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An Examination of the Societal and Individual Effects of Early School Leaving in the Irish Context, Focusing on Sundays Well Life Centre as an Example of Alternative Education

Órlaith Healy

CARL Research Project

Name of student(s):	Órlaith Healy
Name of civil society organization/community group:	The Life Centre- Sundays Well, Cork.
Supervisor(s):	Claire Edwards & Feilim O'hAdhmaill
Name and year of course:	Masters of Social Work: Year Two
Date completed:	18th April 2012

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- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
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Executive summary

Background to the Study

The Sundays Well Life Centre is an alternative educational facility which provides educational support for second-level early school leavers. The Life Centre works in line with the mainstream second-level curriculum, providing educational services for both males and females aged between twelve and sixteen years who have been excluded from, or have chosen to leave mainstream education.
The ethos of the Life Centre incorporates the SERVOL model (Services Volunteered for All) as its main approach to education. SERVOL is an empowerment approach that attempts to support individuals to make positive changes on a personal and community level, and utilises its own terminology to describe is basic philosophy and method of the approach.
This study examines both the societal and individual effects of early school leaving and the role of alternative education services for young people in Ireland, focusing on the Life Centre as an example of alternative education.

Objectives

The overall objectives of this study were to;

- Identify the societal and individual effects of early school leaving.
- To review previous literature and Irish government and EU policies on the topic of early school leaving.
- To examine the school and school structure factors associated with early school leaving.
- To compare and contrast early school leaver's experience of alternative and mainstream education, focusing on the Life Centre as an example of alternative education.
- To make recommendations based on the research projects findings.

Methodology

In this research project a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology were employed. These theoretical approaches were chosen as they were considered most appropriate for the exploratory nature of the research. Secondary research was undertaken in the form of a literature review, which informed the analysis of the data collected. As part of the primary research, five semi-structured interviews were undertaken. The data obtained was analysed through the process of content analysis, with each of the five interviews being transcribed into verbatim written format and thematically reviewed. Through this process key themes which linked the participants were identified. This process involved intensive review of transcripts, so as to ensure all potential links were made.

Results

During data analysis three main structural factors were identified as contributing to the research participants exit from mainstream education. These three factors were identified as; class size, student-teacher relationship and experience of school support. These factors were analysed by the researcher, with both new and previously reviewed literature being introduced to comprehensively analyse the research findings.

Through an extensive literature review the individual implications of early school leaving were explored. The information gathered illustrated the many dimensions associated with early school leaving, highlighting the negative societal and individual implications of early school leaving. Reduced government investment in education was also identified by the researcher, with its negative implications explored.

Recommendations

From the researcher's examination of the Life Centres curriculum, and also visiting the centre, the researcher believes that increased investment in the Life Centre would allow the centre to adopt the Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) programme, with increased investment allowing the centre to employ additional teaching staff in order to cover the LCA curriculum. The researcher believes that this would allow the organisation to cater for a wider school leaver population.
A strong theme to emerge for the author's secondary and primary research is the relationship aspect of early school leaver's school experience, with student–teacher relationships and issues of support, being explored by the researcher. The researcher feels that increased investment and development of guidance provision in second-level schools could work to provide an outlet for students experiencing difficulty. The researcher also recommends the expansion of the guidance counsellor's role, to allow equal focus on the emotional and supportive needs of the student, as well as career and subject guidance. The researcher feels that the benefits of such provisions would work to reduce early school leaving.

Author's conclusions

In conclusion, this study has fulfilled its aims and objectives and answered its core research questions. The principal findings in this study relate to the structural inadequacies of Ireland's mainstream education model, as identified through a literature review and primary research. The researcher then examined the Life Centre as an example of alternative education, comparing how the identified structural inadequacies of the participants' previous school compared with the Life Centre. An area of concern for the researcher is the reduced level of investment in second-level education, particularly in areas of guidance provision and support. Through both the researcher's literature review and primary research, low levels of support have been identified as impacting negatively on students school experience, and have been found to contribute to early school leaving.

Chapter Summaries

- **Chapter one**: Introduction

- **Chapter two** will examine the methodologies and methods used by the researcher in undertaking this research project. The theoretical perspectives as well as data collection and data analysis methods will be examined. Limitations and ethical considerations will also be highlighted.

- **Chapter three** will provide a systematic literature review of this topic area. The chapter will provide a brief overview of the perceived causes of early school leaving in the Irish context, with a particular focus on the individual effects of leaving school early.

- **Chapter four** will present the findings and analyse the data. The data will be analysed thematically, presenting and analysing data with literature reviewed from chapter two.

- **Chapter five** will draw conclusions from the themes which were analysed. It will also go on to make recommendations to the Life Centre.

Declaration

Research Title: An Examination of the Societal and Individual Effects of Early School Leaving in the Irish Context, Focusing on Sundays Well Life Centre as an Example of Alternative Education.

Student: Orlaith Healy

Student Number: 107548958

This Dissertation was submitted to University College Cork in part fulfilment of a Masters of Social Work (MSW) and as part of the Science Shop programme

April 2012

Supervisor: Claire Edwards

Science Shop Mentor: Feilim O'hAdhmaill

I hereby declare this thesis is my own work. I also declare that all names have been changed to protect the identity of all individuals involved in the research.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank the pupils of the Life Centre, past and present, who agreed to take part in this research project. I appreciated your honesty and openness and it was a pleasure to work with you all. I must also thank Maire De Barra, Leaving Certificate co-ordinator from the Life Centre, for answering e-mails, sourcing participants and teaching me about the organisation and the work they do. It has all been greatly appreciated.

I would also like to extend my gratitude and appreciation to my tutor Pat Lenihan, my research supervisor Claire Edwards and mentor Feilim O'hAdhmail, for all of the assistance and feedback they have afforded me throughout the research process.
I would also like to thank the Science Shop committee for allowing me to undertake this research project; I have enjoyed the experience.

Abstract

This research project examines the societal and individual effects of early school leaving (ESL); looking at the role of alternative education services for young people in Ireland, focusing on the Life Centre (LC) as an example of alternative education. Through primary research the contribution of school structure to ESL is examined. In the project two primary search strategies were used in order to achieve the researchers identified aims. The two strategies are secondary research, in the form of a literature review, and primary research, in the form of five semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study illustrate the negative effects of ESL, and the contribution of school structure to ESL. The study recommends increased investment in second-level education, in order to prevent young people from leaving school early. The lack of support identified as being present in mainstream second-level schools was also found to be a contributing factor in many young people's decision to leave school early. From the researcher's examination of the LC curriculum the researcher believes that increased investment in the LC would allow for the adoption of the LCA programme, which would enable the organisation cater to a wider school leaving population. The researcher also feels that increased investment and development of guidance provision in second-level schools could work to provide an outlet for students experiencing difficulty. The researcher believes that this would allow for the enhanced provision of guidance counsellors to students in both the junior and senior cycle. The researcher feels that the benefits of such provisions would work to reduce ESL in Ireland.

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Glossary of Abbreviations

CSO- Civil Society Organisation

ESL- Early School Leaving/ Early School Leavers

ESRI- Economic Social Research Institute

EU- European Union

LC- Life Centre

LCA- Leaving Certificate Applied

MSW- Masters of Social Work

NESSE- Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education & Training

SS- Science Shop

SES- Socio Economic Status

TUI –Teachers Union of Ireland

UCC- University College Cork

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Research

The legal definition of early school leaving (ESL) is described as: *"non-participation in school before reaching the age of 16 years, or before completing three years post-primary education, whichever is later"* (Citizens Information, 2012). The aim of this research is to critically examine the issue of ESL in the Irish context, focusing on the societal and individual effects of ESL in Ireland. The research also examines the individual experience of those who attend alternative education facilities, focusing on the Life Centre as an example of alternative education. In doing so the researcher aims to provide factual research regarding ESL in Ireland.

1.2 The Life Centre-Sundays Well Cork

The Sundays Well Life Centre (LC) is an educational project designed for second-level ESLs. The LC provides educational services for both males and females aged between twelve and sixteen who have been excluded from, or who have dropped out of mainstream education[1]. Some students may be out of school for several years, while others come directly from their previous school. The length of enrolment for a student at the LC can vary from a few months to three or four years. The students are referred to the LC by a variety of agencies, including schools, social workers, courts (in instances of non-attendance) and parents (Morley, 2005). Students are educated in-line with Ireland's post-primary curriculum, achieving Junior and Leaving Certificate qualifications.

