Bored with school: An exploration of young persons' experiences of becoming disengaged from school and attending alternative provision

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Abstract

Student disengagement is a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions. Whilst past research has addressed factors which lead students to become disengaged from school, little research has focused on identifying what works to prevent student disengagement. This research aimed to explore the views of young persons in their final year of compulsory schooling and who were attending an Alternative Learning Programme (ALP). The research also aimed to develop a theory which could explain the process of student disengagement. In order to investigate this process, grounded theory was used to analyse the data collected from the interviews. A mixed methods research design was applied. The quantitative approach involved the distribution of a questionnaire to all the students attending the ALP to collect demographic information, to inform which areas to explore in the qualitative approach and to select participants for the following phase. The data was analysed through SPSS and descriptive statistics were produced. In the qualitative approach, ten semi-structured interviews were carried out. The participants answered questions about their engagement at school. The emergent theory states that student disengagement is likely to occur when there is an interaction between the variables; unmet needs, unappealing curriculum and hostile relationships. The participants attributed re-engagement in learning at the ALP to vocational subjects which were considered as practical and hands-on. Students also considered the curriculum as appropriate for their level. School staff were perceived as caring and supportive and this was key to making them develop a sense of belonging at school. The findings from this research indicate the strong impact teachers have on their students. Thus, teachers need to increase their awareness on how much they can influence their students. Finally, when students find their learning as useful, relevant, and are able to succeed, they are more likely to be engaged at school.

Keywords: Student disengagement, alternative learning programme, curriculum, student-teacher relationships

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Dedication

To all the children who do not have access to education

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank the young persons at the ALP who took the time and interest to participate in my research. I am grateful for your contribution as without you this research would not have been possible. I enjoyed spending time listening to your views.

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List of Abbreviations

ALP   Alternative Learning Programme

EC   European Commission

EP   Educational Psychologist

ESL   Early School Leavers

LSA   Learning Support Assistant

NEET   Not in Education, Employment or Training

SES   Socioeconomic Status

SMT   Senior Management Team

TA   Teaching Assistant

TEP   Trainee Educational Psychologist

UK   United Kingdom

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview of chapter

This research aims to outline the process of student disengagement from mainstream school. The hope is that the research will be able to give a voice to young people to inform professionals about their journey of becoming disengaged from school. The research also aims to give students the opportunity to give suggestions as to what could possibly change within the education system to help students remain engaged at school. A definition of student disengagement will be sought so as to understand the context in which this term will be used throughout the research. This chapter will progress by exploring why research in this area is important both within the local and international context. An overview of the Maltese education system will be presented to help the reader understand this system's structure. The researcher's position regarding interest in researching the area of student disengagement and any hopes arising from this research will also be identified. The purpose and aim of this research will be briefly outlined. To conclude this chapter, the relevance and impact of the current research will be explored to ascertain how it contributes to previous research knowledge in the area of student disengagement.

1.2 Defining student disengagement

Student engagement at school is considered as multifaceted in nature. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) categorise engagement in the following three dimensions:

Behavioural engagement – students who are behaviourally engaged usually participate and get involved in academic and social activities whilst complying with behavioural norms. Through this type of engagement, positive academic outcomes can be achieved and school dropout prevented.

Emotional engagement – students' emotional engagement refers to reactive affections they hold towards their school and teachers. Those students who are emotionally engaged typically show interest, enjoyment and a sense of belonging.

Cognitive engagement – students who are cognitively engaged are invested in their learning process and ready to make an effort to accomplish challenging tasks.

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Each of these dimensions have a polarity i.e. the student can either be engaged, whereby an attitude which denotes compliance with norms and expectations can be observed, or disengaged (Trowler, 2010). This means that the student's attitude is considered to be challenging, confronting and obstructive.

Students' level of engagement in the different dimensions can vary in intensity. A student can engage positively in one or more of the dimensions whilst engaging negatively in the others. Thus, it is debatable whether for a student to be considered as disengaged from school, he/she needs to be disengaged in all of the dimensions. For the purpose of this research, the researcher's understanding of disengagement is that students, to some extent, experience disengagement in all of the dimensions. These different engagement dimensions are interlinked thus, the likelihood is that once disengagement has occurred, the students' behaviour, attitude, emotional well-being and academic accomplishments are impacted. As Coates (2007, p.122) states, engagement is "a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience".

 In line with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) definition of student engagement, disengagement can be defined as lacking participation in learning, not belonging to the school community and avoiding involvement in school related activities. Disengagement is described as a process rather than an event which involves individuals, the community, society and the environment at school (Dale, 2010). When the school and classroom environment support diversity, a student is likely to be engaged. However, disengagement increases when a student does not comply with the school's norms and values of conformity (Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier, 2004). Expectations for classroom conduct vary nonetheless, some basic norms and values remain.

It can be argued that disengagement is a construct of society. Thus, diverse cultures might share different values and expectations of student engagement. Consequently, student disengagement needs to be conceptualised by looking at the wider context. Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) present a critical literature that challenges some assumptions about student engagement. One of the arguments they put forward is that educational institutions have to show what they do and why attending that institution will benefit a prospective student. Thus, student engagement tends to be based on managerial and economically driven goals. The authors also discuss the concept of performativity where students are required to comply with targets and performance indicators so that their performance as learners can be audited. In 2015, the United Kingdom (UK) government's teaching excellence framework started to

partly define student engagement in terms of effort and therefore teachers should reward the time and effort students put into their studies (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). This is still a foreign concept within the Maltese context where students' learning progress tends to be measured through academic attainment.

1.3 The importance of research investigating student disengagement

> Learning and succeeding in school requires active engagement. Engaging adolescents, including those who have become disengaged and alienated from school, is not an easy task. Academic motivation decreases steadily from the early grades of elementary school into high school. Furthermore, adolescents are too old and too independent to follow teachers' demands out of obedience, and many are too young, inexperienced, or uninformed to fully appreciate the value of succeeding in school.

> (National Research Council, 2004, p.1)

Students spend at least a decade in compulsory schooling thus, it is important to understand more about the process of disengagement to identify why and how it happens, and to prevent students from going through this process. By identifying factors that help students to remain engaged at school, their interest and motivation to learn are likely to be sustained. If educators understand better their students' learning experiences, positive changes can occur leading students to have a more meaningful experience of education. The quote (National Research Council, 2004) states that academic motivation decreases as students get older. If this is the case, then research needs to identify what happens across the years and how this decline in motivation to learn can be prevented. The current research aims to look into differences between primary and secondary school and to identify whether there are any differences between the two levels which affect engagement. The National Research Council (2004) also makes reference to the value of succeeding in school. Students have different reasons as to why they become disengaged from school. Thus, exploring students' views on education can lead to a better understanding of the core issues behind student disengagement.

In 2013, the Maltese education system introduced an Alternative Learning Programme (ALP) aimed at students in their final year of secondary mainstream school, opting not to sit for any Ordinary Level examinations (GCSEs) (Government of Malta, 2016a). The curriculum of this programme focuses on vocational subjects with designated workshops situated in the school allowing students to engage in 'hands-on' tasks. Thus, the practical element of learning prevails over theory at the ALP. Another aim of the ALP is to provide students with basic skills and qualifications to be employable whilst also enticing them to consider furthering their studies (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a). Students who are referred to

the ALP are usually considered as cognitively disengaged from mainstream school by professionals working with them and possibly disengaged behaviourally and emotionally as well. The present research aims to explore how students' engagement at school may differ in a different learning environment, possibly according to one which can suit the students' needs better. Hence, the research aims to identify whether a change in extrinsic variables can stimulate students to become re-engaged in the learning process. The findings could help identify what needs to be different in schools to help students be more engaged and motivated to learn and if they have become disengaged, understand how to re-engage them.

Investigating the process of student disengagement can lead to a better understanding of this process. Research findings can assist in the development of preventative measures whereby students avoid becoming disengaged. When disengagement is apparent, further knowledge of this area can inform educators as to what strategies can be applied to re-engage previously disengaged students. Literature reviews on human motivation have suggested that steps such as providing students with options and involving them in the decision making process aid in addressing issues related to school engagement (UCLA, 2011). In this report, the authors go on to state that expressing preferences and having the opportunity to be involved in decisions can lead to greater motivation and academic gains, whilst a decrease in aggressive behaviour is also experienced by the students. Better outcomes are also observed when students are involved in goal setting as higher commitment to achieving set goals is experienced. "There is a vast, multidisciplinary literature about factors that facilitate or obstruct student learning" (Lund Dean & Jolly, 2012, p.228). Nonetheless, the process of student disengagement is a phenomenon which is still experienced by students. Thus, perhaps the way forward is to address student disengagement from a different angle whilst identifying which and how current systems need to change. Giving a voice to the students and exploring with them ways to avoid disengagement could be a way for this task to be approached.

1.4 The Maltese education structure

Formal education in Malta is provided by state schools or private schools with the latter being divided into church and independent schools. State schools are free and primary state schools are found within most towns and villages (Government of Malta, 2015). Primary and secondary state schools are grouped according to geographical regions so as to form part of a College with a total of ten Colleges within the Maltese education system (Government of Malta, 2016b). The education system is structured into four stages: pre-school (ages three to five), primary (ages five to eleven), secondary (ages eleven to sixteen) and tertiary education.

Attending school is compulsory between the ages of five and sixteen (National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE), 2009). Since Malta is a bilingual country, both the Maltese and English languages are formally taught at school (Government of Malta, 2015). Prior to 2014, secondary state schools consisted of single-sex cohorts after which they transitioned to co-education (Directorate for Educational Services, 2014). In line with this transition, schools are currently phasing students in Years 7 and 8 to their respective Middle Schools and students in Years 9, 10 and 11 to Senior Schools. Once compulsory education is completed, students can opt to further their studies either through an academic stream or a vocational stream offered by different colleges and institutions such as: Sixth Form Colleges, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) and the University of Malta (NCHE, 2009).

Prior to 2011, Year 6 students had to sit for exams so as to determine the type of state secondary school they would attend. Students who passed their Junior Lyceum exams transitioned to a Junior Lyceum school whereas students who did not pass these exams were admitted to an Area Secondary school (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports, 2008). The report by the Ministry goes on to state that these exams put the children under a lot of anxiety and stress as the outcome of the mentioned exams would determine the students' future. Thus, these exams had a great impact on the children's physical, psychological and emotional well-being leaving little free time for extra-curricular activities. The 11+ examination system was reviewed to address some of the shortcomings of the exam-oriented education system in Malta. The end of Year 6 examinations became a national benchmark to determine students' achievements. Nonetheless, the results from these exams were not to determine which type of school the students would attend. Following primary school, students would transition to a secondary school according to the geographical region where they resided. Currently, Colleges may organise secondary classes as mixed ability classes and for the core subjects; Maths, Maltese and English, organised into setting or bands (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports, 2008).

1.5 Context of the research

The European Commission (EC) (2013) defines early school leavers (ESL) as those individuals who are between 18 to 24 years old, have achieved the minimum of secondary education and have decided to stop furthering their studies. By 2020, the EC is aiming to decrease the ESL rate to less than 10%. In a span of 13 years, Malta has experienced a high percentage drop rate in ESL, from 54.2% in 2000 to 20.9% in 2013 (National Statistics

Office, 2014). Nonetheless, in comparison to other European Union countries, Malta still has one of the highest percentage rates of ESL. Repercussions brought about by ESL are usually related to the economic sector since young people who leave the education system prematurely are less employable due to a lack of skills and qualifications (EC, 2013). The Commission states that "investing in education helps to break the cycle of deprivation and poverty leading to social exclusion" (EC, 2013, p.6). Thus, in order to acquire personal, social and economic security, a certain level of formal education needs to be achieved by individuals (Villalba, 2014).

The Maltese government set up a 'Strategic plan for the prevention of early school leaving in Malta' due to the ESL problem being faced by the country (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a). Their purpose was to increase student engagement. One of the strategies recommended was the introduction of vocational subjects such as Hospitality, in secondary schools. This strategy provides students with more alternatives which can stimulate their learning whilst also reducing the load of academic subjects. As the targets set by the EU need to be met in the next three years, this research fits with current issues within the local and international context. An understanding of what leads students to become disengaged from school can provide a clearer picture as to how this phenomenon can be tackled. If the students' time at school is a pleasant one, they will most likely be interested to attend and therefore avoid dropping out of school. A framework targeting the prevention, intervention and compensation measures can thus be developed by taking into consideration what the students themselves have to say about the process of disengagement.

An initiative entitled 'Youth Guarantee' was set up in different EU countries. Malta is one of the countries benefitting from this project. Its aim is to tackle youth unemployment and to ensure that all young people who are under twenty five years of age are engaged in either employment, apprenticeship or further education (EC, 2014). The Commission states that there needs to be strong cooperation between different stakeholders whilst investing in early intervention and creating reforms to improve vocational education and training systems. The local and international context are focused on providing young people with opportunities to be engaged within society and to become active citizens. The 'Framework for the education strategy for Malta 2014-2024' (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b) has been developed in such a way to sustain foundations, create alternatives and increase employability. The broad goals behind this strategy, which are in line with European and world benchmarks include: increasing participation in becoming lifelong and adult learners,

supporting educational achievement of children who are considered to be at risk and are from deprived backgrounds, reducing the high rate of ESL and increasing the levels of student attainment in further, vocational, and tertiary education or training. These goals and strategies are likely to be met if research identifies what works with re-engaging disengaged students and identifying preventative measures which avoid such a process from occurring.

1.6 Researcher position

Considering the high number of Maltese students who are ESL, as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) I am interested in learning more about this area whilst gaining an understanding of what my role and contribution towards dealing with student disengagement can be. Although strategies are being implemented to reduce ESL, the present focus may be on shrinking the numbers as opposed to giving young people a chance to make their voices heard. The disengagement process can be understood better if young people have an opportunity to share their opinions. In this way, recommendations made following data analysis will be based on the views of students in conjunction with current theories.

One of my core values is education. I believe that education can provide opportunities to acquire new knowledge about the world, become more open to new experiences and to be equipped with skills which aid in personal development. On a recent trip to Indonesia I had the opportunity to talk to some locals who disclosed that in their country education is not free. Thus, only the elite can afford to send their children to school or those parents who have a relatively stable job but need to work very long hours in order to afford sending them to school. In this situation, young people are very aware of the importance of learning and have an intense desire to learn but are unable to do so. This experience made me reflect on all those students who have access to education and different pathways which could provide them with a stable future but still opt to disengage from school. After this experience I became even more curious to understand the process of disengagement and therefore decided to research this topic for my Doctoral thesis.

Throughout the research process I had the opportunity to reflect further on why education is a core value for me. I became aware that my background has influenced and shaped my beliefs about the disengagement process. The Maltese education system is an exam-oriented one and students are encouraged to do well during their schooling years by obtaining good grades during exams. These marks eventually determine how much a student has succeeded at school. Since I used to do well at school, I fit in quite well with this system and I reinforced the message given by the education system that academic achievement would lead me to

experience success in my life. In order to become this type of person I chose to be engaged at school. Since the opposite of engagement is disengagement, I believe that a person who is disengaged from school is likely to have less opportunities which can lead to a higher quality of living and the possibility to succeed at a career level. I also believe that engagement in the learning process can enable students to develop skills to help them function better in society. Although throughout the research process I became aware of these assumptions and beliefs I have about student disengagement, I was also open to have them challenged by the reports of the participants.

Now that I am on the journey to becoming an Educational Psychologist (EP) I feel even more responsible to be proactive and create change to address disengagement. Through this research I wanted to understand the experience of being disengaged from school by gaining the young persons' views and learning about different constructs of education. I also wanted to be able to facilitate the process of engagement for those who have the opportunity to learn at school. In this way I hope to maximise learning experiences for students.

1.7 Purpose and aims of current research

The purpose of this research was to explore the views of young people who have experienced disengagement from mainstream school. Furthermore, since the ALP is a recent introduction to the Maltese education system, this research wanted to explore the views of students who were benefitting from an alternative provision. The research aimed to create a theory or model of disengagement which could explain how the process of student disengagement occurs and to help identify preventative measures enabling students to become engaged in the learning process. The theory which emerged from this explorative study was considered alongside the current literature.

1.8 An initial trawl of research into student disengagement

The literature review for this research was carried out once all the data was analysed so as to avoid being influenced by the current findings. This process allowed for the emergent findings to be truly grounded in the data. Nonetheless, once the research process commenced, a brief overview of current literature was sought in order to guide the researcher and out of which guiding research questions emerged. An indication as to which psychological theories underpin this research were also identified. These theories relate to the concepts of self-efficacy, motivation and the ecological system which will be discussed in further detail in the Literature Review chapter.

The area of student disengagement has been researched by a range of disciplines, including sociological, economical and psychological. A literature search on this topic revealed that so far, research has attempted to understand how the educational system, socio-economic factors and the environment affect ESL. Different studies have attempted to pin down the factors which usually lead students to become disengaged from school (Walsh, 2006; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Locally, the area of ESL was under-researched until a few years ago and in fact an initial literature search within the Maltese context yielded few results. However, due to the political weight being given by the EC and Maltese government, this area has gained more importance recently giving rise to a national strategy addressing ESL (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a). Previous research carried out locally has focused on identifying factors which lead to ESL. Common themes as to why students become disengaged from school include: self-esteem, motivation, peer groups, family influence and background, the education system and the economic sector (Mifsud, 2013; Spiteri, 2014). This research aims to go a step further by focusing on the process of disengagement and understanding how the participants' views of school changed throughout the years. Also, previous research (Hodgson, 2007; Lee & Breen, 2007; Lessard et al., 2008) has been carried out with young people who had already left school whereas in the current research the participants were still attending compulsory school.

Current literature on the topic of student disengagement has failed to address what young people themselves think could be different within the education system to prevent student disengagement. This is what the proposed research aims to discover. Whilst acknowledging the participants' past experiences it also seeks their views on which strategies can support and engage young people at school. Thus, this research aims to give the young persons a voice which can create meaningful change for other young people who could be in their position.

Due to the recent set up of the ALP in Malta, its effectiveness has not yet been determined. The present research does not seek to evaluate effectiveness but rather to explore whether students are provided with an alternative which addresses their disengagement. At the ALP there is also a focus on vocational subjects. Within the international context, involving students in vocational subjects and activities has been researched. Haughey (2009) evaluated an alternative vocational educational programme. The findings showed that those students who followed this programme started attending school more regularly. An increase in the amount of students who went on to further education or training was also noted. The current

research aims to explore whether vocational educational programmes such as the one offered at the ALP yield similar positive effects.

1.9 Summary of chapter

This chapter sought to identify the definition of student disengagement and highlighted the context in which this term will be used. The chapter progressed to identify why carrying out research in the area of student disengagement is important. Within the current local and international context there is political pressure to increase student engagement so as to prevent school dropouts. An overview of the Maltese education system was also included in this chapter to provide the reader with the context of the school system in Malta. The purpose and aim of this research were briefly discussed. Then, light was shed on the researcher's position and why student disengagement is an area of interest for the researcher. The value of education was acknowledged as sparking the interest to research the area under investigation. Finally, this chapter sought to explore how the current research contributes to previous knowledge on student disengagement. The Methodology chapter will be discussed next. It will be presented after the Introduction chapter so as to follow the order in which the research process was carried out.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Overview of chapter

This chapter will present the conceptual framework for the research i.e. the ontological and epistemological position underpinning this research. This section will be followed by reviewing the purpose and aims of the research and the introduction of the research questions. The research design, recruitment process and participants' context will be identified. Then, data collection techniques and a timeline outlining the data collection process will be highlighted. This section will be followed by a discussion of methodology and will then progress to identify the validity and trustworthiness of the research process. To conclude, the ethical considerations arising for this research will also be indicated.

2.2 Conceptual framework

Crotty (1988) suggests that a research proposal needs to consider which methodology and methods will be employed to carry out the research whilst justifying why such choices were made. Throughout the process of developing a conceptual framework, certain questions need to be asked. Such questions evolve around the consideration of the epistemology informing the research, the theoretical perspective underlying the methodology, the methodology (plan of action) itself linking methods to outcomes and the methods (techniques and procedures) that will be used (Creswell, 2003). Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe paradigms as a set of beliefs representing a worldview and which direct thinking and action. Every researcher carrying out a piece of research will have their own belief system and they need to be aware of how they position themselves in relationship to the research and the paradigm employed. This process of reflexivity aids transparency about the researcher's own views and avoids misinterpreting participants' views as their own. Consequently, depending on which research paradigm the researcher espouses, the ontology, epistemology, methodology and method will follow (Creswell, 2014). Ontology seeks to understand assumptions made about reality and how reality is perceived, whereas epistemology is concerned with understanding how we gain knowledge of different realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The methodology is the process of finding out the knowledge sought after, whilst the method is the actual technique used (Creswell, 2003). These four components which make up the research paradigm will be discussed in further detail in the following sections.

2.2.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Initially, research in early education and psychology was approached through a positivist paradigm which viewed scientific knowledge as objective, certain and accurate (Mertens, 2010). The author explains that the postpositivist movement rejected this view; that what can be studied is limited to what can be observed. Whilst postpositivists still believe in objectivity and generalisability, they also believe that truth can be based on probability rather than certainty. Since the positivist and postpositivist paradigms did not give a voice to the people, the transformative paradigm emerged so as to allow individuals who have been marginalised by society an opportunity to make their voices heard. Through the active collaboration between the participants and the researcher, the voices of the participants can truly be heard (Mertens, 2010). Such a process can increase social justice and aims to achieve equal rights. Pragmatism is another worldview paradigm which does not see the world as an absolute unity; truth is what works to understand the phenomenon being researched (Creswell, 2003).

The constructivist paradigm views the world as socially constructed. Thus, there is no one reality but multiple realities can co-exist since each individual will construct reality in their own way, usually influenced by social and historical contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Individuals seek to understand their world and develop subjective meanings accordingly, meanings which are both varied and multiple (Creswell, 2003). Throughout the process of the study, the participants' perceptions of reality may also change. The researcher needs to be careful to base their interpretation of the collected data on the participants' views and avoid giving interpretations which do not reflect the participants' true experience. The current research aimed to explore how the participants view disengagement from school and to gather their views on attending an ALP. The researcher acknowledged that although the phenomenon of school disengagement was being explored, the participants who were interviewed could construct reality in different ways. Thus, although the participants could have common views, their own individual realities were acknowledged. Each participant's view was explored in-depth through the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. This technique provided the opportunity to capture better what the participants' reality is and how this reality has been shaped.

Given the researcher's strong belief in the existence of multiple realities and the importance of factors such as family, culture and history in shaping one's truth, this research was carried out from a social constructivist perspective. The researcher wanted to provide an opportunity to all the participants to express themselves and truly have a chance to make their individual

voice heard without the need to categorise their truth in one particular way; one truth which needs to fit all.

The pragmatic worldview was also considered for this research. Pragmatism is oriented "towards solving practical problems in the real world" (Feilzer, 2010, p8) rather than on assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Pragmatism in mixed methods research assumes that the usefulness of any mixed methods design can be known in advance. However, determining what 'works' can be quite difficult and can be decided once the research is completed and findings interpreted. One of the reasons why the pragmatic worldview was rejected is because it did not provide the researcher with a clear framework to follow during the research process. Also, it did not highlight people's voices and for this research it was important to capture the voice of the young people.

The constructivist paradigm fit well with the qualitative aspect of the mixed methods design. The participants' reality and views of the world could be explored through this research whilst making each and every voice of the participants count. The quantitative aspect was also approached through the constructivist paradigm. Although the participants' responses were constrained to the choices the researcher presented in the questionnaire, their individual reality was still considered within the provided responses. Moreover, the questionnaire aimed to provide guidance as to the development of the interview guide. Thus, the quantitative data was utilised in a way which supported the qualitative data.

Constructivist epistemology seeks to understand how a person's worldview is captured. The subjectivist epistemology acknowledges that knowledge cannot exist without people constructing it. Each individual is active in constructing their own reality based on their background, experience and circumstances (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Consequently, multiple interpretations of any given situation will exist. The construction of such meaning occurs since individuals engage with the world whilst they are interpreting it. Qualitative researchers manage to capture these perspectives and knowledge of the world through a variety of means which include open-ended questions so that participants can express their views (Creswell, 2003). Whilst carrying out research, staying true to the participants' views and experiences is important so that their reality is reflected as much as possible through the researcher's interpretations. The use of direct quotations from the participants is one way which can help the researcher to stay true to the participants' views (Mertens, 2010). In the Results chapter, several quotations from the participants will be presented to reflect their views as much as possible.

2.3 Purpose of the research

Fox, Martin and Green (2007) state that when a researcher undertakes a piece of research, it needs to be underpinned by a purpose. Exploratory research attempts to understand more about an area which is under researched whereas descriptive research tries to accurately portray events, situations and people. Explanatory research delves into explaining the relationship between phenomena. An opportunity to create change and empower the participants is sought through action research and finally, evaluative research attempts to establish the worth of something (Robson, 2002). The purpose of this research was exploratory since it aimed to explore further the phenomenon of the process of disengagement from school. One of its aims was to explore the views of young persons who were in their final year of compulsory schooling and attending a specific learning programme as an alternative to mainstream school. The exploration of the participants' views sought to delve into the process of what led the participants to become disengaged from school and how this occurred across the years. The researcher also explored the participants' views on what could be different within the Maltese education system so as to prevent other students from becoming disengaged. Since the ALP is a recent initiative in Malta it was hoped that the researcher could explore how this provision might fit with the participants' future plans and whether it has re-engaged them in the learning process.

Robson (2002) suggests that one of the advantages of using exploratory research is that a phenomenon may be explored in a new light and the new findings put into the context of the current literature. Within the Maltese context, previous research has focused on young people's views considered to be disengaged from school who had already left school whereas the present research gained the views of students who were in their final year of compulsory school. Thus, at the time these students were interviewed, they were still going through direct experiences linked to disengagement from school. The choice of the year group in this research was quite significant as it led to the development of new knowledge and enabled a better understanding of students' views and difficulties they faced whilst going through the process of disengagement.

2.4 Research questions

Research questions aid researchers to define what they want to find out from their proposed research. Research questions are also helpful at the end of a research so as to define how successful the research has been i.e. if the research findings answered the aims of the research (Robson, 2011). The research questions put forward in this study aimed to explore students'

views on their schooling experience. These students were in their final year of compulsory schooling and attending an alternative learning programme. The questions asked by the researcher aimed to gain in-depth knowledge of what was happening for these students. The research questions were as follows:

1. What do students attending their final year of compulsory school have to say about disengagement from school?
2. What do participants think could prevent students from becoming disengaged from school?
3. How does attending an Alternative Learning Programme fit with students' future plans?

2.5 Research design

Given the exploratory nature of the research and the aim to develop a theory which could explain the process of student disengagement, grounded theory was deemed as the best fit to this methodology. The use of grounded theory aimed to generate a theory grounded in the data itself suggesting what the process of disengagement from school is about. This theory can be tested in the future with other cohorts attending an alternative provision or other educational institutions both within the local and international context. The flexibility of grounded theory allowed for a number of things: the establishment of background knowledge to determine who attended the ALP, in-depth interviews to gain the views of students who were attending the ALP and the development of a theory to explain how disengagement comes about.

Although there are different versions of grounded theory, Charmaz (2006) identified common features between the different versions. These include: simultaneous collection and analysis of data, making use of theoretical sampling to refine categories, writing analytical memos whilst coding, as well as writing and integrating categories into a theoretical framework. Codes and categories are developed from the gathered data and not through pre-existing literature. In order for the researcher not to be influenced by current literature, the literature review for the present research was carried out after the data was analysed. The social constructionist version of grounded theory introduced by Charmaz (2006) was the version through which this research was approached. According to this author, any created categories and concepts are the result of the interaction between the researcher and the field. Thus, the theoretical framework developed at the end of the research process is constructed by the researcher's perspective and understanding of the collected data. In this approach it is acknowledged that the theory produced is not the only truth about the data but constitutes one

particular reading of it. Charmaz's version of grounded theory was selected since within this social constructivist framework, the emergent theory acknowledges that it is one interpretation of the data which is co-constructed by the researcher and participants. The researcher also recognises that the participants' interpretations to the same phenomenon is subjective. Thus, each participant constructed their own world based on prior experiences. In view of these arguments, Charmaz's version was selected as it fitted closely with the ontology and epistemology discussed earlier on in this chapter.

The mixed methods design was selected to support this research since the researcher wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of what the process of becoming disengaged from school meant for students. In order to obtain a larger number of students' views, an initial survey was carried out [see Appendix 1]. The aim of this tool was to gain an understanding of the background of the students attending the ALP, their views of school across the years and what their goals for the future were. Based on the outcomes of the quantitative element, a semi-structured interview was drafted and the selection of the participants to be interviewed was also made. Thus, the combination of the qualitative and quantitative approaches provided the researcher with the opportunity to obtain in-depth information through the qualitative approach and to obtain larger amounts of data through the quantitative element of the research.

The qualitative aspect of the research design allows more flexibility than the quantitative research design such as being able to add or alter an interview question. In exploratory research like the present research, qualitative methods provide participants with the opportunity to express themselves freely rather than being forced to makes choices from fixed responses (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). Thus, the responses to interview questions are usually rich and exploratory in nature as well as meaningful to the participant.

In this research, the qualitative approach was dominant since greater emphasis was placed on this research design. The quantitative approach was used as a supportive, secondary approach coming first in order to allow aspects of the qualitative approach to develop on the findings and to guide the design of the interview. During the design of the research it was also important to consider the timing of the qualitative and quantitative strands. Timing refers to the time data sets are collected and most importantly to the order in which the results from

the qualitative and quantitative data sets are used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Sequential timing was applied for this research since the two strands were carried out in two distinct phases. The first phase of the research was the quantitative phase whereby it provided a context as to who attends the ALP. The larger sample also provided more views on the disengagement process and views on attending an ALP. Data collected at this phase was analysed prior to moving on to the second phase in order to establish whether the questions which were going to be asked in the following phase were relevant to what the researcher wanted to find out. The first phase was also important since participants for the second phase were recruited through this stage. The second phase of the research, which was qualitative in nature, followed the quantitative one. This phase involved a qualitative exploration of the disengagement process from school of students who were attending the ALP. The second phase provided the main source of data for this research.

