

**How do your learners paint flowers?**  
**An exploration into person-centred learning in**  
**Community Training Centres**

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M.Ed. in Adult and Community Education

2017

**HOW DO YOUR LEARNERS PAINT FLOWERS?  
AN EXPLORATION INTO PERSON-CENTRED  
LEARNING IN COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES**

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Adult and Community Education**

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**2017**

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master in Adult and Community Education from Maynooth University and has not been submitted for any academic assessment to any other University. I confirm that this thesis is my own work. Assistance received has been acknowledged. Permission is given to Maynooth University to lend this thesis.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the young adults who took time to participate in this research. Their involvement was not only crucial, it was insightful and engaging. Sharing of their experiences and at times their vulnerabilities was a humbling experience for me.

This thesis would not have been possible without the friendship and support of the M.Ed. group. It was one of the best experiences I have had and one that will stay with me always. Not only do I consider them colleagues but friends.

The adult education department in Maynooth University has some of the most amazing people in their midst. They are a wealth of talent and knowledge but also exude patience and understanding. In particular I would like to thank Camilla Fitzsimons and Bríd Connolly for their help and support.

Last but not least I would like to acknowledge my family, in particular my children Patrick, Erin and Mary Kate who for the last month or so believed I had gone to live in the attic!

## **Abstract**

This study is an invitation to explore a vital part of our further education and training sector. It gives context to the foundations underpinning the provision of Community Training Centres by exploring the needs and difficulties of early school leavers.

The literature reviewed explores class in education, human development and identity and person-centred learning. This section also looks at governmentality, neoliberalism and New Managerialism in education. The findings reveal many of the attributes of person-centred learning present in CTCs and also reveals the many challenges to this way of learning.

Overall the research was exploratory in nature as it explored the experiences of participants in a community training setting. The study tried to generate the ways in which person-centred approaches to education influenced the experiences of past participants of a CTC. The methodology was a qualitative research influenced by constructivism and led by interpretivism. The research methods consisted of interviews and focus groups.

The study concludes with recommendations for policy makers, organisations and individuals to help improve the future learning experiences for those who share the 'classroom' in the learning journey.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### An Invitation to Explore

---

#### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis is an invitation to explore adult and community education. It examines and interrogates our understanding of a vital part of our further education and training sector. It has given me the opportunity to look critically on my experiences but also to question the theoretical backgrounds supporting my work practices and the speculative agendas perhaps behind those practices. From an adult education perspective, the research inquiry explores the topics of critical reflection, learning and development. For me, as the researcher, it was not only a gateway to reflect on my own working practice but also an opportunity to further understand how I learn.

The research is not a vast exploration of the further education and training sector, nor was it intended to be, but it is a journey through a moment in time with a wonderful group of young women and young men. Through the sharing of knowledge with these young people and the sharing of knowledge within the 'classroom' of the Masters group along with the literature reviewed, it has deepened my understanding of the sector within which I work. I hope the research will also contribute in some way to the public debate currently in play concerning the role or the link between further education and training and social justice and

critical citizenship. As Halsey et al (1997) suggests education plays a key role in helping us navigate between origins and destinations by helping us overcome social disadvantage, providing employment and offering a sense of individual, community and societal well-being.

## **1.2 Personal Motivation**

When I completed my BA in Community Studies in 2011 it was always my intention to continue with my learning. My undergraduate thesis was based on stress in the workplace which was a story I wanted to explore at that time within the working environment of further education. However, I always felt there was another story to be told – one from the learners. This has been my motivation and rationale for completing this research - to hear their story and to facilitate their voice to be heard. This question of the learner voice is part of my working environment and something I feel should be at the heart of future planning and development of all further education and training programmes. It is something which I believe can only enhance the experience for us all in the learning environment which we share.

## **1.3 Background and Context**

My position in the further education and training sector is as an instructor in a Community Training Centre. Community Training Centres (CTCs) are independent, community-based organisations which at present number 35 around the country (IACTO 2016). The Irish Association of Community

Training Organisations (IACTO) is the employer representative body for the independent community boards governing CTCs. CTCs were incorporated into the Youthreach programme which was established in 1988 through a joint venture between the then Department of Education and the Department of Labour. Youthreach “provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training” aged between 16 and 21 (Department of Education and Skills 2017). While CTCs are independent, community based organisations, they also come under the umbrella of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) regarding the planning, provision, coordination and review of programmes provided (IACTO). ETBI is the national representative association for Ireland's sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

The guiding principles of CTCs as outlined by Gus O'Connell at their recent 40-year celebration, is person-centred learning and experiential learning. Productivity Agreement Delivery Support Guidelines (FÁS 2004) for CTCs also point out the value of incorporating Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs theory through a learner-centred approach which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three 'Who says what'. It was hoped the research would uncover the influence of a learner-centred approach in particular those supported by humanistic theorists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. CTCs have worked through many different policies over the past 40 years and come under many different state

agencies. With a political backdrop of neoliberalism and new managerialism which will also be discussed in *Who says what* - chapter three, can CTCs survive the future with their core principles intact? CTC's are currently at the centre of a review process to be completed the end of 2017, so perhaps only time will answer that question!

There is always a danger of losing the learner in the learning process. Deciding what learners can and cannot do, what they should and should not do, how and when this should happen in an endeavour to make learners part of the programmes can at the same time lead to learners being apart from these programmes which were created for them (Noonan 2012). A learner-centred approach is not just the learner being a part of the learning process but also being a part of their learning process. The notion of inclusive and inclusion resonates – do we just want inclusive education that is open to everyone or do we also want to foster inclusion where learner's voices are heard and where they are active contributors to the process in which they are also participants?

In an endeavour to facilitate more active inclusion and considering the open invitation given at the beginning to explore this thesis, a literacy friendly font was used in the typing (Century Gothic, size12). One of the difficulties identified for early school leavers has been literacy and numeracy (*Programme for Action in Education 1984-1987*) and this issue

continues to be an area of concern today (NEPS 2017). NEPS is the National Education and Psychological Service. It is a service provided by the Department of Education and Skills where psychologists work with learners on issues such as learning, behaviour, social and emotional development (Department of Education and Skills 2017).

#### **1.4 Aim of the Research**

Primarily the study involved conversations with past learners of CTCs through interviews and focus group meetings. The purpose was, in listening to their stories, a better understanding could be made of their experiences. Firstly, the aim was to explore the role of CTCs and secondly, to discover how learners had experienced this approach to learning as distinct from the formal school route. Finally, the experiences were further explored to uncover the influence of person-centred learning. Considering these research aims; the following research question was formulated:

*In what way does a person-centred approach to learning influence the experiences of past participants of Community Training Centres?*

#### **1.5 Painting Flowers**

"Flowers Are Red" is a song written and sung by Harry Chapin for an album he released in 1978. The song tells the story of a little boy on his first day of school and his perception of how flowers should be painted. The idea for the song came to Chapin when his secretary told him the

story of her son who had been sent home from school that day with a note saying, "Your son is marching to the beat of a different drummer, but don't worry we will soon have him joining the parade by the end of term" (youtube 2017). How many learners do we sometimes feel 'march to the beat of a different drummer' and why is the education system's answer always to get them 'joining the parade' by the end of the year? I wondered, if I asked the learners in my group to paint flowers, what would they paint? How had their learning shaped their experiences? This led to the formulation of my research title – "How do your learners paint flowers? An exploration into person-centred learning in Community Training Centres".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cVpkzZpDBA>

## **1.6 Research Design**

Bryman (2008) believes that values reflect the personal beliefs or feelings of the researcher and while they should not influence the research it is widely accepted that a researcher cannot keep all their values totally in check. As an instructor in a CTC, it was conceivable that my values and bias might impinge on the findings and this was considered during all aspects of the research.

Reflecting on the aims of the research, the research question and considering my own beliefs and values, the research design was framed.

The theoretical perspective of the research was interpretivism which was informed by a constructivist epistemology. It consisted of qualitative research methods through interviews and focus groups. These sessions were recorded and transcribed with common themes identified and discussed in Chapter Five 'What I discovered' and Chapter Six 'So what!'. As data protection laws did not allow for direct contact details of past learners to be made available to me, 'gatekeepers' were involved in helping to recruit participants. 'Gatekeepers' can often be used to help researchers access possible research participants and can also act as guarantors for the research facilitating both contact and trust (Denscombe 2003). The use of 'gatekeepers' will be discussed further in Chapter Four 'My path of Discovery'.

### **1.7 Structure of Research**

Chapter Two – The story of early school leavers - gives context to the role of CTCs by discussing shifting perceptions of early school leavers through a policy discussion. The establishment and development of CTCs through differing policy documents will also be explored.

Chapter Three – Who says what - discusses the literature regarding class in education, the developing adult and person-centred learning in relation to early school leavers in CTCs. Finally, Governmentality and New Managerialism will be discussed together with their influence on further education and CTCs.



Chapter Four – My path of discovery - details the blue print for the research by discussing the design and theoretical framework. The reasons for selecting a qualitative approach will also be discussed and the ethical considerations and limitations of the study will be outlined.

Chapter Five – What I discovered - will present my findings from the research conversations. These findings tell the common themes to emerge.

Chapter Six – So what - draws together the findings and the literature to provide a cross analysis of the information gathered in the research.

Chapter seven – What next - concludes the study tying together the respective findings and interpretations to the research question. Objectives are reviewed and recommendations are presented.

### **1.8 Reflexivity and Learning**

While using the research to better understand the experiences of learners in a CTC through a greater knowledge and awareness of the Further Education and Training sector, it was also hoped that in this space, a greater exploration into my own learning could be enabled (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl 2007). It was a process which emerged organically after the first research conversation. Throughout the research process there were times when something I read or after conversations

with the young adults helping in the research, I was struck with an emotion or profound piece of personal understanding or learning. I found when these thoughts came they bombarded my mind until I stopped and listened. I remember stopping the car in a hotel carpark on the way home after meeting a learner with the need to put these thoughts and feelings to paper. These moments were written down on various notebooks and pages throughout the year and are presented in this thesis through a series of diary style entries.

This “awareness of self in relationship” allows for the monitoring of your own emotions which can then allow for a “more effective helping relationship” (McLeod 2007:132). By adopting this approach throughout the research, I feel it led to a greater understanding of not just the topic but also the person. It is a position which is advocated in all professions but particularly in education (Palmer 2007). According to Palmer “teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability” (1998: 17), however, it is this vulnerability which allows us to “keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able” (1998: 11).



By writing about how I felt during these times I moved from a place of reflecting on my actions to one of being personally reflexive (Schön 1983). This reflecting inwards towards oneself (Sandelowski and Barroso 2002) or 'introspection' can lead to changes in practice through deconstructing existing praxis and assumptions in theory and methods along with a change in assumptions and beliefs (Ryan 2005). Through this form of reflexivity, it was possible not only to identify the 'what' in the learning but also the 'why'. It involved not only engaging in the moment but also understanding the thoughts and feelings of that experience while experiencing it. In a sense, it was looking through my eyes, through my filters (Mansfield 2006).

## **1.9 Summary**

This chapter discussed the necessary components for a research study. It introduced the background and context along with the aims of the research, the research question and the research design. The relationship between these elements was explored and how the research was to be presented was detailed. In addition to these vital components, my motivation, an acknowledgement of personal values and beliefs and an introduction to reflexivity as presented throughout the thesis was described. Following will be an exploration of policy relating to early school leavers and the establishment of CTCs.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Story of Early School Leavers

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#### 2.1 Introduction

To give context to the foundations underpinning the provision of Community Training Centres (CTCs), this chapter discusses the story of early school leavers through policy documents. This chapter also discusses policy regarding the establishment and development of CTCs.

#### 2.2 'The Problem of Early School Leavers'

##### *Shifting Perceptions?*

Free Post Primary Education was introduced in 1967 by the then Minister for Education Donagh O'Malley though little regard was given to students who left school early. Many decisions regarding educational policies at that time were on foot of an OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) report *Investment in Education* (1965). These decisions, however, did not stop community initiatives like the formation of Community Training Workshops, as Community Training Centres were then known, from evolving in the 1970s. As the 1980s progressed the economy was hit with a severe economic depression with high inflation, high unemployment and harsh public expenditure cutbacks (Leddin & Walsh 1999). These factors coupled together led to a rise in a range of local and national initiatives with a strong community base. This economic climate also resulted in

what Murray et al (2014) regarded as a significant emphasis being put on training and education as a way out of unemployment.

The first policy of significance regarding early school leavers was the *White Paper on Educational Development* (1980). In this document, early school leavers were recognised with a paragraph titled “The problem of early school leavers” (1980:49). In a jointly sponsored project by the Department of Education and the European Economic Community (EEC the precursor to the EU) the students likely to drop out were identified and curricular initiatives were to be devised to make “school more relevant to such pupils” (White Paper on Educational Development 1980:49). This policy saw early school leavers as a ‘problem’ both by the Irish Government and the EEC, a ‘problem’ to be addressed within the school structure.

Chapter IV of the White Paper dealing with ‘Special Provision’, discussed ‘Educational Disadvantage’ and the recognition of “equality of educational opportunity” (1980:31). Recognition was also given to the “diversity of social and environmental conditions which exist in modern society” (1980:31). School failure was seen as a problem in areas where “social and economic conditions such as poor housing, a high rate of adult unemployment and a rate of income below the national average” existed (White Paper on Educational Development 1980:31). By analysing who was more likely to drop out of school and determining

their socio-economic backgrounds, this problem began to be seen as a social problem which needed to be addressed. This principle of equality of educational opportunity also opened the door to the notion of “unequal treatment of children within an educational system (White Paper on Educational Development 1980:31). All of this was significant in opening the debate on the issue of educational equality.

As the EEC began regarding unemployment as a structural issue it also believed practical skills training should have a particular vocational outcome (O'Sullivan 1994). This perception led policy regarding early school leavers to change, with the emphasis not only on vocational skills but now extending to include communications skills, adaptability and flexibility (O'Sullivan 1994). Through the implementation of the *Social Guarantee* (1984) these goals were realised which allowed for the integration of European policy regarding the training of unemployed young people to Irish labour market priorities. For those who had already left school, the *Social Guarantee* (1984) suggested cultivating a different pedagogy like that offered by CTWs which addressed personal development and education and training needs (Crooks & Stokes (eds,) 1987).