The ethos of the LC incorporates the SERVOL[2] model as its main approach to education. SERVOL utilises its own terminology to describe the basic philosophy and method of the approach. The three key philosophies of the model are:

- A philosophy of ignorance: when working with individuals, one should not presume one knows what is best, as everyone is individual, and as individuals lead different lives.
- Attentive listening: you should listen attentively to what people tell you, as their voice is most important in their own development.

[1] Mainstream Education/ A Mainstream School are any school that principally meets the needs of pupils who do not have special educational needs. Definition obtained from http://www.encyclo.co.uk/define/Mainstream%20School

[2] SERVOL- Services Volunteered for All. SERVOL is an empowerment approach that attempts to support individuals to make positive changes on a personal and community level. Further information on the SERVOL model can be accessed at http://www.servoltt.com/history.html.

- Respectful intervention: when helping a person, it must be done respectfully, with the individuals respect and understanding (SERVOL, 2012).

Within the context of the SERVOL model the LC offers its students a more holistic approach to education, by recognising the importance of personal development as well as academic achievement.

One of the main features of the LC is its small class size, with a student teacher ratio of one to one at Junior Certificate level, and two to one at Leaving Certificate level. This is in contrast with the minimum student teacher ratio of 24 to one in most mainstream second-level schools (ASTI, 2012). The organisation feels that small class sizes and low student-teacher ratio allows teaching staff to build better relationships with their students. Within the LC there is a focus on the socialisation and support of their students through the difficult times in their lives. The centres adoption of the SERVOL model, small class size and innovative approach to teaching, aim to provide students with flexible learning opportunities in a supportive learning environment (Barrett & O'Shea, 2011).

1.3 Science Shop

This piece of research was undertaken as part of the Science Shop (SS) run by the School of Applied Social Studies based in University College Cork (UCC). The SS is a community based research initiative which is facilitated by lecturers at UCC. In essence, SSs are a service provided by research institutes to civil society organisations (CSOs) in their region. This research is carried out free of charge by students as part of their curriculum. In this instance, this research project was submitted in partial fulfilment of a Masters in Social Work (MSW) (UCC, 2012).

This research project has been undertaken in partnership with the LC. In the initial proposal received, the LC wished to focus on five aspects of ESL. Due to time and volume constraints, it was decided it would not be possible to look at all five areas identified by the organisation. Following consultations and meetings with the CSOs research co-ordinator, it was decided to examine the societal and individual effects of ESL in the Irish context. During these consultations a research strategy was agreed between the CSO and the researcher. The participatory role of the CSO in this research project will be further examined in Chapter Three.

1.4 Rationale

The researcher applied to undertake a SS project as it involves completing a meaningful piece of research in conjunction with a CSO. It was felt by the researcher that through collaboratively working

with a CSO, the researcher would also be afforded the opportunity to further develop their own negotiation, research and interviewing skills.

Most researchers agree that ESL results from a complex interaction among individual, family, school, and societal factors, with individual and family factors being the major focus of research studies and intervention programs (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). As a result of this, the vast majority of ESL prevention programmes focus on students and families rather than school related factors (Dupper & Davis, 2004). The purpose of this research project is to both outline the societal and individual effects of ESL as identified through a literature review, and explore the school factors that may contribute to an individual's decision to leave school early. Wehlage & Rutter (1986) argue that one of the potential benefits of focusing on school related factors is that, unlike individual background characteristics, they can be changed. The research gathered will be used by the LC to illustrate their work with students in their facility, and to explore the benefits the organisation as perceived by their students.

1.5 Aim

Using the LC as an example of alternative education, the aim of this research project is to examine both the societal and individual effects of ESL, and the role of alternative education services for young people in Ireland.

1.6 Objectives

The following are the objectives of this research project.

1. To identify the societal and individual effects of ESL.
2. To review previous literature and Irish government and EU policies on the topic of ESL.
3. To examine both school and school structure factors associated with ESL.
4. To compare and contrast ESLs experience of alternative and mainstream education, focusing on the LC as an example of alternative education.
5. To make recommendations based on the research project's findings.

1.7 Research Questions

Throughout the research process and the initial research stages, specific research questions and issues emerged which were further refined in the course of developing the research design. The main research questions are summarised below:

1. What are the individual and societal consequences of ESL in the Irish context?

2. What are the current government policies in place to deal with the issue of ESL in Ireland?

3. What structural factors contributed to the LC participants' exit from their previous mainstream school?

4. How did the participants' experience of alternative educational interventions, such as the LC, compare to their previous mainstream school experience?

1.8 Relevance to Social Work Practice

The benefits of social work research include an opportunity for the researcher to develop a more detailed understanding of social problems, and gain insight into themes relating to policy, legislation and political, economic and cultural dynamics (Carey; 2009). The research undertaken in this dissertation is primarily concerned with education structure and young peoples' experience of ESL, as opposed to social work development. While the research does not provide a direct link to social work practice in the form of implications for practitioner development, the research is relevant due to the participant base it examines, with many young people who leave school early coming into contact with social work services (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Therefore, it can be argued that an understanding and knowledge of the factors contributing to and the effects of ESL are essential for social work practitioners. The process of undertaking a SS research project in itself draws comparison to social work practice, as the process of working with a CSO involves negotiation, interview and delegation skills.

1.9 Chapter Summaries

Chapter One: Introduction to research. This chapter has briefly outlined the research project, including an outline of the content of the chapters to follow.

Chapter Two: will examine the methodologies and methods used by the researcher in undertaking this research project. The theoretical perspectives as well as data collection and data analysis methods will be examined with scrutiny. Limitations and ethical considerations will also be highlighted.

Chapter Three: will provide a systematic literature review of the topic area. The chapter will provide a brief overview of the perceived causes of ESL in the Irish context, with a particular focus on the individual effects of ESL.

Chapter Four: will present the findings and analyse the data. The data will be analysed thematically, presenting and analysing data with literature reviewed from chapter two.

Chapter Five: will make recommendations in light of the data analysed and in keeping with the theoretical framework adopted.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research topic; explained the rationale by providing some background and context for the study; outlined aims, objectives and research questions; and illustrated a chapter outline. The next chapter will review the literature in more detail, providing a basis for the research project.

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Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Previous research on the topic of early school exit continues to make the observation that ESL comprises a rather heterogeneous set of pathways and is far more complex once we try to find the causal chains involved (Schargel and Smink, 2001). In assessing the risks surrounding ESL, previous studies suggest that it is futile and overly simplistic to search for cause-effect relationships between single risk factors and school incompletion (McGrath, 2009). Therefore the purpose of this chapter is not to look at the characteristics of the population of people who leave school early, or create generalisations regarding ESLs. The purpose of this chapter is to outline key findings and research on ESL, in order to inform the reader of the individual and societal consequences of ESL. This chapter will also examine factors that contribute to a young person's decision to leave school early.

2.2 Individual Effects of Early School Leaving

Much of the research undertaken in the area of ESL focuses on its individual implications. The Early School Leavers Report (2010) states that ESLs are found to experience disadvantages in relation to access to further education, training, employment chances, employment quality and broader social outcomes, such as social exclusion (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

The report found that in terms of employment opportunities, people who leave school early are more likely to experience unemployment than their more highly educated counterparts in the immediate and post school period (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Research by the NESSE[3] corresponds with the findings of Byrne & Smyth (2010), finding that individual consequences of ESL include; low employment prospects, an increased likelihood of being social welfare dependent and a shorter life expectancy (NESSE, 2010). Such findings are found to be concerning when correlated with a report by the European Parliament, whose research on Europe's future skills requirements suggest that in the future, only one in ten jobs will be within reach of an ESL (Nevala, Hawley & Stokes, 2011).

[3] NESSE: Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education & Training.

2.2.1 Drug and Alcohol Misuse

The ESRI[4] also found that instances of crime, violence, alcohol and drug misuse, and suicide have been found to be significantly higher among ESLs (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Foster (2000) believes that one of the factors contributing to ESLs engaging in alcohol and drug misuse is a lack of knowledge and information. Previous research has shown that when a young person is removed from school they are less likely to receive education about drugs and alcohol, and are generally found not to have the same level of social awareness as their peers who remain in education. Complete exclusion from education can therefore work to increase the young person's likelihood of engaging in alcohol and drug misuse (Foster, 2000).

2.2.2 Early School Leaving & Engagement with the Criminal Justice System.

Research in the area of ESL has also found a connection between ESL and an increased propensity for engagement in criminal activity. One such piece of research was carried out by the alternative education organisation Youth Reach, who found that a high number of prisoners in Mount Joy prison were ESLs (Youth Reach, 2009). Ball & Connolly (2000) also believe that a number of young people offend and come to the attention of the criminal justice system following exclusion from school. As a result of this, many young people could face marginalisation and social exclusion from society in later adulthood.

