Exploring Perspectives of School Refusal in Second-Level Education in Ireland

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Abstract

School refusal can be a major source of chaos and distress for young people and their families, impeding young people's social, academic and psychological development. International research has highlighted the short- and long-term consequences of school refusal to include economic hardship, unemployment, over reliance on welfare services, as well as mental health difficulties in later life (Havik et al., 2015; Kearney, 2008; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

This research presents a unique conceptual framework drawing on the concepts of the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) and education theorists (Biesta, 2006; Freire, 1970) to open the discussion on school refusal and explore it in relation to power imbalances, personal meaning and the purposes of education. The overarching aim of this project is to explore the perspectives and experiences of education professionals, parents and young people in relation to school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland and how their experiences might inform more appropriate responses to school refusal. Employing a mixed method approach, this research includes four sequential studies: a survey to providing information on school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland (N=106), a follow up qualitative study exploring the perspectives of educators (N=17), a qualitative study to explore parents' experiences, concerns and challenges in school refusal (N=10) and a narrative arts-based approach with young people (N=5).

The findings of the research highlight the extent of emotional and psychological distress that accompanies school refusal. It was apparent that many young people who experience school refusal have prior exposure to developmental trauma, attachment disruption, and adverse childhood experiences (ACE's). Others experienced distress and

disillusionment within the current education system. The influence of family socioeconomic status, unequal access to support services and resources, pressures for academic achievement, conflictual relationships within the school and between home and school emerged from the findings. This research project provides grounds for challenging the wider issues of social injustice and educational policy, the need to reconnect with the goals and purpose of education, and the importance of trauma- and attachment-informed approaches to schools.

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List of Acronyms

ADD   Attention Deficit Disorder

ADHD   Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

AMH   Adult Mental Health

ASD   Autism Spectrum Disorder

CAMHS   Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

DCYA   Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DEIS   Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School

DES   Department of Education and Skills

DOH   Department of Health

ETB   Education and Training Board

EWO   Education Welfare Officer

EWS   Education Welfare Services

GCSE   General Certificate of Secondary Education

GP   General Practitioner

HEN   Home Education Network

HSCL   Home School Community Liaison

HSE   Health Service Executive

IAPT   Improving Access to Psychological Therapies

IGCSE   International General Certificate of Secondary Education

LEA   Local Education Authority

NEPS   National Educational Psychological Service

PLC   Post Leaving Certificate

PTMF   Power Threat Meaning Framework

RAD   Reactive Deficit Disorder

SAMHSA   Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

SCP   School Completion Programme

SEL   Social and Emotional Learning

SPHE   Social, Personal and Health Education

1 Introduction

For many children and young people, attending school can be a rich experience providing opportunities in personal development, social relations and education attainment (Kearney, 2008; Pelligrini, 2007). However, for a small number of school-aged youth, the school environment can be a place of threat, stirring unpleasant feelings of emotional distress and discomfort (Gregory & Purcell; 2014; Lauchlan, 2003; O'Toole & Devenney, 2020). Outwardly, this group of young people display difficulty in attending school from missing a small number of classes and half days to prolonged absences of several years (Kearney, 2008; Walter et al., 2010). There has been a growing concern in international research and policy regarding the long-term consequences of school absenteeism (Ingles et al., 2015; Thornton et al., 2015). Further, it is noted that prolonged absence from school can have adverse implications ranging in economic, social, education as well as psychological and mental health issues (Kearney, 2008; Kearney & Albano, 2004; McShane et al., 2001).

School refusal (and other forms of absenteeism) is not just about poor attendance at school. This group of young people are often experiencing emotional distress that is related to their home, school and community environments. Yet little is known about young peoples' experiences of emotional distress and the challenges they experience in attending school. Further, within the clinical literature, young people's emotional distress is understood as a 'symptom' relating to an underlying disorder or illness, rather than a signal that all is not well in the young person's world (O'Toole & Devenney, 2020; Pelligrini, 2007; Stroobant & Jones, 2006; Yoneyama, 2000). This stresses that individual problems are often rooted within individual and family difficulties particularly in areas of mental health, conflictual family relations and behaviour. This makes visible the need to examine the issues relating to emotional distress using an alternative psychological perspective and one that acknowledges

the broader distal influences that may also have profound influences on young people and their families struggling with school refusal.

Moreover, there are many complex factors at play in understanding school refusal. Issues relating to adverse childhood experiences such as poverty, homelessness, school violence, bullying, violence in the home, bereavement, family separation, divorce, neglect, addiction and neighbourhood violence are long established within the literature as underlying difficulties related to school refusal (Archer et al., 2003; Kearney, 2008). Thus, highlighting that school refusal does not exist in a vacuum and more importantly, elements within the school and community settings can also influence a young person's difficulties in attending school. Contentions exist, therefore, relating to a narrow focus of complex factors underlying school refusal, where much emphasis is placed on individual and family factors as key reasons for school refusal. There is a need, therefore, to include the wider debates underlying school refusal such as the impact of adversity and trauma, issues relating to social injustice and the purpose of education.

Considering these tensions in the literature, it is clear that new frameworks for understanding children's 'unwillingness' to attend school are needed. This research project draws on the PTM (Power Threat Meaning) Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) as an alternative psychological perspective to the diagnostic medical model of distress. This framework challenges the widely held assumptions relating to an individual's emotional distress and advocates for understanding people in their wider social environments and the meanings that are related to the lived experiences of the individual. The inclusion of critical concepts in education (e.g. Gert Biesta (2006) and Paulo Freire (1970)) also help to clarify the implications of a culture that emphasises academic performance and achievement. These perspectives reveal the potential for young people's difficulty and distress in meeting the demands of a "learning economy" (Biesta, 2006, p.129) and make visible a need to explore

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the impact of academic demands on professionals as well as young people and parents in the current education system.

To date little research has been conducted in Ireland relating to professionals perspectives and the personal perspectives of young people and parents relating to issues in school refusal. This project aims to foreground the viewpoints and experiences of education professional's, parents and young people to better understand the effects of school refusal in their everyday lives. It adopts a mixed method approach using four sequential studies to allow for a more in depth understanding of school refusal.

1.1   Summary of Thesis Structure

Chapter 2 of this research project presents a review of the literatures that have influenced the development of school refusal and the implications of key constructions in how it is understood and responded to today. This will entail a review of the early clinical literature relating to school phobia and the debates relating to suitable nomenclature of school refusal. This section will also offer a critical analysis of key debates that centre on the 'problem' of school refusal. The second part of this chapter will examine the leading factors that are central to debate within the home and between home and school environments. It will also include an outline of the literature relating to the prevalence and policies of school non-attendance in Ireland and in the international context.

Chapter 3 describes the theoretical underpinnings of this research project. The first section draws on the Power Threat Meaning (PTM) Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) as a conceptual alternative for understanding the patterns of emotional distress relating to school refusal. It will also draw on the negative power influences that provide an in-depth understanding of the key issues. The closing section will draw on theorising concepts in education that explore the transformative potential of education as well as key challenges

relating to the goals of education and difficulties experienced by young people, parents and professionals in the school environment.

Chapter 4 presents the epistemological underpinnings of this research project. This chapter will also focus on the project design and an outline of a Mixed Methods approach used to explore the perspectives and experiences of participants in this research.

This thesis is divided into four distinct studies and this will be addressed in Chapter 5 – 8 of this research project. Chapter 5 pertains to Study 1 and presents the results from a national survey administered to school professionals in second-level schools in Ireland. Chapter 6 (Study 2) will explore in greater detail, the underlying complexities of school refusal and the unique challenges it presents for professionals in their work with young people and parents. This chapter also presents the findings generated from interviews with education professionals (N=17) and a discussion will follow to consider the implications of the key findings. Chapter 7 (Study 3) will explore the viewpoints and experiences of parents in meeting their day-to-day challenges of school refusal. The main findings generated from semi-structured interviews will be presented (n=10) and followed with a discussion of the key findings. Chapter 8 (Study 4) will also present the main findings relating to a small scale study of five young people who have had experience or currently experiencing school refusal. The key findings from the arts-based data will be summarised and followed with a discussion.

Chapter 9 will conclude with a general discussion of the significant themes and issues that emerged across all four studies in this research project and how these relate to understanding and responses to school refusal. This chapter will present the limitations of this research project and recommendations for future research and practices relating to school refusal.

2 Literature Review

School refusal has affected the lives of young people, their families, school professionals and associated professionals for almost a century. School refusal is recognised in the literature as a psychosocial problem leading to difficulties in attending school and the potential for long term school absenteeism (Maynard et al., 2015). International research has highlighted the negative impact of long term school absenteeism, placing students at risk for academic underachievement, restricting opportunities in further education and social and emotional difficulties in later life (Pelligrini, 2007; Thornton et al., 2013).

However, it appears that a considerable body of research has focused on the negative impact of school refusal, its causes and interventions, that are based on clinical and medical models of distress. Drawing on definitions and classifications that are deficit based and stem from the private experiences of the individual obscure the important personal meanings, social and cultural constructs that also underly issues in school refusal. Whilst scholars agree that there are numerous and complex factors at play in understanding school refusal, there seems to be a pervasive view that the responsibility of school refusal lies solely with the individual student and their families, resulting in negative stereotypes of this group. Further, it would seem that there is an over-reliance on quantitative data from clinic samples of young people and families. This has resulted in limited insight of the broader issues of economic, material, social and interpersonal elements in the school refusal literature. Additionally, there has been little research attention given to the role of school related factors and educators responses to school refusal.

This chapter traces the developments of key constructions of school refusal in the literature since its inception in 1930s. In particular, it explores the context of an existing body of literature that highlights an underlying medical model approach to its understanding

of school refusal. Whilst constructions of school refusal are discussed alongside its development, this is not intended as a historical account of school refusal, rather, the aim of this chapter is to trace conceptualisations of school refusal that have implications for how it is understood and responded to today. In framing the development of school refusal in this way, I examine the key factors (i.e. individual, family and school) related to school refusal that are at the centre of debates surrounding young people, families as well as school professionals who work directly with this group.

I will begin, therefore, by examining the definitions and classifications that are currently in use relating to school refusal and show how they are underpinned by a medical model. I explain my orientation in relation to new frameworks that seek to depathologise young people's difficulties in school refusal. I will then trace the developments of school refusal by exploring early conceptualisations and developments relating to this field of literature. In the central section of the chapter, I will examine key risk factors identified as determinants of school refusal in the literature and ways in which they have influenced responses to school refusal. The closing section will give an overview of school absenteeism, policies and practice in Ireland and in the international research literature.

2.1   Pathologising School Refusal: Influences of a Medical Model approach

Unravelling the term 'school refusal' has been the subject of much debate in recent years (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Ingles et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2018; O'Toole & Devenney, 2020; Pelligrini, 2007). The term 'refusal' is derived from the Old French language, *refuser* and to 'refuse' is to 'indicate or show that one is not willing to do something' (Oxford Dictionary of English). School refusal remains a dominant term within the clinical and psychiatric research literature and scholars suggest that it captures the heterogeneity of the difficulties involved in school non-attendance (Ingles et al., 2015; Kearney & Silverman,

1996; King et al., 1996). Further, school refusal is defined as a child's motivated refusal to attend school or remain in class for the duration of the school day (Kearney & Silverman, 1996) and for reasons associated with emotional distress (Berg et al., 1969; King et al., 1999).

Yet scholars have noted a negative discourse underpinning the term school refusal (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; O'Toole & Devenney, 2020; Pelligrini, 2007). Discourse associated with the young person as being 'maladaptive', having 'distorted beliefs' and a mental health 'disorder' are frequently related to school refusal (O'Toole and Devenney, 2020). More recently, scholars have emphasised a need for positive and optimistic understandings of school refusal (O'Toole and Devenney, 2020) and where the young person could be viewed as "repositioning" themselves and "rejecting" the traditional assumptions and speculations being made about them (Stroobant & Jones, 2006, p. 222). This orientation is consistent with contemporary approaches that separate themselves from the pathologising of young people and school refusal and foster, as I will argue, the need to make visible the wider debates (e.g. social, ideological and power dynamics) within society itself.

These debates point to a body of research that is underpinned by a medical model perspective in understanding the young person's difficulty in attending school. To date, this can be seen in existing medical frameworks for mental health such as Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) where school refusal is seen to be part of the diagnostic category of separation anxiety. Several studies have also examined the characteristics of young people experiencing school refusal, within which anxiety disorders in children, and anxiety and depression in adolescents have been deduced (Mc Shane et al., 2001). Whilst there is recognition of a young person's mental health difficulties and indeed, mental health services are often called in to intervene (e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and psychology support services); however,

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this medical model also serves to pathologise and stigmatise children and adolescents for what are understandable struggles in attending school (Kutchins & Kirk, 1997; Maj, 2012). The use of medical narratives and diagnosis, therefore, obscures understanding of the more complex factors relating to school refusal and this will be discussed in a later section of this review.

In addition, contentions exist within the literature on the distinction between two dominant terms - school refusal and truancy. The usage of terms such as truancy and school refusal continue to pathologise a young person's difficulty in school non-attendance; in that non-attenders are either psychologically 'dysfunctional' (i.e. school refusal/school phobia) or 'delinquent' and socially 'dysfunctional' (i.e. truancy). A major characteristic that distinguishes both terms is that truancy is related to antisocial behaviour (e.g. destructiveness, aggressiveness and involvement in crime) and anti-school sentiments (e.g. school withdrawal and condoning parents), and school refusal is associated with profound negative emotions (e.g. anxiety related issues) in connection with the school environment (Archer et al., 2003; Carlen et al., 1992; Havik et al., 2015; Maynard et al., 2005; Miller, 2008; Place et al., 2000). Scholars have also pointed to the unhelpful effects of creating distinctions in these terms (Lauchlan, 2003). Such terms reflect underlying dominant narratives that position young people in very different ways (O'Toole & Devenney, 2020). This highlights a need for a deeper understanding of young people's experiences and personal life circumstances.

Other terms also exist in the literature that characterise the behaviour of young people and school non-attendance such as school 'dropout' or 'early school leaving' behaviour (Ekstrand, 2015). These terms are also used interchangeably to define young people as lacking in motivation, disengaged, displaying delinquent and absenteeism behaviour within the education process (Lyche, 2010). Thus, the variety of terms in the literature further highlight attempts to differentiate groups of young people who fail to attend school. There is

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a need, therefore, to engage more closely with the dominant narratives that underpin groups in school non-attendance. Thus, this research will focus on the narratives underpinning school refusal and in particular, the psychological component of emotional distress that is used to characterise behavioural issues in school refusal.

Having defined key definitions and frameworks underpinning school refusal, it would be useful at this point to provide the context in which early constructs and developments within the literature have evolved and influence how we understand school refusal today.

2.2   Early Conceptualisations of School Refusal

For many years, labels such as school phobia, truancy and school refusal have been used interchangeably to gain a shared understanding of the young person's difficulty in attending the school classroom. It is widely acknowledged within the literature that there is a lack of shared definition of school refusal and this is dependent on the ways in which it has been conceptualised by different audiences, past and present (Elliot, 1999; Pelligrini, 2007). This has resulted in the growth and development of approaches relating to assessment procedures, diagnosis of definable mental health 'disorders' and the management of school refusal.

The construct of 'school refusal' was first presented by Broadwin in 1932 and although referred to as a 'type of truancy', he was the first to distinguish the features of school refusal from the traditional accounts of truancy (Broadwin, 1932; Thambirajah et al., 2008). According to Broadwin (1932), this group of young people could be distinguished from other 'truants' as showing a favourable attitude to school, inclined not to display antisocial behaviour and of an intelligent disposition.

> When at home it is happy and apparently care-free. When dragged to school it is
> miserable, fearful and at the first opportunity runs home despite the certainty of

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corporal punishment. The onset is generally sudden. The previous schoolwork and conduct has been fair (Broadwin, 1932, p254).

Subsequently, these young people became labelled as 'neurotic' in their behaviour towards school non-attendance. These distinctions became progressively defined by other authors (Hersov, 1960; Suttenfield, 1954; Warren, 1948) who indicated a preference for the term 'school phobia' to further delineate the young person and their difficulties in attending school. Thus, marking the beginning of authors attempts to construct narrow definitions of the signs and symptoms of school refusal related to emotional distress and distinguish it from other forms of school non-attendance.

However, disagreement in early examples of school phobia appear in the literature when identifying whether school refusal was specifically a phobia (Suttenfield, 1954) or part of a clinical form of separation anxiety (Estes et al., 1956; Johnson et al., 1941; Klein, 1945). Concurrently, theoretical models of understanding, couched in theories of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic approaches (Atkinson, 1985) were established in the literature. These approaches placed emphasis on the underlying psychological influences (conscious and unconscious motivations) of human behaviour, emotion and feelings with particular focus on early childhood experiences. For example, the mutual over-dependent relationship between mother and child (and sometimes between father and child) were viewed as fostering feelings of resentment and hostility within the relationship (Waldfogel et al., 1957). This hostile relationship was also viewed as influencing the child's preference to stay at home and protect relations with their parent (Freud, 1962). It was also argued that the child or young person's "displacement of conflict" (Atkinson et al., 1985, p. 85) could be observed between the home (parent) and school (teacher) environment, thus becoming a phobia.

However, later writers (see Estes et al., 1956; Johnson et al., 1941; Last et al., 1987) contested the explanation of a phobia to describe the characteristics associated with school refusal and provided a more detailed account based on 'separation anxiety'.

First, an acute anxiety in the child, which [the] condition may be caused by organic disease, or by some emotional conflict manifested in hysterical, hypochondriacal, or compulsive symptoms precipitated by arrival of a new sibling, promotion in school, etc. Second, and equally important, an increase of anxiety in the mother due to some simultaneously operating threat to her satisfactions, such as sudden economic deprivation, marital unhappiness, illness, etc. Third, there seems always to be a strikingly poorly resolved early dependency relationship of these children to their mothers (Johnson et al., 1941, p.702).

The above statement reflects early attempts to construct the symptoms of school refusal (i.e. hysterical, hypochondriacal and compulsive) as well as the interplay between mother and child relations (i.e. psychological and dependency issues) and the unconscious motivations of projection and displacement resulting in the development of a child's acute anxiety in being separated from their mother in the home environment. Further, these studies reflect major developments in the definitions and classifications of school refusal that show to be deficit based stemming from the experiences of young people and their families and can be seen as a significant move towards a medical based understanding of emotional distress.

Explanations within the behavioural approaches of psychology also emerged to include the school environment. Theories on classical conditioning viewed the school environment (size of school building, teacher-student relations and academic pressure, toilet use and changing for physical activities) as a major source of the young person's fear and anxiety (Miller, 2008). Therefore, school based social anxiety became perceived as key in

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influencing the young person's difficult peer relations, fear of rejection or incidents of bullying (Miller, 2008). However, it would seem that studies have directed little research attention to the complexities of an individual's emotional distress and the broader implications that this may have for difficulties in attending school.

In more recent literature, disagreement continues relating to the shared definitions and classification of school refusal. For instance, variations in terminology can be seen in the usage of terms such as 'school phobia' (Yoneyama, 2000), 'school refusal behaviour' (SRB; Kearney & Bensaheb (2006), 'anxiety-based school refusal' (Hansen et al., 1998), 'chronic non-attendance' (Lauchlan, 2003), 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) (Morgan et al., 2018) and 'extended non-attendance' (Pellegrini, 2007). A small number of studies have adopted a broader perspective by demonstrating a preference for terms such as 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' (EBSA) and 'extended non-attendance' in lieu of school refusal, to avoid pathologisation of young people and school non-attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Morgan et al., 2018; Pellegrini, 2007). These scholars draw attention to the unsuitability of earlier terms that place responsibility on the individual (i.e. within child characteristics) for change (Baker & Bishop, 2015, Gregory & Purcell, 2014) and lack inclusion of environmental factors that could be equally influential in understanding school refusal (Emerson, 2004). Further, this makes visible a need to understand emotional distress using a different approach and one that considers the complex issues (e.g. trauma, adversity, economic and material, access to resources and ideological power influences) that may also play a significant role in the young person's circumstances. This thesis seeks to explore this issue further by introducing the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) in Chapter 3 of this research project.

2.3   Family and Child Risk Factors associated with School Refusal

Finding the source of a young person's difficulties in attending school are perceived as key to understanding and responding to school refusal in the clinical literature. Most studies have given close examination to the precipitating factors (e.g. difficult family relations, mental health difficulties, poor peer relations and exam pressure) and the predisposing factors (e.g. anxiety related issues, personality traits and characteristics) that contribute and perpetuate difficulties relating to school refusal (Thambirajah et al., 2008). In Table 2.1, the authors, Thambirajah et al., (2008) and Morgan et al., (2018), identify three major categories (i.e. school, child and family) that are viewed as leading factors influencing school refusal within the literature.

Table 2.1

Factors Relating to School Refusal (adapted from Morgan et al., 2018 (p.7) and Thambirajah et al., 2008 (p.36))

School Factors

- Bullying (viewed the most common school factor)
- Transition to secondary school or change of school
- Unidentified general or specific learning difficulties
- Poor Special Educational Need (SEN) provision
- Structure of the school day
- Academic demands, high levels of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms
- Exam pressure
- Transport or journey to school
- Activities that the child/young person finds challenging (e.g. P.E. (Physical Education), performing in public)

Child Factors

- Separation difficulties
- Difficult peer relations
- Fear of Failure, low self-confidence
- Over developmental difficulties and learning difficulties or related to Autistic Spectrum (may be unidentified or unsupported)
- Physical illness
- Traumatic events (poverty, abuse, physical, sexual, emotional), domestic violence, physical and emotional neglect etc.
- Related to specific age groups: 5-6, 11-12 & 13 -14 years
- Over dependence on parents
- Worries about parent's health
- Carer duties in the family home (e.g. looking after younger siblings)
- Being the youngest in the family

Family Factors

- Recent family transitions
- Recent losses in the family (i.e. bereavement)
- Significant changes in the family (i.e. separation, divorce, or change in family dynamic)
- Parent(s) physical and mental health difficulties
- Over-involvement, over-protecting parenting style
- Under-involvement of a parent
- Difficult relations within the family
- High levels of family stress in relation to school refusal

These categories acknowledge the interaction between the child (and young person), the school environment and home environment in factors that most influence school refusal. They also acknowledge multiple factors that may contribute to circumstances and individual experiences in school refusal. Key factors relating to bullying, loss and bereavement also highlight the adverse impact of issues relating to school refusal that need to be addressed. However, these categories also draw attention to a narrow and restrictive view of the factors within these three groupings (i.e. school, family and child), whereby issues relating to social context seem to be absent. As has already been noted, underlying vulnerabilities have often been associated with individual psychological characteristics such as anxiety related disorders in school refusal behaviour. Further, there is an existing body of research that associates negative life experiences (i.e. stressful events, adversity or trauma) and behaviour difficulties with genetic or biological risk factors, in which the wider environment is regarded as important only when it is potentially triggering a mental health disorder (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

On closer examination, the child factors displayed in Table 2.1 also emphasise individual psychological characteristics (e.g. anxiety related issues, low self-confidence, difficult social relationships, worry and over dependence on parents etc.) and therefore, draw attention away from the wider social, economic and cultural dimensions of context. For instance, factors relating to power and inequality (e.g. structural inequalities, poverty and low socioeconomic status, discrimination and racism) have been shown to have significant negative effects on mental health difficulties (Felitti et al., 1998). In experiences of childhood adversities, for example, a young person's access to resources (i.e. emotional, physical, social and economic) can influence negative educational outcomes such as absenteeism and disengagement with school (Bethell et al., 2014; Burke et al., 2011).

Further, studies of childhood bullying suggest that victims are more likely to come from marginalised groups who are already experiencing deprivation of their rights and prejudice in issues relating to ethnicity, intellectual or physical disability, chronic illness or sexual orientation (Englander, 2007, Sentenac et al., 2011; Stonewall, 2012). Thus, it seems important to recognise the impact of social context and its implications in understanding a young person's behaviour in school refusal.

In addition, there is a prevailing view within the literature that a young person's issues in attending the school classroom stem mostly from personal and family problems. Whilst there is recognition by some authors of socio economic and cultural influences (Franklin & Shilvock, 2010; Soto, 2002, Teasley, 2004), in general, there seems to be a 'blame-the-victim' discourse (Ryan, 1976) underpinning school refusal. This ideology draws on explanations and factors such as family detachment and enmeshment (i.e. family boundaries that are emotionally entangled), maternal depression, as well as parental disengagement, conflict, separation and traumatic incidents within the home relating to school non-attendance (Kearney, 2008; Mc Shane et al., 2001; Thornton et al., 2013). This signifies a need to understand the personal meanings and internal experiences of young people and their families as well as inclusion of the broader influences that underpin school refusal, a point that will be explored in Chapter 3 of this research project.

The effects of socioeconomic status (SES) show to be inconsistent within the literature (Heyne et al., 2001). Some studies have indicated that families of young people and school refusal to be mostly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bernstein & Garfinkel, 1986; Nichols & Berg, 1970). Whilst others have indicated equal representation of school refusal in both families from lower and higher socioeconomic status (Hansen et al., 1998). However, there is agreement within the literature that factors relating to children from lone parent families, parent's level of education, children with carer duties within the family and

inadequate housing conditions present as key influences when considering school refusal and issues relating to socioeconomic status (NEWB, 2011).

Further, the research to date has relied heavily on empirical studies that investigate family characteristics of young people and school non-attendance using a range of psychometric measures (e.g. Bernstein et al., 1999; Bernstein & Garfinkel, 1988; Johnson et al., 1941; Kearney & Silverman, 1996; Partridge, 1939; Waldron et al., 1975). The findings from these studies also rely on clinic populations (e.g. inpatient and outpatient clinics) and where families and young people have already met the criteria for a mental health diagnosis (i.e. anxiety and/depression). For instance, one study involved 134 families of young people and school refusal and comparisons were made between single-parent and two-parent families (Bernstein & Borchardt, 1996). Demographically, these participants were mostly Caucasian and from lower and middle socioeconomic backgrounds. Results indicated that children from 'mother-only families' were more susceptible to conflictual family relations due to communication and role performance (i.e. difficulty in defining family roles and boundaries) issues. Further, it was concluded that children and young people who are predisposed to a diagnosis of anxiety and depression may be more likely to have difficulties in school attendance within single-parent homes.

Additionally, Hansen and colleagues (1998) further investigated 76 clinic referred children and adolescents who were diagnosed with anxiety related issues. In this sample, adolescents were found to have more increased levels of school non-attendance than younger children. It was noted that the adolescent developmental period can be particularly challenging for young people. However, for "anxiety based school refusal", these young people have a "greater difficulty coping with fears of school, resulting in greater avoidance and absenteeism" (Hansen et al., 1998, p.252). The results of this study also highlighted family focus on social and recreational activities to have a salient influence on young people

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and school refusal. Families who endorsed low levels of physical activity resulted in young people being less active, spending more time in the home and were, therefore, less likely to attend school. This also resulted in poor social skills among young people and their interactions with peers.

These studies bring to light a number of shortcomings. As has already been noted, these studies have relied mostly on young people experiencing school refusal from clinical inpatient and outpatient samples and who have a diagnosis of anxiety and/or depression. Further, these samples of participants show to be mainly Caucasian, ignoring cultural diversity within samples. Moreover, young people's struggle in attending school is largely based on the individual's personal problems such as a predisposed anxiety disorder resulting in fear and avoidance of the school environment. Conflictual family relations (i.e. issues in communication and role performance) within single parent families and other families lack of attention to the young person's social skills and outdoor activities are presumed as leading factors of school refusal. However, the practice of children's safety and protection in community areas where there may be high rates of crime and violence also need to be considered. These challenges have important implications for social inequalities that can underpin family practices relating to issues in school refusal. In sum, these shortcomings highlight a need to look to studies conducted in the community with parents of young people who are at risk or experiencing school refusal and to explore the daily challenges and difficulties that these families encounter. This thesis aims to address this need by including the perspectives of parents of young people who were at risk or experiencing school refusal from the community context.

Further, clinical studies emphasise an understanding of a young person's responses using a functional model of school refusal behaviour (Kearney, 2008; Kearney & Albano, 2004; Kearney and Bensaheb, 2006; Kearney & Silverman, 1990). This model focuses on

four leading factors related to the young person's responses associated with school refusal behaviour - 1) the young person's avoidance of school stimuli that cause distress within the school environment (e.g. travel, entering school building or classroom), 2) avoidance of social situations (e.g. peers, oral presentations, school performances, 3) preference for staying at home with a parent or caregiver (e.g. giving way to tantrums and running away from school) and 4) seeking activities outside the school environment (e.g. watching television, playing video games, substance use and spending time with friends) (Kearney, 2008).

On the one hand, this model provides a useful lens to understand young people's responses to school refusal such as avoidance of aversive situations as well as responding to situations that provide positive and negative reinforcement (Thambirajah et al., 2008). On the other hand, it depicts a child-centred focus that places responsibility on the individual for their struggles in attending school (Shilvock, 2010). Generalising factors that construct young people as having specific strategies (i.e. avoiding behaviour, responding to negative and positive reinforcement) makes visible a restrictive view of the young person's challenges within the school and home environments and does not account for reasons why such strategies evolve in the first place. It also ignores more deep-rooted issues relating to emotional distress and the wider influences (i.e. economic and material, social, ideological and interpersonal) that may be underlying young people's behaviour in school refusal (Shilvock, 2010). The relationship between the young person's emotional distress and the broader influences of society will be a central point addressed throughout this research project.

Other scholars have focused on the young person's experiences of emotional distress and school refusal within the wider influences of society. Student discourse on 'Tokokyohi' (school phobia/refusal) in Japan, for example, reveal powerful discourses relating to the importance of school attendance and where there is an emphasis on negative stereotypes and

stigmatisation of young people and school refusal. In this study, student discourses revealed

feelings of low self-esteem, self-doubt and isolation in their struggles with school refusal

(Yoneyama, 2000). However, the young people's accounts of their experiences of school

refusal also illustrated personal journeys from one of emotional and physical exhaustion to an

awareness of their difficulties within the school environment and in society, and finally, to

feeling a sense of 'rebirth' as they reject the school system or return on their own terms

(Yoneyama, 2000; Pelligrini, 2007). Whilst clear differences can be seen between Japanese

and Western societies, there also seems to be obvious resemblances linked to school

attendance, academic achievement and conformity (Pelligrini, 2007). Yoneyama's (2000),

findings demonstrate a need for culturally sensitive understandings of the issues and

responses to school refusal. These accounts can also be seen as valuable insights in

understanding young people's experiences of emotional distress in school refusal and

emphasise a need for more research exploring their lived experiences. The current study

aims to address this need by including the opinions and viewpoints of five young people with

experiences of school refusal from second-level education in Ireland.

2.4   Role of School Factors in School Refusal

As indicated previously, there seems to be a prevailing view within the literature that

the risk factors influencing school refusal are primarily related to familial dynamics such as

difficult family relations, child-parent attachment issues, parent mental health, lone parent

families as well as parent's own level of education (Pelligrini, 2007). Meanwhile, there is

evidence within the literature that acknowledges the role of the school environment as

fundamental in identifying, addressing and engaging with the young people and issues in

school non-attendance (Lauchlan, 2003; Pelligrini, 2007; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Yet,

there has been little research attention given to the role of school related factors in school refusal (Lauchlan, 2003; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

A review of the literature carried out by Lauchlan (2003), reveals a diverse number of issues in relation to the school environment. These include school policies containing a strict code of discipline, policies of streaming resulting in a student being placed in a classroom with troublesome and disgruntled peers, incidents of bullying and difficult student-teacher relations (e.g. formal, impersonal and hostile). Further, difficulty coping with academic demands, transition from primary to second-level school, school size, unpredictability within the school structures (e.g. frequent change of school staff) and school day (e.g. time periods between classes) were also reported to have a significant impact on the young person and school refusal (Thambirajah et al., 2008). These issues draw attention to the challenges experienced by young people who are already encountering physical and emotional distress in attending the school classroom.

The qualitative research to date has focused on student experiences and their reasons for not attending school (Wilkins, 2008). In one study, young people identified themes relating to the school climate and these include feeling a daily threat of physical violence among peers, compounded by teacher's responses to these situations (i.e. shouting and loudness) to break up confrontational situations between students. Further young people expressed difficulties in student-teacher relations, feelings of low self-worth, isolation and detachment in the school environment (Wilkins, 2008). This study also examined the experiences of students who agreed to attend an alternative smaller scale school setting. In contrast to their earlier experiences, these student's reported positive student-teacher relations where there was a sense of respect, care and being heard that in turn showed to alleviate their academic distress. Teachers were no longer viewed as authoritarian figures and more so, as people who showed to encourage and accommodate the young person's learning experiences.

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The findings suggest that the negative school experiences of young people are common within the literature and that positive school attributes can motivate and engage a young person to attend school (Wilkins, 2008).

Similar qualitative studies have examined the experiences of young people and families relating to school refusal and second-level education. Young people expressed feelings of exhaustion, difficulty staying awake in class, feeling unsafe within the school environment, fear of teachers, difficult peer relations, social isolation compounded with the pressure to return to school as quickly as possible (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Other studies have also drawn attention to "school burnout" as a common factor among young people experiencing school refusal in second-level education (Yoneyama, 2000, p.78). In this instance, young people expressed feelings of extreme fatigue particularly in relation to feeling under pressure to perform academically and to be a 'good student'. The pressure to return to school also gave way to experiences of somatic complaints (e.g. stomach-ache, headache, nausea, breathlessness and dizziness) (Yoneyama, 2000). These findings draw attention to the heightened experience of emotional distress and trauma experiences associated with school refusal, that show to be further aggravated by the school environment. There is need, therefore, for further research to provide greater insight into the lived experience of the young person and school refusal.

A number of large-scale studies involving the examination of school factors have also reported on young people and school refusal. For instance, Archer and colleagues (2003) administered a large-scale UK study comprising of school staff and outside educational professionals, parents and carers. In this study, school professionals highlighted the structure of the school (size and layout) and the proceedings of school day (journey to and from school, break times, lunch times) as the main influences on a young person's difficulty in attending school. Additionally, difficult student-teacher relations, transition from primary to

secondary school, choosing options in secondary level education (resulting in new groupings), fear of subjects (e.g. Physical Education or P.E.) particularly due to the discomfort felt at changing in front of their peers, academic pressures (and struggling with work), incidents of bullying, poor peer relations and difficulty returning due to repeated absence were also found to significantly influence the young person's difficulty in attending school. Other studies have also reported that most LEA (Local Education Authority) officials and second-level schoolteachers acknowledged that the school curriculum may not always engage students and that the level of teaching could also play significant role in school non-attendance (Malcolm et al., 2003).

Although several studies recognise the importance of the school context in relation to school refusal research, few studies have explored the perceptions and viewpoints of educational professionals who work directly with young people who are at risk or having difficulties in attending school. In one study, Torrens Armstrong and colleagues (2011) interviewed 92 school health professionals using semi-structured interviews. The results of this study reported that professionals identified young people (students) as 'phobics' and 'frequent fliers' linking 'school refusal' behaviour to reasons of legitimate or non-legitimate illness. Professionals also provided strategies (e.g. preventative measures and assessment of the individual's needs) in tackling the issues of school refusal. In relation to professional training and development, this study highlighted that little training was provided for educational professionals on issues associated with school refusal. Further, policies and guidance relating to school refusal were based primarily on a general policy of school attendance.

Whilst the above studies draw attention to the importance of school context in relation to issues in school refusal, little research attention is given to the broader influences of power and ideology (e.g. policy, curriculum, pedagogy and resources) that are also embedded in the

system of education. Equally, the school factors listed in Table 2.1 present a restricted view of the underlying issues relating to school refusal. For instance, difficult experiences relating to bullying, transitioning from primary to second-level school, utilising transport and journeying to school, academic pressure and performances in subjects and structure of the school day, all show to represent the individual's 'rational' fears in their responses to threats relating to school environment. They do not, however, consider the broader influences, both visible and non-visible, that exist within the education system.

For instance, the standardisation of teaching and curriculum has been shaped by the international presence of globalisation in educational policy (Morrow & Torres, 2000; Biesta, 2006). This can be seen in policies that emphasise a dominant discourse in the dimensions of accountability, excellence, performativity, high stakes testing and assessments (Apple, 2000; Biesta, 2010). Education has therefore become a "site of struggle and compromise" in implementing policies that follow an economic rationality (Apple, 2000, p. 59). Responding to the demands of globalisation has also presented with its challenges whereby schools can get drawn into this ideological system that can create stress and pressure for young people as students, as well as for teachers and parents within the school environment (O'Toole, in press). Nevertheless, schools also have the power to draw attention to negative power influences amongst their students and to disrupt current dominant discourses relating to practices in education (O'Toole, in press).

In addition, these contentions within the literature draw attention to a need for a more expansive approach to understanding school related factors that contribute to school refusal. It also requires a need for educational institutions, such as schools, to consider and explore appropriate responses to young people who are facing difficult experiences in their lives (e.g. a trauma-informed practice and pedagogical practices). It requires collaboration, not just

between schools and outside support agencies, but also between the various stakeholder groups in society (O'Toole, in press).

This thesis begins to address these issues by exploring the experiences of education professionals who work directly with young people and school refusal, as well as the experiences felt by parents and young people in their everyday challenges of school refusal. So far, this section has identified complex factors relating to school refusal and the assumptions that underpin the representation of families and young people within the school refusal literature. It has also explored how key constructions can effect and limit our understanding of school refusal and the importance of developing further research in the school environment. In the section below, I will now examine current research on the prevalence and policies of school non-attendance and school refusal within the inter(national) literature.

2.5   School Absenteeism: A National and International Perspective

To date, estimating the precise prevalence rate of school refusal has been a difficult challenge for research in school refusal and other forms of school absenteeism (Thambirajah et al., 2008). It has been noted in the literature that the recording of complete and partial absences (i.e. skipped classes) are difficult to quantify and therefore, obscure concise prevalence rates in school refusal (Kearney, 2008). Further, there is a lack of uniformity in school policies relating to the defining and reporting on school absenteeism (Kearney, 2008).

As indicated in the previous section, school refusal research is largely derived from epidemiological studies and clinic referrals of all school aged children (Thambirajah et al., 2008) and therefore, does not account for the prevalence and incidence of young people experiencing school refusal within the community context. Whilst scholars have argued that 5% of children will experience school refusal at some point in their lives (Fremont, 2003;

Ingles et al., 2015; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006, Last & Strauss, 1990), others propose the

prevalence rate to range between 1 and 2 % (King et al., 1998). It has also been suggested

that these prevalence rates may increase to 35% when considering additional factors such as a

student beginning a new education course, a change of school or moving to the next

educational level in the school system (Ingles et al., 2015, Pina et al., 2009).

Currently, the classification of school non-attendance within the field of education

commonly falls into two categories: authorised (i.e. permission is authorised by a

representative of the school) and unauthorised absence (i.e. absence from school without

permission from a school representative) (Thambirajah et al., 2008) (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

Categorising School Absenteeism (adopted from Thambirajah et al., 2008)

School non-attendance	
Authorised absence	Approval sought for school absence in advance or reason accepted as a satisfactory explanation afterwards by a school official (e.g. an illness or bereavement).
Unauthorised absence	Absence from school without the permission of a school official. This includes lateness in attending school, planned holidays during school term, truancy, school refusal and parentally condoned absences (i.e. Parent keeps child at home).

However, Thambirajah and colleagues (2008) indicate that this system of

classification is inherently problematic because of the lack of official acknowledgement in

education to recognise young people and school refusal as a group separate to other forms of

school non-attendance. For instance, it has been noted that school refusal related absences

are more likely to be collated under truancy and parentally controlled absences. This presents

with challenges, in not only identifying young people who experience school refusal (Archer,

et al., 2003; Kearney, 2008), but also in administering research in this area (Thambirajah et al, 2008). Further, uncertainty and inconsistency relating to schools' decisions on how and when to classify a young person's absenteeism as school refusal has also proven problematic. Thambirajah and colleagues (2008) have noted young people who show unwillingness to attend school and yet, manage to attend for the minimum requirement of school days may not be identified as belonging to this group. Therefore, these young people also need to be included in the definition of school refusal (Thambirajah et al., 2008). These aspects draw attention to the complex nature of school refusal and the challenges presented regarding terminology, definitions and classification.

In most countries today, it is a legal requirement for parents of children and young people to endorse consistent school attendance from the age of 5 to 16 years (Thambirajah et al., 2008). In Ireland, the legal establishment of compulsory school attendance was introduced in 1926 by the School Attendance Act (Fahey 1992; Quinlivan, 1986). This act brought forth the requirement of parents to ensure full attendance of children and young people. In this legislation, education attendance in Ireland is now compulsory from 6 to 16 years of age. However, children and young people do not have a legal obligation to attend a formal school setting nor are parents obliged to send them. In this instance, parents have the option of providing education in their homes or in alternative education centres as recognised by the state (e.g. home-schooling or apprenticeship programmes).

