claim that they are still in recovery. The aftermath of bullying is an area that also needs attention.

This study highlights the importance of having alternatives in education. The education system needs to broaden its focus to include elements of social, emotional and ethical learning alongside the pre-existing academic focus. One educational path is not going to suit or accommodate all students, they need viable alternatives. It is clear from the study that Youthreach caters for the needs of the participants in this study, however, the programme is not perceived as a real alternative to school by the

general public. An improvement in the image and status of Youthreach is warranted. It should be identified by the DES as an integral part of the education system and visible on the national education structure.

The participants in this study live in rural locations and they provide insights into the difficulties associated with rural living. They identify the additional difficulties associated with being an early school-leaver in rural areas. The physical distance barrier is often not considered; living in rural areas makes it harder for these students to attend on a regular basis. Many of the participants indicated that the majority of their training allowance was used to subsidise the transportation costs involved in attending the programme. This highlights the importance of financial assistance or transport provisions for those leaving in rural areas, who clearly stated that they would not be able to further their education if they did not receive the training allowance. Also, it was identified that progression from a rural area was more difficult, particularly for those with mental health issues. This study draws attention to the need for smoother transitions from the Youthreach programme. As highlighted by the DES (2010a) Inspectorate, the participants need to be monitored and supported when they leave the programme. In order for the Youthreach programme to be effective it has to enable and assist the progression of the participants.

The next chapter will provide the main conclusion as well as present recommendations for future research.

Chapter 7
Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This research set out to investigate the educational experiences of the Youthreach participants with whom I work on a daily basis. The participants of this study were given a voice, by being provided with an opportunity to share their stories and explain why they did not remain in mainstream schools. The study unearthed the raw power of the participants' words. It provided new and interesting findings in relation to early school-leavers. It revealed that the participants in this study felt disempowered and rejected by the schooling system and that Youthreach programmes have responded by means of recovery processes.

This research is a small-scale qualitative investigation based within the context of four Youthreach centres in the Western region of Ireland. In Chapters One and Two, I provided an account of the Youthreach framework and a review of the literature in relation to educational disadvantage and early school-leaving. The study focused on the participants and their experiences of leaving school early and joining the Youthreach programmes. It explored the issues that the participants had in relation to mainstream, what led to their early departure and how they felt they were progressing in their new educational path. The study intently focused on the impact that poor mental health had upon their lives. In particular, it explored the existence and extent of students' mental health related issues within Youthreach and the research also explored the participants' experiences of dealing with mental ill-health.

Early school-leavers are often considered as 'deficient' in some way; that the circumstances that surround their personal lives are often regarded as the main cause of their mainstream schooling demise. However, this study provided detailed participants' accounts that disclose the schooling system as the source of their 'mainstream unrest'. The findings revealed that the standardised schooling system did not cater for or respect the needs of the participants; it stifled their individuality and shut down possibilities by denigrating their talents and abilities. As Cian indicated earlier "They expect you to be robots in them schools, expect them all to be the same. There is no such thing, everyone is not the same, everyone is different like. But they expect everyone to be perfect".

Youthreach was formed as a second chance education programme aimed at preparing young people for working life. However, this study compellingly suggested that is far more than just a training programme. It is a healing space; a place that participants can recover after their "downfall" from mainstream education and a place that assists them with their mental health issues. In Youthreach centres, caring environments are created that nurture the participants by celebrating their range of talents and opening up possibilities for them. "'Potential' is, no one is a failure in here, everyone is equal but they do different things differently and that sort of thing" (page, 189).

The findings revealed rich insights into the participants' perceptions of what they regarded as essential elements of an educational experience; elements that they considered present in Youthreach centres but absent from their mainstream schooling experience. The findings offered resounding evidence that the stories of the participants in this study are imbued with the concepts of care, recognition and respect. Throughout the findings participants provided insightful accounts of their sense of empowerment in Youthreach, where they felt they were listened to and respected by the tutors.

The methodological approach I presented in Chapter Three was qualitative in nature and consisted of three main data collection methods. These were: thirty seven participants' collages, eleven participants' interviews and twelve coordinators' open ended questionnaires. The combination of collage creations and individual interviews created a unique and innovative approach that successfully engaged the young people in the process. The coordinators' questionnaires were utilised as a means of triangulation and were not considered or used as the main findings of this study. The results of the questionnaires were compiled to identify the coordinators' perceptions on the prevalence of mental health issues within centres and a means of further interpreting the participants' perspectives.

The data collected was analysed to generate the findings in Chapters Four and Five. In Chapter Six, the discussion, the findings were related to the literature. In conjunction with the above introductory comments, the Discussion Chapter also indicated the many struggles that the participants faced when they joined Youthreach; the disparity between their contentment with the programme and the

perceived negative societal views. It revealed issues specifically pertaining to living in rural locations. It highlighted the current inadequacies that exist within the educational system and makes recommendations for the restructuring of Youthreach within that system.

The purpose of this final Chapter is to present the main conclusions and recommendations for this thesis. The chapter is divided into five main sections. The first section presents a summary of the findings in relation to the four research questions outlined on Page 7. The second section presents the main contributions of this study to the field and the third section provides an overview of the implications of the findings. The fourth section is a reflection on the choice of the collage method used in this study. The final section identifies possible further studies in the area of Youthreach and my final thoughts are presented.

7.1 Summary of findings

In this section the main findings of the study will be summarised in relation to the study's initial research questions.

What are the participants' depictions of being early school-leavers and the implications of such portrayals?

Each of the participants in this study had their own unique story to share about their early departure from mainstream. None of the participants that were interviewed really wanted to leave school. There was a distinct air of disappointment in their stories. They felt that they had no other option than to leave early and as a result they were unable to attain a 'normal' Leaving Certificate like the rest of their peers. It is evident from the findings of the collages and interviews that the participants experienced varying degrees of what I termed, 'mainstream unrest'. Their stories around leaving were diverse and complex and no definitive reason could be specifically identified as to the main cause for early school-leaving. However, the most prominent reason was based on the mental trauma that ensued from the participants' perceptions of being unfairly treated and disrespected by teachers, and being bullied by other students. The findings revealed deep seated participants' feelings on the lack of care, recognition and respect that they witnessed within the mainstream schooling environment. Numerous other reasons were also identified,

such as perceived irrelevance of the curriculum, undiagnosed SEN, literacy and numeracy difficulties, examination pressure, being grouped in classes based on ability and home factors, all of which are acknowledged in the literature as factors leading to early school-leaving.

A significant finding in this thesis is that Youthreach has become a type of recovery process. It was clearly evident that the participants experienced a sense of relief after leaving school and were happier that they no longer had to face the everyday torment that they associated with attending school. The Youthreach participants who had left school for over six months seemed to be engaged in a type of recovery process. In their collages and interviews they indicated that they were still struggling on a daily basis with mental issues that had surfaced during their time in school. Nonetheless, they portrayed a sense of determination and optimism about their future. They felt that they were the same as anyone else but will now have to do things differently in order to succeed. They were aware that they would face a longer and more complicated progression route as a result of being early school-leavers.

How do the participants view their current Youthreach programmes and what elements of the programme do the participants perceive to be significant to them?

Many of the participants were pleased to have found somewhere like Youthreach; a place where they felt happy to attend. They regarded Youthreach as having a different atmosphere to school, deeming it to be more accommodating to their own particular needs and found it easy to settle in as they experienced an initial feeling of being accepted. The significance of relationships and respect are prominent features in the findings of this thesis. The participants noted the importance of the relationships that they had formed with members of staff and indicated that there was a strong ethos of respect between staff and students within the centres. They specified that within the centres there was a caring, supportive and non-judgemental environment. Many participants considered the small numbers appealing and referred to the centres as having a family-like structure. There is a sense that the participants felt securely attached to this type of educational approach. Many of the participants believed that the most salient features for them were that they were listened to and cared for within the centres.

The participants had generally mixed views on the programme content. Although many enjoyed the practical nature of the majority of subjects, many claimed that they would have liked greater subject choice to include, science and business. However, there were feelings of possibilities and opportunities emanating from the participants' stories. They made reference to the benefits they obtained from learning within the small groups and through the more applied teaching methods. The participants considered the extensive opportunities to complete work experience modules to be a valuable element of the programmes; having prolonged periods to try out possible career choices. The majority of the participants in the interviews made explicit reference to the programme being less stressful and equated this to the lessening or removal of homework from their lives. While they felt that their home life was often brought with them into the centres, they found it easier to cope with issues when they did not have to focus on centre related work in their home environment. Receiving a training allowance was deemed by many as both an incentive and a necessity for attending the programme. Those living in rural areas regarded the payment as essential in order to be able to attend; with large amounts of their payment being used for expenses such as transport or accommodation.

What are the mental-health-related issues that affect the lives of the participants? What is the impact of mental health on their participation on the programme?

A key finding of this study is the prevalence of mental health issues among the participants. The majority of the participants revealed that they were dealing with varying degrees of mental health problems. These included: depression, stress, anxiety, substance misuse, anger management, mood disorder and risk taking behaviour. Some of the participants found it difficult to discuss these matters. However, many indicated that much of their mental health related issues stemmed from family related problems. A large proportion of the interviewed female participants believed that they were dealing with mental ill health as a result of being bullied in school. They claimed that they were now extremely vulnerable and that the bullying has had a prolonged negative effect on their overall wellbeing. Four of the eleven participants revealed that they had considered suicide: two had suicidal ideations and two had attempted suicide prior to attending Youthreach.

The coordinators of the centres concurred with this and stated that a large proportion of their time was spent dealing with the high levels of mental health related problems that were apparent in the centres. The participants were keenly aware that they needed help and support to work through their issues. The participants and the coordinators identified internal and external supports that have been made available through the centres. Two of the participants stated that they relied on their artistic abilities to express their issues and that this had been encouraged in the centres.

The concept of recognition is a major finding in this research. One of the main difficulties that the participants had encountered while on the programmes was related to the perceived poor recognition of the centres. Many of the participants provided compelling accounts of how they felt they were negatively perceived by society. In particular, they noted how students of Youthreach centres were often described as delinquents by the general public. It was clearly evident that they were dismayed by all the pessimism that they felt was associated with attending the programmes. While the participants identified many positive aspects of Youthreach and described their successful development with the programme, this perceived poor public image conflicted greatly with their contentment. This resulted in reduced self-esteem and therefore their mental wellbeing.

What are the participants' aspirations for the future?

There was a keen sense arising from the participants' accounts that the Youthreach programmes opened up possibilities. All of the participants felt that they were working towards their future goals. They all had ambitions about what they hoped to achieve. While some were still trying out different ideas through the work experience programmes, many of the participants indicated that they had uncovered their talents while attending the programme. They all considered that it was extremely important that they would succeed in Youthreach. They felt that they were previously unsuccessful and to fail again would be very damaging to their confidence levels. The participants believed that their ability to succeed within Youthreach provided them with the self-confidence and motivation that they needed to progress further. Some of the participants were disappointed with the poor recognition and limited progression routes from the LCA, and that they would have to complete an extra year in order to gain access to third level courses.

The participants indicated that they had received valuable help from their career guidance tutors and highlighted the importance of having access to the guidance support. Many of the participants felt that they were ready to move on from the centre and had found comfort in the fact that they could return during the following year if they needed help. Those that were planning to move onto further education courses considered it to be a major step in their lives; as they would have to leave home and move to larger towns and cities. Many of the participants reflected on the idea of moving away from their comfortable supporting environment and trying to manage to live on their own. Some of the participants believed that they would have to move outside Ireland in order to get work and felt that their prospects would be limited here. The participants were continually concerned about the recognition of the LCA. They were worried about the value of the qualification outside of Ireland and felt that they may need a trade before they leave. Many of the participants were anxious about further cuts in education allowances and grants and the increased costs associated with progressing onto further training. They believed that money would be the deciding factor in furthering their education.