The *Programme for Action in Education* (1984-1987) was the next policy of note regarding early school leavers as it accepted the system had failed some students rather than the students failing “...our education

system has failed, if at the end of the day, the young person leaving school or college has not been enabled to achieve his potential" (1984-1987 Chapter 1, 1:10)). This is in stark contrast to the *White Paper on Educational Development* (1980) where early school leavers were the 'problem' with responsibility placed on the social background of the student rather than the education system. As a result, CTWs were seen to deal with students who the education system had failed rather than dealing with failed students, a point which it could be said is perhaps still not fully embraced by all today, sometimes second chance being seen as second class.

## **2.3 Community Training Centres**

### *2.3.1 The Beginning*

The pilot workshops which heralded the beginning of Community Training Workshops (CTWs) as Community Training Centres were then called began in 1979. They followed on foot of work started by St Vincent's Trust in 1977 who were working with local community groups at that time. The first CTWs were in Ardee Street, Sherriff Street and the North Wall, all in inner city Dublin. It was "education within and for communities" (Tett 2010:1).

The name Community Training Workshop originated with An Chomhairle Oilíúna (AnCO) (Operating Manual for CTWs 1999). AnCO was the Industrial Training Authority set up under the Industrial Training Act (1967)



to promote, facilitate and co-ordinate the training of people for industry (Section 9.1). The local community groups involved in setting up the workshops were concerned about young people in their area who had left school early with little or no qualifications at a time of high unemployment (Operating Manual for CTWs 1999). The community groups consisted of local business people, members of An Garda Síochána, members of the religious orders and local politicians. To this day, the composition of many management committees for CTCs around the country has a similar breakdown. This firmly places CTCs in the community, working with the community.

### 2.3.2 *The Early Years*

Throughout the 1980s the CTW movement grew at an increasing pace with initiatives like the *Youth Employment Agency Act* (1981) and the *Social Guarantee* (1984). Two points of note relevant to CTWs arose from the *Youth Employment Agency Act* (1981). First, the establishment of a statutory body concerned with the training and employment of young people and second the financial means by which to complete this task (1981). Through this Act a connection between the role of training and employment was further developed. These connections were not new as reports such as *Investment in Education* (1966) and the *White Paper on Manpower Policy* (Ireland 1986) also recognised and restated this principle. The financial aspect of the *Youth Employment Agency Act* (1981) included a Youth Employment Levy on all incomes of those over

16 in employment. This resulted in the CTW model being rolled out throughout the country with many current CTCs set up around this time. Almost 50 workshops were established by 1986 with a total budget of IR£6-7 million, almost half of these monies coming from the Youth Employment Levy (Corcoran 1987).

Coupled with this expansion, AnCO also wished to develop the workshop system to a national level (O'Connell, G. & Stokes, D. 1989). AnCO felt the best way to do this was to hand over administration of CTWs to local management committees. Thus, AnCO drew up a framework of agreement with these management committees pinpointing what was required of the workshops regarding the training and education of early school leavers. Management Committees were to set up as limited companies with a Board of Directors. The Board of Management would meet once a month to oversee issues relating to staffing, financial matters and general upkeep of the workshop with AnCO having a representative on the committee. This new quasi-independent CTW structure allowed for local and community input to the courses being offered but under the guidance of AnCO. The structure is still in place today for Boards of Management except for state representation as there is no SOLAS representative on the committee. SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) is the current State organisation established in 2013 with responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland (SOLAS 2017).

The implementation of the *Social Guarantee* (1984) also led to a further increase in funding and an integration of services, both of which favoured CTWs. Through the integration of services schools were invited to prepare bi-annual reports identifying those who had left school early without completing the pre-requisite level of education. This report was then sent to AnCO who contacted these students offering them a place on a training course in a local CTW. This increase in funding coupled with the integration of services contributed to the rise in places offered by CTWs from 1,183 in 1984 to 1650 places by 1986 (Corcoran 1987). Another example of service integration was the funding of teachers by the Department of Education (name given to the Department of Education and Skills at that time) to supply literacy and numeracy to trainees in CTWs. The *Social Guarantee* (1984) also recognised two alternative streams of school leavers, the first group as a priority which were those who left at or before group/intermediate level and second, other young people who had left school and were unemployed and needed additional qualifications. Current CTCs still operate under these priority group guidelines. Over 60% of learners must come from priority group one, those at or below foundation level Junior Cert and less than 40% from priority group two, those above Junior Cert but below Leaving Cert (CTC Business Plan Template).

As well as identifying two alternative streams of school leavers, the *Social Guarantee* (1984) also recognised two groups of early school leavers.

The first group under an education banner and the second under a training banner through the CTW network and funded by AnCO (O'Connell & Stokes 1989). Granville (1982) remarks how two central prominences resulted from this separation, the first preventative for those who had not left school yet but were at risk of leaving and the second those who had already left. It could be argued this delineation also contributed to the different routes for early school leavers to the Youthreach or CTW path of learning in later years and discussed further in this chapter.

### *2.3.3 The Establishment of Youthreach*

Because of the overlapping of vocational programmes such as the literacy initiative, the *Programme for Action in Education 1984-1987* suggested taking an inter-departmental approach to the problem of unemployment involving the Department of Education, the Department of Labour, AnCO and the YEA. The interaction of all these agencies towards this issue was the precursor to the establishment of the Youthreach Programme in 1988. The newly created Youthreach centres were to emphasise academic achievement in a student-centred holistic approach to education and would be administered through the VECs (Vocational Education Committees) located around the country. Through subsequent years and successive policies particularly *Youthreach 2000 – A Consultative Process*, it could be said this difference

in emphasise between CTWs and Youthreach centres was eroded with the only main difference being the funding stream.

The Youthreach Programme was administered initially in two strands, one through the Department of Education through Vocational Education Committees (VECs) the second through the Department of Labour (currently Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation) through the newly established FÁS. Under the auspices of An Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) AnCO, YEA and the National Manpower Services amalgamate in 1988. FÁS then took over responsibility for CTWs under it's Youthreach programme. The National Manpower Services was a non-statutory, non-departmental body for advice, consultation, representation and advocacy regarding employment services set up in 1971 (*Labour Services Act (1987)*). FÁS, was charged with the operation of training and employment programmes, overseeing the provision of an employment/recruitment service and an advisory service for industry and support for community-based enterprises.

#### *2.3.4 'What is emphasised and what is omitted'*

The Department of Education began a series of stay-in-school initiatives and asked CTWs to devise courses tailored to these initiatives. The courses were to focus on certification and allow for a more seamless progression from school to CTWs and then on to more conventional FÁS courses. This was a turning point for CTWs as the emphasis was being

placed more on certification than vocational preparation for work. It resulted in a change for trainees in the modules they were completing including how and when these modules were achieved. Tett (2010:15) discusses these situations whereby “new contexts, contingencies and competing interests come about through what is emphasised and what is omitted, in policy and practice”.

### *2.3.5 Changing Future*

The *White Paper on Education, Charting our Education Future* (1995), chapter 7, referenced the role youth work had to play in developing the “links between youth work, adult and community education” (1995:117). This point was important as it linked adult and community education to the developmental and educational experiences of students which it felt would “equip them [students] to play an active part in a democratic society, as well as meeting their own personal developmental needs” (*Report of the National Youth Policy Committee* 1984:114).

Up to this point trainees to CTWs could start at 15, however, the *Education (Welfare) Act* (2000) raised the school leaving age to 16 or on completion of three years of post-primary education whichever came first. This eventually would bring two significant changes to how CTWs operate. First changing the age for joining from 15 to 16 and second effectively reducing the number of students applying to a CTW without a Junior Certificate thus eliminating many trainees from the priority one

group. Maintenance of these ratios was and continues to be a significant factor in the performance management of a CTC despite the numbers presenting in this group reducing.

Extending payment to participants on Youthreach VEC courses resulted from the *White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life* (2000). Thus, students leaving school were now advised of paid courses which they could avail of in VEC Youthreach centres. This development allowed for a major expansion in Youthreach VEC centres.

## **2.4 Summary**

This chapter explored policy relating to Early School Leavers in an effort to give context to the foundations underpinning the provision of Community Training Centres (CTCs). Policy regarding the establishment and development of CTCs was also discussed. Following will be an exploration into the literature supporting CTCs.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Who thinks what?

---

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the literature that underpins the provision of Community Training Centres (CTCs). In this section I am going to look at class (Marx 1968, Goldthorpe 1978, Harvey 2005) and class in education with reference to Smyth (1999) and Lyons et al (2003). However societal influences such as class are not the only causal factors in early school leavers. Individual aspects can have a bearing. The relationship between human development (Erikson 1980) and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which can impact on education, wellbeing, health and behaviour (NEPS 2017) will be explored. Examples of ACEs include emotional abuse, emotional neglect and physical neglect (NEPS 2017). This chapter will also discuss learner-centred approaches to education in particular humanistic approaches or person-centred learning through the work of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Gerard Corey. The chapter will conclude with a consideration of Governmentality (Foucault 2010) and New Managerialism (Lynch 2014) in further education and its influence in CTCs.

The aim of this chapter is to explore what is already known on these topics and critically discuss these findings. It is hoped this exploration will help those reading this thesis to better understand the role of CTCs and



person-centred approaches to learning when working with learners in a CTC. Exploring the research subject separately and not in context does not help to properly illuminate the issue (Herbert 1990). Analysis of all documents and background information are also essential so problems, issues and significant features of the programme can be illuminated (Herbert 1990)

### **3.2 What 'class' are you in?**

Class or social stratification is society's way of classifying people into different socioeconomic levels based on their occupation, income, wealth and social status (Saunders 1990). It signifies the way in which society is shaped collectively and deliberately. It is normally distinguished as three social classes – upper class (the wealthiest members of society), middle class (those who fall below the wealthiest members and above the lower paid) and lower class (lower paid workers or unemployed) (Saunders 1990). This social stratification that exists in society according to Willis (1997) is perpetuated through our education system. It can be a reason why early school leavers become early school leavers and why educational choices available on leaving school are few and limited. It is important to note however, that it is the system and not the people that needs to be changed (Willis 1997).

Marx (1968) was very clear in his definition of class with two clear opposites, a ruling class and a subordinate class, determined by

ownership of the means of production. Another point of view holds that social stratification can be determined by “the different value, which is put on different people's work” (Goldthorpe 1978:142). This is drawn from the functionalist theory where everyone has a function or role in society and depending on what that role is, it will either have high prestige, low prestige or fall somewhere in the middle (Goldthorpe 1978). This shaping of society is achieved “through such important socialising agencies as the family, church, law, media, schools, and even trade unions” (Slattery 2003:122).

From a survey carried out by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in 2015, the social context of learners in Youthreach was explored. It found 92% of centres were in urban areas with 8% in rural (NEPS 2017). Very high levels of economic disadvantage were reported in the families of the learners indicating that centres cater for learners with a “particularly high level of social exclusion” (NEPS 2017:57). Day (2006) discusses inner-city communities and the physical move to outer-city estates as being of crucial importance. While the majority of outer-city estates remained good, there was, as he maintains, a “concentration of the weaker and more vulnerable” in some estates (Day 2006:87). This led to what could be called a clearance area for difficult and troubled people (Day 2006) and could be argued relates to the high percentage of CTCs in urban areas. Higher levels of unemployment; medical card support; local authority accommodation;

lone-parent families; families with 5 or more children and children from Irish traveller communities were reported in the families of learners in Youthreach centres. These higher levels are compared to those in either post primary schools and post-primary schools in the Department of Education and Skills social inclusion strategy *Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools* (DEIS) (NEPS 2017).

The effect class has on our educational experience as youth is evident (Smyth 1999). Working-class pupils have lower exam grades, higher absenteeism and higher dropout rates than those in middle-class schools (Smyth 1999). Not only does the social background of the pupils affect their experiences, but also the social class mix of the school (Smyth 1999). The type of school attended for example co-ed secondary; single-sex secondary and community/comprehensive school was another factor (Smyth 1999).

Lyons et al (2003) through exploring the teaching of mathematics, furthers this idea of class as an influence in shaping the educational experiences of youth. To take social class into consideration it was decided to study schools on either end of the spectrum. Fee-paying schools and designated disadvantaged schools were contacted as well as some schools "which varied in terms of their single sex/co-educational status and their management structure" (Lyons et al 2003:359). Single sex schools tend to be more middle class in their intake with community

colleges and vocational schools more working class (Lyons et al 2003). It was found the schools with the most disadvantaged students were the ones, which primarily took up the greater percentage of Foundation and Ordinary level maths and were usually community colleges or vocational schools (Lyons et al 2003). Differences in the performance of students at exams was also highlighted as was the “widespread use of grinds” (Lyons et al 2003:361), a factor which would normally only affect middle class students and upwards. Crucial in Lyons’ study was the impact teachers felt a pupil’s social background had on how they performed, with the blame for bad performance falling on pupil’s social class background rather than anything to do with the way they learn or were taught (Lyons 2003).

Lynch and Lodge (2002) state four stages, which are complex but systematic, within schools where class is perpetuated. Stage one starts with the legal and political aspect of education, which gives the advantage to upper and middle-class families giving them the element of choice because of their financial resources (Lynch and Lodge 2002). Stage two is the actual choosing of a school by parents. Factors such as the cost of transport, uniforms, school fees and voluntary contributions are all considered (Lynch and Lodge 2002). Only those parents with the necessary resources really have the element of choice. In Stage three as students take up their place in school, ability grouping can happen whereby students are placed in classes/groups according to their

academic prowess (Lynch and Lodge 2002). Lynch and Lodge maintain "ability is frequently a euphemism for class; it neutralises class debate within a culture and an education system that prides itself on its meritocratic values" (2002:49). Finally, Stage four discusses the climate within the classroom. While prior selection had made classrooms relatively harmonious, how a teacher controlled the class differed depending on the social mix of the group (Lynch and Lodge 2002). Higher streams/bands were more controlled by individual questioning and extra work allocations while lower streams/bands concentrated on student behaviour and correcting and/or punishing (detention) this behaviour (Lynch and Lodge 2002).