At present, school non-attendance policies in Irish second-level schools follow a strategy for school attendance and participation in accordance with the Education Welfare Act (2000). At the forefront of the Irish school attendance strategy is the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, who are responsible for assisting in and monitoring child school attendance and education provision. This service also draws on the skills and expertise of services such as the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL), the School Completion Service

(SCP) and the Educational Welfare Service (EWS). Schools in Ireland are also required to maintain attendance records for all students and forward information to the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, if a student exceeds the twenty days absentee requirement (see https://www.tusla.ie). However, whilst data on school absenteeism is recorded in Irish schools (primary and post-primary), little information is available on the classification of school non-attendance and the factors that may influence particular student groups (Thornton et al., 2013).

Schools also play a significant role in identifying and supporting young people who are going through distressing or challenging experiences. Schools in Ireland cooperate with a range of services and agencies including CAMHS, General Practitioner (GP) and the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS). In addition, Irish second-level schools adopt a whole school approach to promoting mental health and wellbeing through the implementation of curriculum such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), developing school guidance plans and following the guidelines of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). Policies are typically developed in collaboration between education and health sectors in Ireland such as the Health Service Executive (HSE), Department of Health (DoH), Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

2.6   The Current Project

Since the establishment of compulsory school attendance in the early twentieth century, there is a recognition within the literature of the difficulties experienced by children and young people in attending school (Place et al., 2000). Earlier research reveals the depiction of school refusal behaviour as a 'phobia' (Hersov, 1960; Johnson et al., 1941; Warren, 1948) and 'separation anxiety' (Atkinson et al., 1985; Estes et al., 1956; Klein, 1945;

Waldfogel et al., 1957). The literature suggests that parent (i.e. maternal) characteristics such as an overprotective parenting style serve to limit the child's opportunities for independence (Atkinson et al., 1985; Freud, 1962). Further, it appears that much of the understanding of school refusal has been shaped by a focus on emotional and behavioural responses relating to early childhood experiences and underlying psychological issues associated with familial dynamics. These construals have important implications for how professionals make sense and respond to families and individuals in school refusal.

Further, language and terminology reflect the powerful influence of social and psychological constructions that shape how school refusal is responded to today (O'Toole & Devenney, 2020). To date, scholars question the suitability of terms such as 'school refusal' and 'school phobia' as it denotes medical undertones that show to pathologise the emotional distress and place responsibility on the individual. This approach endorses the struggles of young people and families as a personal problem and uses an individualistic lens in understanding school refusal.

The literature also illuminates disparities in school policies relating to school non-attendance. For example, the current classification of authorised and unauthorised absence fails to recognise young people and school refusal as a distinct group and this has resulted in little attention been given to educational research on the specific issues relating to school refusal (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Further, due to a clinical focus on family dynamics with samples selected from child mental health clinics, has also resulted in limited research and information being made available on the role of the school environment (Pelligrini, 2007).

Specifically, this project examines the relationships between education professionals, young people and parents affected by school refusal in the school and home environments. It also explores the component of emotional distress relating to young people's experiences in school refusal and how this relates to the broader influences in society. It, therefore,

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examines the underlying assumptions and constructions of young people and families experiencing school refusal and the implications this has for how school refusal is responded to today. Therefore, the current project sought to explore the perspectives of professionals, parents and young people in issues relating to school refusal and to consider the following overarching research question:

- What are the perspectives and experiences of educational professionals, parents and young people in relation to school refusal in second-level education in Ireland and how do their experiences inform more appropriate responses to school refusal?

This chapter has highlighted a need for further exploration of the dominant discourses underlying key issues in school refusal. It also highlights a need for further exploration using a theoretical framework that can provide an alternative lens in understanding these issues. It is for this reason that I present a theoretical framework in the next chapter to help open up discussion on the underlying issues relating to school refusal.

3   Theoretical Framework

An ambitious aim of this research project is to apply a theoretical framework that offers a unique alternative approach to conceptualising and responding to young people's issues in school refusal. Therefore, it brings together very different and complimentary theoretical concepts that help to open the discussions in relation to school refusal. In this chapter I will introduce the Power Threat Meaning (PTM) Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) as a conceptual alternative to understanding the young person's emotional distress and troubled or troubling behaviour in school refusal. Additionally, I will examine power influences underlying school refusal. I will focus on the negative operation of power and inequalities, and the threats posed by these powers that have been shown to have an adverse impact on young people and their families. I will also include key concepts in educational theory relating to the purpose of education and educational goals in the school environment (e.g. academic achievement, performance and accountability) that also show to impact on young people, parents and professionals in issues pertaining to school refusal.

I will begin by giving an outline of the PTM Framework in providing a conceptual resource to understanding psychological distress. I then discuss the four core questions that form the basis of the PTM Framework and their contribution to understanding emotional distress in school refusal. The central section of this chapter will outline the operation of negative power influences within societal structures and relate these to an understanding of the issues of school refusal. In the closing section, I will consider the aims of the current education system and the demands of performativity and accountability agenda's in education that give way to a pressurised culture in schools. I draw on theoretical education concepts that focus on the transformative potential of education, the need for awareness of dominant practices and processes in education and their implication for issues in school refusal.

3.1   The Power Threat Meaning Framework: A Conceptual Resource

The PTMF (Power Threat Meaning Framework) can provide a useful lens to draw on alternative perspectives in emotional distress that are not explained by previous medical frameworks for mental health (e.g. DSM-V and ICD-11). To date, the PTM Framework has been developed as a conceptual resource and has been used to inform service design across a number of existing statutory services within the UK and these include: the complex trauma training for the IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) service, a trauma-informed approach in Adult Mental Health (AMH), the development of an Outcome-Orientated CAMHS model, groupwork for women survivors of abuse as well as narrative approaches in therapeutic settings (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). It has also been implemented across other services and disciplines, namely, in an early intervention youth mental health service, Jigsaw, (see Aherne et al., 2019), the Surviving Prison Group to explore the impact of long-term imprisonment (see Reis et al., 2019) and in specialist services relating to the Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) or Intellectual Disability (see Flynn & Polak, 2019). It is also worth emphasising that the PTMF can be relevant to people who have never experienced significant difficulties with mental health or who have never had contact with mental health services, making it accessible to all.

The aim of the PTMF is to inform a range of services and to develop already existing approaches by incorporating the concepts and principals that underpin this framework and to provide an alternative understanding of emotional and psychological distress. The principles and concepts of the PTM Framework are based on a contemporary, meta framework drawing on a range of perspectives and models to offer a radical approach in understanding "the origins, experience and expression of emotional distress and troubled or troubling behaviour" (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, p.8). This framework, therefore, recognises a need to

depathologise the individual's distress and to appreciate their efforts as ways of coping and surviving personal life circumstances in light of adversities and conflicts that may exist in their lives (past or present) (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Thus, personal meaning (i.e. how the individual makes sense of their situation) is closely linked to the wider social and cultural discourses, belief systems, relationships and access to economic and material resources.

Framing emotional distress in this way, acknowledges the person as being connected to their proximal world through their relational experiences with close family, friends and other influential figures, as well as belonging to community-based establishments such as work, education and accessing resources (Smail, 1984). However, to adopt the principles of this framework requires a specific letting go of the traditional medical model approaches to emotional distress:

> Asking people to let go of the hope of finding medical-type patterns in distress organised by biology and 'psychopathology', and suggesting instead patterns organised by meaning, necessitates abandoning the false hope of finding discrete, universal causal pathways which are a precise fit for any individual, and which are stable across cultures (Johnstone et al., 2019, p.49)

The above statement draws attention to the current psychiatric profession that has been subjected to considerable pressure and criticism relating to the pathologisation of a person's life difficulties (Maj, 2012). The reductionist approach of the medical model to health and illness of the individual has been strongly criticised for leaving little room for the cultural, social and psychological experiences of the individual (Alonso, 2004; Farre & Rapley, 2017). There is considerable dispute, therefore, relating to the development of theories and practices to treat bodily illnesses and physical problems, that exist as the same practices used in the treatment of mental health distress and troubling behaviour. Thus,

resulting in a medicalised language (e.g. 'symptoms', 'illness', 'disturbed', 'disorder', 'treatment') that lends itself to focusing on the origin and causes of "mental disorders" (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, p.21).

> It is the implied lack of meaning which suggests an inner defect, dysfunction or
> pathology and justifies the switch to a medical framework and the search for
> biological abnormality (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, p.77).

This statement brings to light the assumptions of a biological reductionist model that fails to acknowledge meaning, social and interpersonal factors that also play an integral part in understanding emotional distress (Read & Harper, 2020. In this way, the medical model serves to disregard not only the proximal space of the person, but also the wider psychological impact of social and economic policy (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). However, this is not to suggest that the medical model approach cannot be applied to specific health conditions such as neurological or neurodegenerative disorders, outcomes of stroke, brain injury or other examples of a debilitating disease (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Read & Harper, 2020). Moreover, it is the limiting influences of a medical model approach to understanding human emotional distress and the associated challenging experiences.

This theorising perspective of a medical model approach can also be traced to the development of wellbeing interventions within schools that show to have an individualistic focus, in which explanations relating to context also seem to be absent. Happiness interventions, for example, show to focus on individual student goals that relate to ways of improving thoughts, beliefs and actions that work towards a more cheerful constitution. Thus, little attention is given to the potential for environmental circumstances that may also be troublesome for the young person (O'Toole & Simovska, 2020: Prilleltensky, 2001). This can place pressure on young people to be a 'good student' and to be resilient in persisting

with situations that they may find challenging. This makes visible a need to not only identify the characteristics of an individual's symptoms of distress, more importantly to consider their wellbeing at multiple levels (i.e. personal, interpersonal, organisational and communal dimensions) (Prilleltensky, 2001).

It is, of course, important to acknowledge that whilst the PTM Framework has been endorsed by many practitioners who prefer non-medicalised approaches to mental health, it has also been criticised for lacking clarity (Larkin, 2018), driven by ideology (Salkovskis, 2018) and largely ignoring biological influences on mental health (Phillips & Raskin, 2020). However, such critiques are anecdotal in responses to the PTM Framework and whilst it is in early development and implementation, little research has evaluated the outcomes of using a PTM framework (Seery et al., 2021).

Indeed, other theoretical approaches to understanding young people's issues in school refusal were also considered for the purposes of this research. The Dynamic Systems theory, for example, represents a relational framework that adopts a multilevel holistic system for understanding the individual and their context in development (Overton, 2007; Thelen & Smith, 2006; Urban et al., 2011). In addition, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological model (1979, 1989) also considers the development of the individual within their environment as part of a multi-layered set of interconnected environmental systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono-systems). Taken together, these models of inquiry facilitate an understanding of young people's difficulties in school refusal that can be viewed within their social relationships and differing contexts such as family, schools, community and the broader socio-cultural influences. However, for the purposes of this research, these approaches did not go far enough in understanding the unique complexities of emotional distress in school refusal, whilst the principles and concepts of the PTM Framework facilitated a more in-depth understanding of these issues.

Of course, other perspectives could also be considered in understanding a young person's struggle in school refusal. For instance, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the Stage-Environment Fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993), storm and stress beliefs and children's rights paradigms provide a useful lens in understanding how respect for young people's rights, voice and viewpoint can have a positive influence on the growth and development of adolescents (Eccles et al., 1993; Greene, 2012; Hines & Paulson, 2006; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). In addition, perspectives in humanistic psychology, person-centred counselling and psychotherapy that facilitate agency, growth and mental health support of young people, would also be beneficial in understanding more deep-rooted issues relating to school refusal.

3.2 Implications of the PTMF for Issues in School Refusal

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, school refusal has been associated with underlying assumptions based on a medical model approach that delineates the young person's distress as 'maladaptive', having emotional 'disturbances' as well as a range of somatic symptoms (e.g. physical ill health). In contrast, the PTM Framework adopts four core questions (see Table 3.1) as an alternative understanding to the traditional medical model approach of "What is wrong with you?" in the 'treatment' of emotional distress (Blue Knot Foundation, 2012, p.14). In doing so, the PTMF helps to think about the fundamental elements that are core to the persistence of emotional distress and troubled or troubling behaviour.

Table 3.1

Power Threat Meaning Framework Questions

Power   What has happened to you?
                     (How has **Power** operated in your life)

Threat   How did this affect you?
                     (What kind of **Threats** does this pose?)

Meaning   What sense did you make of it?
                     (What is the **Meaning** of these situations and experiences to you?)

Threat Response What did you have to do to survive?
                     (What kinds of **Threat Response** are you using?)

Strengths   What are your strengths?
                     (What access to **Power Resources** do you have?)

The four key questions highlighted in Table 3.1 are at the heart of the PTM

Framework. Each question emphasises aspects relating to power (what has happened to

you?), threats (how did this affect you?), meaning making (what sense did you make of it?)

and threat responses (what did you do to survive?) that are identified in order to understand

the person's responses to their experience. These four questions represent the way in which

the individual is part of their environment through social, cultural and biological components.

An additional question relating to strengths and skills also acknowledges positive aspects in

the person's life (e.g. social support, resourcefulness, access to material, leisure and

education, connections to community and nature etc.) (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

Therefore, when a young person presents with 'problematic' behaviour in refusing to

go to school, these questions help to identify the distress patterns (i.e. signs and symptoms)

relating to the young person's troubled or troubling behaviour (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

Thus, the meaning related to these patterns can be viewed as an expression of the young person's embodied reaction to the world that they live in.

For instance, consider the experiences of a young person at the sound of the alarm clock ringing on a Monday morning, the ritual of putting on a school uniform, eating breakfast and preparing a packed school bag, further aggravated by the tense anticipation of the day ahead. Their tense anticipation may be traced to threats or challenges within the proximal environment and linked to childhood adversities (e.g. bullying, neglect, sexual or physical abuse, emotional abuse, domestic violence, family separation and divorce, family illness, bereavement and social media) that may be part of their past and present experiences (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). All of which could undoubtedly lead to a reaction and response of avoiding the school environment. Or alternatively, consider school structures and practices that may be the source of the young person's distress (e.g. strict code of discipline, policies of streaming, competitive culture and school size) and the pressure of academic performance and emphasis on qualifications, a point that will be returned to later in this chapter.

These examples illustrate the importance of social context in understanding a young person's difficulties in school refusal. Not only do they highlight the young person's experiences of emotional distress, but also, their responses to threatening situations and the negative impact of power that may underlie their circumstances. Therefore, the PTM Framework promotes a conceptual shift in understanding the young person's responses to such situations as intelligible and serving a purpose rather than a condition that signifies there may be something 'wrong' (i.e. medically) with this person (Aherne et al., 2019; Read & Harper, 2020).

Thus, the role of personal meaning is central to understanding the young person's distress and draws on the complexes of bodily feelings and sensations (Burkitt, 2014).

Feelings can, therefore, be understood to be part of human "stream of consciousness" which links both thought and experience as 'ours' (Burkitt, 2014, p. 58). Therefore, feelings play a central part of the person's lived experience that merge into named emotions (i.e. fear, love, hate, shame, anger, frustration etc.) before gradually dispersing into other emotions becoming part of a new lived experience. As in the example of school refusal above, the origin of emotion and feelings show to operate within a context or situation (i.e. school and/or home environment) and this makes visible a need for a greater understanding of the young person's distress within broader influences relating to conflicts and adversities in their lives.

Such conceptual paradigm's offer a unique and radical way to examine responses to emotional distress and the challenges experienced in adapting to negative life experiences. For example, responses to emotional distress can be understood as efforts on the person's behalf to transform, alleviate or survive a situation that may be causing difficulty in their daily lives (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). These responses can also be traced to human neurophysiological components in stress associated with a fight, flight, freeze response when in the face of danger (Porges, 2009). More recently, the use of culturally evolved strategies has also been identified as responses to adversity (e.g. substance use disorder, eating disorders, self-harm etc.) and human distress (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

In addition, the term adversity refers to the individual's experience of 'trauma' resulting in a range of responses that help the individual to survive and adapt to their life's circumstances (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). For example, Herman (1992) defines psychological trauma as troubled behaviour in which the person is overwhelmed by the "ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning" (Herman, 1992, p. 33). Hence, repeated exposure to negative life experiences which may be part of a person's interactions with significant others, can evoke responses of overwhelmed

emotions associated with loss of control, fear and panic, helplessness and survival threats (Andreasen, 1985)

Childhood adversities also share a range of common elements resulting in self-protective and adaptive strategies. These strategies have been associated with long term difficult outcomes such as anxiety, social and relational difficulties, drug and alcohol difficulties, low educational achievement, self-harm and suicide (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Within the school environment, these strategies can also create a strong negative self-view resulting in harmful effects on the person's emotional, social and intellectual learning (Felitti et al., 1998; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Stempel et al., 2017). These challenges raise essential questions regarding young people's emotional distress and the need for an integration of trauma-informed practice within school environments (O'Toole, in press).

Further, the challenges of 'everyday adversities' in contemporary cultural practices can be seen to have negative influences on young people's experiences (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). For instance, existing literature points to the negative effects of materialism and consumer shopping behaviour on young people. Young people are increasingly targeted by advertising agencies and marketers who communicate their information through media (i.e. internet, television, radio and magazines) (Goldberg et al., 2003; Vandana & Lenka, 2014). Studies have conclusively shown high levels of materialism and compulsive buying behaviour to be associated with negative outcomes in wellbeing and life satisfaction in young people (Mueller et al., 2011). In addition, the increased value of materialism over life goals can risk poor engagement with school and academic performance and has been viewed as a cause for concern (Goldberg et al., 2003). Equally, the growth of a new digital media culture has shown to impact on young people's activities relating to body image and dieting behaviour, negative health and lifestyle choices such as smoking, problematic alcohol consumption and fast-food consumption (Dunlop et al., 2016). These issues have important

implications for policies in education and the need to take necessary steps in supporting young people and the cultural pressures they face in today's society.

3.3   Negative Power Influences Underpinning School Refusal

The PTMF adopts a broad perspective in understanding the influences of power, social context and the dominant discourses of society relating to emotional distress. Power is defined as the "fundamental dynamic of social structure" (Smail, 2005, p.28). It can be seen to operate within both positive and negative influences, that "work on and through people" (Freire, 1985, p.xix). Power can also be found at the root of people's struggle, resistance and drive for their ideal of a better world (Freire, 1985). Therefore, power is not only part of the public and private worlds of governments and ruling classes but also in those groups that are viewed to position themselves in opposition and in resistance (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1985).

But the subtlety of domination is not exhausted by simply referring to those cultural forms that bear down on the oppressed daily, it is also to be found in the way in which the oppressed internalise and thus participate in their own oppression" (Freire, 1985, p.xix)

The above statement draws attention to people's circumstances and how these can sustain psychological, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Such circumstances include issues in social class and poverty, income inequalities, unemployment, belonging to subordinate group(s); war and other life-threatening events, childhood neglect; sexual, physical and emotional abuse; sexual and domestic violence; bullying, harassment, discrimination and loss of a parent in childhood (Felitti et al., 1998; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, p.92). Equally, the nature of psychological distress does not occur per chance within the individual, more so, from the everyday interactions of people (family, friends, work, school and community) and fundamentally from the structures in society that are already

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created (Smail, 1984). Theoretical perspectives that consider the importance of power in relation to social inequalities and the maintenance of psychological distress can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (2010), Michel Foucault (1979, 1980) and Nikolas Rose (1985). These poststructural scholars provide a comprehensive analysis of the less visible influences of power that play a crucial role in shaping the meaning of events and experiences.

Whilst positive and negative power influences exist in a range of ways within society, it is important to consider the negative operation of power in understanding the adverse effects of school refusal. Table 3.2 presents an overview of the negative power influences that can be seen to be interconnected and operating through social organisations, institutions and practices (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). The dominant influences of power are, therefore, nuanced by the social context (i.e. physical, social and relational, educational and media) and dominant discourses of society (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). In this way, the influence of power can provide insight into an individual's response to their situation and the meanings adopted in assessing their circumstances and if it brings support, concern or disapproval from others (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

Table 3.2

Types of Power (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018)

Negative Influences of Power	
Biological or Embodied Power	Includes the possession of embodied attributes with cultural meanings such as strength, physical appearance, fertility, skin shade and colour, embodied abilities and physical health.
Coercive Power	Power by force such as war and conflict, intimidation, ensuring compliance, to frighten or threats or greater physical strength.

Table 3.2 (continued)

Legal Power	Power of arrest, imprisonment or hospitalisation, support or limiting aspects of power.
Economic and Material Power	Having the means to gain valued possessions and services, to control others' access to them and to pursue valued activities such as housing, employment, transport, education, medical treatment, leisure, legal services, safety and security, and privacy.
Ideological Power	Involving the control of meaning, language and 'agendas' allowing for groups or issues to be withheld from public scrutiny. Power to create beliefs or stereotypes about particular groups and to have these beliefs, experiences, behaviour and feelings validated by others' as well as the power to silence and undermine.
Interpersonal Power	All forms of power can operate through relationships such as the power to look after or not look after, protect or abandon, to give, withdraw or withhold love.
Social or Cultural Capital	Whether or not we have access to socially valued education, employment training and leisure. Whether we want or have access to social connection, belonging and confidence in the society we live in.

Table 3.2 assists in exploring the potential for negative power influences underlying school refusal. For instance, school strategies such as the implementation of Codes of Behaviour, discipline procedures, motivation attendance strategies or employment of an Attendance Tracker secretary (i.e. staff who are appointed to track attendance of individual students in school) could be seen as elements of a coercive power used to ensure the young person's reengagement and return to the school classroom. Further, these coercive power elements could also be visible in clinical (e.g. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, CBT) and medical (psychopharmacologic such as SSRI's (i.e. Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors))

responses to the 'treatment' of school refusal. The use of these interventions can be seen to offer solutions at the level of the individual and obscuring links between social context and emotional distress. Further, the use of medications and biomedical interventions have been described as having negative outcomes that can be "potentially disabling, coercive and retraumatising within mental health systems" (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018: Read & Harper, 2020; UN, 2017).

Subsequently, a legal and coercive power could be seen when court proceedings and threat of imprisonment are used for those parents and young people who are perceived to be uncooperative with the education services regarding school attendance and where the young person is not part of an alternative education setting. In addition, economic and material power elements may be visible in the young person's (and their family's) unequal access to resources. These include housing, transport, leisure, medical interventions and education, where access to psychoeducational assessments and therapeutic supports would be deemed as vital resources in school refusal. Underlying social and interpersonal power influences could also be detected in the young person's access (or lack of access) to protection, nurture, educational opportunities, leisure and employment training. Thus, these power influences have the potential of influencing the young person's opportunities and engagement in education.

Furthermore, a less visible ideological power could be seen in the stereotypes of young people experiencing school refusal (i.e. fragile, vulnerable with internalising and maladaptive behaviour, lazy and unmotivated) and as being part of an adolescent group (i.e. associated with delinquency, deviancy, drug and alcohol problems and sexual promiscuity). These assumptions draw attention to the way in which stereotypical thinking can have negative consequences for individuals and groups. It can endorse discriminatory practices that are based on assumptions relating to the abilities, characteristics, and performance of

individuals of a particular race, gender, sexuality, class, disability and age (Devlin, 2006). Therefore, stereotyping can have a profound impact on members of a particular group (i.e. lack of respect and in some instances, violence) and can create barriers to promoting and achieving equality (Devlin, 2006).

Schools can also be seen as non-neutral institutions, in that they too are influenced by power dynamics in culture, norms, availability of resources (i.e. government grants, policies and legal power) and by the interest of "capitalist rationality" (Freire, 1985, p.15). Ideological power can be seen to operate through social structures and institutions, including, education, the media, advertising, the legal system, healthcare and research (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Ideological power also shapes education systems in how they are operated and organised in today's society. For instance, influences of the Enlightenment period highlight a movement from educating individual's for citizenship, work roles, membership and identity at local, regional and national level to a more strategic approach within national policy and governing states (Burbules & Torres, 2000). Whilst the focus on an enlightenment framework remains an important one, these approaches reflect underlying assumptions of students as "human capital" in a world that is dominated by leadership discourses relating to economic competition, performativity, measurement, high stakes testing and accountability (Apple, 2000, p.60). In these approaches little attention is given to the stress and pressure experienced by students, teachers and parents. Nevertheless, schools are uniquely placed to explore these power dynamics within the school system and to nurture awareness and change among its students in transformative practices in education (O'Toole, in press), a point that will be explored further in the next section of this chapter.

Together these perspectives assist in examining the influences of negative power elements within education, social, economic and political structures of society, that also help to shape the emergence and persistence of emotional distress and troubled or troubling

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behaviour. The closing section of this chapter will now consider key concepts in educational theory relating to the purpose and goals in education and their implications for how we understand and respond to school refusal today.

3.4   The Education System, Purpose and Accountability

Theorising perspectives in education provide an opportunity to engage with questions relating to the purpose of education and key issues relating to the challenges of school refusal. Over the past decades, schools have been influenced by a dominant discourse relating to the development of a "learning economy" in policies and practices in education (Biesta, 2006, p.169). Policies relating to the importance of school effectiveness, dating back to the 1980s, have played an influential role in the development and change of education today. Measurement outcomes, for example, have become the mainstay of the education system in an effort to transform education into an evidence based profession. However, this movement has had a profound impact on the policies and practices of schools and educators in which "…we end up valuing what is measured, rather than that we engage in measurement of what we value" (Biesta, 2008, p.43).

In this way, an over reliance on factual information relating to the directions of education and educational outcomes have evolved and this has brought with it a rise in a culture of performativity in education whereby targets and indicators (e.g. examinations results and points) have become the primary motivation. Performativity, therefore, refers to approaches that incorporate a culture, a technology and a regulation practice that emphasises the importance of decisions, comparisons (e.g. performances of schools and individual students) and displays (e.g. of measurement) relating to sanctions and rewards (Ball, 2003). These approaches have implications for everyday practice in schools and make visible a need

to reconnect with the purpose of education within the assessment of education practices and student achievements (Biesta, 2008).

It has been argued that the purpose of education involves three specific functions, namely, qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2010, 2015). The first domain, qualification, draws attention to the focus of the skills and knowledge of children, young people and adults (Biesta, 2010). In today's education system, it is noted that this domain is the most influential function to be implemented in preparing the young person for future employment and contributing to wider economic growth and development (Biesta, 2010; Biesta 2015). Thus, this domain provides an important purpose in preparing students with skills that can be used in significant areas of their lives (e.g. political literacy, cultural literacy) and a foundation of skills for their "citizenship". (Biesta, 2010, p.20). Therefore, education plays a key role in preparing the student for their future experiences within the complexities of society (Biesta, 2015).

The function of socialisation incorporates the social, political, cultural, professional and religious elements that underlie education systems. By drawing on this function, education is primarily concerned with the preservation of norms and values in relation to religious or cultural traditions (Biesta, 2010). Whilst this can overtly be observed as an aim of education, it can also appear to be an underlying negative power influence, particularly in inequalities, maintaining social structures and divisions (Biesta, 2015). In addition, the third function of education, subjectification (or individuation), encourages the student in a process of becoming a "subject" (Biesta, 2010, p. 21). In this way, the person becomes a subject of "initiative and responsibility" (Biesta, 2015, p77). The focus of education, therefore, lies in the 'quality' of subjectification and encourages the student "to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting" (Biesta 2010, p. 21).

However, when the purpose of education is to focus primarily on one domain (i.e. the goal of qualification), this can create an imbalance in the education system, whereby, "excessive emphasis on academic achievement [can] cause severe stress for young people; particularly in cultures where failure is not really an option" (Biesta, 2015, p.78). In this instance, young people may become more vulnerable to distress through the external pressure of exam performance, fear of failure and a sense of not doing enough. Therefore, exercising autonomy and independence (i.e. as in the domain of subjectification) can become a difficult challenge for the young person when experiencing distress due to academic demands. Thus, these theorising concepts highlight imbalances relating to the purpose of education within current education practices and raise important questions relating to agenda setting and its effects on students and teachers.

The purpose of education has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years. A key consideration is the process of globalisation (i.e. economic, political, and cultural) and its impact on educational practice and policy (Burbules & Torres, 2000). There is a growing body of literature that recognises the dominant discourses within policy and practice that is driven by frameworks produced by supra- and transnational organisations, namely, the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2006; Morrow & Alberto Torres, 2000). These dominant agents show to have strong agenda's producing important benchmarks and indicators within policy and practice at national levels (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2006; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Laursen, 2006). However, scholars have drawn attention to the serious implications of globalisation in the process of transforming teaching and learning practices within education (Ball, 2003).

For instance, leadership discourses have become dominated by terms such as accountability, excellence, standards and high stakes testing (or assessments) to enhance

achievement and performativity (Apple, 2000; Biesta, 2010; Madaus & Clark, 2001).

However, scholars have argued that education as a practice, has become transformed into a

set of procedures and managerial approaches that has affected relationships between state and

education institutions, schools and teachers, and parents and students (Biesta, 2010). Driven

by neoliberal and economic change in the 1970's, the process of accountability has positioned

educators as 'providers' and students (and parents) as 'customers'. In this way, parents and

students have become part of an 'accountability loop' in which their participation (i.e. having

a democratic voice) has become secondary and therefore, outside the decision-making

process in education:

> …the culture of accountability has made it very difficult for the relationships between
>
> parents/students and educators/institutions to develop into mutual, reciprocal and
>
> democratic relationships, relationships that are based upon a shared concern for the
>
> educational good (Biesta, 2010, p.71).

This can also have negative consequences for educators in meeting the needs of the

'customer', and for parents and students (i.e. 'consumers') who may find it difficult to

establish reliable and trusting relations with educators and institutions (Biesta, 2010, p.70).

Therefore, the role of communication and dialogue are important developments in engaging

with the true purpose of education: "… it is crucial to see that the voice of the student and the

voice of the teacher are very different voices that come with different responsibilities and

expectations" (Biesta, 2015, p. 83).

The effects of these discourses and policies at national level can also be felt by the

students (and parents) at local level and in particular, when facing into the stress and pressure

of academic achievement and performativity. Whilst there are obvious benefits to

examinations and assessments such as setting goals and standards for the education of

teachers and students, it also obscures a recognition of the complexes of context underlying the examination process. For instance, taking into account individual's personal choice of goals and interests, differences in ability and self-esteem as well as the complexity of the school environment (social and cultural) are all elements that seem to be absent in the agenda setting of the examination process (Madaus & Clarke, 2001).

Further, the motivational incentive of high stakes testing does not account for the motivation of all its students. For example, some students may view the receiving of awards as unobtainable and that they lack the appropriate skills and ability to pass examinations. For others, academic success may not be viewed as a viable option, for reasons relating to competition, shortage of places in further education and employment, or as having little relevance within their social milieu (Madaus & Clarke, 2001). These consequences can also contribute to a toxic school environment, creating a negative health impact on young people in issues relating to self-esteem, emotional distress, social isolation and hostile relations (between staff, students and parents) (Ball, 2003; Madaus & Clarke, 2001). Therefore, these issues draw attention to the need to restructure strategies regarding academic experiences of young people and in particular, for individuals experiencing difficulty in school attendance. These issues also highlight a need for agendas in education to assist in enhancing the freedom and liberation of education experiences.

The use of a Freirean perspective also helps to illuminate the importance of developing humanised, critical conscious students who recognise the need to act and liberate themselves within education and the world. Paulo Freire, a renowned radical theorist of the 20th Century, promoted a humanist pedagogy, bringing to light his passion for justice, critical consciousness, knowledge and social change (McLaren & Leonard, 1993). Born in Brazil, he became a distinguished figure in education who inculcated the importance of a *conscientização* (i.e. critical consciousness) among his students. This revolutionary

pedagogy acknowledged not only the need to change the lives of the oppressed in order to learn and live their lives more fully; but also, to acknowledge the historical context and structures within society (McLaren & Leonard, 1993).

Therefore, critical consciousness plays an integral role in engaging with the broader social, political and economic influences of society (Freire, 1970). In order to bring about change, Freire (1985) advocates for an examination of the physical and exploitive elements of domination that influence the person's internal experience and inhibit their freedom of "social and self-emancipation" (Freire, 1985, p.xx). In this way, groups (e.g. young people and school refusal) may come to view society from their own perspective and recognise their potential and responsibility in society's transformation. For instance, the more students conform to the process of depositing of information and make effort to adapt to this process, the less chance there is of developing a critical consciousness. Therefore, to passively accept the status quo reflects the student's tolerance of a flawed system upon which the "fragmented view of reality is deposited on them" (Freire, 1970, p.46). Thus, for Freire, the true essence of liberation is by engaging with power and knowledge in a way that reflects self-directed action (Freire, 1970).

The banking model of education provides insight into the negative interests of power by focusing on "changing the consciousness of the oppressed" rather than the "situation that oppresses them" (Freire 1970, p.47). Thus, the purpose of a critical consciousness is to instil change and transformation in the world in which students awake to their current reality of "domestication" (Freire, 1970, p. 48). In this instance, the 'passive student' may awaken to the fact that their life is not as it should be or that their reality is open to change and transformation (Freire, 1970). These concepts have important implications in how educators respond to the needs of young people and school refusal, and in supporting alternative pathways in their education.

The message, therefore, in Freire's humanist pedagogy is clear, in that, for educators to understand liberation and freedom they:

> must first be aware of the form that domination takes, the nature of its locations and the problem it poses for those who experience it as both a subjective and objective force (Giroux,1985, p. 20)

Thus, in order for change to take place, praxis (i.e. action and reflection) needs to be directed at the very structures that need to change. As in the teacher student relationship of the banking model, it is not about leaders as the active educator and the oppressed as simply being the workers; more so, it the participation of the oppressed which acts as a vital component of change (Freire, 1970). The importance of a critical consciousness, therefore, is encouraging the student, having rights to participate in their own future, to question the system they live in and to participate in the restructuring of the school system and society. Thus, the school environment is highly influential in the development of the young person and the future of our society (McLaren & Leonard,1993).

> The empowering of education, Freire suggests is not a new data bank or doctrine delivered to students; it is instead, a democratic and transformative relationship between students and teacher, students and learning and students and society (Shor, 1993, p.26).

In sum, this Freirean perspective assists in better understanding the challenges presented to young people in their experiences of school refusal. The banking model of education highlights key issues such as difficult student-teacher relations, constraints of school structures as well as pressure in academic achievement and performance that can have a profound negative impact on the young person's experiences. It also makes visible the fundamental importance of negative power influences that contribute to issues in school

refusal (e.g. marginalisation and powerlessness). The concept of praxis, therefore, promotes a need for a reflective approach encouraging young people to take action, to challenge the status quo and at the same time, encouraging a collaborative process between teachers and students, school and teachers, parents and students, integrating both knowledge and understanding within theory and practice.

Therefore, adopting Freirean principles has important implications for the research questions and methods within the current project. For instance, exploring the perspectives and experiences of education professionals, parents and young people makes explicit key issues in social justice, equality, inclusion and participation. These principles also highlight the need for critical awareness of oppressive conditions with regard to marginalised groups. This can be seen as central to improving the wellbeing and situations of individuals within the school environment.

3.5   Conclusion

There are many complex factors that contribute to the issues experienced in school refusal and these can have far reaching consequences for how it is understood and responded to in today's society. The PTM Framework provides an alternative conceptual resource to understand specific issues relating to emotional distress and school refusal. The PTM Framework draws specifically on four core questions that examine the underlying difficulties experienced by a young person and potential threats within the home and school environments. These questions are positioned in contrast to the traditional medical model approach to issues in mental health and encourage a conceptual shift in understanding human emotional distress as intelligible responses and as ways of adapting to possible negative life experiences (e.g. trauma, adversity and childhood adversities). Therefore, the PTM

Framework makes visible the relationship between emotional distress and the broader distal influences in society.

Critical theoretical concepts in education have also brought to light propositions in relation to the purpose of education and help to illuminate key issues relating to school refusal. The impact of globalisation visible in policies relating to the goal of qualification, an over emphasis on measurement practices and the process of accountability have placed added pressure on education practices (Apple, 2000; Biesta, 2006; Burbules & Torres, 2000). These practices have also placed additional strain on professionals, as well as students and parents within the current education system. Freire's (1970) banking model of education highlights the benefits and implications of a critical consciousness to bring about change and transformation within the education system. Freire, therefore, advocates that education as a praxis has the potential to encourage freedom and liberation in the development of a critical consciousness within students. These concepts have implications for the transformative potential of education, the importance of awareness of forms of domination and the problems that these can pose.

In the next chapter, I will discuss my epistemological position in relation to this research project and give an overview of the methodology employed to answer the main research question.

4 Methodology and Epistemological Positioning

The purpose of this chapter is to present the epistemological and methodological assumptions underlying this research project. Therefore, I will present my epistemological positioning that provides a broad framework in understanding and critically engaging with the issues underlying school refusal. I will also describe the methodological approach and its important implications relating to the design and methods of this research project.

4.1 Critical Realism

This research is underpinned by a critical realism approach that provides a useful framework to engage in research that is concerned with fundamental issues in the social world and their manifestations in social structures and power. Critical realism is, therefore, concerned with the philosophical nature of the natural and social worlds as a basis for analysis (Alderson, 2016).

Evolving from the positivist and constructivist paradigm debates of the 1970s and 1980s, critical realism emerged from researchers and social theorists efforts to develop post positivism in the social sciences (Archer et al., 2016). It also sought to draw on these approaches providing a comprehensive understanding of ontology and epistemology within a philosophy of science (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A central tenet of critical realism, however, is the distinction between ontology (i.e. the nature of reality) and epistemology (i.e. the nature of knowledge) and follows an assertion that ontology cannot be reduced to epistemology (Fletcher, 2017). This distinction has challenged mainstream philosophy and science, which has traditionally merged ontology into epistemology by focusing on a quest for general laws and hypothesis testing as a basis of scientific knowledge. This has resulted in an "epistemic

fallacy", as termed by Bhaskar (1998, p. 27), who critiqued positivism for reducing 'reality' to what can be scientifically known and interpreted by human knowledge.

Critical realism departs from this position by acknowledging the relationship between ontology and epistemology in understanding the social world. It does not adhere to a particular method, a particular set of beliefs or a particular framework; rather, it offers a "reflexive philosophical stance" (Archer et al., 2016, p.2) that allows for a selection of empirical research methods deemed appropriate for the investigation of the social world (Scott, 2010). Further, critical realism is concerned with the complexities of social reality (i.e. causation, structures, agency and relations). Whilst the critical realist believes a 'reality' to exist, it also proposes that human knowledge plays only a small part in a much larger and more in-depth reality:

> Reality is assumed to exist but to be only imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms and the fundamentally intractable nature of phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

Therefore, critical realism ontology examines reality within three distinct layers: Empirical, Actual and Real (see Figure 4.1):

Figure 4.1

Critical Realism: Three Layers of Reality (adapted from Fletcher, 2017)

Empirical Level
- Events can be experienced and observed
- Events are understood through human interpretation

Actual Level
- Events that occur and are generated by underlying mechanisms and may or may not be observed.
- No filter of human experience or interpretation

Real Level
- Causal structures or 'causal mechanisms' exist.
- Inherent properties within an object or structure that cause events at empirical level to occur

At the empirical level, the objective experience (i.e. events and objects) of the individual can be observed and explained. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, these events are also viewed through the lens of human experience and perception, and where the individual's perceptions, ideas and actions within their social experiences are understood as temporary and causal. In the middle level, the actual represents the subjective experience of the individual where there is no particular lens of human experience. Events may appear without the awareness of human attention and depends on the circumstances that the individual may experience. Thus, these happenings take on a different understanding than what would be observed at the empirical level (Danermark et al., 2002). Critical realism also examines a third and more in-depth real level that brings to light the causal mechanisms or structure mechanisms which are the essential components of the object or structure that instigate events such as those appearing at the Empirical level. Thus, the fundamental aim of critical realism is to give clarity to social events and phenomena that affect the causal mechanisms

and the layers of reality (Fletcher, 2017). Therefore, the researcher approaches causation critically, examining facts and events that affect human responses and relationships and at the same time, drawing on the historical, cultural and social structures and processes that underlie the complexities of those facts and events in the social world (Archer et al., 2016).

Critical realism also brings together the interdependence of structure and agency. Alderson (2016) demonstrates the conflicting elements of social structure and agency in relation to education and children's human rights. For instance, when children first arrive at the school yard, they become aware of trusting and respectful relationships, deciphering who they like and dislike, and events that evoke responses of comfort or discomfort. Within this environment, there is potential for growth and nurture particularly through positive relations with adults (e.g. teachers). However, there are also positive and negative power influences to consider within the school context (i.e. coercive *power 2* and creative emancipating *power 1*) (Bhaskar, 2008). These can be seen in the external pressures relating to student-teacher relationships such as academic demands (i.e. planning, competitive league tables, standardised testing and assessments) that can result in tensions and contradictions that deviate from the principles of "active democracy" (Alderson, 2016, p. 7). Alderson's (2016) illustration makes visible the importance of examining agency and structure relations in regard to prevailing problems and systems of power within education institutions. It justifies the importance of reflexively accounting for what it is we are claiming to know about the world (Archer et al., 2016). Appropriate methodologies, therefore, need to be developed beyond an either/or of the quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to understand relations between structure and agency (Scott, 2010).

Therefore, critical realism provides an opportunity to explain and critique social conditions within the social world and can be applied to research in school refusal. It provides a forum to consider appropriate methods in the qualitative dimension (e.g.

