

# **Early Literacy Experiences of Early School Leaving Women**

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## **Master of Arts**

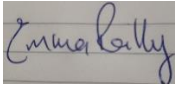
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**December 2022**

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## Acknowledgements

I want to thank my parents, although my mother won't get a chance to read this, having passed away, she was an avid reader with books beside her chair where she sat in the evening and on her bedside locker. I think she would be proud. So to my dad, who bought me books, comics, and weekly trips to the library, these experiences made me who I am today- Thank you.

To my family, Jack, Alex, Leo, Christy, and Michael, thanks for putting up with me and asking how I was getting on, in particular, Christy, who described this thesis as really just a fancy project -that kept me grounded.

To Dr. Sinead Mc Nally, whose support knows no bounds, I would not have gotten through this journey without her.

To myself- you did it, nothing left to prove.

Finally, a thank you to the women who let me into their lives and tell their stories; it was a privilege.

Table of Contents:

## Contents

1	Introduction .....	7
1.1	The Research Study.....	12
1.2	Structure of the Thesis.....	12
2	Literature Review: Introduction.....	14
2.1	Defining Literacy .....	14
2.2	Positionality.....	16
2.3	Theoretical Framework-Ontology, Epistemology, and Theoretical Perspective .....	19
2.4	Narrative Lives .....	23
2.5	Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory .....	26
2.6	The Impact of Early Experiences on Later Life and the Importance of Relationships .....	33
2.7	The Role of Early literacy experience.....	37
2.8	The Historical Context of Education for Women .....	42
2.9	Indicators for and Implications of Leaving School Early .....	48
2.10	Conclusion.....	56
3	Methodology: Introduction .....	58
3.1	Methodological Considerations and Impact of Covid 19.....	59
3.2	The Road to Narrative Inquiry.....	61
3.2.1	Defining Features of Narrative Enquiry (adapted from Creswell and Poth, 2018).....	62
3.3	Procedures for conducting Narrative Inquiry .....	65
3.3.1	Recruitment .....	67
3.3.2	Reflections on Recruitment .....	67
3.3.3	Methods Procedure .....	68
3.4	Deciding on Data.....	71
3.5	Analysis of Interview Data .....	72
3.6	Ethics.....	78
4	Findings .....	82
4.1	Participants' Characteristics and Contexts .....	82
4.2	Theme 1: Earliest Literacy Experiences.....	99
4.2.1	Observing an adult reading in the home and being read to.....	99
4.2.2	Having access to books in the home and being gifted books .....	103
4.3	Theme 2: Transitions School Experiences.....	104
4.3.1	Anne's Experience.....	104
4.3.2	Barbra's Experience .....	105

4.3.3	Cara’s Experience .....	106
4.3.4	Dara’s Experience.....	107
4.3.5	Evelyn’s Experiences .....	107
4.4	Theme 3: The Importance of Relationships .....	108
4.4.1	Anne’s Experiences .....	108
4.4.2	Barbra’s experiences.....	111
4.4.3	Cara’s Experiences .....	111
4.4.4	Dara’s Experience.....	113
4.4.5	Evelyn’s Experience.....	114
4.5	Theme 4: Return to Education and the Support of a Significant Adult .....	115
4.5.1	Anne’s experience.....	116
4.5.2	Barbra’s Experience .....	117
4.5.3	Cara’s Experience.....	118
4.5.4	Dara’s Experience.....	119
4.5.5	Evelyn’s Experience.....	120
4.6	Post Leaving School Experiences .....	121
4.6.1	Access to Employment.....	121
4.6.2	Life Altering Events .....	121
4.7	Literacy Child Rearing Practices .....	122
4.7.1	Anne’s Experience.....	122
4.7.2	Cara’s Experience.....	123
4.7.3	Dara’s Experience.....	124
4.7.4	Evelyn’s Experience.....	124
5	Discussion.....	126
5.1	Earliest Literacy Experiences.....	126
5.2	The School Experience: Transitions and the Role of Significant Others .....	129
5.3	Child-rearing literacy practices .....	134
5.4	Return to Education .....	135
5.5	Limitations of the Study .....	136
5.6	Conclusion.....	137
	Bibliography .....	139
6	Appendices.....	149
	Appendix A -Debriefing Material .....	149
	Appendix B- Informed Consent.....	150
	Appendix C - Plain Language Statement .....	152
	Appendix D - Possible Interview Questions .....	154