ESL is of significant concern because it is identified as a fundamental contributory factor to social exclusion later in life. Lonergan (2012) believes that ESL can work as a catalyst for a myriad of negative life outcomes, arguing that ESL first leads to exclusion from the school community, resulting in exclusion from peers and those who may influence them positively. Lonergan argues that this eventually works to socially exclude the young person, and increase their potential for engaging in criminal activity (2012). He highlights the importance of early intervention, stating that young people must be intervened with before they leave formal education, believing that schools and educators are in the best possible position to impact on a young person positively, to build self-esteem, impart social values and teach young people resilience (Lonergan, 2012).

2.3 Factors associated with Early School Leaving

The reasons why young people leave school early vary depending on one's perception of whether ESL is the result of individual failure or failure of the system. Research by Byrne & Smyth (2010) found

[4] ESRI: Economic Social Research Institute.

that many young people identified an inability to cope in mainstream education as one of the main reasons for their early school exit. This inability to cope in mainstream education is also open to structural, familial and individual discourse (NESSE, 2010).

2.3.1 Socio-economic Factors and Early School Leaving

When one looks at the individual ESL, the individuals social class and socio-economic status (SES) are often highlighted as contributing to early school exit (see Ryan, 2000, Johnston, 2009, James, 2005). Given the vast research done in this area, and with respect to the CSOs desire not to focus on this link, literature discussing the possible contribution of SES and social class to ESL will not be discussed in this research project.

However, through the course of the literature review the researcher obtained a study by Darmody et al., (2007) on truancy in Irish secondary schools. The study identifies school social mix as being predictive of truancy patterns, with those attending disadvantaged schools found to be significantly more likely to absent themselves, while those attending fee-paying schools were found to be less likely (Darmody et al., 2007). The study also indicates that high truancy rates among working-class students are partly accounted for by the fact that they attend predominantly working-class schools (ibid).

Within the above study, analyses were conducted to explore whether there was an interaction between individual and school social class. The results found that truancy rates among middle-class students who attend disadvantaged schools were high; indicating that the structure and ethos of the institution or school dominate over the individuals social class. The findings from the study suggest that the school one attends, more so than the individuals social class, impact on whether a young person absents from school (Darmody et al., 2007).

2.3.2 Education Structure and Early School Leaving

McGrath (2009) argues that the current mainstream model of education does not incorporate the lived realities and pressing concerns of young people in contemporary society. McGrath further argues that the model needs to be flexible and embrace the contingencies and dynamic ways of living and learning among young people (ibid).

As identified by Darmody et al., (2007) school structure, or school habitus, can influence whether or not a young person leaves school early. Robinson (2010) is an internationally recognised leader in the development of education, creativity and innovation. In his lectures, he criticises the current model and

structure of education that is prevalent across Europe. Robinson contests that the current model of education is outdated and was conceived and developed in a different economic, intellectual and cultural era (ibid).

Robinson (2010) argues that the current system of education is modelled on the interests, and in the image of industrialisation, and that schools are organised on factory lines; with ringing bells, uniformed clothing and separate teaching facilities. Robinson's argument highlights the apparent rigidity of the current model of education that he believes exists internationally. Robinson argues that this production line model of education incorporates a model of learning that is rooted in conformity and standardisation (2010). Robinson also argues that this model leaves little room for variation, stating that some people learn better in small groups while others learn better at different times of the day (2010).

In a 2010 Oireachats report on the subject of ESL, similar criticisms of the current model of education were found; with the report arguing that structural inadequacies within Ireland's current education model are exacerbating the problem of ESL. The report criticises the Irish model of second-level education, stating that it does not equally facilitate all young people to grow, demonstrate or realise their full range of talents or skills (Healy-Eames et al., 2010). The report also states that the current model is a major contributing factor to ESL, particularly among males (Healy-Eames et al., 2010). The report also argues that the exam based system does not suit all young people, causing many young people to subsequently leave school early (ibid). Similarly, many of the reports participants criticised the curriculum and assessment model present in second-level schools, with a consensus that a more balanced, practical, and real-life curriculum was needed. A preference for continuous assessment over terminal examinations were also expressed (Healy-Eames et al., 2010).

2.3.3 Provision of Support in Mainstream Secondary Schools

Within the Oireachtas report (2010) are recommendations for on-going professional and educational development for teachers. This is proposed in order to better equip teachers to identify behaviours among students which are indicative of underlying problems. Such training and development would help teachers better interpret and deal with student behaviours, such as acting out, withdrawal, bullying and sensitive issues such as suicidal ideation or sexuality confusion (Healy-Eames et al., 2010).

Similarly, in a study carried out by Ryan (2000) on the provision of guidance and support services for ESLs, evidence was found to suggest that young people in second-level schools need higher levels of support than are currently afforded to them. On reflection of their school experience, the respondents in the study (ESLs) felt that they had been failed by the current system which is present in second-level

schools, as it did not offer adequate support for the complex kinds of issues which they were experiencing (Ryan, 2000).

2.4 Implications of Early School Leaving

While ESL is primarily an individual experience, one must also acknowledge the enormous fiscal and social costs it creates for society. With regard to this, in this section the author will outline the societal effects of ESL, focusing in particular on its economic cost.

2.4.1 The Economic Cost of Early School Leaving

When examining the social cost of ESL, one cannot disregard its monetary implications, with research carried out by the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI, 2009) highlighting the fiscal cost of ESL. The research estimates that of every group of students that commences first year of secondary school each year, the numbers who do not complete the Leaving Certificate will end up costing the state €4bn over a 40 year working life, or €100m per year (ibid). ESL or inadequate educational attainment also generates large public and social costs in the form of lower income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of public services such as healthcare, criminal justice and social benefit payments (NESSE, 2010). In Ireland, the annual cost to the state in benefits, together with lost tax revenue per male ESL, has been estimated at €29, 300, even before costs associated with health are considered (Nevala et al., 2011, p.12). Such figures are a cause of concern for government and policy makers, when you consider that the current rate of early school exit in the EU is estimated at 16.3% of boys and 12.5% of girls (European Commission, 20112, p.5).

Countries with high levels of early school exit struggle to maintain high levels of employment and social cohesion (European Commission, 20111). Such countries will also struggle to compete in the global marketplace and will face a constraint in the achievement of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, which is the main priority of the Europe 2020 Strategy. To reduce the European rate of ESL by just one percentage point would provide the European economy with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees each year (European Commission; 2011)[2].

2.5 Irish Policy

Within Ireland two primary sets of measures have been introduced to address ESL; curricular reform and targeted funding for schools catering to disadvantaged populations. In terms of curricular reform, the period since the mid-1990s has seen the introduction of two programmes targeting students

potentially at risk of ESL (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). At junior cycle the Junior Certificate School Programme has been introduced; which emphasises cross curricular work, using teamwork among teachers, basic skills development, and personal and social development. At senior cycle the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was introduced and specifically aimed at young people who are at risk of early school exit, with the curriculum consisting of general and vocational education. Research on the LCA programme by Banks et al., (2010) indicates that many young people attribute their staying in second-level education to the programme, however young people who complete the LCA may experience restricted access to third level institutions, as accreditation is based on a credits system and not the standardised points system that is required for the majority of third level institutions (Citizens Information, 2012).

The Education Act (1998) defines educational disadvantage as: *"...the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools"* (Government of Ireland, 1998, Section 32:9). This definition of educational disadvantage is used as the frame of reference for the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Education in Schools) programme, which focuses on young people between the ages of four-18 who are at risk of ESL. The initiative works by providing selected schools with funds to develop appropriate intervention strategies. The action plan is focused on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

However, within the Irish Governments 2012 Budget, proposed cuts outlined aim to save €132.3m (Department of Finance, 2012, p.16). Within the measures outlined is a requirement for second-level schools to manage guidance provision within their existing pupil-teacher ratio, which is estimated to save €10.4m (ibid). The TUI believes that student dis-affection and ESL could increase the result of this *"ever-diminishing support framework for students"* (TUI, 2012 [Online][5]). According to the TUI, the proposed reduction in guidance provision will come into effect in September 2012, resulting in a loss of guidance support for students and increases in class size (TUI, 2012). One cannot ignore the effect of the current recession on educational policy and provision, with reduced government investment in education affecting services which are already present.