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qualitative interviews and arts-based methods of research), to explore the internal experiences of individuals as they reflect on and interpret objective social structures that they are part of and the impact of these structures on their lives (Archer et al., 2016). Appropriate quantitative approaches can also be applied by examining the generalisability of social objects and structural forms (i.e. to empower or restrict) that affect agents' acting in the world (Scott, 2010). It can also highlight methodological issues that have been part of the long standing conflict between structure and agency, quantitative and qualitative methods, objectivity and subjectivity and between realism and idealism (Archer et al., 2016; Scott, 2010). In this way, critical realism provides a broad framework that constitutes variety in empirical research methods and has significant implications for understanding and critically engaging with accounts of social mechanisms and issues within the social world.

4.1.1 *Researcher Positionality*

It is widely acknowledged that research within the social or educational field seldom is or can be value-free (Holmes, 2020). Therefore, positionality and reflexivity are necessary concepts for the researcher to consider in being able to identify, construct and articulate their influences and position throughout the research process (Cohen et al., 2011).

My background is in the field of education and psychology. I have worked as a school teacher in second-level education for a number of years and in other education centres such as Youthreach and Adult Education. This has motivated my interest in understanding young peoples' experiences of school refusal. I am also particularly aware that as a researcher, I hold both an insider and an outsider position. For instance, I am an insider by having direct experience as a school teacher and as an assistant psychologist, facilitating therapeutic workshops for young people experiencing mental health difficulties. However, I am also an outsider in not being part of programmes or organisations that young people experiencing school refusal may be attending (e.g. Youth organisations or education centres).

This brings both strengths and weaknesses to the research process (Holmes, 2020). For instance, a background in the field of education and psychology may allow for more meaningful or insightful questions due to a priori knowledge and at the same time, the researcher may inherently or unknowingly be biased or overly sympathetic to a particular group of participants (e.g. teachers, students or parents) within the research process. Equally, not being part of an organisation that works with young people and school refusal may reduce access to potential participants and yet, the researcher may find that participants may be more willing to reveal sensitive information to an outsider to whom they will have no further contact with (Holmes, 2020).

I am aware that I am not just a spectator looking in and that I inhabit different positions depending on the circumstances and purposes of the research. I am mindful of my own interests, values and commitments that can influence and shape the research process. I endeavour to be critically reflective and challenge my own assumptions and biases through a reflective process that entails daily journaling and critically engaging with other researchers and my supervisors throughout the research process.

4.2   Selecting a Mixed Methods Approach

The research process involves different approaches, both descriptive and explanatory in the understanding of empirical reality (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). These approaches involve important decisions relating to styles of inquiry that assist in narrowing the research topic into research questions, methods of data collection, analyses and interpretation (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Choosing the appropriate style of research is dependent on a number of decisions relating to the research aims, analysis goals relating to the research questions, selected paradigm and the desire of research control and intervention

(Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Therefore, the selected approach will have important implications relating to the choice of steps in the research design and methods.

The current research project sought to understand the issues relating to school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland by exploring the experiences and viewpoints of educational professionals, parents and young people. In doing so, this research project adopts a mixed method approach. Mixed Methods Research (MMR) has become an established approach that has received growing interest in recent decades (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). It is defined as a specific research approach that involves the collection and analyses of data that integrates and interprets the findings using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007b). Therefore, the MMR approach forms part of a research community that differs in philosophical orientations and approaches to the process of research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

For instance, the quantitative approach, which is located within the social and behavioural sciences, is most commonly represented in positivist/postpositivist paradigms. These paradigms link social research to scientific methods (i.e. testing hypothesis and using quantitative measurements) that are grounded in the earlier principles of a value free environment (i.e. Positivists); whilst later orientations of this tradition acknowledge the value of the researcher in the research process (i.e. Postpositivists) (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Additionally, research within the qualitative tradition differ in their orientation by subscribing to a constructivist paradigm and administering techniques that focus on the collection of data, analysis and interpretation through the use of narrative information (i.e. generating themes and thematic analysis). Therefore, meaning of phenomena are understood by valuing constructed realities, social interactions and rich narratives (Mertens, 2019; Teddlie & Tashakorri, 2009).

For the most part, the MMR approach is grounded in the concept of pragmatism (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Howe, 1998; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This underlying philosophy counters the "incompatibility thesis" by choosing between different models of inquiry and allowing for the use of multiple paradigms to address a research problem (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p.15). MMR, therefore, rejects the either/or preferences of the paradigm debates (i.e. the competing worldviews of positivism and constructivism) and acknowledges the values of the researcher as playing central role in interpreting results. In doing so, it rejects the beliefs of "truth" and "reality" and focuses instead on "what works" in regard to questions under investigation (Tashakorri & Teddlie, 2003a, p.713). Thus, the aim of this research project is to address the issue of school refusal by administering confirmatory and exploratory questions to understand the issues relating to school refusal and by drawing on elements of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Methodological eclecticism is acknowledged as a core characteristic of mixed method research (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). It allows for a choice of 'methodological tools' that are deemed necessary in answering the research question. Study 1 of this research project applies a quantitative approach by administering survey research to gather information, in which the goal is to understand the characteristics of school refusal within second-level schools based on the sample data. However, to choose a solo quantitative approach, would add to a large volume of quantitative research relating to issues in school refusal and undervalue the lived experiences (i.e. perspectives and viewpoints) of young people, parents and education professionals in issues pertaining to school refusal. Therefore, this research project applies a qualitative approach to explore the perceptual experiences of school refusal and to capture a holistic and integrated understanding of these narratives. For instance, it will utilise semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences of education professionals and parents of young people and school refusal (Study 2 and Study 3) and a narrative arts-

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based method to explore young people's experiences of school refusal (Study 4). Taken together, these approaches engage in a flexible process of inquiry by using mixed methods that have "complementary strengths", allowing the researcher to choose the most suitable techniques to answer the research questions (Johnson & Turner, 2003, p.35).

Therefore, adopting a mixed method approach facilitates a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the issues relating to school refusal. For instance, selecting a survey questionnaire will provide the necessary data to reach a wider pool of participants and to understand how school refusal is represented in the context of Irish second-level schools. Further, the data obtained from the follow up semi-structured interviews with education professionals will provide further insight into how school refusal is understood and responded to in second-level education. The use of semi-structured interviews and narrative arts-based methods will also give voice to the experiences and perspectives of parents and young people. Thus, providing rich information relating to the adverse impact of school refusal on young people and their families. Other methodological approaches were considered for this research such as focus groups and additional arts-based methods such as Photovoice. However, considering the sensitive nature of the topic of school refusal, the above methods were considered most appropriate.

The core characteristics of MMR, therefore, distinguish it as a methodological approach and contribute to its emergence as a separate methodological movement. However, MMR has also been subject to intense debate on issues relating to the field's development (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). The use of methodological eclecticism, for example, has raised issues relating to the necessary skill set of the researcher and the potential for incompatibility in the mixing of both types of methods. However, it has been proposed that developing experience through training, coursework and field research can increase competency and familiarity with both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research

(Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). Issues also exist in the literature in regard to paradigms 'ownership' of methods (e.g. post positivism/quantitative methods). As stated earlier, the MMR advocates for the usage of a range of paradigms as the underlying philosophical assumptions in a research approach and object to the existence of a 'natural home' for research methods (e.g. qualitative methods) (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). Proponents of the MMR, therefore, emphasise the importance of choosing methods that are concerned with answering the research questions, rather than the primary focus of linkage between epistemological and methodological approaches. The current research project, therefore, seeks to understand and address key concerns and issues relating to school refusal by adopting a variety of methods that help to answer the research question.

4.3   Research Design

The purpose of mixed methods research is to combine quantitative and qualitative dimensions that support and strengthen an understanding of a research problem and with a focus on answering the research questions. The research design employed for this project will be a sequential mixed methods design as outlined in Figure 4.2. A sequential mixed method design is characterised by the chronological combination of two or more research components. In this design, the questions or procedures of one component precedes the other (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The research questions for the qualitative and quantitative components may also be related to one another and develop as the research progresses.

Figure 4.2

Sequential Mixed Methods Design

Quan

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┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────┐                    ┌────────────────────────┐
│ Study 1: Survey  │ ───▶ │ Data     │ ─────────────────▶ │ Interview Topic Guide  │
│ Questionnaire    │      │ Analysis │                    │                        │
└──────────────────┘      └──────────┘                    └────────────────────────┘
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        QUAL   **QUAL**

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┌──────────────┐      ┌───────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐      ┌───────────────┐
│ Study 2:     │ ───▶ │ Data Analysis │ ───▶ │ Study 3:     │ ───▶ │ Data Analysis │
│ Interviews   │      │               │      │ Interviews   │      │               │
└──────────────┘      └───────────────┘      └──────────────┘      └───────────────┘
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        QUAL

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┌────────────────────────┐      ┌───────────────┐            ╭──────────────────╮
│ Study 4: Interviews and│ ───▶ │ Data Analysis │ ─────────▶ │  Interpretation  │
│ arts based methods     │      │               │            ╰──────────────────╯
└────────────────────────┘      └───────────────┘
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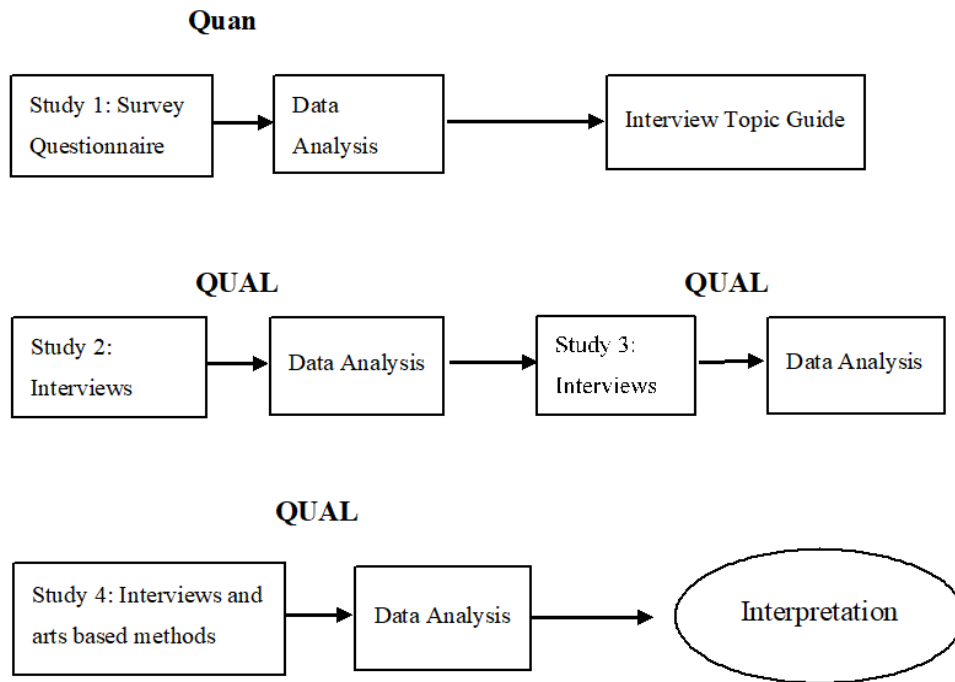
For instance, Figure 4.2 displays the way in which interview questions (i.e. Interview Topic Guide) may depend on the outcomes of analysis from the questionnaire survey data (Study 1). Therefore, the purpose of the research design in the current project will be to obtain information from the quantitative results of a survey sample and to follow up with a qualitative exploration and expansion on the issues raised at the initial stage of the research.

In the first component of this research project, the data analysis aims to gather information on the characteristics, prevalence rates, school policies, issues and concerns relating to young people (and their families) and school refusal within second-level schools in Ireland. The second qualitative component of this project will comprise of multiple studies, namely, Study 2, Study 3 and Study 4. In this follow up, the perspectives and experiences of education professionals, parents and young people will be generated through the use of semi-

structured interviews. Further, a narrative arts-based method will also be employed to gain an in-depth understanding of young people's experiences of school refusal within the interview context. Therefore, qualitative data will be collected to provide new insights into the lived experiences of young people and parents, as well as to highlight the concerns and challenges voiced by education professionals in issues relating to school refusal.

This chapter has outlined critical realism as the philosophical paradigm underpinning this research project. It has provided an overview of the main elements of a mixed methods design to explore the research questions pertaining to this research project. Turning now to the findings of each of the four studies, the key themes that emerged from the perspectives of education professionals, parents and young people will be addressed.

5   Study 1: School Professionals Survey of School Refusal in

Ireland

In this chapter, I will present the results from a national survey administered to school professionals in second-level schools in Ireland. I will explore and discuss how school refusal is represented and key issues raised by professionals relating to young people's difficulties in school attendance.

5.1   Purpose and Research Questions

Many countries monitor student's daily attendance through centralised attendance systems and record data on school absenteeism (Keppens et al., 2019). However, little is known about the issues associated with distinct groups of students and their difficulties in absenteeism (Thornton et al., 2013). Further, it has been argued that the system of classification of school absenteeism has been problematic, due to a lack of recognition of young people and school refusal as a group separate to other forms of school non-attendance, leaving official statistics on school refusal in short supply (Thambirajah et al., 2008). There has been little information available on the prevalence and experiences of young people and school refusal in Irish second-level schools. For instance, research enquiries made to organisations such as Tusla, the Department of Education and Skills as well as staff within Irish second-level schools further confirmed the absence of statistical information regarding the recording and classification of school refusal within second-level schools in Ireland. In addition, there has been little research attention given to the perspectives and experiences of education professionals who work directly with young people and school refusal (see Chapter 2). This marks an important gap in the research by addressing the role of the school environment in issues relating to school refusal.

The overarching aim of this research project is to explore the perspectives of education professionals, parents and young people and to examine how these narratives reflect current constructions that may inform more appropriate responses to school refusal. By exploring the perspectives of school professionals, this study begins to examine how school refusal is represented in the Irish education context, explores education professional's viewpoints, challenges or concerns and how schools are responding to young people and families in relation to experiences of school refusal. Therefore, a research questionnaire was administered to second-level schools in Ireland to collect information relating to prevalence, school policies and practice, risk factors and concerns relating to school refusal.

The research questions sought to address issues in school refusal relating to prevalence, terminology and classification, the role of school factors, family and child risk factors and current responses in policy and practice within second-level education in Ireland. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following specific research questions:

1. What are the current demographic trends (i.e. prevalence, age-groups, gender, social background, education) of school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland?

2. What are the key concerns and issues highlighted by education professionals who work with young people and school refusal?

3. What supports and policies are in place for students at risk or experiencing school refusal and what additional supports and policies are viewed as necessary for future planning?

5.2 Research Methods

Study 1 comprised of a national survey administered to all second-level schools (N=712) in Ireland during a 3-month period, between March and June 2017. This survey was

administered using an online survey software programme (SurveyMonkey) designed to create and run professional surveys. Descriptive statistics (e.g. percentages, medians and mode) and inductive content analysis were used to examine the data.

5.2.1   Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire exploring the topic of school refusal was developed specific to education professionals (i.e. principals, teachers and school related staff roles) in second-level schools in Ireland. The questionnaire was originally developed by Smyth and colleagues (2009) and the items (i.e. questions and statements) relating to the topic of school refusal were adapted for the purposes of this study. The adapted questionnaire items in this study were devised from international research on school refusal as well as consultations with key stakeholders associated with school absenteeism and second-level education in Ireland.

Therefore, key areas to be addressed from these sources were 1) to explore the demographics of this group of young people and school refusal, 2) to explore professional's experiences of school refusal, focusing on insights gained from education professionals in this area, 3) to review understanding and use of intervention practices in response to school refusal, 4) to enhance knowledge of the factors associated with school refusal that would help benefit policy makers and target resources in Ireland and in the international field of research (Baker & Bishop, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Havik et al., 2014; Kearney, 2008; Thornton et al., 2013).

The questionnaire sought information on:

- the numbers of young people identified as experiencing school refusal

- school policies and approaches to supporting young people and school refusal

- risk factors relating to young people and school refusal

- academic, social and behavioural difficulties relating to school refusal within the school environment

- challenges experienced by professionals (i.e. open-ended questions)

The questionnaire comprised of 24 questions and took the duration of 20 minutes to complete. The number of questions were specifically chosen in order to avoid respondent fatigue that can often be associated with survey length and question type (e.g. overuse of open-ended questions and complex questions) (Vikas et al., 2017).

The use of online survey research in this study allowed for access to a wider group of professionals who shared specific expertise and viewpoints on the issues of school refusal. To send a paper survey to all second-level schools in Ireland would have proven expensive when considering printing, postage and potential travel costs. Additionally, online surveys help to reduce researcher time and effort through the use of survey software packages (e.g. SurveyMonkey) that provides a variety of questionnaire templates and options to export statistical software packages. Thus, allowing the researcher time to prepare incoming data for further analysis whilst waiting for remaining responses to the questionnaire (Wright, 2005). Whilst technology for online survey research is beneficial, some difficulties did arise relating to access of potential participants through the use of email messages and firewalls, a point that will be returned to later in this chapter.

Following completion of the online survey questionnaire, respondents were also asked to indicate their willingness to take part in the qualitative follow up interviews by providing their contact details at the end of the survey. Pre-testing of this questionnaire was initiated by pilot testing a small number of participant's (n=4) and modifications were made based on the feedback from the pilot responses. The pre-tested surveys were conducted online using the

SurveyMonkey software in the same way as those used in the survey following the pre-testing stage. A copy comprising of the items of this questionnaire is presented in Appendix D.

5.2.2   Selection of Items Relating to School Refusal

Part 1 of the survey comprised of questions relating to the respondent's school background information. The first question was measured using a single mark to signify all that applies item: "Please state your role in the school?" and the following options were provided: Principal, Year Head, Guidance Counsellor, School Based Counsellor and other. School information was collected using seven items relating to information on the total number of students in the school, total number of teachers, type of school (ETB (Education and Training Board), Community, Voluntary and Private), including an option for DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools, community area and religious ethos.

Part two of the questionnaire consisted of questions that related to the estimated prevalence of school refusal in Irish second-level schools using two items to include: the number of students having difficulty attending school, the number of students in each year group (1st – 6^h) having difficulty attending school and a further two items were used to assess the gender (Male/Female/No Gender Difference) of students experiencing or at risk of school refusal and the gender education of the school (Single-sex/Co-educational) was also included.

Part three of the questionnaire gained information on 1) policies and supports for young people experiencing school refusal, 2) factors that were viewed as influencing a student experiencing school refusal, 3) school-based approaches and contact with outside services to support young people and school refusal and 4) a final two open ended questions relating to respondent's own viewpoints of supports and issues relating to students at risk or experiencing school refusal.

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Four items were used to assess the supports available in second-level schools for young people at risk of school refusal and respondents indicated (*Yes/No*) to the implementation of a school attendance strategy, a strategy for school refusal and availability of a dedicated staff member. In addition, a 4-point Likert-type scale comprised of the following choices: nearly all, more than half, less than half, only a few, and respondents were asked to reply to a question relating to the difficulties experienced by students in areas such as academic progress, social interaction with peers, behaviour in class and involvement in extracurricular activities. Subsequently, items relating to factors influencing school refusal were divided into four sub sections (School Factors, Home/Community Factors, Cultural Factors, Psychological Factors). These items were measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale to include the following choices: a great deal, quite a lot, a little, not a factor. The use of a 4-point Likert-scale was adapted and developed from the original survey questionnaire by Smyth and colleagues (2009).

Information on school-based approaches to support students experiencing school refusal and any collaboration with outside agencies was collected. This comprised of descriptions of particular approaches used by schools, provision of social and personal support within the school setting by dedicated members of staff and contact with specific outside agencies (e.g. Tusla, EWO, NEPS, CAMHS and GP) in working with young people experiencing school refusal.

The final two items in the questionnaire comprised of two open ended survey questions: "what supports would you like to see in place for students at risk or experiencing school refusal?" and "are there any other issues regarding school refusal on which you would like to comment?". The final question in this survey identified a follow up qualitative study in "exploring the issues of school refusal in more detail", in which respondents had the

opportunity to take part by including their name, school address, contact phone number and email address if they wished to take part.

5.2.3 Procedure and Sampling

The survey was based on a school sampling frame used as the main data collection for this study. The school sampling frame comprised of school names and school information (i.e. principal's names, school address, school type and geolocation) data on individual post primary school lists from the Department of Education and Skills (2017) (see http://www.education.ie).

A first email invitation (see Appendix A) was sent out to all principals in second-level schools in Ireland (N=712) to take part in a national survey via SurveyMonkey. Information on the research project (see Appendix B) and a consent form (see Appendix C) was given to those respondents willing to take part in the survey questionnaire. A total of three reminder emails were sent at two-week intervals to potential respondents who had not replied. A total of 106 respondents agreed to take part in this study, resulting in a 15% response rate.

5.2.4 Approach to Data Analysis

In this study, 106 returned questionnaires were imported from an online survey software programme, SurveyMonkey, into an SPSS (Statistical Analysis for Social Sciences, 2016) spreadsheet. In this study, the quantitative data presented is descriptive by way of documenting educational professionals' responses across schools. Statistics including percentages, medians and mode were calculated and a visual representation of the data drawing on bar charts, pie charts and histograms were included.

Thematic analysis was conducted on responses to two open-ended questions in the survey questionnaire. This involved the reading and re reading of open-ended questions. The data from the questions were then coded systematically. Categories were formed into themes

and the clarification of the themes and quotes were sought, concluding the analysis (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). The stages of analysis can be viewed in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Thematic Analysis adopted by Braun & Clarke, 2006

Phase	Description of the process
Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribe data by way of reading and re reading the interviews a number of times, taking note of any initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and data set. Generate a thematic map of the analysis.
Defining and naming of themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells: generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
Producing the Report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid and compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Thematic analysis is a widely established qualitative analytic method used in a range

of research fields. It provides a flexible and useful research approach to data, facilitating a

rich and detailed account of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It can also facilitate the

summary of key features of a large data set, providing a more detailed account of a particular

theme or group of themes relating to a particular question. Therefore, the use of thematic

analysis was deemed appropriate in this study as it allowed for a detailed analysis of the

open-ended questions and to capture important themes (and prevalence) in relation to the research questions.

5.3 Ethical Issues

Ethical approval relating to the research for this study was sought from the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Committee. Issues relating to confidentiality and anonymity were considered. Information was sought on security concerning confidentiality of the survey and it was noted that SurveyMonkey adhered to the compliance of EU-U.S Privacy Shield Framework (see https://www.privacyshield.gov.list).

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate their willingness to be involved in a qualitative follow up and this would entail the provision of personal information (name, phone number, email, school address). Therefore, any identifiable information was removed from all questionnaires to ensure confidentiality. SurveyMonkey online data was protected using a secure password and questionnaires were located on a secure password protected hard drive.

5.4 Results

In this study, analysis of the data presents the responses of education professionals (N=106) to a national survey of school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland. This includes an overview of the demographic information of schools (e.g. type of school, community area, gender, etc.) who took part in this survey. Further analysis presents the estimated prevalence of young people experiencing school refusal (i.e. between one and ten young people) and identifies these students to be within examination year groups. This is followed by schools' administering of current policies and supports that are in place for young people experiencing difficulties in attendance. Issues pertaining to risk factors within

the home and school environment and psychological factors were identified by respondents as major influences in school refusal.

Key themes that emerged from the responses to open ended questions have been identified and these include increased support and collaboration between schools and services, the provision of additional supports for professional's, families and young people and overall, professional's concerns and challenges relating to issues in school refusal. The results of this data and themed responses to the open-ended questions can be viewed in the following section.

5.4.1   Response Rate

A first email invitation for a national survey was distributed to all second-level schools in Ireland via electronic email (SurveyMonkey). From the total number of questionnaires sent (N=712), 11 bounced (i.e. a term used to describe an invalid email address) and 34 opted out (i.e. the number of people who have opted out of all future emails regarding SurveyMonkey) and 244 remained unopened. A total of three reminder email invitations were administered in a three-month period to those respondents who did not respond. This cumulated to a total of 106 questionnaires returned, resulting in a 15% response rate.

The response rate for this survey indicates the potential of a nonresponse bias which may have occurred due to the use of network firewalls (i.e. security device in computer software or hardware) in schools resulting in the labelling of email invites as 'spam'. Further, the topic of school refusal may have been considered a sensitive and complex issue. Therefore, potential participants (i.e. Principals, teachers, other school staff) may have been reluctant to discuss families and young people due to the sensitivity of the issues in school refusal.

5.4.2 *Respondents' Background*

Figure 5.1

Percentage of Respondents Relating to School Staff Roles
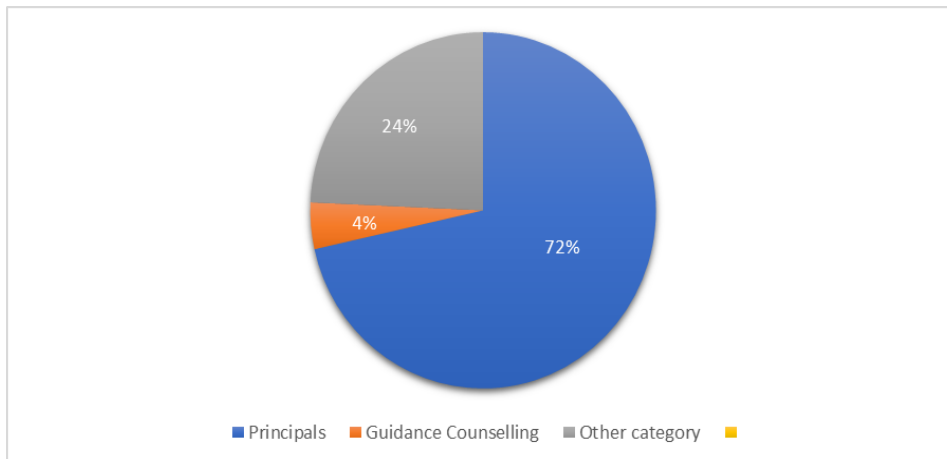
Figure 5.1 highlights that the majority of respondents who participated in this survey were school principals (n=67). Remaining responses included the guidance counselling profession (n=4), and a further 23 respondents indicated their staff roles as 'other', namely, deputy principals (n=8), home school liaison officer's (HSLO) (n=4), special duties posts in school absenteeism (n=2), special needs coordinator (n=3), school completion programme (SCP) coordinator's (n=2), teachers (n=2) and staff from administration (n=1).

5.4.3 Demographic Summary

Table 5.2

Demographic Information of the Sample

Demographic Information	Frequency	Percentage
Community Area		
Urban (city & town)	38	40.9
Rural (town & village)	49	52.7
County	6	6.5
Type of School		
ETB Education & Training Board	40	43.0
Community & Comprehensive	13	14.0
Voluntary Secondary School	38	40.9
Private	2	2.2
DEIS (Delivering Equality		
& Opportunity to Schools)		
Yes	33	35.5
No	60	64.5
Religious Ethos		
Catholic	50	54.3
Church of Ireland	1	1.1
Interdenominational	10	10.9
Multidenominational	31	33.7
School Gender		
Single sex school	30	32.6
Co-education	62	67.4

Table 5.2 presents school demographic information of the 106 respondents who participated in this study. In the survey, respondents were located almost equally across rural (52.7%) and urban schools (40.9%). There are currently 724 second-level schools in Ireland

whereby the number of voluntary second-level schools are larger in number, compared to ETBs and community and comprehensive schools (see https://www.education.ie). Similarly, the schools who responded to this survey comprised mostly of voluntary second-level schools (40.9%) and ETB (43.0%).

Further, several voluntary second-level schools are under the patronage of religious denominations and other organisations in Ireland (ESRI, 2013), in which 50.5% are under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Department of Education and Skills, 2020) Similarly, most schools responding to this survey were from a catholic denomination (n=50, 54.3%) and a further 31 (33.7%) schools were from a multidenominational patronage. Sixty-two respondents (67.4%) were from co-educational schools and 30 (32.6%) from all-girls or all-boys schools.

5.4.4 *Prevalence of Young People Experiencing School Refusal*

The respondents in the current study were required to give information on the estimated prevalence of school refusal in their school and to include school year groups. As can be seen in Figure 5.2, almost 70% (n=65) of respondents indicated that between 1 and 10 young people experience school refusal in their school. The schools that responded to this survey had an average of 583 students per school, compared to 496 of the school population in Ireland. Thus, one respondent represents, on average, between 0.2% and 1.7% incidence of school refusal per school in their student population. This corresponds with the international picture for numbers of students experiencing school refusal to be within 1-2% range.

Figure 5.2

Percentage of Students Experiencing School Refusal
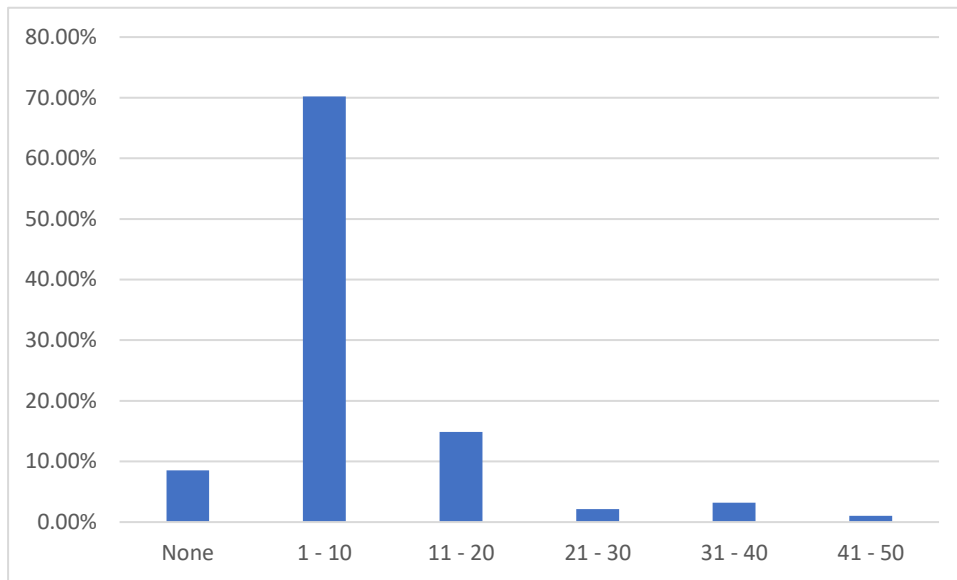
Additionally, year groups that were viewed as showing increased prevalence of school refusal were in the third-year group (77.4%, n=65), fifth-year group (76.1%, n=57), the sixth-year group (72.3%, n=55) and second year group (70.1%, n=65) (see Appendix E). These results draw attention to year groups that are in preparation for junior and senior cycle examinations (i.e. Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate) with regard to experiences in school refusal.

When asked whether there were gender differences between male and female students who showed difficulty in attending school, 39.4% of respondents indicated male students as showing greater difficulty in their experience of school refusal in comparison to the number of professionals who selected female students (10.6%). However, thirty-three respondents (50.7%), indicated that there was no gender difference in male or female students in relation to school refusal.

Respondents were also asked about current polices and supports in place for young people at risk or experiencing school refusal in their schools. As can be seen from Figure 5.3 the majority of respondents (78.8%, n=67) indicated that they have a School Attendance Strategy.

Figure 5.3

Percentage of Schools with a School Attendance Strategy
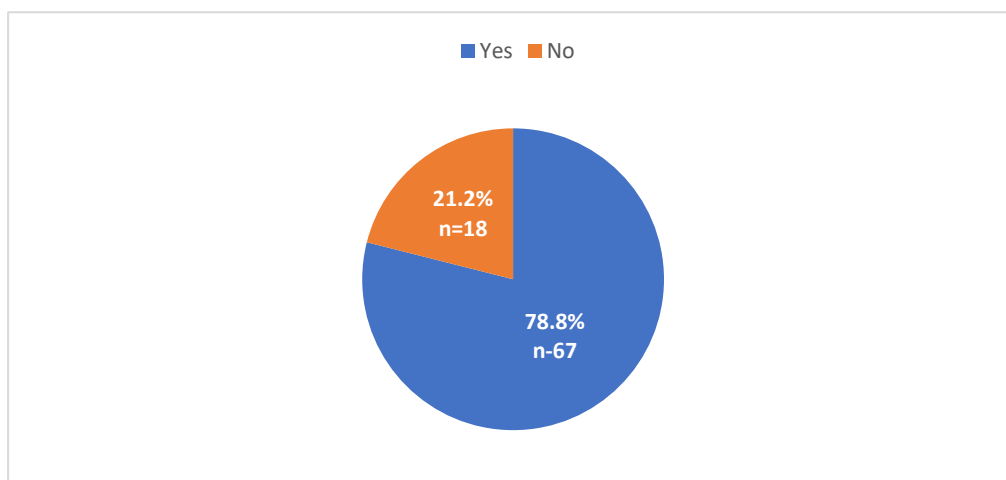
Whilst respondents emphasised that their school strategies do include responses to school refusal behaviour, however, the use of policies specifically related to school refusal were not included in these strategies.

Figure 5.4

Strategy Including Responses to School Refusing Behaviour
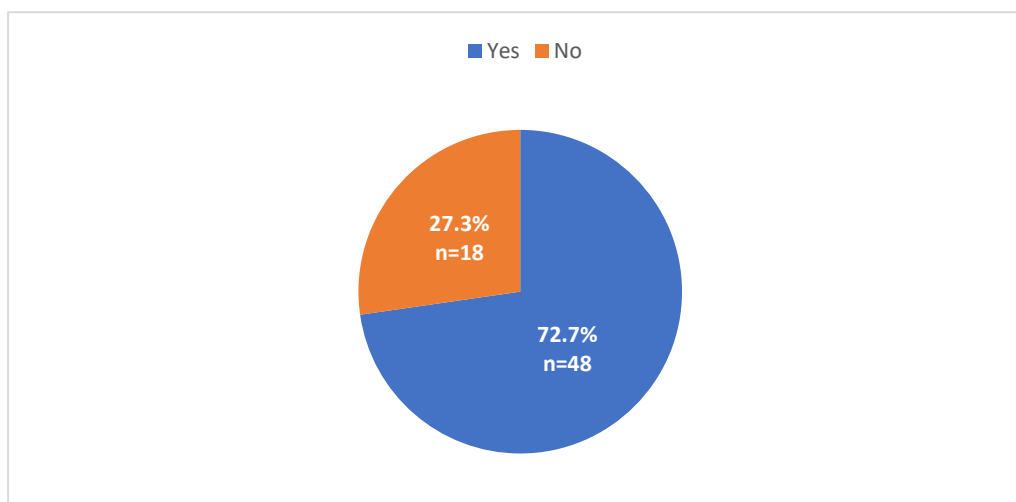
Those respondents who answered 'yes' to including responses to issues in school refusal within their School Attendance Strategy (see Figure 5.4), also indicated having a dedicated member of staff to identify school refusal. These included year heads (n=11), deputy principals (n=10) and school completion officers (n=13) in identifying young people at risk of school refusal in their schools.

Respondents were also asked to select prolonged difficulties that a young person may experience within the school environment. Over half of the respondents (68.3%, n=56) indicated social interaction with peers as continued difficulties for young people and school refusal. A further 52 (64.2%) respondents indicated difficulties in academic progress and 47 (58.8%) indicated participation in extracurricular activities as challenging experiences for young people and school refusal. By contrast, a lower proportion of responses (25.3%, n= 20) selected difficult behaviour in class relating to school refusal. This reflects previous research that emphasises behaviour relating to emotional distress (e.g. anxiety, depression, fatigue, somatic complaints), running away from school, temper tantrums and non-

compliance as being more related to school refusal rather than disruptive behaviour in the school classroom (Kearney & Bates, 2005; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006).

5.5 Factors Contributing to School Refusal

Issues relating to home/community and psychological factors were perceived as having a major influence on a young person's difficulty in attending school.

Table 5.3

Home/Community Factors and School Refusal

	A great deal	**Quite a lot**	**A little**	**Not a factor**
Lack of Parental Encouragement (N=83,78.3%)	23 (27.7%)	29 (34.9%)	23 (27.7%)	8 (9.6%)
Lone Parent Families (N=82, 77.4%)	14 (17.1%)	25 (30.5%)	29 (35.4%)	14 (17.1%)
Over Attachment to Parent/Guardian (N=82,77.4%)	13 (15.9%)	18 (22.0%)	39 (47.6%)	12 (14.6%)
Family Separation (N=80,75.5%)	7 (8.8%)	24 (30.0%)	38 (47.5%)	11 (13.8%)
Financial Issues at Home (N=82,77.4)	3 (3.7%)	14 (17.1%)	38 (46.3%)	27 (32.9%)
Carer Duties in the Family Home (N=80, 75.5%)	2 (2.5%)	13 (16.3%)	31 (38.8%)	34 (42.5%)
Domestic Violence in the Home (N=80,75.5%)	1 (1.3%)	2 (2.5%)	36 (45.0%)	41 (51.3%)

Table 5.3 (continued)

Child and Residential Care (N=82, 77.4%)	4 (4.9%)	4 (4.9%)	27 (32.9%)	47 (57.3%)

Table 5.3 provides a breakdown of home and community factors relating to issues in school refusal. The most common factors cited by respondents were lack of parental encouragement (62.6%, n=52), young people from lone parent families (47.6%, n=39) and over attachment to a parent/guardian (37.9%, n=31) in issues pertaining to school refusal. In contrast, factors relating to financial issues (20.8%, n=17), carer duties in the family home (18.8%, n=15), domestic violence (3.8%, n=3) and child and residential care (9.8%, n=8) were indicated by respondents as having less impact on young people and school refusal. However, lower representation of these factors relating to the family home (i.e. financial issues, carer duties, domestic violence and residential care) may also indicate respondents lack of knowledge on issues of adversity impacting young people's difficulty in attending school.

As can be seen in Table 5.4, respondents referred to psychological factors as having a major influence on difficulties relating to school refusal.

Table 5.4

Psychological Factors and School Refusal

	A great deal	Quite a lot	A little	Not a factor
Anxiety Issues (N=83, 78.3%)	29 (34.9%)	30 (36.1%)	23 (27.7%)	1 (1.2%)
Low Mood/Depression (N=80, 75.5%)	37 (46.3%)	26 (32.5%)	15 (18.8%)	2 (2.5%)
Stress (N=83,78.3%)	29 (34.9%)	30 (36.1%)	23 (27.7%)	1 (1.2%)
Seeking Activities outside School Classroom (N= 82,77.4%)	16 (19.5%)	22 (26.8%)	29 (35.4%)	15 (18.3%)
Self-Harm (N=80,75.5%)	9 (11.3%)	15 (18.8%)	38 (47.5%)	18 (22.5%)

Anxiety issues (77.1%, n=59) and low mood/depression (78.8%, n=63) were cited by respondents as the main psychological factors relating to school refusal. Fifty-nine (71.0%) respondents also viewed stress as having a considerable impact on school refusal behaviour. Seven respondents provided additional qualitative information by choosing the 'other' category. These responses included "fear of failure, so some don't try at all" (R2) and "fear due to lack of regular attendance and how other students will perceive them" (R3). Additionally, respondents referred to "attachment issues with parents" (R6) and "health issues undiagnosed until teen years leave students very anxious" (R3)

Table 5.5 also presents an overview of school factors that were also indicated to have a major impact on young people experiencing or at risk of school refusal.

Table 5.5

School Factors and School Refusal

	A great deal	Quite a lot	A little	Not a factor
Poor Peer Relationships (N=83, 78.3%)	16 (19.3%)	35 (42.2%)	27 (32.5%)	5(4.7%)
Exam Pressure (N=82, 77.4%)	5 (6.1%)	23 (28.0%)	38 (46.3%)	16 (19.5%)
Unassessed Special Needs (N=79,74.5%)	8 (10.1%)	18 (22.8%)	27 (34.2%)	26 (32.9%)
Homework/Schoolwork too Challenging (N=81,76.4%)	6 (7.4%)	20 (24.7%)	42 (51.9%)	13 (16.0%)
Assessed Special Educational Needs (N=79,74.5%)	6 (7.6%)	11 (13.9%)	42 (53.2%)	20 (25.3%)
Poor Relationships with School Staff (N=81, 76.4%)	2 (2.5%)	9 (11.1%)	41 (50.6%)	29 (35.8%)
Newcomer to School (N=79,74.5%)	3 (3.8%)	4 (5.1%)	32 (40.5%)	40 (50.6%)
Bullying (N=82,77.4%)	1 (1.2%)	5 (6.1%)	45 (54.9%)	31 (37.8%)

Respondents selected poor peer relationships, exam pressure and unassessed special needs as having a major influence on school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland. For example, 51 (61.5%) respondents viewed poor peer relationships as one of the leading factors in relation to school refusal. Exam pressure (34.1%, n=28) and unassessed special needs (32.9%, n=26) were also selected as a major influence on young people. However, 32.1% (n=26) of respondents indicated homework/schoolwork too challenging compared to 67.9% (n=55) of respondents who indicated that it had little effect or not a factor in relation to school refusal. Similarly, factors such as poor relationships with school staff (13.6%, n=11),

newcomer to school (8.9%, n=7) and bullying (7.3%, n=6) were cited as having the least influence on young people and school refusal. Therefore, these results indicate that respondents seem to place most emphasis on individual related factors (e.g. experiencing difficult peer relationships and exam pressure) as influencing school refusal rather than factors within the school environment (e.g. difficult teacher-student relations, pressure of academic performance, bullying).