2.6 Research participants and recruitment procedures

Sampling refers to the method which is used to select a group of people who belong to a particular population (Mertens, 2010). The selected individuals become the participants who take part in the research. In the current research two recruitment processes occurred; one for the quantitative design and another one for the qualitative design. It was envisaged that the questionnaire would be distributed to all the cohort of students who were attending the ALP at the time the data was collected. The choice of carrying out the research at the ALP stemmed from the criteria the school sets to select its cohort. Students attending this programme need to be in their final year of compulsory schooling opting not to sit for any O Level examinations. These students are usually considered by school staff as being disengaged from school and who frequently have challenging or disruptive behaviour. At present, locally there is only one school offering this type of alternative programme for students who need to attend compulsory school. Hence, the selection of the sample for this research occurred quite naturally.

The total number of students attending the ALP totalled two hundred and thirty. All of these students were handed a copy of the questionnaire. One hundred and forty-five students returned it, amounting to around 63% of the total population. Five of the students who returned the questionnaire only marked a few responses thus, their questionnaire was dismissed due to an excessive amount of missing information. The sample constituted of both males and females and their ages ranged from fourteen to seventeen.

In order to select participants for the second phase of the research, another sheet was attached to the questionnaire [see Appendix 1] asking the participants whether they wanted to be considered for the interview. Purposive sampling was applied at this stage, whereby the researcher identified the participants based on a variety of criteria including specialist knowledge about the phenomenon being researched as well as willingness to participate in the research (Oliver, 2006). To be considered for the study, the participants had to be attending the ALP on a full time basis. In order to have a true representation of the population, all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds were considered.

Twelve potential participants, 10 girls and 2 boys, showed interest to be interviewed. All these participants met the researcher for a brief individual meeting to ascertain their suitability and motivation to take part in the interview. Since the researcher wanted a more equal balance between boys and girls, some of the groups were asked whether there were any other boys that wanted to participate. Following this meeting, one more boy came forward. All the 3 boys and 7 of the girls were interviewed. The girls' selection depended on how motivated they were to share their views during the briefing meeting. Since data saturation occurred once ten interviews were analysed, two further participants were not interviewed. These students were told that whilst their interest was greatly appreciated, for the time being the researcher did not need new information. Nonetheless, they were going to be placed on a reserve list so that if further data would be required by the researcher they would be contacted. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the participants' details. All the participants were given a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity.

Participant	Gender	Age	Vocational Subjects	Future Plans
Elena	Female	15	Beauty and Hairdressing	MCAST – hairdressing course
Grace	Female	15	Beauty and Hairdressing	MCAST - hairdressing course
Julian	Male	15	Sports and Drama	MCAST – sports course
Holly	Female	17	Beauty and Hairdressing	MCAST - hairdressing course
Pamela	Female	15	Beauty and Hairdressing	MCAST - hairdressing course

Jane	Female	16	Beauty and Hairdressing	Youth.Inc – education programme
Fleur	Female	16	Beauty and Hairdressing	MCAST – beauty course
Sean	Male	16	Hospitality and Sports	Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS)
Greg	Male	15	Sports and Drama	Youth.Inc – education programme
Kelly	Female	16	Beauty and Hairdressing	MCAST – beauty course

Table 2.1- Participant information

All the participants who were interviewed were handed an information sheet [see Appendix 2] explaining the interview process and the researcher's role. Prior to the interviews, the information sheet was read to the participants so as to ensure that they understood its content whilst having the possibility to ask questions. Once the process was clear, the participants were also asked to sign a consent form found at the back of the information sheet. Consent from the participants' parents was also sought. This was done by asking the participants to hand a copy of the consent form [see Appendix 3] to their parents and to return the signed copy to the researcher.

2.7 Strategies for data gathering

2.7.1 Semi-structured interviews

The main aim behind this research was to explore young people's views on their experience of school across the years and what led them to become disengaged from school. In order to obtain such in-depth information, the gathered data was of a qualitative nature. In the second phase of the research, an exploration of such views was sought through one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the students. In semi-structured interviews questions tend to be pre-set but flexibility in the order and which type of questions are asked is allowed (Robson, 2011). This is done so that the researcher can focus on the participants' disclosures and be open to having a fluid conversation with them rather than a rigid one. Interviews provided an opportunity to the participants to open up to the researcher as much as they felt comfortable. The questions asked were open-ended so as not to limit the participants with a fixed answer. When semi-structured interviews are used, the participants' perceptions can be captured and their reality can be depicted through their own words. Thus, this method of collecting data allows the researcher to understand how each person constructs their own world. This method

also fits with the selected ontological position of the researcher. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the participants to discuss and clarify complex questions (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Futing, 2004). The authors state that if the researcher wants to probe further into an area the participant shows interest in, or if the researcher picks up on information which was not evident in previous conversations, further exploration during the interview can occur.

An interview guide [see Appendix 4] was developed in order to guide the researcher with potential questions to be asked during the interviews. The questions aimed to gain sufficient information from the participants to be able to answer the research questions. Before any questions on the topic were asked, the researcher attempted to build a rapport with the participants so as to make them feel at ease. A few examples of the questions asked were: "Can you tell me something about yourself?", "What do you enjoy doing in your free time?" and "What are your hobbies?" The first set of questions of the interview guide aimed to explore the views of the participants at different stages of their schooling experience. Thus, any similarities and differences between primary and secondary school could be identified. The participants were also asked questions to understand more about what they liked and disliked about school as well as any factors which may have influenced them in becoming disengaged from school. The interviews progressed to ask questions which could answer the second research question i.e., what could be different within the Maltese education system to assist students in being engaged at school. This was done by asking them directly what could be different but also through indirect questions which explored retrospectively what they would have done differently at school and asking the participants whether they had any regrets. Finally, the last set of questions asked during the interview focused on the participants' views of attending the ALP. Nonetheless, throughout the interview, exploring their views on the ALP occurred in a flowing manner and questions in relation to the ALP were asked when they fitted with what the participants were discussing.

2.7.2 Questionnaires

The quantitative element of the research involved the distribution of the questionnaire to all the participants. Questionnaires are a valuable source of data collection which allow the possibility to gather data from large samples (Langdridge, 2004). The author also states that questionnaires can be used to collect opinions, beliefs, as well as attitudes whilst also being a convenient way of collecting background data. In fact, the purpose of using a questionnaire for this research was to collect demographic information about the participants and to obtain

an overview of their views at mainstream school and at the ALP. The questionnaire was not designed with the purpose to draw inferential statistics from the data. It wanted to gather the views of a larger sample of students attending the ALP. Thus, in addition to the ten views gained through the qualitative interviews, views on school disengagement could also be explored on a larger scale even though this was not done in-depth. The questions asked in the questionnaire aimed to explore factors which could have led the participants to become disengaged from school. Other questions attempted to identify the participants' views on education and whether they thought that a better education could provide them with a better future. Finally, the questionnaire moved on to explore the participants' views on attending an ALP.

2.8 The process of data collection

 The first step to start collecting data involved contacting the Assistant Head of the ALP in order to discuss the data collection process. This meeting was held in the first week of April 2016. The Assistant Head was very supportive of this research and after a few issues were discussed, the next stage could begin. A week following this meeting, the researcher went back to the school and addressed all the students during a weekly school assembly. The students were informed about the questionnaire that would be distributed to all students and that if they were interested, they could also sign up to be considered for the interviews. The Assistant Head asked one of the Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) working at the school to help out with the distribution of the questionnaire. This LSA visited each group and gave a copy to all the students who wanted to take part. Once the students filled in the anonymous questionnaire they returned it to the LSA who in turn returned all of the questionnaires to the Assistant Head. Initially, the researcher considered visiting each group herself in order to explain the questionnaire and be available to answer questions should the participants have any. However, upon a discussion with the Assistant Head, it was decided that for practical and ethical reasons it would be more appropriate if a school staff member approached the students. Once the participants who wanted to be considered for the interviews came forward, the researcher met with each participant individually so as to brief them and explain what would happen next.

The participants were also given a consent form which had to be signed by their parents and returned to the researcher. The participants had to be reminded several times to bring the signed consent form with them to school. Each time the researcher visited the school, she reminded those students who had not yet returned the parent consent form to remember to do

so. The semi-structured interviews were held at school. The interviews were held in the guidance room since it consisted of smaller cubicles which allowed for privacy. The cubicles were furnished with armchairs providing a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere for the participants and making the interview seem less formal. The interviews lasted between twenty to thirty minutes each, depending on how much the participants had to share. Following consent from the participants, the researcher used a tape recorder to audio record all of the interviews. This process facilitated the transcription of the interviews. Since grounded theory was the selected methodology to analyse the qualitative data, data collection and analysis had to occur concurrently. Also, the time frame to collect the data was quite limited; from April to May. In June, the students had their exams and therefore access to the participants was limited until the end of May.

The first two interviews were held in the fourth week of April 2016 after which, the interviews were immediately transcribed and analysed. The process of how the data was analysed will be described in detail in the next section. Following the first two interviews, another two were held in the first week of May. Once their analysis was completed, another three interviews were carried out in the second week of May amongst which were two of the boys' interviews. Another two interviews were held in the third week of May and finally the last interview took place during the last week of May. Figure 2.1 illustrates the data collection process discussed above.

1st week of April 2016	• Met with the Assistant Head of the ALP
2nd week of April 2016	• Addressed students during weekly school assembly • Distributed the questionnaire
3rd week of April 2016	• Collected the questionnaire • Identified the participants for the interviews • Debriefed the participants about the interview process
4th week of April 2016	• The first two semi-structured interviews were held
1st week of May 2016	• Semi-structured interviews 3 and 4 were held
2nd week of May 2016	• Semi-structured interviews 5, 6 and 7 were held
3rd week of May 2016	• Semi-structured interviews 8 and 9 were held
4th week of May 2016	• Semi-structured interview 10 was held

Figure 2.1 - Overview of the data collection process

2.9 Data analysis

2.9.1 Quantitative approach

Data analysis for the quantitative element of this research occurred through the statistics package SPSS whereby the descriptive statistics command was used to produce results of a descriptive nature. Descriptive statistics enable the researcher to summarise data but they do not explore the data inferentially where relationships between variables would be found (Langdridge, 2004). Since the questionnaire aimed to give a context to the research, establishing relationships between variables was not sought in this research. The selected method of data analysis was able to produce a frequencies dialogue box, tables and charts which represented graphically the analysed data [see Chapter 3].

2.9.2 Qualitative approach

Grounded theory was the selected method to analyse the qualitative data. This methodology is used to develop theory grounded in the collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). "Grounded theory is both the process of category identification and integration (as *method*), and its product (as *theory*)" (Willig, 2008, p.35). It provides guidelines as to how categories can be identified, how links between categories can be made and how relationships between such categories can be established. Willig (2008) explains that grounded theory applied as a theory, is also the end-product of the data analysis stage providing an explanatory framework to understand the phenomenon being researched. Hence, the choice of using grounded theory as a method to analyse the qualitative data was to generate a theory grounded in the data itself. Rather than fitting the participants' views to a current theory, the emergent theory reflected their own views. The findings yielded knowledge about the processes, beliefs, perceptions and issues which disengaged students encounter during their time at school. This knowledge can also be useful in helping to create change by providing an understanding of what disengages students and what can prevent them from going through the disengagement process.

Collecting, coding and analysing the data at the same time was a useful process since emergent themes provided an indication of which data would be useful to collect next. If the data were to be collected all at once and analysed at the end, it would not have been possible to alter the focus of data collection. Once the transcripts were produced, the first step to start analysing the data was to create codes. Coding refers to segments of data which are labelled and which simultaneously categorise and summarise each piece of data (Charmaz, 2006). The process of coding eventually leads to the identification of categories. Grounded theory coding usually occurs in two phases. In the first phase, initial descriptive codes are given to the data. This can be done either line by line or in segments. In the present research, line by line coding was mostly applied and whenever possible the descriptive codes which were created emerged from the words which the participants themselves used. This was done to reflect the participants' views as much as possible. The second phase of coding is more focused. It uses the most frequent initial codes to synthesise and integrate large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2006).

Categories are instances such as events and processes which share central features or characteristics with each other (Willig, 2008). The categories can either be at a low level of abstraction, termed as descriptive labels, or at a higher level of abstraction which tend to be

analytical categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Thus, the emerging categories are of two kinds; those constructed by the researcher and those abstracted from the research situation whereby the participants' own words are used as a category (Glaser, 1965). In this research, categories were developed for each interview and then compared with each other. An example of a developed category was 'interests' whereby the participants mentioned different hobbies they had, such as; playing football, dancing and drawing. This category was at a low level since it described a simple action the participants enjoyed doing. An example of a higher level category was 'resiliency' where the participants mentioned different episodes which have influenced their capacity to become resilient young people. Constant comparative analysis refers to the process of identifying similarities and differences between emerging categories (Willig, 2008). In turn, differences within a category give rise to subcategories. Comparison of data occurs both within the same interview and in different interviews. In this research, once the initial categories emerged, they were compared to other categories which emerged from the same interview so as to identify similarities and differences. Then, as further data was being collected and analysed, the emerging categories were constantly being compared to previously identified categories.

Theoretical sampling in grounded theory means that pertinent data is collected so that categories can be refined to develop the emerging theory. The researcher goes back to the empirical world to collect more data which can challenge or elaborate categories until saturation of existing categories occurs (Charmaz, 2006). As data was being collected and analysed, the categories of emotional well-being and learning process were amongst the most common. Thus, following data analysis of the first few interviews, the researcher inquired further into these areas when the next set of interviews were held. Theoretical saturation occurred after the tenth interview was carried out. Categories are said to be saturated when fresh data no longer identifies new categories (Willig, 2008). Memo writing is another important process in grounded theory whereby the researcher transforms the analysed data into a theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Writing memos involves sorting, analysing and coding data which then leads to the discovery of patterns in the data. Through memos, the researcher keeps a record of how categories are developed and of any identified relationships between such categories. The next chapter will provide details on the use of memos which aided the development of the emergent theory.

2.10 Quality criteria

Criteria to judging the excellence of quantitative studies are known to be well-established. On the contrary, the standards for evaluating qualitative methodologies are more difficult to identify (Yardley, 2000). Reliability refers to the stability of a research over time whereas validity is concerned with the extent to which a tool really measures what it intends to measure (Langdridge, 2004). For the questionnaire of the present research, face validity was considered since this type of validity ascertains whether the questions asked appear to measure what they intend to measure. This was the case for the questionnaire as when the data was analysed, the type of data produced was what the researcher had foreseen. Considering the fact that the questionnaire aimed to collect demographics and participants' views as opposed to inferential statistics, the reliability of the questionnaire was not tested.

Meyrick (2006) presents a model [see Appendix 5] which can lead to building good qualitative research. This model is based on the principles of transparency and systematicity whilst it provides a choice of techniques which can be applied at different stages within the qualitative research process. It also represents different epistemological approaches. Meyrick's model attempts to draw quality into the whole process of doing qualitative research. Thus, the researcher needs to be attentive throughout all the different stages rather than at a particular stage only. By doing so, the validity of any conclusions made is likely to increase. Quality indicators for qualitative research depend on the purpose and approach of the study (Mertens, 2010). As per Meyrick's model mentioned above, Mertens (2010) states that in order to achieve good quality in qualitative research, the researcher needs to document carefully how the research was conducted, how the data was analysed and interpreted, as well as the thinking processes of the researcher.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) aimed to develop constructs which address the shortcomings of providing quality criteria for qualitative research. These constructs revolve around the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility is one of the criteria which establishes the trustworthiness of a research i.e. how congruent the findings are with the reality of the phenomenon being researched (Shenton, 2004). In this research, member checking occurred once all the interviews were carried out in order to increase the credibility of the research. This was achieved by meeting once again with all the participants on an individual basis and asking them whether the interpretations of the researcher reflected their views.

Transferability in qualitative research parallels external validity in postpositivist research whereby generalisation of the findings is based on the assumption that the sample used in the research represents the population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If someone is reading a research, that person needs to make judgements to determine the degree of similarities and differences between the presented research situations and their own research process (Mertens, 2010). Thus, in order to meet the transferability criteria, the researcher needs to provide sufficient details to enable the reader to make such judgements. This research provided ample detail describing the context giving rise to investigating the area of student disengagement, the background of the participants and the ALP, a description of the time and place where the data was collected, and a detailed account of the research design. The constructivist paradigm acknowledges that multiple realities exist thus, a variation in results can be expected even if the same research with identical conditions had to be carried out again (Mertens, 2010). In order to increase the dependability of a qualitative research, the parallel criterion of reliability in the postpositivist paradigm, it is important that the processes carried out during the research are tracked and reported in detail. Such documentation can enable future researchers to repeat the work and even though the same results may not be gained, the research design can be used as a guidance and to indicate whether good research practice was followed. In the current research, the aim was to provide clear details to describe the research process. Thus, readers of this research are able to comprehend the applied research methods and their effectiveness.

Confirmability is a concept in qualitative research which is comparable to the concern of objectivity (Shenton, 2004). It refers to the fact that the findings of a research need to reflect the experience and ideas of the participants as opposed to the thought process of the researcher. One way of reducing the effect of the investigator bias is triangulation where multiple methods and data sources are used so as to support interpretations made by the researcher (Mertens, 2010). Another way to avoid researcher bias is through the process of reflexivity. Reflexivity is the process which enables a researcher to reflect about their role in the research and how their background and context can influence the interpretation of data (Creswell, 2014). Prior to starting the research, the researcher had the opportunity to reflect on her personal interest and experience in relation to why this research area was selected [see Chapter 1]. This level of awareness can avoid the research taking a particular direction and producing skewed results. Reflexivity was also adhered to during the data collection stage to avoid asking questions and giving responses which could have influenced participants in giving answers which fitted the researcher's perceptions. Keeping a reflective diary was also

quite useful to the researcher in order to maintain records of thoughts and reflections throughout the research process. During data analysis, memos were kept to track thoughts which could have influenced the interpretation of the data. The reflexivity process will be explained in further detail in the Discussion chapter. Discussions with the UEL supervisor and field work supervisor at the placement EPS were also held to help the researcher keep on track of the research process.

Another challenge encountered in this research was related to the fact that the interviews were held in Maltese and then translated to English. Translating some of the Maltese words into English was quite difficult since literal words might be non-existent. In such situations, another word representing the context in which the word was used had to be given. The researcher also asked different peers as to which words they would use when translating particular Maltese words to try and select the most suitable English word.

2.11 Ethical considerations

Prior to beginning the research, ethical approval was sought from the University of East London [see Appendix 6]. In addition, since the research was carried out in a Maltese state school, ethical approval had to be obtained from the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education [see Appendix 7]. The Code of Human Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2010) was used to guide decisions with regards to any ethical issues which had to be taken in this research. This Code underlines four main principles which need to be adhered to in order to carry out ethical research. These principles are: respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, maximising benefit and minimising harm, providing scientific value, and engaging in social responsibility. In brief, these principles state that psychologists carrying out research need to respect the experience and expertise of the participants whilst also respecting their privacy. Researchers also need to be transparent about the research process with the participants of their research. Being accountable and producing high quality research are considered as the ethical procedures to follow. The quality criteria which were adhered to in this research were described in the section above. According to the Code of Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2010), any generated psychological knowledge must be used for beneficial purposes. Researchers should also be self-reflective throughout the research process so as to minimise researcher bias as was explained in the reflexivity process above. Finally, psychologists need to avoid harming the participants in any way and be sensitive to the potential impact of their interventions.

In this research, since some of the participants were still under sixteen years of age, consent from all the participants' parents was sought. This was done by sending them a briefing sheet which explained what the research was about and asking them to sign a consent form [see Appendix 3] giving permission to their child to participate in the research. The same procedure was carried out with the participants [see Appendix 2]. Prior to the interviews, the researcher outlined the research process to the participants in order to explain the purpose of the research and what would be happening throughout the different stages. Participants were also notified that during data gathering they had the right to withdraw, modify their consent or ask for the destruction of all or part of the data if they felt the need to do so. Participants who filled in the questionnaire were asked to do so anonymously so as to maintain their confidentiality. The participants also had an option to write their name should they wish to be considered for the interview. In order to protect their identity, a separate sheet was given to them where they could sign up. This sheet was collected separately from the questionnaire. Since the interviews were held face-to-face, maintaining the participants' anonymity was not possible. Nonetheless, in order to protect their identity, the participants' real names were not used when discussing the research or during data analysis. Since Malta is a small country and ensuring anonymity may be difficult, few details were given about each participant [see Table 2.1] so as to limit the participants' identity from being revealed. Confidentiality was also maintained by not disclosing to the senior management team (SMT) who the participants were and by not sharing with anyone what particular students discussed during the interviews. Furthermore, all paper information was stored in a locked cabinet so as to protect hard copies of the data whereas the digital data was encrypted with a password.

This research posed minimal risk to the participants especially physical harm. Data collection occurred at a safe location i.e. the participants' school. A member from the SMT was notified when the researcher was on premises carrying out the research and informed of the room and time when the interviews were held. During the interviews, the participants discussed their experience of disengagement from school which could have been a sensitive topic to discuss for some. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were reminded that if at any point they felt uncomfortable they had the opportunity to stop their involvement. The participants were also told that if they felt the need, following the interview, they could speak to the researcher in private so as to seek further support or reassurance. The school counsellor was also notified about the research who in turn agreed that if any students felt the need to

talk to her following any stage of the research process, the participants would be able to do so.

In the present research, the participants were not deceived and no information was withheld from them. The nature of the research was explained to them and the researcher answered any questions the participants had. Permission was also sought from the participants to audio record the interview so that transcription of the conversation between the researcher and participants could occur. Once the interviews were over, the participants had the opportunity to ask any further questions, discuss or comment on anything that had happened during the interview. The researcher also gave her work email address to the participants so that following the interviews they could communicate with her and inquire about the research findings if they wished to do so.

2.12 Summary of chapter

The first part of the chapter explored the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher. This research was approached through the social constructivist paradigm. Then, the purpose of the research was stated where the aim of the research was to explore the views of young people who experienced disengagement from school. The research questions were also stated in this chapter. The research design was explored in detail where the mixed methods design was selected for this research. Whilst the quantitative element occurred first, the qualitative element had more weight. A questionnaire was handed to all participants attending the ALP. These participants also had the opportunity to make themselves known to the researcher if they wanted to be considered for the interviews. In the end, ten interviews were held and they were analysed using grounded theory methods. This chapter also discussed the quality criteria of the research and concluded by outlining the ethical issues which were accounted for when the research was carried out. In the next chapter, the research findings will be presented.

Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Overview of chapter

In this chapter, the findings from the analysed quantitative and qualitative data will be presented. First, the results which emerged from the questionnaire will be highlighted. Findings for each question will be illustrated through the use of tables, graphs and charts. The results of the quantitative approach will provide a context to the research and indicate students' views about the phenomenon of student disengagement. The first part of the quantitative data will give an overview of the students' demographics attending the ALP. Then, the results from the questionnaire will identify the participants' views on their experience of mainstream school and the ALP. Following the results from the quantitative data, the chapter will progress to present the qualitative data analysed through grounded theory. This will be done by illustrating how the initial stage of open coding was carried out. Then, the emergent categories will be identified and supported through direct quotations from the participants. These findings will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. This chapter will conclude by putting forward the emergent theory which proposes how the process of student disengagement occurs.

3.2 Findings from the questionnaire

The first set of items of the questionnaire included "gender," "age," "college," and "locality". These items aimed to gather demographic data about the sample population. "Gender" was coded as males or females. Table 3.1 illustrates the total number of participants who filled in the questionnaire and their respective gender.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	93	66.4	66.4	66.4
	Female	47	33.6	33.6	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.1 – Gender percentage of sample population

As Figure 3.1 shows, 66.4% of the sample population was composed of males and the remaining 33.6% of the population was females.
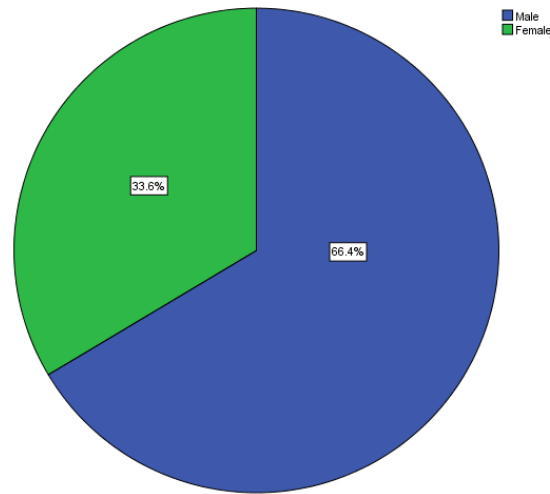
Figure 3.1 - Gender percentage of sample population

(See Appendix 8 for the frequency distribution tables which correlate with the bar graphs and pie charts).

"Age" was measured as a continuous variable where the participants were asked to record their age in years. Their ages ranged from 14 to 17 years old and the average age for this sample was 15.5 years [see Figure 3.2].
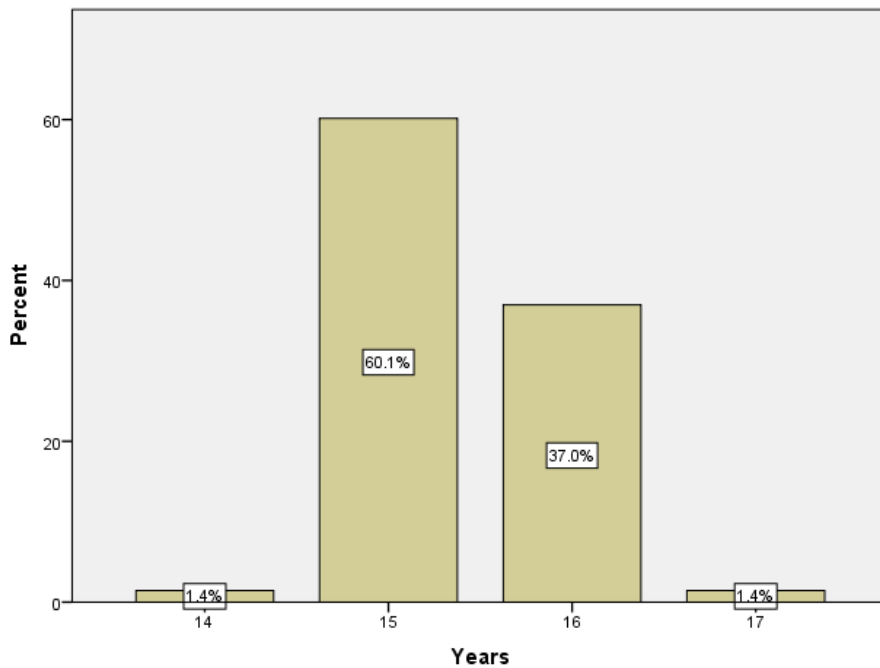
Figure 3.2 – Age range of sample population

The data for "college" and "locality" was not computed since most of the participants wrote the name of their current school rather than the college attached to their previous mainstream school. With regards to the locality, the participants listed the town of their current school as opposed to the locality where they resided.