[5] Quote obtained from TUI webpage. Accessed via: http://www.tui.ie/press-releases/guidance-cut-will-have-disproportionate-effect-on-most-disadvantaged.1735.html.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter research from both Ireland and Europe has been used to examine the individual and societal effects of ESL. The research findings portray predominantly negative consequences ESL. While attempts were made, the researcher found it difficult to obtain literature stating otherwise.

A primary finding from the literature review is the structural influences on ESL, in particular the rigid nature of the current educational model.

From the review it is evident that ESL is an important issue for both Irish and European policy makers, with the long term social and economic consequences having the potential to impact negatively on future economies.

The findings from this literature review will be used to illustrate, analyse and discuss the findings of the researcher's primary research in chapter four.

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Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction to the Chapter

According to Miller & Brewer (2003) methodology connotes a set of rules and procedures to guide research, and against which its claims can be evaluated. In this chapter the theoretical framework and methodology employed in this study will be outlined. The methods utilised in this research are namely a literature review and qualitative semi-structured interviews. The analysis of this data will also be discussed. Consideration will be given towards ethical issues regarding research sample, consent and confidentiality, as well as the limitations of this research project.

3.2 Methodology

According to Kumar (2005) the two main methodological approaches to research inquiry are classified as quantitative or qualitative research. Padgett (1998) explains that qualitative research methods are inherently inductive; they seek to discover, not to test or explain theories, and are *"naturalistic in that they favour observation and interviewing of respondents over scientific enquiry*" (Padgett, 1998, p.2). Kumar (2005) advises that the choice of whether to employ a quantitative or qualitative methodology is dependent on the researcher's aim of inquiry and use of research findings. As the aim of the research was to explore the individual and societal effects of ESL, and ESLs experience of alternative education, a qualitative methodology was undertaken, as this approach emphasises in-depth analysis, focusing on the individual.

3.3 Theoretical Perspectives

Ontology explores the nature of social reality, what kinds of things can be said to exist and in what ways (Miller & Brewer, 2003). The ontological perspective that the researcher adopts comes from constructivism. According to Chamaz (2006, p.187) constructivist inquiry starts by looking at *"the experience and how members construct it"*. The role of the constructivist is to then enter the phenomenon, gain multiple perspectives, and locate it within its web of connections and constraints (ibid).

A constructivist position suggests that social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore a constructivist ontological position is appropriate for this study, as the study focuses on the individual effects of ESL and examines the educational experiences

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and interactions of the identified research participants. In this instance, the participants' dual experience of mainstream and alternative education with the LC is considered.

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and justification, how we know what we know (Miller & Brewer, 2003). Under the ontology of constructivism, the epistemology of this research is interpretivism. In utilising the interpretive methodology, researchers aim to understand the people they study on their own terms; to think in their concepts and feel in their values. These experiences are then translated into the conceptual categories and values of the researchers own system (Carey, 2009, p. 53). This theoretical approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to analyse the personal experiences and attitudes of each person interviewed, in order to interpret the structural factors identified by the participants as impacting on their early school exit.

3.4 Methods Undertaken

Padgett (2003) explains that qualitative methods are often used by the researcher when they wish to capture the lived experience from the perspectives of those who live it and create meaning from it, stating: *"when the researcher seeks to understand such experiences, qualitative methods are invariably the path to take"* (Padgett, 1998, p.8). These methods combined with a constructivist ontological position allowed the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the participant's experience of both mainstream education and education with the LC. The interpretive approach emphasises practice and actions, and requires the researcher to watch, listen, ask, record and examine (Charmaz, 2006). The interpretive approach also dictated what methods would be used in this study.

The methods used in the research project are both primary and secondary based. Primary research involves the collection of data from original sources (Robson, 2002). This was required in order to explore the participants' dual experience of education with the LC and their previous secondary school. Secondary research is the use of primary data which has already been processed and analysed (Robson, 2002). Secondary research was used to familiarise the researcher on the topic of ESL, review previous research in the area and further develop the researcher's initial research questions. Secondary research was also used to analyse the data collected, complimenting the researcher's primary data analysis. In this sense the methods used can be described as applied research as it involves both primary and secondary data (Carey, 2009).

3.5 Secondary Research: Literature Review

According to Kumar (2005, p.30) undertaking a literature review is one of the essential preliminary tasks in a research study, and involves the researcher *"reviewing existing literature in order to arm the researcher with the available body of knowledge on the chosen research topic".*

To ensure credibility of the literature reviewed, the researcher was mindful to use literature accessed from authentic and credible sources (Flick, 2009). The main literature identified for review were previous academic studies in the area of ESL, commissioned reports to government and nongovernment organisations, EU publications, legislative acts of government and official publications.

3.6 Search Strategy

The researcher used the UCC portal to access library catalogues, electronic journals and databases. A number of search engines were used to examine a wide range of these databases such as; SAGE, J-STOR, Taylor & Francis and Oxford online journals. Key search words associated with ESL were used, such as; 'truancy' 'absenteeism' 'education' & 'early school leaving'.

Websites were also used-namely citizen's information and Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) website to obtain current, up-to-date data. YouTube was also used to watch lectures and seminars from the EU and the USA on the topic of ESL. However these sources form a small minority of information reviewed.

3.7 Interview Type: Semi-Structured Interviews

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews contain a combination of both *"planned and pre-planned questions, with the latter allowing the interviewer some discretion to create new questions in response to the participants' answers"* (Carey, 2009, p. 113). Another important aspect of this interview style is that it allows space for the research participant to introduce topics or information that were not identified by the researcher.

The benefits of this interview approach is that it is less intrusive to those being interviewed, encourages two-way communication and allows room for those being interviewed to ask questions of the interviewer (Ruane, 2005). As acknowledged by Darlington and Scott (2002, p.48*) "the interview takes seriously the notion that people are experts on their own experience and so are best able to report how they understand their own experience".* This corresponds with the researchers own social

work values and use of the client centred approach, where clients are recognised as the expert in their own lives (Trevithick, 2010).

3.8 Sample selection

In basic terms, sampling is the process through which a sample is chosen (Carey, 2009). According to Kumar (2006, p.165) the significance of sampling in qualitative research is of diminished importance, as the main aim of qualitative inquiries is to explore or describe the *"diversity in a situation, phenomenon or issue"*. In qualitative research, the main forms of sampling pursued are primarily purposive, convenience or theoretical sampling, which involves selecting respondents based on their ability to provide information relating to the researchers questions, aims and objectives (Padgett, 1998). In this research project purposive sampling was used to identify research participants. Purposive sampling does not use randomization in its selection elements. In this method, study participants are handpicked by the researcher for the purpose of the particular study (Mark, 1996). From a research point of view, it is argued that non-probability samples are less desirable, as they do not use randomisation in their selection elements and therefore are often seriously biased (Carey, 2009). However, as the focus of the research project is on the experience of persons who attended education with the LC as a specific example of alternative education, it was imperative to the validity of the research that the participants identified were past pupils of the LC and met ethical and practical criteria, such as;

- Participant's must be aged over eighteen.
- Have previously attended education with the Life Centre.

In qualitative research sample size is often dictated by time and resource constraints, with sample sizes ranging from one to as many as the researcher requires (Padgett, 1998). UCC MSW research guidelines recommend a minimum of five participants are interviewed in completion of an MSW research project (School of Applied Social Studies, 2009). In accordance with UCC research guidelines, and time and resource constraints encountered, the sample number for this research was decided at five.

The research participants' were sourced by the LC. The LC approached a database of twenty past and current pupils who met the identified criteria. They were then advised of the research project and their participation was requested. The participants' interviewed range in age from 18-20 years.

Two past pupils and three current pupils of the LC were interviewed, with four males and one female participating. The subject of gender, and the over representation of males in ESL was not explored in this research project. The use of primarily male participants in this research sample was unplanned, as

the aim of the research project is not gender specific. The high number of males in the participant sample corresponds with previous research, indicating that patterns of ESL in Ireland differ significantly by gender, with the male population being over represented in ESL figures (Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Byrne, McCoy & Watson, 2008). As only one female participated, all the participants are referred to as males, so as to ensure the participant's anonymity.

3.9 Difficulties encountered

The initial aim of the research project was to specifically interview past pupils of the LC, as it was felt that this participant group would have a more reflective viewpoint, having left school and having no current links to the LC. However difficulty was encountered in sourcing participants to be interviewed, as many of the LCS past pupils were engaged in further education and living in locations outside of Cork, therefore unable to participate. This resulted in the researcher interviewing only two past pupils and three current pupils of the LC. As the purpose of the research was to examine the participants' educational experiences of their previous secondary school and the LC, the change in participant demographic did not result in a deviation from the authors initial research aims, questions or objectives. The difficulty encountered in sourcing participants resulted in the researcher deviating from the original interview timetable and postponing chapter deadlines. The researcher appreciates the difficulty faced by the CSO in sourcing participants, and recognises the difficulties encountered as a sometimes unavoidable component of the research process.