Overall, a lower proportion of respondents identified cultural factors (i.e. language barriers, family values, discrimination, racism) as relating to young people and school refusal (see Appendix G). For example, nine (11.0%) respondents viewed cultural differences as having a significant impact on school refusal, compared to 73 (89.0%) who perceived it as having little or not a factor in relation to school refusal. Whilst nine respondents (10.9%) indicated language barriers (i.e. where English is not a first language) as relating to difficulties in school refusal, 73 (89%) did not see it related to these issues. Lack of knowledge (8.5%) and racism (15.8%) were also identified as having a lower impact on issues relating to school refusal. However, these results may also suggest a limited awareness and knowledge amongst professionals when considering cultural influences and school refusal.

Respondents were also asked to select those staff who provided social and personal support to young people in relation to school refusal. Several respondents selected a guidance counsellor (75.5%, n=80), year head (74.5%, n=79), principal (73.6%, n=78), SPHE programme (72.6%, n=77) and school mentors (62.3%, n=66) as their main staff approaches to providing support to young people in relation to school refusal (see Appendix F). In addition, 62 respondents provided qualitative responses to describe their main approaches in support of young people experiencing school refusal in second-level schools (see Table 5.6).

Table 5.6

Themed Responses to Open-Ended Question and Example Responses

Responses	Example of Responses
Positive Home-School Relationships	Meetings with parent, constant contact with home when parents are co-operative (R58).
Care Team	We have a team approach, the care team include members of senior management, year head, member of resource team [and] usually a member of the special needs assistant team (R20).
School Staff Approach	Assigning the student, a staff liaison person, setting targets…regular meetings with parents (R61).
Reduced Curriculum	Pupils can be put on a short timetable with fewer school subjects, a portfolio of options of supports depending on the needs of the child (R8).
Outside Agencies	…working closely with SCP and EWO, children identified at early stage and as much intervention takes place as soon as possible (R26).
Other Supports	As a school we would seek to encourage the student to attend…other supports – after school activities, homework club, extra classes etc. (R42).

As shown in Table 5.6, these responses included approaches that focus on building positive relations between the home and school environment: "building up strong relationships with home" where " a variety of staff make contact and visit the home" (R1). In addition, a care team and school staff approach were emphasised to include members of senior management, year head and a resource team. For other respondents, the importance of collaboration with outside services played a vital role in approaches to school refusal:

School has a very flexible responsive approach to this issue. Students and parents would be visited by the HSCL or invited into school if preferred to discuss the matter.

School would encourage engagement with guidance counsellor in school and external

agencies as required… (R42)

However, as one respondent noted that whilst their school liaises with outside agencies in

supporting young people and school refusal, re-engagement within the school environment

was not always attainable: "[…] even with this level of planning and review, we achieve

c.50% success rate" (R20).

In working with support services, respondents were also asked to indicate to what

extent their school liaises with specific multiagency services (see Table 5.7).

Table 5.7

Schools Liaising with Multiagency Services

	To a great extent	To some extent	Not to any great extent	Not to any extent
Tusla (Education Welfare Service) (N=83,78.3%)	49 (59.0%)	28(33.7%)	5(6.0%)	1 (1.2%)
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (N=81, 76.4%)	38(46.9%)	30(37.0%)	9 (11.1%)	4(4.8%)
Tusla (Social Work Service) (N=82, 77.4%)	30 (36.6%)	34 (41.5%)	15 (18.3%)	3 (3.7%)
Youth Work Service (N=83, 78.3%)	21 (25.3%)	37 (44.6%)	11 (13.3%)	14(16.9%)
Community/Voluntary Groups (N=81,76.4%)	14 (17.3%)	31 (38.3%)	18 (22.2%)	18(22.2%)
Second-Level Support Service (N=81, 76.4%)	4 (4.9%)	17 (21.0%)	31 (38.3%)	29(35.8%)

As can be seen from the data in Table 5.7, schools tend to liaise with services such as Child and Family Agency, Tusla (Education Welfare Service) and NEPS when working with young people and school refusal. For example, the majority of respondents (n=77, 92.7%) indicated that their school liaised with Tusla (EWS). Similarly, 68 (83.9%) respondents indicated that they would liaise with NEPS, whilst 64 (78.1%) respondents indicated that they also liaise with Tusla, Social Work services.

5.6   Open Ended Survey Questions

In the closing section of this survey respondents were asked to respond to two open ended survey questions. These questions related to supports that respondents would like to see in place for young people at risk or currently experiencing school refusal, and any other issues in relation to further comments on school refusal.

In response to (other) supports more than half of the respondents (n=57) answered this question. The key themes to emerge were *Greater Support and Collaboration Between Services and Schools*, the provision of *Compulsory HSCL service* and *Increased family support.* Table 5.8 presents an overview of these themes.

Table 5.8

Themed Responses to Open-Ended Question and Example Responses

Responses	Example responses
Supports for School Refusal	
Greater Support and Collaboration Among Services	A complete organisational approach. Agencies such as Tusla, NEPS and Gardai if necessary (R1).
Compulsory HSCL Officer	Dedicated Home School Liaison person in every school is essential (R20).
Increased Family Support	More professional engagement with parents now and particularly when the child is younger (R49).

5.6.1 Greater Support and Collaboration Amongst Services

Respondents raised a number of issues relating to challenges in communication with outside agencies. For example, one respondent referred to delayed responses from support services: "[the] EWO [Education Welfare Service] responses to these issues [in school refusal] are very slow, to the point where I'm sure many schools think - 'what's the point?'. It seems like another layer of paperwork without any return for the child" (R1). Another respondent cited difficult communication with services: "We would welcome input from CAMHS but that is not forthcoming" (R8). Lack of communication between schools and outside services was also evident in the following statement:

> We have no NEPS [National Educational Psychological Service] contact currently, CAMHS rarely liaise with us as they state that they do not need to discuss their students with us and…[the] Social Work department liaise but do not have education high on their agenda (R22)

In addition, respondents referred to their difficulty in accessing resources from support services and indicated a need for more support and flexibility: "greater and more continued counselling support" (R2), "faster response times from NEPS and CAMHS" (R23) and "easier access to psychological support" (R47) were emphasised for young people and school refusal. Therefore, respondents expressed a need for "a complete organisational approach" between support services such as Tusla, NEPS and designated members from An Garda Siochana to support professionals who work closely with young people and school refusal.

5.6.2 Provision of a Home School Liaison Officer (HSCL)

Respondents also advocated for an increase in HSCL posts in supporting young people at risk or experiencing school refusal. Some respondents indicated that HSCL posts

had been withdrawn from their school and they no longer had access to this service: "The return of our HSCL post was withdrawn from the school a number of years ago" (R3). Respondents also emphasised a need for a HSCL officer in all second-level schools : "Dedicated Home School Liaison person in every school is essential. The deputy principal on his own cannot keep abreast of it [school refusal] when there are so many other pressing needs" (R20).

5.6.3 Increased Family Support

Respondents emphasised the importance of providing increased support for parents and families experiencing school refusal. For example, respondents referred to more support for families from Tusla (Child and Family Agency), the implementation of "mentor programmes for families in difficulty" (R38) to promote school attendance and "better guidance and counselling for parents…" (48). Respondents also noted the lack of resources available to support young people (and families) at risk or showing difficulty in attending school:

Within the school structure there are not enough resources to support these students. The numbers of students with serious issues/anxiety is increasing annually. Yet resources to tackle these issues are restricted annually (R27)

Respondents also expressed a need for training and allocation of teaching staff within the school environment in an effort to provide "strategies for teachers to avoid [the student] getting to school refusal stage" (R32)

In response to the open-ended question linked to any other issues regarding school refusal, 42 respondents expressed additional concerns. This can be viewed under the key theme: *Concerns and challenges in School Refusal*. Table 5.9 presents a breakdown of this theme and topics identified from these responses.

Table 5.9

Themed Responses to Open Ended Question and Example Responses

Responses	Response Examples
Concerns and Challenges	
Primary level education and school refusal	We are usually at a critical stage of the problem when a student refuses to attend. […] If we could identify earlier in order to avoid the crisis (R18).
Psychological issues	Mental health issues. We have noticed high levels of anxiety among parents and students is an issue (R 38).
Increasing problem	This is a growing problem. […] In the last few years, the numbers are noticeably increasing (R17).
Overworked staff	Another significant issue that lies with the responsibility of overworked senior management (R32).

5.6.4 Concerns and Challenges in School Refusal

When asked to comment on any other issues relating to the challenges of school refusal, respondents brought to light a number of concerns. Some respondents referred to school refusal as a psychological issue that "…needs to be addressed immediately and as a matter of priority" (R15). Other respondents highlighted the challenges experienced by young people and the need to think differently about how to approach school refusal: "It is so challenging. A student feels so vulnerable, believe everybody has expectations of them. A lot of counselling is necessary and thinking outside the box to get students out and about, and then [back] into school" (R16). Respondents also drew attention to school refusal as an increasing "problem" and the need for an "overall approach to the difficulties faced by young people in a positive manner" (R1).

Respondents also referred to the expectations and added strain placed on schools and staff in dealing with the issues relating to school refusal: "school's often overreach in terms of the complex issues that they try to solve and have no competence to do so. Teachers are not psychologists or social workers and that's ok" (R25). Respondents, therefore, felt that by focusing on the young person's attendance in primary education would better assist in addressing the issues of school refusal:

> The issues are usually well embedded before they get to secondary. We rarely experience a student who had good primary attendance fall away in second-level. It is usually a continuation and once it commences it is very hard to arrest if it is embedded in the child's behaviours from an early stage (R18)

5.7 Summary and Initial Discussion

The results of the current study indicated that between one and ten young people in Ireland experience difficulties in school refusal. Evidence of school refusal was seen to cut across year groups and in particular, those in preparation for state examinations (third, fifth- and sixth-year groups). Factors relating to the home and school environment were viewed as having a significant influence on school refusal difficulties, as well as predisposing risk factors relating to issues in emotional distress (e.g. anxiety issues and low mood/depression).

Schools showed to draw upon a range of supports and policies for students experiencing difficulties in school attendance and this included the implementation of a national School Attendance Strategy, liaising with multiagency services, the assignment of a designated member of staff for school attendance issues and additional school strategies. Schools referred to the use of a collaborative approach with other agencies in response to young people at risk or experiencing school refusal and these included pastoral care teams, Education Welfare Services (Tusla), NEPS and CAMHS.

Concerns were expressed in relation to the lack of communication between services and the need for added resources to support professionals and young people in school refusal. Respondents expressed a need for a more unified response from support services and additional supports (i.e. compulsory HSCL Officer and family support). Concerns were also expressed in regard to school refusal becoming an increasing issue in schools and the need to focus on school attendance difficulties in primary education. The present study addresses a need to develop research that draws on the experiences of education professionals and outside agencies in working with young people and school refusal. These findings have implications for how school refusal is understood and the need for a holistic and integrated approach to school refusal.

5.8 Prevalence, Exam Stress and Attendance Strategies

In this study school refusal showed to be a common and increasing occurrence and respondents indicated that between one and ten young people experienced school refusal in Irish second-level schools. These results show to be consistent with previous research which estimates the prevalence of school refusal to range from 1% to 5% (Ingles et al., 2015; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; King et al., 1998). However, estimating accurate numbers of young people experiencing school refusal has proved challenging within the literature. It is argued that there is inconsistency within school policies relating to the recording of absenteeism in which most absences are likely to be recorded under truancy or absences sanctioned by parents (Thambirajah, 2008). Thus, there exists further disparity within the literature assessing the numbers of young people experiencing school refusal (Kearney, 2008). This draws attention to the need to raise awareness of the issues relating to school non-attendance in schools and to develop research in this area.

This study also found that the likelihood of young people showing difficulties relating to school refusal to be greater across specific year groups, namely, third, fifth and sixth year. These year groups were also part of second-level examinations of the Irish state (i.e. the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate). This involves examinations of a list of subjects at the end of the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate period. These results also show to be consistent with previous research relating to the influences of school factors on experiences of school refusal. Academic demands and high levels of pressure including examinations are documented in a number of studies relating to risk factors and school refusal (Archer et al., 2003; Lauchlan, 2003; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Scholars have also highlighted school burnout, fatigue and feeling under pressure to perform academically as key issues relating to emotional distress and school refusal (Yoneyama, 2000). This result, therefore, draws attention to the negative impact of measurement and goals of qualifications on the young person's experiences (Biesta, 2017). Pressure in exam performance and the potential for fear of failure can placed added strain on young people who may already be experiencing issues in emotional distress.

Schools also showed to draw upon a variety of resources to support students experiencing school refusal. In this study, over 70% of respondents indicated the use of a national School Attendance Strategy that included responses to school refusal behaviour. This policy showed to employ a tiered approach in supporting young people and school attendance difficulties. For instance, schools tended to use a school-staff approach (i.e. year head, school chaplain, school-based counsellor and deputy principal) and subsequently, a school-home staff approach involving home visits by school staff to meet with the young person and their families, as well as collaboration with pastoral care teams and outside support services (i.e. Tusla, EWO, NEPS and CAMHS). These results are in accord with literature relating to school attendance policies in Ireland (i.e. Education Welfare Act, 2000)

and strategies outlined by the Child and Family Agency, Tusla. The results also draw attention to schools' essential role in identifying, addressing and engaging with young people experiencing distress in school attendance difficulties. There is a need, therefore, to develop school-based research that focuses on the experiences and insights of education professionals who work directly with young people and difficulties in school refusal. The current thesis addresses this issue in Study 2 of this research project.

5.9   Factors Contributing to School Refusal

With respect to identifying the source of young people's difficulties in attending school, the results of this study highlighted two main categories as having a key influence on school refusal. First, respondents indicated proximal processes such as lone parent families, parent's lack of encouragement, and parent and child attachment difficulties as key challenges in school refusal. Second, psychological factors relating to the individual such as anxiety, low mood/depression and stress were identified as key difficulties in experiences of school refusal. These results match those observed in earlier empirical studies that defined young people and children as having psychological issues related to over-dependent relationships between mother and child, resulting in separation anxiety (Atkinson, 1985; Waldfogel et al., 1957; Johnson et al, 1941). Further, these results support research that identified predisposed psychological factors (e.g. a diagnosis of anxiety or depression), single-parent homes and parent's lack of involvement and encouragement (e.g. low levels of physical activity and poor development of social skills) to result in an increased likelihood of difficulties in school attendance resulting in school refusal (Bernstein & Bortchardt, 1996; Hansen et al., 1998).

As mentioned above, professionals identified psychological factors and home factors as having prominent influences on school refusal behaviour. Yet, these results reflect an

underrepresentation of factors that are associated with difficult family circumstances such as financial difficulty, violence in the home, young person's carer duties in the home and child and residential care. This has important implications and suggests professionals limited knowledge of adverse experiences that may be happening in the lives of young people and families in school refusal. It also draws attention to the lack of acknowledgement of context, whereby the problem of school refusal is located within the individual as a psychological issue and linked to difficulties in parent motivation. This serves to obscure the broader complex factors that underpin issues in school refusal, a point that will be returned to later in this thesis.

In terms of school factors, over half of the respondents indicated poor peer relationships as a leading factor in school refusal. Additionally, exam pressure and unassessed special needs were selected as key influences in young people's experiences of school refusal. However, the data also indicated that items relating to homework/schoolwork too challenging, poor relationships with school staff, newcomer to school and incidents of bullying ranked low in responses to school factors in school refusal. The results of this study differ from previous studies that identify key factors such as bullying, transition to secondary school, difficulty coping with academic demands and school performance, and difficult student-teacher relationships as leading influences within the school environment (Lauchlan, 2003; Thambirajah et al., 2008; Morgan et al., 2018). Therefore, it would seem that issues relating to context are notably absent from professionals responses to school related factors. These results draw attention to a lack of understanding of young people's plight within the school environment, placing responsibility of issues in school refusal with the individual (i.e. poor social relationships, exam pressure and unassessed special needs) and less attention being given to challenges within the school environment (i.e. bullying and difficult student-teacher relationships etc.).

It would seem, therefore, that there is a narrow focus of factors relating to young people's experiences within the home and school environment in the current study. As highlighted in Table 2.1, whilst the literature on school refusal acknowledges child, school and family factors, it also depicts a restrictive view of issues of context, obscuring links between school refusal and aspects of the social environment (i.e. economic, social and cultural dimensions). The results of this study exemplify how school refusal is construed within the school environment and further emphasise a need to raise awareness among professionals of the difficulties experienced by young people and their families in school refusal.

In addition, low representation of responses to cultural factors and school refusal (e.g. cultural differences, language barriers, knowledge of Irish education system and racism) signify a need to recognise and include diverse cultures relating to young people and school attendance difficulties in future research. Yet, research has highlighted issues relating to parent-school language barriers, cultural differences, families values of education, school based racism and parental mistrust of school officials as key dimensions relating to cultural factors and school absenteeism (Franklin & Soto, 2002; Kearney, 2008). Therefore, there is a need to increase awareness amongst professionals of the broader distal influences (i.e. cultural, socioeconomic, inequalities and access to resources) that may also have an impact on school refusal behaviour (Devenney & O'Toole, 2021).

5.10 Support for Professionals and School Refusal

Responses to the open-ended questions in this study discussed challenges and concerns relating to professionals' work with young people and school refusal. Respondent's expressed challenges in communication in working with outside support services (e.g. Tusla, EWO, CAMHS and NEPS) and therefore, expressed a need for "better interagency support"

when working with young people and school refusal. Respondent's also expressed a need for additional resources to support staff within the school environment (e.g. compulsory HSCL posts) and to provide additional support to families within the home environment (e.g. guidance and counselling services). These findings further corroborate the ideas of Archer and colleagues (2003) who suggested a need for a more robust multiagency approach to be developed by professionals within and outside schools when working with young people and school refusal.

Further, respondents in this study referred to difficulty in coping with issues relating to school refusal "when there are so many [other] pressing needs" in schools. This draws attention to the added strain and increased expectations placed not only on young people, but also on schools and teaching staff. Issues relating to the impact of today's culture of measurement in education and accountability within the education system show to place added strain on all parties (i.e. school staff, parents and students). This raises critical questions relating to the purpose of education (Biesta, 2006) and the need to develop future research in the school environment and in particular, from the perspectives of education professionals.

5.11 Conclusion

The results of this study highlighted key issues and concerns relating to school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland. These results support current research relating to the number of young people who experience school refusal in second-level education and provide evidence for young people experiencing greater difficulty in school attendance within the school examination years. These results, therefore, draw our attention to the importance of considering the potentially distressing impact of academic demands and school performance on young people's experiences in the school environment.

Respondents in this study also highlighted issues in the home and psychological distress as key factors relating to school refusal. Issues pertaining to parent and child attachment difficulties, lone parent families and parents' lack of encouragement were viewed as having increased influences on young people. In addition, young people's emotional distress relating to anxiety, low mood/depression and stress were identified as key issues. This result further indicates a need to develop research within community-based settings focusing on the effects of school refusal on young people and their families. There is also a need to raise awareness amongst professionals of the difficulties (i.e. adversity and trauma) experienced by young people in school refusal.

These results have important implications for a more collective approach between support services and schools in working with young people and school refusal. The results of this study also suggest that there is a need to ensure appropriate support for families and young people, supports for education professionals in training and additional support staff, and increased interagency collaboration.

In the next chapter, the qualitative follow up interviews based on the survey questionnaire, will further explore the experiences and perspectives of education professionals.

6 Study 2: Education Professionals' Views on School Refusal

In this chapter, I explore in detail the viewpoints and unique challenges school refusal presents for educators in their work with young people and parents in the school setting. In particular, I focus on the challenges and concerns voiced by professionals who work directly with young people and school refusal within the school environment. I argue for alternative approaches to understanding emotional distress associated with school refusal and a need to make visible the negative influences of power on the experiences of young people, families and professionals.

6.1 Purpose and Research Questions

Although school refusal has gained increased attention in recent years, there is a notable paucity of research exploring the influential role of the school environment (Havik et al., 2014; Shilvock, 2010; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Further, it has been noted in the literature that education professionals play an essential role in identifying and engaging with the young person and their experiences of school refusal (Bates, 2005; Havik et al., 2014: Kearney & Bates, 2005). Yet, there has been little education research that has explored the perspectives and experiences of education professionals (and associated professionals) in Ireland and in the international context.

As previously discussed, there are many complex factors relating to the experiences and challenges of school refusal and there is a need to develop educational research that explores the wider issues relating to school refusal (i.e. psychological, social, education, economic and ideological influences). Therefore, this research project explores the views of education professionals, parents and young people in relation to second-level schools in Ireland and to establish current constructions and responses to school refusal. The aim of this

study is to further explore how school refusal is construed within the Irish education context, to gain insight into how professionals respond to young people and their families who are affected by school refusal and to identify the challenges and concerns experienced by education professionals.

The research questions chosen for this study sought to develop further understanding of the underlying issues in school refusal such as the role of school factors, impact of academic pressure and performativity, family and child risk factors and current issues arising in policy and practice. Therefore, the research questions adopted for this study are:

1 What are education professionals' views of the topic of school refusal and how are they responding to the issue?

2 What are the key concerns and challenges raised by professionals on the issue of school refusal?

3 What supports and policies are in place for young people at risk or experiencing school refusal and what supports are deemed necessary for future planning?

6.2   Research Methods

At the end of Study 1, participants were provided with an opportunity to take part in the qualitative follow up of Study 2 by providing their contact details at the end of the survey questionnaire. Therefore, purposive and convenience sampling were used in which participants from Study 1 who indicated their willingness to take part in follow up interviews were contacted by email. Subsequently, adult participants such as principals, teachers, school-based counsellors and SCP officers were asked to take part in this research project by

participating in semi structured interviews. These interviews were conducted by telephone and comprised of a one-time meeting only for approximately fifty minutes to one hour.

6.2.1   *Participants and Sampling Strategy*

Participants were professionals working in or supporting second-level schools in Ireland. These included principals, vice principals, teachers, school-based guidance counsellors and professionals from outside agencies such as an SCP officer. The sample of participants in this study were selected in the following way: After completion of a national survey on school refusal (see Appendix D), potential participants were asked to indicate their willingness to take part in a qualitative follow up of the research project. A total of 30 responses were received and were subsequently contacted by the researcher. Follow up emails and phone calls were initiated to potential participants from the contact list in the survey. Following this contact, a final 17 participants agreed to take part in this study: 8 male and 9 female. Participants have been provided with pseudonyms as seen throughout this study (see Table 6.1). Personal details have been removed to protect the identity of participants.

Table 6.1

Participants Background Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Professional Role	School Type	Geographical Location by Region in Ireland
1. John	Male	Teacher	Private, fee-paying, mixed gender	South East
2. Anna	Female	Retired Principal	Public, all-girls	East
3. Sam	Male	Retired Principal	*DEIS, all-boys	West
4. Frances	Female	Principal	Public, mixed gender	East
5. Maeve	Female	Deputy Principal	Public, mixed gender	East
6. Rachael	Female	Deputy Principal	Public, all-girls	Mid-East
7. Amy	Female	School Completion Officer	Public, all-girls	Mid-East
8. Jack	Male	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender	North West
9. Aoife	Female	Guidance Counsellor	Public, mixed gender	Mid-West
10. David	Male	Principal	Public, all-boys	South-East
11. Emma	Female	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender	Mid-East
12. Tanya	Female	Principal	DEIS, all-girls school	East
13. Thomas	Male	Principal	Private, fee paying, all-boys	East
14. Robert	Male	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender	South East
15. Ethan	Male	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender	East
16. Phillip	Male	Principal	DEIS, mixed gender	Midlands
17. Lisa	Female	Head Teacher	Public, all girls	South East

Note: DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) denotes those schools who

qualify for entry into the DEIS scheme, a government funded scheme that provides additional

resources for schools serving communities in low socioeconomic areas.

6.2.2 Procedure

Those participants who agreed to take part in the research study through the online survey questionnaire forwarded their name, phone number and email address to the researcher. These participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form (by email) outlining the nature of the research project and what their participation would entail (See Appendix H and Appendix I). All interviews were conducted by telephone and took approximately fifty minutes to one hour. Pilot interviews were conducted with a small number of professionals (n=3) to allow for any changes to be made to the outline of the interview.

Interviews were semi-structured, and a topic guide was allocated to each participant prior to the interview. Questions were designed to explore the experiences and challenges of working with young people at risk or experiencing school refusal. Topics included participants experiences of their relations with the young person and their family, available support and resources received, school policy, social and cultural diversity and specific concerns that they may have in relation to school refusal (See Appendix J).

6.2.3 Approach to Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and then analysed using thematic analysis. In this study, a hybrid approach was chosen as the main method of thematic analysis. This analysis incorporated two contrasting approaches: the data driven inductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998) adopted by Braun & Clark's (2006) analytic method and the deductive, a priori template of codes method, illustrated by Crabtree & Miller (1999). This coding process enhanced the research questions by allowing themes to initially emerge from the data using the inductive coding process and in turn, allowed for the

theoretical framework and concepts to be part of the deductive thematic analysis. The chart

illustrated in Table 6.2 represents each stage of this coding process.

Table 6.2

Stages of Thematic Analysis (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crabtree & Miller, 1999)

Stage	Description of Process
Stage 1: Developing the coding manual	Prepare the table of codes and information creating a priori codes based on theoretical concepts and research questions.
Stage 2: Familiarise yourself with your data	Transcribe data and begin reading and re reading the interviews a number of times taking note of any initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
Stage 3: Generate initial codes and identify emerging themes (inductive approach)	Begin coding interesting features of the data across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each code. Collate codes into relevant themes and summarising data into each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
Stage 4: Applying the template of codes	Using the template analytic technique (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), apply codes from the codebook to the text, identifying meaningful units of text (a priori codes).
Stage 5: Connecting the codes, identifying the themes and adding additional codes	Identify themes and patterns within the text across the entire data (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Check for meaning and patterns related to a priori codes and assign any new additional a posteriori codes (data-driven) (Swain, 2018).

Table 6.2 (continued)

Stage 6: Corroborating and legitimating coded themes	Corroborating involves the process of confirming the findings (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p.136) and reviewing the texts by way of searching for consistent or disconfirming interpretations of the text.
Stage 7: Representing the Account	Sharing the new interpretations and understandings by representing an account of what has been discovered (Crabtree & Miller, p. 137). Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples. Complete a final analysis of selected extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2006) related to a series of interconnected codes (both a priori and a posteriori codes) and that are related to the research question and literature.

Themes and patterns were initially identified within the data using an inductive or 'bottom up' thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is viewed as a flexible method that can "provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke 2006). In this approach, the emerging themes were driven by the interview data without setting the data into a "pre-existing coding frame" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.12). Themes were also developed at a "latent level" (Boyatzis, 1998) of analysis which identifies and examines underlying assumptions and conceptualisations emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p13). An illustration of the main themes using an inductive approach are provided in Table 6.3. These themes include the following: *Understanding School Refusal, Impact of Socioeconomic Status, School Responses to School Refusal* and *Academic Pressure and Performance.*

Table 6.3

Data-Driven Codes from Inductive Analysis

A posteriori codes (data-driven codes)	Description
Understanding School Refusal - Emotional distress - Teacher-student relationships - Family relationships - Peer relationships	Professionals concerns and challenges associated with young people's difficulties in emotional distress and relationships (i.e. with teachers, peers and family).
Impact of Socioeconomic Status	Professionals viewpoints on effects of family socioeconomic status and school refusal. Issues relating to family financial stability, access to resources, parental motivation, commitment to education and mental health issues were highlighted as key influences in school refusal.
School Responses to School Refusal - School policies - Working with outside services	School and educators responses to school refusal. Examples include administering of a range of support strategies, educators evaluation of the success of school strategies and relationships between schools and outside services in school refusal.
Academic Pressure and Performance	Professionals key concerns in relation to academic performance and achievement such as education attainment, performativity and family support.

In addition to the inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a 'top down' theoretical process was adopted producing a set of a priori codes as outlined by Crabtree & Miller (1999). By using this approach, the research aims and questions could be examined by allowing the theoretical precepts (i.e. PTM Framework, 2018 and key concepts in education

theory) to be a central focus within the deductive process. Therefore, a "template organising style" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p.166) was used in the form of a codebook derived from the research questions and theoretical frameworks in this study. As can be seen in Table 6.4, analysis of the text was then guided by the template of codes and applied across all interview data.

Table 6.4

Codes Developed A Priori from the Template of Codes

A priori codes (theory driven codes)	Description
Power Influences	Negative influences of power that operate through organisations, institutions and practices (biological/embodied, coercive, legal, economic/material, ideological & interpersonal power).
Threat	Threats that the negative operation of power may pose to a person or the group and with reference to emotional distress.
Meaning	Meanings are not simply viewed as 'individual'. They are produced within social and cultural discourses, memories, bodily responses, environments and the unequal distribution of resources.
Common Threat Responses	Linking the negative power influences, core threats and meaning produces the threat responses that a person, group or family draw upon to ensure emotional, physical, relational and social survival. Examples: preparing to fight, flight flee, emotional overwhelm, hypervigilance, denial, avoidance, isolation, self-blame, injustice/unfairness, overwork, perfectionism, restricting eating, overuse of alcohol etc.
Oppression	Examination of the physical and exploitive elements of domination underlying oppressive structures, processes and practices in education. The banking model of education focuses on the role of teacher and student in the traditional model of education. (Freire, 1970, p45).

Table 6.4 (continued)

Concept of Accountability	The process of accountability is viewed as playing a significant role in the development of current educational practices (see Biesta, 2010). The culture of accountability places strain on the development of relationships between teachers, students and parents (i.e. the accountability loop).
Domain of Education	The three domains of education (See Biesta, 2015) – qualification, socialization and subjectification. To view evidence for one or more of these functions helps to understand the purpose of education (e.g. measurement in education) and what it is for, whilst also drawing on the negative impact this may have on teachers and student relations.

In addition, any new codes that arose from the inductive analysis process were either included as separate from the a priori codes or used to expand upon the codes created in the codebook (i.e. the deductive process).

6.2.4   *Ethical Issues*

The safety and integrity of the research participants was taken into consideration for all adult participants taking part in Study 2 of this research project. At the initial stage of the research process, each participant was contacted by email and an information sheet and consent form was forwarded by email prior to the telephone interview. All information about the research project was initially discussed by telephone and participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions about the research project prior to commencing the interview. I collaborated with principals, teachers, school counsellors and outside agencies to find an appropriate time for the interviews to take place, in order to reduce any disruption to classes throughout the interview process.

6.2.5   *Data Protection*

Whilst the majority of interviews (N=16) were carried out with adult participants by telephone, one interview took place in the participants own school environment. All telephone interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and iPhone. Audio files were then uploaded to my PC laptop and deleted immediately from the audio devices. In addition, all audio files were password protected.

When transcribing the interviews, all participants were provided with a pseudonym (e.g. John). All personal information elicited from the online survey in Study 1 (e.g. name, school address, mobile phone number, email address) were stored separately in a locked filing cabinet in my home. Informed consent forms were also stored separately from the participant data in my home. Within the interview transcripts, I also ensured the use of anonymised identifiers (e.g., name of schools, colleges, places, staff members, students, parents). Thus, reducing the risk of identity and personal disclosure at public presentations and in the analysis and write up of this research project.

6.3   Findings

The following analysis is based on interviews with 17 professionals. The recording and listening to the viewpoints and experiences of educational professionals on the topic of school refusal highlighted key issues relating to current understanding of emotional distress, risk factors within the home and school environment and the broader influences underlying difficulties in attendance relating to school refusal (social and relational, cultural and educational).

Key themes have been identified from professionals' perspectives and experiences of issues relating to school refusal. These include the emotional and psychological distress experienced by young people and school refusal, the impact of family's socioeconomic status

revealing inequalities in accessing support services and resources; the tense relations between young people, teachers and parents particularly evident in the pressure for academic achievement and performance; and school responses by use of a range of policies and strategies to support young people and school refusal. The themes and sub themes that emerged from this data are illustrated with quotations from the interviews and can be viewed in the following section.

6.4   Emotional Distress in School Refusal

Emotional distress was reported by all participants to be a key concern when working directly with young people and school refusal. Participants associated young people's difficulties in mental health to be related to issues such as anxiety, emotional withdrawal, suicide ideation, self-harm, and physical ill health. Educators also expressed their concern for young people's welfare as Lisa recalled a young person in the school setting: "She [the student] came [into school] very upset and I was worried about her mental health and the fact that she had self-harmed before".

Additionally, participants linked school refusal to a range of psychiatric diagnoses such as "depression", "autism", "Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD)" and "Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)". Young people's difficulties were also linked to the parent and child relationship in terms of an "attachment issue" and "separation anxieties". Further, Thomas referred to school refusal as a "condition" that can carry on into later life:

> It's a very tough one for the child as well because they have to go on to maturity and try to manage their condition. A lot of these issues that are [at] the root of school refusal just don't go away. They will have [these issues] in work and they'll have to manage their condition (Thomas).

Whilst these statements suggest the young person's difficulties to be deficit based and stemming from a condition or disorder, other participant' acknowledged young people's emotional distress as related to life circumstances and difficult family relations. For instance, Lisa commented that "… students that have refused to come to school … they come from families where there was issues, Mum and Dad were separated. Maybe Dad wasn't on the scene". Frances similarly reported family circumstances such as parent separation and divorce proceedings and the impact of bereavement within the family home: "so I can understand how a young child is reluctant to say goodbye to a parent, you know, and kind of trust the school environment that everything's going to be okay". Working in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area, Tanya further reported on her student's as "children who are homeless, children who are hungry and [where] there is serious poverty at home". Tanya noted that experiences of adversity created additional challenges for young people adapting to education demands in school: "they may have resilience and grit around surviving everyday realities, it's the resilience around anxieties, around exams etc., that is something they [need to] build up".

However, some participants questioned the family dynamics in relation to school refusal viewing it as a "common trend", where families do not "have any child that is a chronic attender if there aren't problems in the family". Aoife equally questioned the family's willingness to confront their problems: "…there is something systemic somewhere in family systems or family operations … so rather than facing up to whatever was going on, this child just didn't come to school and so that was it" (Aoife). Whilst awareness of family challenges is evident in the above statements, they also reflect constructions that are related to blame and criticism of family challenges associated with school refusal.

6.5 Socioeconomic Status, Family and Resources

A number of issues were identified relating to family socioeconomic status and their access to resources. Family's access to the necessary services and resources were viewed as crucial elements in reengaging the young person in education. Further, Frances remarked on the prevalence of school refusal to be evident in families from "very wealthy backgrounds" to families "from working class background[s]" and Jack, similarly, commented that school refusal was not fixed to a specific socioeconomic group: "I wouldn't say it's exclusive to one or other [social group]".

In addition, participants revealed differences when working with families of higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds and school refusal. Both Aoife and Thomas commented that families of higher socioeconomic background were more trusting, proactive within the education system and had high expectations in their response to school refusal compared to families of lower socioeconomic background:

> The middle-class parents are more willing to work with us. They trust us a bit more. They probably have had more positive experiences of school themselves, that would be my guess. So, they trust us in terms of working with us to try and resolve whatever the issue is.   In fact, some of them would have really high expectations around what we can achieve in that regard (Aoife)

Thomas also commented on the experiences of parents as having more "alternatives" in accessing social networks and information to promote the young person's reengagement with school:

> I think that a lot of the middle-class parents would have a lot more alternatives, are very proactive in the sense that they do everything they can possibly do to motivate

their children and they have probably more social networks and links to ensure that their child is motivated to come to school (Thomas)

Talking further on this issue, Thomas referred to more "enhanced" opportunities (e.g. work experience) available to families of higher socioeconomic background resulting in positive responses to school refusal: "He [student] has done some wonderful work experience in his dad's office and other people's offices by virtue of the fact that his dad is trying to motivate him" and this "has been greatly more enhanced than a child from a lower socio economic background where the parents wouldn't have that network of friends …to engage the child". Equally, Lisa commented that "the more disadvantaged a [family] background the less […] parents want to get involved" in school services. Lisa also remarked that a parent from a higher socioeconomic background would endeavor to engage with school staff in comparison to a parent from a lower socioeconomic background, who tend to show a lack of commitment and a negative "attitude" in responding to school refusal.

Participants also differentiated family's socioeconomic status with mental health issues and school refusal. In one example, Thomas equates family 'dysfunction' and "lack of support at home" with lower socioeconomic status and in contrast, anxiety related issues in families from a higher socioeconomic background:

> …in lower socioeconomic groups… some of the barriers to participation are more social and more family orientated in that maybe a dysfunctional family or obviously lack of support at home might well be a reason for somebody not to be getting up in the morning, not going to school, not being fed, not being clothed, and feeling alienated, isolated as a result of their family circumstances. That necessarily isn't the case here [with families from higher socioeconomic background], we would find

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perhaps that the predominant reason would be anxiety, mental wellness... really are

the reasons behind school refusal in our situation (Thomas).

This brings to light underlying ideologies relating to family socioeconomic status and mental

health. It would seem that whilst school refusal cuts across social class divides, there are also

differences in how school refusal is understood depending upon family's socioeconomic

status.

6.6   Challenges in Academic Achievement and Performance

Participants referred to pressures in schoolwork and performativity as key issues in

school refusal. For instance, John referred to the young person's experiences of school

refusal to a pressure to perform…pressure to do the course and pressure within the class".

Phillip also referred to young people experiencing school refusal to be "…anxious students,

their self-concepts would be very low, they are expecting to fail".

Talking further on this issue, Anna reflected on the school environment particularly

when students are in transition from primary to second-level school:

Now many teachers would try their very best in first year to kind of keep somewhat of

the primary school [ethos] going, but the minute they [students] get in, they are told –

now you are going to do your Junior Certificate [state examination] - and it is all

about exams and it is test driven and I think it is a very big jump from … primary to

secondary school (Anna)

Robert also questioned the current standardised approach of examinations in education: "…I

think we are trying to make everybody fit into the same type of box or the same type of

category". Anna also remarked on the levels of stress associated with the Leaving Certificate

examination: "I think the Leaving Certificate has become so stressful because we have made

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students believe that their whole life depends on it and there's no other way. That it is such a stress […]". Frances, referred to difficulties in attendance as adding to the challenge of academic performance and achievements: "… because they [students] are missing so much time and then, they are in a panic about catching up".

In addition, participants referred to alternative options in mainstream education as providing a less stressful environment for the young person's experiences in school refusal. These options included home tuition and outside education centres (i.e. Youthreach and apprenticeships). Participants referred to the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as providing positive options for young people and education.

For instance, Robert compared the benefit of alternative courses to the distress experienced by students sitting the Leaving Certificate examination: "If you force them [students] through a Leaving Cert[ificate], it is going to cause anxiety and stress and all kinds of problems". Anna similarly felt that courses outside the Leaving Certificate can provide a less stressful environment and an opportunity for the young person to get on the career "ladder" of education. Maeve also noted the benefits of QQI's as creating a positive space and opportunities for young people to form relationships:

> The students love them. […] It gives them a very happy school experience and because they might be in small groups, …it gives them an opportunity to form a relationship with the other person who is in their class…(Maeve).

Emma also referred to Youthreach as an education centre that could be more beneficial for young people experiencing school refusal:

> Well, it's a fresh start for them [student]. They are in a smaller environment. … you have a small class, the teachers will know the students extremely well, they will talk

to the students in a much less formal way.   There are no bells …they move from class to class. […] They didn't have to wear a uniform, they could, come in in whatever clothes [they like]…(Emma)

It would seem, therefore, that alternative education centres were viewed by many participants as a more favourable option for young people experiencing school refusal, providing a less stressful environment and more positive relations with peers and teachers.

6.7   Strained Relationships in School and Home Environment

Accounts given by participants revealed difficult and tense relations between school professionals and parents/students. The following subthemes capture these issues: *Teacher-Student Relations* and *Family and School Relations.*

6.7.1   Teacher-Student Relations

Participants discussed the impact of school refusal on teacher-student relations. For example, John expressed a sense of frustration in working directly with young people and school refusal: "trying to make them catch up and they are missing course curriculum and that is one of the most frustrating things about school refusal". John further added that he felt "quite helpless" in getting the young person to re-engage with the course curriculum.

Lisa, also commented on the tensions among her teaching staff and the difficulties expressed when the young person returns to the school classroom: "staff are coming to me and saying that it is not fair on other students, this student is coming in and he is upsetting the dynamics of the class again and taking up my time". Rachael also revealed student fear and tension in the classroom after a period of school absenteeism"… [it is] that idea that you might be spoken to in front of the class [and] that would show you up as being a little bit [behind in schoolwork] and I think that is their [student's] fear, definitely". Whilst Rachael

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recognises the importance of compassion, she also experiences difficulty in communicating with the young person: "…it still is not enough to convince them [the student] that they are cared for [and] that they are wanted in the classroom; but they only see that the majority don't want them around and that could be based on not having work done, the basic things that teachers give out about".