7.2 Contributions of this study

This was a small scale study and the findings are not considered to be generalizable. Nonetheless, there is currently little research available on Youthreach participants and this piece of work is valuable in that it has provided rich insights into the experiences of early school-leavers as they endeavour to progress their education through the Youthreach programmes. In particular, by presenting the voice of the participants in the findings, it uncovers the participants' perceptions of the reasons for their early withdrawal from school, some of which have not been revealed in previous research.

The empirical findings are a major contribution of this study. The data collected has not been captured in previous research. My insider knowledge had powerful empirical value in this research. It enabled me to interpret closely what was said by the participants and to bring forward the voice of these young people in a manner that is true to form. The knowledge created by this experience and the voices of the participants has been grounded in the evidence presented. These findings are very significant for educators as they further the understanding of early school-leavers by

revealing the importance of the presence of relationships, care, respect and recognition within educational provisions.

This study provided rich insights into the prevalence of mental health issues among early school-leavers, which is relatively unique research in an Irish context. The participants provided vivid accounts of their struggles with mental health issues that have affected their lives, through various personal and school related factors. The findings of this study indicated that there is a fundamental need to incorporate mental health into the educational conversation and to consider the importance of the implementation of policies that focus on mental well-being among young people in education.

This study contributes to new knowledge in the field of early school leaving and highlights the importance of the Youthreach programme. The findings have indicated that Youthreach has provided these participants with the much needed support that they were looking for but did not find within mainstream education. The findings are abundant with participants' examples that advocate the Youthreach programme. However, the findings also clearly indicated that participants' perceived that Youthreach has a poor public image and this is damaging to their overall well-being and hinders their success on the programme. It is crucial that Youthreach gains recognition within the education system and is acknowledged as a viable option to mainstream schooling.

This study helps to fill the gaps in the current literature. The issues of early school-leaving and the structural and resource issues associated with living in rural locations was presented in this study and identified as a gap in previous research undertaken. The findings indicated that those living in rural areas rely heavily on the financial support that they receive from attending Youthreach and regard it as a necessity in order to attend the programme. This highlights the importance of the training allowance for rural participants.

The arts-based method of collage creation used in this study contributes to the area of qualitative educational research. The creation of collages is a relatively new and unique means of carrying out research with young people. The collages became integral elements of the research and engaged the participants in the process. The presentation of the findings in various forms drew out the voices of the participants

and depicted the wholeness of them as individuals. The attention and commitment dedicated to this process enabled the voice of the participants to emerge in an authentic and powerful manner.

The findings and discussion presented provide policy makers with clearer understandings of the complexities of the lives of early school-leavers within a Youthreach setting. This study aimed to give voice to the participants in order to highlight the importance of their stories and the concepts of care, respect and recognition that they contributed to the debate on early school-leaving. Policies and procedures are often put in place to best suit these students without ever asking them for their opinions or views. This study provided a clearer description of their needs so that programmes that will really work for them can be planned and developed more effectively.

7.3 Implications of the findings

The findings in this research are powerful expressions by the participants. Their voices have been presented and a sense of them as individuals has been depicted. The implications of the findings of this study are presented by three main headings: mental health issues, Youthreach, an alternative and ruralism and education.

Mental health issues

This research assists in the development of the current literature in relation to reasons for early school-leaving. It identifies mental health related issues as a possible major determinant in a young person's decision to leave school early. This research suggests that there may be a significant link between early school-leaving and mental ill-health. Also it highlights it as a serious concern and one that warrants further attention.

The literature in Chapter Two indicates that one in five young people have mental health related issues (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012). It also reveals that approximately one in five students leave school early each year (Byrne and Smyth, 2010) and in reference to the literature (page 86) of this study, there is a notable link between early school-leaving and mental ill-health. Although more research is needed in this area, I feel that it is important to consider that mental health issues may have a larger role to play in a young person's decision to leave school early than

what may have been previously realised. Also the decision to leave school can exacerbate mental health problems as the students become isolated from their peers and socially disadvantaged. This is particularly significant for Youthreach centres, as there is a greater possibility that the majority of students joining the programmes have mental health related problems.

The findings of this study suggested this to be the case. The coordinators of the centres indicated that it is now more uncommon to find a student in Youthreach who does not have mental health related issues. The coordinators who participated in this study felt that in recent years that they have witnessed a considerable shift in the nature of their duties; with a large proportion of each day being spent on mental health related issues. This has been particularly challenging for many of them who claim that they are trained as teachers and do not have expertise in the area of mental health, and especially to the level that is now required within the centres. Many indicated that they have up-skilled in the areas of suicide prevention and frontline counselling. However, there has been no requirement to do so, or initiatives in place to encourage additional training. It is clear that specific training is needed by both coordinators and staff members of the centres.

Although, for the past two years, several staff members in each of the centres have completed training in SPHE; there is a need for all staff to engage in training that includes SPHE and extends beyond it. There is a need for a holistic approach to dealing with mental health issues and it cannot be achieved by a select few members of staff who carry out the mandatory SPHE programmes. To address the issues of mental health related problems requires a proactive approach. This highlights the need for implementation of policy provisions by the Department of Education, the necessity for appropriate training for all staff working in the centres and the recognition that a holistic approach to the development of mental wellbeing is required. Mental health promotion should be regarded as one of the core functions and priorities of all Youthreach centres. Areas of particular concern relate to dealing with low self-esteem, depression, anger management and bullying issues. The bullying courses on offer not only need to address anti-bullying, but would require 'a recovery from bullying programme' that deals with the aftermath of bullying for those that had previously been bullied in school.

In recent years, the focus on soft skills has become as important a consideration as academic certification, for the development of young people within the centres. The staff members in centres are already engaging with many new and innovative programmes mentioned on Page 33; that have been designed specifically for Youthreach by Mary Gordon of NEPS. However, it is predominantly the twenty centres that are receiving funding for SEN that are in a position to fully operate these programmes on a continual basis. The remaining majority of centres are at a discernible disadvantage as to the supports that they can offer their students. There is an urgent need for greater funding and flexibility within the programmes to offer student supports that focus on mental wellbeing and social development. These elements need to become an integral part of the Youthreach timetables and be recognised as such; by granting dedicated teaching hours to these areas. Although, the aims of the programme is to prepare students for working life and certification, it seems pointless focusing on credentials and priming students for assessment and participation in the workforce when they are trying to deal with such challenging life situations. As Lynch (2008) indicates, there is need to focus on the core issues first before we can start thinking about academic content. This would be in keeping with the vision and ethos of care within Youthreach centres, where the development of the young person as a whole, is paramount.

Many of the coordinators revealed that student cases are dealt with in an ad-hoc manner and that there are no precise guidelines in place. Although each student's case is different, it would be beneficial for coordinators to have clear guidelines and procedures in place. The development of a mental health policy and procedural guidelines may go some way toward creating a consistent approach that could be adopted across all centres. This would help to ensure that no errors are made in dealing with the mental health of the vulnerable young people who attend Youthreach. It would also be particularly important for the coordinators' own sense of wellbeing, by being able to feel reassured that they followed the best course of action available and that they have helped the students to the best of their ability. The mental wellbeing of the coordinators and staff who are dealing with mental health related problems is also an important consideration. There is a need for adequate supports to be in place, not only for the participants of the programmes, but also for those who are dealing with the mental health related issues on a daily basis.

Although this study focuses on Youthreach centres, I believe that the findings provide some insights into mental health needs in mainstream schools. The findings indicated that much of the participants' mental health related problems stemmed from issues pertaining to their time in school. In particular, many of the participants specified that being bullied and the stress related to examinations were factors that impacted negatively on their mental health. It was also noted that their mental health issues were complex and many of the participants' issues derived from family related issues or home factors and did not solely relate to school factors. Many participants' revealed that their home factors made school life difficult. In school, students are commonly only judged on their academic performance and if they are not doing particularly well, if they are not attending, they are regarded as not being interested in school or that they don't care. When often they are dealing with other issues in their lives which need to precede their school work and cannot be ignored. As Noddings (2005) and Lynch (2008) suggest, schools need to focus on all aspects of a student's life, with the biological and social needs being as important as the educational needs. Schools need to become more caring environments for all students.

The literature in Chapter Two indicated that students were least likely to communicate with teachers when they had a problem. This is a major concern that needs addressing; teachers should be considered as significant adults in the lives of young people. Students should feel that they can and would discuss and communicate with teachers if they were having personal difficulties. We will continue to have students leaving school if we persist in solely focusing on preparing the students for third level and not concentrating on preparing them for life or how to deal with life events. The findings also suggest the clear need to advance the policies on bullying and create a zero tolerance approach, where all forms of bullying are treated as potentially harmful to the victim and clear guidelines are put in place. As I write this conclusion the government is launching new mandatory anti-bullying procedures and guidelines for school. This is a positive step towards a system-wide approach to combating bullying in schools as they will no longer have to rely on locally devised policies and practices, they will now have standard procedures and guidelines for reporting and investigating bullying. The next challenge will be to get

the operations on the ground to work effectively with the guidelines and procedures. This requires adequate training for teachers, in order that they have an acute awareness of various forms of bullying and that students feel comfortable and willing to disclose bullying incidents. These procedures need to become an integral part of how schools operate, it cannot be an added on as an extra that is slotted in where possible within a crammed curriculum, an entire new approach and ethos is needed.

Finally, Youthreach centres only cater for a small proportion of young people who leave school early each year. Currently, there is no way of knowing whether the young people that join the Youthreach centres have the greatest needs in relation to mental health and social development or if there are others who are left on the margins who are similar or in greater need of care and support. We should be greatly concerned for those who leave school and do not take part in any employment or training programmes. There is an urgent need for adequate tracking systems to be put in place, where young people can be monitored and supported after leaving school or other programmes. The issues of mental health problems presenting at such a young age is worrying for the future of our society, particularly if these issues are not adequately dealt with now. These young people need to be informed about mental health; they need to know how to deal with problems and where they can access help. They need to know where supports are available and that they are not afraid or feel stigmatised about getting help. The negative culture surrounding mental health needs to be changed.

Youthreach, an alternative

The findings of this study strongly suggested that Youthreach is perceived negatively in society and the students who attend feel that they are regarded as nuisances or troublemakers by the general public. They believed that Youthreach centres have a bad reputation and that their own reputation is partly tarnished for attending the centres. From my own experience I was aware that Youthreach centres had a poor public image, however, I was surprised to find that the participants were so conscious of this negativity and had encountered such damaging experiences. The disharmony between what the programmes are trying to achieve and the negative societal view is a serious concern, particularly in relation to its impact on the students' fragile mental health. These findings made me reflect on these young people being regarded as

more deviant for being on a Youthreach programme than a student who had left school early and who did not return to education. This emits a discouraging message to the participants who are trying to progress in education. The status of Youthreach centres is in urgent need of reform.

The centres were originally designed as a reactive measure to early school-leaving. The DES defines Youthreach as a further education, second chance programme. I do not think that this is an effective concept for Youthreach. The term second chance implies that the participants had a previous chance and did not use it; that they failed in their first attempt or that they have been given a second chance as they did something wrong the first time. For many of the participants in this study they felt that they didn't have an initial 'first' chance; the school system did not cater for their needs and they were unable to progress or succeed. In essence, Youthreach has become their only chance. The term second chance also implies second best for many of the participants. This is inferred by the availability of the LCA in preference to the established Leaving Certificate, the limited choice of subjects and the general poor accommodation standards of many Youthreach centres. The Youthreach programmes need to be purposefully aligned with mainstream schools within the second level school structure and removed from the further education sector. It should be recognised as a true alternative to mainstream school. It seems more practical to allow resources to be shared across the two systems; to have stronger links with schools, services and schemes. Youthreach centres should be interconnected with the NEWB, HSCL, SCP and other available schemes. Youthreach programmes were advocated in the DES (2008) *Value for Money* report as being more beneficial than mainstream for many of its participants. Therefore there is a strong case to suggest that at a minimum, the Youthreach system should have the same level of resources that are on offer in schools and be in a position to seek additional resources.