Willis (1997) followed a group of young men during their final years of school and in to the initial years of their first job. What was notable in his findings were the similarities between perceptions in school and work. "The rejection of school work by 'the lads' and the omnipresent feeling that they know better is also paralleled by a massive feeling on the shop floor, and in the working class generally, that practice is more important than theory" (Willis 1997:56). Discipline in school really has nothing to do with punishment but more to do with maintaining and reinforcing the social class structure (Willis 1997). However, this treatment of working class kids is not intentional on the part of the teachers to keep the working class in their place; it is the educational system which is at fault (Willis 1997). Also, the social organisation of the school can be reflected

in the social organisation of the workplace, the principal equivalent to the manager and the teachers the same as middle management/supervisors (Willis 1997). As in school where the principal is the leader, so too is it evident in the workplace that there is a manager, someone who has overall control (Willis 1997).

However, class is not the only factor associated with leaving school early. Family influences such as a lack of value on education and limited support to remain in school are present (NEPS 2017). School dynamics such as teacher/pupil relationships and a lack of educational resources and support staff are also contributory factors (NEPS 2017). Additionally, individual aspects such as issues with confidence and self-esteem, social skills, coping skills and relationships with peers also affect disengagement (NEPS 2017). Studies suggest (Dube, Anda, Felitti et al 2001) that some of these issues could be a consequence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). This neglect and abuse can have a significant effect on the development of the child and subsequent adult. One way of viewing this is by drawing on the work of Erik Erikson on identity and the life cycle.

### **3.3 The Developing Adult and Adverse Childhood Experiences**

The work of Erik Erikson (1968) is discussed in this research as having contributed significantly to the study of youth and adulthood. Erikson's (1968) psychodynamic theory centres on the premise that at particular stages in our life we face specific conflicts and how we handle these

conflicts will inform how we later deal with life. This theory is determined by genetic biological programming and by psychological and cultural influences (Harder 2009). The conflicts revolve around a quandary between individual desires and the social world within which we live; with the lessons and challenges we face helping us to grow and develop (Erikson 1980). Children learn to internalise parental views of what is right and wrong and this develops an ego, a mediator or guide. This ego then helps reduce conflicts later in life between the primal impulses inherent in everyone (id) and the moralistic you (superego) which has been learned through society, significantly through parents/primary care givers (Billingham et al 2008).

There are eight separate stages, one following another however; a person does not have to master or overcome each stage to progress to the next (Erikson 1980). As Inque, Sanchez and Terral comment, "one stage is not intrinsically superior to another" (2004:49) but different, sequential and inevitable. Working through each phase supports the development of a balanced person, one who relates well to society with the understanding that both extremes of a conflict must be appreciated and accepted as useful and necessary (Erikson 1980). Thus, with this awareness of two extremes a viable solution can be reached. Most people do not fully resolve each phase with tensions emerging again in a person's life at times of conflict and change. Leaving school and starting in a new learning environment would certainly be viewed as

change and perhaps conflict if the decision to do so wasn't necessarily their own.

In the first year of a child's life they learn trust and mistrust so that hope and drive can emerge (Erikson 1980). A child relies on a parent/guardian/care giver to provide warmth, love and physical care, if this does not happen if there is rejection, indifference or coldness to a child, they learn to mistrust people (Erikson 1980). In adults, this is characterised in "individuals who withdraw into themselves ... they sometimes close up, refusing food and comfort and becoming oblivious to companionship" (Erikson 1980:58). Between the age of 1 and 3 there is autonomy and shame with self-control, courage and will an outcome (Erikson 1980). At this stage children are learning to explore and they are encouraged to try new things even if this results in accidents (Erikson 1980). The child who is not encouraged to explore and given out to if they try or who is overprotected may feel humiliation rather than independence (Erikson 1980). A failure to develop an understanding of holding on and letting go can result in a child, and subsequently an adult, acquiring compulsive behaviour and "compulsion neurosis" (Erikson 1980:71). Roughly between the age of 3 and 5 a child takes the initiative for example in play, tasks or activities. However, on the other hand feelings of shame can emerge if children are prevented from playing or are criticised when they do (Erikson 1980). Around the age of 6 to 12 children learn to work and cooperate with others, developing



both industry and inferiority leading to an understanding of competency (Erikson 1980). Children begin to stay longer in school during the day and lessons become more serious with the addition of homework. Skills, which can be used by society, are encouraged such as painting, cooking and studying (Erikson 1980). Children who are messy in these tasks or who cannot complete them properly are made to feel inferior or inadequate when compared to other children (Erikson 1980). Here we can clearly see our painting flowers experience, where anything outside the norm for what flowers should be is considered imperfect or defective in some way. Early school leavers can feel they have failed because they didn't stay in school and complete either their Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate. They can feel because they haven't got something that is of value to society i.e. a qualification they are of no use to society.

Somewhere between the age of 12 to 18 identity and role confusion emerges (Erikson 1980). Identity means essentially how a person sees themselves in relation to their world. It is not something however that 'develops' at the age of 12 or 18 or in between, instead it is a collection of the experiences and challenges which have been faced up to that moment (Erikson 1980). Role confusion is the opposite or negative view of identity whereby a person cannot determine who they are or what their role is. Before this stage our development mainly depended on what other people did for us, however now, our development depends on what we do for ourselves (Erikson 1980). According to Erikson (1980)

the outcome here is to develop what our philosophy is for life. Also, evident here can be an intolerance to others who can be seen as different either in colour, religion, culture even dress (Erikson 1980). However, this is argued as more of a defence mechanism rather than on outright prejudice (Erikson 1980).

Babies who have a secure attachment with their parent/guardian/care giver and experience the comfort and safety this provides “come to have a sense of self-worth and learn how to regulate their feelings and to socialise effectively with others” (NEPS 2017:3). However, if children experience neglect this learning can be upset. As children grow up their idea of the world is shaped by their relationships in that world to date. The result of good attachments leads to the ability to understand people's inner feelings and thus the ability to be able to read emotions and reactions, feel empathy for others and develop a conscience (NEPS 2017). However, an insecure childhood or harsh or neglectful parenting can lead to feelings of being unloved or being rejected, the world is viewed as an unsafe place and a source of pain (NEPS 2017).

Using Erikson (1980) provides an opportunity to explore the different ways in which early school leavers might negotiate various situations which may arise in their lives. An understanding of the different stages of Erikson's development theory (1980) illustrates that the experiences and management of a conflict depends on a person being able to be

responsible for their own needs and future direction. The first four stages in Erikson's theory (1980) show people relying on others to complete things for them but from stage five onwards this is dependent on themselves. A person's capacity to take this individual responsibility is not only dependent on external factors but also on them as a person and how they have negotiated and developed as an individual to that point. To truly negotiate each phase, we must identify with both sides of the conflict, to understand trust we must appreciate mistrust, to appreciate initiative we must first understand criticism.

Strong, loving and supportive attachments and relationships with parents/guardians/care givers are vital in achieving this understanding. Adverse Childhood Experiences can have a very negative impact on these developmental stages. Repeated exposure to distress and upset causing fear, can also lead to a different baseline of reaction when dealing with situations which can result in someone always 'on their guard' and rarely calm and rational (NEPS 2017). This hypervigilance can interfere with someone's ability to attend and to concentrate leading to absenteeism and disruption (NEPS 2017).

Billingham et al (2008) suggests Erikson's theory (1980) is unscientific with case studies lacking or where there was generalisation or oversimplification. However, for this study I feel his theory is appropriate

in attempting to sketch a view of current CTC learners. It might be useful also to consider a profile of CTC learners as explored by NEPS (2017).

“A small minority of the learners presented as having a general learning difficulty the rest scored within the broad average range of ability, with almost a third in the upper half of that range .....

a small number performed at a superior level in the literacy subtests, but a sizeable minority demonstrated significant difficulties with these skills .....

many of the learners disclosed difficulties in relation to their mental health (particularly with depression, anxiety and anger management) and admitted to engaging in risk-taking behaviours (particularly substance misuse) .....

the vast majority of the learners reported having had adverse childhood experiences. The most common were witnessing and receiving verbal abuse, the family having significant financial difficulties, a parent with a mental health problem, parental separation and being threatened with abandonment” (NEPS 2017).

So, while learning difficulties were not identified as a significant feature, literacy and numeracy problems along with mental health and adverse childhood experiences proved to be meaningful (NEPS 2017). This profile is not to judge or stereotype early school leavers, but to have an increased awareness of any outside factors which might impact on a learner's daily life.

As a possible solution to these societal and political pressures relating to early school leavers CTCs were established. As previously discussed, the two underlying principles of CTCs was that of a learner-centred approach and experiential learning.

### **3.4 Learner-centred approach**

A learner-centred approach puts the learner at the centre of the learning process and not the syllabus (AONTAS 2016). This results in learners being self-directed and equal in the learning process along with instructors, organisers and funders (AONTAS 2016). It concerns the whole person and thus is holistic in its approach valuing the life experiences of people (AONTAS 2016). By working with others, students engage in experiential learning and are empowered to use prior knowledge to construct new learning (Iowa CORE 2017). It is constructivist in nature as students learn more through experiences and active involvement than by observing (Brooks & Brooks 1993).

The 'Guiding Principles' which CTCs operate on include the needs of the individual learner as central to the operational features of centres (FÁS 2004). With this as a core guiding principle a number of other strands developed which keeps the learner pivotal to all aspects of CTC services including – learner needs assessment; individual learning plan (ILP); continuous monitoring of ILP; keyworker concept where a member of staff is nominated as the first and key point of contact for an individual learner; case conferencing which involves bringing together all those in the centre involved with the learners to provide a systematic and planned discussion as a means of responding to the needs of learners and tracking systems to build on and compliment the initial needs

assessment and ILP development so as to assist in the on-going needs which might arise for a learner when they have left the centre (FÁS 2004).

Characteristics of learner-centred approaches include a welcoming atmosphere which is encouraging, engaging and supportive. The learning is flexible and is responsive to meeting the learner needs and interests. There is a real partnership between the learner and the instructor with instructors being open, caring and able to engage learners. Above all learner-centred approaches start where the learner is at and helps them move forward at their own pace (AONTAS 2016). At its heart, learner centred approaches involve “promoting inclusion, participation and facilitating the class/group to shape the learning” (AONTAS 2016).

Adopting a learner-centred approach, however, comes with challenges. Outside interests such as demands made by funders which do not suit learner-centred approaches can cause discord for both learners and staff. Organisational issues by way of a lack of support for staff in adopting a more holistic approach can be problematic. Staff concerns where staff find it difficult to let go of their 'teacher' role can cause tension and learner's issues where learners perhaps don't see the value of the approach or the relevance of the course or where they were made do the course (AONTAS 2016).

One way to look at a learner-centred approach is through the lens of humanistic education or person-centred learning. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) and Carl Rogers (1902-1987) were the leading thinkers in this field which was based on their work as humanistic psychologists. At its core, person-centred learning seeks to engage the whole person by focusing on their growth and development and not just their academic attainment (Tangney 2013). Objectives such as developing self-esteem, setting and achieving appropriate goals and developing full autonomy are crucial (Tangney 2013).

I acknowledge there is a difference in the views expressed by Rogers and Erikson with Erikson seen as more negative and pessimistic and viewed more towards aggression with three types of personalities (Squidoo 2010). Humanism and Rogers on the other hand sees everyone as being good (Squidoo 2010). However, both believe in the importance of childhood experiences and how this childhood experience can affect the adult personality (Squidoo 2010). It is this similarity which I believe makes Erikson and Rogers work well together for this study.

The principles underpinning person-centred learning include the '*student's choice and control*' over the course of their learning (Rowan 2011). This idea of increased choice and control is to allow students to be more motivated and engaged with what they are doing. It involves the subject matter being something the student needs and wants to

know. Focusing on the '*felt concerns and interests*' of the student is also important as the mood and feelings of the students can either help or hinder the learning process (Rowan 2011). Grades are irrelevant and '*self-evaluation*' is meaningful according to a learner centred approach (Rowan 2011). Finally, the '*teacher as facilitator*' is emphasised as being more supportive, more understanding and more genuine (Rowan 2011). Understanding learner's requirements in this way can help instructors to consider the different needs learners have in class. This can then be used to support their learning. A useful means of considering these needs is through Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (AONTAS 2016). In particular, the lower stages are significant with needs such as safety, food, shelter, belonging and self-esteem (AONTAS 2016).

### **3.5 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and person-centred learning**

Maslow (1962) emphasised the positive qualities in people rather than treating them as a "bag of symptoms" (Hoffmann 1988:109). This theory was partially based on his own assumptions of human potential and on his case studies of historical figures such as Albert Einstein (Carlson 2013). Maslow described human needs as ordered in a hierarchy (Maslow 1962) although none of his works showed a visual representation. The first four levels are known as the Deficient needs or D-needs (Maslow 1962). At the bottom are the physiological needs including food, water and sleep (Maslow 1962). Following this is safety needs such as the stability of a job and the security of your family (Maslow 1962). Once these two levels are



satisfied food, water, shelter and safety; a person is ready to spread their wings and attempt more. As people take care of their basic needs they are ready for love and belonging with friendships and family. Self-esteem is the fourth need characterised through confidence, achievement and respect of others and by others (Maslow 1962). Finally, at the top is self-actualisation, achieving the fullest use of abilities, “being everything that one is capable of becoming” (Hagerty 1999). However, Maslow also wrote that certain conditions needed to be present in order for the D-needs to be realised (Maslow 1962). Freedom of speech, freedom to obtain new information and finally freedom to express yourself (Maslow 1962).

Maslow was not without his critics. Peterson (2009) suggests Maslow spent too much time researching the positive things and how things go right for people but did not pay enough attention to the negative viewpoint. Maslow was also criticised as being too soft scientifically (Hoffman 1988). There is an argument that Maslow’s hierarchy does not take cognisance of people’s cultural background and thus cannot be applied to everyone (Rice 2012). Considering these arguments and my research, I believe Maslow’s theory is appropriate to use in this study as the ‘needs’ based element was of particular relevance.

Satisfying these needs as put forward by Maslow (1962) is a step in the process of being everything a person can be but it involves working with

people who foster an engaging environment and an atmosphere of genuine care. An atmosphere where empathy and unconditional positive regard on the part of the helper is vital (Rogers 1951). It involves entering the world of the learner and really coming to know it (Thorne 1984) and what Carl Rogers presented in his theory of person-centred learning.