3.10 Data collection

The interviews were conducted in conjunction with the CSO, taking on board their advice and considering the research participants at all times. The interviews took place at the CSO location.

Prior to the interviews commencing, a copy of the interview schedule[6] was forwarded to the LC co-ordinator. The purpose of this was to allow time for review, and to ensure the CSO were aware of the topics which would be discussed in the interviews. Due to the young age of the participants (18-20) it was felt necessary by the researcher to do this, so as to allow the organisation opportunity to flag questions/topics which they felt may prove too sensitive or inappropriate to discuss. The interview schedule was also reviewed by the researcher's tutor and mentor to ensure the appropriateness, relevance and phrasing of the interview schedule.

3.11 Data Analysis

As the purpose of the research project was to explore the individual educational experiences of the research participants, the data obtained from the primary research was analysed through the lens of interpretivism, with the researcher identifying the structural factors associated with the participants' early school exit through interpretation of their accounts of education. The interviews were recorded using an Olympus dictating device. Permission for the use of a Dictaphone was obtained from the research participants prior to conducting the interviews.

The data obtained was analysed through the process of content analysis (Kumar, 2005). Each of the five interviews were transcribed into verbatim written format by the researcher and thematically reviewed. The researcher then identified key themes which linked the participants. This process involved intensive review of transcripts, so as to ensure all potential links were made.

Once the main themes were identified, the transcripts were again reviewed, with the researcher classifying the participant responses under the already identified themes. During the analysis process the transcripts worked as a visual aid, allowing the researcher to physically highlight and extract data. Secondary data was linked during the final phase of data analysis, with themes gathered from the interviews being assessed and linked with literature obtained through secondary research. New literature was also introduced during this process.

Padgett (1998, p.48) advises that the researcher *"must assume a reflexive stance, anticipating as much as possible how their qualities may impinge upon the research"*. Throughout the research process the researcher endeavoured to overcome the risk of interviewer bias by primarily focusing on the individual; on the attitudes and outcomes of the research participants.

3.12 Research Journal

A research journal was utilised throughout all stages of the research project; in both designing the research and analysing data. The journal was primarily used to record analytical notes and questions that arose for the researcher. The importance of the journal cannot be underestimated by the researcher, as it holds the blueprints of the research project.

3.13 Limitations

It is acknowledged that there were limitations within this research project. The research focused on two specific areas, namely the individual effects of ESL in the Irish context and the research participants'

[6] Please see: Appendix A

dual experience of mainstream education and education with the LC. This narrow focus excluded the views of the participants' parents and teaching staff from both the LC and the participants' previous secondary schools.

Due to time and volume constraints it was only feasible to conduct a small scale research project. The topic and area under examination were agreed by the researcher and the CSO in November 2011. As the location of the interview took place at the LC, it does raise questions as to how much freedom the participants felt they had to constructively criticise the LC. However due to the participatory nature of the research, the CSO location was agreed by both the researcher and the CSO as the most appropriate location, as the LC was both accessible and familiar to the participants.

The contribution of the participants' SES or personal histories was not examined. The decision not to focus on the participants' SES and personal history was agreed by the CSO & the researcher, with the CSO wishing not to focus on the link.

3.14 Ethical Considerations

Miller & Brewer (2003) state that ethical responsibility is essential at all stages of the research process, from the design of the study to how participants are recruited and treated throughout the course of the procedure, and the consequences of their participation.

The researcher received ethical approval from the UCC ethics committee prior to undertaking primary research. Due to the nature of the subject under discussion, the researcher was mindful of possible upset caused to participants in discussing their previous educational experience, with particular reference to their previous mainstream education experience. Padgett (1998) advises that the necessary arrangements should be made if the researcher proposes to enquire about emotion-laden topics. Provisions were made by the LC to ensure that a staff member was made available to speak with each participant after the interview, to ensure the participant's well-being and allow the participant an opportunity to de-brief if desired.

3.15 Informed Consent

Kumar (2005, p.212) states that *"in every discipline it is considered unethical to collect information without the knowledge of participants, and their expressed willingness and informed consent"*. Informed consent implies that the research participants are made aware of the type of information sought, the purpose of the study and the indirect and direct implications of their participation (ibid). On the day of the interview, the participants met with the researcher and were given an informed consent

document[7], which was reviewed and signed by the participants. The purpose of the interview was explained, with time allowed for questions.

3.16 Confidentiality

The identity of the research participants are known by the LC, the participants and the researcher alone. Once interviews were transcribed the researcher replaced all the participant names with pseudonyms and ensured any identifying information was omitted from the final report presented. Every attempt has been taken to disguise the participants throughout the data analysis phase. The co-ordinator of the LC was provided with a copy of the analysis chapter to review prior to publication to ensure anonymity.

It was decided by the researcher not to include a background description of the participants involved, as it was felt by the researcher that this would possibly make the participants too identifiable.

The transcripts and interview recordings obtained during data collection will be held for four months by the researcher. This four month window was established, should the researcher be required to re-submit the research project. After the four month window has ended, the interview recordings and transcripts will be destroyed by the researcher.

3.17 Conclusion

In this research project a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology are employed. These theoretical approaches were chosen as they were considered most appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study. Secondary research was undertaken in the form of a literature review, which informed the analysis of the data collected. As part of the primary research, five semi-structured interviews were undertaken. The analysis of data obtained from the interview process was also explained. Limitations were recognised and ethical considerations raised.

The data obtained from the author's primary research will be examined in the coming chapter.

[7] Please see: Appendix B

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Chapter Four: Presenting and Analysing the Data

4.1 Introduction

The information which was gathered during the data collection stage will be presented, analysed and discussed in this chapter. The data obtained is based on the accounts of five young people who were excluded from their previous mainstream school and are currently/ were previously engaged in education with the LC. The research considers the participants' previous mainstream education and how this compares to their educational experience with the LC.

During data analysis three main structural factors were identified as contributing to the participants exit from mainstream education. These three factors were identified as; class size, student-teacher relationship and experience of support. The data will be analysed thematically under the structural factors identified, with the findings supported by verbatim extracts from the participants. Reference will be made to data obtained in the previous literature review, with new literature also being introduced in order to better analyse the research findings.

4.2 Class Size

A consistent difficulty expressed by the participants, with regards to their previous mainstream school, was a difficulty concentrating in large classroom settings:

> *"There are no distractions and all that kind of stuff here [Life Centre], you know?"*
>
> *(Participant C)*

> *"...here, there's one teacher in front of you and its way better because you're learning one to one you're getting more out of it. There's no one to distract you and you can't distract yourself because you're in a room with one person…so ya'know…"*
>
> *(Participant B)*

> *"Over there in my old school, there were too many in the class and all that…I couldn't do it, I couldn't work like".*
>
> *(Participant E)*

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When explored, participant's advised they would become distracted by peers and friends talking to them. For some participants it was found that this resulted in misbehaviour and getting in trouble with teachers:

> *"Am…it would force you really, to mess around a bit more, because there was more people and they were all doing the same thing as you".*
>
> *(Participant C)*

The issue of distraction was a consistent difficulty described by the participants in working in a large class, with peers being identified as source of distraction by some of the participants:

> *"...it was quite fun going into class every day, meeting up with my friends and stuff; you'd have the laugh and the like".*
>
> *(Participant A)*
>
> *"...I find it easier to concentrate here [Life Centre]...over there [previous mainstream school], one person could talk to you and you'd be distracted for the whole class".*
>
> *(Participant B)*

While peers were alluded to in the participants' descriptions of school experience, overall the impact of peers/friends was not identified by the participants as having a major influence on either their exit from their previous secondary school or their attendance with the LC.

As identified in the Literature review, Robinson (2010) argues that the current mainstream model of education leaves very little room for variation, and does not accommodate for people who learn better in small groups or at different times of the day. It was evident from the interviews that many participants found the experience of working in the large classes of their previous mainstream school difficult, with the experience working to impact negatively on their school experience.