Ruralism and education

This research provided a focus on the rural aspects of early school-leaving. Much of the available literature on early school-leaving in Ireland is based upon urban studies. This research offers some unique insights into the lives of early school-leavers who live in rural locations. It enables us to understand some of the issues faced by young people in rural areas; issues that may not be apparent in urban based studies. It highlights the varying degrees of disadvantage that comes solely from living in rural areas; where limited resources, services and poor transport facilities are an everyday issue. The isolation that comes from living in a rural area can also impact heavily on a young person's mental health.

The main aim of many of the young people in rural areas is to have enough money so that they can afford their own transport. They regard it as a necessity rather than a luxury. The participants in this study indicated that they would not be able to attend the centres if they were not paid, as a large proportion of their payment was spent on transport or accommodation. The current reduction in allowances may have a bigger impact on retention rates in Youthreach centres in rural areas. It also draws attention to the potential disadvantage that many participants in this study had in relation to progression opportunities. The progression to further education courses is a much bigger step for those living in rural areas. They will almost always have to travel large distances to attend a course and would have to make the decision to move nearer the course. Many of the participants felt that they may not be ready or that they would not be able to afford to go. Rural isolation makes it difficult for some to progress and the lack of opportunities and jobs available locally can make the young people very disillusioned about their future.

7.4 Reflections on the methodology

The arts-based method used in this research was a form of collage creation. It was included in the design process as an innovative means of opening up discussions with the participants. From my own experience of working with the young people I felt that it would be a more appealing approach to take, as many prefer drawing and creating as opposed to written or oral forms of communication. Furthermore, I was aware that the young people are often apprehensive about talking to strangers, or those outside of the centre. Therefore, I believed that the collage creation period gave us all an opportunity to become acquainted, instead of jumping right in and asking them to participate in an interview. Also, I wanted as many participants to be able to get involved in a meaningful way and for them to get an opportunity to reflect on their educational journey and consider how they were feeling as a consequence of leaving school early. I felt that the collage method in this study was very successful. It worked as a standalone data collection method and it provided a platform from which to initiate the subsequent interviews with eleven of the participants. This approach provided the participants with an element of power during the research process as they had control over their creations. This was an important consideration in this study as a power imbalance may have become an issue during data collection. I was extremely conscious that I was both a researcher and a Youthreach tutor, this was particularly important in my own centre. In order to reduce the power imbalance I initially chatted with all the groups beforehand and provided them with a form of power: the power to withdraw, engage, create and discuss issues from their perspective.

When I had first considered the collage process I had imagined that many of the participants would have decided to draw or paint, as that was my own experience with students in the past. On reflection, I believe that the participants did not feel comfortable drawing and the timeframe may not have allowed them enough time to complete a piece that they would have been happy to present. And perhaps they would have been more self-conscious of their art work than the collage pieces. Even in the collage work there was limited use of pictures and many of the participants decided to cut out significant words. Although this worked favourably for analysis, it was not the initial intention or instruction to the participants. They were free to

choose a method of collage or drawing and I specifically asked to conduct the research in the art rooms of each centre in order to encourage the students to participate fully in the approach. Finally, I felt that engaging with this collage method influenced my overall choice of thesis layout and the importance of including visual representation in the study.

Surprisingly, the collage process created an additional assistance to my everyday work. While carrying out the collage creation workshops, I was observing the participants and in that short timeframe I was able to identify those who had problems with their literacy. I observed this through the manner in which the students engaged with the papers and magazines, found words, expressed their thoughts or in other circumstances did not participate at all, or decided to act out. Afterwards, I asked the coordinators, if I had made the correct assumptions and they confirmed my view. On reflection, I thought about it more and my experience of working with students with difficulties and how I have attained this awareness of being able to spot potential difficulties and the means by which the students often try and mask their problems. Although this was not part of the research aims I considered this a noteworthy finding for my own work and for others working in the centres. I believe that the use of collage creation at programme inductions could provide centre personnel with a relatively quick way of gaining insight into students' experiences of school and also, an indication of their literacy level. It may in some ways also indicate their mental health status and how they are feeling about things. It could be a potential way of getting them to express their thoughts in a non-invasive manner. Overall, I feel very positive about what has been achieved in this study and through this methodological process. I feel that my skills in data collection and analysis have improved greatly, and I am pleased in the manner in which I was able to present the participants' voices. I believe that my choice of methods has enabled me to effectively capture the participants' voices and provided the means by which I was able to do justice to their unique stories.

7.5 Suggestions for further study

There is a limited amount of research available for the Youthreach sector, with a need for greater research in this area. Below I have outlined topics that I feel warrant research:

- This research was a small study; it would be beneficial to carry out further study in the area of Youthreach students and mental health issues. However, I do not feel that a large scale questionnaire would yield significant findings in this particular area, there is a need to continue with an in-depth approach, such as the methods presented in this study that engage with the participants in a meaningful way.

- There is a need for a longitudinal study of Youthreach participants; from initial induction into the centre, right through until exit, and for a year after completion of the programme. It would provide a real insight into the life of an early school leaver, who found an alternative route.

- Little is known about students who complete Youthreach. Research could be carried out that focuses on students who have left the centres for more than three years. This would provide a good indication as to whether they have been able to successfully progress from the programme and are fulfilling their ambitions. This may give some insights into the potential effectiveness of Youthreach to help students to progress. Also, an important study would include researching those who leave school early and do not complete any further education.

- It would be of interest to carry out research that includes those who are termed disadvantaged and continue on in school and those who leave early. A comparison research could investigate the difference between the progression routes after leaving school and how they may vary.

- Research could also be carried out on tutor-student relationships in Youthreach.

- Another area that would be worth considering is a rural /urban comparison of disadvantage; do different types of disadvantage make a difference to the students' progress.

- It would be interesting to carry out research in relation to the staff and coordinators of Youthreach on the impact of working with early school-leavers.

Final comment

The use of Robert Frost's poem at the introduction of this thesis was a reflective addition to the study. Although, I present a simplistic interpretation of the poem here, I felt that the poem depicted the educational journey of the participants in this study. These participants, like the person in the poem, made a decision between the two roads. They went down the mainstream route as far as they could and realising what it entailed they decided to select the less travelled Youthreach path. There is a view that this route will serve them best; that their issues will be addressed. However, there is a sense of loss or disappointment in their stories about not being able to, or deciding not to take the first path. And although this dismay may remain with them throughout their lives, there is hope, like the ending in the poem, that the road that these participants chose will make a positive difference to their lives.

Although schools are evolving and trying to meet the ever increasing needs of students, Youthreach will still need to exist, as we cannot continue to fit students into a one dimensional system. The advancement in schools means that there are reductions in the numbers that are now leaving school early. However, those who now leave seem to be more vulnerable and in more need of assistance than ever before, their problems are greater and their mental health seems to be a more significant issue. Youthreach has responded to these young people by providing them with the space to recover after they have been damaged by mainstream schooling. The centres have become caring environments in which the participants feel that they are respected. Youthreach has many qualities that make it a unique and worthwhile programme for many young people. It should not just be a place that students have to go because they were unable to make it in mainstream schools. They should not feel like failures because the school system did not suit their needs. It should exist as a valid alternative to school, a chosen path, not a second chance to try and make it.

Students need viable choices. There should be structures in place that enable them to 'be somebody' with school, to be able to succeed in the areas that they want, so that they are not trying disparately to fulfil this ambition without school. Care needs to become an essential element within education. Care must be enabled in education so that students can form an attachment with schools, to feel like they belong. We need to care for those who could be regarded as some of society's most vulnerable young people. They need support, resources and progression opportunities. Overall, we should be striving for what is best for the young people so that they can participate fully in society and that they can reach their full potential. We need to keep striving for improvements in the systems and as Brookfield (2005, p.9) asserts, we must endeavour to 'keep alive the hope that the world can be changed to make it fairer and more compassionate'. Youthreach centres could form part of a revised version of the previous two-tier second level system of vocational training and academic tract choices. It could be offered as a choice at upper second level to those who wish to follow a more vocational route.

There are numerous closing statements that could be presented here; ending as I started, with the words of a poem. Poems by Emily Dickinson on hope and dwelling in possibility are seemly. However, the voices of the participants are at the heart of this study and I feel that it would be most fitting to assign the final thought in this thesis to the words of Damon:

"We all have a beating heart inside of us and we all have the same drive to do something with ourselves, make a life".

Bibliography

Abdelnoor, A. and Hollins, S. (2004) 'The effect of childhood bereavement on secondary school performance', *Educational Psychology in Practice: theory, research and practice in educational psychology*, 20(1), pp. 43-54, [Online]. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0266736042000180401 (Accessed: 18 July 2013).

Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1989) Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*, *44,* 709-716.

Antonesa, M., Fallon, H., Ryan, A.B., Ryan, A. and Walsh, T, with Borys, L. (2006) *Researching and writing your thesis: A guide for postgraduate students.* Maynooth: MACE.

Anyon, J. (1981) 'Social Class and School Knowledge', *Curriculum inquiry*, 11(1), pp. 3-42.

Aspelin, J. (2012) 'How do relationships influence student achievement? Understanding student performance from a general, social psychological standpoint', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 22(1), pp. 41-56 [Online]. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2012.680327 (Accessed: 20 August 2012).

Banks, J., Byrne, D., McCoy, S. and Smyth, E. (2010) 'Engaging young people? Student experiences of the LCA programme'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.tara.tcd.ie/bitstream/2262/50607/1/RS015.pdf (Accessed: 4 April 2013).

Barnardos (2009) 'Written out written off: Failure to invest in education deprives children of their potential'. Available at: http://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/campaigns/disadvantages/Written_Out_Written_Off.pdf (Accessed: 15 January 2013).

Barnardos (2012) 'Schools cost survey 2012'. Available at: http://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/Advocacy/2012-School-Costs-Report.pdf (Accessed: 3 July 2013).

Barnes, A., Cross, D., Lester, L., Hearn, L., Epstein, M. and Monks, H. (2012) 'The Invisibility of Covert Bullying Among Students: Challenges for School Intervention', *Australian Journal Of Guidance & Counselling*, 22(2), pp. 206-226, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost [Online]. Available at: http://web.ebscohost.com.jproxy.nuim.ie/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=12fe4afa-c06a-499a-a1cf-f59d0d6990b8%40sessionmgr12&vid=4&hid=18 (Accessed: 16 July 2013).

Bell, J. (1999) *Doing your research project: a guide for first-time researchers in education and social science.* 3rd ed. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Bernstein, B. (1972) 'Social Class, Language and Socialization', in Giglioli, P. (ed.) *Language and Social Context*. Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin, pp.157-178.

Bernstein, B. (1974) *Class, codes and control*. London: Routledge.

Berry, R.M. (1998) 'Conducting a piece of educational research: choice of topic, adoption of suitable research methodology, and narrowing down of investigate focus', [Online]. Available at: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000846.doc (Accessed: 17 October 2007).

Blackledge, D. and Hunt, B. (1985) *Sociological Interpretations of Education*. London: Crom Helm, pp.134-152.

Bøe, T., Øverland, S., Lundervold, A. and Hysing, M.(2012) 'Socioeconomic status and children's mental health: results from the Bergen Child Study', *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology,* 47, 10, pp. 1557-1566, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost,[Online]. Available at: http://web.ebscohost.com.jproxy.nuim.ie (Accessed: 19July 2013).

Boldt, S. (1994) *Listening and learning: A study of the experiences of early school-leavers from the inner city of Dublin*. Dublin: Marino Institute of Education.

Boldt, S. (1997) *Hear my voice: a longitudinal study of the post-school experiences of early school-leavers in Ireland*. Dublin: Typeform Repro.