### **3.6 Carl Rogers and person-centred learning**

Rogers (1961) believed that everyone wanted to be fulfilled, to be the best they could be, to self-actualise, and given the right conditions he also believed this was possible for people to achieve. Rogers' theory maintained that people wanted to grow and develop and with the right help and guidance can solve their own problems (Corey 1996). The success, according to Rogers (1961), depended on three core conditions – congruence, the ability to be oneself, to be real with yourself and the client; unconditional positive regard, the importance of listening to the person without judging them and having the ability to dispel or reverse negative conditions of worth (Rogers 1980) and finally empathy, to fully understand the client's world from their point of view "to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he is seen by himself, to lay aside all perceptions from the external frame of reference while doing so" (Rogers 1951:29).

Divisions in the class creates what Rogers & Freiberg refer to as “haves” and “have nots” which in turn leads to a social pattern being created in the classroom (1994). The “haves” get the support and encouragement of the teacher and the “have nots” are largely ignored by the teacher (Rogers & Freiberg 1994). This type of classroom environment Rogers & Freiberg also argues encourages “students to be either tourists or citizens” (1994:9). Tourists being those learners who never really engage in the class, who don’t volunteer information but neither do they get called on by the teacher (Rogers & Freiberg 1994). The citizen on the other hand is encouraged to get involved through “cooperative learning activities, peer teaching, learning centres, field trips, projects” (Rogers & Freiberg 1994:9).

We all experience some negative conditions of worth throughout our lives in all walks of life - home, school, work, relationships and we carry those experiences with us when we move to the next phase. Finding friends, partners, teachers who will help us reverse these experiences is essential to helping us develop as a person. For this reason, Rogers & Freiberg place a lot of emphasis on teachers and their ability to negate these experiences. Rogers & Freiberg describe teachers as being more facilitators, and this requires, “a special perspective on life” (1994:21). They found where a student was valued and where caring and creative people were meeting their needs, they thrived. Rogers & Freiberg also found that more and more students were presenting to schools with no

motivation to learn and teachers did not possess the resources to deal with these students (Rogers & Freiberg 1994). The corner stone of Freedom to Learn involves the “focus on learning rather than teaching, [and] sharing control and choice between teachers and students” (Cornelius-White 2008:203).

Classroom management in schools traditionally has been based on behaviourism of the students with discipline administered by the teacher (Freiberg & Lamb 2009). Advances have been made on Rogers work in relation to classroom management and research has shown that person-centred classrooms may provide the answer to this problem (Freiberg & Lamb 2009). Instead of fixed rewards and consequences for student behaviour which, in the words of Freiberg & Lamb, limits a person's ability to become self-directed and self-disciplined, a balance needs to be created between the students and teacher's needs (2009). This balance is created by forming a collective classroom “a balance between the want of the teacher (the W) and the efforts and needs of the students (the E) forming a collective classroom WE” (Freiberg & Lamb 2009).

As previously discussed Rogers believes everyone has the power within them to change, to fulfil their true destiny. Under the right conditions people can solve their own problems and move their own life ahead without direction from others. However, there is a weakness here in that not everyone has that power to grow within them and thus Rogers' style

is not suitable for all (Corey 1996). Not all students have the answer to their own problems and as the facilitator in Rogers' method is non-directive, students might never move on (Corey 1996). The theory itself seems too simplistic (Corey 1996). Also with Rogers' approach the student is never challenged, their assumptions or beliefs are never questioned; the facilitator limits their responses to "reflections and empathic listening" (Corey 1996:214). This reliance and over-emphasis on the person-centred approach to education, could lead the facilitator to put no value in their own power and personality in working with the students (Corey 1996). Another criticism of Rogers is that his ideas on person centred learning developed from work on client centred therapy and the research he had carried out in this field. However, according to Wallace, critics note "much of the research on person-centred therapy is questionable because it is based primarily on the self-reports of subjects under investigation" (1986:106). In other words, the research is carried out on the people who are taking part in the therapy, not from an outsider point of view on the theory and practice.

Rogers' theory relates to the fact that while the theory has become increasingly comprehensive over time, it has not evolved much since the 1960's. According to Kerbs and Blackman (1988) Rogers' theory does not address to a significant amount the stages of development. Another argument on the lack of development of the theory relates to an over emphasis on the conscious experience and not enough to the

unconscious (Hall & Lindzey 1985) and while the extension of Rogers' work outside of a therapeutic practice from the outside might seem very beneficial, it may in fact not be thorough or precise enough to apply to everyone.

The teacher's role in a learner centred approach is more of a facilitator helping and guiding students to learn, both students and teachers are participants in the learning process (Jones 2007). This facilitator role sits very well with the person centred approach to learning advocated by Carl Rogers.

However, these ideals advocated under a person-centred approach to learning are under threat from an education system defined more by a business model than by a caring profession (Lynch, Grummell et al 2012). The foundation of this business model lies in the form of New Managerialism which has its roots in Neoliberalism and Governmentality.

### **3.7 Threats to person centred learning**

#### *3.7.1 Governmentality*

Towards the latter end of his life French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) put forward an idea on the way governments try to produce the perfect citizen to realise government policies (Foucault 2010). It included techniques and strategies which makes governing people easier or what Foucault would term 'the art of governing' (2010). This

results in control not just limited to political policies but also to a range of control techniques which people apply to themselves but which are also used to control populations (Foucault 2010). This interpretation of power and how it is exercised according to Lynch (2014) has heightened our understanding of how control and regulation is exercised. Control is less and less exercised through a ruling power and more and more through internal self-regulation (Rose 1989). This is achieved by managing the insides of workers (Lynch 2014). The promotion of adaptability, flexibility and self-empowerment are all new identities given to the worker and results in governing from the inside out (Lynch 2014). Through internalizing these management values of efficiency, productivity and outputs people take on this governing of the soul through Managerialism (Lynch 2014). However, Managerialism can't be solely defined as different management practices (Lynch 2014) it is realised through a mixture of social, political and economic changes all linked to neoliberalism (Clarke & Newman 1997).

### *3.7.2 Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism is the idea that society should be shaped by the free market and that the economy should be deregulated and privatised (Lynch 2014). It believes in making the public-sector work like the private sector and is a model taken on by all political parties and so it is harder to overcome. Neoliberalism has influenced all public systems, especially education, forwarding the capitalist agenda through ideas of choice,

accountability, freedom, standards-based and results driven all being used (Harvey 2005). Examples of this happening include the bank bailout, healthcare as a commodity which you buy not as a right and privatisation of public companies/assets (Harvey 2005). Initiatives under neoliberalism include deregulation, free trade and reduced Government spending. These initiatives help to increase the role of the private sector in both the economy and society in general. It also results in what Lynch (2014:1) refers to as the off-loading of the “cost of education, health care and public services generally, on to the individual”. Neoliberalism fights trade unions and worker power in an effort to keep the rich richer and the poor poorer. The organisational arm of neoliberalism according to Lynch (2014) is New Managerialism.

### *3.7.3 Enter New Managerialism*

In the early 2000s performativity and professionalism intensified in further education (Grummell & Murray 2015). When compared to primary, second level or higher education, further education was considered to lack professional structure (Grummell & Murray 2015). Through a Productivity Agreement between CTWs and FÁS various new measures were introduced to address this ‘lack of professional structure’ including an increase in contact hours for tutors with trainees, working an extra 2½ hours per week, signing up to PMDS (Performance Management Development Scheme), inclusion of extra duties to tutor roles and agreeing to up-skill and retrain where/if necessary. These changes were



to “capture the performance of further education” (Grummell & Murray 2015:439) and to understand what learning had been achieved for both the learner and society. Part of these discussions resulted in CTWs changing name to Community Training Centres (CTCs), tutors to instructors and trainees to learners.

This type of governance of organisations is an example of market principles surfacing in the running of organisations - New Managerialism (Lynch 2014). As a concept, it further changes the direction, ethos and experience for learners and staff of CTCs.

Another issue to arise for CTCs under the banner of performativity and professionalism was the qualifications of the instructors. The further education sector has a tradition of having staff with high levels of vocational skills primarily coming directly from industry. This industry and experiential knowledge is true of staff in CTCs also and is a highly sought-after commodity when sitting in a room with a group of learners sharing, acknowledging and appreciating everyone's contribution to the learning process. However, with the introduction of the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999)* instructor qualifications and in turn suitability became an issue. Gone was the importance of experiential and industry knowledge to be replaced by professional knowledge. This hunt for professionalism was further advanced with the stipulation that

required all tutors/instructors in further education to register with the Teaching Council.

There is general agreement that the idea of professional is good, in most cases leading to better pay and conditions for the practitioner with better standards for clients and protection from rogue traders (Fitzsimons 2017). However, it is the prioritising of this credential above others that is problematic. Fitzsimons & Dorman (2013) discuss a model with three sources of authority in relation to credentials:

Authority from above – conferred by a role we occupy or designation from a higher authority, - authority from below or around – conferred from those we work with in the respect or recognition they have for us, and authority from within - that which we give ourselves through self-confidence in the validity of our profession. (2013:53)

By raising one above the other, lesser value is given to the others which diminishes their worth which is not only detrimental to community education but to individual worth, security and autonomy.

#### *3.7.4 Certification*

Also under the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999)* was the creation of HETAC (Higher Education and Training Awards Council) and FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) in 2001. By this time also AnCO, the Youth Employment Agency and the National Manpower Services who had all been involved in the development of CTCs amalgamated under the auspices of An Foras Áiseanna Saothair

(FÁS) who had also taken responsibility for CTWs under its Youthreach programme. Most certification taking place in CTCs up to this point consisted of FÁS IAS (Integrated Assessment System) and some NCVA (National Council for Vocational Awards). The FÁS IAS certification covered more short-term goals for CTC participants. It was particularly suited to those with attendance difficulties, with negative experiences of school or those coming from an educational system with little or no academic achievements, all characteristics of CTC learners. The modules were hands-on and, practical based. Within a relatively short space of time learners could achieve a successful outcome in a module which perhaps in the past had not been achievable for them. This had a very positive affect on their self-worth, confidence and overall attitude to education. However, moving away from the FÁS IAS modules with their short-term goals proved difficult for some CTC learners to navigate as it could be harder to see the end goal.

A further development from the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999)* was the establishment in 2001 of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The NQAI was to develop and promote the implementation of a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The NFQ is a ten-stage system incorporating educational and training awards from certificate to doctoral level on a fan from level 1 to level 10. The establishment of this framework meant everyone had a place and there was a place for everyone! No matter what your educational

experience you could be placed on this framework which could then be used as a base from which to start your next journey on the path of lifelong learning. It could be argued that gone now was the element of choice for trainees. Once your level was determined the path of learning was established and initiated. Fitzsimons (2017) argues “these frameworks are hierarchical, linear and measurable in their approach to learning” (2017:169). The NQAI along with HETAC and FETAC would subsequently be dissolved and their functions passed to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in 2012.

The country began its decline into bankruptcy from 2008 resulting in high unemployment, working contract reductions, cuts in wages and increases in social problems. With the country on its knees financially help was sought from the EU. In return for this financial aid, certain recommendations were given by the EU which Ireland would need to introduce into the economy to guarantee Ireland would return to being an active ‘card paying’ member of the EU.

The *Further Education and Training Act* (2013) when implemented which was to have a significant effect on CTCs. This Act allowed for the restructuring of the VECs across the country into 16 new Education and Training Boards (ETBs) under the one body called ETBI (Education and Training Boards Ireland). This restructuring had been Government policy for some time, however, the programme of assistance agreed with the

EU/ECB/IMF Troika in November of 2011, as mentioned above, also committed Ireland to structural reform of the educational system. The formation of SOLAS that same year provided for the dissolution of FÁS and the establishment of SOLAS as the new statutory authority to oversee the Further Education and Training sector ([www.ebi.ie/public-setor-reform/solas/](http://www.ebi.ie/public-setor-reform/solas/) 2017). FÁS training services including FÁS Training Centres and CTCs transferred to SOLAS under the now named Department of Education and Skills.

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter explored the literature that underpins CTCs, from the outset through class in who attends and why to the methods that are employed when there. Learner-centred approaches were discussed through the work of Rogers and Maslow in person-centred learning. An exploration was also made into human development and identity and the effects of adverse childhood experiences on this development. Finally, a consideration was given to the idea of Governmentality, neoliberalism and New Managerialism and its effect in further education.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### My Path of Discovery

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#### 4.1 Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to explain how the research question was explored. This will include discussing the research design, the strategy of enquiry and the data collection methods used. In reflecting on these issues, the research question and the factors which influence social research also had to be considered. Overall the research was exploratory in nature as it explored the experiences of participants in a community training setting. The research tried to generate in what way did person-centred approaches to education influence the experiences of past participants of Community Training Centres.

Research design can be discussed and explained through the lens of scaffolded learning in providing structures which can then be built on or added to (Crotty 1998). This approach is used to explain the research design for this study. To begin with, I will describe my own ontological and epistemological position. Following this I will explain the theoretical perspective, the methodology and the research methods used. The methodology is a qualitative research influenced by constructivism and led by interpretivism. As the research question concerned past learners of CTC's this group was identified as the research population. Due to data protection issues access to this research population was through

'gatekeepers'. The research methods consisted of interviews and focus groups. Realisation is given to the fact that these positions may not be shared by everyone, as an interpretivist researcher I understand different researchers will present research in different ways and with different results. It is through this interpretivist perspective I have situated this research. Justification will be given for these positions and the epistemology and ontology supporting the research will be explored.

#### **4.2 My World View**

There is a personal acknowledgement that my world view has been shaped by the experiences I have had and the meanings I have associated with these events. This meaning making process has also been influenced by family, friends, work, colleagues and the world I grew up in. My values and beliefs are what has emerged and what will hopefully continue to emerge as I move through my life with all its ups and downs. I am the only one of five siblings that completed the Leaving Certificate and the only one to complete an undergraduate degree course. The routine of going to school was very important when I was a child but perhaps not so much getting an education. A common sentiment held by many at that time was what good is an education if you can't get a job, so work was what I concentrated on.

Many years later I returned to education. I found myself thoroughly enjoying the experience and growing greatly as a result. It was not so

much the product of this learning that was the real enjoyment or reward for me but the process, how I got there (Fromm 1978). This belief in and the importance of these experiences were factors in completing this research.