In contrast, the experience of working in the small classes of the LC was described as 'easier'. Due to the small number of students, some participants also found they were able to receive more support and assistance from teachers in LC:

> *"Let's say if you were asking the teacher a question over there [previous mainstream school], they couldn't answer you whenever you wanted, you know? There were too many people for them [teachers]".*
>
> *(Participant D)*

One participant described being unable to understand his homework at his previous mainstream school, and consistently looking for help from teachers:

"In the evenings I'd go home not understanding any of my homework... then you'd be going into school the next day trying to explain to the teacher that you didn't know what you were doing because they didn't explain it, that I asked for help and they didn't give it to me…it was hard like...."

(Participant E)

This created a cycle of the participant asking for help, becoming frustrated and being disciplined by his school. The participants' criticisms of not being afforded adequate teaching assistance can also be interpreted as a criticism of the school structure, with the large class sizes experienced at their previous mainstream schools being described by other participants as making it difficult for teachers to afford equal attention to students. Rudduck et al (1996) advise that a desire for academic achievement is a predominant feature of many young people, with a vast majority wishing to learn and succeed in school. The participants' criticisms of their previous schools' ability to assist them in class demonstrate the student's view of learning as a valuable activity.

It can also be argued that large class size may make it difficult for teachers to afford adequate assistance to students who may be struggling, either academically or personally. This was found to be the experience of many participants, with participants describing experiences of disengagement and misbehaviour when they did not understand what was being taught in class. This resulted in some participants falling behind in their coursework, creating a process of withdrawal from school, as described by one participant:

"They didn't do anything with me in the classroom at all. They used to sit me down the back, and basically I would just go to sleep like. That's all I'd do when I went to that school [previous mainstream]"

(Participant D)

The process of withdrawal is documented by Alexander & Entwisle (2001, p.760), who describe an individual's decision to leave school as a *"cumulative long-term process of disengagement from school"*. Evidence of this process was present in many participants' accounts of their previous mainstream experience.

Research by Nye et al., (2002) on the effects of class size on students' school exit, found virtually no evidence to suggest small classes are more beneficial than large classes. Through data analysis the researcher was unable to obtain literature that could definitively state whether small class-size is more beneficial than large class-size, with research on the area found to be subject to cultural and curricular variation. For example, in their research on perceived small-class benefits in the US, Pong & Pallas

(2001) identified small-class size as having positive effects on eight grade math achievement, while Milesi and Gamoran (2006) found no evidence of main class size effects on mathematics and reading achievement. However, from the participants interviewed in this study, class size was found to have a major influence on how they learn and why they left their previous secondary school.

4.3 Student-Teacher Relationship

While a vast majority of literature on ESL focuses on individual features and socio-economic factors, an often overlooked school factor is the quality of student-teacher relationships and their impact on students' success in school (Davis & Dupper, 2004). From the interviews, relationships with teachers was the most salient and consistently described feature of the participants' mainstream and LC educational experience, with the topic tending to take up more time than any other.

During the interview, participants were asked about their relationships with teachers at their previous mainstream school and at the LC. Variations were found in the student's acknowledgement of their own role in the student-teacher relationship, with some participants focusing on the teacher as the source of difficulty in the relationship. Alternatively, other participants focused on their own role as contributing to the difficult student-teacher relationship experienced, feeling that their misbehaviour and inability to work with certain teachers resulted in a strained relationship with teaching staff:

> *"They [teachers] hated me cause I used to give back cheek and have the laugh like....I never realised how serious my behaviour had gotten until I left..."*
>
> *(Participant C)*

In their research on ESL, Lee & Burkham (2003) found that students attending schools defined by more positive student-teacher relationships were less likely to drop-out, than those attending schools with less positive student-teacher relationships. In the Irish context, a number of studies identified differences between ESLs and school completers in terms of their orientation towards school life. One such study by McCoy & Smyth (2004) found that students who experienced predominantly negative interactions with teachers in the junior cycle were more likely to drop out, while those who viewed their school life as happy were less likely to drop out/leave school early (ESRI, 2010). Oakes (2005) also found that student retention was greater in schools where relations were found to be good between teachers and students.

Student-teacher relationships are a key feature of school life, it is therefore inevitable that the relationship affects, or at the very least plays a role in how young people learn. Relationship with teaching staff was indicated by the participants as having a significant impact on how they learn in

school. During the interview, the researcher asked the participants if they felt their relationships with teachers impacted on how they learned. The participants responded as follows:

"Yeah it does a bit…Because if you don't like them, you know, you'd get cheeky with them".

(Participant B)

"It affects everything, even how you learn..."

(Participant C)

"Yeah, because if there is a negative vibe between you and your teacher there's gonna be a clash in the work like".

(Participant E)

Willie (2000) found that teachers who both praise and display confidence in their students, set the foundations for the development of positive relationships, as well as positive learning experiences. It is argued that this type of positive regard can also work to motivate the student and develop a bond between teacher and student. As identified with small class size, positive student-teacher relationships were described by the participants as making learning with the LC easier in comparison with their previous mainstream school, making the students more inclined to attend school, and making it easier for students to work with teaching staff:

"Well you wouldn't be like a dog coming in here in the morning like really would ya? They're all sound like, dead on...there'd be no hassle coming in".

(Participant B)

"When you're here, you come and everyone's like 'hello' and they're all jolly, like they're gonna burst into a musical number, you know? [Laughs] that's just how jolly they are here...its handy coming in when you're coming into that like".

(Participant A)

It was found that this somewhat 'friend-like' view of teachers did not compromise the LCs staff role as authority figures, with a sense of respect towards LC staff conveyed by participants in their description of staff, with participants stating that they felt more inclined to do their work and obey rules in the LC as they respected staff more than in their previous school, as described by participants:

"...It's not a 'teacher student' relationship. On some levels it is, like they have the authority and they are the teachers and they are the ones in charge, but its equal and you'd respect them because of that".

(Participant E)

4.4 Effect of structural factors on student-teacher relationship: Language

A number of participants expressed a dislike for the structural formalities of their previous school, such as having to refer to teachers as 'sir' and 'miss';

> *"I can't stick calling people 'Miss' or 'Sir'. I can't stick that like. I feel its pure degrading or something. I think it's making them higher than us, making them higher than the student rather than 'the same as".*
>
> *(Participant C)*

Brantlinger (1995) found that schools with policies that require a high degree of conformity create a feeling of dismissal among students, with students feeling their thoughts and feelings are less than those of the teachers. In the above account, the participant described feeling the formal manner in he was required to address teachers worked to elevate the teachers above the students. It is interpreted that this in turn made the participant feel that teachers viewed themselves as someway better, or more important than students.

Erickson (1987, p.336) states *"when teachers and students differ in implicit expectations of appropriateness in behaviour, they act in ways that each misinterprets"*. Erickson argues that while young people may belong to the same language community as their teachers, they are part of differing speech networks- *"networks of people who share similar assumptions about appropriate styles of communication"* (ibid). As expressed by participant C, his experience of addressing teachers in such a formal manner was possibly in contravention with his speech network, with the participant viewing the formality as creating an unequal divide between him and the teacher. While for teaching staff, the participant's dislike for addressing staff as 'miss or sir' could be interpreted as disrespectful, leading staff to possibly label the student as such. As a result, such cultural differences in speaking and listening between the students' and teacher's speech network can lead to systemic and recurrent miscommunication and labelling of student deficiency (Erickson, 1987).

4.4 Effect of structural factors on student-teacher relationship: School Uniform

Many participants also expressed a dislike for wearing school uniforms:

> *"It was horrible [the uniform]…You had to have the regulation pants, regulation shirt, jumper everything with the crest. You couldn't have any variations...We were like a load of sheep. I felt like a sheep. Basically you can't be yourself like; we were like a load of sheep being carted around the school, wearing the same clothes".*
>
> *(Participant D)*

According to King (1996) the main purpose of students wearing school uniforms is to create equality among students; with everyone dressed the same so as to eliminate possible discrimination among the student body. For the participants interviewed, the uniform appeared to create a sense of inequality as they visibly distinguished between pupils and teachers.

> *"There'd be a divide nearly; between you and them [teachers], like they could wear their own clothes and we'd have this yoke with a tie...what you wear doesn't affect how you learn".*
>
> *(Participant E)*

The enforcement of wearing the uniform was identified as a source of conflict, with participants describing instances of being disciplined for not wearing the proper uniform. Being dressed the same as their peers also resulted in some participants feeling 'constricted' and 'uncomfortable' as well as experiencing a loss of identity at having to wear a uniform.