Boldt, S., Devine, B., Mac Devitt, D. and Morgan, M. (1998) *Educational Disadvantage and Early School-leaving* Discussion Papers, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The forms of capital', in Ball, S. (ed.) (2004) *The RouteledgeFalmer reader in sociology of education*. London: RouteledgeFalmer, pp. 30-44.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.C. (1977) *Reproduction in Education, society and culture*, California: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bowlby, J. (1990) *A secure base: parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books.

Brady, B. and Dolan, P. (2009) 'Youth mentoring as a tool for community and civic engagement reflections on findings in an Irish research study', *Community Development*, 40(4), pp. 359-366.

Brannick, T. and Coghlan, D. (2007) 'In defense of being "native": The case for insider academic research', *Organizational Research Methods*, 10, pp. 59-74 [Online]. Available at: http://orm.sagepub.com/content/10/1/59.refs.html (Accessed: 23 February 2013).

Breen, C. and Whelan, C. (1996) *Social mobility and social class in Ireland.* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Brookfield, S.D. (1995) *Becoming a critically reflective teacher.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brookfield, S.D. (2005) *The power of critical theory for adult learning and teaching.* Berkshire: Open University Press.

Brown, J. (2005) 'Developing a strategy for crisis intervention in Youthreach'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.youthreach.ie/aatopmenu/Library/Research%20Report%20Co%20Donegal%20VEC%20YR.pdf (Accessed: 20 August 2012).

Bryman, A. (1988) *Quantity and quality in social research*. London: Routledge.

Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland, enacted in 1937), Article 42.4 (on education and state).

Byrne, D. and Smyth, E. (2010) 'No way back? The dynamics of early school-leaving'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/BKMNEXT163.pdf (Accessed: 19 May 2010).

Byrne, D., McCoy, S. and Watson, D. (2008) 'School-leavers' survey report 2007'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.esri.ie (Accessed: 13 September 2012).

Cassidy, A. (2012) *Searching for equality: improving reading literacy at second level in disadvantaged schools. The impact of the JCSP Literacy Strategy on reading literacy with a particular focus on the impact of the JCSP Literacy Medley.* Unpublished D.Ed. diss., National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2013) Socio-economic group classification list. Available at: http://www.cso.ie (Accessed: 3 July 2013).

Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

Charon, J.M. (2001) *Symbolic interactionism: An introduction, an interpretation, an integration.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Cheney, G. (2005) Irish Education Report. [Online]. Available at: http://www.ncee.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Irish-Education-Report.pdf (Accessed: 24 October 2013).

CHL (2006) Comparative Analysis of the Duties of Youthreach Staff. Report to the Teachers' Union of Ireland. [Online]. Available at: http://www.tui.ie/Hot%20Topics/YR.pdf (Accessed: 17 July 2008).

Clarke, A., Classon, J. and Phillips, S. (2007). 'Evaluation of the YOUTHREACH SEN pilot initiative' Report to the Department of Education and Science. [Online]. Available at: http://www.youthreach.ie/webwheel/levelc/levelc.htm (Accessed: 6 December 2010).

Clegg, J. and Ginsborg, J. (eds.) (2006) *Language and social disadvantage: theory and practice*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Cohen, J. (2006) 'Social, Emotional, Ethical, and Academic Education: Creating a Climate for Learning, Participation in Democracy, and Well-Being', *Harvard Educational Review,* 76(2), pp. 201-237. [Online]. Available at: http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/cohen-HE-Paper-7-06.pdf (Accessed: 24 July 2013).

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2000) *Research methods in education*. 5th ed. London: Routledge.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007) *Research methods in education*. 6th ed. London: Routledge.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011) *Research methods in education*. 7th ed. London: Routledge.

Coholic, D. (2010) *Arts Activities for children and young people in need: Helping children to develop mindfulness, spiritual awareness and self-esteem*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Colley, H. (2003) 'Engagement mentoring for 'disaffected' youth: a new model of mentoring for social inclusion', *British Educational Research Journal*, 29(4), pp. 521-542. (Accessed 05 September 2011).

Combat Poverty Agency (2003) *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland,* Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

Corbin Dwyer, S. and Buckle, J.L. (2009) 'The space between: on being an insider-outsider in qualitative research', International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8(1) pp. 54-63. [Online]. Available at: http://wigan-ojs.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/viewFile/2981/5198 (Accessed: 23 February 2013).

Cornagli, F., Crivellaro, E. and McNally, S. (2012) Mental health and education decisions, [Online]. Available at: http://cee.lse.ac.uk/ceedps/ceedp136.pdf (Accessed: 31 May 2013).

Corson, D. (1988) *Oral language across the curriculum*. Avon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Cox, T. (ed.) (2000) *Combating Educational Disadvantage: meeting the needs of vulnerable children,* London: Sage.

Cregan, A. (2008) *From Difference to Disadvantage: 'Talking Posh' sociolinguistic perspectives on the context of schooling in Ireland*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication Inc.

Cross, D., Shaw, T., Hearn, L., Epstein, M., Monks, H., Lester, L. and Thomas, L. (2009) 'Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS)', Available at: http://foi.deewr.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian_covert_bullying_preval ence_study_executive_summary.pdf (Accessed: 16 July 2013).

Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research.* London: Sage Publications.

Cullen, B. (2000) *Policy aspects of educational disadvantage*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

Demir, B., Kaynak-Demir, H. and Sönmez, E.I. (2010) 'Sense of identity and depression in adolescents', *The Turkish Journal of Pediatrics*, 52 pp. 68-72. [Online]. Available at: http://www.turkishjournalpediatrics.org/pediatrics/pdf/pdf_TJP_735.pdf (Accessed: 15 August 2013).

Denscombe, M. (2003) *The good research guide.* 2nd ed. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Denzin, N. (1989) *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y**.** (eds.) (1994) *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.

Department of Education and Science (DES) (1995) Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (DES) and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2001) *Programme statement and outline of student tasks*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2004a) Circular F49/04: designation of Centres for Education under Education Act, 1998. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2004b) 'A brief description of the Irish education system'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/A-Brief-Description-of-the-Irish-Education-System.pdf (Accessed: 11 November 2013).

Department of Education and Science (2008) *Value For Money Review: Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Centre Programmes funded by the Department of Education and Science.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (2010a) 'An Evaluation of Youthreach: Inspectorate evaluation studies'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/insp_evaluation_youth_reach_2010_pdf.pdf (Accessed: 14 November 2011)

Department of Education and Skills (2010b) *Draft operator guidelines for the Youthreach programme funded by the Department of Education and Skills*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2011) 'OECD project overcoming school failure: policies that work. National report Ireland', [Online]. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/ireland/49624509.pdf (Accessed: 1 July 2013).

Department of Education and Skills (2012a) Irish education system. [Online]. Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/ (Accessed: 28 November 2012).

Department of Education and Science (2012b) Circular 0046/2012: 'Implementation of budget 2013 in respect of the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Youthreach', [Online]. Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Advanced-Search/?q=0046/2012&t=all&f=all (Accessed: 10 January 2013).

Department of Education and Skills (2013a) 'Youthreach Survey 2012'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/ (Accessed: 12 December 2013).

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2013b) 'Action plan on bullying. Report of the Anti-Bullying Working Group to the Minister for Education and Skills', [Online]. Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Action-Plan-On-Bullying-2013.pdf (Accessed: 17 July 2013).

Department of Education and Skills (2013c) 'Well-being in post-primary school. Guidelines for mental health promotion and suicide prevention', [Online]. Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Well_Being_PP_Schools_Guidelines.pdf (Accessed: 20 July 2013).

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2014) Retention rates of pupils in second-level schools: 2007 entry cohorts. [Online]. Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/stats_retention_report_2007_cohort.pdf (Accessed: 3 February 2014).

Department of Health and Children (DOHC) (2006) 'A vision for change: Report of the expert group on mental health policy'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.dohc.ie/publications/vision_for_change.html (Accessed: 6 April 2013).

Department of Labour and Department of Education (1989) *Draft Youthreach Operators' guidelines*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Derman-Sparks, L. and Fite, K. (2007) 'Disadvantage and diversity in early childhood education' in Downes, P. and Gilligan, A. (eds.) *Beyond educational disadvantage*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, pp. 47-56.

Devine, D. (2005) 'Welcome to the Celtic Tiger? Teachers responses to immigration and increasing ethnic diversity in Irish school', *International studies in sociology of education*, 15(1), pp. 49-70.

292

Devine, D. (2009) 'Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in children's social world in school' in Drudy, S (ed.) *Education in Ireland: Challenges and change.* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan. pp. 57-72.

Dooley, B. and Fitzgerald, A. (2012) *My world survey. National study of youth mental health in Ireland,* Available at: http://www.headstrong.ie/sites/default/files/My%20World%20Survey%202012%20Online.pdf (Accessed: 7 April 2013).

Downes, P. and Maunsell, C. (2007) *Count us in, tackling early school-leaving in South west inner city Dublin: An integrated response*. SICCDA Dublin.

Downes, P. (2007) 'Why SMART outcomes ain't always so smart', in Downes, P. and Gilligan, A. (eds.) *Beyond educational disadvantage*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, pp. 57-69.

Downes, P. (2011) 'The neglected shadow: European perspectives on emotional supports for early school-leaving prevention', *The Internal Journal of Emotional Education*, 3(2), pp. 3-36, [Online]. Available at: http://www.spd.dcu.ie/site/edc/documents/theneglectedshadow.pdf (Accessed: 1 July 2013).

Downes, P., Maunsell, C. and Ivers, J. (2006) *A holistic approach to early school-leaving and school retention in Blanchardstown: Current issues and future steps for services and schools*. Dublin: Educational Disadvantage Centre.

Drudy, S., and Lynch, K. (1993) *Schools and society in Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Dunne, A. (2010) *Dividing lines: streaming, access to curriculum and junior certificate achievement in Ireland*. Available at: http://www.combatpoverty.ie/publications/workingpapers/2010-05_WP_dividinglines.pdf (Accessed: 31 December 2013).

Educational Disadvantage Committee (2005) *Moving beyond educational disadvantage 2002-2005.* Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

Edwards, J. (1989) *Language and disadvantage: studies in disorders of communications*. 2nd ed: London: Whurr Publishers.

Egan, M. (2012) An Irish investigation into the factors affecting bystander intervention to cyberbullying among adolescents. Higher Diploma, Dublin Business School.

Erikson, E.H. (1980) *Identity and life cycle,* New York: Norton.

Erikson, E.H. (1995) *Childhood and society*, London: Vintage.

Erikson, R. and Jonsson, J. (1996) *Can education be equalized? The Swedish case in comparative perspective.* Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

European Commission (2011) Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the council, the European economic and social Committee and the committee of the regions. 'Tackling early school-leaving: a key contribution to the Europe 2020 agenda'. [Online]. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/school-education/doc/earlycom_en.pdf (Accessed: 22 August 2012).

European Commission (2012a) 'Education and Training monitor 2012'. [Online]. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/publications/monitor12_en.pdf (Accessed: 31 May 2013).

European Commission (2012b) 'EU Youth Report. Status of the situation of young people in the European Union'. Working Document, Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/youth/documents/national_youth_reports_2012/eu_youth_rep ort_swd_situation_of_young_people.pdf (Accessed: 17 July 2013).

Eurostat (2009) Suicide death rate: By age group. [Online]. Available at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=%201&language=e n&pcode=tsdph240&plugin=1. (Accessed: 23 July 2013).

Fagan, G.H. (1995) *Culture, politics, and Irish school dropouts – constructing political identities.* London: Bergin and Garvey.

Farrell, M. (2008) *Educating special needs children: an introduction to provision for pupils with disabilities and disorders*. Oxon: Routledge.

Farrelly, G. (2007) 'Bullying and social context: challenges for schools', in Downes, P. and Gilligan, A. (eds.) *Beyond educational disadvantage*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, pp. 429-440.

Field, S., Kuczera, M. and Pont, B. (2007) 'No more failures: Ten steps to equity in education', Organisation for Economic and Cooperation Development (OECD) report. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/publishing/corrigenda (Accessed: 10 July 2013).