The questionnaire progressed to enquire about the level of education of the participants' parents. Two separate sets of data were collected for parent 1 and parent 2. Figure 3.3 shows the level of education achieved by parent 1 where the most common response (75%) was secondary school level, followed by post-secondary level, primary level and tertiary level respectively. A small percentage of participants were unable to indicate the education level of parent 1.
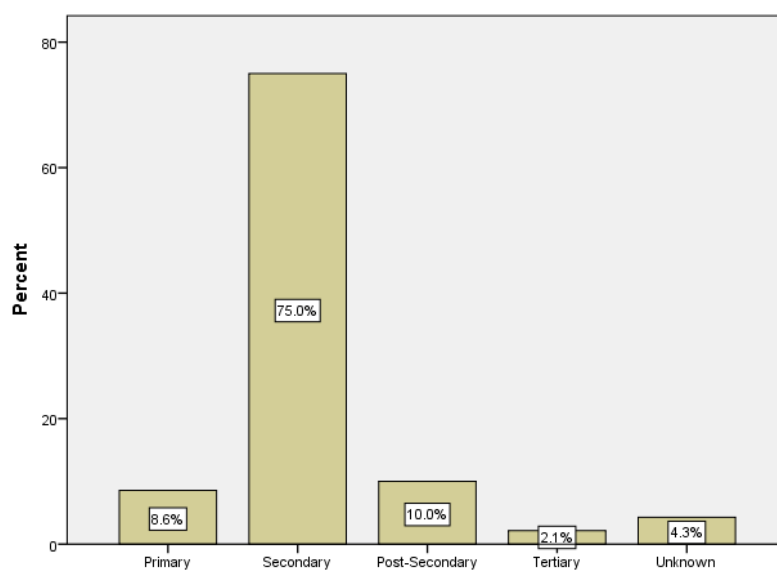
Figure3.3 – Parents' 1 level of education

Similar results were noted for parents' 2 level of education where the most common response (57.1%) was secondary level and the least common was tertiary level of education. However, 24.3% of the sample population did not respond to this question [see Figure 3.4].
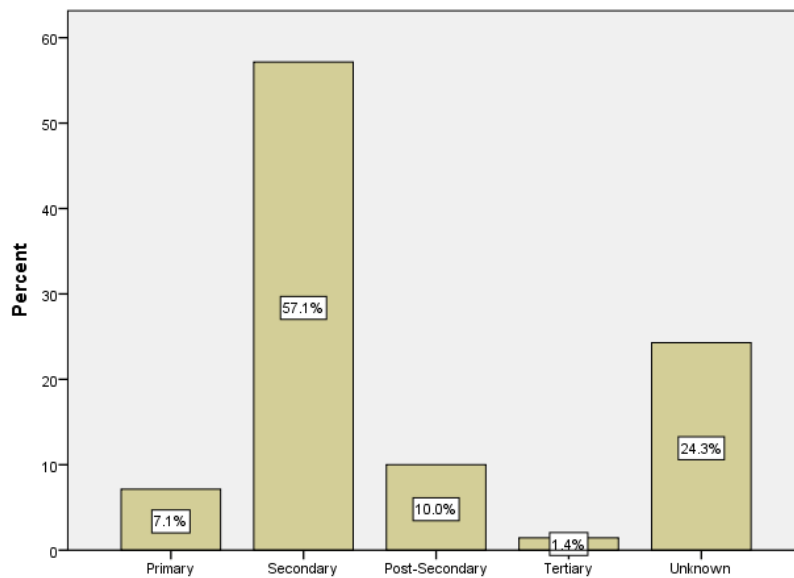
Figure 3.4 – Parents' 2 level of education

The first question of the questionnaire aimed to gain an understanding about the participants' enjoyment at school. The majority (57.7%) of the participants stated that they preferred secondary school over primary school [see Figure 3.5].
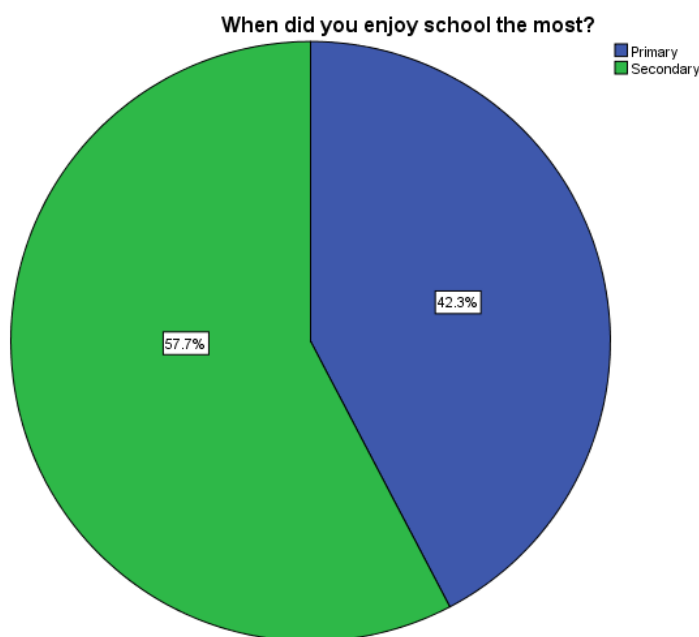
Figure 3.5 – Preference of school enjoyment

The subsequent question asked participants to rate reasons which could have led them to become disengaged from school. The participants used two different rating methods to respond to this question. Half of the participants rated each statement separately on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 [see Figure 3.6.1], whereas the other half gave an overall rating

from 1 to 5 across all statements [see Figure 3.6.2]. These two sets of data were inputted and analysed separately.
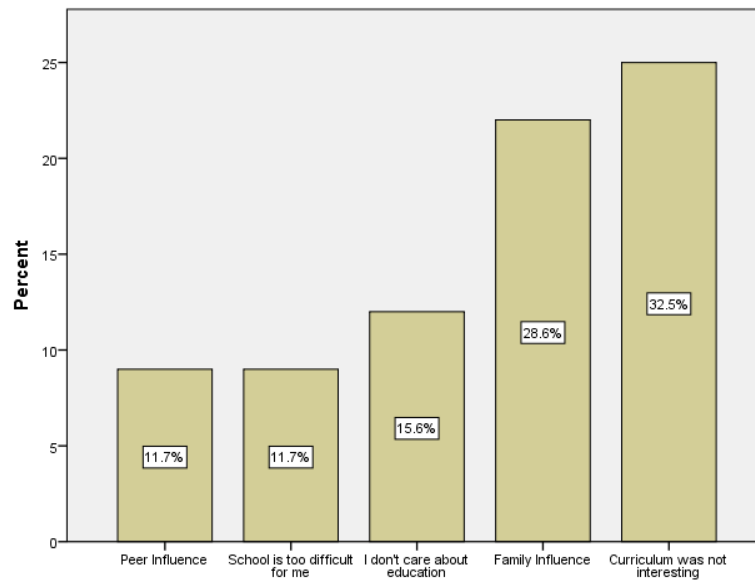
Figure 3.6.1 – Disengagement from mainstream school
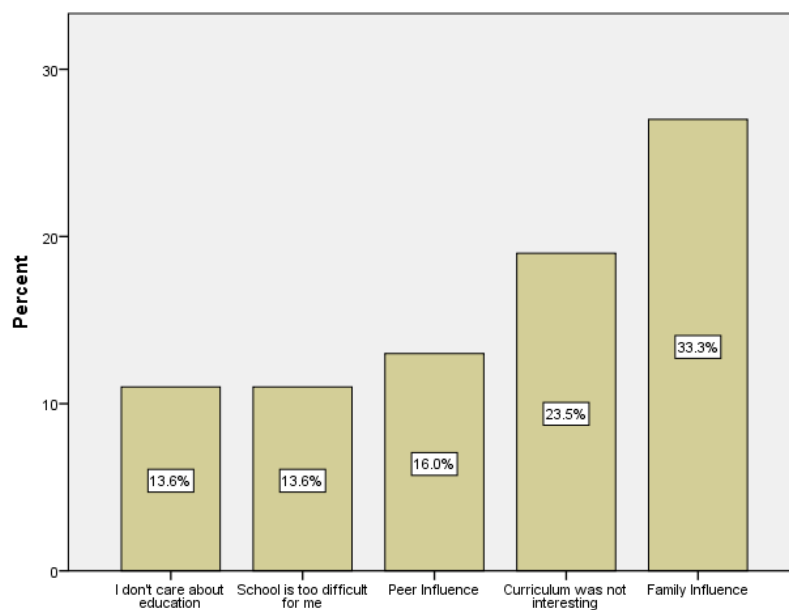
Figure 3.6.2 – Disengagement from mainstream school

The data in both bar graphs shows that the two most common reasons which affected the participants' disengagement from school were family influence and a curriculum considered as uninteresting.

The participants were then asked whether given the opportunity to go back in time, they would engage themselves more at school. The findings revealed that 73% of the sample population would opt to be more engaged [see Figure 3.7].
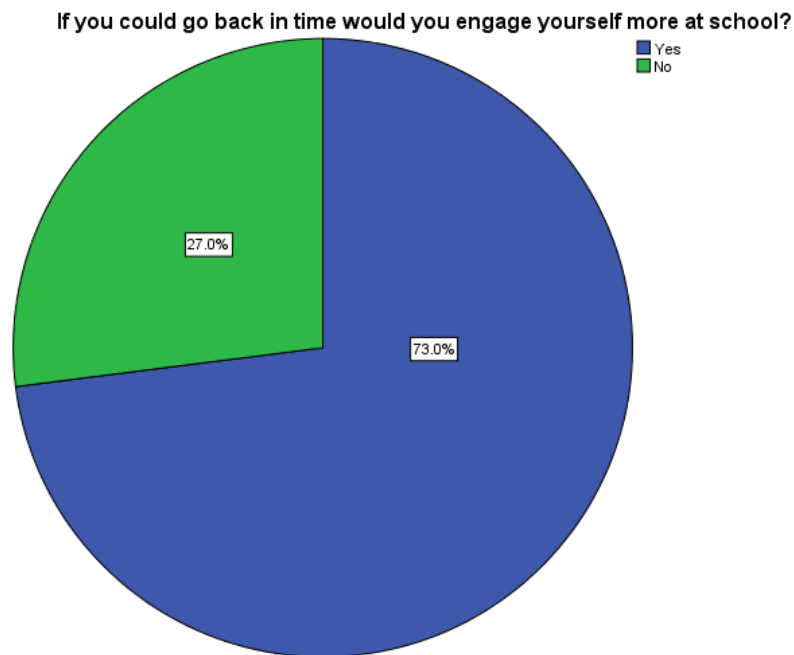
Figure 3.7 – Views on school engagement

According to the participants, adults who could have supported them to be more engaged at school were; teachers (31.1%), their parents (26.1%), peers (13.6%), Head of school (10.0%), guidance teachers (9.6%), career advisors (5.0%) and counsellors (4.6%) [see Figure 3.8].
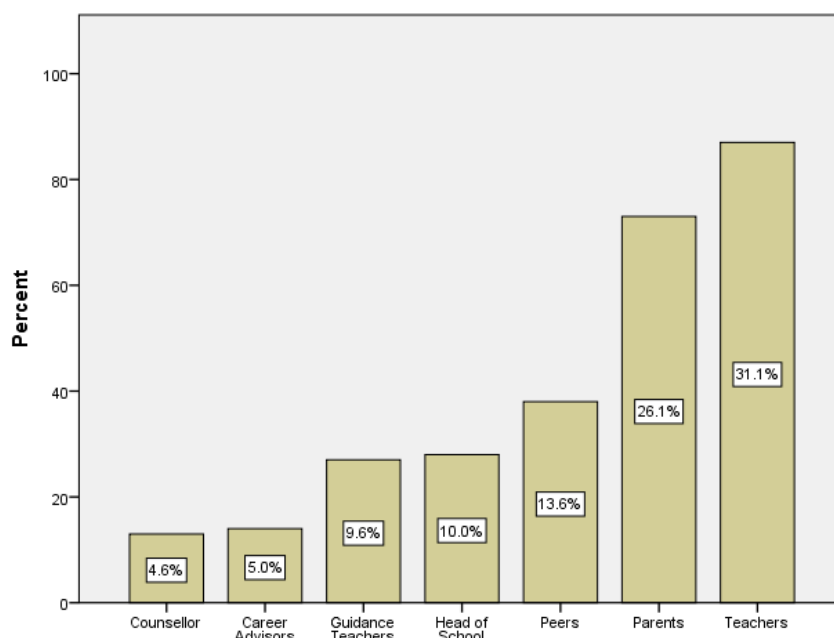
Figure 3.8 – Adults who could have supported the participants' engagement at school

A very high percentage (89.9%) of the sample population indicated that having a higher level of education could provide them with a better future [see Figure 3.9].
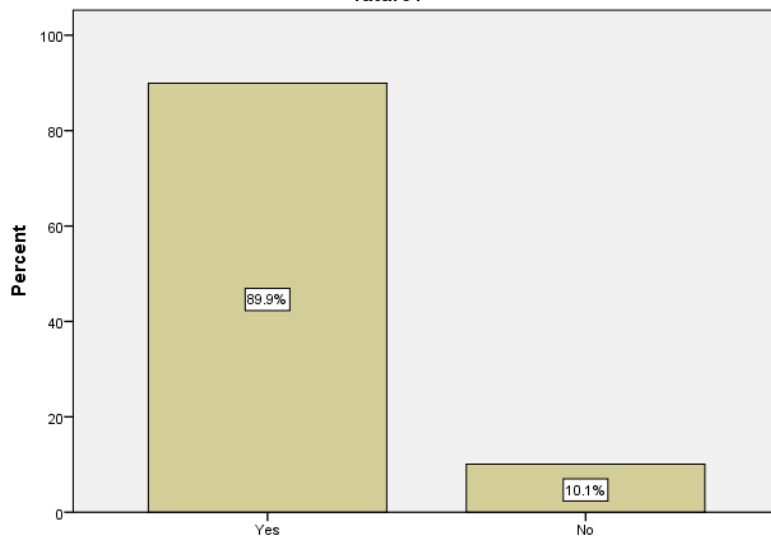
Figure 3.9 – Participants' perception on their future

The setting of the ALP was considered (94.9%) as conducive to learning in that it helped the students to be more engaged than their previous schools [see Figure 3.10].
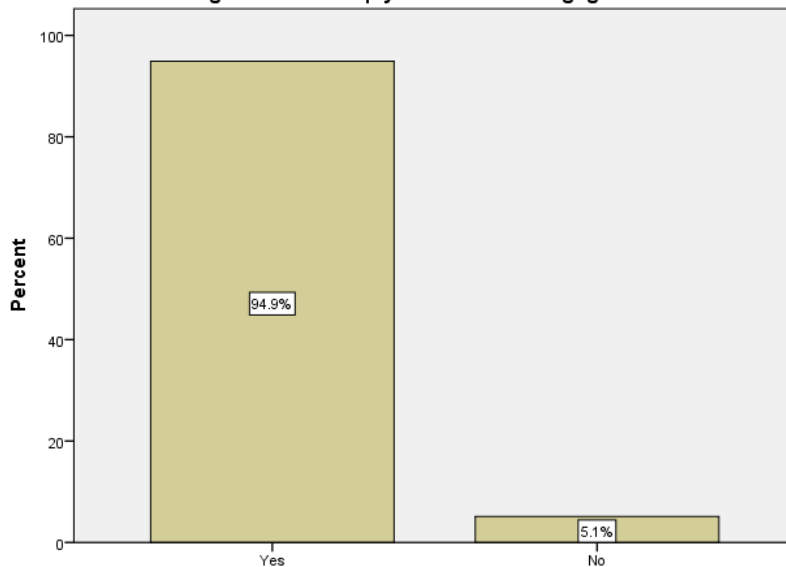
Figure 3.10 – The ALP's effect on school engagement

Question 7 of the questionnaire aimed to build on the previous question in order to identify why the setting of the ALP supported students to be more engaged at school. The participants used two different rating methods to answer this question. The majority of the participants rated each statement separately on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 [see Figure 3.11.1],

whereas the rest of the participants gave an overall rating from 1 to 5 across all statements [see Figure 3.11.2]. These two sets of data were inputted and analysed separately.
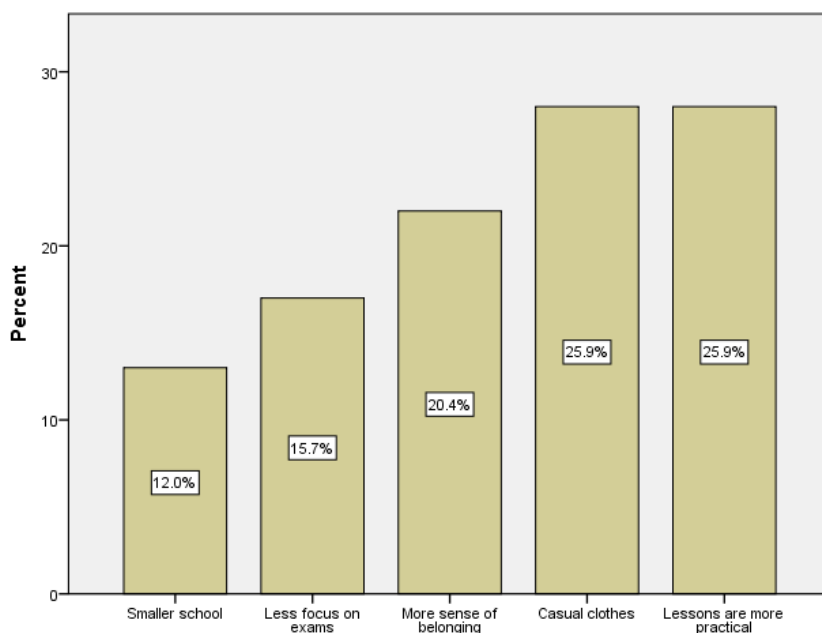
Figure 3.11.1 – Factors affecting the choice to attend the ALP
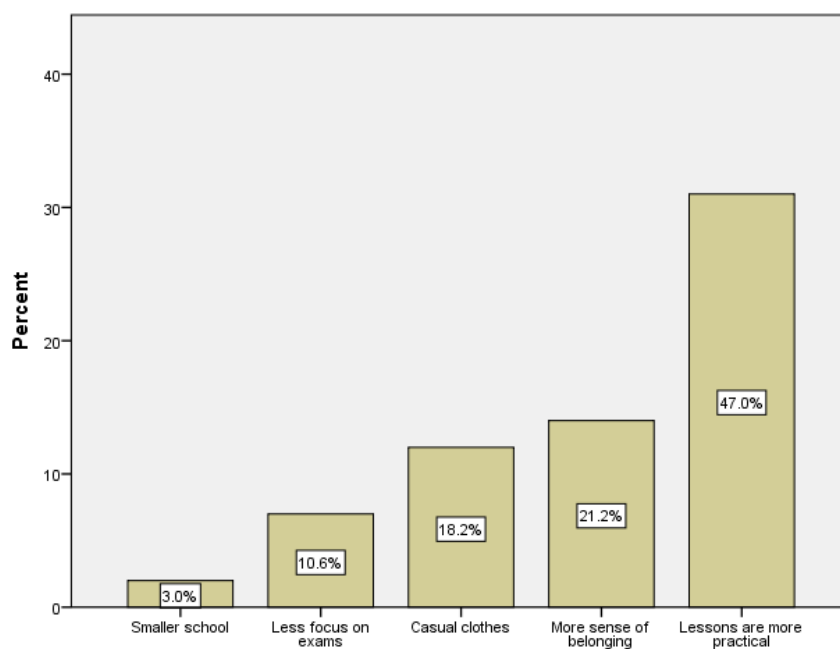
Figure 3.11.2 – Factors affecting the choice to attend the ALP

The results from Figure 3.11.1 and Figure 3.11.2 are quite similar. The most common reason why students wanted to attend the ALP was that lessons are more practical and hands-on compared to the lessons delivered at mainstream school. This reason was followed by the concession to wear casual clothes and that the ALP provided a sense of belonging. The least popular reasons to attend the ALP were less focus on exams and that it is a small school.

Finally, the questionnaire aimed to explore the participants' views on what they wanted to do once they finished attending compulsory school. Participants were asked whether they would consider further education or training, or whether they would transition to the world of work. The most popular response (58.9%) was furthering education whereas the rest (41.1%) of the participants stated that they wanted to start working once compulsory school was over [see Figure 3.12].
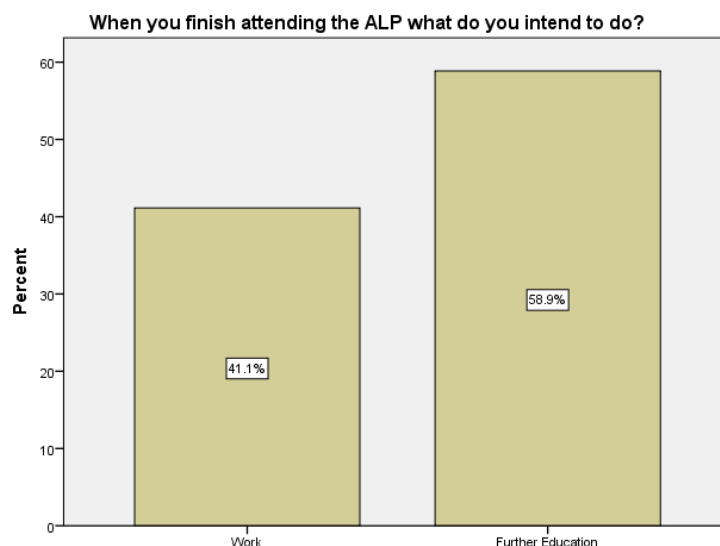
Figure 3.12 – What comes next following compulsory schooling

3.3 Summary of findings

The results from the questionnaire indicated that more males than females attended the ALP and that the highest level of education of both parents was secondary school level. Students stated that the most common reason why mainstream school was not engaging was due to the curriculum being uninteresting. The participants also mentioned that given the opportunity to go back to their schooling years at mainstream school they would try to be more engaged at school. In their opinion, people who could have supported their engagement at school the most were their teachers and parents respectively. The setting of the ALP was considered as more engaging than mainstream school. Interestingly, the majority of the participants agreed that having a higher level of education could provide them with a better future. Finally, most of the participants stated that they wanted to further their education over starting to work once they finished attending the ALP.

The results from the quantitative approach provided an indication as to which areas were beneficial to explore during the interviews. The quantitative approach for this research was the foundation stage to start identifying what the researcher could inquire about in the qualitative approach. Thus, the quantitative data yielded an overview of students' views on

disengagement whereas the qualitative data which will be presented next, provided an in-depth analysis of ten students' views.

3.4 Findings from the interviews

The first stage of analysing the qualitative data occurred through the process of open coding which then led to the development of initial codes. First, initial descriptive codes were given to lines or segments of data. The codes were either low level i.e. at a descriptive level, or high level where the codes were more analytical in nature. The initial codes were then compared to each other and integrated to build categories. An example of the open coding process will be given in the next section. Then, the categories which emerged from the constant comparative analysis will be presented whereby direct quotations in each category will be illustrated so as to support the findings. As discussed in the Methodology chapter, each participant was given a pseudonym and quotes are coded under this name. The categories will describe how the participants viewed themselves along with the relationships they developed with their family, school staff and peers. The categories will progress to present findings related to the participants' emotional well-being, resiliency, coping strategies and transitions. These categories will be followed by the categories labelled as: process of disengagement, the learning process, teaching methodology, curriculum and resources; both at mainstream school and the ALP. The categories will progress to describe the school setting and learnt skills. Finally, the last two categories which will be presented aim to specifically answer two of the research questions. In the last part of the chapter, the core categories which emerged from the comparative analysis will be outlined. The core categories will then lead to the development of the theory which emerged from the research findings.

3.5 Open coding

The process of open coding involved a close reading of each interview transcript (see Appendix 9 for an example of a transcript. All transcripts are on the CD attached to this thesis). Line by line coding was applied to develop the categories and whenever possible the developed codes reflected the participants' own words. Table 3.2 and Table 3.3 show an example of data analysis in its early stages.

Extract from the Interview with Jane (lines 163-168)	Line by line coding
It (ALP) is helping me a lot. For example, I always used to like Hairdressing and Beauty. In Hairdressing I am learning how to do blow dries, how to wash hair better, how to create up styles, how to do make up better. For example, I didn't know that before you do make up you need to cleanse your face or that you need to use different brushes. Now I got to know them in Beauty lessons. I didn't know that when you do your nails you don't just paint them but you need to buff them. I learnt a lot of new things.	Feeling supported by the environment Specialising in an area of interest Learning to do practical tasks Gaining new knowledge Becoming upskilled Learning by doing Learning to do something in stages Enriching learning experience

Table 3.2– An example of the open coding process (first stage)

Codes	Categories developed from the codes	Questions asked to build the theory (Memos)
– Feeling supported by the environment – Learning to do practical tasks – Specialising in an area of interest – Gaining new knowledge – Becoming upskilled – Learning by doing – Learning to do something in stages – Enriching learning experience	– Support – Vocational subjects – Practical skills – Hands on activities – Interesting curriculum	– How is the *curriculum* different for vocational subjects? – How are students *learning* differently at the ALP? – Are students experiencing more *success?* – How are the students more *engaged* at the ALP?

Table 3.3 – An example of the open coding process (second stage)

The development of higher order categories was possible once the initial codes for each transcript were created. One of the initial codes which was developed was 'interests' where participants described what they enjoy doing in their free time. All the participants responded to this question and interests varied from playing sports, drawing, listening to music and watching movies. Each time the researcher went back to the field, data in line with this code was collected to establish whether it had any influence on disengagement. Similarly, the

initial code 'family background' was considered to identify whether it affected students' disengagement from school. Results from the questionnaire showed that the students indicated their family as a factor which could have affected their engagement at school. Thus, the researcher wanted to find out more about this factor. Each time the researcher went back to the field to gather new data, information about family influences was sought.

An initial code which emerged from all the interviews was related to the self-concept. Through the participants' opinions, the researcher could identify how the participants viewed themselves. The category of the self was considered as important since the researcher wanted to identify whether students with a particular self-concept were more prone to becoming disengaged from school. Thus, if during the interviews information related to the self-concept did not emerge, the researcher inquired further into this area. During all of the interviews, the participants were keen to discuss their experience at the ALP rather than focusing on their experiences at primary and secondary school. Hence, the researcher provided sufficient opportunities to the participants to talk about these experiences. Through such an exploration, the researcher was able to identify differences between mainstream school and the ALP which led to the re-engagement of students in the learning process.

Following the process of initial coding, axial coding was applied where links between open codes were made through the process of constant comparative analysis. This process led to the emergence of higher order categories which will be identified in the following section.

3.6 Constant comparative analysis

During constant comparative analysis, the categories developed from each transcript were compared to each other and categories which captured best the experience of the participants were refined. For example, one of the developed categories from the initial codes was 'struggling with school'. However, when this category was compared to other categories, 'disengagement' fit more with the participants' views. The following is another example of how a higher order category was refined. The initial developed category was 'academic learning' since participants mentioned different experiences related to their learning of academic subjects such as, finding it boring and not achievable. However, when this category was compared to other categories, 'curriculum' replaced 'academic learning' since it was able to capture the participants' views on the curriculum in general rather than focusing on one particular area. The process of constant comparative analysis resulted in 19 higher order categories [see Table 3.4] which will be discussed next.

Self	Interests	Family	Staff
Peers	Emotional well being	Resiliency	Coping strategies
Transition	Disengagement	Attitude	Teaching Methodology
Learning Process	Curriculum	Resources	Setting
Skills	Change	Future	

Table 3.4 – Higher order categories

In the following sections, specific terms will be used to indicate the frequency of endorsement as expressed by the participants. The phrase "most" will be used to discuss concepts expressed by at least 7 of the 10 participants. The phrase "some" will show that 4 to 6 of the participants supported the concept. "A few" will be used to indicate concepts expressed by 3 or fewer participants. The scope behind the use of these terms is not to quantify responses but rather to illustrate the strength of shared experiences of a category. If categories reflected the response of only one participant these were still considered and the researcher went back to field to find out whether they were significant to be considered in the development of the theory.

3.6.1 Self

Polarities in the participants' characters could be noted. Greg described himself as a "*quiet boy*" (line 66) and Pamela stated:

   I used to be shy to tell her that I am not understanding (lines 42-43).

Kelly viewed herself as "*a shy person*" (line 162) as did Holly. Jane described herself as:

   I was dyslexic when I was young and I was very hyperactive (lines 54-55).

Grace said:

   When I was in Year 6 I was sprightlier and I used to fight a lot (line 79).

Whereas Sean stated:

   I was not a quiet guy. I used to fight a lot (line 24).

Other perceptions of how students viewed themselves included low self-efficacy and a lack of confidence in themselves. In fact Greg stated:

   When I used to be asked a question I used to blank. I used to tell them to ask someone else or to remain quiet (lines 73-74).

3.6.2 Interests

As discussed in the previous section, the participants claimed they had several interests. This category was not pursued since upon comparison to other categories, no significant relationships were found. Thus, this category was not strong enough to be considered for the development of the theory.

3.6.3 Family

'Family' was another category which was dropped since no relevance was found with the other categories. Most of the participants stated that they were not influenced by their parents to either engage or disengage from school. A few students stated that although their parents encouraged them to study they still opted not to engage in learning.

3.6.4 Staff

The category 'staff' was divided into mainstream school staff and ALP staff. All the participants shared a unanimous experience that the staff at the ALP were caring, supportive, helpful and understanding. The type of support given by the staff was both academic and emotional. Grace shared that:

> *The teacher that we have here explains much more and gives us handouts which are easier to understand and more pleasing to the eye. Even the way the teacher and the LSA talk, you end up understanding much more* (lines 142-144).

Elena stated:

> *Teachers explain as if they are your friends and in a way that you learn more. Previously, they used to teach and that's it. Here it is like a family, everyone teaches each other. I like that a lot* (lines 71-73).

Sean also shared:

> *They support me a lot. I want to go to ITS and they are helping me to get there* (line 120).

Greg said:

> *I talk to my LSA about my problems, both academic and personal. So it helps* (line 171).

The participants' experience of staff at mainstream school was mixed. Some of the participants experienced their teachers as helpful and supportive such as Elena who said that at secondary school:

> *Teachers were really nice* (line 45).

Grace also found support in her primary school teachers:

In my experience they really helped me out a lot. Even when I was going through difficult times in my life, it was a very nice experience. I used to find a lot of support from teachers and LSAs (lines 55-56, 58).

The experience of a few participants was different as they felt that they were labelled by school staff as 'naughty' and carried that label with them throughout the years. Jane's experience resonates with this negative experience and openly stated that:

Teachers didn't used to like me... The Assistant Head always sided with the teacher and the other children and even if something happened at school I used to get blamed for it, if something happened in class, I always got blamed (lines 12-13, 51-53).

Similarly, Sean stated:

I was the black sheep. It was always my fault, whatever happens. I am not saying that I did not do anything, but even when it was not me I was always the one to blame (line 58-59).

3.6.5 Peers

Relationships with peers at the ALP and mainstream school were generally described by the participants as positive. Fleur described her relationship with peers as:

Ok, I am still friends with them. Some of them are still here with me at the ALP (line 54).

Holly stated that the reason she enjoyed attending primary school was:

Because of my friends (line 39).

Julian shared that the choice of attending the ALP was influenced by his peers deciding to attend this programme:

My friends where going to leave school and I was going to remain all alone in school (line 39).

Sean mentioned that some of his peers influenced him negatively as they encouraged him to skip lessons. Kelly shared that at mainstream school making friends was not an easy task and that she used to depend on her sister to socialise. However, when she started attending the ALP this situation improved:

The students in secondary they were all naughty. This year they are not naughty and have nice characters. Now I have made friends with the class mates. Previously, I did not do so because I was always attached to my sister (lines 257-259).

Jane's experience of peers at mainstream school was quite negative. At primary school she was bullied and at secondary school she was frequently isolated by her peers:

In secondary I made new friends, we clicked we became like sisters, then we remained friends, then I do not know what happened, maybe there was jealousy (lines 108-109).

Some of Jane's classmates used to complain to her that she got the support of an LSA whilst they did not and they experienced this as an unfair situation. Jane stated:

I used to stay on my own, go to the library and I used to be very sad because everyone used to stay with their friends during break and I used to be on my own (lines 105-106).

3.6.6 Emotional well-being

'Emotional well-being' is another category which was subdivided into mainstream school and ALP. The participants expressed that at the ALP they felt at ease and developed a sense of belonging. Greg expressed:

The students are more welcoming and we almost never fight. We are more of a family here (lines 164-165).

Grace also stated that:

It is not just because it is a nice school since even the previous schools were nice, but you feel more comfortable here (lines 125-126).

Experiences at mainstream school were mixed where some of the participants enjoyed attending primary and secondary school and viewed it as a positive experience. In primary school Fleur enjoyed:

The lessons, the way they used to do them… they used to explain and I used to understand better (lines 23, 25).

For some of the participants transitioning to the ALP was an opportunity to start afresh. Jane stated that primary school:

Was not that good because I was bullied (line 12).

Sean was frequently excluded from the classroom or school. He stated that mainstream school got rid of him by sending him to the ALP:

I did not use to do the homework and I was not quiet in class. When I did not do the homework then she would kick me out of the class. At times she left me for a whole day outside the class (lines 41-42).

Sean stated that he managed to control his anger when he started cage fighting:

I started to become calmer (line 47).

3.6.7 Resiliency

It could be noted that most of the participants who struggled at mainstream school gave up on succeeding in their learning experience. Grace expressed:

I used to give up, even when exams got close. I would give up any hope of me passing the exams (lines 85-86).

Across the years, the participants lost the confidence in themselves that they could achieve within the education system. They were expected to succeed with all their unaddressed difficulties and needs. Greg perceived himself as having the potential to do some O Levels:

I knew that I was capable to sit for some subjects such as English and Maltese (line 81).