Many participant's highlighted feelings of pressure and responsibility in preparing the young person for state examinations and completion of course curriculum. For instance, Maeve, remarked on the pressure and frustration felt by her teaching staff to complete school coursework:

> […] Their [the teachers] job is to get the student through their Junior Cert[ificate] or to get them through school. So, no teacher can opt out of that. So, the teachers would be coming to me extremely stressed and concerned and really, genuinely, up the walls about it […] (Maeve)

Further, the non-completion of project components and curriculum-based assessments evoked added feelings of stress and frustration among teaching staff:

> I know that some of our teachers would be extremely stressed about that and those who have a project component to their subjects, which is more and more of them, and the teachers get really stressed around [school projects]. They [the students] haven't got their science workbook done or they haven't got their religion project done, they haven't got their CBA's [Curriculum Based Assessment] done. The teachers get really stressed about that, when a student doesn't come in and some of our teachers will give a considerable amount of extra time to their students […] (Maeve)

However, participants also argued that there are limitations as to what a school can do in relation to a young person refusing to come to school and completing their coursework. There comes a point where school staff feel they can do no more:

> We [school management] would say to teachers - you can't worry about the student not coming in anymore, that's in our hands now at this stage. So that can obviously be a bit of a relief for teachers when it comes to exams […]. I will be honest with you, there comes a point in the school here as well where we say, look we can't do any more in that situation […] (Rachael)

6.7.2 Family and School Relations

When engaging directly with young people and school refusal, issues and challenges also existed between the school and home environment. Thomas indicated difficulties in communication between schools and parents when working with issues concerning school refusal:

> […] While schools are told that social services say you keep ringing [the family], you keep affirming the child, keep in contact with them, [however], that is very difficult to do if the child actually has blocked your number or if the child doesn't want to engage with the school […] You find that parents, on some occasions, are not necessarily going to open their door really to the school looking for support (Thomas)

The above statement highlights key issues such as pressure on schools to maintain contact with families (e.g. phone calls and house calls) and strained relations between schools and parents. Anna also reported on the challenges of "communication" between teachers and parents as "very difficult" within the school environment. Other participants felt that parents were under pressure and were "cast adrift" when it came to the decision-making process in

school refusal. Further, Maeve remarked that despite the best efforts of schools and parents working together, engaging the student can be difficult to maintain:

I have found that suggestions that we made and programmes that have been tailor made to the interests of the student have been responded to very enthusiastically by the student and their family. There would be initial improvement, vast improvement in the attendance but it tapers off [decreases] unfortunately (Maeve)

However, Jack emphasised the importance of building positive relations with the family in working with young people and school refusal:

… quite often when you are having difficult conversations with family, we actually want the same thing for the student, we might be looking at it from different angles and different perspectives and to try and get each other to see that and understand what the issues are […] (Jack)

Participant's narratives also reflected the distress and pressure experienced by families in an effort to ensure the young person attends the school classroom. David recalled an incident concerning the young person and a family member in which the "family would drag him [student] and coax him into the classroom to keep him in there". David emphasised the distress experienced by parents, the young person and professionals in the school classroom:

…now it has been quite distressing at times with the father dragging him in and the father in here and the father going out and the boy roaring and crying and crying and so on (David)

Sam also recalled an incident that involved the physical restraint of the young person:

….we sent for mam and we had to bring him [the student] home and she actually

ended up taking his shoes off him so that he couldn't run out of the car and this was

done physically (Sam).

John, similarly, recalled a "parental reaction" to school refusal resulting in the use of physical

force to ensure the young person attended the school classroom: "…he [student] was taken in

the car and the father dragged him in and made him stay". The above statements indicate the

distressing impact of school refusal for all parties – the young person, their parents and

school professionals.

6.8   School Responses to School Refusal

This theme addresses the supports and policies in place for young people at risk or

experiencing school refusal. This section will focus on key issues experienced by

participant's working with young people, their families and outside support services. These

issues can be viewed under the following subthemes: *School policies and School Refusal* and

Challenges in Working with Support Services.

6.8.1   *School Policies and School Refusal*

Participants in this study reported on a wide range of policies and practices to support

young people and their difficulties in attending school. As mentioned previously (see

Chapter 2), school policies in Irish second-level schools follow a strategy for school

attendance and participation in accordance with the Education Welfare Act (2000). This

policy includes working with Tusla, Child and Family Agency and parents as the main

stakeholders in ensuring attendance and punctuality are upheld. In relation to school refusal,

the principal will notify Tusla when a young person is absent for over 20 days or where a

young person is showing irregular attendance at school.

Lisa referred to their school policy regarding contact with parents and support services in issues relating to school absenteeism:

> Our first contact would be [that] I would ring the parents myself when I see there's a problem with missing days and then I would try and speak to the parents and student together to see what we can do to get them in more often. Then, if that wouldn't work, we would go to the Home School Liaison Officer (HSCL) and she would go down and meet the parents and students herself (Lisa)

Thomas similarly remarked that "there would be custom and practice whereby we contact every parent with a child absent" when responding to school non-attendance and:

> every morning, [parents] get an email or a text message to say your child isn't in or your child is late. … If your child is absent for two days you get an email or you are asked to contact the school to let us know what is happening (Thomas)

Jack also referred to the involvement of school personnel who work closely with young people and their families in disadvantaged areas. These included a HSCL officer, a SCP officer and meetings with the EWO: "so we put in a huge amount of effort and time into tracking the student who has poor attendance and trying to get them back in".

There was a general feeling of commitment and concern among participants as they implemented strategies to engage a young person at risk of school refusal. These strategies were used to support students, particularly when they felt emotionally overwhelmed. The use of a "personal time out pass", a "stress ball" and access to a "relaxation room" were amongst some of the strategies used in schools. Schools also used an "attendance matters" strategy to promote and encourage full attendance. This involved a strategy of placing the names of young people who had full attendance on the inside of the front door of the school: "we want to get the idea into students minds that full attendance is what's required, so it's not okay to

actually miss a day here and miss a day there" (Emma). The implementation of a weekly wellbeing programme was also used as a positive approach to young people's mental health and wellbeing, whilst other participants followed a "Code of Behaviour" and reduced timetables in working with young people and school refusal.

Nevertheless, participants expressed feeling a sense of "failure" and frustration as Frances noted: "I had two successes [in student attendance] and all the others have been failures" and that school strategies "rarely work …and then [the student] stopped coming in at all". Whilst participants referred to the use of medication to support the young person's experiences of emotional distress in attending school, Frances questioned the long term use of medication:

> Sometimes they need medication because in two of the success cases it was medication that got them over the threshold of the door of the school. … Anxiety, betablockers that kind of thing, to actually get them in and then a reduced timetable can work as well. We have tried everything under the sun, and I suppose sometimes it works but I feel in the last two years, I haven't had much success (Frances)

Anna similarly questioned whether the use of medication is the best approach to school refusal and mental health issues:

> A lot of students are on medication which is very scary and instead of dealing with the situation they are zombified and very early in their lives. We would have first years on medication. I know that there are students who are on medication at six years of age. So, what kind of education system are we offering is the big question and what is the purpose of our education system? (Anna).

6.8.2 Challenges in Working with Support Services

Participants discussed their experiences in working with outside support services and the implementation of strategies in working with young people and school refusal. Participants discussed working with a variety of services including Tusla, SCP officer, HSCL officer, CAMHS, Jigsaw (National Centre for Youth Mental Health), Youthreach (programme for early school leavers aged 15 – 20) and Meitheal (community development support and training organization).

Participants highlighted the importance of working together with support services in "trying to understand" and "overcome" the issues concerning school refusal:

> We would have had outside agency in with the family, supporting the family. I would have had the Home School Liaison teacher in [and] the school completion teacher in the conversation as well. We would have had the EWO [Education Welfare Officer] on the phone and they are all trying to encourage him [young person] to come in […] (Jack)

Whilst most participants expressed appreciation for the work that outside support services provide for schools, they also expressed frustration and pressure in communication: "You have so many services involved and a lot of them are kind of barking instructions at the school […]" (Francis). Rachael similarly commented on dealing with a large number of agencies and the unsuccessful outcome for the school and the young person:

> I mean every single agency imaginable was on that [school refusal]. So, therefore, she [young person] literally would be collected and brought into school by her father as agreed by case conferences. […] She desperately, at the same time, wanted to feel she belonged to something. So, the school kind of put out all the stops to make her feel welcome but invariably she sat with me in my office (Rachael)

Some participants described the complexities and challenges in working with services, particularly, when a young person has been diagnosed with autism alongside experiences of school refusal:

> […] So, they have called in CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services], they have called in some sort of a Youthreach place, they have called in Jigsaw. Everything under the sun and we have bent over backwards for that scenario and again that one's been a failure (Francis)

Other participants grappled with the need to distinguish the role of professionals in the school environment as "education providers" or "care providers":

> … when we are really worried about somebody [student], our main soul focus in this school is we are education providers, we are not care providers. […] So, there's a certain point we can provide scaffolding and support but there is a point where we say CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] will have to take over. The medical services have to take over, this is not our job (Tanya)

6.9   Summary and Initial Discussion

The findings of this current study reveal a range of issues evident in professional's viewpoints and experiences in their work with young people and school refusal. Participant's narratives emphasised emotional distress as a core element of school refusal. Further, these experiences seemed to be exacerbated by the young person's adverse life experiences and difficulties within the home and school environment. These issues were also shaped by family socioeconomic status and equality differences in accessing support services and opportunities in education. In schools, conflictual relationships were evident between educators and support services, as well as educators and students/parents, highlighting an

underlying pressure in academic achievement and performance. Participant's narratives, therefore, provide useful insight into the complexities of school refusal and have important implications for how to appropriately respond to school refusal.

6.10 Emotional Distress: An Alternative Perspective

In contemporary Western cultures, frameworks that are used to understand emotional distress derive mainly from a medical model approach. This approach can be seen to exist through language (e.g. symptoms, disorders, illness), institutions (e.g. hospitals and clinics), practice (e.g. psychiatric diagnosis, prescribing of drugs, hospitalisation) and research (e.g. clinic inpatient and outpatient samples searching for biological or genetic causes) (Boyle, 2020). As discussed in Chapter 2, these medicalised narratives or sets of meanings are evident in the dominant clinical and psychiatric literature that is used to make sense of the occurrence of emotional distress in school refusal. School refusal is generally viewed as a complex, 'dysfunctional' and 'maladaptive' form of childhood and adolescent behaviour. It is regarded as a set of problematic behaviours linked to psychiatric disorders that need to be identified, addressed and treated (Stroobant & Jones, 2006).

In the current study, professional's narratives of emotional distress and school refusal also reflected a medicalised language relating to symptoms and disorders, including separation anxiety and other anxiety related issues (e.g. social difficulties, avoidance, withdrawal, attachment difficulties and chronic upset), depression, autism, ADHD and RAD. Young people were viewed as having a "range of psychological issues" and a "condition" that would be with them for all of their lives. Similarly, previous studies have associated experiences of emotional distress with 'symptoms' and 'disorders' such as separation anxiety, school phobia and depression in school refusal (Archer et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 1941; Kearney & Albano, 2004; Mc Shane et al., 2001). This language has also been noted by

Torrens Armstrong & colleagues (2011) where young people were construed as "the sick student" and "school phobics" by education professionals (Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011, p.577).

Not only does this language draw attention to a medical model approach to distress, but it also obscures the complex environmental and social factors related to school refusal (Baker & Bishop 2015, Gregory & Purcell, 2014, O'Toole & Devenney, 2020, Pelligrini, 2007, Place et al., 2000, Smith, 2014, Torrens Armstrong et al., 2011). Therefore, whilst the medical model approach is widely recognised in addressing experiences in psychological distress and mental health issues, it should not be viewed as a solitary approach in working with young people and school refusal.

Indeed, new approaches to understanding school refusal have begun to mobilise contemporary thinking of school refusal relating it to the wider issues of young people's experiences of emotional distress (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Devenney & O'Toole, 2021; Gregory and Purcell, 2014; O' Toole & Devenney, 2020; Stroobant & Jones, 2006; Yoneyama, 2000). Further, the PTM Framework provides a conceptual alternative to the medicalised approach (as discussed in Chapter 3). It has relevance in terms of recognising the individual's responses in emotional distress that can be seen to serve a purpose when encountering challenging life experiences (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). To apply this framework to school refusal, recognises symptoms (e.g. anxiety, depression, attachment difficulties, emotional overwhelm etc.) as difficulties evolving from the natural environment of the young person's life and their need to aid survival. The PTM framework, therefore, helps to widen perspectives of mental health difficulties through the inclusion of broader environmental influences and challenges the stigma and stereotypes of young people and their families (Aherne et al., 2019).

6.11 Economic Influences, Family and School Refusal

The association between socioeconomic status, poverty and mental health difficulties relating to young people and families is widely established in the literature (Cromby et al., 2013) and within school refusal (Berg et al., 1993, Place et al., 2000). In particular, there is disagreement amongst scholars relating to the effects of socioeconomic status and school refusal (Heyne et al., 2001). However, professionals in this study indicated equal representation of school refusal amongst families from lower and higher socioeconomic status. Factors relating to poverty, inadequate housing conditions, lone parent families, parent's level of education and difficulties in mental health were reported as primary issues relating to socioeconomic status and school refusal.

Nevertheless, young people from a higher socioeconomic background were viewed as having more "enhanced" opportunities (i.e. access to private services and being more involved in education system) than a family from a lower socioeconomic background. This in turn, was viewed by professional's to have more positive outcomes for parents who were more "confident" and "alert" in accessing private professional support services for the young person. In contrast, low income families were perceived to lack motivation, focusing more on financial affordability of the services rather than the young person's engagement in education. These findings make visible the effects of inequality in opportunities for families and young people to engage in education and raise prominent issues on the wider debates of power and inequality.

Family circumstances (i.e. marital difficulties, parental separation, illness of a parent, attachment issues and domestic abuse) were also viewed as having adverse effects on the young person's motivation to attend school. This finding concurs with earlier research that highlights family mental health difficulties, family breakdown, separation anxiety, traumatic

events (bereavement, violence and physical, emotional abuse) as influencing the young person and school refusal (Archer et al., 2003; Bernstein et al., 1999; Havik et al., 2015; Lauchlan, 2003; Mansdorf & Lukens, 1987; Place et al., 2000). In addition, some of the issues emerging from this finding relate specifically to ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) which highlight child abuse, neglect and difficulties within the home, and as having short- and long-term influences on children, young people and adults in later life (Oral et al., 2016). Further, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests specific childhood adversities relating to poor academic performance, negative peer relationships, bullying, absence of friends, poverty and witnessing violence within the community as key experiences associated with long-term risks for negative life experiences and difficult health related issues (Felitti et al., 1998; Oral et al., 2016).

These findings raise important questions relating to professional's awareness of trauma experiences of young people and whether responses to school refusal are sufficiently sensitive to their needs or are they are otherwise serving to re-traumatize the individual. Research in ACE related studies, therefore, emphasise a need to introduce a trauma-informed practice in schools, supporting professionals in understanding the nature of trauma and its impact on the young person's life (Anderson et al., 2015; Harris & Fallot, 2001; O'Toole, under submission; SAMHSA, 2014).

6.12 Educational Issues, School Setting and Relationships

A review of the literature highlights difficult student-teacher relationships, academic demands, strict codes of discipline, school policies and structures as key issues relating to school refusal within the school setting (Archer et al., 2003; Lauchlan, 2003; Wilkins, 2008). The findings of the current study also indicated strained relationships between teaching staff, young people and parents. Feelings of fear, embarrassment and low self-worth were viewed

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as common in young people at risk or experiencing school refusal. At the same time, participants expressed a concern for their teaching staff who were "extremely stressed" and felt responsible for the young person's non-completion of academic coursework and examinations. Parents were also viewed as "giving in too easily" and lacking in "parental control" and showed to be under pressure by the use of physical restraint to ensure the young person attended the school classroom.

These narratives draw attention to the effects of academic pressure felt not only by students, but also by teachers and parents as well. The goal of qualifications and measurement in recent times has resulted in increased pressure on academic expectations and learning outcomes in education (Biesta, 2010). Further, the heightened focus of educational achievement and exam performance shows not only to be a contributing factor in school refusal (Havik et al., 2015; Kearney, 2008; Yoneyama, 2010;), but also to the high levels of stress and burnout amongst the teaching profession (Foley, 2013; Johnson et al., 2005; Kerr et al. 2011). These findings highlight underlying issues relating to policies in measurement and professional accountability and have important implications for education practices and a need to reconnect with the goals of education.

Research has also highlighted the use of preventative strategies in responding to issues relating to school refusal (Archer et al., 2003). This study confirmed that professionals engaged in a range of policies and strategies to support young people experiencing school refusal. Participant's engaged in strategies such as providing young people with access to a "relaxation room", implementation of "attendance matters", "Code of Behaviour" and weekly programmes promoting positive student wellbeing. However, despite the best efforts of schools to support and respond to the challenges presented in school refusal, there was a general sense of failure amongst professional's and the futile nature of providing resources for young people who were absent for prolonged periods. As previously indicated, these

strategies highlight a need to re-examine responses to school refusal and to question whether they are adequately meeting the needs of the young person. There is a need for further research to re-examine policies, training and practice in response to issues in school refusal. These issues will be further examined in Chapter 9 of this thesis.

6.13 Conclusion

The complex nature of school refusal has presented unique challenges for professionals and their relationships with young people and parents in the school and home environment. The findings of this study make visible the limitations of a medical model approach and the alternative of a PTM Framework that provides opportunities to better understand emotional distress and include the wider debates (i.e. community, societal influences, stigma and stereotypes) relating to young people and school refusal. The effects of socioeconomic status and family circumstances also draw attention to the broader power influences within society (inequality in accessing resources, family adversity/trauma) that may influence a young person's motivation to attend school.

The findings of this study have implications for professionals and their level of awareness of potential trauma that students may be experiencing in their school. Thus, emphasising a need for a trauma-informed practice in schools. Further, strained relationships between teachers, students and parents relating to academic achievement and performance highlight considerable academic pressure on all parties. Some educators expressed feelings of failure when trying to support and engage the young person with a range of strategies in school and questioned the futile nature of investing time and resources in young people who did not return to school. These findings further evoke questions relating to the true purpose of education and expectations in relation to academic goals.

In the chapter that follows, I explore the perspectives and experiences of parents of young people and school refusal. I focus specifically on the challenges and concerns expressed by parents in the home and school environments. I argue for the importance of developing research that involves greater insight into the lived experiences of families when addressing issues in school refusal.

7 Study 3: Parents Perspectives of School Refusal

In this chapter, I foreground the experiences of parents of young people who encounter difficulties relating to school refusal. I explore the viewpoints and experiences of parents in meeting the day-to-day challenges of school refusal presented in the main findings of this study. These perspectives are fundamental to gain a holistic understanding of the issues involved in school refusal and how best to support families in these circumstances.

7.1 Purpose and Research Questions

There is a prevailing view within the literature that the home environment is a key element in understanding a young person's difficulty in attending school. However, little research has been given to perspectives of parents and their day-to-day experiences and challenges of school refusal. The quantitative research to date has relied heavily on family assessment measures that focus on the causality of school refusal based on clinic populations (Bernstein & Garfinkel, 1988; Bernstein et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 1941; Kearney & Silverman, 1996). As indicated previously, these explanations relating to familial dynamics and the individual's underlying psychological issues hinder understanding of the lived experiences and personal meanings attached to larger distal influences (i.e. social, economic, cultural and education) that can also be seen to impact school refusal.

The overarching purpose of this thesis is to explore the perspectives and experiences of education professionals, parents and young people in relation to school refusal and to consider how these narratives inform current constructions and responses to school refusal. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to contribute to an understanding of school refusal by exploring the perspectives of parents of young people who have experienced or are experiencing school refusal. Specifically, it seeks to explore the impact of school refusal on

parents (and young people) and to identify their concerns and challenges in supporting their child in issues pertaining to school refusal.

Therefore, the research questions chosen for this study address issues with respect to family and child risk factors within the home environment, the impact of emotional distress on young people and their families, and the necessary supports needed in responding to families in issues pertaining to school refusal. Thus, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are parents' experiences of supporting their child through school refusal?

2. How do parent's make sense of their child's experiences of school refusal?

3. What supports are accessed by parents in meeting the challenges of school refusal and what other supports are deemed necessary to support families?

7.2 Research Methods

Similar to the approach used in Study 2 of this thesis, a qualitative method was used to allow a deeper insight into the lived experiences and perspectives of parents of young people and school refusal. The following sub-sections outlines the information on the sample of participants, procedure and ethical considerations.

7.2.1 Participants and Sampling Strategy

Parents whose child(ren) were experiencing school refusal or who had experienced school refusal in the past and were currently attending or not attending an education setting were asked to take part this project. A purposive sample of parents were asked to participate in the qualitative interviews of this research process. Links to key agencies within Irish educational services (e.g. Tusla and Youthreach) as well as the Home Education Network

(HEN) and word-of-mouth inquiry (e.g. conference presentations) formed the basis of the recruitment of participants in this study.

A total of 10 participants agreed to take part in this study: 1 male and 9 female (See Table 7.1). Seven participants were from two-parent families and three were from single-parent families. The children (of parents) comprised of one boy and nine girls who were experiencing or had experienced school refusal and were aged 14 to 21 years. All participation was voluntary and participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the research project. Participants have been provided with pseudonyms as seen throughout this study (see Table 7.1). Personal details have been removed to protect the identity of the participants.

Table 7.1

Participant Background Information

Pseudonym	Family structure	Geographical location: urban/community area in Ireland
1. Barbara	Two parent	Rural area
2. Martha	Two parent	Urban area
3. Anna	Single parent	Urban area
4. Edith	Two parent	Rural area
5. Kirsten	Two parent	Rural area
6. Evelyn	Two parent	Rural area
7. Enya	Single parent	Urban area
8. Enid	Two parent	Urban area
9. Sofia	Single parent	Urban area
10. Donal	Two parent	Urban area

7.2.2 Procedure

For those participants who agreed to take part in this research project, their name, phone number and email address were forwarded for follow up contact by the researcher. Participants were then provided with an information sheet and consent form outlining the nature of the research project and what their participation would entail (See Appendix K and Appendix L). All interviews were conducted face-to-face, one contact time only and continued for the duration of one hour approximately.

Further, a semi-structured interview topic guide was developed on the basis of parents' experiences of their child and school refusal. The interview guide included elements for discussion such as background information (occupational role, number of children in family, area of residence), the parent's school experiences and their level of education and parent's experiences of the current education setting that the young person is/is not attending. The topic guide also included parent's experiences of school refusal in relation to the young person (e.g. challenges and concerns), impact of school refusal on home life (e.g. family relationships) and experiences of alternative routes in second-level education (see Appendix M). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

7.2.3 Approach to Data Analysis

Qualitative data in this study consisted of 10 interviews with parents of young people experiencing school refusal or who had experienced school refusal in the past. A hybrid approach consisting of two contrasting philosophical methods (Swain, 2018) was selected as the main approach to the analytic process. As previously described in Study 2 of this thesis, themes and patterns were identified using an inductive or 'bottom up' thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) adopted by Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytic method and a 'top down' theoretical process was further adopted producing a set of a priori codes as outlined by

Crabtree & Miller (1999). The stages of this coding process can be viewed in Table 6.2 of this research project.

Table 7.2 presents an overview of the main themes derived from the use of an inductive approach to thematic analysis pertaining to this study. Themes relating to parents' experiences and perspectives of school refusal emerged from the interview data: *Young People's Experiences in School Refusal, Experiences of Adversity, Parental Challenges and Concerns, Family and School Refusal, Diagnosis and School Refusal, Life Beyond School Refusal* and *Strengths of Young Person.*

Table 7.2

Data-Driven Codes from Inductive Analysis

A posteriori codes (data driven codes)	Description
Young People's Experiences in School Refusal - Emotional - Social - Academic - Label of school refusal	Parents concerns expressed in their descriptions of young people's experiences in school refusal. These relate to internal and external pressures (emotional, social and academic) as well as the negative impact of the label of school refusal.
Experiences of Adversity (Trauma)	Descriptions of adversities such as violence in the home, bereavement, parental separation and divorce and bullying in the school environment.
Parental Challenges and Concerns	Parents descriptions of the impact of school refusal such as emotional distress (i.e. guilt, fear, failure, emotional overwhelm) and financial strain (i.e. difficulty attending work, relying on welfare supplements, accessing public services).
Family and School Refusal	The impact of school refusal on family life. (i.e. stress, feeling judged by others, guilt, failure and conflictual relationships in the home).
Diagnosis Related to School Refusal	Common diagnoses associated with school refusal: anxiety, depression, autism and dyslexia.

Table 7.2 (continued)

Life Beyond School Refusal - New courses undertaken - Young person's motivation for further and higher education - Hopes for the future	Education opportunities available to young people outside mainstream education setting and young people's motivation to seek alternative routes and future aspirations.
Strengths of the Young Person - Strengths and positive attributes - Other attributes	Parents descriptions of the strengths of the young person with reference to their skills, resourcefulness and determination. Other attributes include personal traits (e.g. sensitive, quiet, shy, perfectionist).

In addition, Table 7.3 displays the a priori template of codes that were utilised in the deductive analytic process. These themes were derived from the research questions and theoretical frameworks of this study. The template of codes as outlined in Table 7.3 were applied across all interview data.

Table 7.3

Codes Developed A Priori from the Template of Codes

A priori codes (theory driven codes)	Description
Power Influences	Negative influences of power operating through organisations, institutions and practices (biological/embodied, coercive, legal, economic/material, ideological and interpersonal power).
Threat	This refers to the threats that the negative operation of power may pose to a person or a group and its relationship with emotional distress.
Meaning	Meanings are not simply viewed as 'individual'. They are produced within social and cultural discourses, memories, bodily responses, environments and the unequal distribution of resources.
Common Threat Responses	The association between negative power influences, core threats and meaning that produce

Table 7.3 (continued)

	threat responses or 'symptoms' that a person or group draw on to ensure emotional, physical, relational and social survival. Examples include preparing to fight, flight, flee; emotional overwhelm, hypervigilance, denial, avoidance, isolation, self-blame, overuse of alcohol, restricting eating and so forth.
Education: Oppressive Structures	The physical and exploitative elements of domination underlying oppressive structures, processes and practices (Freire, 1970). The banking model of education emphasises the individual as disconnected from their world and exist as objects of the oppressor's actions rather than subjects of their own actions. The person becomes a 'container' to be filled in an environment without dialogue or freedom (Freire, 1970).
Individualisation	A trend in education towards a 'learning economy' resulting in a more individualistic understanding of lifelong learning: the goals in qualifications, exam performance and student responsibility of finding alternative routes (Biesta, 2006).
Domains of Education	This relates to an exploration of young people's experiences and the functions of education: 1) qualification, 2) socialisation and 3) subjectification and how this may relate to the question of purpose (Biesta, 2006).

7.2.4   Ethical Issues

Involvement of parents who had child(ren) experiencing school refusal or who had experienced school refusal in the past involved ethical considerations in Study 3 of this research project. The importance of confidentiality and its limitations were discussed with each participant at the interview briefing and throughout the research process. Emphasis was also given to the participant's right to withdraw from this research project. Further, all

participants' personal information was removed and pseudonyms were assigned to each of the transcripts and quotations used in the write up of this research project.

The role of the researcher and their ethical commitment to protecting the wellbeing and dignity of all participants played an integral part of this research process. To be part of the 'private spaces' of participants' experiences requires a commitment on the researcher's part to ensure minimum risk to each participant (Stake, 2005). In this study, some participants recalled experiences of mental health difficulties, difficult family relations, domestic abuse, marginalisation and stress in their day-to-day lives. Therefore, the issues discussed in conversations with participants were of a sensitive nature and as a researcher, I was vigilant of my duty of care to participant's taking part in this study. There were moments of difficult feelings for participants (e.g. feeling sadness, disappointment, upset and anger) and I responded with sensitivity and non-judgement. I had also offered participants the opportunity to take a break from the interview proceedings if they wished. Prior to the interview process, I had investigated and compiled a list of relevant sources (e.g. local counselling services, family resource centres, Parentline, Samaritans and the HSE) and contact information for parents of young people at risk or experiencing school refusal, should further support be necessary to discuss any issues arising within this research process.

In addition, I used a reflective approach by keeping a daily journal of my interview experiences and kept up to date communication with my supervisor throughout the interview process. Participants were also given the opportunity to be interviewed in their own home or in a public setting (e.g. hotel foyer, café, local resource centre). Subsequently, five interviews took place in the participant's own home and the remainder in public settings (i.e. café, hotel foyer and an office). Potential risks for myself, as the main researcher, were also given consideration prior to conducting interviews in the home setting. For example,

meetings with participants were conducted in daylight hours and a contact person was made aware of my location and time of interviews.

7.2.5 *Data Protection*

All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and iPhone. Audio files were uploaded to my PC laptop and deleted immediately from the audio devices. All details relating to data protection, management and storage are located in Study 2 of this research project.

7.3 Findings

The following analysis relates to qualitative interviews conducted with 10 parents. Analysis of the data from these interviews revealed themes on parents' perspectives and experiences of school refusal. The recording and listening to the viewpoints and experiences of parents on the topic of school refusal highlighted key issues such as family and child risk factors, the role of the school factors (academic demands and performativity), the impact of the wider environment relating to adversity and socioeconomic status and the negative influences of power and inequality in experiences relating to school refusal.

Key themes included parents' concerns for the emotional and psychological distress experienced by the young person whilst in attendance at school or anticipating their return to the school environment; the impact of adversity and trauma within the home and school environments that showed to exacerbate the young person's emotional distress and their difficulties in attending school; parental challenges in accessing resources and support services for the young person in education and health; and strained relations between the home and school environment particularly evident in academic demands and the pressure to return to school, resulting in most young people seeking alternative routes in education. The

themes and sub themes that emerged from the interview data can be viewed in the following section.

7.4 Young People's Experiences Relating to School Refusal

The young person's experiences of emotional distress were of major concern among participants. This theme captures a number of key issues in relation to the young person's difficulties in attending school. These issues can be viewed under the two sub themes: *Experiences of Emotional Distress* and *Surviving Adversities in the Home and School Environment.*

7.4.1 Experiences of Emotional Distress

Participant's reported bodily and emotional symptoms relating to the young person's experiences of distress. Martha, for example, referred to her daughter's physical ill health at the beginning of the school year: "within about two weeks of going back to school, she [daughter] started becoming sick, … and then it was a pain in her ears". Donal similarly referred to his daughter as "hard to get her out of bed…[and] crying in the morning". Barbara commented on the emotional exhaustion experienced by the young person in which "he slept … and slept and slept" following difficulties relating to school refusal.   Martha also reported that her daughter had difficulties eating and sleeping which eventually resulted in her not returning to school:

> She [young person] came off school for mid-term and she just refused to go back. I couldn't get her [into school]…she couldn't sleep, she couldn't eat, she couldn't do anything, and I got an urgent referral to CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services]. We went down that route, but she never actually went back [to school] (Martha)

Talking further on this issue, Martha noted her daughter's feelings of anger and rage as: "she felt like she was being treated [as] abnormal, that it was almost like a conspiracy against her, that we weren't doing it for her benefit, we were doing it to make us feel better". This comment illustrates that whilst Martha believes in the importance of professional support for her daughter; at the same time, her daughter felt silenced and powerless in the decisions relating to school refusal. This also brings to light the struggles felt by both parent and the young person in their experiences of school refusal.

Other participants reported that children experienced overwhelming emotions such as fear, panic and powerlessness: "As she [young person] would say, it is exhausting to be anxious all the time. Absolutely dreading [school], so she was worrying about what are the school [teachers and peers] thinking [and] what will they say…" (Edith). Kirsten, similarly, noted the young person's experiences of feeling "trapped because she can't get out of it [the school building]".

Participants also referred to responses in school refusal linked to psychiatric diagnoses such as autism, ADD, anxiety and depression. On the one hand, Sophia referred to the purpose of a diagnosis within the current education system as a "comfort" and "we have to give our children these labels to get them through the educational system". However, Anna questioned whether a diagnosis truly represented her daughter's difficulties and her life circumstances: "the stuff she has been through has been very very difficult. I don't think that she has a diagnosis of something wrong with her. I just think that she is who she is".

Further, Enya referred to the discomfort felt by her daughter in being diagnosed as autistic and that "she didn't really want to hang out in the resource room with all the other kids who were autistic because she didn't really identify with them". Both Enya and her daughter felt that: "sometimes we are both questioning whether this is an accurate diagnosis, because was it just circumstantial, and would she have been okay if she hadn't been bullied?".

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Both Anna and Enya felt that a diagnosis did not provide adequate explanations about the causes of their daughter's difficulties or alleviate distress in their day-to-day experiences. These statements question the validity and need for a diagnosis, calling attention to the underlying difficulties of the diagnostic approach.

7.4.2 Surviving Adversities in the Home and School Environment

Participants described adversities or traumatic events that showed to have an impact on young people's experiences of emotional distress. For example, Sophia recalled the effects of conflictual family relations within the home environment: "My home wasn't a happy home. His [husband] behaviour inside our home was appalling… I had to go through the whole court system...so that definitely has had [an] effect". Anna, similarly, reflected on the effects of a serious incident of domestic violence in the home resulting in court proceedings: "She [daughter] fell apart at the time of the court case […] her whole world fell apart…".

Further, Enya revealed traumatic incidents of bullying in her daughter's primary school years resulting in early suicidal thoughts:

> I felt she was isolated by her teachers and by her peers and eventually when they did a full investigation, they found that loads of kids admitted to bullying her and said that other kids bullied her… and she started having suicidal [thoughts], like talking about suicide, this was about the age of ten or eleven and then we went to [Name of Clinic] (Enya)

Talking further on this issue, Enya described the long term effects of bullying resulting in low "confidence" and low self-esteem: "…over the years then gradually it [self-esteem] just got ground away to nothing and she just was a shell of a person really". Martha, similarly, described the effects of bullying on the young person whilst travelling on the school bus

"where people were refusing to sit beside her, so you would have three of them sitting in a seat for two and leaving her sit on her own [making] snide comments". As a result, Martha described her daughter as feeling socially isolated, lonely and unsafe.

Other participants described the effects of moving from the family's country of origin to Ireland and the young person's feelings of loss in grieving for their former life experiences: "She was grieving for the life she had lost and had to come to terms with - that's gone, that's it". Barbara also described the difficulties following the death of a grandmother and the young person's fear and worry in returning to school: "One day everything was great and the next day Granny was gone, and I was thinking did he think the same thing could happen to me".

7.5   Parental Challenges in Accessing Support Services

Parents referred to equality differences in accessing support services and resources for the young people when experiencing significant difficulties in emotional distress. Edith, for example, reported on the limited availability of support services in the Irish public healthcare system for young people when experiencing emotional distress. She highlighted issues in referral response times within services and that only in issues relating to severe mental health issues (e.g. suicide attempts and suicidal ideation) would immediate help be given. Edith also emphasised the benefits of having the financial means in her own family to adequately support her daughter in issues relating to emotional distress: "I know for a fact that I wouldn't be where I am, our family wouldn't be where they are and above all [daughter's name] would not be where she is today without being able to literally throw money at it".

In contrast, Anna referred to her difficulties as a single parent in accessing financial support for the care of her daughter after a prolonged period of absence from school: "I had to be at home with her because it is just me and her" and "I realised I can't live on my income

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here". For Anna, the importance of accessing a social welfare payment (e.g. Carer's Allowance) was one way of supporting her daughter: "I was studying with the intent to get a job but I had to leave it because my daughter was just [at home] and things were upside down [home life was difficult] […]".

In addition to accessing services, participants also referred to difficulties in communication with education and healthcare services when seeking support for the young person and school refusal. For example, Enya described difficulty in communication with the school: "I'd asked for few things to change, [such as] changing a certain class [student group] and they just kind of stopped [communicating]". Enya also highlighted that she felt "intimidated" and judged in her communications with school services: "I felt like they looked down on me and didn't really respect me very much and just saw that I was doing something wrong".

The findings of this study also suggest that whilst there was support services available for families and young people experiencing school refusal, it would seem that there was an absence of compassion in understanding their plight. Sophia, for example, referred to a meeting with a healthcare professional in which she and her daughter felt dismissed and judged: "I still [remember], she turned around and said there's nothing wrong with her [young person], she is just hard work and I thought - oh my god [feeling shocked]". Sophia, therefore, did not feel validated or understood in her communications with the professional services. This was also evident in Barbara's account of attending a meeting with healthcare services:

Now at this stage it [school refusal] had gone on for [a long time], it was so bad. I remember down in CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health services] in an interview [meeting] I was crying and she was saying to me that she felt I needed to

deal with my issues and I felt the only issues I have here - are what's going on. Then they were sending us off for family therapy… (Barbara)

Feeling judged and emotionally overwhelmed when communicating with services was a common experience among participants and their families.

7.6   The Impact of Academic Demands on Families and Young people

Participants referred to the pressure and strain of academic demands on the young person that was evident in completing tasks in homework and achieving high examination grades:

She [young person] was spending three or four hours every night desperately trying to get it all done perfectly and she [was] getting more and more stressed and of course probably getting less and less efficient as time was going by … So, in the end she was getting four A's and four B's in her Junior Cert[ificate] …but completely overachieving.   Not healthy (Evelyn)

Talking further on this issue, Evelyn expressed her concerns for her daughter's mental health whilst attending school: "I don't care if she never goes to college, I don't care what she does academically, but I want her to be happier than what she was those three months". In addition, Anna felt that her daughter may have been taking her academic work too "seriously" and that "having so many classes on top of each other probably in hindsight, was too much for her as well, because in every class she would be taking every bit of work seriously". Kirsten also referred to the added "pressure" and "stressful" experience of possible legal consequences relating to school non-attendance: "they [Tusla] give me a [legal] notice that she had to be in everyday [and] they would bring further action if she missed a day out and she couldn't miss a day without a doctor's note".

Donal further questioned the pressure of performance and examinations in the current education system and summarises it as follows: "You [the student] are going to do this number [to sit examinations] and you are going to get the high points and your choice of course will be determined by your points rather than by your interests. That is mad". Equally, Evelyn referred to the pressure of "being in a system that doesn't suit you" whereby "you have to put a lot of effort in, you are working your body [and] mind too hard because you are actually not doing the thing that you are really meant to do"; and Enid further questioned "how does one meet the needs of young people that are not feeling safe, secure or struggle in this environment?".

Participants also highlighted the importance of positive relations between teacher and student, viewed as crucial when working through issues surrounding school refusal: "even though maths isn't her favourite subject, her teacher decided to take an interest and that was a significant relational thing" (Donal). Talking further on this issue, Donal highlighted the importance of choice and freedom within the school environment: "she is a person in her own right who has power and control over her own life and should be respected; and my job is not to change the teacher, my job is to teach her [the young person] to respect herself".

Whilst most participants expressed positive sentiments in supporting their children in their education, a sense of failure, guilt and responsibility was also evident in participants' narratives. Evelyn, for example, felt that she was "bucking the system" by giving permission to her daughter to not return to school and that "it is not fair, she cannot carry that responsibility". This view was also expressed by Enya who felt a "stigma" and pressure to ensure her daughter sat the Leaving Certificate examination: "…now I don't care, but at first, it was very hard, there was that stigma in my head I just thought - oh, if I can just get her through the Leaving Cert[ificate] everything will be okay".

Talking further on this issue, Enya described this experience as a long term 'battle' in keeping her daughter in school and that she "should have just allowed her to leave school earlier". Enya also reflected on the effects of stigmatisation and feelings of guilt and "being judged" in supporting her daughter to not return to school to complete her Leaving Certificate:

> It pretty much destroyed both of our lives for a long time and in hindsight I have so much guilt for making her go in and putting her in that environment, repeatedly. As a parent, it just feels like I don't understand why I did that, and I think there is a lot of stigma maybe around not being in education and even at supporting her to leave school and I can tell that I am still being judged for my decision to support her with that… (Enya)

Sophia similarly expressed feelings of failure when her daughter was not attending school: "It's terrible because part of it is [that] you feel you have failed as a parent as well because your child isn't 'normal'". Martha equally commented on feeling isolated as a parent in coping with the difficulties of school refusal: "...you do feel like you're the only person who [has] ever come against this".

7.7   Coping with School Refusal: Prospects for the Future

Many participants recognised their children's strengths in coping with difficulties relating to school refusal. For example, participants described their son/daughter's as being of "strong character", "curious", "astute", "headstrong", having "a sense of right and wrong", "spirited" and "active".

Further, participants noted young people's resilience and resourcefulness in pursuing goals of personal interest and passion: "I'd say she is more active in an extroverted way. Horses is her main interest. So, she works out in the stable all day long, teaches, she is an

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instructor. She has been for a couple of years" (Donal). Enid also referred to the young

person's passion and creativity in music and dance:

> She plays [instruments] a lot. She plays piano keyboard, guitar base, ukulele;
> anything she puts her hand to, she seems to be able to play. […] She loves doing
> anything creative and dancing and singing and she is very passionate about things
> (Enid).

Enid described the young person as being inquisitive and an avid reader of books: "She

thinks so wide, she is questioning everything. […] She would read everything she can get her

hands on".