Fielding, N. (1993) 'Qualitative Interviewing', in Gilbert, N. (ed.) *Researching social life*. London: Sage, pp. 135-153.

Fleming, T. (2008) 'A secure base for adult learning. Attachment theory and adult education'. *The adult learner: The Journal of Adult and Community Education in Ireland,* Vol 25, pp. 33-53.

Fleming, T. (2011) 'Recognition in the work of Axel Honneth: implications for transformative learning theory', *9th International transformative learning conference: Transformative Learning in Time of Crisis: Individual and Collective Challenges*, Athens 28th May. Available at: http://www.tedfleming.net/doc/FlemingTed_on_Honneth.pdf (Accessed: 7 January 2014).

Flick, U. (2009) *An introduction to qualitative research*. 4th ed. London: Sage publications Ltd.

Flynn, N. (2007) 'Tackling educational disadvantage: Home and school', in Downes, P. and Gilligan, A. (eds.) *Beyond educational disadvantage*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, pp. 91-102.

Fontana, A. and Frey, J. (1994) 'Interviewing – the art of science', in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 361-376.

Gall, M.D., Borg, W.R. and Gall, J.P. (2007) *Educational Research – An Introduction.* 8th ed. Boston: Pearson Allyn and Bacon.

Gardner, H. (1983) *Frames of mind: the theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

Gauntlett, D. and Holzwarth, P. (2006) 'Creative and visual methods for exploring identities'. *Visual Studies*, 21(1), pp82-91Taylor and Francis [Online]. Available at: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rvst20 (Accessed: 11 February 2013).

Gillham, B. (2010) *Case study research methods*. London: Continuum International Publishing.

Giroux, H. (1991) *Postmodernism, feminism, and cultural politics: withdrawing educational boundaries.* Albany, NY: Suny Press.

Giroux, H.A. (2001) *Theory and resistance education - towards a pedagogy for the opposition*. Wesport: Bergin and Garvey.

Glassner, B. and Moreno, J.D**.** (eds.) (1989) *The qualitative-quantitative distinction in social sciences*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Goleman, D. (1996) '*Emotional Intelligence: why it matters more than IQ"*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Gordon, M. (2007) 'Profiling Wheel-Guidelines for staff'. Available at: http://www.youthreach.ie /webwheel/levelc/levelc.htm (Accessed: 15 May 2011).

Gordon, M. and Co. Meath VEC (2011) 'Youthreach soft skills framework'. Available at: http://www.youthreach.ie/webwheel/reports/Reports.htm#Webwheel%20Library. (Accessed: 27 October 2013).

Gordon, M. (2012). 'Youthreach Ireland: guidance and counselling in Youthreach programme in Ireland'. *Reducing early school leaving: efficient and effective policies in Europe conference,* Brussels 1st & 2nd March. Husa President Park Hotel. Available at: ec.europa.eu/education/ (Accessed: 22 August 2013).

Gordon, M (2013) 'Youthreach SEN initiative research study report'. Available at: http://www.youthreach.ie/webwheel/reports/Reports.htm#Webwheel%20Library. (Accessed: 27 December 2013).

Goulding, C. (2002) *Grounded theory: a practical guide for management, business and market researchers.* London: Sage Publications.

Government of Ireland (1998) *Education Act,* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (1999) *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act,* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (2000) *Education (Welfare) Act*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (2004) *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (2008) *Equal Status Acts 2000-2008,* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Greene, J.C. (1994) 'Qualitative program evaluation – practice and promise', in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications pp. 530- 544.

Habermas, J. (1972) *Knowledge and human interests*. London: Heinemann.

Hanafin, M. (2006) Available at: http://www.maryhanafin.ie/ november272006.htm (Accessed: 4 December 2007).

Haran, N. (2004) 'Equality in Education: An Examination of Community-based Youth Initiatives Under the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme', Dublin: Area Development Management Limited.

Health Service Executive (HSE) (2007) 'Mental Health in Ireland: Awareness and attitudes', [Online]. Available at: http://www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HSP00612.pdf (Accessed: 31 May 2013).

Health Service Executive (HSE) (2012) 'Third annual child and adolescent mental health service report 2010-2011', [Online]. Available at: http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/Publications/services/Mentalhealth/camhsannualr eport20102011.pdf (Accessed: 23 July 2013).

Health Service Executive (HSE) (2014) 'Fifth annual child and adolescent mental health service report 2012-2013', [Online]. Available at: http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/Publications/services/Mentalhealth/camhsrpts/C AMHS12,13.pdf (Accessed: 21 February 2014).

Hennick, M., Hutter, I. and Bailey, A. (2011) *Qualitative Research Methods.* London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Hitchcock, G. and Hughes, D. (1995) *Research and the teacher: a qualitative introduction to school based research.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Holland, J. (2008) 'How schools can support children who experience loss and death', *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling,* 36(4), pp. 411-424, [Online]. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069880802364569 (Accessed: 18 July 2013).

Holmes, J. (2010) *Exploring in security: towards an attachment informed psychoanalytical psychotherapy*. East Sussex: Routledge.

Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. (1995) *The active interview. Qualitative research methods, series 37*. London: Sage Publications.

Honneth, A. (2002) 'Recognition or redistribution?', in Lash, S and Featherstone, M. (eds.) *Recognition and difference: politics, identity, multiculture,* London: Sage Publications Ltd. pp. 43-56.

Hourigan, N. and Campbell, M. (2010) *The TEACH report. Traveller education and adults: Crisis, challenge and chance.* Dublin: National Association of Travellers' Centres.

Huberman, M. and Miles, M. (1994) 'Data management and analysis methods', in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds) Handbook of qualitative research. London: Sage Publications, pp. 428-444.

Illich, I. (1970) *Deschooling Society.* London: Marion Boyars.

Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT)(2012) 'The vicious circle of social exclusion and crime: Ireland's disproportionate punishment of the poor', Position Paper. Available at: http://www.iprt.ie/files/Position_Paper_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 3 July 2013).

Jackson, P. (1968) *Life in classrooms.* New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Johnson, E.S. and Legg, C.E. (1948) 'Why young people leave school', *NASSP Bulletin,* 32 pp.14-24 [Online]. Available at: http://bul.sagepub.com (Accessed: 25 May 2008).

Kellaghan, T., Weir, S., Ó hUallacháin, S. and Morgan, M. (1995) *Educational disadvantage in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Education/Combat Poverty Agency/ Educational Research Centre.

Kelly, B.D. (2004) 'Mental health policy in Ireland 1984-2004: theory, overview and future directions', *Irish Journal of psychological medicine*, 21(2), pp.61-68. [Online]. Available at: http://www.suicideireland.com/Mental-Health-Information-Reports/View-category.html (Accessed: 30 May 2013).

Kemmis, S. (1993) 'Action Research', in Hammersley, M. (ed.) *Educational research: current issues*. London: Sage Publications.

Kessler, R. C., Berglund ,P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Merikangas, K. R. and Walters, E. E. (2005) 'Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62, pp.593-602. [Online]. Available at: http://archpsyc.jamanetwork.com/ (Accessed: 7 July 2013).

Kinsella, W (2009) 'Are inclusive schools possible? Students with disabilities and special educational needs in second-level school' in Drudy, S (ed.) *Education in Ireland: Challenges and change.* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan. pp. 73-88.

Kohler Riessman, C. (2008) *Narrative methods for the Human Sciences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Komosa-Hawkins, K. (2010) 'Best practices in school-based mentoring programs for adolescents', *Child and Youth Services,* 31(3-4), pp.121-137.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969) *On Death and Dying*. Available at: http://selfdefinition.org/afterlife/Elizabeth-Kubler-Ross-On-Death-and-Dying.pdf (Accessed: 17 July 2013).

Lalor, K., de Róiste, Á. and Devlin, M. (2007) *Young people in contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Leavy, A. (2005) ''When I meet them I talk to them': the challenges of diversity for pre-service teacher education', *Irish educational studies*, 24(2-3), pp. 159-177.

Leavy, P. (2009) *Methods meet art: arts-based research practice*. NY: The Guildford Press.

LeCompte, M. and Goetz, J. (1982) 'Problems of reliability and validity in ethnographic research', *Review of Educational Research.* 52(1), pp.31-60.

Leitch, R. (2008) 'Creatively researching children's narratives through images and drawings' in Thomson, P (ed.) *Doing visual research with children and young people.* Oxon: Routledge. pp. 37-57.

Locke, A., Ginsborg, J. and Peers, I. (2002) 'Development and disadvantage: implications for the early years and beyond', *International journal of language and communication disorders*, 37(1), pp. 3-15.

Lynch, K. (1989) *The Hidden Curriculum: Reproduction in education, an appraisal.* London: Falmer Press.

Lynch, K (1990) 'Reproduction: the role of cultural factors and educational mediators', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(1), pp. 3-20, JSTOR [Online]. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1393274 (Accessed: 9 August 2008).

Lynch, K. (1999) *Equality in Education.* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Lynch, K. (2008) 'The need for care-full education', Available at: http://www.nesetweb.eu/sites/default/files/NESSE-seminar-13.pdf (Accessed: 14 July 2013).

Lynch, K. and Baker, J. (2005) 'Equality in education: an equality of condition perspective', *Theory and Research in Education,* 3(2), pp. 131-164 [Online]. Available at: http://tre.sagepub.com/content/3/2/131 (Accessed: 31 December 2013).

Lynch, K., Grummell, B. and Devine, D. (2012) *New managerialism in education: commercialization, carelessness and gender.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lynch, K. and Lodge, A. (2002) *Equality and power in schools – redistribution, recognition and representation*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Lyons, M. (2003) *Inside Classrooms: the teaching and learning of mathematics in social context.* Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

Mac Ruairc, G. (2009) 'Language, socio-economic class and educational underachievement' in Drudy, S (ed.) *Education in Ireland: Challenges and change.* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan. pp. 118-135.

Mac Ruairc, G. (2011) 'Where words collide: social class, schools and linguistic discontinuity', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(4), pp. 541-561. [Online]. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.578437 (Accessed: 11 December 2013).

Maxwell, J. A. (1996) *Qualitative research design: an interactive approach.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Maykut, P. and Morehouse, R. (2001) *Beginning qualitative research – a philosophic and practical guide*. London: Routledge Falmer.

McCoy, S., Kelly, E. and Watson, D. (2007a) 'School-leavers' survey report 2006'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.esri.ie (Accessed: 27 November 2007).

McCoy, S., Darmody, M., Smyth, E. and Dunne, A. (2007b) 'Attendance and students' school experiences. [Online]. Available at: http://www.esri.ie (Accessed: 27 November 2007).

McEvoy, O. (2009) 'Teenage mental health: what helps and what hurts?', Report on the outcome of consultations with teenagers on mental health, Available at: http://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/publications/MentalHealthWhatHelpsAndWhatHurts.pdf (Accessed: 19 July 2013).

McGrath, B. (2006) ''Everything is different here …': mobilizing capabilities through inclusive education practices and relationships', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 10(6), pp. 595-614.

McHugh, K. (2008) *"It's good out here, I like it" an exploration of early school-leavers' experiences of second-chance education and their views on the web-wheel initiative within YOUTHREACH.* Unpublished M.Ed. diss., National University of Ireland, Galway.

McKeown, K. and Clarke, M. (2004) 'Educational disadvantage in Ireland'. Report for the One Foundation, March. [Online]. Available at: http://www.onefoundation.ie/media/pdf/Educational_Disadvantage_in_Ireland_mar04.pdf (Accessed: 2 July 2013).

McKeown, K. and Haase, T. (2006) 'The mental health of children and the factors which influence it: a study of families in Ballymun summary report'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.effectiveservices.org/images/uploads/2006%20The%20Mental%20Health%20of%20Children%20and%20the%20Factors%20Which%20Influence%20It%20A%20Study%20of%20Families%20in%20B(1).pdf (Accessed: 21 July 2013).

McNiff, S. (2008) 'Art-based research', in Knowles, G and Cole, A. (Eds) *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research.* California: Sage.