My world view also considers elements of critical approaches. My experience as a community educator over the past 15 years has steered my values and beliefs in a direction where I feel change is needed in society particularly in education. Participants on community training centre courses are often referred to as 'school drop outs'. They are a group very much spoken about but not very often spoken to. With this research, in some small way, voice can be given to the voiceless (Foucault 1977). Educators like many others who are placed in social institutions are privy to the discourse used and it is our duty to "help them [learners] confront their circumstances, marshal their positive and strong attributes, consort with their dreams and hopes" (Saleebey 2001:36).

### **4.3 Epistemology**

There are alternative viewpoints on epistemology however epistemology as I refer to it here is how knowledge is established or what Crotty (1998) refers to as a theory of knowledge. It is the basis for all research and it informs the approach or theoretical perspective taken. Epistemology concerns itself with the question of what is acceptable knowledge in a discipline (Bryman 2008). One of the questions to ask is whether a natural



science model of the research process can be used when studying the social world (Bryman 2008). Questions like this lead to different paradigms or different world views which are alternate belief systems or theories that can guide us in the way we do research (Esterberg 2002).

Paradigms can be broken down into five different categories – positivism; naturalism; constructivism; postmodernism and critical approaches including feminism (Esterberg 2002). Traditional approaches to research concentrated around positivism which believed the social world was knowledgeable and we could all agree on what society was, something was true unless it was proven untrue (Esterberg 2002). A naturalist approach involves the researcher going out and living in the world of the participants to observe them within this world such as an anthropologist might do (Esterberg 2002). Constructivism as a paradigm believes that society is constructed or created by the people in it through looking at experiences, meaning making and social interactions (Esterberg 2002). Postmodernism tends to form a commonality amongst its believers that there is no one form or approach “but instead a number of different realities and ways of knowing, all equally valid” (Esterberg 2002:20). Kincheloe and McLaren (1998) explain this as a society overloaded with representations from films, photographs and electronic means. Finally, critical approaches including Feminism “seek insight into the social world in order to help people change oppressive conditions” (Esterberg 2002:17).

The paradigm which speaks to me most in trying to understand the experiences of past learners of community training centres is constructivism. As a basis for the research this paradigm also lends itself to the idea that from experiences people construct or make sense of their world and themselves in that world (Crotty 1998). Through conversations with learners they then got to explain these views. Trying to make sense of or give meaning to our experiences which can be varied and multiple can be described as socially constructed knowledge claims and what the researcher should endeavour to examine in all its complexities (Creswell 2003).

Elements of critical theory are also evident in the research as, as a researcher, I often question “currently held values and assumptions and challenge conventional social structures” (Gray 2009:25). Perhaps, through this study in some small way, challenges can be made to these conventional social structures. The study does offer, however, a counter hegemonic perspective in that it facilitates a critique of the existing status quo and its legitimacy. The research might also help in developing, sometime in the future “new ways of understanding as a guide to effective action” (Gray 2009:25).

#### **4.4 Constructivism**

In this research, by exploring learner's experiences and interpreting the meaning they attribute to these experiences, perhaps we can begin to understand the worldview they have constructed. When we connect with the world we construct meaning from these experiences (Crotty 1998). For me, there is no objective truth as there is in positivism but more subjective meanings which have been attributed to different experiences.

Not only was it important to get the participants experiences of the courses they completed it was also important to try and understand the context in which these experiences took place for example family/school/peer environment. As well as connecting and engaging with the world to inform meaning we also make sense of our world "based on historical and social perspectives – we are born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture" (Creswell 2003:9). Describing experiences and then locating these experiences within a wider personal background is part of a process of interactions. Constructivism as a paradigm asks us to concentrate on exchanges or interactions (Esterberg 2002) and can be aligned to a tradition called symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969). Three principles underpin symbolic interactionism – people's reaction to things are based on the meaning given to them; these meanings come from society; and the meanings attributed by society came through a process of interpretation (Blumer 1969).

#### **4.5 Theoretical Perspective**

This research is centred on my understanding of what participants made of their experiences in a community training centre. It is also based on my perception of what they believe learning to be, based on past interactions with the education system and attitudes of family/peer groups to education in general. Added to this will be my analysis of their experiences and the beliefs I will bring to that discussion. This philosophical stance or theoretical perspective is what Crotty explains as our ontological approach which he defines as “how one views the world” (1998). The ontological approach informing this research is interpretivism.

Not only is the research trying to understand the participants experiences it is also trying to understand how these experiences were framed or constructed by them and for them in their lives. While constructivism and interpretive approaches are varied they do share “the notion that all social reality is constructed, or created, by social actors” (Esterberg 2002). An interpretivist approach might initially suppose the researcher is going to begin by examining the world in which the participants dwell (Esterberg 2002). However, instead the researcher concentrates on the meanings people give to the world they live in (Esterberg 2002).

Once epistemological and ontological perspectives for the research were defined next to be decided was the strategy of inquiry or the

methodology to be used. Finding the best process to fully understand and investigate the research question was the consideration. Reflecting on the research approach, it was not a question of quantitative or qualitative methods but rather how best the research question could be understood (Lyons 2003). The research was not going to be based on positive well-known facts but rather on interpretive data. These concerns lead to a qualitative research approach or methodology, which focuses on the lived experience of the participants (Creswell 2003).

#### **4.6 Methodology**

The aim of a methodology is to help understand the research process. As Crotty (1998) says it is the “plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes”. Three alternative strategies of inquiry are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods or mixed approaches (Creswell 2003).

A quantitative approach would be more associated with a positivist epistemological paradigm and objectivism ontological orientation. This would lead to a more deductive approach to research. A theory exists and research is conducted to prove such theory is evident. Quantitative research usually involves some process of measuring and counting data and usually consists of either “experimental designs [and] non-experimental designs such as surveys” (Creswell 2003: 13).

Qualitative research on the other hand concerns itself with “meanings and the way people understand things” (Denscombe 2005:267). It has long been associated with the humanistic tradition (Mason 2002). As a methodology, qualitative research sits very well with interpretivism as both are concerned with how the world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced (Mason 2002). It also looks at patterns of behaviour such as the activities of a group in society through their traditions, relationships and cultural norms (Denscombe 2005). Examples of different approaches that can be used in qualitative research include ethnographies, grounded theory, case studies, phenomenological research and narrative research (Creswell 2003). Essences of a narrative inquiry were used for this research as a feature of qualitative data is its stories and narratives (Esterberg 2002). A broad understanding of the term narrative, as meaning a story or account of events or experiences whether true or fictitious, was used. When we describe something, we are telling how it is seen or witnessed, however when we narrate something it is “the voice of culture – its many voices, in fact – that is heard in what we say” (Crotty 1998:64). Narrative inquiry in its truest sense however, involves interviews with participants where these interviews “are then retold or restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology” (Creswell 2003:15). This type of inquiry can involve numerous interviews with participants where scripts of previous interviews

are presented, discussed and retold (Creswell 2003). This was not the case for this enquiry.

#### **4.7 Research Methods**

As identified, qualitative research can be used to gain an understanding of underlying opinions and motivations. It can also help to provide insights into a problem and help uncover trends in thoughts and opinions (Denscombe 2005). Methods, therefore, in qualitative research tend to dive deeper into issues with a smaller selection size using unstructured or semi-structured techniques. Common methods include individual face-to-face interviews, group discussions (focus groups) and participant observations (Barbour 2013).

For this research face to face interviews and focus groups were chosen as a means of collecting data. Face to face interviews were considered optimal for the collection of 'rich' data and for the subjective experiences of participants (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Focus groups, while also considering individual participant experiences, in addition gave participants the opportunity to collectively reflect on their experiences and for me as a researcher to get a further understanding of the issue. Focus groups are useful when "you want to understand group processes – how people arrive at decisions" (Esterberg 2002:109). A structure was given to the conversations as follows – establishing the context of the experience (previous learning); details of the experience; and finally, reflections on the experience. Each participant was asked to

think of the session as “a conversation with a purpose” (Kvale 2006:483). Personal experience stories such as what the participants recounted in these conversations, is an account of their subjective encounters (Denzin 1989).

#### **4.8 Recruiting Research Participants**

The best way to get people to participate in these interviews and focus groups was the next issue to be addressed. Data protection laws meant learner details could not be given directly to me. However, past learners very often keep in touch with centres and/or instructors at centres through social media. There are 35 community training centres across the country so an email was sent out to the General Manger of all these centres. Email addresses for the centres were obtained from the Irish Association of Community Training Organisations (IACTO) website. The email explained the research and asked if General Managers might be interested in helping to publicise the study by ‘posting’ a digital add on their website and/or Facebook page. This brought in the notion of gatekeepers to the research. Gatekeepers are described as “those who control access to the information which the researcher seeks” (May 2001:60). While this may not have been the ideal situation, it did not detract from the rich data which was uncovered.





Figure 4.1 'Add' with embedded link

Positive replies came back from four general managers and the digital add was forwarded to them for 'posting'. The add had an embedded link to a Facebook account which I set up specifically for the research. If potential participants wanted to find out more about the project they simply had to click anywhere on the add.



Figure 4.2 Facebook page

There was one direct hit through the Facebook page and two general managers very kindly offered to contact a couple of their past learners to participate. This resulted in one interview and two focus groups with a total of seven participants overall.

Each session lasted approximately 40 minutes and was held in a meeting room at a local community centre and the meeting room of each of the two training centres who had agreed to participate. The sessions began with an introduction to myself and the research. This was followed by a detailed explanation of the consent form including the wish to record the session. Agreement was received by all participants; consent forms were signed and the conversations were recorded.

#### **4.9 Thematic Analysis**

Through the conversations with participants on their experiences of taking part in a community training centre course, stories begin to emerge. By using semi-structured techniques these stories could be recorded and analysed (Esterberg 2002). This analysis can be undertaken in a similar way to analysing literature encouraging “social researchers to pay attention to the language used to describe experiences and to focus on the structure of stories” Esterberg (2002:181).

The semi-structuring of the interview and focus group sessions also allowed for the tagging of the research conversations arranged by

themes. Commonalities between the sessions and the themes were then identified and established. Themes often present no meaning when viewed individually but when grouped together can form a broad picture of a shared experience (Leininger 1985). The thematic analysis will be discussed in more detail in chapter six of the research.

#### **4.10 Ethical Considerations**

In considering ethics in research “ethical practice and ethical codes rest on the principle of assuring the free consent of participants to participate, guarding the confidentiality of the material, and protecting participants from any harm that may ensue from their participation” (Josselson 2007:537). These concerns were to the forefront when fleshing out the idea for the research through to its completion.

One of the biggest concerns for me was informed consent and making sure that everyone was protected both externally through confidentiality but also internally from any adverse thoughts or emotions which may arise because of taking part. While these ethical issues seem to only present themselves at the field research stage, in fact Clarke & Hoggett (2009:21) would contend these “issues are present throughout the whole research process”.

Bond (2015) advocates three factors to consider when devising an ethical approach to research. First, what is the risk and how do you

minimise that risk? Second, how do you make sure the participants are fully informed about the research? And third, what do you get and give to people to show you have their consent?

Risk - in assessing possible risk three questions were considered: What is 'harm'? What is 'risk'? What are the potential benefits? By considering these questions I was better placed to help those taking part to make an informed consent regarding their participation. Asking questions regarding past experiences in CTCs might be embarrassing, insensitive, worrying or upsetting. These concerns were kept in mind when devising the questions (*Appendix 1*) which were kept open. A conversation was had before the actual recorded discussion on the structure of the talk and what kind of questions I would ask. After our discussion, we spoke again to check everyone was okay. It was not envisioned there would be any risk or harm to those taking part in fact I hoped it might be found enjoyable and interesting, even empowering. Getting the opportunity to tell their story in itself might be uplifting. The chance this information might then be used to inform future knowledge on CTCs could be empowering.

Fully Informed – an information sheet (*Appendix 2*) was produced and printed and left on the table in my room at work to see if any learners might pick it up and read. One or two started but no-one finished. I was not surprised due to the writing intensity on the page and given literacy

difficulties of some learners even though a literacy friendly font had been used. I then went away and created the information sheet in a 'comic strip' form and printed this version. Same as before I left the page with the comic strip on the table beside the printed information sheet and all learners went straight for the 'comic strip' and not only read it but asked questions. Armed with this knowledge I uploaded the 'comic strip' to the Facebook page to act as an alternative information page along with the full typed version.



Figure 4.3 Comic Strip on Facebook page

(see Appendix 3 for bigger printout)

Consent - Included in discussions before the taped conversations was a detailed briefing session on the information sheet and consent form. Questions were asked and answered to reassure all present what was happening and how. Following these discussions consent forms were signed and all were asked how they would like to receive the typed copy of our recorded conversation. All gave email addresses and were happy to receive typed copies. It was emphasised to all that they could change their mind at any stage about taking part and if so I would not use anything they had said. Pseudonyms were then chosen which in every case was a great ice breaker before starting the session.

It was hoped by considering all the above aspects in relation to consent, it was not just a 'ticking' process but in fact "an ethic of care rather than rights" (Josselson 2007:540).

As will be seen later in 'What I discovered' - chapter 5 and 'So what'-chapter 6, the conversations were open and engaging. Weak consent can lead to poorer data as participants will try and protect themselves (Boeije 2010). If you are not clear about what happens to the information after the conversations, this can lead to ambiguity (Boeije 2010). There was no payment to anyone taking part, all gave their time freely. All transcriptions were emailed back for final approval and withdrawal in part or in full if requested.

#### **4.11 Limitations of the study**

No research can be truly without limitations (Bloomberg & Volpe 2008). This was anticipated and considered for this research also. By exposing and acknowledging these conditions, which may weaken a study (Rossman et al 2003), it also serves as a means of addressing them. The sample size was not as large as I would have liked, however, it did facilitate a platform for a qualitative “process of interpretation” (Denscombe 2003:268) to emerge. The reliance on ‘gatekeepers’ as a means of getting research participants is also acknowledged as is the use of the internet to initially disseminate information on the research and then to recruit participants. Access and ability to use the internet is not a given for 100% of the population, however, through experience with this cohort of learners, Facebook and its use is widespread. There was also a change that the digital add was read and then discarded without any follow up.