It is evident from the participants' accounts that a push toward conformity (e.g. wearing school uniform/addressing teaching staff in a formal manner) resulted in resistance and a more negative attitude toward teachers and administrators (Brantlinger, 1995). In this case, the participants' previous schools enforcement of such rules, and the participants' subsequent reaction to enforcement, worked to create tension between the participants and their teachers, impacting negatively on the student-teacher relationship.

4.5 Experience of School Support

During the interview many participants described instances where they were supported by the LC, and described feeling they had an outlet of support if they were experiencing difficulties:

> *"… I feel that I would have someone to talk to in the centre if I had a problem with anything, either with staff or if something was going on for me".*
>
> *(Participant E)*

> *"…anybody would help you, anybody around here. Everybody is just so friendly like".*
>
> *(Participant C)*

> *"… If you asked they'd tell you that I'd do anything they asked me, never gave them any trouble. And they'd be the same back. They've done everything in their power to help me like".*
>
> *(Participant B)*

> *"They're really good here, they're really encouraging, and you'd feel really encouraged like".*
>
> *(Participant D)*

> *"Yeah you could like…it's important to have it; I wouldn't talk to them about stuff though".*
>
> *(Participant A)*

Participants were asked how their experience of being supported with the LC compared to their previous mainstream educational experience. Many participants advised they felt unsupported in their previous school, advising there were few support outlets available:

> *"Basically if you wanted to talk about anything there you'd have to talk to the priest…you couldn't have a conversation with him like; there was no opinion, no advice…, he'd be like 'yeah yeah go back to class', that was it like…".*
>
> *(Participant C)*

International research on students' experience of ESL have found that many ESLs felt that teachers didn't care about them, and that they were uninterested in their success and were not willing to help them with problems (Lee, Ready, & Ross, 1999; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1994). In this research

similar feelings were expressed, with some participants' describing feeling unable to approach their previous school for support or advice:

> *"I felt they'd turn around and tell me "it's your own fault for doing this and doing that" do you know what I mean? I'd feel they'd tell me "I can't do anything for you about that".*
>
> *(Participant B)*

Pomeroy (1999) in her study of excluded students' perceptions of educational experience found that a common grievance raised by students surveyed was their teacher's inability to listen to them. The two themes of not listening identified by the students were; a sense that their point of view was not being valued and a belief that their teacher would not listen to, or consider their 'side of the story' when describing an issue. The attitudes expressed in Pomeroy's research are similar to those expressed in this research, with participants' advising they felt they would not have been believed or listened to by their previous teachers if they approached them, as well as feeling their opinion was of little value:

> *"... I didn't get a chance to say anything, it was like my opinion didn't count, I'd try and explain something or ask something, and the teacher would just speak over me and the class would go on…"* *(Participant A)*

A majority of the participants stated guidance counsellors were present in their previous school; however no participants stated they availed of support (either academic or emotional) through them:

> *"We did yeah [have guidance teachers] but my class never did any of that".*
>
> *(Participant B)*

Some participants described receiving support/extra help from teachers at their previous school when they initially began struggling, but that the support did not remain:

> *"... I got some help like, just by a certain one or two teachers whom I was getting extra help from with stuff already. But eventually it kind of wore off".*
>
> *(Participant C)*
>
> *"...They probably did now [ask how I was], maybe at the start, but they just gave up like. They just left me off and didn't ask again".* *(Participant E)*

As identified in the Literature review, research by Ryan (2000) found evidence to suggest that young people in secondary school need higher levels of support than are currently afforded. Some participants advised that guidance counsellors were available in their previous school, but that their year group did not avail of them. This may have been, as career guidance counsellors are not usually made available to

students in the junior cycle (1st, 2nd, 3rd year), with all of the participants interviewed leaving school either during, or prior to completion of Junior Certificate exams (Hearne, 2012).

The need for more support than is currently afforded to students in mainstream secondary schools was expressed by a majority of the participants, with one such participant describing the importance of support to them:

> *"if you have something on your chest you often can't say anything to no-one because you're too caged in about it, and if you can go in and talk to somebody about it…you go in pure tense and you come out and it's like a release, your whole body would be free after talking to someone…for me its somewhere you can go and talk, and you know they're not gonna go back and say that to anyone else like".*
>
> *(Participant C)*

Some participants alluded to experiencing chaotic personal and family histories which may have resulted in some participants requiring more support than their mainstream peers. These participants spoke positively of the LC teaching staff, especially around the area of support, with the area of guidance and support being seen by many participants as an important feature of the LC.

4.6 Evaluation of the Life Centres Implementation of SERVOL

The Sundays Well LC ethos is based on a philosophy known as SERVOL- Services Volunteered for all (refer to pg. 9). In essence, the aim of implementing the model is to facilitate the education of students in their perspective educational programmes, while at the same time allowing young people power over their own lives, to make their own choices and achieve academic success (Morley; 2005 p.6).

During the data analysis process examples of the implementation of the SERVOL approach were identified within the participants' accounts of their education with the LC. The author had not intended to review the implementation of the SERVOL model, initially planning to solely focus on the structural factors identified by the participants as contributing to their early school exit, and comparing such factors with their experience of education with the LC. The participants were not advised of, or spoken to about the SERVOL philosophy by the researcher, with the links identified being purely incidental and the result of the data analysis process. In the following paragraphs the researcher has outlined three brief examples of the implementation of the philosophy's three key principles as evidenced in the participants' accounts of education with the LC.

The principal of attentive listening states that *"Until all the cultural arrogance has been drained from your mind and you really begin to hear the voice of the people as the important element in their won development"* (Morley, 2006 p.7). This philosophy emphasises the importance of the individual's voice

in their own development. Evidence of the implementation of this method was found in the participants' descriptions of feeling listened to by teaching staff and having their opinions valued and heard:

> *"The teachers are just so bubbly and your equal…you are like, they have their opinion and then there like 'OK so can I have your opinion?' and I'm like 'you actually want my opinion?!' Oh god! I was kind of in shock the first time a teacher said that to me...my face dropped I was like 'what?".*
>
> *(Participant C)*

The philosophy of ignorance acknowledges the premise that every individual has different life experiences, and because of this one should not presume they know what is best (SERVOL, 2012). Evidence of the implementation of this was found in the participants' descriptions of their transition to the LC:

> *"When I came here they didn't want to know what happened in my last school; they just wanted to know was I serious about doing my Leaving and learning' and 'they didn't mind about why I left my old school...I come in and do my work and get on with it like, they only give out if I'm not holding up my end y'know?"*
>
> *(Participant E)*

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter the researcher analysed the main structural factors identified by the participants as negatively impacting on their experience of mainstream education, and possibly contributing to their decision to leave their previous mainstream school. Comparisons were also made with the participants' experience of education with the LC, comparing how the structural inadequacies identified as being present in their previous school compared to their experience of education with the LC. The findings of the researcher's primary research will be outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion & Recommendations

Part One: Summary of Research Findings

5.1 Summary of Primary Research Findings

The process of analysing the data was a difficult one, so as to give justice to the participants represented in this sample. Every effort was taken to ensure that the voices of all participants were heard, in keeping with the researcher's theoretical paradigm of interpretivism. The themes identified were reviewed and supported with verbatim extracts from the participants. Throughout the analysis process, consideration was also given to the response of the literature and the response of the researcher. It is important to state that the participant sample is small, with only five participants being interviewed. Therefore the structural factors identified by the participants cannot be generalised and applied to all ESLs.

Small class-size was identified as having a positive effect on the participants' experience of education with the LC. A lack of literature exploring the effects of class-size was also identified during the analysis process, with previous research on the area unable to provide definitive findings on the contribution of class-size to young people's dis-engagement from school. From the participants' accounts, it is felt that the small class-size allowed them to receive extra support, which in turn helped develop positive working relationships with teachers.

Support was identified as important by the participants, with the level of support afforded by the LC as possibly working to encourage the participants to remain in education with them. It was found that inadequate levels of support experienced by participants at their previous school may have contributed to their decision to leave.

Student-teacher relationships were identified by participants as impacting on how they work and learn in school. It was also found that for some participant's, school requirements such as addressing teachers as miss or sir/wearing a school uniform, created tension between students and teachers, with the enforcement of such rules being explored as an issue of contention for some participants.

5.2 Complete Summary of Research Findings

The information gathered from this piece of research illustrates the many dimensions associated with ESL. Through an extensive literature review, the individual implications of ESL were explored. From

the research it was evident that the Irish model of education largely relies on a 'one-size fits all' model of instruction and assessment. It is felt by the researcher that this model does not do enough to accommodate young people who are unable to fit into this largely prescribed model of learning.