However, he decided not to attempt any of these exams:

I said that it is not worth it to just sit for 2 O Levels, so I came here instead… Here the level is lower than secondary school but I knew it from before so I am not complaining. It is as if I started secondary school all over again (Greg, lines 82-83, 113-114).

3.6.8 Coping strategies

When the participants encountered difficulties in their experiences at mainstream school, most of them struggled in developing coping strategies. Jane was bullied at school and struggled to build and maintain relationships with her teachers as she was labelled as "*naughty*" (line 133). Changing schools helped her to move on and cope. Kelly managed to understand a difficult curriculum by relying on her twin sister:

I just left the teacher to carry on with the lesson and just give up on understanding… Then my sister would help me out later (lines 39-41).

However, a few of the participants managed to develop positive coping strategies to deal with their struggles. Sean realised that he had anger issues which he used to channel onto his peers and which frequently led him into being in trouble at school. His way of coping with anger was to start practising the sport of cage fighting. Greg was another student who managed to cope with his feelings in a positive manner by talking about his problems to his teachers and who in return helped him to feel better.

3.6.9 Transition

Participants made reference to the transitions from primary to secondary school, and from mainstream school to the ALP. Some of the participants also had to transition to more than one primary school. Kelly experienced the transition to secondary school as:

A bit more difficult because the school was much bigger. I remember on my first day of school I got lost as I did not know where to go. There were a lot of building blocks. Then I started to get used to it and started understanding a bit more (lines 63-65).

Greg experienced the transition to a different secondary school as uncomfortable:

Since I moved village I went to a new secondary school. I did not know anyone there so I felt uncomfortable (lines 48-49).

3.6.10 Disengagement

Disengagement from mainstream school was described by the participants as occurring due to them not understanding the content of the lessons, lagging behind and failing exams. Kelly stated:

I just left the teacher to carry on with the lesson and just give up on understanding. Her methods did not help me out so might as well not pay attention to the lesson (lines 39-41).

Although efforts were made by some of the students to succeed at school, they still did not manage to experience success. As Kelly vividly described:

I did not usually pass my exams. I used to lag behind and still did not understand when I studied. I never passed an exam, apart from the Maths exams in Form 1 where I scored 88. Then I continued to lag behind, from bad to worse. Once I scored only 33. I did not pass my exams (lines 87-80).

Grace mentioned that her disengagement from school was influenced by her peers' attitude towards school:

They would decide to skip class and then I would end up skipping class as well so as to stay with them (lines 216-217).

At the ALP, students perceived themselves to be more engaged at school and interested in learning. Elena stated:

Now I am more interested. At first I was starting to give up because it was something new, but then I did not give up because I would lose on learning, so you have to try (lines 186-187).

When students felt supported by their teachers they kept trying hard to achieve their goals. As Julian stated:

In previous schools, if you failed in a subject it was not a problem, but here they continue to pressure you to pass… This helps so that when you leave here you would have learnt something (lines 62-65).

In Greg's experience, the ALP was an opportunity to discover his strengths:

When I came here I did not know what to find but then I realised that here you can show what you are capable of. You show your talents here (lines 86-87).

3.6.11 Attitude

The participants' attitude towards school was mixed. Some of the participants stated that they did not like school whereas a few mentioned that they enjoyed their time at mainstream school. Kelly enjoyed secondary school:

All in all it was a very nice experience because we had a lot of lessons and not just the three core subjects; Maths, Maltese and English (lines 69-71).

When Elena started to attend the ALP she experienced a change in her attitude towards school. In fact she stated:

I did not even pay attention to the lessons and I did not like school. When I woke up I would say here we go again I have to go to school again. Nowadays, when I wake up, I look forward to come to school. Once this is over I will miss it. I am sorry that it is going to be over. I think they should lengthen our stay here (lines 89-92).

Similarly Pamela stated:

> *I did not like school that much. I used to go in a normal manner but I did not use to pay attention. I did not like it that much… Over here it's different though* (lines 20-21, 90).

Once Pamela discovered which learning style helped her to learn best, she started to value education more:

> *I learn much more and it brought me to my senses that I was wasting time* (line 146).

Interestingly, although Julian liked school he did want to pursue the academic path:

> *I believe that school is important. I used to like everything about school. Reading and studying for example. However that was no longer my ambition, to continue school I mean* (lines 22-23).

His ambition was to play football and therefore Julian preferred to focus his energy and time to improve his athletic skills.

3.6.12 Teaching methodology

The teaching methodology used by the teachers at the ALP was well received by the participants. The teachers made an effort to explain several times until all the students managed to understand the lesson. In fact, the participants stated that at the ALP, teachers did not mind giving multiple explanations. They were very patient and made sure that the students mastered the lesson. Jane shared that:

> *The teacher does not rush in the lessons, she teaches according to your level. If the others have progressed further, she will still explain according to your level. She does not keep rushing and you end up not understanding* (lines 199-201).

Similarly Pamela stated that:

> *During Maths I am concentrating much more now and when I do not understand I ask the teacher and she will re-explain until I understand. Then, I would really understand* (lines 97-98).

Differentiated teaching was applied by the teachers at the ALP. This helped the students to understand better since they perceived the level of the curriculum as adequate for their needs. Individual attention was also provided by the teachers and therefore students felt more supported in their learning. Pamela stated that:

Now it is different, the teacher explains to all of us individually (line 132).

Also, at the ALP an LSA is assigned to each class so as to assist all students rather than having LSAs assigned to particular students. This type of support was perceived well by the students and as Pamela stated LSAs are:

Helpful… Helpful… She helps me a lot (line 140).

Kelly also shared that:

Here the teachers are different. They really have nice characters and they help us out a lot. They go around every student and take care of every student. During secondary we never had an LSA but here we do. We really appreciate the LSA (lines 134-136).

3.6.13 Learning process

Throughout the interviews, the participants were able to identify different factors which either facilitated or disrupted their learning process. Elena stated that:

You learn a lot from other students (line 40).

Thus, she appreciated collaborating with her peers to learn. Some of the students also realised that if they made an effort and paid attention during the lessons they were able to learn. As Elena shared:

When I paid attention I always understood (line 176).

Most of the participants also realised that they were able to learn better by doing rather than listening to theories, whilst a few of the participants were able to identify the factors that hindered their learning process. Greg identified that peers in his classroom distracted him from learning:

There were naughty students whom I did not like… They would stay acting funny during the lessons or start shouting (lines 61, 63).

Similarly, Kelly shared that:

The students were too noisy and because of that I would not hear the lesson… This did not help me to understand the teacher and the lesson. You really need a quiet classroom to be able to understand the lesson (lines 203, 206-208).

Two of the participants also stated that they have dyslexia. Jane acknowledged that:

I used to struggle… I always used to lag behind… I used to find it a bit difficult but I was never able to catch up and understand because I always found it difficult (lines 67, 118, 130-131).

Greg mentioned that with the extra support of a teacher he learnt how to read:

We also used to have a guidance teacher who taught me a lot of things. There were words that I did not know how to read and with her help I learnt how to read them at a fast pace (lines 175-177).

3.6.14 Curriculum

When different initial codes were compared to each other, several codes fit with the category 'curriculum'. Since this category contained a lot of information, it was split into experiences at mainstream school and experiences at the ALP. The curriculum at mainstream school was generally described as too difficult to understand. Fleur stated:

I did not understand. For example, I did not use to understand what the question was (line 62).

Similarly Pamela stated that:

I did not understand a lot. When I used to go to a Maths lesson it was not for my level so I did not used to understand (lines 130-131).

The curriculum at mainstream school was also viewed as being very theoretical and involving little practice. This type of curriculum did not suit the participants' needs and learning styles. In fact, Sean said:

I get bored Miss. I am very good in practice, but am not good in theory (line 44).

Greg also stated that:

In secondary they tell you what you should do but you do not get to practise it. They tell you what you have to study rather than how you should be doing it (lines 158-159).

The curriculum at the ALP was more compatible with the students' needs and it was well received by the students. All of the participants mentioned that vocational subjects made learning more interesting and helped them to be engaged at school. In Pamela's experience:

Here we have vocational subjects, we have Hair and Beauty. I really like them. The teachers are also really okay with us so that attracts you even more. I am learning and paying attention more here. It's like what I did not use to enjoy I am now enjoying over here. It changed me (lines 92-94).

The ALP was also experienced as being suitable for the participants since they believed that the curriculum level they were presented with was achievable and that they were able to experience success. Fleur viewed the ALP as "*a bit easier*" (line 114). Greg thought that the curriculum offered to him at the ALP was relevant to his future plans:

They give you the opportunity to practise the work that you want to do in the future (line 155).

Similarly, Grace stated that:

Here I think I pay more attention because here we have subjects that I really like. I had chosen Physical Education (PE) and Biology during secondary because I liked those subjects but here I am learning stuff that I can use in my future work (lines 96-98).

3.6.15 Resources

The ALP is equipped with workshops where the practical elements of the vocational subjects can be carried out. Thus, some of the participants mentioned that the ALP has more resources which cater for their interests. Julian stated:

Here they have more equipment to work with. Previous schools did not have such equipment since sports was not considered as an important subject. Here you can train much better (lines 77-78).

3.6.16 Setting

During the interviews, the participants stated that the settings of their respective schools influenced their level of engagement. The fact that classes at the ALP consist of small groups was one of the most common factors mentioned by the participants. Greg stated that in a smaller group:

You feel more comfortable. Even when there is a joke we laugh it out and then continue because we are a small group. In a larger group it becomes more disruptive. Also, since we are a small group you can participate much more in a lesson (lines 167-169).

Likewise, Grace stated:

We are not a lot of students in our group. For example today we are only 4 so there is not a lot of confusion. We end up understanding and focusing much more (lines 146-147).

The atmosphere at the ALP was also well received by the participants. As Kelly stated:

The atmosphere here is very nice. For example, previously we did not have a Youth Hub but here we do (lines 176-177).

Elena described the ALP as:

The environment in this school is different. It is smaller and students are different. That's it, but it is much better (lines 75-76).

Secondary mainstream schools were perceived to be too strict nonetheless, students still believed that discipline was important. As Elena stated:

*There should be an element of discipline because otherwise everyone would do what he or she wants. Here we do have discipline but there is some liberty as well (*lines 117-119).

Julian said that students:

Have the liberty to talk here. Previously, students were not allowed to talk. Well I do not believe that a student should be allowed to say anything he wants but it was too strict before. Here it is more liberal… No fighting and swear words should be tolerated, so yes there should be an element of discipline. Here they do have discipline but they give us freedom as well (lines 137-139, 148-149).

3.6.17 Skills

The participants mentioned that the ALP provided them with an opportunity to master new skills. Through different activities and educational outings, the participants were able to gain skills which could allow them to function independently in society. Grace made reference to a sleepover they had whilst attending the ALP:

We had to go to the grocer and buy as many fruits as possible with 2 euros (lines 175-176).

Such activities helped the participants develop budgeting skills. Holly also mentioned that the activities organised by the ALP enriched their learning experience:

You learn from them… For example, they took us to a bank and I had never been to a bank (line 203, 205).

Jane emphasised that what they were taught at the ALP is useful for everyday life:

They teach you for everyday life not Maths in the syllabus but for everyday life. For example ICT they teach you for everyday life, to whom you should talk to at work, how to apply for work, how to write and send a C.V., how you should approach your boss, these type of things (lines 307-309).

3.6.18 Change

The participants were asked to share their thoughts about what could be different within the mainstream education system so as to support students in remaining engaged at school. The aim behind this question was to answer the second research question [see Methodology chapter]. Several suggestions were made by the participants which included:

o schools offering vocational subjects;

o teachers to prepare hands-on activities;

o teachers to use differentiated teaching;

o schools to organise excursions/activities to teach the curriculum;

o having shorter lessons;

o teachers not rushing to explain and making sure that students understand the lesson before moving on to the next lesson; and

o schools to find more balance between discipline and liberty.

Jane's experiences mirrored several of these recommendations:

If you are not understanding, the teacher should not keep on rushing and the explanation needs to be catered for different levels. Different materials need to be provided to students, some things are for students who are more intelligent and for those students who have lower abilities she gives them a different handout with things they can understand and which are suitable for them. The teacher should not rush with these students (lines 238-242).

The practical element of learning was emphasised by several participants. Grace suggested:

For example if you have sums to do, don't just give them a paper and expect them to do it. Give them building blocks to make something with it. Stuff like that (lines 192-194).

Greg proposed that:

 They should give time to students to show what they know and then teach them what they do not know (lines 135-136).

Elena focused on the development of the relationship between students and teachers as well as being able to enjoy learning:

They should take more care of the students. Students should have some discipline but they should still have some fun at school. You would not be entering a school but a family. Like here, we do have fun and laugh but we still do the lessons (lines 107-109).

3.6.19 Future

The participants were asked questions related to future aspirations. These questions were aimed at answering the third research question [see Methodology chapter]. All of the participants mentioned that once they finished attending the ALP they had the intention to attend a post-secondary institute. Most of the participants wanted to further their studies in the vocational subjects they chose at the ALP. These subjects were: Hair, Beauty, Sports and Hospitality. Table 2.1 in the Methodology chapter illustrates what the future plans of the participants were.

The participants also stated that the ALP was an opportunity for them to explore better what they could do in their future. Julian stated that the ALP is for:

Any type of student but more suited for those who have problems on deciding what they are going to do with their future. Those who are still not sure of what they are going to do, whether to continue studying or not (lines 167-169).

Sean stated that had he not attended the ALP, once he finished compulsory school he would "*have started working*" (line 122). Similarly, Pamela stated "*I think I would have stopped*" (line 159) and would not have considered entering further education. For Grace, the experience at the ALP reinforced her aspiration to attend the post-secondary institute MCAST:

No I always said that I wanted to continue studying. I always wanted to go to MCAST but this year served to want to go more because we went for a visit to see how it is. Here they show you a lot of things which help you to understand more what you want (lines 163-165).

Although Jane struggled to learn at school due to her learning difficulties, she still wanted to further her education:

> *I am not going to stop attending school to go to work. I want to continue attending school because it was always my dream to enrol in the army* (lines 322-323).

3.7 Core categories

Once the higher order categories were identified, they were compared to each other in order to identify common properties and suitability to be considered for the following stage; the development of core categories. The core categories resulted from the dominant categories which resonated with student disengagement. Following each stage, the researcher narrowed down and filtered the categories to come up with 3 main categories which reflected the experiences of the participants. Table 3.5 illustrates a few examples of the process which led to the development of the core categories.

Initial Codes	Categories	Higher Order Categories	Core Categories
• Bullied by classmate • Transition to secondary school • Life skills in preparation for real life • Developing a sense of independence • Having ambitions and aspirations	• Development of life skills • Independence • Future Plans • Self-Concept	• Self • Emotional well-being • Coping strategies • Skills	• Needs
• Patient teachers • Good relationships with peers • Confiding in staff members • Strict teachers • Support of LSA • Encouraged by parents to study	• Supported • Nurtured • Sense of belonging • Discipline	• Staff • Family • Peers	• Relationships

• Learning to do practical tasks • Specialising in an area of interest • Gaining new knowledge • Becoming upskilled • Learning by doing • Learning to do something in stages • Enriching learning experience	• Vocational subjects • Practical skills • Hands on activities • Interesting curriculum • Literacy Difficulties	• Curriculum • Learning Process • Teaching Methodology	• Learning

Table 3.5 – Coding process leading to the development of core categories

The core categories which emerged were: 'needs', 'relationships' and 'learning'. Table 3.6 shows which categories made up the core categories.

Needs	Relationships	Learning
Self	Staff	Disengagement
Emotional well-being	Peers	Attitude
Transition	Family	Teaching methodology
Resiliency		Learning process
Coping Strategies		Curriculum
Skills		Resources

Table 3.6 - Categories making up the core categories

The core categories emerged from the higher order categories. The categories which made up the core category 'needs' reflected the participants' views and characteristics which resulted in their needs being either met or unmet. Some of the participants viewed themselves negatively and considered themselves as failures. Two of the participants mentioned they had dyslexia and although they were provided with the support of an LSA they still struggled at school. Other experiences such as bullying, always getting blamed when something goes wrong at school and being unable to control anger were other factors which made the participants dislike school. A few of the participants found it difficult to cope with transitions to a new school when they felt unsupported. Through the conversations with the participants it was noted that they lacked resilience when they encountered tough situations in their schooling experience and their developed coping strategy was giving up. At the ALP, the participants had the opportunity to gain skills which led to become more independent and helped them to increase their self-efficacy since they were able to experience success.

'Relationships' was another core category which emerged from the higher order categories: staff, peers and family. The results showed that the type of relationship built with teachers was the most influencing factor which affected student disengagement. When the participants felt that they were supported and understood, they connected with the teaching staff and realised that the teachers' goal was to help students achieve their potential and succeed in what was important to them. The type of relationship which was developed between teachers and students at the ALP was a nurturing one. The participants felt valued since they received individual attention from their teachers and did not give up on them when they did not understand. Also, the support of an LSA per class was well received by the participants since they were able to get some extra help when they needed it. Thus, not only students identified as having special educational needs got extra support. For a few of the participants, peers' influence was another factor which affected their level of engagement. Students considered as followers tended to copy their peers' actions. Thus, if their peers skipped a class they tended to do the same. Interestingly, the relationship with parents was described by the participants as having neither a positive nor negative influence on them as to how much they decided to be engaged at school.

The third core category which was developed following the comparative analysis was 'learning'. This category grouped together different aspects of the learning process which influenced the participants' disengagement. One of the main influencing factors which was distinct in this analysis was the curriculum offered at mainstream school. For the participants, this curriculum was very theoretical with little focus on practice, if any at all. Most of the time, the content presented to the participants was perceived as too difficult to understand. However, through the ALP experience, the participants were able to realise that they could learn from each other and that if they paid attention they were able to concentrate better. They were also able to realise that when there were disruptive students in their class, their own learning process was also disrupted. The students were grateful when teachers at the ALP took the time to explain several times and that they gave individual attention to all students. The shift from mainstream school to the ALP was perceived well by the participants and their attitude towards school was more positive. Once they found value in what they were learning, attending school and engaging in the learning process occurred.

3.8 Overview of the emergent theory

The final part of this chapter is an overview which connects all the different pieces of the puzzle which emerged throughout the analysis of the data. The theory aims to explain how disengagement from school occurs. The emergent theory is illustrated in Figure 3.13, whereas Table 3.7 demonstrates the process whereby the core categories led to the emergent theory.

Core Category	Memos	Variable in Theory
Needs	Students showed different needs: dyslexia, hyperactivity, lack of confidence, bullying, failing…	Unmet needs
	Are these needs addressed?	
	Is support given? Who should provide this support?	
	Are unmet needs the reason why students disliked school?	
	At the ALP students say they are supported, engaged and enjoy school – are their needs being met?	
	Repetitive failing experiences leading to self-fulfilling prophecy.	
	Support received at ALP not only emotional but also academic – multiple explanations, pace of students…	
	Met needs → Student engagement	
	Unmet needs → Student disengagement	
Relationships	Relationships with peers, family and staff members were mentioned as having an impact on whether students disengaged or not at school. Parents less influential – although they were encouraged by parents still disengaged.	Hostile Relationships
	Peers having a negative influence if they encouraged participants to skip lessons.	
	Most influential were teaching staff – At ALP relationships with staff described as positive; supportive, caring, nurturing, listen to you, individual attention – mentioned as making their experience at school better.	
	Some relationships at previous schools were described as negative e.g. very strict teachers, blaming them, labelling them etc.	
	Positive/Supportive relationships → Student engagement	
	Negative relationships → Student disengagement	

Learning	Emphasis on practical sessions rather than focus on theory.	Unappealing curriculum
	Students engaged at ALP because it is very hands-on.	
	At mainstream, classes are grouped according to bands (abilities of students) – although there are different levels students still found it hard to follow. Teaching methodology not appropriate? Curriculum too difficult even though adapted?	
	Usually lower stream classes have students with challenging behaviour – not bothered about school? Teachers struggle to deliver lessons in these classes? Attitude of not liking school where is it coming from? Are all children meant to like school and want to learn?	
	At ALP students enjoy school and interested to learn so what changed? Vocational subjects – chose subjects they want to learn about.	
	ALP – less focus on theory more practice and life skills	
	Interesting curriculum → Student engagement	
	Unappealing curriculum → Student disengagement	

Table 3.7 - Memos leading to the development of the theory
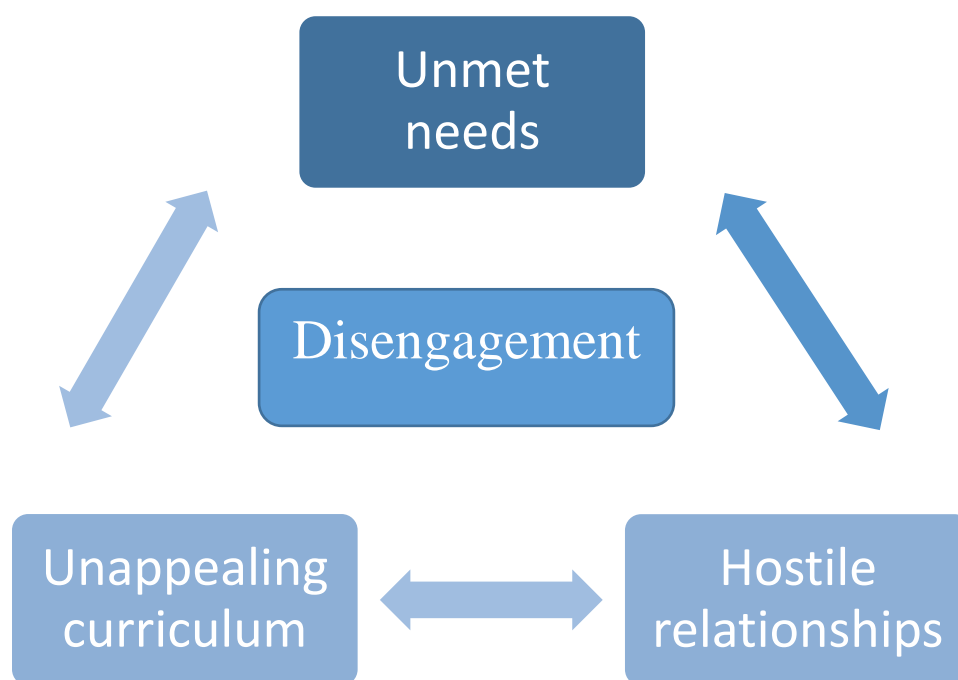
Figure 3.13 – Emergent theory of student disengagement

The theory suggests that the participants' views on school disengagement are best understood as an interaction between the variables: 'unappealing curriculum', 'hostile relationships' and 'unmet needs'. When these factors interact together, students are more likely to become disengaged from school and the learning process. The reference to unmet needs in the theory is characterised by a variety of factors. These factors included educational needs such as, students having learning difficulties and being unable to understand the content presented to them. Other needs included hyperactivity and medical conditions which led to school absenteeism. Emotional needs which were not catered for accounted to experiences of bullying, difficulties to express emotions in appropriate ways and low self-efficacy. When the relationships built with teachers are not experienced as nurturing by the participants, the environment which is created can be experienced as hostile and therefore students may feel that they do not belong at school. In this research, it was acknowledged that school staff need to use discipline so that order at school can be maintained. However, when staff are too strict with students this is not perceived well and can trigger rebellious behaviour in students. When students do not feel understood, cared for and well-supported, they are more likely to become disengaged from school. Another crucial factor in the emergent theory is an unappealing curriculum. Students who prefer to engage in hands-on, practical activities and are considered as kinaesthetic learners are put off by academic subjects which involve a lot of

theory and little practice. The experience of some of the participants reflected boredom at school since what they were expected to learn was not considered as interesting.

The setting of the ALP provided the participants with an environment which addressed the factors contributing to the process of disengagement and which occurred at mainstream school. Once the participants' individual needs were met, they were presented with a curriculum which was interesting and enticing, and found school staff who invested in building relationships with them, the participants were engaged at school and in learning.

3.9 Summary of chapter

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings from the analysed data. The first set of data was collected from the questionnaires and the analysis produced descriptive statistics. The results indicated that students pointed towards an uninteresting curriculum and family influences as the most common reasons why they became disengaged from school. Teachers and parents were indicated as the persons who could have helped them the most to be engaged at school. The majority of the participants stated that having a higher level of education could provide them with a better future. Also, the majority of those attending the ALP stated that this setting helped them to be re-engaged at school, mostly because the lessons were more practical than mainstream school. This chapter then progressed to present the qualitative data which was analysed through grounded theory. The process of initial coding resulted in categories being developed which were later compared to each other and gave rise to 19 categories. The three core categories 'needs', 'relationships' and 'learning' were eventually identified as the main factors which led the participants to become disengaged from school. Finally, this chapter concluded by presenting the emergent theory from the data. In the next chapter, the literature pertaining to the research findings will be discussed.

Chapter 4: Literature Review

4.1 Overview of chapter

The first part of this chapter will describe the psychological theories referring to the area of student disengagement. Then, the process of the systematic literature searches will be outlined. From these systematic searches, twelve key papers were identified and critically analysed. The research findings will be grouped and discussed under the following categories: student disengagement, models of student disengagement, the dropping out process, positive engagement principles, alternative learning programmes and student re-engagement. These papers were chosen according to their fit with the categories identified during data analysis.

4.2 Psychological theories underpinning student disengagement

The term student disengagement makes reference to three dimensions; behavioural, emotional and cognitive [see Introduction chapter]. Social engagement at school can occur through the participation in extracurricular activities and through friendships which can both act as motivation to attend and stay in school (National Research Council, 2004). When students becomes disengaged from school, there is the danger that their behaviour becomes problematic and this may eventually lead them to drop out of school (UCLA, 2011). Other repercussions associated with dropping out of school include: lacking skills required to integrate into the workforce, suffering from social maladjustment and experiencing psychological dysfunctions (Kaplan 1996). Psychological disengagement can lead to internalised behaviour such as emotional distress and/or externalised behaviour such us misbehaviour (Adelman & Taylor, 2010). The Centre (UCLA, 2011) states that psychologically, when a learner is disengaged, feelings of competence, self-determination and being valued by others are likely to be threatened.

When students believe that they lack the capacity to succeed or that they do not have control over outcomes, efforts to succeed at school are likely to diminish (Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990). Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1997) reflects the notion that in order to be engaged at school, students need to believe that they can succeed. As the learner's life at school progresses, demands tend to increase and students are expected to become more responsible (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). If learners are unable to live up to these

expectations, they can start believing that they are incapable of succeeding at school and therefore prefer to disengage from the schooling experience.

Motivation, the desire to act in a particular way, is an important factor which leads to experiencing success at school (Sternberg, 2005). The author states that without motivation, students may never make an effort to learn. In fact, "motivation is seen as a pre-requisite of and a necessary element for student engagement in learning" (Sitwat & Zyngier, 2012, p.252). Within the classroom context, motivation refers to how much a student focuses on the learning process in order to achieve successful outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsically motivated students tend to experience greater achievement levels, decreased levels of anxiety, feelings of competence and engagement in learning (Wigfield & Waguer, 2005). It has been acknowledged that students cannot always be intrinsically motivated and that teachers frequently make use of extrinsic motivators such as praise and rewards to encourage students to engage in the learning process (Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2006). Thus, there needs to be a balanced pedagogy in the classroom, where a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators is reached since relying solely on intrinsic motivation may not be conducive to learning for all students (Sitwat & Zyngier, 2012). Nonetheless, in the study conducted by Vansteenkiste, Lens and Deci (2006), intrinsic goal framing as opposed to extrinsic goal framing and no-goal framing, led to: deeper engagement in learning, increased persistence at learning activities and better conceptual learning.

Self-determination theory is a theory of motivation. Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that this theory is based on addressing three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness. Competence refers to the desire to control and master the environment. The need for relatedness seeks to build connections with others and to develop a sense of belonging. Doing something out of own interest denotes the need of autonomy. People tend to feel motivated when they are able to meet these three needs. Deci and Ryan (2000) also propose that self-determination occurs along a continuum. Intrinsic motivation represents the most self-determined or autonomous behaviour regulation whereas extrinsic or controlled motivation is characterised by activities yielding specific outcomes. As a person progresses along the self-determination continuum, motivation becomes less controlled and more self-determined [see Figure 4.1].
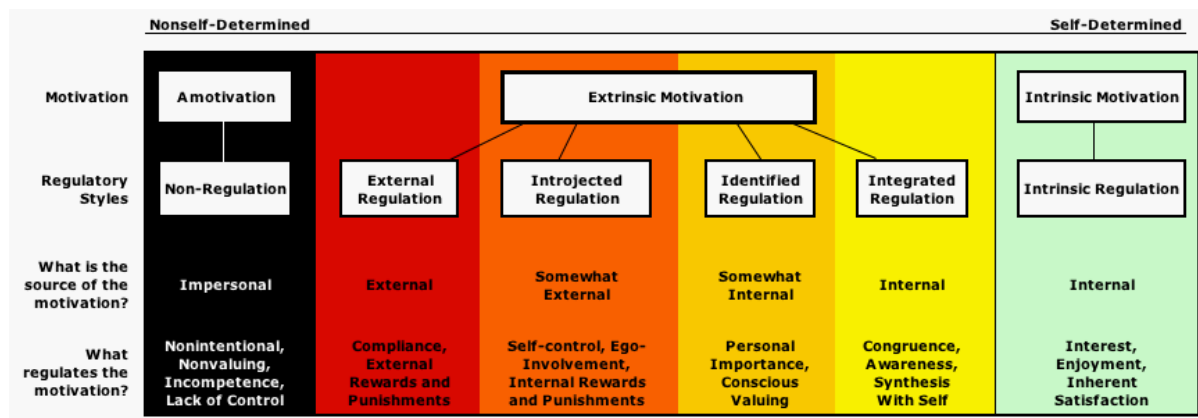
Figure 4.1 – The self-determination continuum (based on Deci & Ryan, 2000).

McLean (2009) puts forward a model to explain motivation for successful learning based on students' needs. These needs are: affiliation, agency and autonomy (the 3As). Affiliation is the sense of being valued, understood and the creation of an emotional bond with others which in turn leads to the development of a sense of security. Agency refers to self-belief, self-confidence and being able to give contributions enabling a person to strive for success. Autonomy is the capacity to be self-responsible and to be in charge of one's own learning. Thus, according to McLean, for a student to be motivated the 3As need to be present.