#### **4.12 Reflexivity**

Many researchers putting themselves ‘in the research’ struggle with how much is too much? Some struggle placing their own reactions to the research within the thesis. However, with all these considerations given to the why perhaps we don’t give enough attention to the notion of can it be done and what it might look like. Etherington (2016) advocates the value of critical reflexivity as a way of including ourselves and our experiences through our inner child, adult and parent.

#### **4.13 Summary**

The research design and theoretical perspective is the cornerstone to all research. Many will approach these issues from different angles and differing points of view but all researchers will share “both innovative thinking and a meticulous attention to the detail of data gathering” (May 2001:1). How one decides to do this data gathering is determined by several factors. Denscombe (2005) writes there is no one right way to do research but rather a way that best suits the issue being explored. Also for consideration was my own view of the world and how this view was informed. The researcher plays an important role and their “subjective assessments” (Wolcott 2009:17) can influence how research is conducted. As Bryman (2008) states, the researcher can never fully leave themselves out of any study.

This research was concerned with understanding the experiences of learners of a community training centre. It also involved uncovering meaning which participants attributed to these experiences by way of developing patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas 1994). Alongside this process was my own experiences which were used to try to better understand the views expressed by the participants (Nieswiadomy 1993).

Constructivism attempts to understand and explain the social world from the perspective of the social actors directly involved in the social process



(Burrell & Morgan 1979). While the constructivist view advocates that meaning is constructed, Crotty would argue that meaning is not “merely waiting for someone to come upon it” (1998: 42). The world and the objects in that world may become loaded with possible meaning but their actual meaning cannot come to be until some form of consciousness connects or interlocks with them (Crotty 1998). A tension thus exists in this epistemological stance where on the one hand individuals are endowed with responsibility and choice but on the other hand our social world is stratified by class, gender and race (Frith 1984).

This chapter took the research question and my own beliefs and values into consideration when framing the research design. The theoretical perspective of the research was interpretivism which was informed by a constructivist epistemology. It consisted of a qualitative research method through one interview and two focus group meetings. All sessions were recorded and transcribed with common themes identified for further discussion. All transcripts are available for examination. The next chapter will present and discuss the findings.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### What I discovered

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#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings to emerge from conversations with the research participants. These findings illuminate pieces of information in the participants attempts to tell the story of their experiences (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008). Findings such as food for the soul, significance of friends and connections, finding a job, perceptions of self, advocates for care and lack of choice are detailed.

The research involved conversations with seven young women and men from city and country locations. All participants were asked to choose their own pseudonym. Abigail is 20 years old and from the city. She has just finished her L4 major award and will be starting college in September studying animal care. Ann is 18 years old and from the city. She also completed a L4 major award and is currently working in catering. However, she is going through the recruitment process for the Defence Forces and would hope to start there soon. Sarah is 30 years old and from the country and completed a L5 major award in Business Studies a number of years ago at the CTC. She then progressed to a PLC course and then completed a Degree in Applied Social Studies & Professional Social Care. Paula is 19 and from the country. She completed a L4 major award and will start college in September studying business.

George is 20 and from the city. He has completed a L4 major award and is working in retail. Joseph is 20 and from the city. He has also completed a L4 major award and will start a Journalism course in September. And finally, David is 22 and from the city. He has completed a L4 major award and is working as a Chef.

While small in numbers, everyone provided rich, personal and collective experiences which they expressed in a very open and honest exchange. The conversations were structured loosely in three parts. To give context to their CTC experience, learning experiences before joining the CTC was first, followed by conversations on their time in the CTC and finally reflections on that experience.

## **5.2 Food for the soul**

A big reason for coming to CTCs was the food. From the cereal and toast in the morning; to the scones and jam at break; fry-ups on Thursday/Friday and Sunday dinner one day during the week, this seemed to satisfy a simple basic need for all;

*"A Sunday dinner on one of the days". (Abigail)*

*"On a Friday you get a fry, so it's good". (Ann)*

During any of the conversations there was a notable change in body language when the discussion on food came up. People got animated

when they mentioned the fry to almost licking their lips at the mention of the hot scones with butter and jam.

Genuine interest was expressed in the catering modules also with both full-time and part-time work resulting. Some mentioned it as a life skill, something they would use themselves in the future;

*“Go to the gym and make some healthy food”. (George)*



### 5.3 Significance of friends and connections

Throughout the conversations, the significance of friends was evident. This connection could be both positive and negative, it could either support or discourage someone from attending. On discussing school;

*"People would say, 'I'm not going and you're not going, yeah'?" (David)*

*"Yeah, I'm like 'No I'm not going back'." (Ann)*

*"Yeah, you're like, 'I'm not staying in school on my own'." (George)*

However, this connection could also support someone in a system which they didn't feel a part of;

*"I liked going there because of my friends and boys and that was it, smoking out the back." (Sarah)*

Acknowledgement was given to attendance in the beginning in CTCs being difficult but as friends were made and interest in the course grew, attendance improved;

*"I got more interested in the course and I made friends". (Abigail)*

Of significance was the transference of friendship onto the instructors in CTCs;

*"It's like talking to your friends, the instructors in here, they're great". (Ann)*

*"They're like your friend, you know, so it's like being back in school when you wanted to stay with your friends." (George)*

Very often reference was made to the fact that school wasn't for them that they felt they didn't belong there;

*"I hated it, I hated the teachers, I hated the system, yeah I just didn't want to get up in the mornings, you know?" (George)*

*"I think school, a lot of people don't ... it doesn't gel well with a lot of people". (Sarah)*

*"It's not for everyone". (Abigail)*

Feelings of not belonging and not being understood in some cases led to non-engagement in school which in turn led to behaviour issues:

*"I got bored a lot, I was doodling and not listening to the teacher all the time, being sent out of class for messing and just not being bothered with school, I just hated it." (Sarah)*

#### **5.4 Finding a job**

Whether in school or in the CTC the importance of finding a job was evident. This importance overrode the type of work found. The

emphasise from the family perspective was just to get a job and from themselves just to earn money;

*"I just wanted to work and have money". (Sarah)*

*"I was just told stop messing around and get a job". (George)*

And while initially this feeling was evident, over time they became more conscious of the work they wished to do. Some had left and were already working; however, they also spoke of changing in the future;

*"I'm not saying this is what I want to do for life ..... I just wanted to get a job straight away just to start myself". (George)*

*"My dad worked in a company and the stuff we were doing [in the CTC] would have matched a secretary's job so I was like would you be able to get me a job in there and I'll be a receptionist and he was like yeah, yeah. So that was the aim to do it but then when I got there [to the CTC], things changed and I changed". (Sarah)*

In a society where working and being part of the labour force is of paramount importance this idea of getting a job or employment is their way of identifying themselves as part of society. It is also a means of providing themselves with a sense of safety and security – a future life.

*"[I] just wanted to work in a shop, anywhere to get minimum wage and I would have been happy with that". (Sarah)*

*“One thing I want to do is be able to make myself some fancy food”. (George)*

### **5.5 Perceptions of self**

By far the conversations on previous learning experiences, which for all was second level education, gave a detailed insight into how they felt about themselves before they joined the CTC. How these experiences shaped their perception of themselves and then in turn how their time in the CTC changed these perceptions again.

*“I genuinely didn’t get on in school and didn’t think I could do anything else”. (George)*

*“In school, I was afraid to say what I thought”. (Sarah)*

*“I was nervous, I was really shy coming in”. (Ann)*

*“I always remember at the parent teacher meetings that ‘Sarah has the potential but just needs to put her head down and do it’ and I could never do that just put my head down”. (Sarah)*

Once people got started on their courses they began to feel more confident and weren’t afraid to speak up. One person commented that after a while you;

*“Couldn’t shut me up then”. (Abigail)*



*"It kind of helps with confidence and stuff and I came in and absolutely loved it". (Paula)*

Comparisons were made of themselves before and after and evidence of their increased self-worth emerged. Not only did they believe college could be something for them, they actually applied to college for courses;

*"I wouldn't have been able to organise myself enough before this to actually go to college but they really helped me". (Joseph)*

*"I felt stupid in school and then I felt the opposite of stupid". (Sarah)*



## 5.6 Advocates for care

The relationship between the learners and the instructors in CTCs was particularly highlighted by all. Working in a considerate and inclusive way learners felt part of the process, that their opinion mattered;

*“Tutors respect you as an adult and then you respect them back”.* (Paula)

*“They don't treat you like subordinates”.* (David)

*“It's more team work like, so it's good”.* (Ann)

Caring for the person as a whole and acknowledging that not only are they 'learners' but in fact they are also part of a community and part of society and the future of that society;

*“The thing is they really help you to go further than school .... here they try to help you with actually what happens afterwards”.* (Joseph)

This recognition of a connection or bond between instructors and learners is of vital importance as it acknowledges there are two people in the relationship both sharing their time and themselves to the learning process. Listening to learner's stories and appreciating and valuing these experiences is very important as these stories are what has made them and what will inform how they will engage in the learning process;

*“Getting on with the tutors and they listen to you and they take ten minutes off their day to listen to you moan about something that looking back wasn't that important”. (Sarah)*

Instructors must always see the person behind the learner – the inner child, the emerging adult, the son, the daughter, the father, the mother. Adopting a non-judgemental approach and a caring rapport can act as a model for all relationships and behaviour in general;

*“The tutors respect you like an adult .... like that kind of atmosphere like the tutors actually care”. (Paula)*

Looking at the whole person, it's not just about their module interest or what career they might like to follow, it's also about what they are interested in outside the walls of the training centre and engaging in these interests also;

*“You can get skills outside of your subject, like you can ask for help and whatever hobbies you have and they will be more willing to oblige”. (Joseph)*

Equally so the apparent lack of a relationship between learners and teachers in schools was noted;

*“In school, they don't care what happened to you last night when you got home”. (Sarah)*

In conversations, it was evident learners viewed instructors in a positive light. At times during discussions their physical demeanour changed

when speaking about instructors and it was clear that a strong caring relationship had developed for many;

*"Your face shines up now when you say that"*. (Sandra)

Negative issues of identity and self-worth established in previous learning environments can not only leave people feeling uncomfortable in a classroom setting but perhaps also uncomfortable in themselves. Patience on the part of the instructor is vital to help reassure someone in this situation;

*"Anywhere you went, they'd help"*. (Abigail)

*"It's not like, this is a teacher, this is this and you do what I tell you. It's not like that, it's all fun in here"*. (George)

Praise and success in the modules they were completing also helped greatly in making them feel better about themselves;

*"We had a typing test every morning and we'd see who was the fastest, I was the fastest"*. (Abigail)

Continuous assessment methods used in CTCs far outweighed the exam route in schools;

*"In school, I didn't care what my result was but it was 40% or 50%. Once I passed that was grand but coming here, I was getting 90% and 89% and stuff. I was like what the hell, I couldn't believe it, the confidence goes up straight away".* (Sarah)

Acknowledgement was given also to the smaller classes which are a feature in CTCs against the large classes in school;

*"Because it's a small class as well, you feel it's a better unit than like thirty people".* (George)

*"So, you get along more as well, when you were in a school it was like all different groups".* (Ann)

Comments were also made on the learning/teaching methods in school and the engagement of the learner;

*"They just teach you to memorise things, they don't actually teach you how to learn."* (David)

*"They're fucked in the way that they teach people, like they don't teach you the right way."* (George)

*"There's too many in the class."* (Ann)

Emphasising the practical aspect of CTCs against the academic side of schools;

*"I think in school the teachers did all the things you need in life like reading, writing, history or maths but other subjects, you know, I'm more of a practical person". (David)*

*"[School] just teach you how to be good at it, like they try to help you in school within a school environment". (Joseph)*

*"It wasn't all a big memory test because I remember being in school and I wished my essays were counted towards my mark. I used to love the idea of continuous assessment and then I got here and it's completely different." (Sarah)*

One participant did, however, speak of the relationships with the teachers in school and how these relationships influenced the learning;

*"I'd no problems with teachers, there were a few teachers I liked and then there were a few teachers I didn't like. But when I liked the teacher I did make more of an effort in class then if I didn't, I never did my homework." (Sarah)*

### **5.7 Lack of choice**

When discussing previous learning experiences one of the over-riding feelings was the lack of choice or control people felt, from everyday attendance to what they wore;

*"More of you have to go to school .... you've no choice in the matter". (Sarah)*

*"If you didn't get on with your parents, we got kicked out". (David)*

Another commented on the financial consequences (children's allowance payments) of not attending;

*"My ma wouldn't get her money". (Abigail)*

The consequence for the school was also noted;

*"It would look bad on their records". (Abigail)*

However, never once did anyone mention their right to education which had not being fulfilled. They did not consider themselves in the equation, it was always the consequence to others in them not attending, not valuing themselves as being worthy of this entitlement.

Issues of control were expressed through school rules and regulations;

*"I hated the uniforms, especially in the summer coz they were black". (Ann)*

*"Having the list of rules and regulations and you can't do this and you can't do that and smoking is prohibited and you can't wear your jewellery and all this BS". (Sarah)*

The long arm of the law was mentioned when discussing non-attendance at school;

*"If you drop out of school they literally hunt you down and require notes from parents, it's awful". (George)*

Examples of control within CTCs were expressed through the allocation of learners to particular levels on the NFQ and the lack of choice in choosing modules on the course;

*"When I came in I was just put on Level 4, a lot of people came in and were put on level 3 and level 4". (Ann)*

*"No, we didn't get to pick between modules or anything". (Sarah)*

*"The modules are set for you when you come in". (Ann)*

However, these issues did not appear to be as controlling for them in comparison to their time in school;

*"You were coming from an institutionalised school to a little bit more relaxed freedom". (Sarah)*



Indeed, control of certain matters were handed over to learners, for example around attendance and the fact of coming in and getting paid or not coming in and not getting paid, it was their choice;

*“We were expected to be there when the timetable was on but if we had a doctor's appointment or if we had something on, they understood. We mightn't be paid for it”. (Sarah)*



The position of learner representatives or a learner's forum was discussed but learners didn't remember being part of any such process or if they were, that it was of much benefit;

*"We didn't do anything like that I don't think, not that I can remember". (Paula)*

*"I didn't have any suggestions for educational improvements because everything is perfect, everything works, we don't need a thing in here". (David)*

Reference was made to a meeting which was held with learners to get feedback from them on certain issues but it seemed the process didn't really engage them;

*"You would want to hear all the lads at the meeting when I was there, they were like 'this is a load of shite'." (Joseph)*

## **5.8 Summary**

This chapter set out to give an overview of the conversations which took place through interviews and focus group sessions with past participants of CTCs from an urban and rural area in Ireland. The information was insightful, surprising, rewarding in parts and upsetting in others with the language colourful at times. Discussions on previous learning was a crucial part of the conversations as it provided context to the experiences. Awareness of their lack of choice, the importance of friends and connections, the influence family and society has on them,

their notion of self and the importance of respect and care in the learning environment were all noted. The following chapter will discuss links between these themes and the literature reviewed.