Talking further on this issue, participants reported on their experiences of exploring

alternative pathways with young people and their learning. For example, a number of

participants referred to the HEN as a supportive network for young people and families: "I

found them amazing... they were so supportive […] and it made you feel that you weren't this

complete [failure], that as a parent that you weren't failing because your child had refused to

go to school (Martha)". Similarly, Anna reported on opportunities in alternative UK courses

such as the IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) and GCSE's

(General Certificate of Secondary Education) made available through the HEN. Other young

people pursued courses such as the PLC (Post Leaving Certificate) course with the intention

of continuing their learning to third level education: "From the PLC [Post Leaving Certificate

Course] she can get on to either Art or Arts which is what she is looking at (Evelyn)".

Participants also noted the positive effects of pursuing alternative routes in education:

"Just seeing her build up her confidence has been amazing especially over this last year, […]

she has got more friends now than she has ever had and she's just doing great" (Enya).

7.8   Summary and Initial Discussion

The aim of this study was to address a gap within the school refusal literature by exploring perspectives and experiences of parents. Whilst the narratives in study 3 demonstrate similar issues to those identified in Study 1 and Study 2, there are differences in parent's experiences of school refusal, and this will be explored further in Chapter 9.

In this study, key themes to emerge from the analysis were emotional distress that showed to be challenging for young people and their families, the effect of adverse or traumatic events on young people's experiences of emotional distress and difficulties in attending school, and issues of inequality in parent's experiences of accessing support services in healthcare and education. Added pressure and strain was also felt by parents in coping with the demands of school attendance, student performance and examinations. This resulted in difficult relations between parents/young people and healthcare/education services. These themes not only highlight the challenges experienced by families and young people in coping with difficulties relating to school refusal, also, the issues of power influences and inequality.

7.9   School Refusal: Emotional Distress and Family Circumstances

The perspectives of parent's in this study gave a snapshot of the young person's distress in their day-to-day experiences of school refusal. Emotional distress showed to be a central issue in the lives of young people (and families) experiencing school refusal. For example, parents observed young people's emotional and somatic symptoms when anticipating their return to school (e.g. physical ill health, exhaustion, anger, rage, fear, panic and suicidal thoughts). This finding also concurs with earlier studies that associate school refusal with negative emotional responses to the school environment (Archer et al., 2003; Carlen et al., 1992; Hansen et al., 1998; Havik et al., 2015; Place et al., 2000).

However, this finding also suggests a need for further exploration of the possible sources of power in child and families life experiences and can serve as a starting point to understanding emotional distress in school refusal. For instance, Anna and Sofia referred to experiences of violence and coercive behaviour in their home. This also resulted in court proceedings, parent separation and divorce. Anna further highlighted the financial difficulties and emotional distress in coping with school attendance difficulties in a single parent family. Barbara highlighted the distress experienced by her son at the death of his grandparent. Edith, similarly, referred to the young person's experiences of loss and distress in moving from their country of origin to Ireland. For other participants, the school environment showed to be a source of distress and exacerbate difficulties in school refusal. For example, bullying, academic pressure, rigidity of education structures, lack of autonomy was highlighted by a number of participants as key sources of distress in school refusal. (e.g. by Donal, Martha, Enid, Evelyn and Enya). These findings also lend support to research that has highlighted risk factors within the family, home and school environment relating to school refusal (Morgan et al., 2018; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Further, these sources of distress call attention to power imbalances that operate through social structures, organisations and everyday interactions in individual's lives. Experiences of financial difficulties in accessing resources, difficulty in communication and engagement with professional services and the added strain of the potential for prosecution regarding school non-attendance emerged as key issues influencing the personal circumstances of young people and families in this study. The findings showed to highlight the negative operation of interrelated forms of power that serve to exacerbate the threats and personal meanings in people's lives. These issues bring to light ways in which life circumstances can shape young people and family's responses creating further difficulties in engaging with the education system.

7.10 Socioeconomic Disparities and Responses to School Refusal

As indicated above, the experiences of parents in this study identified the effects of socioeconomic disparities in school refusal. Parent's brought to light their difficulty in accessing resources particularly when the young person was at home and experiencing emotional distress. Some parents emphasised the importance of having the financial means and "being able to throw money at it" to support the young person in accessing healthcare services. At the same time, other participants experienced limited availability of services recognising that "I can't live on my income here" when looking for access to public services and financial resources. This became particularly stressful for parents when the young person was no longer attending school and experiencing significant emotional distress. This finding also accords with research that has examined social and economic factors such as family income, housing, education, employment and social supports affecting families and their experiences of school refusal (Kearney, 2008).

Further, parental challenges in communication and cooperation with school and healthcare services arose as an issue in this study. There was a consensus among parents that support services lacked empathy, knowledge and understanding in working with families and issues relating to school refusal. These responses to school refusal showed to exist across the different social class divides and resulted in strained relations between parents, young people and professionals. Further, this finding is consistent with previous research which links negative family experiences with school and community health services in working through issues in school refusal. These included family's experiences of feeling disbelieved in their plight of coping with school refusal, inconsistent responses from services, added pressure to resume full time education for the young person and feelings of accountability and blame when communicating with services and school refusal (Baker & Bishop; 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Havik et al., 2014).

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Similarly, the parents in this study expressed feelings of dismissal, disbelieved, guilt and blame in their exchanges with professionals and services relating to school refusal. This finding not only draws attention to the importance of ways in which school refusal is understood and responded to within services, but also indicates a need to include parents in discussions and debates on issues pertaining to school refusal. Such inclusion in the current study has shown to be extremely valuable in facilitating in-depth understanding of the responses to school refusal, a point that will be returned to in Chapter 9.

7.11 The Role of School Factors in School Refusal

A review of the literature confirms that school related factors are often understated as having a contributing role in school non-attendance issues (Lauchlan, 2003; Thambirajah et al., 2008). This may be owing to the absence of schools and the perspectives of education professionals (and parents) in the clinical and medical fields of research (Lauchlan, 2003). Therefore, most studies in the field of school refusal have focused on identifying precipitating and perpetuating risk factors as well as strategies that can promote positive school attendance (Lauchlan, 2003; Malcolm et al., 2003; Pelligrini, 2007).

Comparatively, the findings of this study revealed a range of issues relating to young people's experiences of school refusal within their schools. Difficulties in academic demands associated with schoolwork and completion of examinations (e.g. Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate), difficult peer relations, difficult student-teacher relations (e.g. non-engaging) and school structures (e.g. noisy classrooms, busy corridors, large numbers of students and pressure to perform in the classroom) were common issues experienced by young people in their schools. Although existing research on school related factors is limited, this finding supports reviews within the literature that associate difficulty coping with academic demands, bullying, difficult peer relations, strict codes of discipline, school size,

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unpredictability in school structures and school day, as key contributing factors influencing school refusal (Lauchlan, 2003; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

In addition, parent's narratives revealed underlying pressure of potential legal consequences involving "further action" if the young person did not return to the school environment. Parent's expressed feeling "intimidated", "judged" and stigmatised in their efforts to ensure the young person returned to the school environment and completed their examinations in second-level education. This finding reflects an emphasis on performance and achievement that is placing excessive pressure on parents and students, as well as teachers to achieve high grades and points within the current education system (Biesta, 2010, 2015, 2017). This also highlights a need to engage with questions relating to the purpose of education, the ways in which education is effective and who benefits most from the system as it currently operates? (Biesta, 2009). These questions draw attention to the profound impact that the functions of education have on educational policy, and practices of schools and teachers, students and parents.

7.12 Conclusion

Historically research investigating the factors associated with school refusal have focused on family and young people's difficulties as central to understanding and responding to issues in school refusal. This chapter set out to explore the experiences and viewpoints of parents in relation to young people and school refusal in second-level schools. The parents' stories reflect their children's life circumstances in the home and school environments and highlight the importance of considering the role of school factors, adverse life experiences and the negative effects of power influences and social context.

Having considered the key issues highlighted in parents' experiences and viewpoints of school refusal, I will now present and discuss key findings generated from the narrative arts-based sessions with five young people and their experiences of school refusal.

8   Study 4: Young People's Experiences of School Refusal

This thesis has focused on the perspectives and experiences of education professionals and parents of young people in relation to issues and challenges in school refusal. I explore key challenges raised by young people within the home and school environment and make visible the need to better understand young people's inner experiences as well as to consider a different approach in moving towards minimising young people's distress.

8.1   Purpose and Research Questions

A great deal of the existing research in this area has relied heavily on a quantitative tradition, based on clinic samples of young people and their families, and influenced by a medical model approach in understanding and responding to young people's difficulties in attending school. Whilst it has been noted in the literature that school refusal is essentially rooted in emotional distress, little research attention has been given to the beliefs, feelings and thoughts of young people's experiences, and particularly, in the school environment. Thus, little emphasis has been given to the voices of young people and the influence of broader distal elements (e.g. socio-cultural, political and educational influences) relating to their experiences of school refusal.

The main purpose of this research is to explore the perspectives of education professionals, parents and young people in issues relating to school refusal and to establish how these narratives inform current understanding and responses in school refusal. The aim of the present study, therefore, is to explore the viewpoints and firsthand experiences of young people using a visual arts-based approach. It seeks to develop an understanding of the challenges that young people experience in the home and school environments, and highlight alternative ways to interpret and respond to issues relating to school refusal.

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The research questions in this study sought to address issues relating to the missing voices of young people in their experiences of school refusal and the negative impact of the school and home environment in experiences relating to emotional distress. Therefore, the research questions adopted for this study are:

1. What are the young person's experiences of school refusal?

2. How do family relationships and life circumstances affect the young person's experiences of school refusal?

3. What are the key challenges within the school environment and how do these effect young people's experiences in education?

8.2   Research Methods

A qualitative approach using an arts-based method was employed in this study to gain an in depth understanding of young people's experiences and perspectives of school refusal. The following sub-sections outlines the information of the sample of participants, the procedure and ethical considerations in working with young people in this research project.

8.2.1   *Participants and Sampling*

A purposive sample of young people were asked to take part in the qualitative sessions of this research. Participants were young people aged between 11 – 19 years who had experience of difficulties in attendance at a second-level school in Ireland for at least one school term; or had experienced difficulties in the past and had returned to school. This also included young people receiving support from an education service or registered for a home education service due to non-attendance. In addition, this study specified the inclusion of young people who were willing to take part in arts-based activities.

Potential participants were asked to take part in this study by professionals in education and psychology services (i.e. Tusla and CAMHS), from an organisation for parents of young people who were not in attendance of a second-level school (i.e. HEN) and from word-of-mouth (i.e. conference presentations). A final five young people (5 female) agreed to take part in two narrative arts-based sessions. Table 8.1 displays the background information of all participants who took part in this study. Additionally, three participants were from a lower income socioeconomic background and the remaining two were from a higher income socioeconomic background.

All participation was voluntary and participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the research project. Personal details have been removed and pseudonyms have been allocated to each participant to protect their identity.

Table 8.1

Participant Background Information

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Family Structure	Level of Education	Geographical Location: by Region in Ireland
1. Rose	17	White Irish	Two Parent	Junior Certificate	South West
2. Lauryn	19	White Irish	Single parent	Junior Certificate PLC (Post Leaving Certificate Course)	East
3. Nicole	15	White Irish	Single parent	Junior Certificate	North
4. Catherine	18	White Irish	Single Parent	Leaving Certificate	North
5. Lucy	16	White Irish	Single parent	2nd year: Second - Level Education	North-West

8.2.2 *Procedure*

Young people who had expressed a willingness to take part in this study were invited to participate in two narrative arts-based sessions and their parents (i.e. for young people under 18 years of age) were contacted by phone or email. Parents and young people were provided with an information sheet, consent form and assent form outlining the nature of the research project and what the young person's participation would entail (see Appendix N and Appendix O).

Session 1 involved an initial introduction of the research project, opportunities for young people to ask questions and confirmation of consent to participate (parental consent having been already obtained). The introduction of a visual art stimuli (i.e. self-portrait) and the purpose of this technique and what it would entail was explained. This activity took between 15 and 20 minutes and participants were also asked to discuss their drawing. In session 2, two visual elicitation methods were introduced (i.e. the relational map and two timelines) and each activity took 15 – 20 minutes. Participants were then asked to discuss their drawings after each piece was completed. Previous to these sessions, a pilot session (n=2) was run in order to highlight any issues that may arise.

8.2.3 *Approach to Data Analysis*

The qualitative data in this study included five interviews with young people experiencing school refusal or who had experienced school refusal in the past. In addition, three visual methods were employed: an arts-based projective technique comprising of the self-portrait and two visual elicitation methods known as a relational map and timeline (i.e. focusing on the present and future). These methods offer an alternative to the current use of language-based methods in qualitative research (Gauntlett, 2007). The use of drawing, therefore, allows participants time to reflect and respond when exploring issues (Gauntlett,

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2007) and create opportunities to contribute to issues that are of a sensitive nature (Bagnoli, 2009; Crilly et al., 2006).

Discussions surrounding the visual methods were transcribed and analysed using a hybrid approach (Swain, 2018). As previously explained, themes and patterns were initially identified within the data using an inductive or 'bottom up' thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), adopted by Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytic method and a 'top down' theoretical process that produced a priori codes as outlined by Crabtree & Miller (1999). The stages of this coding process can also be viewed in Table 6.2.

Table 8.2 presents an overview of the themes derived from the inductive approach to thematic analysis. Themes that emerged from young people's viewpoints and experiences of school refusal were as follows: *Experiences and Responses to Emotional Distress, Effects of Life Circumstances on School Refusal, School Characteristics and Constraints of Academic Pressure* and *Alternative Education Opportunities.*

Table 8.2

Data-Driven Codes from Inductive Analysis

A Posteriori Codes (Data-Driven Codes)	Description
Experiences and Responses to Emotional Distress - Emotional Experiences - Social Experiences - Diagnoses - Medication	The young person's experiences of emotional distress in the school environment including difficult social relationships, student-teacher relations and the impact of receiving a diagnosis and medication.
Effects of Life Circumstances on School Refusal - Adversity - Bullying - Family Relations	Experiences of childhood adversities – parental separation, difficult family relations, young carer role within the family, bereavement and incidents of bullying in primary and second-level school.

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Table 8.2 (continued)

School Characteristics and Constraints of Academic Pressure - School structures/characteristics - Academic Pressure	The effects of school structures and characteristics (e.g. physical school environment) and academic demands (e.g. classwork, examinations and homework) on the young person's education experiences.
Alternative Education Opportunities - Future Goals - Values and Beliefs	Educational opportunities that are available to the young person outside the mainstream school setting. Interests and motivation relating to the young person's future goals, values and beliefs that influence how they are in their world and how they wish to live their life.

Following the inductive approach to thematic analysis, Table 8.3 presents an overview of the a priori template of codes that were identified in the deductive analytic process of this study. These themes were derived from the main theoretical frameworks as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Table 8.3

Codes Developed A Priori from the Template of Codes

A priori	Description
Power Influences	Negative influences of power that operate through organisations, institutions and practices (biological/embodied, coercive, legal, economic/material, ideological & interpersonal power).
Threat	Threats that the negative operation of power may pose to a person or the group and with reference to emotional distress.
Meaning	Meanings are not simply viewed as 'individual'. They are produced within social and cultural discourses, memories, bodily responses, environments and the unequal distribution of resources.

Table 8.3 (continued)

Common Threat Response	Linking the negative power influences, core threats and meaning produces the threat responses that a person, group or family draw upon to ensure emotional, physical, relational and social survival. (E.g. preparing to fight, flight flee, emotional overwhelm, hypervigilance, denial, avoidance, isolation, self-blame, injustice/unfairness, overwork, perfectionism, restricting eating, overuse of alcohol etc.).
Education	Examination of the physical and exploitive elements of domination underlying oppressive structures, processes and practices (Freire, 1970). The banking model of education emphasises the individual as disconnected from their world and exist as objects of the oppressor's actions rather than subjects of their own actions. The person becomes a 'container' to be filled and in an environment without dialogue or freedom (Freire, 1970).
Individualisation	A trend in education towards a 'learning economy' resulting in a more individualistic understanding of lifelong learning; the goal of qualifications, the external pressures of exam performance and the responsibility of finding alternative routes in education (Biesta, 2006).
Domains of Education	Exploring young people's experiences relating to the functions of education: 1) qualification, 2) socialisation and 3) subjectification and how this may relate to the question of the purpose of education (Biesta, 2006).

8.2.4   Ethical Issues

To ensure the ethical conduct of this study, young people were contacted by key agency professionals or their parent/guardian and asked if they wished to take part in this study. In the first session, I allotted time to introduce the study and read the contents of the information sheet with the young person, allowing for open discussion and questions regarding consent to participate.

Consideration was also given to the possibility that a young person's parent may also be interviewed at a separate stage of the project. For example, on one occasion, I interviewed a parent of a young person in Study 3 of this project. I emphasised in the session briefing with the young person, that no information would be passed at any stage of the research process to parents, teachers or outside agencies. However, I also communicated that complete confidentiality could not be guaranteed as per Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) and in particular, in the event of abuse or harm being reported.

Consideration was also given to potential power dynamics in that young people may have already had contact with a number of school and outside agencies (i.e. principals, teachers, educational welfare officer's, school completion officer's, psychology and counselling services). Therefore, there was the possibility that I would be viewed as having a professional role of an education or health professional (i.e. teacher, psychologist or counsellor) in this regard. Therefore, I clarified my role as the main researcher in this project by providing a description of my role within the research project.

8.2.5   Data Protection

All discussions relating to the young person's drawings (self-portrait, relational map and timelines) within the sessions were recorded using a voice recorder and iPhone. All details relating to data protection, management and storage are located in Study 2 of this research project.

8.2.6   Safeguarding Participants

The role of the researcher and ethical commitment to protecting the wellbeing and dignity of all research participants played an integral part of this research process. Within this research project young people showed to have difficult life experiences such as issues in

emotional and psychological distress, childhood adversity and marginalisation. In considering these ethical issues, the research methods and arts-based activities had been specifically chosen to ensure that no unnecessary burden would be placed upon the young person taking part in this project. This method of research therefore provided a participatory and open forum for the young person as a research participant, whereby, they could contribute as much or as little as they felt most appropriate and to have the opportunity to express their own insights on what they considered important.

Further, Bagnoli (2004) cautions that whilst there is a potential for a trusting relationship between the researcher and the participant in this method of research, it can also influence people disclosing much more information than what they had anticipated and particularly when this information is of a sensitive nature. When the interview has ended, a person may be left with the feeling of emotional vulnerability because of the potential power they may have given over to the researcher (Bagnoli, 2004). For example, on one occasion, a parent had contacted me and expressed concern in a similar light and that the young person felt that she may have said too much. Therefore, I had ensured that all personal identifiers and confidential information would be removed in the research process and particularly, in the arts-based drawings (names, locations, school names, family and friends' names) and within the accompanying quotations.

Using an arts-based method can also provide the young person with the opportunity for a more "holistic narration of self" and one that can help to overcome silences that are otherwise too difficult to put into words (Bagnoli, 2009, p.566). However, it was also important to be vigilant and sensitive to the needs of each participant and to use tact and wisdom to avoid any unnecessary stress or emotional vulnerability. For example, on one occasion, the young person clearly showed distress and discomfort at the initial stage of drawings in the sessions. I had observed that the young person's body language was

uncomfortable, and I responded with non-judgement and sensitivity, offering opportunities to take breaks throughout the session.

As the main researcher, I had compiled a list of the relevant sources and contact information of services for young people should they need further support to discuss any issues arising from the research process. For example, in the young person's local area, I had compiled contact numbers of counselling services (at low cost) within the local resource centres. To further safeguard these issues, designated meetings with the project supervisor and myself were arranged to discuss emerging ethical issues throughout the research process. I also used a reflective approach by keeping a daily journal as part of my research diary throughout the research process. Participants were also given the opportunity to be interviewed in their own home or in a public setting (local resource centre). Subsequently, I met with two young people in their own homes and three young people in their local resource centre.

8.3   Findings

In the analysis that follows, key themes have been identified relating to the perspectives and experiences of five young people on issues relating to school refusal. The recording and listening to the voices of young people on the topic of school refusal brought to light fundamental issues relating to the negative impact of school refusal and these included emotional and psychological distress, the role of family and child risk factors (e.g. childhood adversity and bullying), the role of the school environment (e.g. relationships, school structures, academic pressure and performativity) and issues in marginalisation and exclusion.

Themes that emerged in the current study included the young person's experiences of emotional distress and physical reactions when in the school environment and the impact of

diagnosis and prescribed medication within the school environment; the effects of life circumstances and adversity or traumatic events within the home and school environments; the distressing impact of academic performance relating to examinations and schoolwork and the importance of building skills and abilities outside the school environment for future goals in education. The themes that emerged from this data are illustrated using quotations from interviews and visual diagrams from the narrative arts-based methods in the following section.

8.4   Experiences and Responses to Emotional Distress

In all narratives, young people described a range of emotional and troubling difficulties relating to school refusal such as physical ill health, exhaustion, overeating, isolation, loneliness, feeling unsafe, avoidance, distrust of others, self-blame, emotional distance, perfectionism, powerlessness, self-injury, suicidal thinking, anger, rage, and injustice. These experiences were related to the school and home environments.

When attending school, many participants described heightened experiences in emotional distress. Rose, for example, referred to having difficult social relationships with her peers and feeling "isolated and lonely" when in the school environment. Lauryn, similarly, described feeling "trapped" and unsafe resulting in distance with her peers: "I felt like I couldn't escape [from school], and I didn't have a good time […] [and] even though I had friends that I liked and wanted to talk to, I just didn't want to be around people.".

In addition, participants referred to emotional difficulties related to anxiety and panic attacks in the school environment. Nicole, for example, referred to her efforts in attending school as: "I try every day and eventually I'm like I cannot go in. It's my anxiety, cause I get panic attacks, I have to go to the [school] bathroom". Similarly, in Catherine's timeline

(Figure 8.5), "panic attacks" were part of events that she experienced throughout her school years.

Participant's also referred to the effects of receiving a psychiatric diagnosis at times of distress. Lucy spoke of feeling anger when diagnosed with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder): "when I was diagnosed, I did go through a period of time where I was angry because I had so many problems in school and throughout my life and I just always felt kind of alienated from everyone else". Whilst Lucy acknowledged the importance of a diagnosis for her sensory and social difficulties, she also felt that there were negative connotations associated with her diagnosis such as being "mentally incapable". In her self-portrait drawing (see Figure 8.6), Lucy referred to a quote "Asperger's is not a fault, it is a variant" and this quote held significant meaning for Lucy in light of the negative language associated with autism (i.e. 'mentally incapable').

Lauryn, similarly, referred to her experiences of diagnosis in ASD and being part of a programme prior to beginning first year at second-level school. Lauryn expressed "regret" and discomfort when placed with peers in an autism support group and felt that the programme created a barrier in making new friends in first year at second-level school. Therefore, it would seem that to be identified as "on the autistic spectrum" exacerbated her difficulties within the school environment.

Participants also described their experiences of receiving medical treatment for their emotional and psychological distress. Catherine, for example, described her experiences of taking prescribed medication: "They put me on tablets for four years and I was like a zombie, and I felt weird because I didn't have no emotions or anything. So, I stopped [taking] them [medication] …". Catherine further commented on the challenges experienced in her decision to discontinue prescribed medicine: "…I stopped [taking the medication], but I am trying to get used to the fact that my social anxiety is still there". Lucy's timeline (see Figure

8.4) also illustrates her difficulties of being prescribed medication for acute emotional distress and showed to cause further issues such as weight gain and low self-esteem:

> I stopped reading for a long time which is a big indicator that there is something wrong with me, … badly wrong. I was struggling really badly with anxiety and there was actually about a month where I wouldn't leave the house. I lay in the bed with my curtains closed all the time and … the psychiatrist put me on medication named Risperidone [antipsychotic medication] and that causes a lot of weight gain which didn't help my self-esteem issues. I feel now looking back on it, I should have been sent to DBT [Dialectical Behaviour Therapy] instead of being put on medication because there is the argument that you needed it, but (sighs)... I don't know. See it is a hard one because I guess I was like suicidal at one point … (Lucy)

Lucy brings to light both the positive and negative aspects of psychiatric medication. Whilst Lucy acknowledged the importance of being prescribed medication to cope with her emotional distress and feeling suicidal, she also queried the long-term use of medication and whether there are other less disabling solutions (such as DBT). For Lucy, having access to services such as DBT was an important step in rebuilding her self-esteem and self-worth:

> …It [Dialectical Behaviour Therapy] changed my life. I became so much happier…I started to realise my worth and like you know just started to develop a self-esteem. I was building it up from scratch because it just didn't exist. At that stage, I had been through so much (Lucy)

8.5   The Adverse Effects of Life Circumstances on School Experiences

Disrupted early attachment relationships were part of the lived experience of most young people in this study. Catherine, for example, had grown up in the home of her

maternal grandmother since eight years of age. Catherine commented: "I left mums at eight

[years of age] and went to granny's house for four years and then when I went there in

primary school and [for] secondary school I went to dads [house]".

Figure 8.1

Catherine's Relational Map
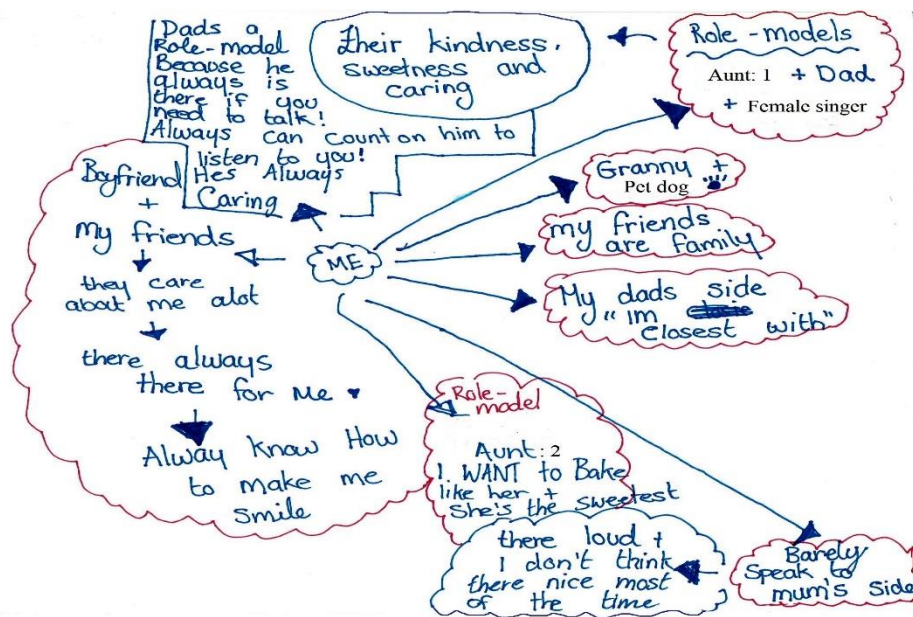
In Catherine's relational map (see Figure 8.1), the people drawn closest to her (i.e. "Me") are

"dad" and "Granny" and her close relatives (i.e. Aunt 1 and Aunt 2) and Catherine

highlighted that "family is a big part of my life" and "so when I started school, dad and

granny were all like, push[ing] me to go [to school] but I didn't want to go".

Lucy's relational map (see Figure 8.2) also brought to light the importance of family

and extended family relations in her life. In this map, "granny" and "granda" appear central

to the drawing with herself and her mother. Lucy referred to growing up with her mother and

her maternal grandparents, as her mother was a single parent from a young age. Lucy

commented on the effects of her parent's separation on her school experiences:

Lucy: yeah, and then when I was around seven [years of age], my mum and dad

separated and then my [Holy] communion [religious tradition] was when I was eight,

so that is kind of the memory of events.

RD: and what was your experience of school at that time?

Lucy: …apparently, I withdrew into myself.

Figure 8.2

Lucy's Relational Map
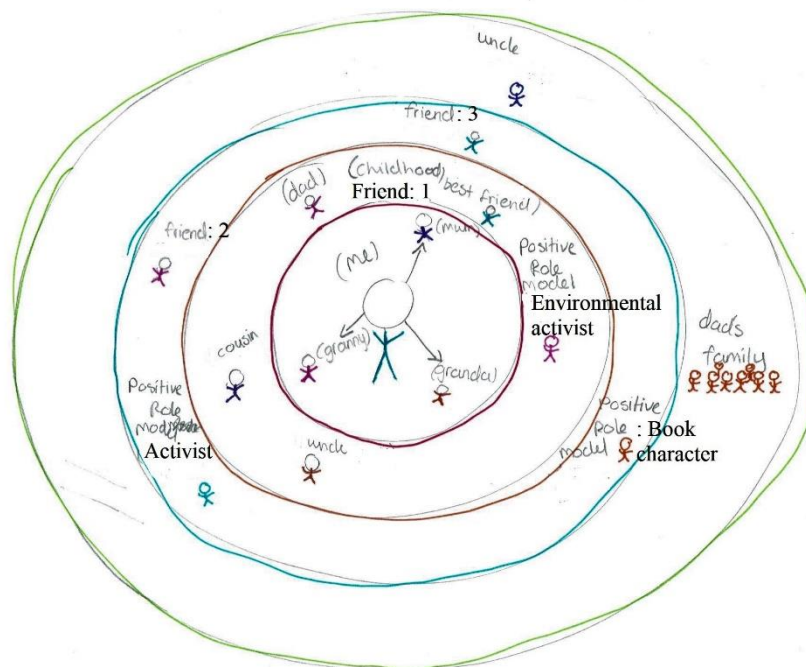
Nicole also recalled growing up with her mother and brother after her parents had separated

at five years of age. Nicole, equally referred to the importance of family and relatives in her

drawing of the relational map (see Figure 8.3).

Figure 8.3

Nicole's Relational Map

In addition, participants referred to other adverse life experiences such as having young carer responsibilities within the home. Nicole, for example, reflected on her role as a young carer following her parent's separation: "I kind of grew up really fast and just cooking and cleaning, [I] matured". Nicole also recalled working in her first job (outdoors) at the age of eight years during her school holidays and mid-term breaks: "It was tough, cause you were always on your feet".

Participants also commented on life circumstances that involved moving to a new home. Rose, for example, referred to moving to a new home and school as an unsettling experience: "I came from [City name] when I was six [years]. I moved to a new house which was a big thing in my life". Lauryn also referred to the illness of a family member that

affected her difficulties at school "… [I was] sad, even sadder for the whole year and I like stopped really, I kind of stopped doing all the essays and stuff".

Further, all participants in this study described experiences of bullying in their school years. These narratives revealed increased levels of fear, mistrust and young people feeling discriminated against within the school environment. Lucy's timeline (see Figure 8.4) brought to light experiences of her most important moments and biographical events in her life and references to bullying and deterioration of her "mental health" shows to dominate these events: "… all the years I was at school, I can remember being bullied as far back as when I was seven or eight [years]".

Figure 8.4

Lucy's Timeline
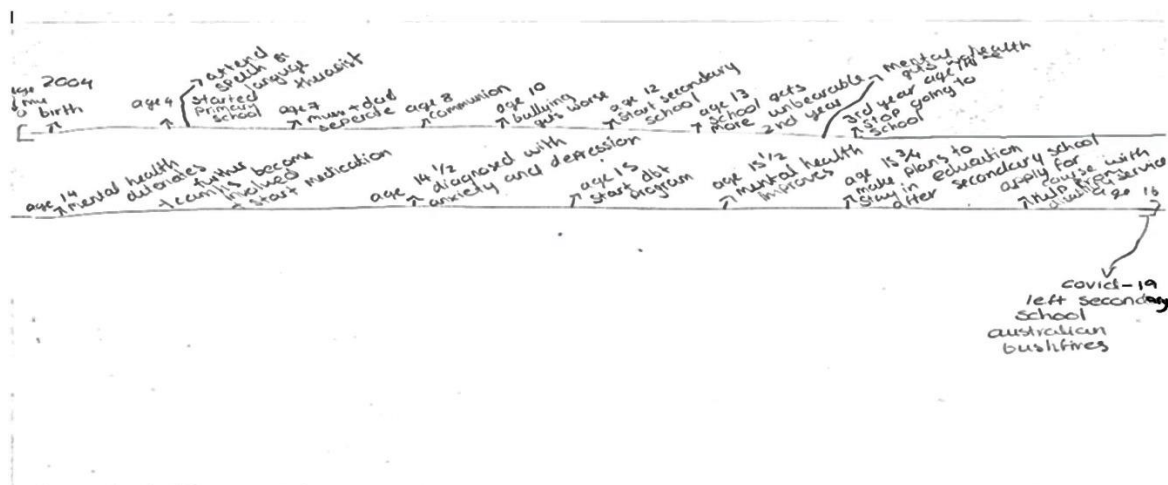
Lucy recalled experiences of "verbal insults" within the school classroom: "[…] he [a student] leaned forward and he called me a retard. [The comment was] just whispered to me, but loud enough for the whole class to hear. The teacher did not hear it". In addition, she described her everyday experiences as feeling "intimidation" and fear within the school environment. As stated in Lucy's timeline, her "mental health gets worse" and in third year

"…[I] stop going to school". Lucy's statements, therefore, bring to light the adverse effects of bullying and lack of support in her school environment resulting in increased distress and not returning to school.

Similarly, Catherine's timeline (see Figure 8.5) reflected important milestones and biographical information in her life events. Negative school events such as bullying also showed to dominate her life experiences.

Figure 8.5

Catherine's Timeline
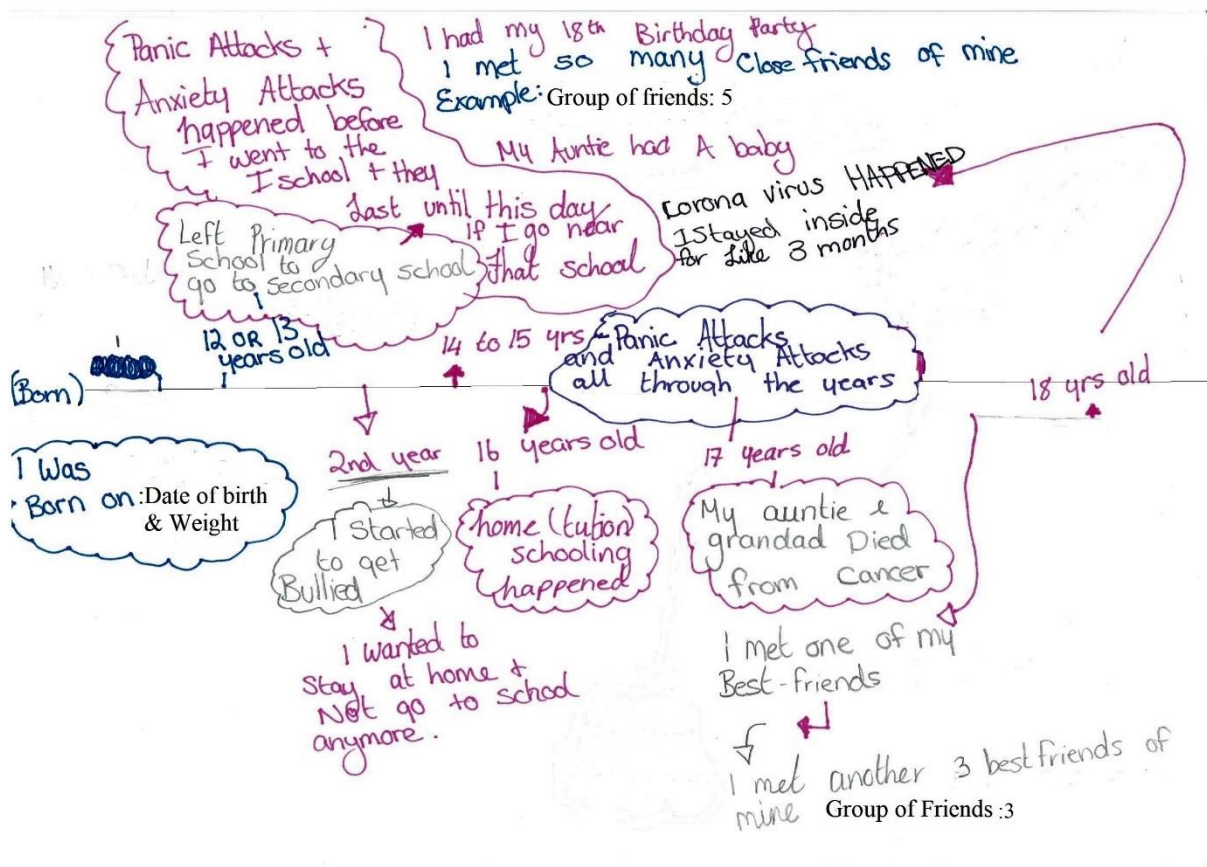
I started to get bullied. […] I wanted to stay at home and not go to school anymore.

[The] panic attacks and anxiety attacks happened before I went to the [second-level]

school, they last until this day if I go near that school (Catherine)

The above statement emphasises the long term effects of school experiences on the young person's distress. Talking further on this issue, Rose questioned whether bullying was related to school structures and the school environment where students feel disgruntled, powerless and having no choice:

> Then people feel powerless and angry because they have no choice and that's when they start picking on one another. […] It's as if you don't have a choice about where you are, at least you have a choice about who you bully or who you pick on or what you say or you have to try and be […] (Rose)

> Young people also described going to the school toilets and the school infirmary (i.e. nurses office) as places of safety within the school environment. As Lucy reflected:

> […] I felt safe in the infirmary, and I felt safe when I was left alone in the toilets by myself and [when] there was no one else in the toilets. Other than that, the majority, I'd say about 95% of the time I felt unsafe in school (Lucy)

Catherine similarly highlighted at breaktimes in school, "[I] would lock myself in the [school] bathroom and I would wait until the bell was over and I would walk [out] by myself".

8.6 School Characteristics and the Constraints of Academic Pressure

The physical school environment became a recurrent theme throughout participants narratives in this study. For most participants, the school building was frequently referred to as "grey", "dull", "off-putting" and resembling a "prison" and a "factory". Rose also described the school environment as "controlled" whereby: "... there's a feeling of which there is a very kind of a controlled air to the school. […] It's very sedate. Everyone is the same...". Lucy, similarly, referred to feeling "imprisoned" and that the school environment:

"just wasn't the right environment for me". In her everyday experiences, Lucy noted that "every single morning when I walked into school, I could not wait to get home in the evenings. I couldn't wait to get out of school".

Overall, young people in this study described their education experiences as "pressurising", "tiring", "all too much" and feeling "stressed". Participant's referred to the school practices of homework and state examinations as "just so pressurising and I just hated it" (Nicole). However, Lucy emphasised that staying in education was something that she continued to aspire to: "… but like I knew from the offset, I want to stay in education just not that kind of education".

Lauryn also described her experiences of school practices such as sitting exams, having social difficulties, not feeling confident and finding it difficult to be herself within the school environment: "I couldn't become a confident person in school, so I was just really insecure". Lauryn also referred to schoolwork and homework as a challenging way for her to learn: "[…] I needed help with everything, I felt especially with the essays [that] I just felt like I couldn't [do them]". Subsequently, Lauryn reflected on feeling exhaustion and stress which reinforced her decision to not return to school:

> Cause…by the time I was in fifth year…I was so tired all the time and I don't think I would have been physically able to do the Leaving Cert[ificate]. I think I would have ended up dropping out because I would have been so stressed (Lauryn).

By contrast, Lauryn's decision to not return to school and not complete the Leaving Certificate, resulted in her finding new pathway's in education and instilled motivation: "I ended up actually doing something that was good and helpful […] whereas if I had done sixth year, it would probably have ended up being a wasted year".

Other participants questioned the current education system and referred to the importance of agency and freedom. For example, Rose described her feelings of "boredom", fatigue and being "angry with the system and kind of raging against it". Rose questioned school approaches in that: "being yourself isn't necessarily cherished in schools and I feel that is very important". Rose expressed a need for students to have their "voices heard" and to have "more space" and freedom. By doing so, Rose felt that "people being allowed to learn what they want to learn instead of having the system tell them you have to have all these things perfect" would best improve current approaches in education. Thus, Rose felt that the importance of choice, having a voice and being listened to as important attributes within the school environment: "[…] [So that], I am learning something that actually propels me in the right direction rather than herding me into an economic system that doesn't work".

Rose further referred to the school examination system as an "inaccurate benchmark" and the need for educating young people in a different way:

> To me, it strikes me that it is just an inaccurate benchmark. It gives you a snapshot of how quickly a person can regurgitate what they have learned by heart and that's all. It doesn't show you who they are, what they like doing, what gift they have to give the world, [it] is often [that] some small section of people will have that gift that is asked for by the education system and that's great [for them] (Rose)

8.7   Moving Beyond School Refusal

All participants gave examples of their personal goals and interests that existed in their lives outside the school environment. For example, participants referred to leisure activities such as "horse-riding", "travel", "surfing", "skiing", "music" and playing musical instruments (e.g. piano, guitar, ukulele, tin whistle), "writing", "reading" and spending time with friends and family.