Research such as the one carried out by Spiteri (2014) suggests that disengagement from school is a process and that multiple factors which include family, peers, school and individuals themselves, interact together influencing the individual's development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) acknowledges that an individual is at the centre of different environmental systems. The 'microsystem', the innermost environmental layer, is made up of the immediate setting of the person such as the family and school. Within the 'mesosystem' relationships between the microsystems are created. The 'exosystem' involves indirect contexts which exert an influence on the individual's life. The next layer, the 'macrosystem', reflects the larger cultural context of the individual. Finally, the 'chronosystem' comprises the transitions which occur throughout the person's lifespan [see Appendix 10 for an illustration of this model].

4.3 Systematic searches

The systematic searches were carried out through the search engine EBSCO Host. The following databases were used to complete each of the systematic searches:

- o Academic Search Complete
- o British Education Index

- o Child Development & Adolescent Studies
- o Education Research Complete
- o Education Resource Information Centre
- o PsycARTICLES
- o PsychINFO
- o Teacher Reference Centre.

The advanced search tab was used so that searches containing multiple keywords could be inputted. Boolean search mode was selected to ensure that each of the identified terms were included in the search. The built-in thesaurus function was also used to find synonyms and related terms for each of the keywords which were searched. This was done to avoid eliminating articles relevant to this research which were not identified through the searches due to alternative terms being utilised. 'Scholarly journals' was used as a filter to refine the results produced by each search. Table 4.1 illustrates the findings from the systematic searches and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for each search.

Keywords	Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria	Number of Results	Key References Found
Student Engagement and Alternative Learning	▪ Academic Journals ▪ English language ▪ Last 20 years	32	1
Student Disengagement	▪ Academic Journals ▪ English language ▪ Last 10 years	196	9
Alternative Learning Programme and Disengaged Students	▪ Academic Journals ▪ English language	2	1

Table 4.1 - Systematic searches results

The choice of the selected keywords to carry out the systematic searches reflected the research questions which the research aimed to answer. Thus, the two main themes to be explored in further detail were student disengagement and alternative learning programmes. Different versions and combinations of these terms were selected to identify key research which could inform the researcher about the phenomenon of student disengagement and alternatives which could avoid this process from occurring.

A total of 230 articles were found through the systematic searches. The titles and abstracts were reviewed and eventually led to the identification of eleven key research references which will be critically analysed further on in this chapter. The selection of these articles occurred by choosing the articles which fitted closely with the categories developed during data analysis. A manual hand search followed so as to identify any further research carried out in the UK since the systematic searches yielded only two studies which were carried out in the UK. This search identified a key research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (Kettlewell, Southcott, Stevens, & McCrone, 2012) and therefore became the twelfth key research to be critically evaluated. Table 4.2 illustrates details about the twelve key research references.

Number	Authors	Date	Research Title	Journal	Methodology
1	Walsh, F.	2006	A Middle School Dilemma: Dealing with "I Don't Care"	American Secondary Education, 35(1), 5-15	Literature review on positive engagement principles
2	Lessard, A., et al.	2008	Shades of Disengagement: High School Dropouts Speak Out	Social Psychology of Education, 11(1), 25-42	Individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews
3	Haughey, A.	2009	Pupils Disengaged from School: Evaluation of an Alternative Vocational Education Programme	Educational and Child Psychology, 26(1), 52-59	Attendance records and post-school destination data
4	Mornane, A.	2009	The Adolescent Students Views of Factors Influencing Learning	The International Journal of Learning, 16(5), 221-229	Interviews with students every 4 weeks and observations in class, over a period of nine months
5	Deed, C.	2011	Accessing Students' Reasoning for Disengagement	International Journal on School Disaffection, 8(2), 24-28	Class observations and interviews with students
6	Jones, J.	2011	Narratives of Student Engagement in an Alternative Learning Context	Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 16(3), 219-236	Classroom and school observations, semi structured interviews with students and teachers (for triangulation)
7	Blondal, K.S., & Adalbjarnardottir, S.	2012	Student Disengagement in Relation to Expected and Unexpected Educational Pathways	Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 56(1), 85-100	Three measures of disengagement: (1) negative school behaviours, (2) academic disinterest, and (3) lack of identification with school.
8	Kettlewell, K., Southcott, C., Stevens, E. & McCrone, T.	2012	Engaging the disengaged	Publication: NFER Research Programme - From Education to Employment	Evaluation of programmes targeting students at risk of disengagement

9	Lund Dean, K., & Jolly, J.P.	2012	Student Identity, Disengagement and Learning	Academy of Management Learning & Education, 11(2), 228-243	Literature review presenting an identity-based student disengagement model
10	Iachini, A.L., Buettner, C., Anderson-Butcher, D., & Reno, R.	2013	Exploring Students' Perceptions of Academic Disengagement and Reengagement in a Dropout Recovery Charter School Setting	Children and Schools, 35(2), 113-120	Two focus groups
11	Nicholson, L.J., & Putwain, D.W.	2015	Facilitating Re-engagement in Learning: A Disengaged Student Perspective	The Psychology of Education Review, 39(2), 37-41	Semi-structured interviews
12	Ruglis, J., & Vallée, D.	2016	Student Disengagement as/and Unfairness: Re-reading Schools through Photos	Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies, 14(2), 186-216	Photo essays, photo-elicitation interviews, artists' statements and a focus group

Table 4.2- Details of the key research

4.4 Critical analysis

The studies presented in this section will be grouped according to their fit with the created categories which emerged during the data analysis process. These categories reflect the main findings and key concepts presented in the studies. First, the studies which explored the students' experience of being disengaged from school will be discussed. These studies will be followed by the presentation of a variety of models which attempt to explain the process of disengagement from different perspectives. The dropping out process will be described in further detail by looking at different stages of this process and events or situations which typically accompany the students during this journey. Then, positive engagement principles which can be applied by teachers in order to assist students to remain engaged in learning will be addressed. The literature review will then progress to explore the aims of alternative learning programmes and what makes them a success. Finally, this review will seek to explore how students can become re-engaged in learning. *Table 4.3* summarises the context and key outcomes to the research studies which will be discussed in the following sections. Three of the research papers are not included in this table since they present literature reviews rather than research studies.

Research Title	Setting	Participants	Characteristics of Provision/Participants	Key Outcomes
Shades of Disengagement: High School Dropouts Speak Out	French-Canadian Caucasians high school in the province of Quebec	44 males and 36 females between 17 and 21 years of age	Participants had dropped out of school and did not obtain their high school diplomas	An application of strategies to navigate through the different stages of the disengagement process
Pupils Disengaged from School: Evaluation of an Alternative Vocational Education Programme	A programme set up in a rural council in Scotland	91 participants to evaluate changes in attendance and 139 participants to evaluate the destination following the attendance of PAVE	Vocational and educational components focusing on basic skills	Significant improvements in attendance and an increased probability of entering employment or further education
The Adolescent Students Views of Factors Influencing Learning	A Catholic and a Government secondary school in Victoria, Australia	6 males and 4 females in Year 8	The schools had a history of student disengagement	The concept of the possible selves encouraged the development of future goals and aspirations
Accessing Students' Reasoning for Disengagement	Regional Catholic secondary college in Australia	5 males and 2 females in Year 10	A subject entitled Future Mathematics, a hands on approach to teaching and learning Maths	Disengagement was a reasoned decision based on questions of relevance, usefulness and capacity to succeed
Narratives of Student Engagement in an Alternative Learning Context	Small public high school in the mid-Atlantic Region, United States.	24 students and 12 teachers	An alternative school designed as a dropout prevention programme	Affective engagement preceded school identification and behavioural commitment to learning

Student Disengagement in Relation to Expected and Unexpected Educational Pathways	Public schools in Reykjavik, Iceland	832 adolescents who were: (1) 14 years old at baseline (2) 15 years old at the follow-up study, and (3) completed standardised national achievement tests at the end of compulsory school	Homogeneous sample with respect to culture, religion and language (representative of Reykjavik), and heterogeneous sample in terms of socioeconomic status (SES) background	Males and students from lower SES backgrounds were generally more disengaged. Those at risk academically who graduated unexpectedly showed fewer negative behaviours than the expected dropouts
Exploring Students' Perceptions of Academic Disengagement and Reengagement in a Dropout Recovery Charter School Setting	Urban dropout recovery charter school in a Midwestern city in the United States	6 males and 7 females between 17 and 20 years of age	Academic learning related to the work environment where application of skills is sought through internship-based career opportunities	Barriers to success in mainstream school were due to behavioural and discipline challenges, lack of support from teachers and lack of individualised planning
Facilitating Re-engagement in Learning: A Disengaged Student Perspective	Alternative provision secondary school in the North West of England	23 males and 12 females between 14 and 16 years of age	Established for students who stopped attending mainstream school with a reduced academic curriculum and small class size	Factors which facilitated re-engagement in learning related to classroom factors, relational factors, generic school factors and personal factors
Student Disengagement as/and Unfairness: Re-reading Schools through Photos	English-speaking Montreal public schools where the youths are racially/ethnic diverse	2 males and 2 females between 14 and 16 years of age	Participants self-identified as being disengaged and were still enrolled at school	A struggle against systemic unfairness where the participants struggled to make progress, experienced failure and found the curriculum uninteresting

Table 4.3- Details of the key research identified for critical analysis

4.4.1 Student disengagement

Disengagement from the learning experience is considered as a strategic decision based on how much the learner thinks that the learning is relevant, useful and whether he/she has the capacity to succeed (Deed, 2011). At the core of Deed's paper is the use of strategic questioning where students ask questions to themselves to become aware of how they strategise their learning. Some of the responses to the question "What are you thinking when you do not understand the work?" included; the fear of being ridiculed and giving up if the work was too hard. Other strategic questions the students found themselves asking were related to the level of difficulty of the assigned work, whether the content was interesting and relevant to their present everyday life, and whether the learning would help them for future employment.

Students' learning experiences can be explored when: time and space to access their voices are provided by educators, a language of learning is built and if pedagogical possibilities are explored (Deed, 2011). This author suggests that students and teachers should collaborate together so as to identify the best way for teachers to teach and for students to learn, and that the relationship developed between these two is regarded as partners in learning. The collaboration suggested by Deed (2011) portrays an ideal scenario. However, from personal experience of working within schools, their dynamic environment does not provide much time for teachers to sit with every single student and acquire information about their learning experiences. In school settings were the class size is small, this type of collaboration is more attainable as in fact this was revealed by the participants of the current research.

Mornane's (2009) study, part of a wider project, aimed to explore which factors influence students' learning goals and their capacity for self-regulation. The concept of possible selves refers to the individuals' ideas of what they might become in the future (Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2002). The possible self can act as a motivating action which connects current learning to future goals and aspirations. Five factors which help to predict academic resilience include: self-efficacy, planning, control, composure and persistence (Martin & Marsh, 2006). The authors state that when students experience academic resilience they enjoy attending school, participate in class and develop positive self-esteem. When students set goals, the effort they place on learning can be more specific and students persevere to achieve higher goals. Thus, goal setting can help students to be engaged at school by focusing on achieving the set goals.

The results of the same study showed that in the Mathematics subject, the factors which were rated by the participants as highly affecting their learning were: the relevance of the subject,

working hard, the teacher, future goals and classroom behaviour. Thus, students engaged more in a subject if they thought it was relevant to their future aspirations. Family expectations was another factor influencing student engagement. The participants perceived their family as placing different expectations on different subjects such as, Mathematics being deemed more essential in their children's learning than Science. These findings might suggest that in order to seek parents' approval, students try harder in subjects they perceive to be important for their family. Thus, besides internal factors such as motivation and future goals, external factors such as family and teacher expectations may also influence how much a student is engaged at school.

The selected schools in Mornane's (2009) study were described by the author as being known for having a history of disengagement and low motivation amongst students. Nonetheless, all of the participants who were interviewed stated that they envisaged themselves either at university or at TAFE (technical and further education). Considering the aspirations these students had, 'disengaged' might not have been the most fitting term to describe their experiences at school.

The purpose of Ruglis and Vallée's study (2016) was to explore youths' experiences of the process of school disengagement. Another aim was to view engagement from a different lens; one which focuses less on the individual as being problematic and more on the bioecological perspective. The authors of this study make reference to the concept of unfairness where students who are in a minority or who come from a disadvantaged background are likely to attend a school where they will experience inequity (e.g. limited access to resources or poor school buildings). Consequently, students may react to unfairness in the distribution of outcomes by exhibiting disruptive behaviour and forming negative relationships with teachers and peers. Such behaviour and attitude is then labelled as student disengagement.

Ruglis and Vallée (2016) inform the readers that the themes which emerged from data analysis are best understood in a class-based analysis since none of the participants came from a privileged background. The participants in the study reported that disengagement accumulates over time and it affects the quality of life and options for the future. Whilst certain social and academic aspects of disengagement occur in elementary school they are aggravated by the high school transition. The participants also shared that they experienced failure with each increasing grade when academic difficulties arose. A sense of unfairness brought about by teachers, policies and the school was also implied. From the youths' photo essays, the following themes emerged: struggling to become or to have movement, experiencing failure, and enduring a boring, repetitive and meaningless curriculum.

In three of the four participants' selection of photos, ladders were captured. The ladders represented the school journey of the participants which was full of challenges. Other photos managed to capture the youths' insecurities in being able to experience success at school and which restricted their options of what comes next. One of the captured photos was blurry and showed a homeless man. The participant's Artist Statement to describe this photo read "if you don't do your work, that's what you end up like" (Ruglis & Vallée, 2016, p.205). The participants also mentioned that in order to increase student engagement, schools should include more opportunities where students choose their courses and have more dynamic, project-based school work. In fact, one of the youths took a photo to capture a low mark of a History assignment. However, in the photo-elicitation interview the young person stated that once the activities started to become more interactive, he started to score better marks on projects. The strength of this study was that it offered an innovative methodology to elicit student views on student disengagement. However, only four participants were recruited and one of them did not attend all of the meetings and the photo-elicitation interview. Thus, findings from this study are limited and difficult to generalise. Perhaps further research into the area of disengagement could make use of the photo essays technique to build on Ruglis and Vallée's (2016) research. Participants would probably be interested to take part in research which uses this method of data collection.

Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2012) carried out a quantitative study to explore how school engagement processes distinguish between students who follow expected educational pathways and those who do not. Considering the lack of research focusing on both the behavioural and emotional dimensions of disengagement, Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir's study (2012) aimed to address this gap. The results of the study showed that at age 14, expected dropouts exhibited the most negative behaviours at school with males being more behaviourally disengaged than females. Males also experienced less academic interest than females, as did students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Moreover, compared to expected graduates, high achievers who dropped out unexpectedly experienced more behavioural and emotional disengagement. Results from the following year showed that in general, disengagement increased amongst unexpected dropouts however it decreased amongst expected graduates.

A strength of Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir's study (2012) is that it is a longitudinal study, with the participants' educational journey being tracked over 8 years. In the present study, it would have been interesting to track the participants' pathway over the next few years and to evaluate whether they followed the path they mentioned during the interviews. Although the sample in Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir's study was based on a considerable amount of participants,

generalising the findings to an international context is still difficult due to the sample's homogeneity. Also, in order to measure academic disinterest and non-identification with school, only 3 items per measure rated on a Likert scale were used. Thus, capturing the true experience of behavioural and emotional disengagement might be difficult from this study.

4.4.2 Models of student disengagement

Following an overview of different factors which lead students to experience disengagement from school, the focus will now shift from 'why' to 'how'. Three concrete models which explain the role of the self in student disengagement will be presented. These models fit with the current research findings where the participants' experiences revealed that aspects related to self-identity and capacity to succeed affected their engagement at school.

Finn (1989) proposes two disengagement models which describe school dropout as a cumulative and dynamic process. In the frustration-self-esteem model, students who fail to achieve at school feel frustrated. So as to protect their self-esteem, these students reject school by engaging in disruptive behaviour and by withdrawing from the schooling experience. The other model proposed by Finn (1989) is the participation-identification model, which includes the behavioural and emotional dimensions. Students who invest emotionally in school are more likely to succeed at school and through active participation, develop a sense of belonging. Those who do not participate and bond with school are more likely to fail.

Lund Dean and Jolly's (2012) paper introduces the concept of social-identity as a component which factors in the process of disengagement. The authors explain that the self-concept is grounded in different roles an individual has. Each role brings along with it different expectations. The model presented by Lund Dean and Jolly (2012, p.235), explains how engagement or disengagement from learning occurs based on the student's identity [see Figure 4.2]. Engagement or disengagement in learning starts with the current self and what the student brings in to the learning setting. Social identity, the person's sense of self based on group memberships, plays a role in this early stage. Once the learner is presented with a learning activity, an initial risk assessment is made to assess perceived threats and decide whether to engage in the learning activity or not. If the perceived threat is considered as high, the student disengages from learning. When a student attempts to learn something new, learning may be experienced as negative, triggering stress or fear which may potentially damage parts of the brain associated with learning (Zull, 2002).

Lund Dean and Jolly (2012) argue that during high threatening situations, the learner disengages through a fight or flight response. An example of the fight response is disrupting other students in class, whereas an example of the flight response is not showing up to class. When students perceive the threat as moderate, they go through a secondary risk assessment. If the learner's coping strategies are adequate, the possible self becomes more enticing and therefore the student engages in learning. Coping behaviours associated with emotional change include: planning, problem solving and positive re-appraisal. Once the student perceives little or no threat, the adaptive learning process and adjustments to the identity occur.
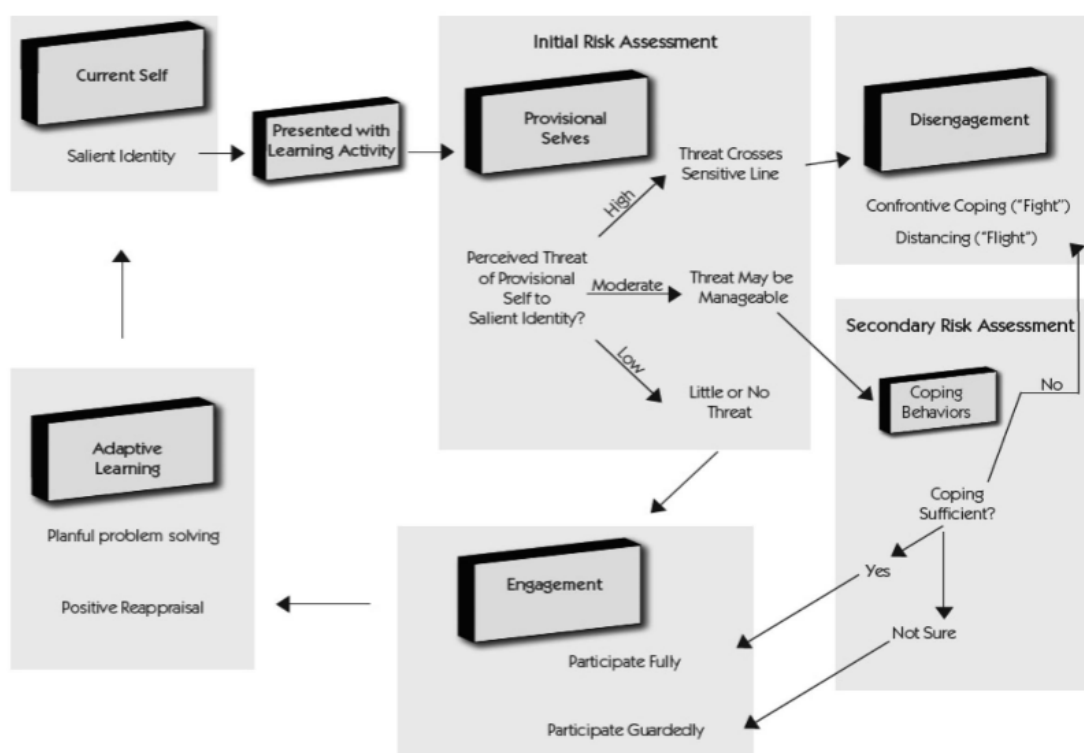
Figure 4.2- Identity-based student disengagement model

Lund Dean and Jolly's (2012) identity-based student disengagement model provided another perspective to view the disengagement process. This model is one which does not solely focus on the intellectual changes a learner goes through but considers the emotional changes as well. Whilst teachers may consider reaching the learning objectives as the end of the learning process, students need to explore how they fit with the content presented to them and create coping mechanisms so as to decide what comes next in the learning stage (Weiner, 1979). Thus, focusing on positive coping strategies may be the key for students to choose to engage in learning opportunities rather than opting out.

In the following section, the dropping out process will be explored in further detail by looking at the different phases of how this process occurs and the events in each stage.

4.4.3 The dropping out process

The purpose of the study carried out by Lessard et al. (2008) was to explore the educational journey of students identified as dropouts. The data collected in their study points out that 35% of the participants started to encounter difficulties with disengagement in primary school whereas the majority of the participants started to experience disengagement difficulties in secondary school. The findings from the study which describe the dropout process are illustrated in the figure below.
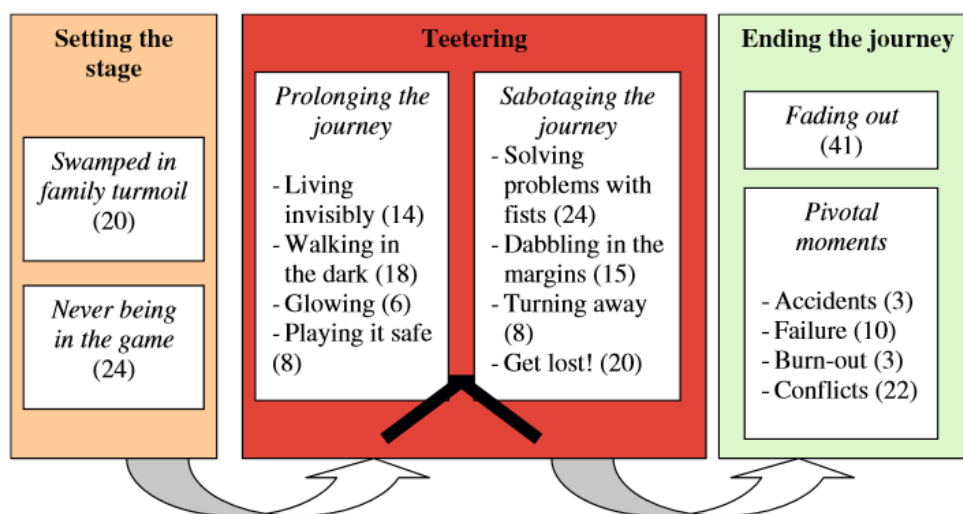
Figure 4.3- The dropout process *(Lessard et al., 2008, p.31).*

The initial phase of the dropout process views family turmoil as having a potential influence on the child's educational journey. Examples of these events include: divorce, abuse, neglect, being in care, changing schools and experiencing loss. Following the initial phase, Lessard et al. (2008) propose two strategies which students can adopt i.e., either to prolong or to sabotage their journey at school. For the participants of the study, prolonging the journey at school meant finding ways to navigate within the school context whilst continuing their educational journey. Some of the students attempted to become invisible by withdrawing from the school's social aspects or through passive forms of resistance. A few of the participants stated that they were shy, did not want to attract attention onto them or that they felt unvalued by others. Other common difficulties experienced by the participants included; not seeing value in being engaged at school and being unable to link educational journeys with their futures. Although most of the participants admitted disliking school, they also acknowledged that some teachers were caring, patient and attentive.

These qualities made the participants feel appreciated and helped to prolong their educational journey.

Whilst some students at school make a conscious effort to avoid getting into trouble, others choose to solve their problems through fighting (Lessard et al., 2008). Some of the participants in Lessard et al.'s, study stated that the repercussions associated with not fighting were actually higher than those associated with fighting. In order to defend themselves from being picked on, humiliated or excluded, these participants had to show that they were tough and therefore attempted to earn respect through fighting. The end of the journey for most of the participants was characterised by a pivotal moment such as a particular incident, conflicts with teachers, repetitive failing or burn out which led them to drop out of school. Other participants described their end of the journey as a fade out where following years of disengagement, instability, rejection and being pushed aside, they came to the conclusion to simply stop engaging at school by choosing to be physically absent from school.

Lessard et al. (2008) provide a thick description of the research process. Thus, replicating the study would be a fairly straightforward task. Although it is very detailed and it delves deeply into how participants experienced school disengagement, its limitation is that the population is relatively homogenous; from the same ethnic background within a province in Canada. Thus, findings from this study may be limited to that specific population.

4.4.4 Positive engagement principles

Walsh (2006) is another author who sought to explore the difficulty of engaging students who are disinterested in learning. In his writing, he makes continuous reference to the phrase "I don't care" which is frequently used by disengaged students. The paper written by Walsh aims to inform the readers about different positive engagement principles. It presents literature which explains how applying three main positive engagement principles in the classroom can assist students to remain engaged in learning. These principles aim to address the causes rather than the symptoms of disengagement and to promote collaboration over control. They also put forward a few suggestions which address how the role of the teacher can tackle student disengagement. As the findings from the current research revealed, the role of the teacher is critical when dealing with disengaged students.

The first principle refers to teachers making an effort in getting to know their students and being able to access their world. Such a relationship would be built by paying attention to the students' areas of interest, attuning to their emotional state and understanding their behavioural patterns. In

addition to the teaching role, Walsh (2006) encourages teachers to take up a managing role with their students. This managing role would include acquiring information about the students' learning dispositions and skills level. Similar to Deed (2011), Walsh suggests that students should be collaborators in the learning process and together with their teachers understand how they learn best and identify which skills they need to develop in order to succeed.

The second principle encourages teachers to find time to talk to their students so that they can understand better what their process of disengagement is about. As Walsh (2006) explains, disengagement can be made up of a multitude of factors which include social, developmental, psychological and instructional factors [see Appendix 11 for model illustrating these factors]. The author explains that students who are disengaged from school can push their teachers away making it even more difficult for teachers to bond with their students. Nonetheless, one of the most powerful ways to reach disengaged students is to continue showing them interest, support, care, concern and empathy. Useful communication skills which can help establish a connection with disengaged students include: constructive assertiveness, empathic responding and problem solving (Emmer, Evertson & Worsham, 2003).

The third principle discusses the emotional toll student disengagement can have on teachers. Thus, this principle proposes that teachers should not take student antagonism and inaction personally. When tense conversations with students occur, Walsh (2006) suggests that teachers need to take a step back so that the situation can deescalate whilst power struggles and explosive confrontations are avoided. By showing unconditional positive regard towards their students, teachers can focus on affirming the positive qualities that their students have whilst separating the person from their unacceptable behaviour. Walsh's principles are rooted in a strengths based approach however, in the real world, maintaining such a positive attitude is probably challenging for teachers especially if several attempts to re-engage disengaged students have failed. Nonetheless, when the positive engagement principles mentioned above were integrated in alternative learning programmes, student engagement increased, as will be discussed in the next section.

4.4.5 Alternative learning programmes

Alternative education programmes tend to be viewed as an alternative to suspension or expulsion of students at risk of dropping out of school (McCall, 2003). The author explains that the most common reasons why students are referred to alternative education programmes are: behavioural issues, academic remediation, poor social skills, life events and recurrent absenteeism. The What Works Clearinghouse (Institute of Education Sciences, 2014), provided empirical research that

interventions involving vocational training, academic skills training, after-school enhancement and comprehensive programs are effective in preventing school dropout. Empirical studies also suggest that programmes which adopt an individualised approach, create a supportive learning environment, and foster deep relationships between students and teachers, help students to be engaged at school (Institute of Education Sciences, 2014).

The NFER Research Programme founded in the UK, aimed to establish which interventions have greatest impact on preventing students from becoming disengaged learners and which consequently help in decreasing NEET (not in education, employment or training) numbers (Kettlewell et al., 2012). A number of schools were selected where an intervention was already in place. The selected schools became the case studies for this research where interviews with a member of the SMT and staff members delivering the intervention were carried out. Following the interventions, up to two focus groups per school were held with the students. Moreover, a short questionnaire was administered to the students taking part in the focus groups.

The aim of the programmes was to engage students at risk of disengagement and to re-engage students who were already disengaged. Most of the programmes integrated either two or more approaches to prevent disengagement such as; career guidance, following an alternative curriculum and partnering with employers. Two of the schools introduced mentoring sessions. Mentors in one of the schools were form teachers who discussed performance and future plans with their students. The other school made use of local business employees to act as mentors. Schools who adopted curriculum based approaches, developed an alternative curriculum provision which was rooted in vocational work supported by an employer. Building resilience and readiness to progress into further education or training were also the target of such programmes.

Findings from the study indicated that the support programmes were perceived as effective by both staff and students (Kettlewell et al., 2012). Interviewed staff stated that the students who participated enjoyed attending the programme and responded well to it. Other factors which were deemed to make the programme a success included: developing a good relationship with students, providing one-to-one support, doing practical hands-on activities, offering flexibility to meet individual needs and small group size. The students perceived work-based programmes well and found the practical elements helpful. When mentoring was provided, students found the sessions useful as they had the opportunity to discuss issues which came up whilst being offered guidance and advice.

4.4.6 Student re-engagement

The study by Nicholson and Putwain (2015) investigated the perspective of disengaged students on school-related factors that facilitated re-engagement in learning. A student-centred approach was adopted to capture cognitive, academic and behavioural engagement. Re-engaging students is considered as challenging since conventional routes tend to be futile (Cook, 2005). Thus, identifying the factors which can re-engage students who have become disengaged from school is vital.

The results of the study yielded four themes representing factors which facilitated the students' re-engagement in learning once they joined the alternative provision. Classroom factors was the first theme which emerged. The participants stated that small class size enabled them to concentrate better during the lessons and that staff members were more able to monitor and control their behaviour. They could also provide more attention and support when the students required it. Intellectual challenge was considered as appropriate for their levels and the fact that students were able to choose aspects of their learning, helped them to be more interested and enjoy the lessons. Although discipline was also enforced at the alternative provision, students expressed that it was handled differently from mainstream school. Rather than being shouted at, teachers took time to help students calm down and talk about the underlying problem leading to the disruptive behaviour.