## CHAPER SIX

### So what!

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#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter will pull together how the findings answer the research question and how they relate to the literature. The findings chapter split apart and separated pieces of information in an attempt to tell the research story (Bloomerg and Volpe 2008). The analysis chapter, however, is “an attempt to reconstruct a holistic understanding” (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008:133) of the research. My research question asked:

*In what way does a person-centred approach to learning influence the experiences of past participants of Community Training Centres?*

Semi-structuring the interviews gave way to marking and identifying common ideas and themes across all conversations. ‘Food for the soul’ and the ‘Significance of friends and connections’ in the findings chapter will be discussed under the theme ‘What we need to get moving!’. ‘Finding a job’ and ‘Perceptions of self’ relates to the theme ‘Who do you think you are?’. ‘Advocates for care’ will be discussed as a theme and ‘Beyond the CTC’ will discuss how the recognition of others leads to the endorsement of identity and self-worth. Finally, the idea of ‘Lack of

choice' relates to the theme of 'Recognition and challenges to power in society'.

## **6.2 What we need to get moving!**

The literature reviewed (FÁS 2004) showed a learner-centred approach to learning as one of the founding principles of Community Training Centres (CTCs). This approach puts the learner “at the centre of the learning process” (AONTAS 2017). Procedures such as keyworking, case conferencing, ILPs and tracking where learners are given the opportunity to actively engage in their learning process are crucial and in keeping with a learner-centred approach (FÁS 2004). However, all too often the assumption can be made that learners enter the training centre each day ready and able to learn. Regrettably this is not always the case. A vast space can sometimes exist between the capabilities in which learners enter training centres and where we expect them to be. Timetables are set; projections are made; ratios are adhered to, modules are decided, policies and procedures are ticked and trends are meticulously kept. However, basic needs such as food, security and belonging (Maslow 1962) are sometimes assumed. These needs were highlighted by participants as being something they received in CTCs and which was of great importance to them:

*“cooked food ..... fry on Thursday..... dinner on one of the days” (Abigail)*

Receiving payment in the training centre was discussed too as not just a benefit but a necessity. Participants very often contribute to family finances both directly by giving some of their training allowance to a parent or guardian and indirectly through children's allowance payments. These payments offered a sense of safety and security (Maslow 1962). Non-attendance and lateness can cause a withdrawal of these monies. Not only can this provide genuine hardship for learners but it can damage that sense of security and safety which CTCs need to be cognisant of through their role in providing a person-centred approach to learning.

“That was the benefit, that I was getting paid to do the course”. (Sarah)

Once these needs of food and security are satisfied people are then ready to share themselves with others (Maslow 1962). This can be achieved through friendships and a sense of belonging and connection (Maslow 1962). All participants noted the friends and connections they had made with others in the centre. Initially, some acknowledged this was difficult but as time passed and they began to feel more at ease and settled in the centre this became easier.

“I think it was just getting on with everyone and your opinion mattered”. (Paula)

It is useful to use the 'deficient needs' as described by Maslow (1962) to try and understand what learners need in order to begin the process of

learning. These needs alone are not motivation and they are not in a rigid fixed order (Maslow 1962). Instead they are needs which vary from day to day from person to person but which when satisfied can help lead to a happier, healthier person who can perhaps begin to explore their passion in life.

### **6.3 Who do you think you are?**

The importance of getting a job to participants seems to be paramount and in most cases, it didn't really matter what job once they were earning money. This could be a societal or class influence where the aim of education according to Willis (1997) is to produce workers and maintain the social class structure. Another way to view this is the security, stability and the sense of identity on an individual level which finding a job and earning money can give. Having your own money leads to a certain amount of steadiness and autonomy, no longer depending on others. Money gives you the means perhaps to establish more consistent ways of providing food, shelter and clothing for yourself. This individual responsibility could be viewed through Erikson's identity and life cycle theory (1980) as a step towards becoming a balanced person, one who is ready and capable of taking their place in society. Some learners negotiate this step with ease while others change employment a few times with some even retuning to the centre.

*"I'm not saying this is what I want to do for life". (George)*

Navigating this stage within a 2-year programme is sometimes not possible for some CTC learners. Many times, learners finish in the centre without this individual responsibility and are not ready for work or further training and they are then classed as drop-outs. Sometimes they will start further training but will drop out of this also. The CTC tracking system is a means of addressing this personal need but to what end? What happens during the tracking process to help develop this personal responsibility? If the learner has still not identified their next step at the end of the tracking period what next? This is in fact a failure on CTCs to adequately allow for each person's development. While CTCs are advocating a learner-centred approach to learning on the one hand, on the other this learning must then be completed within a set time frame. One could question if this is particularly learner-centred?

Adverse childhood experiences (NEPS 2017) and the effect on the developing child (Erikson 1980) must also be considered a feature of CTC learners. Navigating the conflicts we face in life between our individual desires and the social world without significant warmth, love and physical care can affect our growth and development (Erikson 1980). Withdrawal, eating problems, lack of initiative, negativity and compulsive behaviour can arise (Erikson 1980).



Feelings of mistrust, humiliation, embarrassment, shame and inferiority can prevail (Erikson 1980).

*"Talking to us like we were thicks". (Abigail)*

*"I felt stupid in school". (Sarah)*

Being mindful of these feelings and working with learners in ways which can negate some of these experiences is vital. Comments like above are some of the ways which show the negative feelings participants had about themselves before joining the CTC. It also shows the perceptions they believed others had of them. These feelings can be associated with 'negative conditions of worth' (Rogers 1980). A person-centred approach to learning may dispel or reverse these negative conditions through listening to learners without judging them and fully understanding their world from their point of view. This can help learners achieve congruence (Rogers 1969), a similarity or semblance between who they are (self) and who they feel they should be (ideal self). The role of the teacher or instructor is vital in this relationship and in fostering healthy growth.

## 6.4 Advocates for Care

The conversations with participants showed how the use of inclusive teaching methods affirmed ability and confidence.

*“because it wasn’t all a big memory test .... love the idea of continuous assessment .... just the way it was assessed and the way you wanted to write it”. (Sarah)*

*“it was good .... like you’d find something funny on YouTube and then he goes around with a memory stick and then on Friday whoever is like the funniest was picked to either go early or, I don’t know, I can’t really remember but it was good”. (Abigail)*

The literature review showed how important instructors are in the learning process as facilitators and in promoting unconditional positive regard and empathy (Rogers 1980). CTC instructors through fostering a learner-centred approach (AONTAS 2017, FÁS 2004) can help facilitate the development of the person as a whole. Tending to what Maslow (1962) refers to as ‘deficient needs’ can also allow learners to engage more. This care can foster the healthy growth and development of the individual (Rogers 1980, Erikson 1980). A caring rapport can also model behaviour and relationships where one feeds the other. Care and humanity are very important when working with learners who are considered vulnerable. Sometimes this vulnerability can lead to attention seeking. Learners may not be used to people caring for them and making them feel appreciated thus they can react to this by craving more attention.

The “*respect ... patience ... help ... humour ... friendship*” of instructors highlighted by participants helped in moving forward in their lives. However, these conversations also revealed the vulnerability that can ensue on behalf of the instructors in being open and sharing of oneself. The nature of our public systems be they health, education or welfare is a reflection on our society as a whole. How we treat the old, the sick and the vulnerable in our society speaks of who and what we are as a people. For those who work in these areas we must always be vigilant on the issue of self-care. The constant need for attention by learners be that positive or negative can be particularly draining on instructors. Instructors and management alike need to allow and facilitate elements of self-care and in particular, self-identity to permeate. A day can be filled with highs and lows going from a particularly good session with a group to an emotional outburst through verbal or physical means, all of which can be mentally and physically exhausting for instructors. Supervision although provided by some centres, can be sparse and irregular. Attention can be placed more on critical reflection as a means to changes in practice rather than on a debriefing session for staff. This debriefing and emotional sustenance very often falls to peer support within the organisation yet time and backing for these groupings are scarce. Meetings primarily concentrate on learner’s needs with sparse concern given to the well-being of staff. Learners can and do push boundaries, staff have been known to be at the end of these incidents. All of these issues can have a detrimental effect on instructor’s health,

well-being and personal lives. The over reliance on peer support can also lead to a culture of normalising behaviour on the part of learners and acceptance of this behaviour on the part of staff. For the staff and particularly for the learner this could be a precarious development. Also, the desensitization of staff can occur through this collective peer setting. Additionally, it can be hard to gain perspective on concerns when everyone working within the issues are so intimately involved within it.

### **6.5 Beyond the CTC – Identity and self-worth**

Identity is a key feature in our development as it refers to how we deal with issues in relation to who we are (Erikson 1980). Identity is organised, is learned and is active at all times (Erikson 1980). The enhancement of positive identity is crucial when working with people who to this point may not have received affirmations of their worth both individually as a person but also as a member of a community and society. A person's evaluation of themselves, their self-esteem (Maslow 1962) can influence identity formation. This identity formation can in turn influence the emotions and performance related to it. So, a positive self-evaluation can encourage a person while a negative self-evaluation can upset a person's performance and emotions. If this negative self-evaluation is continued over a long period of time and if it centres on issues which cannot be changed or acquired easily, a disruption to a person's performance and emotions can happen.

Literature has shown how adverse childhood experiences can affect a person's development and engagement. Participants have also commented on the negative experiences they have had in school. Issues such as not liking the subjects, the way subjects were then examined, and rules and regulations which restricted their self-expression.

*"they were very strict on uniform .... you couldn't have your jacket on, everything had to be perfect and you couldn't have slits in your trousers .... nose studs, she would take out your nose studs and then lost them"*  
(Sarah)

Examples were also given by participants where conditions and learning approaches in CTCs helped improve self-esteem issues.

*"it was small classes and that you call the tutors by their name, it wasn't Miss and you could go out for a fag .... you were able to wear your own clothes, you got paid for it".* (Sarah)

*"It was for a website, for making up a website and I done mine on printers .... showing how to change cartridges .... I had to film myself and then I had to film myself doing it, so I did it".* (Abigail)

This collaborative engagement between instructors and learners helps improve self-confidence which in turn improves self-esteem.

“He [instructor] helped me do the form and everything and they accepted me”. (Joseph)

The recognition of others through acceptance of self-expression (own clothes), equality (first names) all help to endorse identity and self-worth. So too can recognition through the achievement of modules/awards and while we can argue a case against learning outcomes, certification and levels this recognition of others can also help in improving self-worth and identity formation.

*“I kind of wanted parent teacher meetings because I was doing better than what I was in school and I wanted, because I remember getting parent teacher meetings coming up and oh god I have to be good now for the next few weeks because my parents will know all about it and I would get a bollicking when I went home, all the time. Never had a good parent teacher meeting and I really wanted them here because I was doing well. I just wanted my dad to come in and get X to tell him “no she is doing really well”. I just wanted him to know that.”.* (Sarah)

This work, however, is continual and worry was expressed by some in moving forward to further training where this support either personally or financially may not follow. One participant mentioned how the training

allowance would be significantly lower which would result in difficulties for her.

*“she [her mother] gets fifty but when I get forty she won’t get anything so she’s going to be at me”.* (Abigail)

If we subscribe to Erikson’s theory (1980) we then believe life is a succession of stages, sequential and evitable. It means we are continually in this realm of negotiation and balance, it will not end when a learner’s 2-years are completed in a CTC but will continue through their life into the next stage. Organisations and society as a whole need to understand that a set period of time is not going to solve all problems.

### **6.6 Recognition and challenges to power in society**

Participant observations and recognition of power in society was expressed through their lack of power or choice. Comments about not having a choice in going to school with pressure from family and the authorities to attend. Also, when they did go to school not having any choice when they were there with regards to wearing a uniform and self-expression. When participants started in CTCs these concerns were the first things that directly affected them and coming from an ‘institutionalised school’ initially this freedom was liberating. Being able to wear your own clothes, express yourself through body art, first name bases with staff and to an extent control of your money was refreshing.

If you were in you got paid and if you were not in you didn't, the choice was yours, or was it?

All this lack of choice/power relates to what Foucault (2010) would term the art of governing. The techniques and strategies which governments employ to produce the perfect obedient citizen who will go where they are told, when they are told and do what they are told. By putting learner's payments in their own hands this results in learners applying this control to themselves. With an emphasis on achieving modules and major awards within a set timeframe and 'progressing' up to the next level, efficiency, productivity and outputs are encouraged. These management values combined with the idea of a society that puts profit before people with education and healthcare seen as a commodity introduces the concept of New Managerialism, the executor of neoliberalism.

However, participants did recognise illusions of power when discussing a meeting they were involved in looking for feedback. Having given suggestions, they felt it wasn't really what the organisers were looking for.

*"They just said "yeah, like we need something more on the mark", you know". (David)*

This emphasises the importance of proper meaningful engagement, not coming in with an agenda.



A challenge to power and hope was also expressed when discussing qualifications.

*“Like in the past maybe people would care a lot about the Leaving Cert but I feel that now is a good time to prove that that’s not exactly the case and somebody can be successful without having to go through all the education”. (George)*

### **6.7 Summary**

This chapter pulled together the findings with the literature reviewed to present a holistic understanding of the research. The themes presented were What we need to get moving; Who do you think you are?; Advocates for care; Beyond the CTC Identity and self-worth and finally Recognition and challenges to power in society. Following will be the final chapter and will conclude the research.