Figure 8.6

Lucy's Self-Portrait
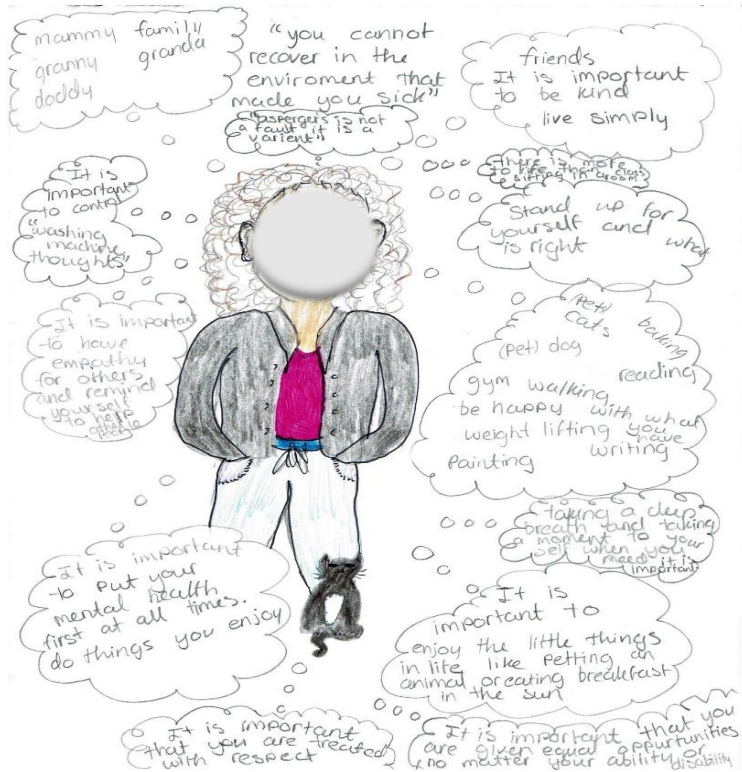
Participant's also expressed their personal values and principles relating to their current life experiences. In her self-portrait (see Figure 8.6), Lucy included important principles that she wishes to live by, such as to "live simply", "be kind", to be able to "stand up for yourself and what is right", to be treated with "respect", "to put your mental health first at all times and do things you enjoy" and the importance of "equal opportunities, no matter your ability or disability". Rose, similarly, referred to positive values and beliefs that she holds such as appreciating beauty, nature and spirituality.

Participant's timeline patterns also revealed expectations of future aspirations including courses and career paths outside the second-level education.

Figure 8.7

Rose's Future Timeline
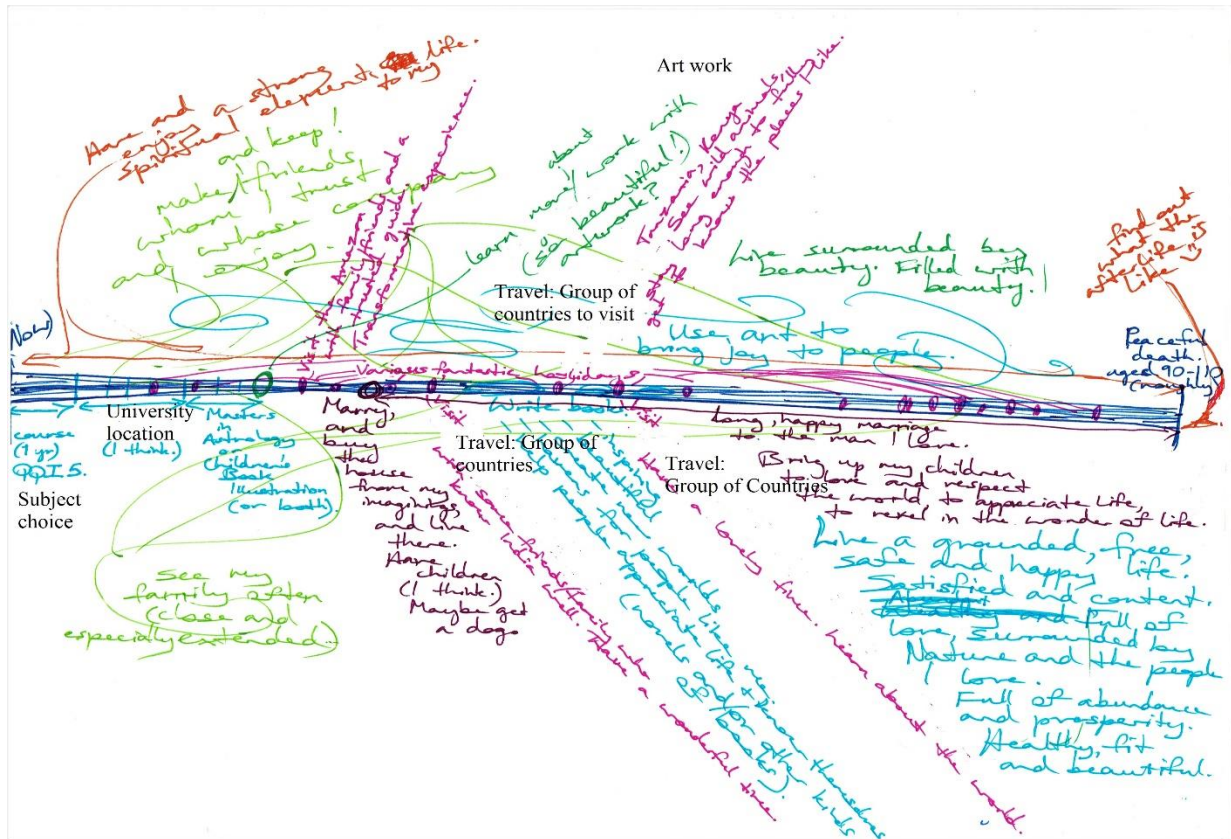
For example, in Rose's timeline (Figure 8.7), she hoped to complete a QQI course in the following year, go to university to complete a degree and Masters, then to travel the world with family and friends, secure a job that reflects her passions and hobbies (e.g. books and art), get married and have children. Lauryn, who had also completed a course in the College of Further Education, had planned to continue her studies into the following year: "Then, after that I want to move to [city name] and maybe do a course there, a [subject name] there and I want to form a band as well. I really want to do that at some point (laughs). I don't know if these are in the exact order, I want to do everything".

Figure 8.8

Lucy's Future Timeline
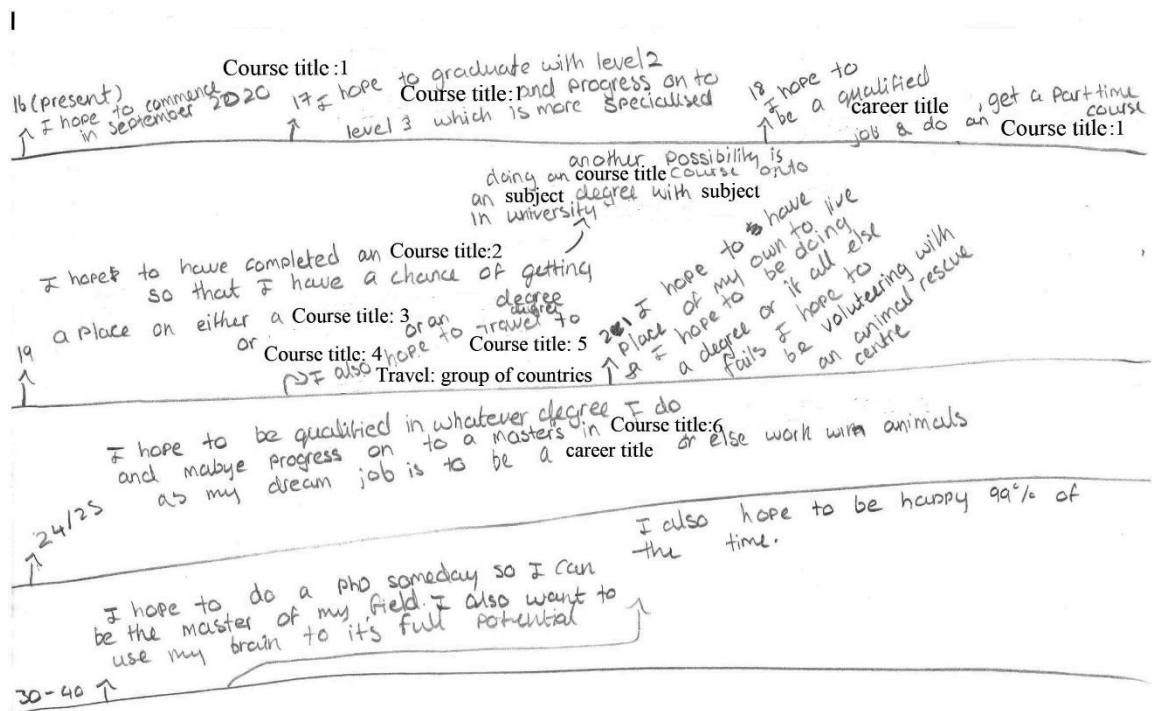
In her future timeline (see Figure 8.8), Lucy also brought to light her plans of

continuing with her education outside second-level school and these included: to begin a

course at the College of Further Education (progress to Level 3), go to University (progress to

Master and PhD level), to live by herself, secure a job that reflects her passions and interests

and work with animals (volunteering). By contrast, Catherine's future timeline has a

different focus than other participants (see Figure 8.9). In this timeline, there is less focus on

educational aspirations (i.e. courses and career choices) and more emphasis on having

children "maybe have a kid or wait till I'm 25" and later, "have my family and go on

holidays". She also includes being independent by learning to drive and "travel around the

world".

Figure 8.9

Catherine's Future Timeline
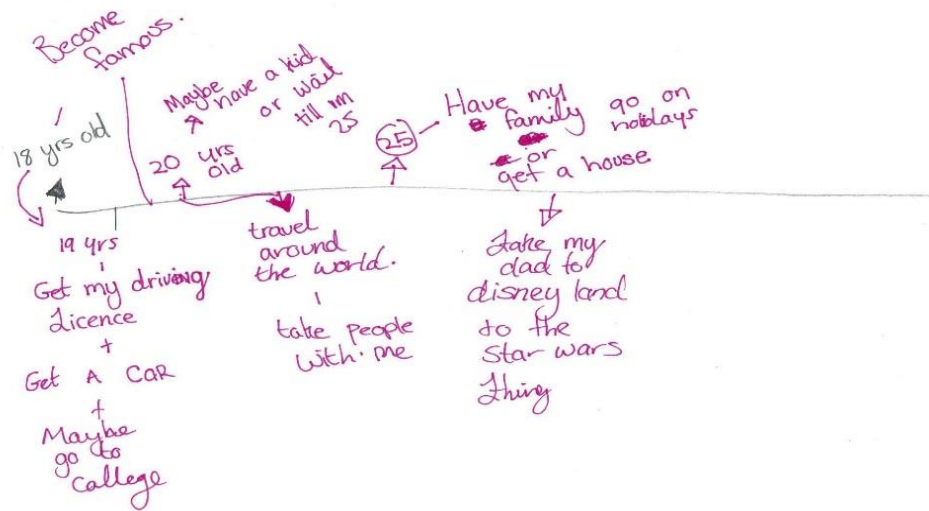
8.8   Summary and Initial Discussion

The themes outlined in Study 4 represent issues that are similar to those identified in the previous studies of this research project. However, the analysis in this study differ in terms of young people's firsthand experiences of school refusal, a point that will be further explored in Chapter 9. Therefore, the findings of this study indicate a range of emotional and troubling difficulties for young people who were experiencing school refusal or had experienced school refusal in the past. This study found that emotional and psychological difficulties were a central issue for young people within the school environment. These difficulties showed to be heightened by negative life experiences such as childhood adversities and bullying within the school environment. The school environment also presented challenges for young people such as difficult relations with peers, teacher-student relations, constraints of school structures and pressure in academic achievement and

performance. Further, young people in this study maintained a positive outlook for their future goals and aspirations in education. Overall, these narratives provide opportunity to explore the unheard voices of young people and help to illuminate the fundamental issues underlying school refusal.

8.9   Emotional Distress and Diagnosis

In this study, some young people referred to their experiences of diagnosis and the long term use of medication in order to cope with their difficulties in school and these included feeling "like a zombie", "weird", having "no emotions", "low self-esteem" and "weight gain". Some young people also described the disabling effects of prescribed medication on their mental health and wellbeing. For instance, they expressed feelings of anger and frustration, noting further deterioration of their "self-esteem" and "self-worth". This draws attention to the negative impact of medication, that can have a disabling and re-traumatising effect on the young person's experiences of distress. Further, young people described their 'symptoms' of emotional distress in relation to an illness and disorder (e.g. social anxiety, autism, depression, suicidal thoughts, panic and fear). As previously noted, this finding not only reflects a medical model approach to emotional distress, but also highlights the more harmful effects of psychiatric diagnosis and medication. These findings draw attention to the problematic assumptions that emphasise emotional distress to be understood as medical type patterns of distress and diagnosable illness (Read & Harper, 2020).

The relationship between school refusal and psychiatric disorders has been widely examined within the literature. Clinic-referred young people, for example, who are refusing to go to school have been categorised into three main groups: 'phobic', 'separation-anxious' and 'anxious/depressed' (King & Bernstein, 2001, p199). Similarly, the finding of this study

is consistent with previous research in that young people have reported diagnoses associated with severe symptoms such as anxiety, social anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, panic attacks, low self-esteem, self-blame, withdrawal, isolation and loneliness. However, this finding draws attention to a medical model construction of school refusal whereby the young person's experiences of emotional distress and behaviour have become part of a language used to define the individual's inner world (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Smail, 2005).

It has also been argued that a diagnosis can be a positive experience for individual's in that it can authenticate the individual's distress, provide relief from self-reproach and guilt as well as opening up access to a network of supports that include agencies and organisations in healthcare (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Nevertheless, having an identity of being 'mentally ill' or "mentally incapable", as highlighted in this study, can also produce a passive response in the individual, diminishing their sense of responsibility and motivation towards their goals in recovery. It can also facilitate a negative stereotyping of the individual as potentially being irresponsible, unpredictable and over dependent (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

In sum, these findings make visible the need for an alternative understanding of the young person's psychological distress in school refusal. As discussed in Chapter 3, the PTM Framework represents a radical move that departs from medical and diagnostic models, arguing for an understanding of the young person's emotional distress and troubled or troubling behaviour based on the negative operation of power and inequalities and the threats that are posed as a result of these power influences. Further, it aids understanding of the role of language and meaning used to conceptualise and shape young people's experiences of emotional distress in school refusal (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; O'Toole & Devenney, 2020).

8.10 Childhood adversity and Life Experiences in School Refusal

In recent years there has been increasing awareness within the literature on the influence of people's life circumstances on their psychological, emotional and behavioural difficulties (WHO, 2000; 2013). The importance, therefore, of social context has become a vital component in understanding emotional and behavioural difficulties.

In this study, young people reported life circumstances that showed to have a major influence on their experiences of school refusal. These included disrupted early attachments effecting family structures, young carer roles, illness and loss of a grandparent, bullying and experiences of alienation and discrimination in the school environment. This finding is in keeping with earlier research that has highlighted poverty, homelessness, violence in the home, bullying, school violence, bereavement, family separation, parental divorce, child neglect, addiction and neighbourhood violence as common experiences in young people and school refusal (Archer et al., 2003; Kearney 2008).

Whilst the findings of this study support the literature relating to risk factors and school refusal, there seems to be lack of attention given to the dimensions of social inequalities and power. Thus, not only do these problems become heightened by the lack of awareness of the social and economic elements, but the personal meaning that also gives shape to the young person's experiences (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). There is a need, therefore, for a different approach that acknowledges the social context (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) and the meanings associated with young people's responses to their environment. The PTM Framework can help to shift understanding of the behavioural outcomes of childhood adversity from one of symptoms, deficits, and dysfunctions relating to family dynamics, to intelligent responses embedded in social, cultural and interpersonal contexts (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). These issues will be further explored in Chapter 9.

8.11 Experiences in Education and School Refusal

Young people's narratives reflected their difficulties at school and the central role of school factors in school refusal. Difficulty in academic demands such as examinations, classwork and homework, school climate and layout as well as difficult peer relations and incidents of bullying were common issues raised by young people in this study. This finding is consistent with previous research that highlights bullying, difficulty coping with academic demands, school size, unpredictability within school structures and school day as having a major influences on young people and school refusal (Havik et al., 2014; Lauchlan, 2003; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Further, this finding accords with Archer and colleagues (2003), in which the transition from primary to second-level school, new groupings in second-level education due to subject choice, incidents of bullying, poor peer relations and academic pressures (i.e. struggling with workload) were also some of the difficulties relating to school refusal highlighted in their study. As indicated previously, these findings draw attention to the fundamental importance of social context and power (i.e. coercive, legal, ideological and interpersonal) in understanding the interaction between environmental factors and school refusal. This is an important consideration in promoting positive and long lasting change for young people and their experiences of school refusal (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Place et al., 2000).

From their perspective, young people in this study referred to the importance of having agency, choice and freedom in their education. There was a consensus among young people that the school environment did not encourage autonomy, opportunities to be heard and to have a say within this setting. Further, young people emphasised that school examinations were an "inaccurate benchmark" in reflecting their true potential. In addition, participants highlighted experiences of pressure and added stress whereby school experiences

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became "all too much". These findings draw attention to the impact of performance and achievement on young people who are already experiencing emotional distress relating to school refusal. This also relates to the discussion in Chapter 6 that brought to light the added strain felt by student, teachers and parents in relation to academic demands and school refusal. It draws attention to the drive of neoliberal policies that have placed added strain on all parties (i.e. students, teachers and parents) where the focus is on the measurement of educational outcomes as the main purpose of education (Biesta, 2010, 2015).

Despite young people's difficult challenges and distress with their schooling, a number of participants continued to hold aspirations towards goals in personal growth and future careers. Young people named a range of leisure activities, the upholding of positive values and goals in their life plans and aspirations such as seeking alternative routes in further and higher education. Whilst the emotional component of school refusal cannot be denied, this finding challenges the current clinical constructions of school refusal behaviour. Rather than focusing on the young person as 'maladaptive' and 'clinically disordered', this finding highlights a need for a more optimistic understanding of young people and their experiences of school refusal (O'Toole and Devenney, 2020; Stroobant & Jones, 2006). Acknowledging the young person as exhibiting agency and resolve in light of their challenges and making effort to withstand social norms and pursue their passions and future goals is an important step in beginning to support young people and their experiences in school refusal (O'Toole and Devenney, 2020).

8.12 Conclusion

The analysis of these findings has revealed a range of issues experienced by young people in the home and school environment effecting their day-to-day difficulties in school attendance. Emotional distress showed to be a central challenge for young people and their

experiences of school refusal. However, links to a medicalised language used to delineate the young person's inner world was also evident. This finding brought to light the potential for negative stereotyping and the negative impact of mental health identities associated with psychiatric diagnoses.

Young people's experiences and viewpoints of education reflected the central role of school factors in school refusal. The added strain of academic demands relating to examinations, increase in homework and schoolwork, as well as a strict school climate and layout emphasise a need for more research-based knowledge about school related factors that may contribute to young people's experiences of school refusal. Despite difficult experiences of emotional distress, young people's drive for personal goals and future aspirations emphasises a need for a more positive and optimistic understanding of school refusal.

In the next Chapter, I will discuss an overview of the key themes that emerged from all four studies outlined in this thesis. I will focus specifically on the prevailing issues raised in these studies and consider ways in which these narratives might inform more appropriate responses to school refusal.

9   General Discussion

The aim of the current research project was to explore the perspectives of educators, parents and young people in issues relating to school refusal in second-level education in Ireland and to examine how their experiences may inform adequate responses to school refusal.

This chapter summarises the implications of these findings, linking them to key themes and perspectives that emerged across all four studies in this project. It also discusses differences in these perspectives as experienced by professionals, parents and young people in coping with the day-to-day effects of school refusal. I consider the broad implications of this research by focusing on the current education system, mental health and wellbeing. I further explore ways to create an education environment that strives to provide new structures and that may serve to benefit rather than harm student experiences. The closing section of this chapter will present the limitations of this research project and recommendations for future research and practices relating to school refusal.

9.1   School Refusal: Themes and Perspectives

Study one explored key issues in school refusal and generated information on the question of prevalence, risk factors, school policies and responses within second-level schools. Respondents indicated school refusal to be a common and pervasive issue that ranged between 1 to 2 % in their schools. School refusal showed to have an increased likelihood among year groups within the Junior and Senior Cycle examinations. Factors relating to the home environment (i.e. family characteristics and difficulties), individual psychological issues (i.e. anxiety, low mood/depression) and the school context were also associated with an increased risk of school refusal behaviour. In response, schools drew on a variety of resources to support

students that included a national School Attendance Strategy. Educator's also raised critical issues in school refusal in terms of greater support and collaboration amongst services, increase of resources for schools and added support for families.

Study 2 further explored the above issues and concerns of educator's and brought to light the complex nature and unique challenges school refusal presents for professionals. Key themes to emerge in this study included emotional and psychological distress as a result of exposure to adverse experiences and trauma experienced by young people and their families, the influences of family's socioeconomic backgrounds in accessing support services and resources, as well as the pressure for academic achievement resulting in conflictual relations between the home and school environments.

The perspectives of parents regarding issues in school refusal was explored in Study 3 of this research project. In particular, some parents expressed their concern for the young person's emotional and psychological distress relating to their exposure to adverse life experiences and trauma within the home and/or school environment. Other parents highlighted the negative impact of academic pressure and performativity on the young person's wellbeing. In their day-to-day challenges in school refusal, parents highlighted their difficulty in communicating with professional's and support services, experiencing unequal access to resources and added strain of ensuring regular school attendance for the young person.

Study 4 offered insight into the internal experiences of young people and their struggle in their experiences of school refusal. The use of arts-based methods in this study provided a space for young people to reflect and engage with key issues and challenges they experienced in school refusal. Therefore, this study highlighted key themes relating to experiences of significant emotional distress associated with childhood adversity and difficult life circumstances for some young people and the impact of academic pressure and performativity for others. This resulted in a general sense of feeling unsafe, isolated and marginalised amongst

young people in their schools and they also highlighted hopes and aspirations regarding future goals, education paths and careers.

9.2   Differences Between Perspectives in School Refusal

Whilst key themes from the analysis of this research highlighted similar issues, there also existed important differences in perspectives of the day-to-day experiences of school refusal. For instance, the viewpoints of education professionals in Study 1 and Study 2 surfaced mainly in issues regarding the management of student's emotional distress that was associated with difficult family dynamics and the influences of socioeconomic backgrounds. This research finding is also consistent with the school refusal literature that links difficult family relations, mental health issues, poverty, lone parent families, issues in child-parent attachment to experiences in school refusal (Pelligrini, 2007).

Educators also identified issues relating to the futile nature of policies and strategies when trying to re-engage the young person into the school system. Schools felt under pressure to maintain contact with families in issues relating to school refusal and teachers expressed feeling "helpless" and "extremely stressed" in ensuring the young person completed course curriculum and were adequately prepared for state examinations (i.e. Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate). Furthermore, this finding draws attention to the considerable pressure experienced by educators, especially their ability to successfully cover curriculum content. This finding dovetails with research relating to elevated levels of stress and burnout amongst the teaching profession (Foley, 2013; Johnson et al., 2005; Kerr et al., 2011).

However, in Study 3, whilst parent's expressed similar feelings of strain and pressure to re-engage the young person in the current school system, their perspectives highlighted different issues and challenges with respect to school refusal. Central to their concerns, were

the effects of adversity and trauma on young people and their families such as conflictual relationships in the home, violence in the home, bereavement, moving home, parental separation and divorce, financial difficulties and incidents of bullying in primary and second-level school. This finding resonates with the complex factors associated with school refusal in the literature such as adverse life experiences (Archer et al., 2003; Kearney, 2008).

Further, concerns regarding the young person's return to the school classroom were described as a long term "battle" and a source of considerable distress and exhaustion for parents and young people. In addition, the threat of legal consequences with respect to school non-attendance evoked added strain to re-engage the young person into the school system. When linking in with school staff and healthcare professionals, some parents expressed a lack of support and understanding of their plight. Overall, these experiences resulted in parent's feeling a sense of guilt, stigmatized and judged in their efforts to cope with the challenges of school refusal, signifying a different set of issues to those experienced by education professionals.

Taken together the findings of this study provide unique insights into family's experiences of school refusal. The perspectives of parent's highlight families and young people's experiences within a community-based setting and therefore, these findings differ to previous research that primarily focus on empirical studies investigating family characteristics of young people and school refusal within clinic populations.

Whilst young people in Study 4 of this research expressed similar issues relating to difficult family circumstances and the impact of academic demands, their viewpoints differed in their firsthand experiences of school refusal. Young people frequently referred to their school experiences as "pressurising", "tiring" and "all too much". They identified issues relating to the constraints of academic pressure and school characteristics, the damaging effects of bullying, issues in neurodiversity, lack of autonomy and exclusion in school life.

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They raised concerns regarding the school classroom as "rowdy", volatile and unsafe. Young people also spoke of their fear for their parents and the imminent threat of legal consequences. Thus, adding to their already existing difficulties in emotional distress and school refusal. These findings are in accord with previous research that has shown issues relating to the daily threat of violence in the school grounds, physical violence amongst peers, loudness in the classroom and witnessing confrontational situations between teachers and other students in young people's experiences of school refusal (Wilkins, 2008). Further, feelings of exhaustion, school burnout, feeling unsafe, fear of teachers, difficult peer relations were also highlighted by recent studies in issues relating to young people and school refusal (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Yoneyama, 2000).

In addition, young people's perspectives evoked a deep sense of wishing to improve their situation and seek a different pathway in education, presenting a contrasting view of the negative stereotypes of this particular group. They expressed personal beliefs and values that related to happiness, wealth, career success and family. Therefore, this finding challenges the misconceptions associated with constructs of young people and school refusal (i.e. as 'maladaptive', 'fragile', 'lazy' and 'unmotivated') (see Chapter 3). These unique aspects illuminate the need for more awareness amongst professionals in issues of school non-attendance and the importance of understanding young people and their life circumstances, a point that will be returned to later in this chapter.

Having discussed key issues and perspectives arising from the analysis of this research, the next section will consider their broader implications relating to senior cycle education, mental health and wellbeing that may be of relevance to responses to school refusal in second-level education in Ireland.

9.3   Challenges to Senior Cycle Education in Ireland

There was a consensus amongst parents, young people and educators that current agendas in education focus on a 'one size fits all' approach to education, in that "we are trying to make everybody fit into the same type of box". In addition, young people spoke of the absence of agency and freedom in their experiences within the current education system. For instance, they highlighted feelings of "anger" and "rage" in the lack of opportunities in personal choice of goals and interests, resulting in feeling pressurised into activities of academic performance and achievement. Young people also questioned the current senior cycle examination system in that it failed to "propel" them in the right direction, resulting in their being part of an "economic system" that did not suit everyone.

These findings raise important questions in relation to the effects of dominant discourses and policies at national level in education. They support debates within the literature regarding the operation of ideological power and education systems, policy and practices (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2006; Burbules & Torres, 2000). As discussed in Chapter 3, leadership discourses have become dominated by terms relating to standards, excellence, high stakes testing, assessments and accountability (Apple, 2000, Biesta, 2010; Madaus & Clark, 2001) This has resulted in less helpful outcomes such as issues in low self-esteem, emotional distress and social isolation for students, as well as hostile and conflictual relations between teachers, students and parents. (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2010; Madaus & Clarke, 2001).

Specifically, the findings of this research support current debates regarding the stress and pressure felt by students, parents and teachers, evoked by the demands of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland. Some professionals questioned the type of education and its purpose when responding to young people and emotional distress in schools. Indeed, the merit-based points system of the Leaving Certificate with its high stakes character and external system of

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assessment has formed the basis of Irish education since the 1960s; and has become a fundamental part of the social and cultural identity in Ireland (McCoy et al., 2019; OECD, 2020). It has been strongly criticised as being a main driver of policies for higher education, lacking in a dynamic and progressive vocational strand, having limited subject choice for students and major concerns for equity, particularly, for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (OECD, 2020).

School leaders also referred to the high levels of stress associated with the Leaving Certificate and the need for greater support and added resources for schools in responding to young people. These findings lend support to current debates highlighting a need for a more holistic approach, incorporating personal, social and life skills as well as academic qualifications within the senior cycle education (OECD, 2020; Smyth, 2019).

Further, there can be little doubt that the events of the past year have presented major challenges and increased tension amongst students in second-level education. The Covid 19 global pandemic has caused major disruptions to students and families including social distancing, school closures and lock-down. Students have been particularly impacted by the shutdown of school buildings, adapting to distance learning and the cancellation of Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle examinations in 2020 (Mohan et al., 2020). In addition, the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate due to the pandemic, has drawn attention to its inflexibility and a need to update the senior cycle into the 21st Century (National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, 2021).

In sum, the findings of this research highlight key issues within the senior cycle education system in Ireland that have had a negative impact on the experiences of parents, young people and educators in issues relating to school refusal. However, it would seem that academic demands and pressure to achieve are a key concern not only amongst young people and their parents in coping with the issues relating to school refusal, but also for young

people in the general population. Thus, the combination of a competitive points system and high stakes examinations highlights a much needed change at policy level in the current senior cycle education.

9.4   Challenges to Mental Health and Wellbeing in School Refusal

Study 4 of this research project offered unique insights into the internal experiences of young people and their struggle in issues of mental health and wellbeing. Young people described a range of symptoms relating to their experiences in the home and school environments such as isolation, loneliness, feeling unsafe, avoidance, distrust of others, perfectionism, powerlessness, suicidal thinking, self-harm, rage, anger and injustice as well as physical ill health, exhaustion and overeating. Within these descriptions, there was also evidence of a disrupted early attachment, the impact of parental separation and divorce, difficult family relations, young carer role in the family, bereavement and incidents of bullying in both primary and second-level school. These findings also support the literature that emphasise young people's repeated exposure to negative life experiences in trauma and adversity that can cause overwhelming emotions resulting in self-protective and adaptive strategies (see Chapter 3).

The importance of creating a safe environment and focusing on models of building relationships is viewed as a crucial step for children and young people who are exposed to experiences of trauma and adversity in the literature (Jennings, 2019). Whilst it may be said that the relationships between student and teacher, student and peers differ to family relationships, much can be done to create a supportive environment in helping young people who have experienced or are experiencing trauma in their lives. For instance, young people who are exposed to developmental trauma can have difficulty trusting peers and adults and particularly, authority figures. They may appear outwardly defensive and defiant in asserting

their control as well as having difficulty in relationships, bullying and victimisation (Jennings, 2019).

As can be seen in the findings of Study 4, some young people's issues were linked to disrupted early attachments. Therefore, understanding theories of attachment (e.g. Bowlby, 1969) can begin to unpack the effects of trauma on children and young people. These can include experiences of separation (e.g. physical and emotional), neglectful parenting styles and traumatic events that play a central role in the disruption of early healthy attachments (Alexander, 2019). "Dysregulated arousal states" as a result of feelings of heightened fear, unsafe, hurt, shame and rage in not having their needs met can create major difficulty for students in the school setting (Alexander, 2019, p. 63). Therefore, understanding the complexity of young people's exposure to these factors is vitally important in ensuring positive engagement and learning within the school setting.

In addition, the PTM Framework provides a useful resource to understanding psychological distress related to young people's adversity and trauma. At the same time, it can be relevant for young people who experience emotional distress and have not had experiences that they would refer to as trauma related. A central difference to the medical model diagnostic approach, is that the PTMF recognises peoples experiences of emotional distress to arise from reasons, meanings and functions rooted in their social and relational environments (Johnstone et al., 2019). For many young people who are experiencing school refusal, asking 'what has happened to you?' (rather than what is wrong with you?) can help to link in with a range of difficult experiences relating to their school non-attendance. The PTMF also considers behaviours by asking what has happened to the person and what did they do in order to survive. This empowers the young person to create their own narratives about their experiences and illuminate possible adversities or trauma that they may have or still be facing (Griffiths, 2019).

9.5 How Can Educators Respond?

As discussed above, the findings of this research highlight adversity and trauma as underlying factors in experiences of school refusal and call attention to the considerable emotional and psychological distress experienced by young people. These findings also suggest a need for schools to adopt trauma-informed approaches when designing school policies and structures and to create trauma awareness amongst teaching staff in their everyday interactions with young people who are at risk or experiencing school refusal.

In Study 2 of the current research, some school leaders grappled with the role and duty of their schools, emphasising that "our main sole focus in this school is we are education providers, we are not care providers" (Tanya). As a school principal, Tanya raises important questions with respect to the responsibility of schools and educators in meeting the holistic needs of their students. This finding also points to the necessity for schools to re-examine their role in supporting young people who may be experiencing adverse or traumatic experiences (Alexander, 2019; Jennings, 2019; Treisman, 2017)

Table 9.1

Trauma Sensitive Schools *(adapted from Alexander, 2019)*
• Adopt a whole school approach involving all members of the school community
• Integrate trauma awareness into policies, procedures and practices
• Develop a knowledge and learning base of the epidemic of trauma in your school
• Build and maintain school climates creating safety, kindness, compassion and healthy relationships
• Resolve student distress and decrease rates of childhood trauma in schools – i.e. easy access to school counsellors and other expert health professionals in trauma
• Equip all educators with the necessary tools, resources, support and mindset in addressing individual student needs

For example, Table 9.1 presents an overview of the core elements used in the implementation of a trauma sensitive school environment. Firstly, a whole school approach forms part of a broader commitment to students and staff in working with trauma related difficulties and secondly, it acknowledges the importance of educator-child interactions within the school setting (Treisman, 2017). In the whole school approach, the aim is to achieve a "bottom up" and "top down" cultural transition within the education institution (Treisman, 2017). In this way, trauma sensitive schools aim to help and benefit all students rather than a small number of individual students who are identified as having trauma related difficulties. School leaders are encouraged to get involved in supporting school staff (i.e. resources, training and self-care), students and parents, to create a positive school culture that fosters safe and supportive relationships in every element of the educational experience (Alexander, 2019). When focusing on the child and educator relations, emphasis is placed on helping students to feel safe, to be connected, to regulate emotionally and to learn (Alexander, 2019). Thus, the focus is on the physical and emotional wellbeing of the individual before academic directives are emphasised.

In Study 4 of the current research, young people expressed their concerns and challenges within the school setting. They referred to the school grounds as resembling a "factory" and "a prison", in which they felt "trapped", isolated and lonely in their day-to-day activities. For others, the school setting evoked feelings of anger, rage and high levels of anxiety in which the environment "just wasn't right". This finding verifies with much of the school refusal literature that emphasises school factors such as feeling unsafe, social isolation, difficulty staying awake in class, anxiety related issues linked to school attendance difficulties (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Wilkins, 2008; Yoneyama, 2000). Further, this finding links with trauma-informed research that highlights issues in

emotional and behavioural regulation to include difficulties in self-control, increase of

anxiety levels, impulsiveness, difficult peer relations, poor concentration and motivation,

flashbacks/memories, as well as difficulty navigating the school classroom (Anderson et al.,

2015; Delaney, 2017). Therefore, these issues make visible a need for trauma-informed

practice to be integrated into teacher-education programmes across schools and with a

particular focus on attachment and trauma awareness (Treisman, 2017).

      As discussed in Chapter 3, behavioural approaches in psychology are often used in the

interventions and treatment of school refusal. These approaches draw on strategies

associated with desensitisation (e.g. breathing techniques, positive visual stimuli), flooding

(e.g. using visual techniques of school setting), gradual exposure to the school environment

and more recently, the use of CBT methods in school refusal (Lauchlan, 2003; Miller, 2008).

These interventions focus on a behaviour modification approach with a strong emphasis on

the immediate return to school. This is considered a core element of this approach due to

events becoming overwhelming and confusing for the young person, when faced with

difficulties in emotional distress (Miller, 2008). Therefore, it is a widely held view that

modifying 'maladaptive' behaviour will serve to engage the young person more positively

towards school attendance (Heyne et al., 2004).

      However, recent literature on trauma-informed practice has highlighted a number of

shortcomings in the above approaches (Treisman, 2017). For instance, young people who

may be exposed to traumatic or adverse experiences are already encountering unregulated

emotions resulting in high levels of emotional distress, whereby, their natural response is to

seek safety and/or control in order to survive. Therefore, strategies that emphasise behaviour

observations, finding potential triggers and consequences in the school classroom are not

useful and detract from more important questions, such as - why is this behaviour happening

in the first place? It is for these reasons that reward systems (e.g. sticker charts, token

economy systems, discipline tools, behaviour charts) and points systems will most likely be unsuccessful with young people who are trauma exposed (Treisman, 2017). The same can be said for the use of punitive or punishment measures in working with young people and school refusal. Due to reasons of dysregulation and high levels of emotional distress, they are less likely to be able to change their actions. Punishment in the form of isolation and disconnection may only increase their stress and anxiety, decrease empathy development and contribute to a more negative school climate (Treisman, 2017).

Whilst supportive measures such as resource packs for schools and parents in assessing and managing school refusal are well intentioned and provide useful information in supporting young people to re-engage with the school system; it appears that they are also limited by an emphasis on behaviour modification approaches. Advice for parents to be persistent and model positive coping styles, to use 'forced' and gradual school attendance for children and young people, and to ensure the young person wears a school uniform whilst at home may well serve to worsen the young person's distress and increase pressure on parents. Similarly, ensuring parents receive consistent information on the importance of regular school attendance may be unhelpful and unsupportive creating further strain and conflict between families and services. As suggested by a parent in Study 3 of the current research, linking parents into support groups and agencies would better aid in reducing pressure and stigma, and work towards engaging with young people at early risk of school refusal. Trauma-informed literature also suggests avoiding the use of language that reflects negative and stereotyping statements (i.e. in school policies, rules, letters, etc.) and to focus on a strengths-based approach that emphasises student skills, strengths, resilience and positive qualities (Treisman, 2017).

The findings of this research point to a need to focus on the issue of student wellbeing in Irish schools. Policy documents consisting of proposed frameworks to assist schools in

fostering social and emotional wellbeing in their students have been circulated. These include 'Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023' (Department of Education and Skills, 2018), 'A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing', 2013-2025 (Department of Health, 2013) and 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020' (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014).

Documents such as the 'Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023' revised edition (2019) focus on a "multi-component, preventative whole school approach" and promotes guidelines that are child and youth centred, non-discriminatory and inclusive, use evidence informed practice, are outcome focused and foster collaboration between schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p15). At the individual student level, the guidelines also state the importance of addressing risk and protective factors in school settings and thus, placing emphasis on positive student-teacher, student-peer relationships, creating a sense of belonging and connectedness (e.g. one good adult), opportunities for SEL (Social and Emotional Learning), wellbeing among school staff as well as protocol and support systems to support children and their families and to provide opportunities to develop skills to manage stress that may be linked to school work.

Whilst these guidelines are considered necessary and timely, however, some scholars have queried the implementation and assessment methods suggested in the guideline approaches to wellbeing (Byrne et al., 2020). Issues relating to the need for a more direct approach in addressing young people's subjective experiences in the assessment process (Byrne et al., 2020), an increase in training and professional development for teaching staff (Maloney et al., 2016) and the need for an increase in pastoral care hours for Guidance Counsellors (Byrne et al., 2020; Hearne et al., 2017) have been highlighted by some Irish studies. Further, it appears that these wellbeing guidelines do not incorporate frameworks for

trauma awareness amongst educators nor do they suggest professional mandatory training in supporting ways to respond to young people in their practices.

Nevertheless, in Ireland, there are ongoing projects that are adopting a trauma-informed approach in school settings such as the Educate Together Nurture Schools programmes for primary and second-level schools. This programme targets the inclusion and support of young people in enhancing their social, emotional and behavioural development. It incorporates a nurture approach to include trauma-informed practices and facilitating teachers in online training in Trauma-Informed Care and in Continued Professional Development (CPD) programmes. In other countries, schools are adopting MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) (see Berger, 2019; Dorado et al., 2016; Stokes & Thurnbull, 2016) to improve outcomes for students. It focuses on interventions and strategies geared towards meeting the individual needs of students (e.g. SEL, executive functioning and academic skills) and monitoring and evaluating their progress (Batsche et al., 2006). Trauma sensitive educators, therefore, focus on attuning to the needs of individual students and modifying supports and practices.

9.6   Limitations

This current research includes different data collection methods and samples used in each of the four studies of this project and therefore, a number of limitations need to be acknowledged.

9.6.1   *The Survey Questionnaire of School Refusal*

The online survey questionnaire of school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland was subject to a number of limitations. For instance, the survey presented with limitations in reaching the target population based within the school sampling frame. The email list from the school sampling frame presented with challenges such as unused or incorrect email

addresses and interpreted as email spam or junk email. Further, access to schools can often be limited for outside researchers due to schools being inundated with requests for surveys (Lefever et al., 2007). This was apparent in the survey whereby a number of schools had opted out of all future emails linked to the online survey programme, SurveyMonkey. However, a useful method to counter this limitation is to embed the survey within a home page of a website and ask volunteers of a particular website (e.g. The Teaching Council) to fill out the survey.

Subsequently, the survey questionnaire cumulated 106 responses, resulting in a 15% response rate. Whilst this response rate is in line with the general response rate for detailed online surveys at 10-25% (Sauermann & Roach, 2013), it cannot be assumed that schools were well-represented. It is difficult to ascertain to what degree schools that did not provide data differ from the schools that did. Therefore, it is important for researchers to consider their methods when looking to increase response rates in online data collection. For instance, ensuring personalised emails, sending reminder emails, paying attention to time between contacts, follow up phone calls and so forth could be considered (Sauermann & Roach, 2013). However, the data generated in this study does provide a good starting point to researchers or organisations wishing to capture information relating to school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland.