The second theme revolved around relational factors. The participants perceived school staff as treating them with respect, caring for them, investing time in getting to know them, encouraging them and believing that they could succeed. Such an environment fostered a sense of belonging in the students. The third theme captured generic school factors. More freedom was associated with the alternative provision. The participants particularly enjoyed choosing a subject to study once a week. The structure of the day, resources, facilities and excursions were also satisfactory for the students. The fourth theme explored different personal factors which helped the participants to re-engage at school. The experience of the alternative provision helped the participants to value education and to want to achieve academically. Their psychological well-being improved whereby the participants felt more mature, less angry and experienced a boost in their self-confidence. It can be noted that the methodology and findings from Nicholson and Putwain's study (2015) are quite similar to the present study. This could be due to the similar set up of the alternative provisions and their guiding principles.

Jones's (2011) study aimed to explore the participants' identification with the alternative provision as opposed to their previous mainstream school. It also aimed to identify the factors contributing to such a change. The philosophy underpinning this alternative provision was choice theory. This theory states that individuals make behavioural choices to meet and fulfil their basic needs (Glasser, 1998). Findings from Jones's (2011) study revealed that the students wanted to change their previous school due to social and academic difficulties. These difficulties brought about a lack of commitment to their previous school and the learning process. All the students experienced changing schools as a positive change. Such a change could be attributed to the participants feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance from the school's community which included both teachers and students. Words used by the students to describe their school included "homey" and "like a family".

The alternative provision included more hands-on and practical activities which helped the students to be more creative and engaged at school. Another strength of the alternative provision as identified by the students was that the environment fostered them to believe in themselves and experience success. Whilst some students required time to adjust to their new school, they found it helpful to build connections with teachers who provided them with care and support.

Iachini et al. (2013) carried out a study to explore students' perceptions on factors which led them to be unsuccessful in mainstream school, what motivated them to enrol in a dropout recovery school and to enlist the factors which promoted their success at the alternative provision. The participants of the study attributed failure in their previous school to; behavioural and discipline challenges, lack of support from teachers and lack of individualised planning for graduation. Getting kicked out of school, experiencing difficulties with taking tests, having peer-related issues and difficulty in paying attention were a few reasons which were attributed to the category of behavioural and discipline challenges. Lack of support from teachers was described as teachers being irritated with their students if they did not understand an explanation and being told to go and seek assistance from someone else. This lack of support was also apparent in getting individual help to plan for the future.

The participants' motivation to go back to school or to transfer from mainstream school to the alternative provision varied in nature. Five of the participants stated that they were referred by others: such as school staff, family or friends, whereas the same amount of participants stated that they were self-determined to succeed at school as they wanted to graduate. Finally, the characteristics of the alternative provision that promoted success included an individualised

approach to learning. Teachers were very patient and explained the lesson until all students managed to understand. An increased level of autonomy was also experienced by the participants. The school structure fitted more with the students since classes were composed of a smaller staff to students ratio and they had flexibility in their schedule. The school climate was appealing for the participants since it was considered as less dramatic than their previous schools and it was also more diverse.

It can be noted that more than half of the participants in this study were past the compulsory school age, nonetheless they still attended the recovery programme. It would be interesting to investigate whether an extension of the ALP in Malta past the compulsory age would attract previously disengaged students and what the experience of these students would be.

Recently, schools started to acknowledge the importance of children and young people developing emotional literacy (Haughey, 2009). In order to support emotional well-being, programmes such as: Circle Time, Circle of Friends, Friends, emotional training and resilience training have been introduced in schools. Haughey states that the implementation of such programmes shifts the focus from the child or young person as problematic to the impact the school environment has on student disengagement. The Scottish Executive (2003) suggests that if the curriculum prepares students to become: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors, learning serves as preparation for life.

Haughey's (2009) study aimed to evaluate a programme for alternative vocational education (PAVE) and to establish whether this programme managed to re-engage previously disengaged students whilst also preventing them from becoming NEET. The results from the study showed that when the participants' attendance records at PAVE were compared to the records at their previous school, a significant improvement in attendance at PAVE was noted. No significant differences were noted between NEET figures of students who attended the programme and those who did not. However, a significant difference was noted for PAVE students who entered employment or further education once the programme was over. The results from this study indicated that participants attending the alternative provision experienced a positive change. However, it does not identify the why and how this progress was achieved. Perhaps the study could have also focused on identifying the factors which made the programme a successful one and to explore the participants' experience of attending PAVE.

4.5 Summary of chapter

This chapter started off by giving an overview of the psychological theories underpinning this research. Then, it progressed to describe the methodology of the systematic searches which were carried out in order to identify the key papers which were critically analysed in this chapter. The literature review identified relevance, usefulness and capacity to succeed as critical factors which affect whether students decide to engage in the learning process or not. An interesting concept of the possible self was introduced which relates to a person's aspirations of who they would like to be in the future. This way of viewing the self can help the development of goals and motivate the person to become a better version of themselves. A meaningless curriculum and failing at it were described as factors which led to student disengagement. These factors also emerged from the current research. Finally, an overview was given of different alternative learning programmes and what makes them a success. Although these programmes may function in slightly different ways, at their crux is the positive relationship built between teachers and students. This was also evident in the current research where positive relationships with school staff were highlighted in all of the interviews. In the next chapter, the research findings which were presented in the Results chapter will be discussed in light of the literature which was critically analysed in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Overview of chapter

This chapter aims to discuss the research findings which were presented in the Results chapter [see Chapter 3] and link them to the research questions as well as the emergent theory. This will be done by discussing the current findings in light of the literature which was presented in the previous chapter. Then, the methodology which was used to carry out this research will be reviewed. The chapter will progress to highlight the challenges of this research and recommendations for future research. The researcher will also indicate the implications of the research findings for both school organisation and EP practice. Suggestions will be made about the dissemination of the findings in Malta and beyond. During this research, the researcher engaged in reflexivity to increase awareness about certain processes. This reflexive process will be discussed. Finally, this chapter will provide an overview which aims to capture the salient points of the research process and to draw out the conclusions from the findings.

5.2 Discussion of findings

In the Results chapter, the constructs of the participants on school disengagement were presented. The participants were able to reflect on their schooling experiences, to compare and contrast mainstream school to the ALP and to suggest what could be different within the education system to help students be more engaged at school. These views will be discussed next in light of the research questions and the emergent theory.

5.2.1 What do students attending their final year of compulsory school have to say about disengagement from school?

Lessard et al. (2007) describe the disengagement process as occurring in different stages. During the first stage, problems within the home environment have the potential to influence how much a student engages at school. However, in the present research, the participants' perception was that their parents did not have an influence on whether they decided to engage at school or not. Some of the participants mentioned that their parents encouraged them to study and be interested in school but they did not want to do so. Interestingly, students who answered the questionnaire rated family influence as one of the most common factors which led them to be disengaged from mainstream school. The findings from the questionnaire are in line with current literature where family influence is considered as one of the factors which can lead to student disengagement (Mifsud, 2013; Spiteri, 2014). However, in the present research differences in the findings from

the interviews and the questionnaire emerged. This difference could have arisen as the questionnaires were anonymous whilst the interviews were held face-to-face. It is possible that the participants may have felt the need to be loyal to their family and therefore felt uncomfortable to state that their family influenced them to be disengaged from school. Perhaps another reason which could explain these findings is that the questions asked during the interview directed the participants to predominantly reflect about school and personal factors rather than family influences which could have led to student disengagement.

Following the initial stage, the disengagement process proceeds to a next stage where students either prolong or sabotage their school journey (Lessard et al., 2007). The choice of attitude towards school at this stage tends to be quite polar i.e., either to act in or to act out. Students who act in can be quite passive, socially withdrawn and try to avoid attracting attention. Some of the participants in this research mentioned that whilst they considered themselves to be shy they did not have difficulties in engaging with peers. Being shy affected these students as when they did not understand the teacher's explanation they chose to remain quiet and avoid asking the teacher to re-explain. Students who act out can engage in physical fights. According to participants in Lessard et al.'s (2007) study, fighting was a way to defend themselves from being a victim. Some of the participants in this research in fact also mentioned that they were aggressive at school and therefore chose to sabotage their educational journey.

The end of the educational journey for the participants in this research was positive since through the setup of the ALP they were re-engaged at school. Thus, the current findings are in line with Iachini et al.'s (2013) findings where the majority of the students who attended the dropout recovery school were re-engaged at school. The reasons attributed to the successful re-engagement of students were: the individualisation aspect of learning, school structure and school climate. These contrasted with factors which acted as barriers in mainstream school i.e., discipline challenges and lack of teacher support. In the participation-identification model, Finn (1989) makes reference to a sense of belonging where the students' experiences of acceptance can affect their perceptions of the school environment and their level of engagement. In fact, participants in Jones' (2011) study shared that at the alternative learning programme they developed feelings of value for the community and its individuals such as: other students and teachers. The students at the ALP mirrored this experience where they felt they had developed a sense of belonging towards the school community.

Most of the participants who were interviewed in this research stated that a crucial factor contributing to their disengagement was their inability to experience academic success at mainstream school. The participants in Deed's (2011) study also stated that when the lesson was too hard to understand they just gave up and were also scared that someone would laugh at them if they got an incorrect answer. Thus, the findings of this research are in line with Deed's findings; when the curriculum felt unachievable to the participants they became cognitively disengaged. It should also be noted that students can make a strategic decision to be disengaged in specific contexts and not others. For example, students may be disengaged during a particular subject and engaged during other subjects. In fact, some of the participants in this research mentioned that when they realised that the core subjects were important for their future they made an effort to learn something during these subjects. However, in other subjects such as Religion these participants were disengaged as they felt it was not relevant to their life.

Some differences emerged between the findings from the current research and the findings from Ruglis and Vallée's (2016) study. Their findings showed that social and academic aspects of disengagement mostly began during primary school. The results from the questionnaire showed that most of the participants enjoyed primary school more than they did secondary school. Thus, the present research suggests that disengagement is more likely to have occurred during secondary school since the participants enjoyed it less than primary school. Nonetheless, the process of disengagement occurs as an accumulation over time and might be worsened by the transition to secondary school (Ruglis & Vallée, 2016). This statement might explain the findings from the current research; although the participants might have experienced disengagement mostly in secondary school, an accumulation of disengagement experiences from primary school cannot be ruled out.

When students experience academic failure for example, obtaining poor marks in exams, they are likely to believe that they cannot succeed at school and eventually stop trying to do so (Bandura, 1997). Iachini et al. (2013) highlight that the pressure for students to perform well on tests is high and this may push schools to seek alternative settings for students who do not perform well at school. Perhaps rather than focusing on why students do not achieve in mainstream school the focus should be on understanding what makes them succeed at alternative provisions and include such factors in mainstream school. This understanding will be sought in the following section.

Similar to the current research, Nicholson and Putwain (2015) investigated the experience of students who were considered as disengaged from mainstream school. These students reported

that attending an alternative programme helped them to be re-engaged with their education. Positive student-staff relationships was one of the crucial key factors which led the participants to be engaged at their new school. Similarly, the participants attending the ALP highlighted the positive effect the relationships with their teachers had on their level of engagement. Low student-staff ratio was another main factor which the participants in Nicholson and Putwain's (2015) study mentioned as helping them to concentrate more during lessons. A small class size enabled staff to have better classroom management and to be more available for the students when they required extra support. At the ALP, some of the participants mentioned that having a small class size enabled them to understand more the lessons whereas other participants stated that a small class size did not really make a difference. Nonetheless, all the participants agreed that having an LSA present in each class was very helpful since either the teacher or the LSA always made sure that each student understood the lesson. The extra support given by the teacher or LSA reassured students that a new topic would not be introduced unless they have understood the present topic.

Haughey (2009) noted that students who attended an alternative vocational education programme improved their attendance and also considered entering further education or training. All the students who were interviewed at the ALP mentioned that they wanted to further their education in the vocational subject they chose at this provision. Some of the participants also mentioned that at mainstream school they did not look forward to go to school however, when they started attending the ALP they woke up eager to attend school. Thus, it can be stated that these type of programmes can have a positive effect on reducing early school leavers and who could eventually become NEET.

5.2.2 What do participants think could prevent students from becoming disengaged from school?
The participants mentioned that one of the reasons which led them to become disengaged from school was that the curriculum they were expected to follow was too difficult to understand. Phrases such as "it was not the right level for me", "I did not used to understand" and "I used to lag behind" show that the participants struggled in following lessons. Suggestions made by the participants to address student disengagement included having the teacher explain the lesson targeting the students' different abilities and for teachers to make sure that everyone understands the lesson before moving on to a new topic. Inquiry, an active learning process where students seek information by asking questions, can occur at different levels (Whitworth, Maeng & Bell, 2013). The authors describe four levels of inquiry based learning; confirmatory, structured, guided, and open. Confirmatory inquiry provides the most guidance to the student whereas open inquiry offers the least guidance. Making use of these different levels of inquiry based learning

can provide students with the right amount of guidance they need to succeed in their learning experience. With the use of this pedagogy, no student is left behind as each student is provided with the appropriate level of support. Differentiation in teaching aims to address students' different learning needs (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Thus, as per suggestion of the participants, if differentiated teaching in the classroom is applied all students would have equity to access learning and for them to reach their maximum potential.

The participants who were interviewed mentioned that students who struggle in academic subjects are more likely to be interested in studying vocational subjects which are more practical and hands-on. Although currently some Maltese state schools offer vocational subjects as an option at Form 3 (Year 9), these subjects still have a lot of theoretical input. Similar to the students attending the ALP, participants in Deed's (2011) study made reference to hands-on activities. Engaging in practical activities helps kinaesthetic learners to assimilate the learning experience better, "it makes more sense to me if I can break it down and see how it works" (Deed, 2011, p.25). Whilst planning, teachers need to ensure that their pedagogy matches different learning styles. The use of different learning styles is likely to help students be more engaged at school as students would learn according to which method applies best to them. Studies indicate that an average student's attention span lasts approximately fifteen minutes (Wankat, 2002). Thus, in order to increase student engagement, planned activities need to enhance the students' learning environment employing interactive approaches. Some of the participants at the ALP mentioned that the use of field trips to teach aspects of the curriculum was interesting and helped them be more involved.

During the interviews, participants mentioned that some of the school staff at mainstream school were very strict and therefore the students felt that they had no freedom and liberty. Students who perceived their teachers to be strict still believed that school should have an element of discipline such as, not accepting that students swear and engage in fights. However, the participants recommended that teachers need to find a balance between being strict and giving a degree of freedom to their students for example, allowing students to talk whilst doing classwork. An authoritarian teaching style refers to teachers who are concerned with enforcing strict discipline without any allowances and show little support, positive reinforcement and warmth towards their students (Bernstein, 2013). This teaching style did not resonate well with the participants and it was seen as increasing their level of disengagement from school. The teaching style which fits most with the participants' suggestion of how teachers should be is the authoritative teaching

style. In this style, teachers are able to maintain firm but fair discipline whilst building a positive and supportive relationship with students (Bernstein, 2013).

5.2.3 How does attending an Alternative Learning Programme fit with students' future plans?

From the questionnaire it emerged that once they finished attending compulsory school, the majority (58.9%) of the students attending the ALP wanted to further their education rather than transition to the world of work. A striking 89.9% also stated that having a higher level of education would provide them with a better future. All of the ten participants who were interviewed stated that following the ALP they planned to enter a post-secondary institute. The students attending the ALP were considered as being disengaged from school. Nonetheless, once they started attending the provision of the ALP the majority of the students stated that they wanted to continue studying. This change in attitude towards school meant that the students who were previously considered as disengaged were now re-engaged in the schooling experience.

Students attending the ALP attributed their re-engagement in the learning process to the fact that they followed vocational subjects. These subjects were practice-based and included hands-on activities rather than theoretical sessions. The fact that they were able to learn by doing helped the students to be focused. Since the subject they were learning was considered as interesting by these students, they were keen to learn more. The research carried out by the Institute of Education Sciences (2014) showed that interventions which involve vocational training help students to be engaged at school. Consequently, the early school leaving dropout rate decreases. The participants studied vocational subjects which enticed them to want to know more at post-secondary level. Thus, the ALP gave the participants an opportunity to explore their interests, find out what they are good at and help them identify potential career pathways.

The participants' experiences are in line with Deed's (2011) findings; that when students think that what they are learning is relevant, useful and that they are able to succeed, then students engage in the learning process. The participants in Deed's study questioned why they should learn something, make an effort to study and to do homework if what they were expected to study was irrelevant in helping them to get a job. Thus, students who may seem disengaged from school for no apparent reason might in actuality be asking themselves whether what they have to learn is relevant for their future. If the answer is yes i.e., they see relevance in subjects or concepts they are taught, then students will be engaged. Perhaps rather than labelling students as disengaged from the schooling experience in general, students might need to be considered as disengaged according to specific areas/subjects. For example, some of the participants at the ALP mentioned

that they did not see value in particular subjects which are not considered as the core subjects (Maths, English and Maltese). This could probably be because some of the participants did not find certain subjects as relevant to their daily life and future jobs. In fact, these same students were very keen to learn and were engaged during the vocational subjects. One of the participants was interested in furthering his studies at the Institute for Tourism Studies once he finished attending the ALP. When he was attending the ALP this student followed the vocational subject 'Hospitality' and during the interview he mentioned that he really enjoyed following this subject as it prepared him for what he wanted to do in the future. In this case, it cannot be stated that the student was disengaged from the whole schooling experience but only from particular subjects considered as irrelevant. Perhaps the discourse around disengagement needs to shift. When students are considered as cognitively disengaged from school it could be specified whether this is a general experience for the student or if the disengagement is limited to particular aspects of the curriculum.

Successful programmes which aim to prevent disengagement incorporate: employer involvement, alternative curriculum and careers guidance (Institute of Education Sciences, 2014). Students who followed these type of programmes appeared to view their future positively. These students also believed that what they were learning was important for their future and that they received support and information to plan their future. Following alternative curriculum provisions which focus on vocational training help students to develop an idea of what they want to do in their future. These findings presented by the Institute of Education Sciences (2014) also reflect the experiences of students at the ALP. Some of the participants mentioned that the ALP is the place to go to if one is unsure of what they want to do in the future. In fact, all the participants who were interviewed mentioned that they wanted to further their studies in one of the vocational subjects they followed at the ALP.

What is demonstrated by the current literature and findings from the present research is that in order to enable students to be engaged at school, they need to find relevance in what they are learning. Thus, perhaps it is time to start discussing with students what they deem as relevant for their future career paths and develop individual education programmes leading to these potential pathways. The curriculum for the core subjects might also be developed in such a way to reflect skills and knowledge which will be useful to the student in the world of work. Schools also need to help students develop life skills which can help them to function independently in society.

5.2.4 The emergent theory

The emergent theory explains disengagement as an interaction between the variables; unmet needs, unappealing curriculum and hostile relationships [see Figure 5.1].
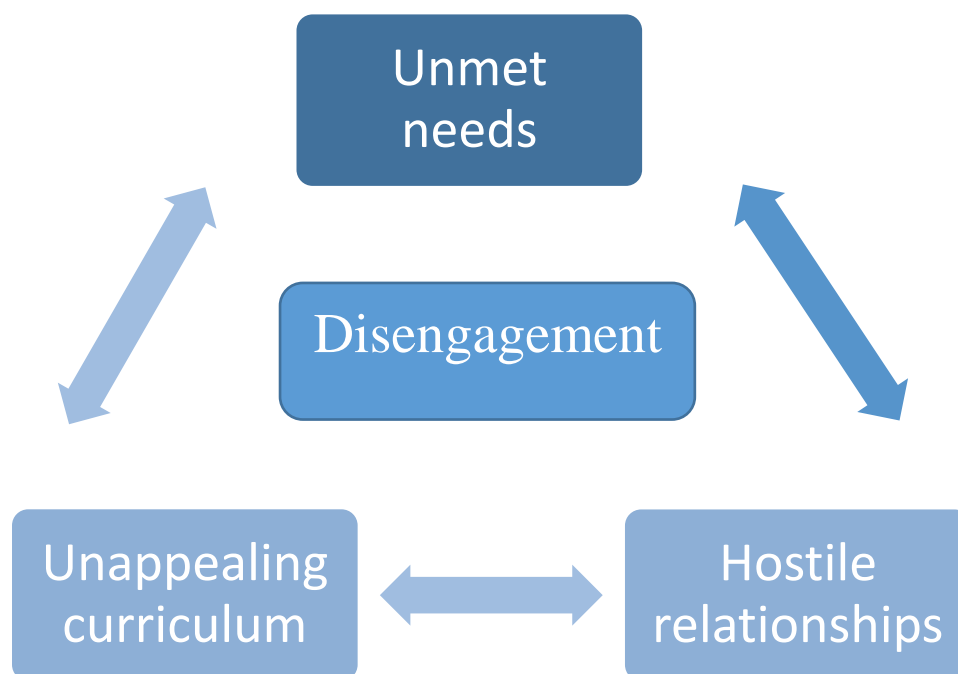
Figure 5.1 – The emergent theory of student disengagement

This emergent theory can be linked to wider psychological theories which were discussed in the Literature Review chapter. According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1997) students are engaged at school if they are able to experience success at school. When the participants in this research attended mainstream school they were unable to experience success as they believed that the curriculum was too difficult for them to understand. Thus, they had repetitive experiences of failure and this might have reinforced their belief that they are not capable learners. However, when the participants attended the ALP they were engaged in learning since the curriculum they had to follow was attainable and therefore they were able to experience success. Theories of motivation also fit with the current research findings. Affiliation in the 3As model by McLean (2009) and relatedness in the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2000), make reference to building relationships and connections with others at school. Findings from this research indicated that the absence of nurturing relationships with school staff and peers led to the process of disengagement. Autonomy, mentioned by Deci and Ryan as well as by McLean, is another need that affects students' levels of engagement. Students are motivated to learn if they are

interested and if they take charge of their own learning. Findings from the current research showed that at the ALP when students followed vocational subjects they were interested to learn and since the learning was more practical they were more in charge of their own learning. In turn, this enabled them to experience success and to increase their self-confidence.

Different research findings which were presented in the previous chapter support this emergent theory. Relationships developed with teachers was an area investigated by several researchers (Walsh, 2006; Haughey, 2009; Jones, 2011, Nicholson & Putwain, 2015). Walsh (2006) suggests that in order to engage reluctant learners, teachers need to get to know their students by taking time to talk to them and to build a relationship based on trust and positive regard. When teachers show care, concern and empathy, students learn that their teachers are ready to support them. Students considered as disengaged acknowledged that positive student-staff relationships had a significant effect on their re-engagement with education (Nicholson & Putwain, 2015). The participants highlighted that staff treated them with respect, spent time getting to know them, cared for them, encouraged them and believed in them. All of these findings are in line with the participants' views at the ALP. Thus, when teachers and students develop hostile relationships, disengagement is more likely to occur. In fact, some of the participants stated that this was the case with some of the teachers when they attended mainstream school. Whilst most of the current literature focuses on the relationships between teachers and students, the variable 'hostile relationships' in the theory also makes reference to relationships developed with peers. In the present research, one of the participants mentioned that when her peers socially excluded her she felt very sad and did not enjoy attending school. Participants in Jones's (2011) study stated that having positive relationships with peers enabled them to develop a sense of belonging towards their community. This was also stated by the participants at the ALP where they felt as if they were one big family.

Another variable in the emergent theory of student disengagement is 'unappealing curriculum'. When students are uninterested in what they are taught, often they decide to disengage from learning. However, when students are given choices in their learning process their levels of engagement increase (Nicholson & Putwain, 2015; Ruglis & Vallée, 2016). Project-based work, field trips and dynamic schoolwork were suggestions made by participants in Ruglis and Vallée's (2016) study to increase students' interest in learning. These activities would offer a richer and a more vigorous educational experience. Similar suggestions were also made by the participants at the ALP. Thus, it can be stated that if students find the topics they have to study as interesting and are presented through a fun and interactive pedagogy, they are likely to find the curriculum as a

worthwhile investment. Another aspect of the curriculum which is likely to affect students' level of engagement is its accessibility. If students find the level of intellectual challenge as inappropriate they are likely to believe that it is too hard for them and that they cannot succeed (Nicholson & Putwain, 2015). As most of the participants at the ALP stated, the curriculum at mainstream school was too hard for them to follow and therefore they decided to disengage from school as they were unable to succeed.

The third variable considered in the student disengagement theory is 'unmet needs'. Unmet needs can refer to academic as well as emotional well-being needs. Unless these needs are identified, support by school cannot be provided. Walsh (2006) suggests that teachers need to take the time to get to know their students by accessing their world and to create a profile for each student to understand what works best for them. Teachers need to understand how their students learn so that they can take into account the students' learning needs and strengths whilst preparing lessons. Mornane (2009) highlights that students have different learning dispositions and attitudes thus, teachers might need to be more conscious of the individual needs of each student rather than approaching students as a group. Participants in Nicholson and Putwain's (2015) study stated that through their experience at the alternative provision they were able to realise the value of education. The students' psychological well-being was also reported to have improved. The experience of the students at the ALP mirrored these findings. When their needs were met, students were cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally engaged.

5.3 Critique of the methodology

5.3.1 Quantitative approach

The purpose of this research was exploratory where the researcher aimed to explore the views of students considered as disengaged from school. This aim was achieved through the mixed methods research design. Morse (2003) states that a mixed methods design gives a more complete picture of human behaviour and experiences. The questionnaire gathered the views of around 63% of the population attending the ALP. This high response rate strengthened the information obtained from the students' views. This response rate could also indicate that students were interested in reflecting why they became disengaged from school and to identify what might prevent other students' disengagement. These views provided an overview of the disengagement process and indicated which areas to research in the qualitative stage that followed. Once the questionnaire was distributed, collected and analysed, a few issues came up. When the researcher analysed the data from the questionnaire it was noted that the participants used two different

rating methods to answer questions two and seven [see Appendix 1]. The participants were meant to answer these questions by giving an overall rating ranging from 1 to 5 across all statements. Whilst some of the participants used this method to answer those two questions, others rated each statement individually by using a Likert scale. In order to use all the collected data for these two questions, the data was inputted separately according to the rating method which the participants applied. The results produced were quite similar to each other. Nonetheless, the instructions for these two questions needed to be phrased more clearly as not all the participants understood what was expected of them. The use of a Likert Scale would have been more appropriate as it would have been easier for students to understand the instructions.

Another issue which was encountered whilst carrying out this research was related to the distribution of the questionnaire. The researcher's initial idea was to distribute the questionnaires directly to the students. However, after a discussion with the Assistant Head of the ALP was held, it was decided that for logistical and ethical reasons it would be more appropriate if a school staff member approached the students. Perhaps following this arrangement it would have been better if the researcher met with the person who was going to distribute the questionnaire in order to go through each question and explain what was expected of the students. This could have prevented any misunderstandings of some of the questions.

The type of questions which were asked in the questionnaire were close-ended. Thus, although the participants were able to share their views on student disengagement they did not have the opportunity to elaborate further or to share alternative views other than the ones provided by the researcher. The researcher's choice to design the questions as close-ended was to be able to manage the collected data from the questionnaire. Perhaps asking more open-ended questions would have enabled the researcher to understand better the reality of the participants and how this was shaped. Some of the questions might have also been constructed in a way which reflected the researcher's assumptions about student disengagement. Thus, some of the findings from the questionnaire might have been skewed towards the researcher's bias on the topic. This could have been avoided if the language used to ask the questions was more neutral.

5.3.2 Qualitative approach

The aim in using grounded theory was to generate a theory or model rooted in the data itself and study the phenomenon of student disengagement from the bottom-up rather than top-down. The techniques used to collect and analyse data in grounded theory allow concepts and categories to emerge from the data (Willig, 2008). As Willig explains, the aim of grounded theory is that the

emergent theory is truly grounded in the data rather than external concepts such as current theories. In order to avoid bias from pre-existing literature, the researcher carried out the literature review once all the data was collected and analysed. This process enabled the researcher to start collecting the data with little influence as possible. Nonetheless, the researcher still reflected on personal bias shaped by different values such as social, political and cultural values. The process of reflexivity will be discussed further on.

Theoretical sampling in grounded theory is the process whereby the researcher codes and analyses data and decides which data to collect next (Charmaz, 2006). In this research, the researcher's timeline to collect all the data was very restricted since the data had to be collected in a span of two months. Once the initial interviews were held, the process was very time consuming as the interviews had to be transcribed and analysed prior to moving onto the next set of interviews. In order to stick to the timeline, the researcher carried out two interviews at a time and on one occasion three interviews on the same day. This meant that the researcher had to analyse more than one transcript at a time. Thus, it was not possible to pursue certain codes and categories which were developed as the researcher had to move on to collect data from the next interview. Upon reflecting, it might have been useful for the researcher to conduct brief sessions with previously interviewed participants to ask about certain categories which were perceived as important to pursue.

The use of semi-structured interviews provided sufficient in-depth information to be collected. It also allowed flexibility in which questions were asked in the following interviews shaped by the data collected from the previous interviews.

5.3.3 Ethical considerations

During this research, all ethical considerations mentioned in the Methodology section were implemented and safeguarded. They proved to be effective as no ethical issues were encountered whilst carrying out the research. Consent from the participants' parents was obtained following several attempts to remind students to bring the form with them to school. Confidentiality was maintained in order to protect the participants' identity. The participants were also debriefed before each stage of data collection was carried out to avoid deception.

5.4 Reflexivity

The researcher is a central figure who actively constructs the collection, selection and interpretation of data. We appreciate that research is co-constituted – a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationship. We realise that meanings are negotiated within

particular social contexts so that another researcher will unfold a different story (Finlay, 2003, p.5).

Reflexivity requires researchers to be aware of their contribution towards the construction of meaning and acknowledge that the subjectivity of the researcher is inevitable (Willig, 2008). Thus, the researcher needs to explore ways in which their involvement with the study will influence and inform the research process. Willig (2008) points out that there are two types of reflexivity; personal and epistemological. Personal reflexivity includes reflections upon the researcher's values, experiences, beliefs and social identities and how they influence the research. Personal reflexivity also involves reflections on how the research may have influenced the researcher in return. Epistemological reflexivity requires the researcher to engage in questions which challenge the research design and how the posed research questions may have constructed, defined or limited the research findings. Thus, this type of reflexivity encourages the researcher to reflect upon assumptions made during the research process and the implications they might have had on the research findings.

The research design selected for this research fit its purpose and the aims of the research were met. The research questions which were asked aimed to explore the views of participants who became disengaged from school. The research also wanted to give a voice to the students in making recommendations themselves as to changes which could be introduced to improve the Maltese education system. Focus groups could have been considered for this research. Nonetheless, the use of interviews provided the participants with more privacy where they could express themselves freely. Had a group of teenagers been all together they might have avoided expressing their views out of fear of being judged by their peers and agree with influential members of the group.