## CHAPER SEVEN

### What next?

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#### 7.1 Introduction

This research began with an invitation to explore. An invitation to explore the complexities of a section of our further education and training sector through the research and the experiences presented in this study. It has certainly informed my understanding of the sector and has led to a greater appreciation of the wider context which Community Training Centres area part of. The research set out to answer the following question:

*In what way does a person-centred approach to learning influence the experiences of past participants of Community Training Centres?*

The question was driven by my desire to hear the learner's stories and to facilitate their voice to be heard. Also as a community educator these 'stories' offer a vital insight to the world of the learner which in the collective classroom we share is critical. The research also aimed to explore the role of CTCs and how the learners in CTC's experienced this form of learning to other more formal routes such as school. Through further exploring these experiences and the literature influences of person-centred learning could be uncovered.

## **7.2 The needs and difficulties of early school leavers**

The need for Community Training Centres arose with concerns for young people who had left school early with little or no qualifications. It was also to address the unequal treatment of children in an education system which had failed them not where they had failed. Social stratification through class and neoliberalism policies which compounds this class division contributed to young people leaving school early and will continue to do so unless societal change happens. Compounding this failure of our education system is a failure of society to look after their most treasured asset, their children, whether it be in areas of health, education or community. Adverse childhood experiences and the effect on development and identity are a particular concern for early school leavers. As a result, CTC learners need to be viewed in a wider context than simply fodder for the further training or employment market.

## **7.3 Person-centred approaches to learning**

Person-centred learning approaches puts the learner at the centre of the learning process not the syllabus and not the organisation. In CTCs examples include learner needs assessments, individual learning plans, keyworking, case conferencing and tracking. The work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow are particularly useful in this context where a holistic approach to learning is recommended for example looking at learner needs before even beginning the process of learning. All the participants found this approach to learning in CTCs beneficial and if

school was not working for someone would recommend a CTC. However, most also said that if school was working then it was better to stay as the Leaving Certificate was recognised more. Features of person-centre learning such as unconditional positive regard, empathy and the teacher as facilitator in the learning process were all highlighted in conversations, in particular the relationship with instructors.

#### **7.4 Recommendations**

These recommendations are based on the research and analysis of the findings in this research and as are follows:

##### *Recommendation 1*

While person-centred approaches to learning are the underlying guidelines for CTCs and are, in most cases, implemented, care and attention needs to be given to how they are implemented and if they are being done with the learner at the centre and not some business plan objective. Neoliberalism and new managerialism objectives are always present and their “prioritisation of efficiency and effectiveness .. at the expense of more broadly-based moral and social values” (Lynch 2014) pose a threat.

##### *Recommendation 2*

Being open and sharing of oneself may lead to vulnerability on the part of the instructors regarding their own self-care. Supervision and care of

staff needs to continue and improve if CTCs are to hold on to the valuable staff which they possess. As the back bone of the organisation, instructors need "to keep their hearts alive in settings where people too often lose heart" (Palmer 2007).

### *Recommendation 3*

A more comprehensive study needs to be completed with CTC staff and learners to get a better understanding of their hopes and aspirations for the organisation. Desk research and quantitative analysis are not in keeping with the person-centred, holistic approach which they advocate for their organisation.

## **7.5 Concluding remarks**

There is no one theory of learning that can be applied to education but instead elements of theories can be used to help facilitate the process. The profile of CTC learners and the features of person-centred learning as envisioned by Maslow and Rogers would suggest a good match of learner needs to education outcomes. The role of the instructor as facilitator is very important in treating the learner as a person, being genuine, having a positive regard for all, showing empathy and accepting the learner for who they are and in so doing helping them navigate through what might otherwise be a difficult time. In some of the more traditional methodologies of learning, feelings and behaviours are somewhat ignored.

Learners in CTCs very often have had a negative experience of the education system to date and it is only through innovative approaches can this experience be altered. Allowing learners to get more involved in their training, providing variety and above all tailoring the programme around their interests and experiences can only lead to greater involvement and enjoyment. This change in the power dynamics of the class in some way changes the role of the learner and instructor, both becoming whole persons with thoughts and feelings.

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## Appendix 1

### Sample Questions

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Initial part of interview – establishing the context of the experience

Previous education

1. Looking back at your time in school, did you enjoy going?
  2. Do you think those memories helped shape your view on school and education in general?
  3. At home was school important, were you encouraged to go?
  4. Do you think school was important to your friends?
  5. Did you feel judged in school and how?
  6. Did you feel under pressure in school around exams and marks?
  7. Did you get involved in class, did you ask questions or volunteer information?
  8. Do you think the group (in the class/centre) motivated and helped each other to succeed?
  9. Were you ever encouraged by teachers or family to think about going to college?
  10. (If in college now) Would you be the first to attend from your family?
-

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## Second phase of interview

### Details of experience

1. Why did you decide to take part in a course at a CTC?
2. How did you hear about the course you decided to do?
3. What do you think were the positive parts to the training centre you were in if any?
4. What do you think were the negative parts to the training centre if any?
5. Did you feel judged in the centre and how?
6. Did you feel under pressure around modules/exams and marks?
7. Did you get involved in class, did you ask questions or volunteer information?
8. Were you ever encouraged by the staff to think about going to college?
9. Do you think the group (in the class/centre) motivated and helped each other to succeed?
10. Who do you feel was the most help to you in helping you make your future decisions the instructor, manager, advocate, counsellor, other?
11. What and/or Who do you think was the driving force behind your decision to progress to further training after the CTC?



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Final phase of interview

Reflection on the experience

1. Before you started in the training centre had you any ideas of what it would be like and did it live up to these expectations or fall below them?
2. How did the experience you had in the training centre differ from school or did it?
3. Did you need to motivate yourself to complete the course?
4. Was the learning any more independent than that from school?
5. Who was your biggest encouragement to continue the course instructors/friends/ family/other?
6. Was the course enjoyable?
7. What do you feel you have gained, if anything, with regards to you personally, financially (chance of a job/better job), confidence, outlook on life?
8. Would you encourage others to come to a CTC?
9. Would there be any advice you would give them?
10. Do you feel it has improved your life circumstances and would you do it again?
11. In a word, could you describe your experience in school, in a CTC and of learning/education in general?

## Appendix 2

### Information Sheet for Possible Participants

#### **A Research Project looking at learner's experiences of a Community Training Centre**

##### **Introduction**

I would like to invite you to take part in this project, which is about the experience you had in a Community Training Centre. I am also interested in how much control or power you feel you had over your course and learning.

##### **Why am I doing the project?**

Having worked in a community training centre for almost 15 years and watched many learners like yourself pass through the doors, I would love to find out what you genuinely felt about your time in the centre. I hope the project might also provide useful information for those in the Community Training Centre sector who run the courses.

##### **Why have you been asked to take part?**

You have been asked to take part as you once attended a course at a Community Training Centre and so could perhaps add a lot of valuable information to the project.

##### **Do you have to take part?**

No – taking part is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you do not have to nor do you have to give a reason why and you will not be contacted again.

If you agree to take part, there is a consent form attached for you to sign. This information sheet and a copy of the consent form will then be given to you. Throughout the process from beginning to end, you are free to stop at any time.

##### **What will the project involve?**

The project will involve a number of interviews with past learners of Community Training Centres which will then be studied. Your individual participation will involve one interview lasting no more than one hour.

##### **What will you have to do if you agree to take part?**

1. Contact me through message on Facebook, email or phone to let me know you are interested.
2. We will arrange to meet up at a time and place easy for you.
3. Complete the attached consent form and bring to our meeting.
4. There will be one single interview with myself during which I will ask you some questions.
5. This interview will be taped and a copy of the recording along with a typed version of the conversation will be sent to you afterwards. If you wish to withdraw any or all of the information given you may do so.

##### **Will your participation in the project remain confidential?**

If you agree to take part, I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear. Any pieces from what you say that are quoted in the final paper will be entirely anonymous.

### **What will happen to the information given?**

The information will be kept confidential for the length of the project. On completion of the project, it will be kept for a further six months and then destroyed.

### **What will happen to the results?**

The results will be put in to a thesis - a thesis is a type of essay on a subject which includes comments from those interviewed. This thesis is also part of the requirements for a Master in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University which I am doing.

The thesis will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and an external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course and anyone who may be interested from the Community Training Centre network. The study may also be published in a research journal.

### **What are the possible advantages of taking part?**

You may find the project interesting and enjoy answering questions about the course you completed. Once the project is finished it could provide useful information for future courses which Community Training Centres run.

### **What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**

I don't expect any disadvantages for you in taking part; however, it is possible you might be uncomfortable talking about your experiences in this way. At the end of the interview I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling.

### **Any further queries?**

If you need further information, you can contact me:

Sandra O'Keeffe  
(085) 327 9843

[sandra.okeeffe.2017@mum](mailto:sandra.okeeffe.2017@mumail.ie)

[ail.ie](http://ail.ie)

Facebook

### **What happens now?**

If you are interested in taking part in the project please contact me through a message on Facebook, email or phone and we can make the necessary arrangements.

If you decide you would rather not participate in the project, simply ignore this message and no further contact will be made.

**Researcher:** Sandra O'Keeffe  
Masters student, Maynooth University

**Supervisor:** Camilla Fitzsimons  
School of Adult Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co Kildare

## Consent Form

I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to take part in a **research project looking at learner's experiences of a Community Training Centre**. The reason for the project and how it will run has been explained to me in writing through an Information Sheet and verbally in conversation.

I am taking part willingly.

I give permission for my interview with Sandra O'Keeffe to be recorded.

I understand that I can pull out of the project, without any effect, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am taking part.

I understand that I can take back my permission to use any of the information gathered in the interview within two weeks of it happening, in which case the information will be deleted.

I understand that my identity will be kept unknown.

I understand that hidden extracts from my interview may be referred to in the thesis and any following printed works if I give permission below.

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

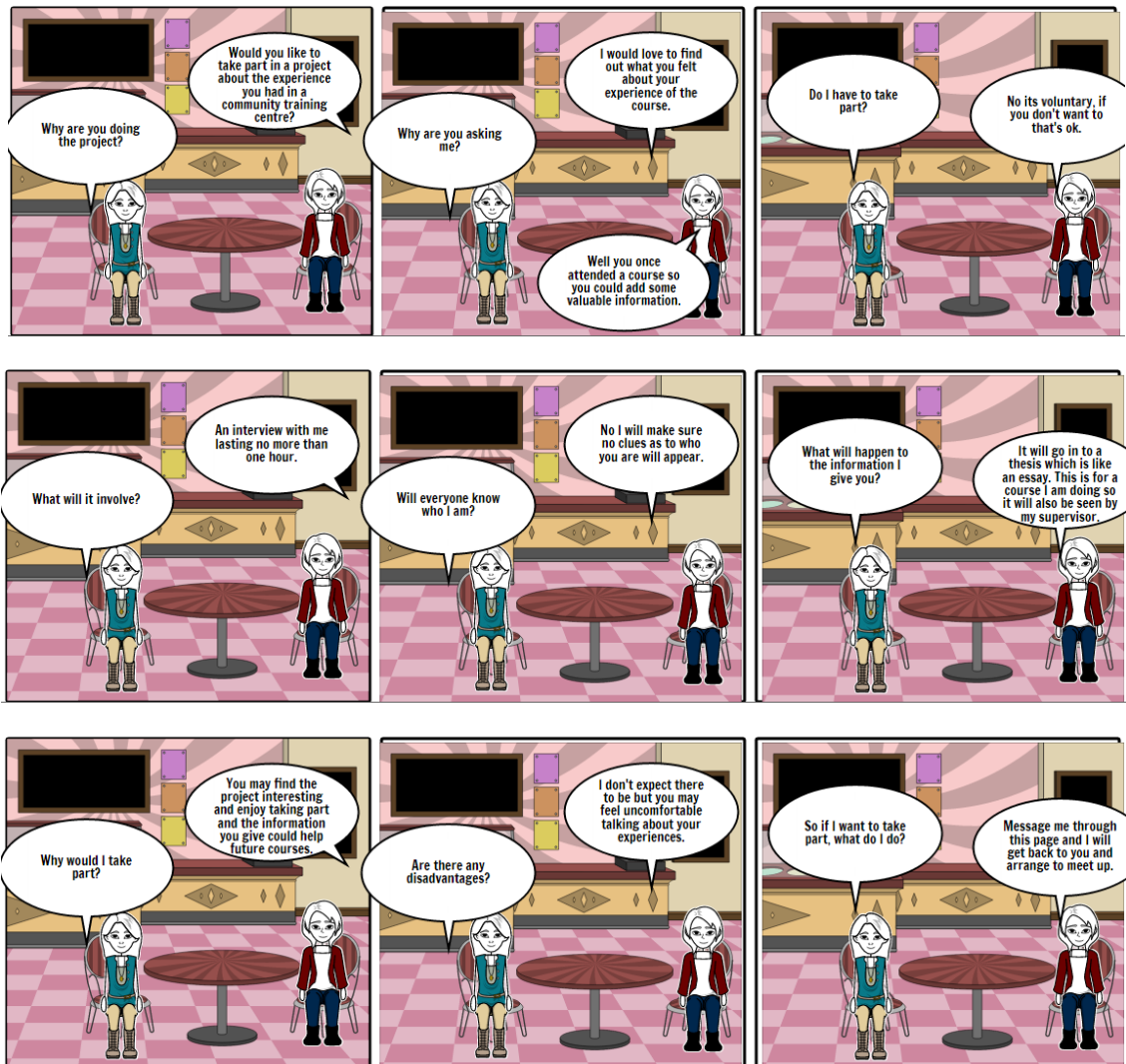
**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher:** Sandra O'Keeffe  
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(085) 327 9843  
[sandra.okeeffe.2017@mumail.ie](mailto:sandra.okeeffe.2017@mumail.ie)  
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**Supervisor:** Camilla Fitzsimons  
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[camilla.fitzsimons@nuim.ie](mailto:camilla.fitzsimons@nuim.ie)

## Appendix 3

### Information Sheet Comic Strip in full



## Appendix 4

### Consent form

<b>Consent Form</b>
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I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to take part in **a research project looking at learner's experiences of a Community Training Centre**. The reason for the project and how it will run has been explained to me in writing through an Information Sheet and verbally in conversation.

I am taking part willingly.

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I understand that I can pull out of the project, without any effect, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am taking part.

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I understand that my identity will be kept unknown.

I understand that hidden extracts from my interview may be referred to in the thesis and any following printed works if I give permission below.

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher:** Sandra O'Keeffe  
Masters student, Maynooth University  
(085) 327 9843  
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