From the literature review it also evident that the topic of ESL is a concern for both Irish and European policy makers, with the long term social and economic consequences having the potential to impact negatively on future economies. The review initially identified strengths, such as the Department of Education's provisions for enhanced guidance counselling targeted at junior cycle students, and investment in class-size reduction. However such provisions have not yet been implemented and are under review, with reduced investment in second level education also being identified by the researcher.

Chapter four outlined and analysed the findings from the author's primary research. From the sample interviewed, structural deficiencies were identified as contributing to the participants' departure from their previous mainstream school. These were identified as; class size, student teacher relationship and experiences of school support. These three areas were identified as the most prominent, and as possibly influencing the participants' exit from their previous mainstream school. It was found that the participants' accounts of education with the LC were predominantly positive, with participants' generally viewing the LC as a positive form of education.

Part Two: Recommendations

5.3 Recommendations to the Life Centre

Following completion of the research project and analysis of the data obtained, the author cannot identify any specific recommendations to be made to the LC. During the interview process research participants were also asked to identify any areas they felt required improvement or needed changing. However no such areas were identified.

From the researcher's examination of the LC curriculum, and also visiting the centre, the researcher believes that increased investment in the LC would enable the centre to adopt the LCA programme, with increased investment allowing the centre to employ additional teaching staff in order to cover the LCA curriculum. The researcher believes that this would allow the organisation to cater for a wider school leaver population.

5.4 Recommendations for Second-Level Education Development

The author is limited by the recommendations she can make in terms of wider educational policy, as it is felt that such analysis is beyond the remit of this research project. From the author's primary and secondary research it is felt that much is already known about the negative effects of ESL, with the issue being the subject of much debate and analysis throughout Europe (e.g., European Commission, 2011). The topic of ESL has also been widely examined and documented within the Irish context (e.g., Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Banks et al., 2010).

A strong theme to emerge for the author's secondary and primary research is the negative relationship aspect of ESLs school experience, with student–teacher relationship and issues of support, being explored by the researcher. The researcher feels increased investment and development of guidance provision in second-level schools could work to provide an outlet for students experiencing difficulty. The researcher believes that this would allow for the enhanced provision of guidance counsellors to students in both the junior and senior cycle. The researcher also recommends the expansion of the guidance counsellor's role, to allow equal focus on the emotional and supportive needs of the student, as well as career and subject guidance. The researcher feels that the benefits of such provisions would work to reduce ESL in Ireland.

The researcher feels that this research project highlights the need for increased investment in second-level education. However, the researcher recognises the weakness of such recommendations when considering current budgetary constraints that exist.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the recommendations made by the researcher in light of the findings of the research project.

In conclusion, the researcher has achieved her research aims, objectives, and answered her research questions. The research makes both specific recommendations to the CSO, and additional recommendations relating to Irish educational policy.

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APPENDIX: A

Interview Schedule

Outlined below is the interview schedule used by the researcher in the primary research.

- ***Opening***

A. (Establish Rapport) [shake hands] My name is Orlaith Healy and I am a final year student in University College Cork. As part of a Masters in Social Work I am completing a research project about the Life Centre. You have been asked to participate in this research project because you previously attended/ are currently attending school with Life Centre.

B. (Purpose) The study is being undertaken to find out about alternative secondary education in Ireland. As part of my research I am focusing on the Life Centre as a form of alternative education. As you are a past pupil of the Life Centre, I would like to ask you some questions about your previous school experience, and your experience of attending school with the Life Centre.

   In the interview I will ask you questions about your experience of attending school with the Life Centre.

   During the interview I will use a Dictaphone to record the interview. The purpose of this is to ensure that I record everything you say accurately, as what you tell me is important. The recording held on the Dictaphone will be strictly confidential and will not be heard by anyone other than you and me.

C. (Motivation). The information obtained from this interview will be used as a basis for my project and will be analysed and presented in my research project. Specific quotations will also be used during data analysis.

   The research project may be read by future students on the course and the study may be published in a research journal. As stated in the informed consent form you received, your participation in this research will be confidential and your name/ age changed.

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D. (Time Line) The interview should take about 20-30 minutes. At the end of the interview there will be an opportunity for you to feedback any points you feel are relevant or if there is anything I have not included. Are you available to respond to some questions at this time? (Allow for questions from the participant).

- ***Transition (General background questions)***

1. How old are you?

2. How old were you when you first attended the Life Centre?

3. Did you attend Secondary School previous to the Life Centre?

4. What year were you in when you transferred to the Life Centre?

5. Why did you attend the Life Centre?

6. How long did you attend the Life Centre for?

- Can you tell me about why you started attending school with the Life Centre?

7. How did you come to enrol in the Life Centre?

8. Were your parents/guardians involved in this process?

9. How did you find the transition to education with the Life Centre?

(Transition to the next topic:_____)

- ***Educational Experience***

7. What was your experience of attending school with the Life Centre?

8. How did your experience of attending school with the Life Centre compare to your previous secondary school experience?

- What was different?
- Can you describe?

9. How would you describe your previous secondary school?

- What did you like/ dislike about attending your previous school?

10. For you, how does this description compare to the Life Centre?

- What did you like/ dislike about attending school with the Life Centre?

11. If you could, what would you change about the Life Centre?

(Transition to the next topic:_____)

- ***Educational Status***

12. Did you complete your Leaving certificate/Junior certificate with the Life Centre?

13. What subjects did you study?

14. Are you currently engaged in education?

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(Transition to the next topic:_____)

- ***Relationships***

15. How would you describe your relationship with teaching staff at the Life Centre?

16. How did your relationship with teaching staff at the Life Centre compare to your relationship with teaching staff at your previous school?

17. How were you supported by teaching staff when you attended the Life Centre?

18. How did this compare to your experience of being supported in your previous school?

19. What role did your relationship with teaching staff play in your educational experience?

(_____)

- ***Peers***

20. How important were friends to you when you were in school?

- In your previous school
- In the Life Centre

21. What role did your friends play in your education? (Did it affect subject choice/whether you went to school?)

- Can you describe

22. Did friendships play a role in whether you went to school or not?

- Can you give an example?

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(_____)

- ***School***

23. How would you describe your attendance at school previous to attending the Life Centre?

24. How would you describe your attendance at school when you were with the Life Centre?

25. What made you want to go to school when you were at the Life Centre?

26. What made you not want to go to school when you were at the Life Centre?

27. When you did well in an exam/ achievement, how was this recognised by teaching staff in the Life Centre?

28. If you could go back to when you were in school with the Life Centre, is there anything that you would change?

(**Transition:** Thank you very much for answering my questions)

- ***Closing***

(Maintain Rapport) I appreciate the time you took for this interview.

- Is there anything else you think would like to add what you have already said? Do you have any questions?

- I will be in touch when I have the project completed.

- If you have any questions or need to get in touch with me please do not hesitate to contact me at: orlaithhealy@gmail.com.

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APPENDIX: B

Informed Consent for Research Participants

Purpose of the study. As part of the requirements for Masters in Social Work at UCC, I am required to carry out a research study. As part of this requirement, I am carrying out a research project in partnership with the Life Centre, the purpose of which is to examine alternative secondary education provision in Ireland.

What will the study involve? The study will involve me meeting with you as a past/current pupil of the life centre in order to gain an insight into your educational experience of attending the Life Centre. This will involve meeting with you and conducting an individual interview. The interview will last 25-30 minutes maximum.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked to take part in this research because you have been identified by staff at the Life Centre as being a current/past pupil.

Do you have to take part? No. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. By signing this consent form you giving a preliminary agreement to be interviewed as part of a case study on the life centre. However, even after you have agreed to participate in the study and have signed the consent form, you still have the option of withdrawing from the study. In addition, if data has been obtained and an interview has been conducted, there is a two week window in which you may withdraw from the study and have the data obtained during the interview destroyed.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Your participation in this study will be kept anonymous. Only staff from the Life Centre & I will know the identity of the participants involved. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be kept entirely anonymous.

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What will happen to the information which you give? The information received in the interview will be kept confidential from third parties, including Life-Centre staff, and will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. On completion of the thesis, the data will be retained for a further six months and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course or possibly published in a research journal.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience. If you subsequently feel distressed, teaching staff and counselors from the Life Centre will be made available to you if you feel you would like to speak with them.

Who has reviewed this study? This study has received ethical approval from the UCC Ethics Committee.

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Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me by e-mail at [E-mail Address].

<u>If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form on the next page.</u>

Consent Form

I……agree to participate in [ ] research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with [ ] to be tape-recorded

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box :)

- I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview
- I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

Signed……. Date…….

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