McSitric, P. and O'Sullivan, A. (2011) *'An evaluation of Youthreach'. National Association of Youthreach Coordinators (NAYC) Annual Conference in Clarion Hotel,* Sligo 24 February. Inspectorate. Department of Education and Skills. Available at: www.youthreach.ie (Accessed: 18 January 2014).

Mehan, H. (1992) 'Understanding inequality in schools: the contribution of interpretive studies', *Sociology of Education*, 65(1), pp. 1-20.

Mezirow, J. (2007) Adult education and empowerment for individual and community development. In Connolly, B., Fleming,T., McCormack and Ryan, A. (eds) *Radical learning for liberation 2.* Maynooth: Mace. pp. 10-17.

Miles, M. B. and Huberman, A. M. (1984) *Qualitative data analysis: a sourcebook of new methods*. London, Sage.

Millar, D. (2012) 'Analysis of school attendance data in primary and post-primary schools 2009/10'. Report for the NEWB. [Online]. Available at: http://www.newb.ie/downloads/pdf/Analysis_of_School_Attendance_Data_in_Primary_and_Post_Primary_0910.pdf (Accessed: 12 October 2013).

Myers, M. (2000) 'Qualitative research and the generalizability question - standing firm with proteus', [Online]. Available at: http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR4-3/myers.html (Assessed: 2 November 2007).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2004) 'Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland: Overview'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.ncca.ie/index.asp?locID=62&docID=-1 (Accessed: 20 August 2008).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2010) Revised JCSP Statement. [Online]. Available at: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Junior_Certificate_School_Programme/The_revised_JCSP_Programme_Statement_.pdf (Accessed: 13 October 2013).

National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) (2002) *Early School-leavers*, Forum Report No. 24, Dublin: NESF.

National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) (2001) Submission to the NESF projectteam on early school-leaving [Online]. Available at: http://www.youth.ie/.../3652/file/Submission%20to%20the%20NESF%20Project%20Team%20on%20Early%20School%20Leaving.pdf (Accessed: 19 April 2007).

Network of Expert in Social Sciences of Education and Training (NESSE) (2010) 'Early school-leaving: Lessons from research for policy makers', Report for the European Commission. Available at: http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/activities/reports (Accessed:15 September 2012).

Noddings, N. (1995) 'Teaching themes of care', *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), pp. 675-679.

Noddings, N. (2005) 'Identifying and responding to needs in education', *Cambridge Journal of Education,* 35(2), pp. 147-159, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, [Online]. Available at: http://web.ebscohost.com.jproxy.nuim.ie/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=f2a4bb6b-433a-4083-80ab-25269386d9aa%40sessionmgr14&vid=4&hid=18 (Accessed: 16 July 2013).

Noffke, S. and Somekh, B. (2005) 'Action research', in; Somekh, B. and Lewin, C. (Eds) *Research issues in the social sciences*. London: Sage. Pp 89-96.

O'Brien, M. (2008) 'Well-being and post-primary schooling'. A review of the literature, [Online]. Available at: http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Curriculum/post-primary/wellbeing/Well-being_report_en.pdf (Accessed: 7 April 2013).

O'Brien, S. (2004) *Quality Framework Initiative: report on the 2003-2004 pilot phase.* Drogheda. Quality Framework Initiative.

O'Brien, S. (2005) *Quality Framework Initiative for Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Centres: quality standards*. Drogheda: Quality Framework Initiative.

O'Brien, T. (2013) 'Awakening to recovery and Honneth's theory of recognition', Adult learner 2013, *Irish Journal of Adult and Community education*, pp.59-74, [Online]. Available at: http://www.aontas.com/download/pdf/aontas_adult_learner_journal_2013_web.pdf (Accessed: 7 January 2014).

O'Dwyer, M. (2004) *Perspectives on Southill school completion programme, as an integrated measure to respond to early school-leaving and educational disadvantage*. Unpublished M.Ed. diss., National University of Ireland, Galway.

O'Neill, B. and Dinh, T. (2013) 'Cyberbullying among 9-16 year olds in Ireland', Digital Childhoods Working Paper Series (No.5). Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology, Available at: http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=cserrep (Accessed: 17 July 2013).

O'Sullivan, D. (2005) *Cultural politics and Irish education since the 1950s: policy paradigms and power.* Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

Oireachtas (2012) 'Wellbeing: promoting mental health in schools', *Spotlight,* No. 2, pp.1-16, [Online]. Available at: http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/housesoftheoireachtas/libraryresearch/spotlights/spotWellbeing280212_101701.pdf (Accessed: 6 April 2013).

Organisation for Economic and Cooperation Development (OECD) (2011) "Teacher-student relations", in PISA 2009 at a Glance, OECD Publishing. [Online]. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264095250-41-en (Accessed: 15 July 2013).

Owen, H. (2009) *Open space technology. A user's guide.* 3rd ed. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publishers Inc.

Pask, R. and Joy, B. (2008) *Mentoring and Coaching: a handbook for educational professionals.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Passow, A. (1970) *Deprivation and disadvantage: nature and manifestations.* Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paterson, L. and Iannelli,C. (2007) 'Social Class and Educational Attainment: A Comparative Study of England, Wales, and Scotland', *Sociology of Education,* 80(4), pp. 330-358 JSTOR [Online]. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20452716 (Accessed: 8 December 2010).

Paul, J.J. and Cillessen A.H.N. (2003) 'Dynamics of Peer Victimization in Early Adolescence', *Journal of Applied School Psychology,* 19:2, 25-43 [Online]. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J008v19n02_03 (Accessed: 17 July 2013).

Pomeroy, E. (1999) 'The teacher-student relationship in secondary school: Insights from excluded students', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 20(4), pp. 465-482, JSTOR [Online]. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1393274 (Accessed: 23 May 2008).

Power, C. and Tormey, R. (2000) *Refocusing the debate: an examination of the interplay between measurement and intervention in educational disadvantage. CEDR occasional paper no.2.* Limerick: Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research.

Prosser, J. and Loxley, A. (2008) 'Introducing visual methods'. [Online]. Available at: http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/420/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-010.pdf (Assessed: 14 April 2012).

Punch, K. (1998) *Introduction to social research-quantitative and qualitative approaches.* London: Sage Publications.

Raphael, B., Stevens, G. and Pedersen, K. (2009) 'Vulnerability and mental health', Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies: *An International Interdisciplinary Journal for Research, Policy and Care,* 1(2), pp.127-138, [Online]. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450120600863380 (Accessed: 20 July 2013).

Reay, D. (2004) 'Finding or losing yourself? Working-class relationships to education', in Ball, S. (ed.) *The routledgefalmer reader in sociology of education.* London: Routeledgefalmer. pp. 30-44.

Reay, D. (2012) 'What would a socially just education system look like?: saving the minnows from the pike', *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(5), pp. 587-599, [Online]. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2012.710015 (Accessed: 28 January 2013).
Reimer, E. (1971) *School is dead- an essay on alternatives in education.* Middlesex: Penguin Education.

Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market/ Researchcentrum voor Onderwijs en Arbeidsmarkt (ROA) (2012) 'Early school-leavers'. ROA fact sheet, [Online]. Available at http://www.roa.unimaas.nl/pdf_publications/2012/ROA_F_2012_2E.pdf (Accessed: 19 May 2013).

Rhodes, J.E. (2002) *Stand by me: the risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Richards, L. (2005) *Handling qualitative data – a practical guide.* London: Sage Publications.

Riley, P. (2011) *Attachment theory and the teacher-student relationship: a practical guide for teachers, teacher educator and school leaders*. Oxon: Routledge.

Robson, C. (1993) *Real world research - a resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real world research - a resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers.* 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

Robson, C. (2011) *Real world research - a resource for users of social research methods in applied settings.* 3rd ed. West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

Rumberger, R. (1987) 'High school dropouts: a review of issues and evidence', *Review of educational research*, 57(2), pp. 101-121

Ryan, A.B. (2006) 'post-positivist approaches to research' in Antonesa, M., Fallon, H., Ryan, A.B., Ryan, A. and Walsh, T, with Borys, L. *Researching and writing your thesis: A guide for postgraduate students*. Maynooth: MACE, pp. 12-27.

Sabatelli, R.M. and Anderson, S. A. (1991) 'Family System Dynamics, Peer Relationships, and Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment', *Family Relations,* 40(4), pp. 363-369 JSTOR [Online]. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/584891 (Accessed: 17 July 2013).

Santrock, J.W. (2006) *Adolescenc*e. 11th ed. Columbus: McGraw-Hill.

Silverman D. (2000) *Doing qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Smithbell, P. (2010) 'Art-based research in education. A review', *The qualitative report* 15(6), pp 1597-1601. [Online]. Available at: http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-6/cahnmann.pdf (Accessed: 15 May 2012).

Smyth, E. (1999a) *Do schools differ? Academic and personal development among pupils in the second level sector.* Dublin: Oak Tree Press.

Smyth, E. (1999b) 'Educational inequalities among school-leavers in Ireland 1979-1994', *Economic and Social Review*, 30(2), pp. 267-284.

Smyth, E. and McCoy, S. (2009) 'Investing in education: Combating educational disadvantage' Report for Barnardos, May. [Online]. Available at: http://www.esri.ie (Accessed: 4 October 2012).

Smyth, J. (2006) ''When students have power': student engagement, student voice, and the possibilities for school reform around 'dropping out' of school', International Journal of Leadership in education, 9(4), pp. 285-298. [Online]. Available at: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13603120600894232#.UwZmlWJ_vSw (Accessed: 15 August 2013).

Smyth, J. and Hattam, R. (2001) 'Voiced research as a sociology for understanding "dropouts" of school'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22(3), pp.410-415. [Online]. Available at: http://www.tandfonline.com.jproxy.nuim.ie/doi/pdf/10.1080/0142569012006800 6 (Accessed: 7 July 2103).

Smyth, J. and Hattam, R. (2004) *'Dropping out', drifting off, being excluded: becoming somebody without school,* New York: Peter Lang.

Spring, N. (2007) 'Tracing the language of educational disadvantage', in Downes, P. and Gilligan, A. (eds.) *Beyond educational disadvantage*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, pp. 3-9.

Staff, J. and Kreager, D.A. (2008) 'Too cool for school? Violence, peer status and high school dropout', *Social Forces*, 87(1), pp. 445-471 JSTOR [Online]. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20430863 (Accessed: 17 July 2013).

Stearns, E. and Glennie E.J. (2006) 'When and Why Dropouts Leave High School'. [Online]. Available at: http://yas.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/38/1/29 (Accessed: 15 July 2012).

Stokes, D. (ed.) (2000) *YOUTHREACH 2000: a consultative process - a report on the outcomes.* Dublin: National Coordinators, YOUTHREACH.

Stokes, D. (2003) *Early school-leaving in Ireland- the matrix of influences explored.* Unpublished Ph.D. diss., National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Stokes, D. (2004) '*Traveller Education Strategy submission'.* [Online]. Available at: http://www.youthreach.ie/aatopmenu/Library/TravellersSubmission.htm (Accessed: 6 December 2013).

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Sweeney, J. (2007) 'Child poverty and child income support', in Cousins, M. (ed) *Welfare policy and poverty*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration and Combat Poverty Agency, pp. 59-100.

Tett, L. and Crowther, J. (1998) 'Families at a disadvantage: class, culture and literacies', *British Educational Research Journal*, 24, pp. 449-460. JSTOR [Online]. Available at: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0141-1926%281998909%2924%3A4%33C449%3AFAADCC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M (Accessed: 17 April 2007).

Toomey, D. (1974) *'*What causes educational disadvantage?', *Journal of Sociology,* 10(1) pp. 31-37, Sage Publications. [Online]. Available at: http://jos.sagepub.com (Accessed: 25 May 2008).

Tormey, R. (2007) 'Education and Poverty' in Cousins, M. (ed.) *Welfare, policy and poverty*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, pp169-199.