An added inherent limitation in the current survey was in regard to terminology and definitions used in school refusal. An arguable weakness is that terminology and language used to describe young people and school refusal can be confusing and inconsistent (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Whilst schools are increasingly aware of reasons for school non-attendance, there exists a lack of clarity amongst professionals relating to definitions and characteristics of young people and school refusal (e.g. school phobia, school refusal) (Archer et al., 2003). Therefore, issues relating to definitions continue to be a limitation and

may create some difficulty or misinterpretation of questions for professionals when distinguishing between school refusal and other forms of school non-attendance. It is important, therefore, that researchers ensure the provision of information concerning current definitions and terminology relating to school refusal.

9.6.2   Interviews with Education Professionals

Due to geographical disparity between participants, interviews were conducted by telephone. Although a priority of this study was to ensure that location was most convenient for participants, there were some challenges to the use of telephone interviews. For example, the distraction of participants by interruptions and activities in their environment (i.e. people entering or exiting the room during interviews, principal requested to leave the phone to attend to an issue) and the absence of visual cues. Perhaps an agreed time to re-connect, should distractions or interruptions continue, could be communicated with participants at the beginning of the telephone interview.

9.6.3   Interviews with Parents

In-depth interviews were used to explore the perspectives of parents who had young people experiencing or having experienced school refusal in the past. However, there are some inherent limitations regarding the current study.

For many participants, the discussion of school refusal was of a sensitive nature. It is possible that some participants may have been selective in the information they wanted to provide due to difficulty of experiences. In this respect, the researcher could only work with that information provided for interpretation.

Further, this study comprised of a sample of 10 parents (9 females and 1 male). A limitation relating to an overrepresentation of mothers among participants is evident in this study. However, this overrepresentation may have reflected parents who were the main

caregiver in the young person's life and, for those parents who were experiencing separation

or divorce in the family home. They may have been best placed to give their opinions on the

impact of issues surrounding school refusal relating to the young person and family life.

Furthermore, the current sample did not include the viewpoints and perspectives of parents

from the Traveller community or other ethnic minority groups, eliminating opportunities for

exploration of issues relating to school refusal and Irish culture. Therefore, consideration

should be given to diversity in research relating to school refusal and to include the

participation of participants from ethnic minority communities in the design and planning of

the research.

In addition, the current qualitative study is limited by the small sample size and

caution must be applied regarding the generalisability of these findings. However, collecting

information on school refusal from other sources such as education professionals and young

people helps to provide a wider perspective and overview of the difficulties relating to school

refusal.

9.6.4   Arts-Based Sessions with Young People

The use of arts-based methods in visual forms of enquiry are particularly helpful in

not only allowing researchers to explore challenging and sensitive topics, but also to reach

vulnerable and marginalized voices (Ward & Shortt, 2020). However, there are a number of

methodological considerations in the current study that also need to be considered. The

current study is limited by the small number of participants and there is an overrepresentation

of females among participants in this study. In addition, the current sample did not include

young people from the Traveller community and other ethnic minority groups. Therefore,

issues in school refusal relating to these groups could not be included. As previously stated,

inclusion of participants from ethnic minority communities may help to ensure the

participation of diverse groups of individuals in school refusal research. Caution must be applied regarding the transferability of the findings, and they should be viewed as examples of young people's experiences of school refusal rather than a representation of this group.

Additional limitations also included young people's responses to the visual arts-based tasks in the current study. For instance, the instructions in the first visual task (i.e. the Self Portrait) were kept to a minimum, to allow the individual the freedom to structure their drawing in their own way and for the researcher to observe how different people make sense of the same task (Bagnoli, 2009). In this way, the Self Portrait provides a participatory dimension, by allowing the participant to guide the interview and illuminate important elements in their lives that they may wish to discuss. However, this task also elicited an important limitation whereby some participants became more concerned with their artistic competency, resulting in feeling under pressure to draw their thoughts on a blank piece of paper. Thus, "fear of graphic aptitude" has been highlighted within previous studies as a potential limitation within such visual arts tasks (Ward & Shortt, 2020, p. 20).   In such instances, participants can become concerned and fearful that they are unable to draw. A slightly more structured approach to this task may have provided more support for the participant. Nevertheless, I found that responding in a non-judgmental manner and allowing extra time and space for the participant to complete their drawing did help to alleviate these difficulties and move on to discuss a number of insightful outcomes from the Self Portrait.

9.7   Recommendations

As discussed in Chapter 2, school refusal is not a new phenomenon, nor does it exist in a vacuum. A young person's difficulties in attending school overlap with experiences of emotional distress related to their home, school and community environments. The research studies presented in this thesis clearly show that high levels of emotional distress, exposure to

adverse life experiences and trauma, the pressure of academic demands and performativity and the impact of inequality on families from lower socio economic backgrounds are key to understanding the issues associated with young people and school refusal. Taken together, these findings suggest that much more needs to be done in understanding and adequately responding to the issues and challenges of school refusal.

First and foremost, a more holistic view at policy level is needed to address the needs of young people and their difficulties within the school setting. For example, adopting a mandatory trauma-informed lens in schools as a way to support educators in understanding the effects of adversity on young people would assist in avoiding blame of students and families, and work more towards building healthy relationships and resilience in young people (Devenney & O'Toole, 2020). These approaches would include training of school personnel and teachers on the impact of trauma on student learning and ways to build a safe and nurturing environment for educating students (See Felitti et al., 1998; SAMHSA, 2014; Stempel et al., 2017). School structures could also adopt a buddy system, a mentor and social skills and mindfulness meditation (e.g. breathing and body scans) programmes to assist in building resilience and healthy relationships for young people within the school setting.

In addition, schools can incorporate effective intervention practices such as Nurture Groups in second-level education. Nurture groups are part of the school environment, teacher-led and use psychosocial intervention of groups of less than 12 students. These groups target social, emotional and behavioural difficulties working towards inclusion and diversity. Information can also be sought for the identification and intervention strategies for vulnerable young people from programmes such as the Educate Together Nurture Schools and other community based programmes initiated by organisations such as Bernardos, Youth Work Ireland and Tusla.

Keeping the lines of communication open between schools, families and outside organisations is a valuable step in helping families of young people experiencing or at risk of school refusal. In support of parents, an initial step would be to provide links to information relating to outside support services (i.e. mental health and education), parent support groups and information on education options outside the mainstream education system (i.e. home-schooling, education centres and courses). Similarly, educators need more support and communication from outside organisations requiring a multiagency, multidisciplinary approach. In addition, a commonly agreed language needs to be established amongst schools and outside services so as to avoid negative or stereotyping labels and stigma of young people and families in school refusal. Therefore, schools and educators need to be informed of the issues relating to school non-attendance and as stated earlier, training and funding in trauma-informed practice will provide opportunities to effectively respond to young people and families in this regard.

Whilst school refusal is widely studied within psychological and psychiatric fields of research, the development of educational research remains sparse and slow moving. The findings of this research contribute to national and international literature in terms of policy and practices relating to school absenteeism and highlights a need for educational research to be developed in areas relating to the role of the school environment. It provides valuable insight for professionals who work with young people and families in issues relating to school refusal. It also provides a broader understanding of the issues which move beyond the taken for granted assumptions surrounding school refusal. Thus, this research foregrounds a need to re-examine policies and practice which address key issues in school refusal (i.e. trauma and adversity).

The findings of this research project also raised questions with regard to the purposes and goals of education. As previously discussed, policies relating to school effectiveness and

achievement show to dominate contemporary education systems. Whilst academic

achievement has obvious benefits for students in preparing them for future employment and

the complexes of society, it is not the only purpose of education. Education also has a

transformative purpose and carries with it an orientation towards independence, freedom,

participation, equality and inclusion (Biesta, 2010, 2014). More research is required to

develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between current agendas in education and

the impact on students, parents and teachers in the school and home setting.

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Email Request to Participate in Online Survey

From: XXXXX

Subject: National Survey of School Refusal in Second-level Schools in Ireland

My name is Roisin Devenney and I am a PhD student with the Education Department in Maynooth University.

I am writing to you to request your participation in a survey of school refusal in Ireland. The aim of the survey is to gather information on school refusal from the perspective of school educators.

Your responses to this survey will help us to understand the issue of school refusal and the ways to respond.

We would be grateful if you could select one staff member in your school and forward this survey for them to complete. This may be a designated member of staff in school non-attendance such as: a school Principal, Year Head, Guidance Counsellor, school based Counsellor or Chaplain.

The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete and your responses are completely anonymous. Please click on the button below to begin the survey.

You can only take the survey once, but you can edit your responses until the survey is closed in June 2017.

This survey has been approved by the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee. Your participation in the survey is completely voluntary and all your responses will be kept confidential. You have the opportunity to withdraw your involvement in this research at any time.

If you have any questions about the survey, please email us at: XXXXX

Thank you very much for your time and cooperation. Your feedback is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Roisin Devenney.

PhD Candidate and Researcher,
Education Department
Maynooth University
Maynooth
Co. Kildare

<center>**Appendix B**</center>

<center>**Information Sheet Study 1**</center>

My name is Roisin Devenney and I am a PhD student with the Education Department in Maynooth University. You are invited to take part in a research study on school refusal. Whether or not you take part is your choice. If you do not want to take part now and change your mind later, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

The Participant Information sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why I am doing the research study, what your participation would involve and what would happen after the study ends. Before you decide whether or not to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information and ask me if there is anything you are not clear on or if you would like more information. Once you understand the study, you will be asked to put your initials to the Consent Form on the end section of this document. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form for you to keep.

This document has two parts:

- Information Sheet

- Consent Form (for signatures if you wish to participate)

What is the purpose of the study: The overall aim of the project is to explore the issues of school refusal both in Ireland and in the international context.

What will the study involve? This study will involve you completing an online survey that will take approximately 20 minutes. This will be asking you basic questions about your experiences of the issues of school refusal in a school setting. You will also have the opportunity to indicate whether or not you would be willing to take part in the follow up of the study by providing your contact details at the end of the survey. Follow up will include a further study of interviews or a focus group with teachers and professional agencies who work with young people and school refusal.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been invited to take part due to your knowledge and expertise in working with young people and school refusal in an Irish context.

Do you have to take part? If you have been asked to complete this survey, please understand that your participation in this research is completely voluntary and your information will not be shared with the principal or other members of staff in your school. It is your choice whether to participate or not. You have the opportunity to withdraw your involvement in the research at any time.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes, all data will be treated as confidential and will be published in the final PhD thesis anonymously. Only the researcher and the supervisor named at the end of the consent form will have access to this data information. Your information will not be shared with anyone else and will be stored in a secure location. Every attempt will be made to anonymise any distinguishing personal or professional characteristics of which an individual participant may be recognised. However, it must be recognised that in some circumstance's confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

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What will happen to the results? The findings will be published within peer-reviewed journals and will be disseminated through research meetings and conferences. The results will form part of a doctoral thesis which will be submitted to Maynooth University.

What if there is a problem? Should any issues arise, you will have the opportunity to discuss this with the researcher and also phone numbers of supporting agencies will be made available to you.

What if I change my mind?   Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. During the study you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give reason or without any personal consequences. This will be in place until the writing of the thesis.

Who has reviewed this study?   The study has been reviewed by the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, the researcher (Roisin Devenney) can be contacted at (mobile number) or by email at XXXXX. You can also contact the research supervisor on XXXXX or by email at XXXXX

Electronic Consent Form

In consenting to participate in this research, I understand the following:

Please tick the appropriate answer:

1. I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet provided for the research stated above

    - ☐ **Yes**

    - ☐ **No**

2. I understand that my position as a participant is completely voluntary and that any point during the research, I have the right to withdraw, without explanation.

    - ☐ **Yes**

    - ☐ **No**

3. I am aware that all data collected as part of this study will be collated and form part of Roisin Devenney's PhD in Education thesis and the results may be included in other publications and presented at conferences.

    - ☐ **Yes**

    - ☐ **No**

4. I am aware that all data will be stored on a password protected device. This data will also be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Acts 1998 & 2003.

    - ☐ **Yes**

    - ☐ **No**

5. I understand that I can request feedback about the study from the researcher (Roisin Devenney) at any time.

    - ☐ **Yes**

    - ☐ **No**

Declaration by participant:

I hereby consent to take part in this study.

Initials of Participant:

By only entering your initials for anonymity and by ticking this box you now give your fully informed consent to participate in this study.

Should you have any concerns or queries before, during or after the research please contact:

Roisin Devenney	*Or*	Dr. Catriona O' Toole
PhD student and researcher		Education Department
Education Department		Maynooth University
Maynooth University		Maynooth
Maynooth		Co. Kildare
Co. Kildare		

Email: XXXXX   Email: XXXXX

Tel: XXXXX   Tel: XXXXX

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Survey Questionnaire for School Refusal

NATIONAL SURVEY OF SCHOOL REFUSAL IN SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOLS

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

School refusal is defined as a child's refusal to attend and/or stay in school for the duration of the school day (The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), 2015). School refusal is also associated with the emotional distress of the student in relation to academic and/or social situations. I would be very grateful if you would complete the enclosed questionnaire. Your response will be combined with the responses of other schools to form an overview of how school refusal is understood and supported in Irish second-level schools.

PART I: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Please state your role in the school?

- ☐ Principal

- ☐ Year Head

- ☐ Guidance counsellor

- ☐ School based counsellor

- ☐ Other (please specify your title)

_____

2. How many students in total are there in your school   Boys _____   Girls_____

3. How many teachers are there in your school?   Full-time_____   Part-time _____

4. (A) Approximately how many staff does your school currently have in the following capacities?

Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator	
Other school-based counsellor/psychologist	
Guidance counsellor(s) or teachers with guidance hours	
Special needs assistants (SNA's)	
None	

(B) How many of the above school staff are in a full time or part time capacity. Please select all that apply.

	Full-time	Part-time
Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator		
Other school-based counsellor/psychologist		
Guidance counsellor(s) or teachers with guidance hours		
Special needs assistants (SNA's)		
None		

5. Which of the following best describes the community area in which your school is located?

☐ Urban – City and town

☐ Rural – Town and village

☐ County (Please specify) _____

6. Which of the following describes the type of school you are working in? Please tick only that which applies.

☐ ETB (Education and Training Board)

☐ Community and Comprehensive School

☐ Voluntary Secondary School

☐ Private

7. Is your school a DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school?

☐ Yes

☐ No

8. What is the religious ethos of your school?

Catholic ☐   Church of Ireland ☐   Interdenominational ☐   Multidenominational ☐

Other ☐   Please specify_____

PART II: PROFILE OF STUDENTS IN RELATION TO SCHOOL REFUSAL

We would like to ask you some questions about students and the experience of school refusal in your school. <u>Please see the definition for school refusal on page 1 of questionnaire</u>.

9. In your assessment, how many students have difficulty in attending the school under the definition of school refusal? Please tick one box.

None ☐   1-10 ☐   11-20 ☐

21-30 ☐   31-40 ☐   41-50 ☐

10. Approximately how many students from each of the following year groups have difficulty attending school under the definition of school refusal.

Year Group	0	1 - 2	3 – 5	6 - 8	8 – 10	10+
1st Year						
2nd Year						
3rd Year						
4th Year						
5th Year						
6th year						

11. Which of the following applies to your school?

☐ **Single-sex school**

☐ **Co-educational school**

12. If co-educational, do male or female students show greater difficulties in their experience of school refusal?

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ No Gender Difference

PART III: SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS AT RISK OF SCHOOL REFUSAL

13. Does your school have a School Attendance Strategy?

☐ Yes

☐ No

14. If you answered yes to Q13, does your School Attendance Strategy include responses to school refusing behaviour?

☐ Yes

☐ No

15. Does your school have a dedicated person for identifying students who have difficulty with school attendance? If yes, please indicate the title.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Title _____

16. In your assessment, what proportion of students experiencing school refusal show sustained difficulties in the following areas?

	Nearly all	More than half	Less than half	Only a few
Academic progress	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social interaction with peers	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behaviour in class	☐	☐	☐	☐
Involvement in extracurricular activities	☐	☐	☐	☐

17 (A): Below are a number of factors related to a student experiencing school refusal. How much would you say each of the following School Factors contribute to these difficulties? (Please tick one option on each line)

	A great deal	Quite a lot	A little	Not a factor
Newcomer to school	☐	☐	☐	☐
Homework/schoolwork too Challenging	☐	☐	☐	☐
Exam pressure	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assessed special education				

Needs	☐	☐	☐	☐
Unassessed special educational needs	☐	☐	☐	☐
Poor peer relationships	☐	☐	☐	☐
Poor relationships with school staff				
Bullying	☐	☐	☐	☐

(B): Home/Community Factors
(Please tick one option on each line)

	A great deal	Quite a lot	A little	Not a factor
Lack of parental encouragement	☐	☐	☐	☐
Lone parent families'	☐	☐	☐	☐
Carer duties in the family home	☐	☐	☐	☐
Financial issues at home	☐	☐	☐	☐
Domestic violence in the home	☐	☐	☐	☐
Family separation	☐	☐	☐	☐
Over-attachment to parent/guardia	☐	☐	☐	☐
Child and residential care	☐	☐	☐	☐

(C) Cultural Factors
(Please tick one option on each line)

	A great deal	Quite a lot	A little	Not a factor
Cultural differences	☐	☐	☐	☐
Language barriers	☐	☐	☐	☐
Lack of knowledge of the Irish educational system	☐	☐	☐	☐
Racism	☐	☐	☐	☐

(D): Psychological Factors

(Please select tick one option on each line)

	A great deal	Quite a lot	A little	Not a factor
Low mood and/or depression	☐	☐	☐	☐
Anxiety issues related to school tasks (i.e. avoidance of exams, oral presentations, sports and eating in the school canteen).	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Stress	☐	☐	☐	☐
Self-harm	☐	☐	☐	☐
Seeking activities outside the school Classroom (i.e. spending time with friends, substance use, playing video games and watching T.V.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Other (Please Specify) _____

18. Does your school have a particular approach in support of students experiencing school refusal?

Yes........☐   No.................☐

(b) If Yes, please describe as fully as possible the approach taken.

19. Who does the school contact in regard to school refusal?

☐   National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

☐   Tusla, Educational Welfare Service

☐   CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)

☐   GP (General Practitioner)

☐   Other (Please Specify)

_____

20. To what extent does the school liaise within multiagency services?

	To a great extent	To some extent	Not to any great extent	Not to any extent
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tusla, Educational Welfare Service	☐	☐	☐	☐
Second-Level Support Service (e.g. Inclusion Support Service (ISS))	☐	☐	☐	☐

Tusla, Social Work Service	☐	☐	☐	☐
Youthwork Services	☐	☐	☐	☐
Community/Voluntary Groups	☐	☐	☐	☐

Other (Please specify)

_____

21 (A): Schools use different ways of providing social and personal support for their students. Please indicate whether or not your school adopts each of the staff approaches listed.

- ☐ Year Head

- ☐ School Mentors

- ☐ Principals

- ☐ Guidance Counsellor

- ☐ School based counsellor

- ☐ External counsellor

- ☐ Chaplain

- ☐ SPHE (Social Personal and Health Education) classes

(B): Please indicate which staff approach you think is the single most important approach in regard to school refusal. Please select one option only.

- ☐ Year Head

- ☐ School Mentors

- ☐ Principals

- ☐ Guidance Counsellor

- ☐ School based counsellor

- ☐ External counsellor

- ☐ Chaplain

- ☐ SPHE (Social Personal and Health Education) classes.

22. Are any of the following used to support students experiencing difficulty attending school in the category of school refusal: (please tick all that apply)

- ☐ Breakfast club

☐   Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

☐   Homework club

☐   The Schools Code of Behavior

☐   Reduced timetable

☐   Extra tuition outside school hour's

☐   Extracurricular activities (incl. Sports)

☐   Summer camp/project

☐   Health and Safety Policy

☐   Financial assistance for trips or outings

23. What (other) supports, if any, would you like to see in place for students at risk/experiencing school refusal.

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24. Are there any other issues regarding school refusal on which you would like to comment?

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This national survey will be followed by a qualitative study exploring the issues of school refusal in more detail. If you are happy to be contacted by the researcher for an interview, please complete the section below.

Name: ……………………………………………….

Address…………………………………………...

……………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………

Phone Number…………………………………………….

Email : ………….………………………………………...

Please note that participation in this research project is completely voluntary. If you decide at a later stage that you do <u>not</u> wish to take part in this research, you have the opportunity to decline when contacted by the researcher (Roisin Devenney). Your personal details will be removed, and no explanation will be required.

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

Appendix E

Respondents Estimation of Students Year Groups and School Refusal

Year group	0	1-2	3-5	6-8	8-10	10+
1st Year	33 (41.8%)	31(39.2%)	12(15.2%)	3(3.8%)	-	-
2nd Year	24 (29.3%)	37 (45.1%)	17 (20.7%)	1 (1.2%)	3 (3.7%)	-
3rd Year	18 (21.4%)	45 (53.6%)	16 (19.0%)	3 (3.6%)	1 (1.2%)	-
4th Year	29 (43.9%)	27 (40.9%)	9 (13.6%)	1 (1.5%)	-	-
5th Year	18 (24.0%)	36 (48.0%)	17 (22.7%)	2 (2.7%)	-	2 (2.7%)
6th Year	21 (27.6%)	27 (35.5%)	20 (26.3%)	6 (7.9%)	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.3%)

Appendix F

School Staff Approach in Providing Social and Personal Support in School Refusal

	Yes	No
Year Head	79 (74.5%)	2 (1.9%)
School Mentors	66 (62.3%)	10 (9.4%)
Principal	78 (73.6%)	1 (0.9%)
Guidance counsellor	80 (75.5%)	-
School based counsellor	39 (36.8%)	30 (28.3%)
External counsellor	46 (43.4%)	23 (21.7%)
Chaplain	43 (40.6%)	28 (26.4%)
SPHE classes	77 (72.6%)	2 (1.9%)

Appendix G

Cultural Factors and School Refusal

	A great deal	Quite a lot	A little	Not a factor
Cultural Differences N=82, 77.4%)	4 (4.9%)	5 (6.1%)	26 (31.7%)	47 (57.3%)
Language Barriers (N=82,77.4%)	2 (2.4%)	7 (8.5%)	23 (28.0%)	50 (61.0%)
Lack of Knowledge of the Irish Educational System (N=82, 77.4%)	1 (1.2%)	6 (7.3%)	22 (26.8%)	53 (64.6%)
Racism (N=82, 77.4%)	1 (1.2%)	12 (14.6%)	69 (84.1%)	-

My name is Roisin Devenney and I am a PhD student with the Education Department in Maynooth University. You are invited to take part in a research study on school refusal. Whether or not you take part is your choice. If you do not want to take part now and change your mind later, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

The Participant Information sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why I am doing the research study, what your participation would involve and what would happen after the study ends. I will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. Before you decide whether or not to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information and ask me if there is anything you are not clear on or if you would like more information. Once you understand the study, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form on the end section of this document. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form for you to keep.

This document has two parts:

- Information Sheet

- Consent Form (for signatures if you wish to participate)

What is the purpose of the study: The overall aim of the project is to explore the issues of School Refusal both in Ireland and in the international context. This study will highlight the issues of school refusal and incorporate the experiences of teachers and other professionals from key agencies, who have experience of school refusal in the second-level schools in Ireland.

What will the study involve? The main focus of the research is to explore school refusal and the issues underpinning school refusal in regard to students in second-level schools in Ireland. The study will involve a number of methodologies and data will be gathered in one of the following ways:

- Audio recorded interviews: with principals and teachers who will be invited to either meet/or talk with the researcher via telephone and to take part in an interview. These interviews will be conducted by telephone. All interviews will last between 20 and 50 minutes.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been invited to take part due to your knowledge and expertise in working with young people and school refusal in an Irish context.

Do you have to take part? Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. You have the opportunity to withdraw your involvement in the research at any time.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes, all data will be treated as confidential and will be published in the final PhD thesis anonymously. Only the researcher involved in the research programme will have access to this information. Your information will not be shared with anyone else and will be stored in a secure location. Every attempt will be made to anonymise any distinguishing personal or professional characteristics of which an individual participant may be recognised. The researcher will transcribe all audio recordings and give pseudonyms for every participant. However, it must be recognised that in some circumstances confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

What will happen to the results? The findings will be published within peer-reviewed journals and will be disseminated through research meetings and conferences. The results will form part of a doctoral thesis which will be submitted to Maynooth University.

What if there is a problem? Should any issues arise, you will have the opportunity to discuss this with the researcher and also phone numbers of supporting agencies will be made available to you.

What if I change my mind? Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. During the study you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give reason or without any personal consequences. This will be in place until the writing of the thesis. If you wish to access your information, you may do so at any time.

Who has reviewed this study? The study has been reviewed by the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, the researcher (Roisin Devenney) can be contacted at XXXXX (mobile) or by email at XXXXX. You can also contact the research supervisor on XXXXX or by email at XXXXX.

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign a consent form.

Appendix I

Consent Form: Professional Study 2

In consenting to participate in this research, I understand the following:

Please tick the appropriate answer by clicking on the appropriate box:	**Yes**	**No**
- I confirm that the research project and the interview associated with it have been fully explained to me.	☐	☐
- I agree to take part in an interview and for this to be audio recorded.	☐	☐
- I am aware that the interviews will be transcribed and that all data will be stored on a password protected device. This data will also be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Acts 1998 & 2003	☐	☐
- I understand that all data collected as part of this study will be collated and form the part of Roisin Devenney's PhD in Education thesis and the results may be included in other publications or presented at conferences.	☐	☐
- I understand that I can request feedback about the study from the researcher at any time (Roisin Devenney).	☐	☐
- I am aware that participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without having to give reason. My decision not to participate or to withdraw will not have any personal consequences for me.	☐	☐
- I have received a copy of this consent form and the participation information sheet for my records.	☐	☐

Declaration by participant:

I hereby consent to take part in this study. Please fill in the form below:

Name (Block Letters)	
Address	
Telephone No.	
Email	

Signature:	**Date:**

Should you have any concerns or queries before, during or after the research please contact:

Roisin Devenney   *Or*   Dr. Catriona O' Toole
PhD student and researcher   Education Department
Education Department   Maynooth University
Maynooth University   Maynooth
Maynooth   Co. Kildare
Co. Kildare

Email: XXXXX   Email: XXXXX

Tel: XXXXX   Tel: XXXXX

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Topic Guide: Professionals Study 2

1. Background information - the type of school you are currently working in. For example, the ethos, size and community area of your school. Current and prior roles held in the school.

2. Experience in working with young people and school refusal.
   For example:
   - Identify a young person(s) you have worked with and to think about the experience of school refusal for both the young person and staff.
   - To use a pseudonym for the young person(s) identified.

3. Challenges experienced by teaching professionals in working with young people and school refusal.

4. School policy and school refusal
   For example:
   - How does the school typically respond to school refusal?
   - Is there a policy in place?
   - What in your opinion, might be supportive of young people and school refusal?

5. Social and cultural diversity in relation to school refusal.
   For example:
   - Do you think there is any relation between school refusal and socioeconomic status?
   - Do you think there is any relation between school refusal and gender?
   - Do you think the school policy on absenteeism and school refusal reflects diversity in the school?

My name is Roisin Devenney and I am a PhD student with the Education Department in Maynooth University. You are invited to take part in a research study on school refusal. Whether or not you take part is your choice. If want to take part now and change your mind later, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

The Participant Information sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why I am doing the research study, what your participation would involve and what would happen after the study ends. I will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. Before you decide whether or not to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information and ask me if there is anything you are not clear on or if you would like more information. Once you understand the study, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form on the end section of this document. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form for you to keep.

This document has two parts:

- Information Sheet

- Consent Form (for signatures if you wish to participate)

What is the purpose of the study? School Refusal has become an issue of global concern in recent years. There is increasing attention on the distressing impact school refusal can have on the individual student and their families. However, few published studies (either in Ireland or the international field of research) have examined the issues of school refusal from the perspective of parents and young people. Therefore, this study uses an educational approach in exploring the issues of school refusal and how these may impact on the experiences of parents and young people.

What will the study involve? The study will involve the following methodology and data will be gathered in the following ways:

- You are being asked to take part in an audio recorded interview that will involve a discussion about your son or daughter who is currently or has in the past refused to attend

second-level school in Ireland. This may also include your son or daughter who is attending other education settings such as home schooling, apprenticeships or other education centres. You will be asked to take part in one session only with myself, the main researcher, and this will take 30 minutes to one hour approximately. You will also be provided with a topic guideline for the interview and this will be given to you before we meet. This will provide an opportunity for you to discuss your experiences of school refusal and how this affects relationships both within your home and with professionals. With your permission these interviews will be recorded using a recording device.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been invited to take part due to your experience as a parent or guardian of a young person who has experienced or is experiencing school refusal.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes, all data collected from this interview will be treated as confidential. Only the researcher and the supervisor named at the end of the consent form will have access to the data information. Your information will not be shared with anyone else and electronic information sheets/consent forms and data collected will be stored on a secure server at Maynooth University. Any data collected on an electronic device such as dictation machine, mobile phone and laptop will be encrypted and password protected and all data will be removed from the device as soon as practicable. Every attempt will be made to anonymise your personal details and to ensure that participant information will not be recognised. For example, when the researcher is transcribing the audio recordings of each interview, a false name (pseudonym) will be used for every participant taking part in this research project.

It is important to emphasise that questions in the interview will be of a personal and sensitive nature. For example, questions in the interview will include the effects of school refusal on family relationships and how this experience has been for you. While every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality, it is also important to highlight that there are also limitations to confidentiality. For example, full confidentiality will not be upheld in the event of any disclosure of abuse or neglect. In the event of abuse or neglect of a person being reported by yourself. In which case the researcher will be obligated to follow child protection guidelines. Also, in some circumstance's confidentiality of research data and records may be overruled by courts in the event of litigation (court proceedings) or a legal investigation being carried out by a lawful authority. In such circumstances the University (Maynooth University) will take all reasonable steps within the law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

What will happen to the results? The findings will be published within peer-reviewed journals and will be disseminated through research meetings and conferences. The results will form part of a doctoral thesis which will be submitted to Maynooth University.

Are there any risks involved? While there are no physical risks to your health in this study; issues may arise due to the personal and sensitive nature of the topic being explored. While you have the opportunity to express your own views and insights, you can contribute as much or as little as you feel is most appropriate. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable in answering. Furthermore, you do not have to give a reason for not responding or continuing with the discussion.

What if I change my mind? Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. During the study you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give reason or without any personal consequences. This will be in place until the submission of the thesis in 2021 or up to the point of the data being held for an appropriate length of time (fully anonymised).

Who has reviewed this study? The study has been reviewed and approved by the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, the researcher (Roisin Devenney) can be contacted at XXXXX (mobile) or by email at XXXXX. You can also contact the research supervisor on XXXXX or by email at XXXXX

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign a consent form

Consent Form: Parent(s)/Guardians Study 3

I………………………………………agree to participate in Roisin Devenney's research study titled 'Understanding School Refusal in Second-Level Schools in Ireland'.

Please tick each statement below :

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my interview with Roisin Devenney to be audio recorded.
☐

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

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to the publication or anonymisation (2021) ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

Please select as appropriate:

I agree that anonymized quotations from these sessions may be used in Roisin Devenney's PhD thesis or related publications ☐

I do not agree that anonymized quotations from these sessions may be used in Roisin Devenney's PhD thesis or related publications. ☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I agree for my data, once anonymised, to be retained indefinitely in the IQDA archive ☐

Signed…………………………………. Date……………….

Participant Name in block capitals …………………………………………..

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed…………………………………. Date……………….

Researcher Name in block capitals …………………………………………..

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019.

Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Should you have any concerns or queries before, during or after the research please contact:

Roisin Devenney	*Or*	Dr. Catriona O' Toole
PhD student and researcher		Education Department
Education Department		Maynooth University
Maynooth University		Maynooth
Maynooth		Co. Kildare
Co. Kildare		
Email: XXXXX		Email: XXXXX
Tel: XXXXX		Tel: XXXXX

Appendix M

Topic Guide: Parents Study 3

Background information – Occupational role (employed, unemployed, work at home parent/guardian), number of children in your family, area of residence (living in rural or urban area), your educational background (primary, secondary, third level).

Understandings of school refusal
For example:
- ° What do you know about school refusal?
- ° What does the term mean to you?

Challenges that you may have experienced with the school / education setting that your child is/was attending.
For example:
- ° What in your opinion, were the main reasons for your child not attending school?
- ° How did the school educators respond to your child refusing to go to school?
- ° In what ways did the school support your child?
- ° What in our own opinion, could be done to further support your child returning to school?

Challenges that you may have experienced with school refusal and home life.
For example:
- ° How did the experience of school refusal affect your child?
- ° How did the experience of school refusal affect family relationships?

Alternatives to secondary school education.
For example:
- ° Did your child choose a different education setting (apprenticeship, Youthreach, Youth Project Centre, home tuition)?
- ° What was this experience like for you and your child and family life?

Participant Information: Young People and Parent(s)/Guardians Study 4

My name is Roisin Devenney and I am a PhD student with the Education Department in Maynooth University. You are invited to take part in a research study on school refusal. Whether or not you take part is your choice. If you do not want to take part now and change your mind later, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

The Participant Information sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why I am doing the research study, what your taking part would involve and what would happen after the study ends. I will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. Before you decide whether or not to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information and ask me if there is anything you are not clear on or if you would like more information. Once you understand the study, you will be asked to sign the Assent Form on the end section of this document and your parent/guardian will also be asked to sign the Consent Form at the end of this document as well. Copies of the Information sheet, Certificate of Assent and Certificate of Consent will be given to you and your parent/guardian for you to keep.

This document has three parts:

- Information Sheet (gives you the information about the study)

- Certificate of Assent (this is where you sign if you agree to participate)

- Certificate of Consent (for a parent to sign if they agree that you may participate).

Purpose: Why are you doing this research? I would like to find out about what young people think about the issue of school refusal in second-level schools in Ireland. I have already spoken to principals, teachers and other educators in 2017 and 2018. The topic of school refusal is becoming a very important area because of the difficult effect it can have on the young person and their families. Also, not many published studies (either in Ireland or in the international field of research) have looked at the issues of school refusal from point of view of the young person. Understanding your experiences is vitally important if we are to better understand the difficulties surrounding school refusal. So, having your viewpoint in this study can play a major role in addressing and highlighting the issues of school refusal. As the main researcher of this study, I have graduated as a secondary school teacher at Maynooth University and since then, have worked with young people for a number of years in different settings such as second-level schools, Youthreach, Adult Education and in the field of psychology.

What are you being asked to do? You are being asked to take part in this research because your ideas and views as a young person can play a very important role in my understanding of school refusal.

Therefore, you will be invited to take part in two to three sessions. These sessions will take between 25 to 50 minutes. In these sessions, I will be using a 'narrative arts-based' method to help explore what school refusal means to you. A narrative arts-based method is the use of pictures such as drawings or images. This is not like an art class, instead, it is a way for us (you and me) to explore and discuss what school is like for you. You will also have the chance to say what you feel about school and to share any concerns or views you may have on the topic of school refusal. I will be asking you to draw three pictures or images and these are shown below:

1. A Self Portrait – This drawing helps you to think about your personal interests and what is important to you in your day to day surroundings.

2. A Timeline – This drawing helps you to look at the past, present and future when thinking about your own life and school experiences. In this drawing you will be asked to think about important events in your life and any changes that have happened which will be mapped onto a timeline (a line drawn from zero to your current age).

3. A Relational Map – This drawing helps you to look at close relationships (family, friends and other important people) in your life. Circles are drawn to highlight who is important/not important to you in your life.

Before we begin you will be asked to decide where you would like these sessions to take place. For example, you may prefer these sessions to take place at the local youth centre or at the local resource centre or in your own home. I will make the arrangements for us (you and me) to meet at your preferred location.

Do you have to take part in this study? You do not have to be in this research if you do not want to. It is your choice. If you decide that you do not want to be in this research, that is okay and nothing will change. If you say 'yes' now, and change your mind later, that is also okay. Also, if you decide that you do not want me to use your drawings or writings, you have the opportunity to withdraw them from the research study at any time.

Confidentiality: Is everybody going to know about this? Your name and any information about you will not be shared with anyone who does not work in this research study. Only myself and my supervisor named at the end of the consent form will be able to see the information from the sessions. Your information will be stored in a secure location (Maynooth University network). I will also be recording our discussions on equipment such as a mobile phone, a small audio recorder and my laptop. These will also be secured with encryption and passwords which means that only the people named on this information sheet (myself and my supervisor) will have access to these recordings. I will remove all the recordings of our sessions from this equipment as soon as possible. All of your private details will be removed from this study. For example, nobody will know your name or where you live. We can decide on another name together that you would like me to use in my project. Therefore, I will not share any information about you to anyone who does not work in this research project. There are also times when confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed. For example, if you make it known to me that an incident of abuse or harm has taken place with you or someone close you, I will be required to follow child protection guidelines and only on this occasion will I have to share your information.

With your permission, I will be using your images and drawings for my research study and may put them into published papers or books. All your private details will be removed from the drawings (names and locations). In the consent form at the end of this document, you will be asked to tick a box saying that you give permission or do not give permission for your drawings and images to be used in this research study and in other places such as published papers or books. Please take time to think about this and feel free to ask me anything you are not clear about or if you need more information. You may also wish to keep your own drawings and images from these sessions. I will then ask your permission to photograph your images or drawings. Also, you have the right to withdraw your work (images and drawings) at any stage of this research project without having to give reason. No one will be angry or disappointed with you if you decide to withdraw your work from the study. This will be in place until I finish writing up my work in 2021.

What if there is a problem? It is important to let you know that while there are no physical risks to your health in this study, we will be talking about your drawings and particular thoughts and feelings you may have about school. You may find it difficult discussing these issues in our sessions and it may bring up strong feelings and emotions. It is important for you to know that while you have the chance to express your own views and thoughts, you can contribute as much or as little as you feel is most suitable. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable in answering. In that event, you do not have to give a reason for not answering a question or continuing with the discussion. This is your choice, and no one will be angry or disappointed with you.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: Can I change my mind? You do not have to be in this research project. During the study you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. This will be in place until the writing up of my work.

Sharing the Findings? When we are finished this research, I will be publishing the findings from our sessions in journals articles and I will also share the findings of our sessions at meetings and talks. These findings will form part of a doctoral thesis which will be put forward to Maynooth University.

Who has reviewed this study? The study has been reviewed and approved by the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

Who to contact: Who can I talk to or ask questions to? If you need any further information, the researcher (Roisin Devenney) can be contacted at XXXXX (mobile) or by email at XXXXX. You can also contact the research supervisor on XXXXX or by email at XXXXX.

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign a consent form

Participant Consent and Assent Form Study 4

I have read and understood the accompanying information sheet. I know what the study is about and the part I will be involved in. I know that I do not have to take part in all of the activities and that I can decide not to continue at any time. I have had my questions answered and know that I can ask questions later if I have them.

I agree to take part in this research.

I understand that my images and drawings from the research sessions will not be identified by my name or personal details and may be used in further research projects and any published papers and books.

Please select as appropriate:

I agree that words and images (without using my name) from these sessions may be used in Roisin Devenney's PhD thesis (study write up) or related publications   ☐

I do not agree that words and images (without using my name) from these sessions may be used in Roisin Devenney's PhD thesis (study write up) or related publications   ☐

Name (Block Letters) _____

Signature_____   Age_____

Date _____

Consent Form For Parent(s)/Guardians

I………………………………………agree that my child may participate in Roisin Devenney's research study titled 'Understanding School Refusal in Second-Level Schools in Ireland'.

Please tick each statement below :

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I understand that my son or daughter's participation is voluntary. ☐

I give permission for the sessions with Roisin Devenney to be audio recorded.

☐

I understand that my child can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while they are participating.

☐

I understand that my child can withdraw permission to use the data right up to the publication (2021).

☐

It has been explained to me how the data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that the data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

Please select as appropriate:

I agree that anonymised quotations and images from these sessions may be used in Roisin Devenney's PhD thesis or related publications ☐

I do not agree that anonymised quotations and images from these sessions may be used in Roisin Devenney's PhD thesis or related publications ☐

I agree that my son or daughter's data to be used for further research projects ☐

I do not agree that my son or daughter's data to be used for further research projects ☐

I agree for my son or daughter's data, once anonymised, to be retained indefinitely in the IQDA archive

☐

Signed…………………………………….   Date……………….

Name in block capitals ……………………………………………...

Relationship to Young Person …………………………………………………...

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed…………………………………….   Date……………….

Researcher Name in block capitals ………………………………………………...

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Should you have any concerns or queries before, during or after the research please contact:

Roisin Devenney   *Or*   Dr. Catriona O' Toole
PhD student and researcher   Education Department
Education Department   Maynooth University
Maynooth University   Maynooth
Maynooth   Co. Kildare
Co. Kildare

Email: XXXXX   Email:XXXXX

Tel: XXXXX   Tel: XXXXX