Through the constant comparative analysis method, the researcher had the possibility to identify categories which were pertinent to the development of the theory. The researcher also had the opportunity to go back to the field and inquire further about developing categories in the following interviews. Hence, the interview questions could be changed to reflect the emerging categories. This process would not have been possible in another data analysis method. Another important element in grounded theory is the use of memos where the researcher keeps a record of thoughts influencing the ideas about codes and their relationship. Thus, memos help the researcher in being more reflexive. The use of memos also aided the researcher to track back the ideas which

emerged during the process of analysing the data and which finally led to the development of the theory.

In order to ascertain whether the developed theory resonates with other professionals' experiences working in the field, the researcher discussed the theory with members of the psychosocial team which the researcher makes part of. This team is a multidisciplinary one thus, professionals from different disciplines were consulted so as to widen the context of the theory other than educational psychology. Other peers from the Doctorate course were also consulted to gain feedback on the theory. The general feedback which was collected stated that the theory sounds logical and that it applies to the students they work with.

5.4.1 Personal impact of the research on the researcher

One of the researcher's constructs of education is that being successful and accomplished stems from being educated. Another construct is that if a person does not show interest to learn this is due to lack of ambition. A common discourse in the Maltese culture is that in order to be considered successful and to have a good job, a young person needs to invest in their learning. The researcher's construct of education was influenced by this discourse and led to the belief that all students should be engaged at school. This is what led the researcher to carry out research investigating the phenomenon of student disengagement. The findings from the research and current literature indicated that when particular factors are present; such as uninteresting curriculum, unmet needs and hostile relationships, disengagement is more likely to occur. Nonetheless, a small number of the participants clearly stated that they were not interested in school. The researcher accepted that there might be some students whose disengagement from school occurs as there is no genuine interest and motivation to learn, and that some individuals with a low level of education may still experience success.

This research had another impact on the researcher. Prior to the research, the researcher felt slightly anxious working with teenagers. Spending time at the ALP made the researcher get out of the comfort zone and work with students of this age group. The researcher enjoyed talking to teenagers and learned to appreciate that adolescence is an interesting time since the teenagers would be at the stage of forming their identity and exploring what comes next in their life. Thus, through this research, the researcher managed to overcome the anxiety of working with adolescents and enjoy working with them.

5.5 Challenges encountered in the research and recommendations for future research

The researcher wanted to interview participants from different classes so as to have an even distribution of the sample population across curriculum areas. The participants who showed interest in being interviewed belonged to three different groups. However, the majority of the participants who were interviewed belonged to the same curriculum area, possibly because of the enthusiasm of their teacher who encouraged them to participate. Thus, if participants from different groups were interviewed, a more typical representation of the sample population would have been obtained. It would have been interesting to explore the views of students who had different areas of interest. In fact, some differences emerged for example: students who chose 'sports' stated that one reason why they became disengaged was because all they were interested in was to play sports. The researcher also wanted to interview an equal amount of boys and girls however, 7 girls and 3 boys were interviewed. Although the aim of the research was not to distinguish differences between boys and girls it would have been interesting to explore their different constructs. Perhaps following the interest shown by students to be considered for the interviews, the researcher could have tried to approach all the groups once again to ask whether any further participants were interested. This could have generated a few more options and provided a more even distribution of the sample population. It would have also been interesting to interview students also considered to be disengaged from school but who opted to stay at mainstream school rather than attend the ALP.

A limitation of the study is that the participants were asked to reflect on their experience of primary school which they had completed some years earlier. A lot of the participants were unable to recall memories from primary school unless specific events had occurred which left an imprint on their life (e.g. being bullied). Thus, it was difficult for the participants to identify factors which led them to become disengaged in primary school. When they were asked to give suggestions to make primary school more interesting for students, they also found it difficult to relate to that time in their life. Future research could explore the experience of primary school students and obtain data whilst students are still in primary school. This would provide more accurate data about this period since students would still be in touch with their experience of attending primary school.

Another limitation of this research is that once the participants finished attending the ALP their educational pathway was not traced. All the participants who were interviewed stated that following compulsory school they intended to attend a post-secondary institute to further their education on the vocational subjects they studied at the ALP. Tracking the participants' pathway could provide information on the influence the ALP had on students' engagement in learning.

When the ALP was set up one of its aims was to entice students to consider furthering their studies (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a). If the students did in fact continue studying at post-secondary level then the ALP would have succeeded in achieving one of its goals. Thus, future research should trace the pathway of students once they have finished attending an alternative provision. Data could be collected longitudinally. First, at the start of a new academic year to check whether the students enrolled at a post-secondary level course then, at the end of the course to ascertain whether the students successfully completed the course or not. This type of data could be gathered for the students who were interviewed. However, similar data could also be collected for the whole cohort of students attending the ALP since the students who filled in the questionnaire also indicated whether they wanted to further their education or start working post-compulsory school. It would have been interesting to follow up which path these students actually followed.

Once the theory was developed, the researcher had the intention to go back to the field and test out the theory which emerged following data analysis. However, due to time restrictions this was not possible and the final theory was not tested to check with students attending the ALP whether the theory fit with their views or not. Although the theory itself was not tested in order to increase the credibility of the research, member checking was carried out. This process was done so as to establish the trustworthiness of the research. This was achieved by checking with all the participants whether the interpretation of the categories developed by the researcher fit with their views. With the use of grounded theory it would be suggested that once the theory is developed the researcher goes back to the field to test it out. Also, in order to increase the generalisability of the theory it could be tested with other cohorts. If the theory fits with other students' views, also considered as disengaged from school, then the developed theory of student disengagement would be able to explain or predict the phenomenon being researched.

Triangulation is the process which involves collecting data from multiple sources so as to check information for consistency of evidence across sources of data (Mertens, 2010). Mertens discusses that by triangulating data the credibility of the research is increased. Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that using triangulation to find consistency across sources contradicts the notion of multiple realities. The researcher's ontological position was social constructivism thus, it was important for the researcher to acknowledge each participant's reality even though this might have been different to the majority of the participants. Thus, using triangulation for the purpose of finding consistent data from multiple sources does not fit with the selected conceptual framework. Nonetheless, collecting data from different sources would have been interesting for this research.

Perhaps future research could explore school staff and parents' views of student disengagement. The results could then be compared and contrasted with the views of students themselves.

5.6 Implications of the findings

The findings of the research indicate that according to the students' views, there are a number of changes which could be implemented within the Maltese education system to prevent student disengagement from occurring. Thus, the focus in approaching this phenomenon should probably be in identifying more preventative measures over finding solutions once disengagement has occurred. In line with the findings from the present research, in the year 2019 a change in the current Maltese educational system is going to be implemented which has the potential to reduce student disengagement. The Ministry of Education and Employment (2016) has proposed a strategy which aims to provide equitable education for all. 'My Journey: Achieving through different paths' will replace the current school model offered at Forms 3 to 5 (Years 9-11) with personalised and relevant education structured for students' needs. The new secondary schooling system which is being proposed will include the provision of general academic education, vocational education and training, as well as applied learning. This new system aims to address the shortcomings of the recent system where students who are not interested in the academic component of learning are not offered alternative options. In fact, the students at the ALP stated that they were re-engaged in learning because they were offered vocational subjects which focused on the practical aspect of learning rather than the theoretical aspect. These students tend to learn by doing thus, an applied subject will provide them with practical hands-on learning which can keep them engaged at school.

The participants who were interviewed pointed out that at the ALP they found the support of the class LSA as very helpful. At mainstream schools in order for a student to receive extra support a student needs to have a statement of needs. However, at the ALP, an LSA is assigned to support the whole class rather than particular students only. Since class sizes at the ALP are also smaller than at mainstream school, receiving extra support and individual attention is likely to occur. The participants stated that this type of support was beneficial because when they did not understand a concept, by the end of the lesson they would have understood as either the teacher or the LSA made sure to re-explain until they understood. Perhaps introducing teaching assistants (TAs) into mainstream schools, as happens at the ALP, is the way forward. Sharples, Webster and Blatchford (2015) produced a report which gives guidance how to make best use of TAs. These recommendations state that TAs add value to what teachers do and that they should not be used

only as an informal teaching resource for students who are low attaining. The role of the TA could also include the delivery of individual and small group structured evidence-based interventions.

The findings of the research showed that the relationships school staff develop with their students has a lot of weight on students' perceptions of how much they feel supported at school. As the emergent theory states, one of the factors which contributes to student disengagement is hostile relationships. Thus, teachers need to be aware of the impact their approach towards students has. Making use of differentiated teaching and preparing hands-on activities as much as possible to engage students, should be considered by teachers whilst planning lessons. Raising awareness on these crucial factors to attempt the prevention of student disengagement could be done during teacher training sessions.

5.7 Implications for EPs

EPs are frequently requested to carry out assessments in order to identify students' needs. An implication of the current research indicates that when students' needs are unmet this can lead to student disengagement. Unmet needs can revolve around any developmental aspect of the student. Educational needs might be picked up more frequently than emotional needs by school staff. If a student does not achieve academically, schools might request EP involvement to try and understand why the child is not making progress. Emotional needs might be more difficult to identify especially if students 'act in' rather than 'act out'. As the emergent theory indicated, unmet needs refer to both educational and emotional needs. Thus, identifying students' needs at a holistic level is important so as to avoid unmet needs.

In the previous section, reference to 'My Journey: Achieving through different paths' was made. The new secondary Maltese education system is set to provide education structured for students' needs. However, there is no indication as to how the students' needs will be identified. EPs usually tend to get involved with students who require their needs to be recognised. Nonetheless, all students will have some sort of needs and if these needs are not identified disengagement from school can occur. EPs can consult with schools at a systemic level to assist them in developing systems which can help them to identify the needs of all students.

Schools also seek the involvement of EPs in order to identify the type of support students require in order to meet their needs. EPs could provide individual and group interventions themselves to support students in developing their areas of need. EPs could also be involved in training staff so that they can support students themselves. This could be achieved during continuous professional development training sessions which are frequently held in schools. Drop-in consultation sessions

could also be organised so that EPs can support school staff when faced with challenges they encounter whilst working with students. As Walsh (2006) discussed in his paper, disengaged students can frequently push their teachers away which makes it even more difficult for teachers to bond with their students. Thus, when students become disengaged from school, teachers might struggle in maintaining a positive connection with their students. Through consultation sessions or supervision held with teachers, school staff can have the opportunity to discuss their struggles and problem solve potential solutions.

5.8 Dissemination of findings

At the start of the research, when the researcher met with the Assistant Head of the ALP a discussion was held as to how the research findings would be communicated to the SMT. The researcher agreed that a copy of the thesis would be passed on to the school as also requested by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (see Appendix 7). At the completion of the research process, a follow-up meeting will be held with the SMT at the ALP to discuss the implications of the findings.

When the research data was being collected, all the participants who were interviewed and those who filled in the questionnaire were informed by the researcher that if they wanted a summary of the research findings they could contact the researcher via email. Hence, the participants were given the researcher's work email address.

The researcher would also like to present the research findings during a Council of Heads meeting which is held monthly. During this meeting, the College Principal and Heads of Schools of the College meet to discuss current issues in practice. By sharing the research findings, good practice in schools can be encouraged and future training opportunities organised so that staff can address students' needs and support them.

Also, in line with the current local context, the area of student disengagement is currently a high priority as discussed in the Introduction chapter. Thus, the researcher aims to seek opportunities to discuss the findings and implications of the research with officials who are currently making reforms in the education system to reduce the number of students who become disengaged from school and those who leave school early. The emergent theory is grounded in the participants' views rather than fitting their views into existing theories. Thus, if the findings and implications from this research are addressed, student disengagement is likely to decrease.

5.9 Conclusion

Current research has focused on the factors which lead to student disengagement. This research has contributed to the knowledge that exists on the phenomenon of student disengagement. However, this research has attempted to focus on the process of disengagement rather than contributing factors. The voices of the young persons were pertinent to this research. The researcher aimed to build a theory which would explain student disengagement from the young persons' views. The use of grounded theory provided this opportunity since the emergent theory was grounded in the data generated bottom-up. Thus, the value of this research is that the findings truly reflect the views of the participants rather than fitting their views into existing theories.

Within the current local and international context there is a focus on reducing the number of early school leavers (European Commission, 2013). This vision has led to the development of frameworks and strategies to reach set targets (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a). Students spend a considerable amount of years attending compulsory school. In order to avoid them dropping out early, the schooling experience needs to be meaningful to students. As the research findings and current literature indicate, when students think that what they are taught is relevant and useful for their future they will be engaged. EPs might liaise with schools to contribute and evaluate the curriculum and other programmes which can prevent student disengagement.

The key findings from this research indicate that student disengagement is a cumulative process which occurs over a span of time. The core categories which developed from the constant comparative analysis process during data analysis led to the emergent theory of student disengagement. This theory states that when students experience hostile relationships mostly with school staff, find the curriculum as uninteresting and have their needs unmet, disengagement is more likely to occur. Teachers are encouraged to take time to get to know their students and build positive relationships with them. Students' holistic needs also need to be identified so that the appropriate support can be provided. The curriculum presented to the students also needs to be relevant to them and feel that they can succeed in it. Differentiated teaching needs to be applied by teachers so that the different levels of students are reached. Alternative provisions which include vocational training proved to be effective in re-engaging students in the learning process. This success was attributed to positive student-staff relationships and to vocational subjects. Students who learnt better through practical hands-on activities rather than through theoretical input benefitted from following vocational subjects.

The next steps following this research should be to increase awareness amongst school staff on the influence their approach towards students has. It is hoped that the findings which resulted from this research can shed light on how student disengagement can be prevented. Schools should also develop systems which can help them to identify their students' needs and how best to support them.

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Appendix 1: *School Experience Survey*

Please read the following questions and answer.

Background Information

Gender: _____

Age: _____

College: _____

Locality: _____

Parents' Level of Education

Parent/Guardian 1   Parent/Guardian 2

Primary   ☐   Primary   ☐

Secondary   ☐   Secondary   ☐

Post-Secondary ☐   Post-Secondary ☐

Tertiary   ☐   Tertiary   ☐

Student's Views

1. When did you enjoy school the most?

   Primary ☐   Secondary ☐

2. Rate the following from 1 to 5 in order of why mainstream school was not interesting for you (1 is the least interesting).

   Curriculum was not interesting   ☐
   I don't care about education   ☐
   Peer influence   ☐
   School is too difficult for me   ☐
   Family influence   ☐

3. If you could go back in time would you try to engage yourself more at school?

   Yes ☐   No ☐

4. Who could have helped you to be more engaged at school?

Class/Subject teacher ☐

Parents ☐

Peers ☐

Guidance teacher ☐

Career advisors ☐

Counsellor ☐

Head of School ☐

5. Do you think that having a higher level of education can provide you with a better future?

Yes ☐   No ☐

6. Does the setting of the ALP help you to be more engaged in school?

Yes ☐   No ☐

7. Why did you want to attend the ALP (rate from 1 to 5 where 1 is the strongest reason and 5 is the weakest reason)?

Casual clothes ☐

Lessons are more practical ☐

Smaller school ☐

Less focus on exams ☐

More sense of belonging ☐

8. When you finish attending the ALP what do you intend to do?

Work ☐   Further Education ☐

Thank you for taking part in this survey.

THE PROCESS OF BECOMING DISENGAGED FROM SCHOOL

This sheet will be collected separately so that the answers to the survey remain anonymous.

Would you like to be considered for the interview to elaborate further on the questions asked above?

       Yes ☐   No ☐

If your answer is yes please write your name _____

Appendix 2: *Participant invitation letter and consent form*

Dear (Student Name),

Who am I?

Name: Marilyn Muscat

Job: Trainee Educational Psychologist

What I do: Work in schools with children, young people, teachers and parents to make the life of students better.

Why I am at your school: I am doing a project to try and understand how students become disengaged from school and what can be done to change this.

Why you?

- You showed interest to participate.
- I believe that you have a lot to say and this can help create change to make school a better place for students.

What happens next?

- We meet for 45 minutes to 1 hour at school.
- I ask you questions about your experience at school.
- I will record the interview on an audio recorder to help me remember what we talk about.

Very Important!

- I will not use your real name when writing about what we talk about. No one will know it's you except for me.
- I will destroy the recording once I finish writing my project. I will keep my writings without your name on them for another two years just in case I need to use them again.
- If you feel uncomfortable during the interview and want to stop you are free to do so. In that case if you want the collected data not to be used for my project I will destroy it.

<u>Finally</u>

If you would like to participate in my project read the following form carefully and sign.

Thank you for your time.

	Yes or No
I have seen the information about the project and I understand what I have to do.	
I understand that my details will be kept confidential.	
I understand that my involvement is voluntary and that I can withdraw my participation at any time.	
I hereby give my consent to participate in this research.	

Name   _____

Signature   _____

Date   _____

<u>Appendix 3</u>: *Information letter and consent form for parents/guardians*

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Marilyn Muscat and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist working with children and young people at School Psychological Services and studying at the University of East London. My role helps schools to find the best ways to support children and young people.

_____ has said they would like to take part in my research and now I am writing to you to check if you are happy for him/her to take part.

Title of Research: Bored with school: An exploration of young persons' experiences of becoming disengaged from school and attending alternative provision.

Aim of Research: This research aims to understand how students experience the process of disengagement from school and how attending an Alternative Learning Programme (ALP) fits the needs and aspirations of young people.

Value of your child's participation: Your child will be able to contribute valuable information which would help me to understand better the Education system in Malta. He/she will put forward strategies which could prevent students from becoming disengaged from school. Thus, their involvement in this research can facilitate change by creating awareness of how the system can be improved and what support needs to be put in place in schools.

Research Process: I will arrange a good time to meet your son/daughter at school to conduct an interview lasting between 45 minutes to an hour. I will ask them questions about their experience at school; primary, secondary and at the ALP. If your son/daughter become upset when talking about their experience they can stop straight away and I will spend some time with them to make sure they are okay.

Confidentiality of Data: I will record the interview using an audio recorder to help me remember what we discuss. This data will be stored electronically and protected with a password so that no one can hear it except me. Once the research process is complete this data will destroyed. Your son/daughter's real name will not be used when discussing the research findings.

Contact details: If you would like to ask me further questions or would like more information you can contact me via:

THE PROCESS OF BECOMING DISENGAGED FROM SCHOOL

Email: marilyn.muscat.3@ilearn.edu.mt

Mobile: 99246366

Should you need to contact my Director of Studies you can do so by sending an email to Dr Mark Fox on m.d.fox@uel.ac.uk

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If you are happy for your child to take part in the research please read the following statements, then put an X in the box next to the statement and finally sign underneath the table as indicated.

I have read this letter which explains what the research is about and what my child will be required to do.	
I understand that my child's details will be kept confidential.	
I understand that my child's involvement is voluntary and they can withdraw their participation at any time.	
I hereby give consent to my child to participate in this research.	

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Marilyn Muscat

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Maltese Version

Ittra ta' informazzjoni u formula ta' kunsens

Għażiż Ġenitur/Gwardjan,

Jiena Marilyn Muscat u naħdem bħala Trainee Educational Psychologist filwaqt li qiegħda nistudja University of East London.

_____ jixtieq/tixtieq tieħu sehem fir-riċerka tiegħi li hija dwar l-esperjenza ta' żgħażagħ fis-sistema Edukattiva u li qiegħdin jattendu l-ALP. Il-kontribut li jista'/tista' tagħti t-tifel/tifla tiegħek huwa importanti sabiex flimkien naraw x'nistgħu nibdlu.

Ser inkun qed niltaqa' mat-tifel/tifla tiegħek l-iskola stess għal madwar 45 minuta fejn ser insaqsih/a dwar l-esperjenza tiegħu/tagħha fl-iskola.

Id-dettalji tat-tifel/tifla ser jinżammu anonimi sabiex l-identita' tiegħu/tagħha tkun protetta.

Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsijiet tista' tikkuntatjani fuq: marilyn.muscat.3@ilearn.edu.mt

- -

Jekk tapprova li t-tifel/tifla tiegħek jieħdu sehem f'din ir-riċerka immarka **X** fil-kaxxi.

Qrajt din l-ittra u nifhem it-tifel/tifla tiegħi x'ser ikun/tkun qed jagħmel/tagħmel.	
Nifhem li d-dettalji tat-tifel/tifla ser jibqgħu kunfidenzjali.	
Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tat-tifel/tifla hija volontarja u jekk irid/trid jista'/tista' jibdel/tibdel fehmtu/a.	
Nagħti l-kunses lit-tifel/tifla biex jipparteċipaw fir-riċerka.	

Isem _____

Firma _____

Data _____

Grazzi.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Marilyn Muscat

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix 4: *Interview guide*

1. What was school like for you growing up? (Primary and secondary school experiences)
2. What did you enjoy about school?
3. What did you dislike about school?
4. Looking back, would you have done anything differently at school?
5. Do you have any regrets about your approach to schooling?
6. What were the influences that led you to not being engaged in school?
7. Was there anyone in your life who could have helped you to engage and like school?
8. In your opinion, what could make schools more engaging for students?
9. What would the ideal school be like for you? (Identify needs)
10. How does the ALP fit in what you want to do in life?
11. How is it better or worse than your previous school?
12. How could the ALP be better?
13. What do you wish to do in your future?
14. Has attending the programme changed your view on school?
15. Do you feel more engaged in this environment?

Appendix 5: *Quality framework for qualitative research*
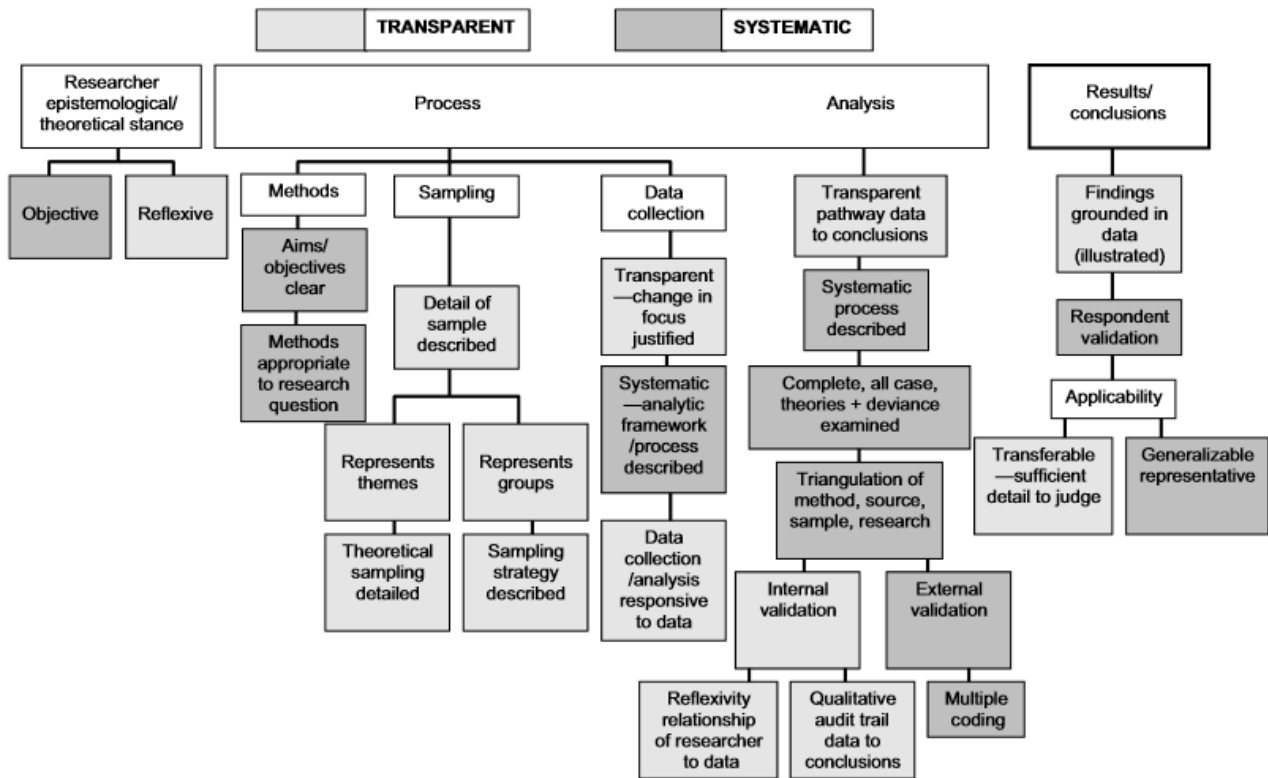
(Meyrick, 2006).

Appendix 6: *Ethical approval from the University of East London*

School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION **For research involving human participants** BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

REVIEWER: Patrizia Collard

SUPERVISOR: Mary Robinson

COURSE: Professional Doctorate in Educational Psychology

STUDENT: Marilyn Muscat
TITLE OF PROPOSED STUDY: Bored with school: An exploration of young persons' experiences of becoming disengaged from school and attending alternative provision.

DECISION OPTIONS:

1. **APPROVED:** Ethics approval for the above named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice) to the date it is submitted for assessment/examination.

2. **APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED <u>BEFORE</u> THE RESEARCH COMMENCES** (see Minor Amendments box below): In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is <u>not</u> required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made <u>before</u> the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.

3. **NOT APPROVED, MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED** (see Major Amendments box below): In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.

DECISION ON THE ABOVE-NAMED PROPOSED RESEARCH STUDY
(Please indicate the decision according to one of the 3 options above)

1. Approved

Minor amendments required *(for reviewer):*

Major amendments required *(for reviewer)*:

ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEACHER *(for reviewer)*

If the proposed research could expose the <u>researcher</u> to any of kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

☐ HIGH

☐ MEDIUM

☐ LOW

Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any):

Reviewer *(Typed name to act as signature)*:   Patrizia Collard

Date: 15.03.2016

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

Confirmation of making the above minor amendments *(for students)*:

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data.

Student's name *(Typed name to act as signature)*:
Student number:

Date:

(Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed, if minor amendments to your ethics application are required)

PLEASE NOTE:

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, travel approval from UEL (not the School of Psychology) must be gained if a researcher intends to travel overseas to collect data, even if this involves the researcher travelling to his/her home country to conduct the research. Application details can be found here: http://www.uel.ac.uk/gradschool/ethics/fieldwork/

Appendix 7: *Approval to carry out research in Maltese state schools*

DIRETTORAT GHAL
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FURJANA VLT 2000
MALTA

DIRECTORATE FOR
QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN EDUCATION
FLORIANA VLT 2000
MALTA

Request for Research in State Schools

A. (Please use BLOCK LETTERS)

Surname: _MUSCAT_   Name: _MARILYN_

I.D. Card Number: _433589M_

Telephone No: _27431190_ *   Mobile No: _99246366_ *

Address: _44 Triq Gio Maria Camilleri_

Locality: _Mosta_   Post Code: _MST 3875_

E-mail Address: _marilynmuscat @ msn.com_

Faculty: _PSYCHOLOGY_ UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON   Course: _PSYCHOLOGY_ DOCTORATE IN EDUCATIONAL AND CHILD   Year Ending: _2017_

Title of Research: _BORED WITH SCHOOL; AN EXPLORATION OF YOUNG PERSONS' EXPERIENCES OF BECOMING DISENGAGED FROM SCHOOL AND ATTENDING ALTERNATIVE PROVISION._

Aims of research: □ Long Essay   □ Dissertation   ☒ Thesis   □ Publication

Time Frame: _January 2015 - May 2017_   Language Used: _ENGLISH_

Description of methodology: _MIXED METHODS; QUALITATIVE - SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, QUANTITATIVE - QUESTIONNAIRE_

School/s where research is to be carried out: _ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PROGRAMME, PAOLA_

Years / Forms: _5_   Age range of students: _15 - 16 yrs_

* Telephone and mobile numbers will only be used in strict confidence and will not be divulged to third parties.

I accept to abide by the rules and regulations re Research in State Schools and to comply with the Data Protection Act 2001.

Warning to applicants - Any false statement, misrepresentation of concealment of material fact on this form or any document presented in support of this application may be grounds for criminal prosecution.

B.   Tutor's Approval (where applicable)

The above research work is being carried out under my supervision.

Tutor's Name: MARY ROBINSON   Signature: _____

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Faculty: School of Psychology   Faculty Stamp WATER LANE

LONDON E15 4LZ

C.   Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education - Official Approval TEL: 020 8223 3000

The above request for permission to carry out research in State Schools is hereby approved according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the University of Malta Ethics Committee.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
DEPARTMENT
Ministry for Education and Employment
Floriana VLT 2000

Louis Scerri
Assistant Director
Research and Policy Development
Department
_____   Date: 16 / 12 / 2015   Official Stamp

Director
(Research and Development Department)

Conditions for the approval of a request by a student to carry out research work in State Schools

Permission for research in State Schools is subject to the following conditions:

1.   The official request form is to be accompanied by a copy of the questionnaire and / or any relevant material intended for use in schools during research work.

2.   The original request form, showing the relevant signatures and approval, must be presented to the Head of School.

3.   All research work is carried out at the discretion of the relative Head of School and subject to their conditions.

4.   Researchers are to observe strict confidentiality at all times.

5.   The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education reserves the right to withdraw permission to carry out research in State Schools at any time and without prior notice.

6.   Students are expected to restrict their research to a minimum of students / teachers / administrators / schools, and to avoid any waste of time during their visits to schools.

7.   As soon as the research in question is completed, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education assumes the right to a full copy (in print/on C.D.) of the research work carried out in State Schools. Researchers are to forward the copies to the Assistant Director, International Research, Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.

8.   Researchers are to hand a copy of their Research in print or on C.D. to the relative School/s.

9.   In the case of video recordings, researchers have to obtain prior permission from the Head of School and the teacher of the class concerned. Any adults recognisable in the video are to give their explicit consent. Parents of students recognisable in the video are also to be requested to aprove that their siblings may be video-recorded. Two copies of the consent forms are necessary, one copy is to be deposited with the Head of School, and the other copy is to accompany the Request Form for Research in State Schools. Once the video recording is completed, one copy of the videotape is to be forwarded to the Head of School. The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education reserves the right to request another copy.

10. The video recording's use is to be limited to this sole research and may not be used for other research without the full consent of interested parties including the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.

Statement of Consent

I hereby give my consent to the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education to process and record personal and sensitive data being given herewith in order to be able to render me with the service I am applying for.