Tormey, R. (2010) 'The silent politics of educational disadvantage and the National Anti-Poverty Strategy', *Irish Educational Studies*, 29(2), pp. 189-199. [Online]. Available at: http://www.tandfonline.com.jproxy.nuim.ie/loi/ries20#.UeZ5U6yYdaU (Accessed: 29 November 2010).

Tovey, H. and Share, P. (2007). *A sociology of Ireland*. 3rd ed. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Walsh, J. (2007) 'Monitoring poverty and welfare policy 1987 -2007', in Cousins, M. (ed) *Welfare policy and poverty*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration and Combat Poverty Agency, pp. 13-58.

Weir, S. (2011) *A report on the first phase of the evaluation of DEIS: Summary report*. Available at: www.erc.ie/documents/deis_pl_summary.pdf (Accessed: 27 July 2013).

Wexler, P. (1992) *Becoming somebody: towards a social psychology of the school,* London: Falmer Press.

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to labour: how working class kids get working class jobs*. Farnborough: Saxon House.

World Health Organisation (2003) 'Caring for children and adolescents with mental disorders. Setting WHO directions', Available at: http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/785.pdf (Accessed: 25 July 2013).

World Health Organisation (2005) 'Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/MH_Promotion_Book.pdf (Accessed: 7 July 2013).

World Health Organisation (2012) 'Adolescent mental health: mapping actions of nongovernmental organisations and other international development organisations'. [Online]. Available at: http://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/adolescent_mental_health/en/ (Accessed: 12 September 2013).

WRCsec (2007) Measure Study of Early School-leavers - Youthreach and Travellers: Measure 11B of the EHRDOP Implemented by the Department of Education and Science. [Online]. Available at: http://www.esf.ie/GetAttachment.aspx?id=e530a29d-329a-48c5-80a9-eb0c6d6a5b9c (Accessed: 17 April 2010).

Appendices

Appendix I: QFI Quality Standards

Appendix II: Soft Skills Framework

Appendix III: Interview Schedule

Appendix IV: Coordinator Questionnaire

Appendix V: Parent consent form

Appendix VI: Student consent form

Appendix VII Letters to coordinators and Board of Management

Appendix I
Quality Standards

The Quality Standards are divided into four main sections and include 27 quality areas.

SECTION ONE: ORGANISATIONAL MANAGEMENT

1. Ethos
2. Planning
3. Evaluation
4. Communication and Links with the Community
5. Transparency, Accountability and Public Relations
6. Administration and Financial Management
7. Record Keeping
8. Health and Safety
9. Premises
10. Equipment

SECTION TWO: PERSONNEL AND DEVELOPMENT

11. Staff Team
12. Staff Recruitment and Induction
13. Staff Development and Training
14. Staff Support

SECTION THREE: LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

15. Social Environment
16. Code of Behaviour
17. Equality
18. Interculturalism

SECTION FOUR:PROGRAMME

19. Programme Development and Delivery
20. Recruitment of Learners and Admission
21. Initial Assessment, Induction and Review
22. Learning Assessment and Certification
23. Support Structures for Learners
24. Literacy and Numeracy
25. Social, Personal and Health Education
26. Work Experience
27. Transfer and Progression

Under each quality area a number of broad quality standards are outlined. Each quality standard is sub-divided into evaluation criteria. Evaluation criteria are statements of how quality standards are made operational. For the internal evaluation process, they will be used to assess whether the quality standards are being met. Centres may wish to add their own evaluation criteria to this list in order to reflect local systems and arrangements. The quality standards and the evaluation criteria are not prescriptive, leaving room for much flexibility at local level in terms of how standards are met.

Examples of Quality areas for programme content and delivery for learners

QUALITY AREA	QUALITY STANDARDS	EVALUATION CRITERIA
23. Support Structures for Learners	A range of supports is in place for learners which help to provide a more holistic response to their needs and maximise their ability to engage in the programme.	Clear procedures and protocols for the provision of the following supports are established and implemented: • Counselling support • Guidance support • Childcare support • Transport support The support is available to learners within the centre. The learners use the support.
	Arrangements are in place for regular meetings/ communication with parents/ guardians as appropriate and other relevant agencies, as a support to the learner.	Parents/ guardians/ relevant agencies are encouraged to support the participation of the learner in the centre. Parents/ guardians are informed of the learner's progress within the centre.
24. Literacy and Numeracy	An integrated approach to literacy/numeracy provision is in place.	The literacy/ numeracy levels of learners are assessed. A literacy plan for the centre is developed and implemented. One to one support for literacy is available as required. The induction programme for staff includes literacy awareness. Literacy development is integrated into all aspects of the programme. Literacy programmes are culturally and environmentally relevant.

Section Four: PROGRAMME

QUALITY AREA	QUALITY STANDARDS	EVALUATION CRITERIA
25. Social, Personal and Health Education	A broad ranging and integrated programme of social, personal and health education is provided.	▪ The overall social, personal and health education needs of learners are assessed. ▪ A programme of learning in the area of social, personal and health education is developed and delivered based on the needs of the learners. ▪ Health promotion is an integrated part of centre policy and practice. ▪ Learners have access to information and training on health related issues.
26. Work Experience	Learners are provided with opportunities to participate in a work experience programme.	▪ Procedures for establishing and supervising work experience are developed and documented. ▪ Responsibility for work experience is clearly allocated. ▪ Insurance requirements are met. ▪ Links with employers are established. ▪ Learners are adequately supervised and supported during work experience. ▪ Appropriate records are maintained.
27. Transfer and Progression	Learners are supported to transfer and progress to programmes within or external to the centre.	▪ A policy and procedures for transfer and progression of learners are developed and documented. ▪ Guidance/ counselling support is provided for learners during the initial stage of moving into a new programme. ▪ Learners are informed of the transfer and progression options that are open to them on completion of programmes. ▪ Learners' progression and transfer routes are documented. ▪ Links are established between employers/ centres of further education and training or other relevant agencies in order to develop transfer and progression routes.

For further information see:
http://www.youthreach.ie/aatopmenu/Library/qualityframe/Quality%20Standards%20pdf%20web.pdf

Appendix II
# Soft Skills Framework
Soft Skills framework and rating scale

Framework with sample of soft skills

Competencies	Skills	
Development of **Confidence** through an AWARENESS and ACCEPTANCE of the SELF Emotional competence Sense of identity Sense of purpose	**1A Life** Can look after self in practical ways e.g. self-presentation, sexual health Can make decisions and plans to benefit self and advance life goals Can place value on own achievements Can weigh up risks and decide how to act accordingly Can solve a range of practical problems	**1B Self-regulation** Can recognise emotions Can express emotions appropriately Can acknowledge own needs Can recognise personal triggers Can cope with adverse circumstances Can manage anxiety and try out new experiences Can handle criticism
Development of **Responsibility** through an AWARENESS and CONSIDERATION of OTHERS Social sensitivity Sense of connected-ness and capacity for empathy	**2A Self-Regulation** Can manage emotions e.g. anger, jealousy, exuberance in consideration of others Can restrain impulsivity Can take responsibility for own actions Can keep own word Can be punctual and reliable Can exercise self-control in relation to drink and drugs Can put in effort and motivate self	**2B Social** Can manage personal interactions with others e.g. can give and receive apologies Can ask for help Can de-centre and observe others' experience Can take care of others Can empathise with others Can listen Can communicate effectively in social situations Can be assertive without being aggressive Can manage and resolve conflicts
Development of **Power** through KNOWLEDGE and APPRECIATION of the WORLD Rational awareness Ability to decentre Curiosity Civic Values	**3A Social** Can work cooperatively with others Can deal effectively with people in formal and semi-formal situations Can understand where others are coming from and take account of this Can observe social rules and niceties	**3B Life** Can understand the structures, practices and rules that apply in the wider world Can locate self within the wider world Can access information and use it Can employ learning strategies Can think about and evaluate social and political matters or events

Rating, Planning and Measuring Progress

The framework provides a structure against which a learner's soft skills can be evaluated and progress in relation to them described and measured. The process is as follows:

The staff team discuss each learner in turn using a template. They rate the learner under each of the three competencies – either by giving one general rating or by allocating a rating separately to the two skill areas encompassed within a competency.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
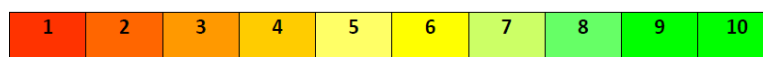
The rating is out of 10, with 1 representing the lowest level found among learners on entry to the programme and 10 representing the highest level achieved by learners at the end of their time in a centre. This range is not an absolute measure but reflects the scale typically found across a group of Youthreach participants. So while applying a rating is not an objective science it is not totally subjective either because

it is based on the considered views of experienced staff who have had practice at observing learners in a number of different contexts over time. The evaluations are made on the basis of this experience. With time the staff will become more sensitive to the levels of skill being demonstrated by learners and more confident about making comparisons. The comparisons take into account the different levels of skills demonstrated by learners (past as well as present), with the young person being rated according to the norm for Youthreach learners. The rating is also being made *within* the learner, with the young person being compared against themselves over time.

Before the rating is decided, it will need to be discussed by all relevant members of staff and the case for the proposed rating will involve the citing of evidence, which can be based on a number of different kinds of indicators. The evidence can be how the learner was observed to behave inside the centre in various situations or in contexts outside of the centre or it can be what the learner has said about themselves or how they contributed in a conversation with others. Evidence can also include reports by others (e.g. parents, peers, employers) about the young person. The evidence being cited will need to be explored and clarified in discussion before the rating is determined. If there is disagreement among the staff the rating may need to be negotiated and a compromise reached.

The 10-point rating scale is not envisaged as an equal-interval measure. The distance between the lower numbers is greater than between the higher numbers. For example the move from 1 to 2 is considerably greater than from 8 to 9. This is because soft skills build cumulatively – the more skilful a young person is the more easily they can acquire new ones. The biggest challenge for a centre is often to begin the process of soft skills development, moving a learner from their initial low levels of self-regulation, social interaction and practical capability. This way of conceptualising the ten-point scale is illustrated by the following figure:

10 Point Rating Scale Diagram
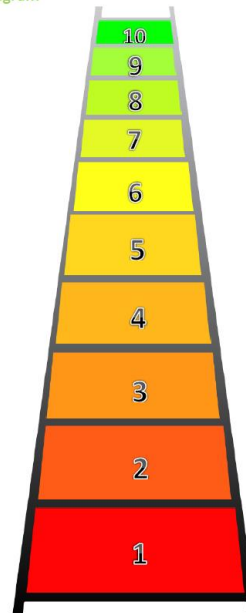
Having agreed a set of ratings for the individual learner the staff team then discuss the priority areas for improvement that they will concentrate on over the coming period. This plan will contain the formal and informal approaches that will be used to improve the learner's soft skills and will name those who will be responsible for this work. Appendix A lists a number of useful documents, programmes and organisations that can support this work.

The plan will also include a date for a meeting to review the learner's response to this teaching, at which their skill levels will be rated again and their progress measured.

Recording Progress

Each learner's templates will be stored in their individual file, which will show their ratings over time along with the interventions that were planned and implemented. Much of this information will be in qualitative form, providing staff with a detailed and specific descriptive account of the progress being made. These ratings over time provide a quantitative summary of each individual's progress.

A simple tabulation of all the learners' ratings over the course of the year provides an easy centre-wide annual summary of the work done by staff in the promotion of soft skills.

Rate of progress in relation to each individual stage

A person at stage

1 moving up to stage 2 - 100% Improvement

2 moving up to stage 3 - 50% Improvement

3 moving up to stage 4 - 33% Improvement

4 moving up to stage 5 - 25% Improvement

5 moving up to stage 6 - 20% Improvement

6 moving up to stage 7 - 17% Improvement

7 moving up to stage 8 - 14% Improvement

8 moving up to stage 9 - 12% Improvement

9 moving up to stage 10 -11% Improvement

Sample Template

For more information see:
http://www.youthreach.ie/webwheel/reports/YOUTHREACH%20SOFT%20SKILLS%20FRAMEWORK%20DOCUMENT,%20Dec%2011.pdf

Background information

- **Tell me a little about your collage/painting/ drawing piece?**
  - o Would you add/ remove anything to it now.
  - o How do you feel about using this type of approach to depict/ highlight your thoughts?
  - o Are you surprised by what you put into it. Is there anything else you would like to see in it?

- **Tell me a little about yourself?**
  - o How are you feeling about being here today?
  - o What was it like growing up, have you always lived around here?
  - o Your family – brothers, sisters- ages- what they are doing? Parents/ guardians/ grandparents?
  - o Interests/hobbies, sport. Working – part-time job
  - o Long term goal ambitions, where you might see yourself in three years / five years?

Schooldays – Secondary and Primary

- **What was secondary school like for you?**
  - o How long is it since you left school?
  - o Are there things you liked about school? Fond memories?
  - o Did you enjoy secondary school at any stage?
  - o Did you have a favourite subject? Why did you enjoy that particular subject?
  - o How did you get on with your teachers?
  - o How did it happen, the leaving school? When did you feel that school was not for you? Or how did it come about?
  - o Would it have been possible to change your mind? Did you discuss it with anyone or did you just leave?
  - o Were people shocked when you decided to leave?
  - o Did many of your friends leave school/ continue on?
  - o What did it feel like when you made the decision, were you thinking about it for a while?
  - o Looking back now, how do you feel about your decision?

- o Remembering back to primary school, how did you get on there? What size school/class was it?
- o What was it like heading to secondary school, can you remember?
- o How do you feel about leaving school early?
- o Being described as an early school leaver, does that have an effect on you? The terms; early school leaver / dropout?
- o Do you think early school-leavers are viewed differently in society/ by others?
- o In your opinion, is it important to stay on in school and finish it off?
- o If you have children would you like them to finish school? Why?
- o How do you feel about telling someone that you left school early?
- o What kinds of things are important for you in terms of schooling?
- o If someone was thinking of leaving school, what advice would you give them?

Attending YOUTHREACH

- **Describe to me what YOUTHREACH is about – in your own words?**
  - o How are you getting on in Youthreach, do you feel?
  - o How long are you attending now?
  - o When you joined Youthreach, did you have to do any assessments?
  - o How would you rate your reading and writing skills on entry?
  - o How would you compare Youthreach to School?
  - o What do you think of the way Youthreach operates?
  - o It has different holidays to school, what do you think of this?
  - o Is it what you expected?
  - o Do you feel you made the right decision joining Youthreach?
  - o Things you like/dislike about YOUTHREACH?
  - o Do you know what FETAC is?
  - o How could things be improved upon?
  - o Do you feel you are making progress?
  - o Can you think of anything that stands out for you since you started in Youthreach?
  - o Would you attend YOUTHREACH if the government decided to cut the payment? Or if there was no payment?

- o Do you speak with anyone about your goals, courses, reading and writing?
- o Have you been involved with the mentoring, do you have a mentor in YOUTHREACH?
- o How do you get on with your mentor? Did you pick your own mentor?
- o What kind of things do you normally discuss, in general?
- o Do you feel comfortable telling you mentoring things that others may not know?
- o Do you use the wheel with your mentor?
- o Is the mentoring what you expected?
- o Do you find it useful? Would you have liked a mentor in school?
- o What classes do you like in Youthreach? Classes you dislike?
- o How do you feel about classes like SPHE or mind out? Should these be part of the programme/your class?
- o How do you feel about participating in those classes? Are you comfortable talking about mental health?
- o How would you describe your own mental health?
- o In your own opinion what do you think Youthreach needs for the future
- o Do you think there is a problem with attendance in Youthreach, what can be done about that?
- o Does it surprise you that students drop out of the programme?
- o What are you aspirations for when you finish the programme?
- o Do you get much help with focusing on your future? Is it enough for everyone?
- o Do you get a chance to go on work experience? How do you find that?
- o Are you looking forward to finishing the programme.
- o Youthreach is described as a second chance education, what do you think of when you hear this?

- **What are the things that can get in your way of achieving your goals?**
  - o In terms of education; if you had a remote control, what would it do?
  - o Do you feel that you have got a fair deal in life so far?
  - o Should life treat you fairly? Why/why not?
  - o What supports/help do you feel that you need to reach your goals?
  - o How do you feel about being a young person growing up in Ireland at present?   **Anything else you would like to add?**

Appendix IV
Questionnaire for the Western Network Youthreach Coordinators

1. What is your understanding of the term 'Mental Health?

   [   ]

2. Please underline/ highlight, on a scale of 1-10 (1 being very little and 10 being extremely high) how would you rate the level of mental health related issues that are currently prevalent among the young people in your centre?

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. List the top 5 mental health issues that you consider relevant to your centre.
   (Please rank in order of significance; 1 being the most common occurring and so on).

   i.

   ii.

   iii.

   iv.

4. How long has the SPHE programme been in operation in your centre?

   [   ]

5. How would you describe the effectiveness of the SPHE programme in meeting the particular needs of the participants in your centre, in relation to mental health issues?

   [   ]

6. Has the current standard SPHE programme been adapted/ customised in any way for your particular centre? Explain if necessary?

   [   ]

7. Are there additional mental health programme(s) available in your centre?

Yes ☐   No ☐

8. If yes, could you describe/name the programme(s)?

┌───┐
│   │
└───┘

9. Would you consider your current mental health programme(s) an integral part of the ethos of the centre or as stand-alone programme(s)? Explain?

┌───┐
│   │
│   │
└───┘

10. In your opinion have the programme(s) been developed as a proactive or reactive measure? Explain?

┌───┐
│   │
│   │
└───┘

11. Is there a mental health policy available in your centre?

Yes ☐   No ☐

12. In your opinion, would you consider a mental health policy a necessary addition to the policies already in place in the centre? Explain.

┌───┐
│   │
└───┘

13. As coordinator, do you deal with mental health issues in your centre? Please expand?

Yes ☐   No ☐   Depends ☐

┌───┐
│   │
└───┘

14. On average, on a daily basis, how much of your time is spent dealing with issues pertaining to Mental Health, or if other staff members are involved please provide information on their role and average time spent on mental health issues per day.

```

```

15. Would you consider gender to be a factor in relation to who may deal with issues pertaining to mental health in your centre? Please expand?

```

```

16. Does your centre work with outside agencies in relation to mental health issues?

Yes ☐   No ☐

17. If yes, could you name them and give some indication of level of relationship/referrals that occur, if any?

```

```

18. In addition to the above question, do you receive reports/documents/details of students mental health issues prior to their entry to the programme, or, are these issues identified while the student is attending the programme? Please give details?

```

```

19. Do you feel sufficiently trained, supported, and supervised to handle the unique demands of mental health issues in your centre?

```

```

20. In particular, has there been any suicide related issues among the young people enrolled in your centre, and if so, what have been the procedures in these instances?

```

```

21. Does your centre have a written plan describing how to respond to the mental health needs of students after a crisis or accident at the centre, such as a death of a student, family member or staff member? Expand if necessary.

Yes ☐   No ☐

[ ]

22. Is your centre/ VEC involved in developing and implementing training and educational activities for staff members on the identification, and behaviour management of social/emotional/behavioural problems in students?

[ ]

23. What would you like to see implemented in your centre in relation to Mental Health.

[ ]

24. Any additional Comments?

[ ]

THE END!

Thank you sincerely for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire.

Kathriona McHugh

Appendix V
Parent consent form

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Kathriona McHugh, I am a tutor in a Youthreach centre in County Galway. I am currently a student in Maynooth University (NUIM), undertaking a doctoral programme. I am proposing to carry out my research in the Youthreach centre that your child is attending.

I am doing research on students' opinions of the Youthreach programmes. My research will include a student group discussion on the their thoughts of being an early school leaver and I am interested in asking the students about their experiences of attending Youthreach and what they think of the programme. The research will take place on one day that will be agreed by the centre coordinator. It is important that students are given the opportunity to voice their opinions in order to inform Youthreach Centres about best practice for the future.

The students will remain anonymous in my written report and any work samples used will not include their names. Students will be referred to as a letter/number or given a false name in the research.

If you have any questions regarding my research project, feel free to contact me through the Youthreach Centre. Also, I will be asking each student to fill out their own consent form, if they are willing to be part of the research.

Yours sincerely,

Kathriona McHugh

Please complete the bottom portion of this letter and return it to me by (date).

Student's name _____

Parent's/ Guardian's signature _____

My child can participate in this research project.

YES ____ NO ____

Appendix VI
Student Consent form

Dear Student,

I am currently undertaking research in the area of student experiences in Youthreach for a Doctorate programme in Maynooth University (NUIM). The purpose of the study is to present students' perspectives of their experiences of the Youthreach programme.

I work in a Youthreach Centre and I am interested in students' thoughts and opinions of the programmes. I plan to conduct a small discussion class with a group of students. The discussion will focus on your journey to becoming a Youthreach student, and your thoughts and experiences of the programme. You will have an opportunity to present your thoughts on paper or by talking on a one to one basis. The discussion or the interview should not take too long.

I can guarantee that all information provided in the discussion is strictly confidential and all names will be changed to conceal identity.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. If you are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form set out below.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Kathriona McHugh

Appendix VII
Letter to the Coordinators of the Youthreach Centres

Dear Coordinator,

Further to our recent conversation with regard my research proposal on conducting a small focus group discussion on learners' experiences of Youthreach with a group of students in your centre. I would like to formally ask for your permission to carry out the research with a group of students who are willing to participate in the study.

The discussion will be informal and will involve asking the students some general questions in relation to their opinions and experiences of the Youthreach programme in general. A variety of methods may be used to capture their responses, including chatting, writing and art work. I feel that this will be a beneficial research for centres as it gives students an opportunity to voice their opinions on the programmes, potentially identifying areas of insufficiency or advancement. These may be instructive in terms of centre evaluations or implementing improvements as outlined by the Inspectorate reports.

I am seeking your permission to carry out recorded sessions in the centre at a time that is convenient for you and the participants. I will be asking parents/guardians and the students to sign a consent form that I have attached overleaf, for your attention.

Thanking you in advance for your support,

Yours sincerely,

Kathriona McHugh.

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

I confirm that I have been given and have read and have understood the information sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.

I am willing to participate in this research. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

I understand that the researcher (Kathriona McHugh) will hold all data collected securely and in confidence and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law).

I understand that the researcher (Kathriona McHugh) may use a piece of work that I created during the research as a sample for other centres or research publications in the future.

I agree to participate in the discussion   ↑   ☐

I agree to the use of voice recording during the discussion   ☐

I agree to the use of voice recording during the interview   ↑ ☐

I agree to my opinions being directly quoted in the research↑   ☐

I have read the above letter and completed the consent form

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Board of Management

Dear Board of Management for Youthreach _____

My name is Kathriona McHugh; I am a tutor in _____Youthreach.
I am currently a student of NUIM, undertaking a doctoral programme. I am
proposing to carry out my research in a number of Youthreach Centres focusing on
the area of the web wheel mentoring process.

The research will take the form of small discussion groups with a number of students
who are involved in the mentoring process. I am hopeful that at least 10 students
from the centre will participate in the research. I plan to carry out the research within
the centre at a time and date that is convenient for them. This research may be of
benefit to the centre in review of the mentoring programme and it has the potential of
informing other centres that do not offer the programme an insight into students'
experiences of the process.

I understand that all information collected from individuals will be done with duly
informed consent from the participating individuals and that participant can refuse
involvement with no negative consequences for said individual.

I would be grateful if you would consider the acceptance of this research proposal. I
have enclosed copies of the relevant documentation of informed consent that will be
issued to parents/guardians and students. If you require additional information,
please do not hesitate to contact me at the details listed below.

Yours sincerely,

Kathriona McHugh