I fully understand that:

a) by opting out my application cannot be processed;

b) authorised personnel who are processing this information may have access to this data in order to supply me with the service being applied for;

c) edited information, that would not identify me, may be included in statistical reports.

I know that I am entitled to see the information related to me, should I ask for it in writing.

I am aware that for the purpose of the Data Protection Act, the Data Controller for this Directorate is:

    The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
    Floriana, VLT 2000

I have read and understood this statement of consent myself _____ ✓

This statement of consent was read and explained to me _____ ✓

Signature: _____ ID number: __433589M__ (Data subject)

Signature: _____ ID number: _____ (Reader if applicable)

Date: __4|12|15__

Data Protection Policy

The Data Protection Act, 2001 regulated the processing of personal data held electronically and in manual form. The Directorate for Quality and Standard in Education is set to fully comply with the Data Protection Principles as set out in the Act.

a) The Directorate will hold information you supply in accordance to your request to carry out research in State Schools and / or Directorates' documents.

b) The information you give may be disclosed to other Departments of the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, who may also have access to your data.

Your rights:

You are entitled to know what information the Directorate holds and processes about you and why; who has access to it; how it is kept up to date; what the Directorate is doing to comply with its obligations under the Data Protection Act, 2001.

The Data Protection Act, 2001 sets down a formal procedure for dealing with data subject access requests which the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport follows.

All data subjects have the right to access any personal information kept about them by the Directorate either on computer or in manual files. Requests to access to personal information by data subjects must be made in writing and addressed to the Data Controller of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. An identification document such as a photocopy of the Identity Card, photocopy of passport etc. of the data subject making the request must be submitted with the request. Such identification material will be returned to the data subject.

The Directorate aims to comply as quickly as possible with requests for access to personal information and will ensure that it is provided within reasonable time, the reason will be explained in writing to the data subject making the request.

All data subjects have the right to request that their information be amended, erased or not used in the event the data is incorrect.

Appendix 8: *Frequency distribution tables*

Age range

What is your age?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	14	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
	15	83	59.3	60.1	61.6
	16	51	36.4	37.0	98.6
	17	2	1.4	1.4	100.0
	Total	138	98.6	100.0	
	Missing	2	1.4		
Total		140	100.0		

Parents' level of education

What is Parent's 1 level of education?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Primary	12	8.6	8.6	8.6
	Secondary	105	75.0	75.0	83.6
	Post-Secondary	14	10.0	10.0	93.6
	Tertiary	3	2.1	2.1	95.7
	Missing	6	4.3	4.3	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

What is Parent's 2 level of education?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Primary	10	7.1	7.1	7.1
	Secondary	80	57.1	57.1	64.3
	Post-Secondary	14	10.0	10.0	74.3
	Tertiary	2	1.4	1.4	75.7
	Missing	34	24.3	24.3	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

THE PROCESS OF BECOMING DISENGAGED FROM SCHOOL

When did you enjoy school the most?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Primary	55	39.3	42.3	42.3
	Secondary	75	53.6	57.7	100.0
	Total	130	92.9	100.0	
	Missing	10	7.1		
Total		140	100.0		

Question 2

Disengagement from mainstream school (individual rating of statements)

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Factors affecting disengagement from mainstream school	Curriculum was not interesting	25	32.5%	32.5%
	I don't care about education	12	15.6%	15.6%
	Peer Influence	9	11.7%	11.7%
	School is too difficult for me	9	11.7%	11.7%
	Family Influence	22	28.6%	28.6%
Total		77	100.0%	100.0%

Disengagement from mainstream school (overall rating of statements)

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Factors affecting disengagement from mainstream school	Curriculum was not interesting	19	23.5%	41.3%
	I don't care about education	11	13.6%	23.9%
	Peer Influence	13	16.0%	28.3%
	School is too difficult for me	11	13.6%	23.9%
	Family Influence	27	33.3%	58.7%
Total		81	100.0%	176.1%

Question 3

If you could go back in time would you engage yourself more at school?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	100	71.4	73.0	73.0
	No	37	26.4	27.0	100.0
	Total	137	97.9	100.0	
	Missing	3	2.1		
Total		140	100.0		

Question 4

Support to be engaged at school

		Responses		Percent of
		N		Cases
Who could have helped you to be more engaged at school?	Teachers	87	31.1%	63.5%
	Parents	73	26.1%	53.3%
	Peers	38	13.6%	27.7%
	Guidance Teachers	27	9.6%	19.7%
	Career Advisors	14	5.0%	10.2%
	Counsellor	13	4.6%	9.5%
	Head of School	28	10.0%	20.4%
Total		280	100.0%	204.4%

Question 5

Do you think that having a higher level of education can provide you with a better future?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	125	89.3	89.9	89.9
	No	14	10.0	10.1	100.0
	Total	139	99.3	100.0	
	Missing	1	.7		
Total		140	100.0		

Question 6

Does the setting of the ALP help you to be more engaged in school?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	130	92.9	94.9	94.9
	No	7	5.0	5.1	100.0
	Total	137	97.9	100.0	
	Missing	3	2.1		
Total		140	100.0		

Question 7

ALP Choice (individual rating of statements)

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Factors affecting the choice to attend the ALP	Casual clothes	28	25.9%	59.6%
	Lessons are more practical	28	25.9%	59.6%
	Smaller school	13	12.0%	27.7%
	Less focus on exams	17	15.7%	36.2%
	More sense of belonging	22	20.4%	46.8%
Total		108	100.0%	229.8%

ALP Choice (overall rating of statements)

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Factors affecting the choice to attend the ALP	Casual clothes	12	18.2%	18.5%
	Lessons are more practical	31	47.0%	47.7%
	Smaller school	2	3.0%	3.1%
	Less focus on exams	7	10.6%	10.8%
	More sense of belonging	14	21.2%	21.5%
Total		66	100.0%	101.5%

Question 8

When you finish attending the ALP what do you intend to do?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Work	51	36.4	41.1	41.1
	Further Education	73	52.1	58.9	100.0
	Total	124	88.6	100.0	
	Missing	16	11.4		
Total		140	100.0		

<u>Appendix 9</u>: *Example of a transcript*

<u>Interview with Jane</u>

(1) Me: So, Hello Jane. First of all can you tell me something about you?

(2) JANE: My name is Jane and I live at Bahrija.

(3) Me: Ok so you live in Bahrija, good. Before you came to the ALP which College did you used
(4) to attend?

(5) JANE: St Theresa College, Mriehel

(6) Me: St Theresa, Mriehel. Good ok, can you describe a little bit yourself? So if you had to tell
(7) me something about yourself, any interests you have or hobbies?

(8) JANE: Hobbies. I like to go walking, stay on the computer, and go for a ride with my bicycle,
(9) those I think.

(10) Me: Mhm, ok. Jane If I had to ask you, your experience in primary when you were still at
(11) school how was it?

(12) JANE: Mmmmm, it was not that good because I was bullied and the teachers didn't used to
(13) like me.

(14) Me: Mhm, and which school where you at in Primary?

(15) JANE: Bahrija

(16) Me: Bahrija as well.

(17) JANE: Emmm I forgot what its name is because they changed the name now.

(18) Me: It's a small school there.

(19) JANE: Yes, yes.

(20) Me: Ok tell me a bit more then.

(21) JANE: Emmm then I went to St Theresa and it's as if I was relieved when I went there.

(22) Me: When you went to secondary school right we're saying?

(23) JANE: Yes exactly.

(24) Me: Ok so when you're telling me you had the experience of bullying when did this happen?
(25) In which years?

(26) JANE: In Primary, maybe Form 4, I mean year 4, year 5, mmm year 3 not that much, it's
(27) more in year 4, year 5 and then in year 6 not as much as well, I think it's more those years.

(28) Me: And is it the same students, particular students that use to tease you?

(29) JANE: Yes yes, there was a boy and he was the bully of the class, ruling the class, it's as if
(30) everyone was afraid of him in class.

(31) Me: And how did this experience affect you Jane?

(32) JANE: Emmm, it didn't affect me very positively.

(33) Me: In which ways? How do you feel different after that experience?

(34) JANE: Emmm because then I went to secondary and it is as if I got better (trangajt) not
(35) because I was naughty (mhawwda) but it feels like I grew up and that I was relieved when I
(36) went to secondary.

(37) Me: So when you were in primary, in the lessons how did it affect you that there were these
(38) children who used to tease you?

(39) JANE: It used to affect me badly, even the Year 4 teacher didn't used to like me much and
(40) even the head teacher used to side with them because she didn't used to like me much as
(41) well, she always used to side with the teachers whatever happens.

(42) Me: And why do you think this was so?

(43) JANE: I don't know, there was this bully at school and whatever happens it was him, it is as
(44) if he was the bully of the school.

(45) Me: Mhm ok and there was just one class?

(46) JANE: Yes because it's a small school.

(47) Me: So practically you spent from Kinder to Year 6 always with the same students, right?

(48) JANE: Yes exactly.

(49) Me: Ok so for example if there was someone who was bothering you, you had to stay with
(50) this person in all the primary years.

(51) JANE: My mother and father came to talk to the Assistant Head always sided with the

(52) teacher and the children and even if something happened at school I used to get blamed for it,

(53) if something happens in class, I always got blamed. Then one time, because when I was

(54) young I was a bit naughty (imqarba) and then when they used to come, because I was

(55) dyslexic when I was young and I was very hyperactive and then one time I don't know what

(56) he did to me and because I smashed (habbatlu) his head in the garden or whatever I did, his

(57) mother, his grandmother and his auntie and all the family came to stand up for him. The

(58) assistant head and all the teachers sided with them. One time I don't know what he did to me

(59) and I was going to run away from school and then there was a teacher and told me to go next

(60) to her and I told her I cannot stand it anymore that he stays teasing me and so on. The

(61) teachers that were really   okay, was the Year 3 teacher who really used to love me and a

(62) Year 6 male teacher he used to defend me all the time and so on. Even the Year 3 teacher was

(63) okay but otherwise the other teachers…

(64) Me: So if I'm understanding correctly even though maybe there was this boy who used to

(65) tease other children, in class you were always the one who gets blamed, when something

(66) happens Jane gets blamed.

(67) JANE: Exactly, even one time… because at school I wasn't… I used to struggle (nibqa lura)

(68) and then one time the Year 4 teacher told me, I mean the Year 5, she told me if you don't

(69) want to do a lesson… She packed all my things and bag and closed it and told me "now stay

(70) there, wait until the bell rings so that we can continue with the lesson". I was irritated I said

(71) "is she serious?" I said I wanted to be interested and she didn't give me a chance to speak and

(72) the LSA told her "leave her, when the bell rings then she will go home".

(73) Me: The LSA was assigned to you?

(74) JANE: Yes, she was with me all the time because I needed a lot of attention from the LSA.

(75) Me: Since when did you have the LSA, do you remember?

(76) JANE: I think since Year 1.

(77) Me: So from Year 1 to Form 4 you had an LSA right?

(78) JANE: Yes.

(79) Me: So at school what type of support did you used to find with the difficulties you had and

(80) experienced?

(81) JANE: In primary?

(82) Me: Yes.

(83) JANE: I didn't used to find a lot of help because as I said I always used to get blamed,
(84) teachers siding with that boy, the Assistant Head, not the Assistant Head, the Head siding
(85) with the teachers and that boy. So he never did anything and I always got blamed

(86) Me: The fact that you had an LSA how was it for you?

(87) JANE: The LSA was really ok and she used to stand up for me and we still occasionally talk
(88) till this present day because she was really ok.

(89) Me: So for you it was of help the fact that you had an LSA.

(90) JANE: Exactly.

(91) Me: If we think about secondary because you told me that for you it was a different
experience.

(92) JANE: In secondary it was really good, the LSA was ok, she was with me all the time which
(93) sometimes bothered me a bit because she used to treat me like a baby, she writes for me, she
(94) does everything for me which used to bother me. I don't write fast so that we would hurry up
(95) she used to tell me "let me write for you" and it seemed that the others used to be bothered.

(96) Me: When you tell me the others, you mean your peers?

(97) JANE: Peers in my class but with whom I used to stay during break time because the LSA
(98) wasn't one to one with me she was shared between three students but she used to take care of
(99) me the most because I needed help. The others seemed to be bothered because they told me
(100) "because it's not fair that she always helps you and not us and that she writes for you and
(101) not us". It seems like they were jealous and annoyed. I used to tell her "let me write" but she
(102) used to tell me "let me write for you" and she used to do everything for me and so the others
(103) were bothered. I was confused as I did not know what to do, if they fight with me I won't
(104) have anyone to stay with and so on. In Form 2 I used to stay with a group then we fought
(105) and we didn't remain friends. I used to stay on my own, go to the library. I used to be very
(106) sad because everyone used to stay with their friends during break and I was on my own.

(107) Me: How else was the experience in secondary different?

(108) JANE: Then in Secondary I made new friends, we clicked, we became like sisters, then we
(109) remained friends, then I don't know what happened maybe there was jealousy. We fought
(110) and we didn't remain friends. Then for a while I stayed a bit on my own. The LSA knew
(111) that with the classmates I used to get along and she told them not to leave me on my own
(112) and to talk to me and now I'm staying with a group that I really get along with. They love
(113) me and I love them back. The others used to leave me on my own.

(114) Me: You decided not to continue with the mainstream school and not to do O levels so
(115) obviously that's why you decided to come to the ALP. So if you had to go back and think of
(116) those reasons, why did you not want to continue engaging in school and do the subjects for
(117) O levels?

(118) JANE: I always used to lag behind (noqod lura) even when she used to give me Maths
(119) homework. In Form 4 I didn't used to do it because I didn't used to understand it. I would
(120) either go to the library with the LSA because I was exempted from Geography, Italian and
(121) History. I used to go to the library with her and used to stay there because I didn't
(122) understand it. By the time I used to get home from school I used to forget it already. Even
(123) though it was basic it wasn't basic enough for me. The private lessons teacher I used to go
(124) to and still do, used to tell me this is difficult for you. I used to go to her so that I could do
(125) the homework not the things she used to give me in the private lesson. She used to tell me
(126) "you're coming here for nothing, I'm wasting your money". She used to end up doing my
(127) homework.

(128) Me: How was it for you the fact that it was difficult for you to understand, the fact that your
(129) work was not the same as your peers'?

(130) JANE: I used to find it a bit difficult but I was never able to catch up and understand
(131) because I always found it difficult. Even when I was in Bahrija she wrote me a certificate
(132) and when they saw it they were taken aback (hadu qata) because from Bahrija I had a label
(133) that I was naughty, a rebel and no one can handle me. When the Assistant Head and the
(134) LSA that was going to work with me saw this they were panicked (ha jiggennu) because
(135) they were saying "how are we going to handle this girl. Staff at Bahrija couldn't handle her
(136) how are we going to handle her?" Then when the LSA was with me and saw how I was they
(137) were very surprised, The Headmistress wrote that about her and she is a quiet girl who
(138) doesn't create trouble (titniffes) and doesn't talk. Once there was an outing and the LSA
(139) was talking to my friends because at times we used to go and visit. She told me to tell the

(140) head teacher that from the things she wrote about you on the certificate we couldn't observe

(141) anything and she told me make sure you tell her. It seemed like the LSA was annoyed, she

(142) used to love me this LSA, why did she wrote those things when they're not true, the

(143) headmistress lied about me because they didn't used to like me.

(144) Me: So what happened to you in primary you had to carry it with you in secondary and as if

(145) you had that label that you were naughty.

(146) JANE: Yes because from there I got the label (fama) that I am naughty, that I am a rebel,

(147) that I am destructive and break things when it's not true. She wrote those things about me

(148) when it's not true.

(149) Me: In Secondary how was it? What did the Head used to tell you? And how was your

(150) relationship with your teachers?

(151) JANE: With the teachers I had a good relationship and even the Assistant Head she was ok

(152) with me, she used to love me and she was ok.

(153) Me: So then the experience in secondary school was different? The things they were saying

(154) about you in primary about how the way you were was not the same as what they were

(155) saying about you in secondary.

(156) JANE: Yes exactly.

(157) Me: Then after secondary, after Form 4 they told you that you could come to the ALP and

(158) you decided to come here. Right?

(159) JANE: Yes. I had Biology and I wanted to do the O level for it but in the exam I got 4. It

(160) was too difficult for me so I said that I will come here. When I came here I made new

(161) friends, I was feeling better (hadt ir-ruh) when I came to this school.

(162) Me: How do you think the ALP will help you accomplish what you wish to do in your life?

(163) JANE: It is helping me a lot. For example I always used to like Hairdressing and Beauty. In

(164) Hairdressing I am learning how to do blow dries, how to wash hair better, how to create up

(165) styles, how to do make up better. For example I didn't know that before you do make up

(166) you need to cleanse your face or that you need to use different brushes. Now I got to know

(167) them in Beauty lessons. I didn't know that when you do your nails you don't just paint them

(168) but you need to buff them. I learnt a lot of new things.

(169) Me: Ok. So if a person had to come here and tell you that she is interested to attending the

(170) ALP what would be those things you would tell her? You should attend because.... or you

(171) should not attend because.... let's start with the first one.

(172) JANE: I would tell her to go because it is a really nice experience, they take you on outings

(173) which were really nice. I found help from the counsellor and guidance. I would tell her to go

(174) because you learn a lot of things and the teachers are really ok.

(175) Me: If we had to think of the opposite now, reasons why you should not come to the ALP,

(176) what would those reasons be?

(177) JANE: I don't know, I feel really happy here. I would encourage her and tell her to come.

(178) Me: Ok. So if we had to think… How is the ALP different from mainstream school, we also

(179) refer to it the traditional school. What does the ALP have different?

(180) JANE: What is different is the fact that you don't wear a uniform.

(181) Me: How does it affect you that you don't have to wear a uniform here?

(182) JANE: Sometimes it's good and sometimes not so much. For example in the morning I have

(183) to stay thinking what I'm going to wear but then I say it's better casual than wearing a

(184) uniform because you can wear what you want.

(185) Me: How else is the ALP different?

(186) JANE: They let us use the mobile during break time, that's it I think.

(187) Me: Are there any reasons why you would say the ALP is different because...?

(188) JANE: We have Hairdressing and Beauty. You have those lessons you enjoy not always

(189) Maths, English, Maltese, Religion, ICT. Those lessons you wouldn't enjoy but you would

(190) still have to attend. Over here it's different, you still have to attend, they won't let you stay

(191) lying around but you have your favourite lessons not lessons that you don't like and have to

(192) attend compulsory. Two times a week you have your favourite lessons.

(193) Me: So you have subjects you can choose, those subjects which are vocational.

(194) JANE: Exactly. You have Maths, English and Maltese, Hairdressing and Beauty. Then

(195) sometimes we have Drama, Gilding, Art. Each term we have something. Before I did not

(196) like Gilding but now I really like it and I enjoy going. Now we started Drama.

(197) Me: So how do you see the lessons different from the school you used to attend before?

(198) JANE: For example Maths is really easy and the teacher is really okay. Maths is good for
(199) my level and the teacher does not rush in the lessons, she teaches according to your level. If
(200) the others have progressed further, she will still explain according to your level. She does
(201) not keep on rushing and you end up not understanding.

(202) Me: So even though you are in the same group and you can have different levels the teacher
(203) will still work according each individual's level.

(204) JANE: Exactly and if I don't understand something she explains it again.

(205) Me: If you think of the school you used to attend before ALP what were those things that
(206) you enjoyed doing? If you had to say I enjoy going to school because....

(207) JANE: I had Home Economics and Biology.

(208) Me: In secondary we're saying.

(209) JANE: Yes yes.

(210) Me: If you had to think of things which led you to dislike school what would they be?

(211) JANE: I used to dislike because it became boring, the lessons were always the same and
(212) they were very difficult. Maths was difficult, Home Economics was difficult, not things
(213) which are basic for you. No they were difficult things

(214) Me: So for you the fact that the material you were given was difficult led you to start
(215) disliking school.

(216) JANE: Yes but then I came here and I started feeling comfortable.

(217) Me: Jane if you had to go back, let's say you were given an opportunity to go back in time
(218) when you were still at school. What would you choose to do differently?

(219) JANE: Maybe I would try to pay more attention and try to study Biology more.

(220) Me: So with a subject you enjoyed maybe you would have tried harder in it?

(221) JANE: Initially it wasn't difficult but then as we went along and went into more detail it
(222) was very difficult.

(223) Me: If you look back do you have any regrets? Do you look back and say I regret that when

(224) I was at school...

(225) JANE: It doesn't affect me that much because here I am really happy so it's better that I

(226) came here than stayed at that school since I wasn't going to do any O levels, the subjects

(227) were too difficult for me, I couldn't understand anything, the LSA would do everything for

(228) me as I wasn't understanding anything, so it's better I came to this school.

(229) Me: So here you feel that the level is good for you so you prefer that a place where you can

(230) understand and do your own things rather than someone else doing them for you.

(231) JANE: Exactly.

(232) Me: If I had to tell you that you can make recommendations at school both primary and

(233) secondary how it can be different so that students can be more engaged at school…

(234) JANE: I don't know... mmm. Maybe I would tell them to pay attention and to try and learn.

(235) Me: Not for the students but how the system is. Let's look at primary school first, if you

(236) think how you were at primary and say… to be more interested at school these things had to

(237) be different, what would they be?

(238) JANE: If you are not understanding, the teacher should not keep on rushing and the

(239) explanation needs to be catered for different levels. Different materials need to be provided

(240) to students, some things are for students who are more intelligent and for those students who

(241) have lower abilities she gives them a different handout with things they can understand and

(242) suitable for them. The teacher should not rush with these students.

(243) Me: What else? If someone who takes care of the Education system had to come here and

(244) you tell him "I think that for the Education system to be better if there are these things the

(245) students would enjoy more school…" What would you tell him to be different?

(246) JANE: In Secondary they have things they enjoy doing not always Maths, Maltese, English,

(247) ICT, History, Geography, Italian but they have subjects they enjoy doing for example Hair

(248) once or twice a week. If they enjoy Beauty then they have lessons in Beauty. If they want to

(249) have some highlights in their hair they allow them to do so because our Head did not allow

(250) us to have our hair dyed.

(251) Me: So how do you think students would be happier if they had these things that you are

(252) mentioning?

(253) JANE: Because they are things they enjoy doing.

(254) Me: Some of the things you are mentioning can be related to discipline. How you think
(255) discipline was at your school?

(256) JANE: We had an Assistant Head who was really strict with us, if you had a rubber band
(257) which was pink he would not allow you to wear it, it had to be black. If your hair was dyed
(258) or had some highlights he wouldn't allow you, if you wore sunglasses as well.

(259) Me: So the fact that there was this type of discipline do you think that students would not
(260) like school as much?

(261) JANE: Yes, I think so.

(262) Me: What else Jane could you suggest to be different?

(263) JANE: Maybe they let them wear some mascara and eyeliner. That's it I think, maybe they
(264) have some casual clothes not always with the uniform things like that.

(265) Me: If you think about the lessons, the way the day is structured how do you think...?

(266) JANE: Maybe the lessons can be shorter, they used to be 45minutes long maybe they can be
(267) shorter so as not to have long lessons.

(268) Me: So for you 45 minutes is a long time or are you referring to when you have double

(269) lessons?

(270) JANE: They used to be long and when I had double lessons it used to be a really long time.

(271) Me: So do you think that when the lesson is long students get bored then?

(272) JANE: Yes for example I used to have double Biology at the end of the day I used to be
(273) really tired sometimes I used to sleep. Biology should be at the beginning of the day so that
(274) everyone is still fresh and paying attention. Having Biology towards the end of the day after
(275) all those lessons you would be tired.

(276) Me: What else do you think could be different besides these things that we are mentioning?

(277) JANE: Maybe if you have some nail polish they won't send you home.

(278) Me: If I had to ask you if there were any people in your life who could have influenced you
(279) to be more engaged and interested in school. Who could have been these people?

(280) JANE: Maybe my parents.

(281) Me: So for example in primary when you used to have those problems and they had to stay
(282) coming to school and even in secondary how were they?

(283) JANE: I always found support from them, they always used to come. When there was that
(284) boy who was really troublesome at school and then when he used to be with his mum he
(285) used to behave like an angel. His mum would boast how quiet her child is and how bright he
(286) is and whatever happens he never used to get blamed I always was the one to get blamed.

(287) Me: In secondary school... before you mentioned that your parents could have influenced
(288) you to be more interested and motivated, how do you think they could have done it?

(289) JANE: Maybe in telling me not to take any notice of him, go to another school, those type
(290) of things.

(291) Me: The fact that now you're attending the ALP do you think it has changed your
(292) perception of how interested in school you could be?

(293) JANE: Yes a lot.

(294) Me: And in which way do you think you look at school differently now?

(295) JANE: Because this school is nicer than the previous one because there are a lot of people
(296) who understand and support you, lessons you enjoy, teachers are ok, they do the lessons that
(297) you wish, English that you understand not difficult for you, Maths that you can understand,
(298) Maltese that you can understand. Those type of things.

(299) Me: So before you came to the ALP if you had to look at school, let's say you would choose
(300) 1 word to describe school how would you describe it?

(301) JANE: This school?

(302) Me: No, where you were before.

(303) JANE: It was nice but I prefer here because there are many things here that you like, for
(304) example twice a week you have Hairdressing and Beauty, the lessons that you want, you
(305) wear casual clothes, you learn a lot of things, how to do nails and hair...

(306) Me: So do you say that they are things that can use every day in your life?

(307) JANE: Yes. They teach you for the everyday life not Maths in the syllabus but for everyday
(308) life. For example ICT they teach you for everyday life, to whom you should talk to at work,
(309) how to apply for work, how to write a C.V., how you should approach your boss, these type
(310) of things, how to send a c.v.

(311) Me: So if we look at subjects such as Maths, English and Maltese which are the core
(312) subjects what do you learn differently here at the ALP in those type of subjects?

(313) JANE: You learn a lot of things because they are adapted for you not too difficult for you
(314) and you cannot understand them.

(315) Me: And are they more practical? Like when you were mentioning practical ICT, for
(316) everyday life or is there still the element of the syllabus, curriculum like you had in the
(317) other school but simpler?

(318) JANE: Here they teach you more to cope with everyday life, how you should behave with
(319) people, the budget you should save…

(320) Me: Before you came to the ALP if you had to see… What did you say you were going to
(321) do with your life once you finish school?

(322) JANE: I am going to the school Youth.Inc. I am not going to stop attending school to go to
(323) work. I want to continue school because it was always my dream to enrol in the army.

(324) Me: If I had to ask you about your dream in a few years' time how do you see yourself?

(325) JANE: That I would be working.

(326) Me: And what type of work?

(327) JANE: In the army.

(328) Me: What inspires you to be in the army?

(329) JANE: I always liked that type of job and I always wanted to do it.

(330) Me: What interests you in this type of job? It's interesting that a young person like you who
(331) is 16 years old says that she wants to be in the army.

(332) JANE: I want to be one of those who are on the helicopters, I don't know it attracts me. I
(333) always wanted to do this type of job.

(334) Me: Are there are any other dreams that you have?

(335) JANE: I don't know, I don't think so.

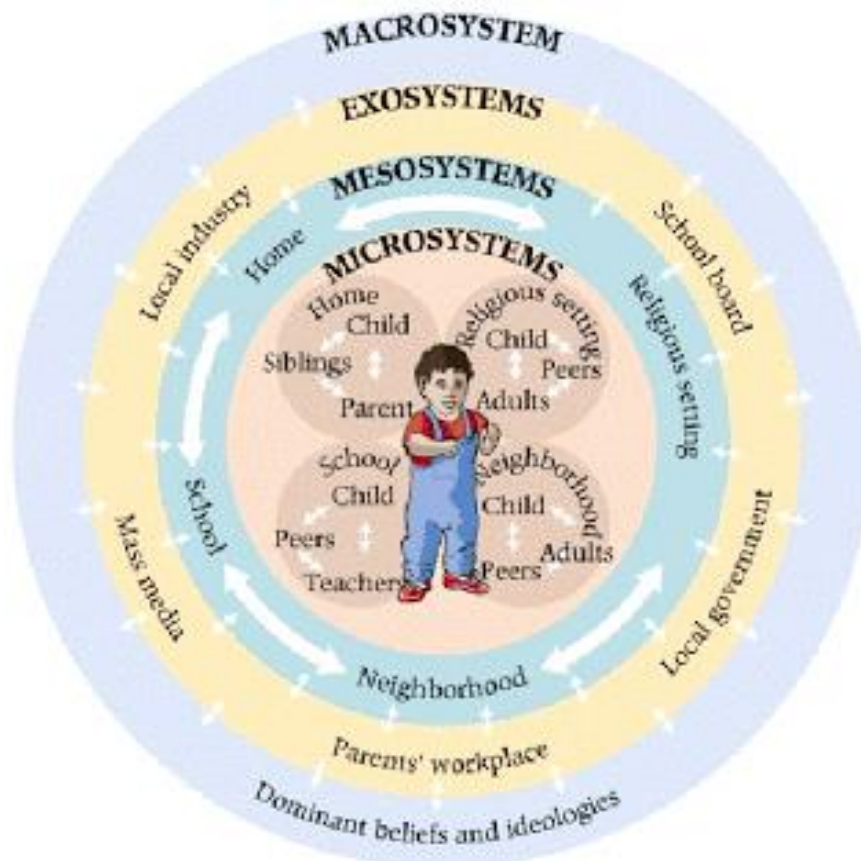(336) Me: Let me just check that we've covered everything. Is there anything else that I didn't ask
(337) you but you would like to tell me related to what we've been discussing?

(338) JANE: No I don't think so.

(339) Me: Ok. Shall we end the interview here?

(340) JANE: Yes.

Appendix 10: *Ecological systems theory*

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Appendix 11: *Factors that may contribute to student disengagement*

Student Self-Efficacy (feeling of capability)

Teacher Competency (teacher's personal and instructional ability)

Student Maturity (emotional and psychological stability)

Task Complexity (level of task difficulty)

Teacher/ Student Relationship (level of compatibility, personal communication) & trust)

I DON'T CARE

Past School or Subject Experiences (history of positive/ negative school-related events in a student's life)

Interest in Subject Matter (level of intrinsic desire) to study content

Classroom Complexity (where learning, teaching and group dynamics converge)

Self-Identity (how the student sees him/herself)

The Social Context (peer relationships and peer pressure)

Current Emotional State (what's going on in the student's life right now)

(Walsh, 2006, p. 10).