Appendix E - Recruitment advertisement for research participants ..... 155

## **The Early Literacy Experiences of Early School Leaving Women**

### **Author-Emma Reilly**

This research explores the early literacy experiences of early school leavers. Interviews were conducted with a group of early school leaving women to give voice to their experiences and to explore the significance of early literacy experiences in their school and later life experiences. So often in educational research, parallels are drawn between children's outcomes and their mother's educational attainment. For example, early school leaving and lower educational attainment can be linked to lower quality employment opportunities, less secure employment, and many social, personal cultural, and economic implications that can have lifelong negative consequences. Therefore, the key aim is to structure the research focused on the women themselves and their early literacy and schooling experiences to examine whether those experiences influenced their schooling experiences, later life experiences, and literacy childrearing practices.

A narrative inquiry approach was adopted as the most appropriate approach to centre the women's early literacy and education experiences. Five women who had left school early, i.e. pre-Leaving Certificate, were interviewed. The study's key findings were multi-layered and complex. Participants did not raise early literacy experiences as impacting their schooling experience. However, positive early literacy experiences, such as seeing a significant person regularly read, having access to books, and being read to in early childhood, appeared to positively influence their literacy-related childrearing practices and their return to education. The analysis also highlighted the importance of relationships and the home and school environments in shaping the participants' schooling experience. A key finding was that the role of transitions in the family and schooling contexts was instrumental in shaping participants' subsequent experiences within the school setting. For educators and

policymakers, this study highlights the voices and experiences of women who were early school leavers, bringing life and record to their narrative and experience.



## List of Figures

Figure 1. Growing Up in Ireland Key Findings 2019, page 16

Figure 2. Existing Theoretical Paradigms adapted from Creswell and Poth, page 20

Figure 3. Bronfenbrenner's Biological Systems Theory, page 27

Figure 4. Percentage of early school leavers according to age and gender, page 49

Figure 5. Theoretical Model of Mechanisms of the Influence of Maternal Education on Children's Academic Outcomes, page 55

Figure 6. Data Analysis Spiral-Taken from Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 186), page 73

Figure 7. Data Analysis Approaches page 74

Figure 8. Adapted Comparative Analysis Framework page 77

# 1 Introduction

## **Researcher Subjectivity Statement**

A subjectivity statement, according to Preissle (2008, p. 2), is 'a summary of who researchers are in relation to what and whom they are studying'. However, according to Peshkin (1988, p. 17), 'subjectivity is an integral part of the research'. It is up to the researcher to assert that their goal is to achieve objectivity. He also conveys the importance of knowing and awareness of where the 'self and the subject' are intertwined (p. 2). Androtti (2011) supports this approach by saying that 'the ability to trace the origins and implications of one's thinking through the awareness that one's subjectivity is constantly constructed within ones social, cultural and historical contexts'. Therefore, I am adopting a reflexive subjective stance in this piece of educational research. I am aware that my interest in this subject matter is inextricably linked to my early literacy experiences. I outline my experiences here to highlight the subjectivity that informs and contextualises my research in this thesis.

I was born in Dublin when in the 1970s, mothers stayed at home and dads went out to work. Only 15% of the population in this area went on to 3rd level education (HEA, 2019), and no one in the family had been to college. Dad finished primary school, and mother completed 2nd level education and had a nursing career cut short before completion by her mother becoming ill and returning to the family home to nurse her back to health. As a result, she never finished her nursing training.

I followed in my mother's footsteps and completed Children's Nurse Training in 1993; I also specialised in neonatal intensive care and received my first qualification from a university. Several years later, I took a career break, decided

to study child development, and started an academic trajectory that has now spanned over a decade. I have a BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning and a Post Grad in 'Leadership and Management in Not for Profit Organisations.' This work is for an MA in Language Literacy and Early Childhood Education. I am unsure if these educational experiences have influenced 'one's life trajectory.

Growing up, I remember my mother reading a lot. Growing up, I remember being given books, two books I remember in particular, 'Little Women and Gulliver's Travels.' I remember my dad would bring home comics, the Dandy and the Beano. I remember the smell of books and comics; it is a happy memory. I remember being brought to the library every Saturday. I remember the air or atmosphere of importance the library oozed, the shiny clean floor, and the silence. I do not have a memory of being read to as a child. I talk about this because I wonder if these literacy experiences influenced who I am today as a woman, mother, and researcher. My own school experience was relatively unremarkable; I was not particularly good at school, and whatever challenges I was presented with did not impact the completion of my education to leaving cert level. Although that statement of completing your education, I believe that it (education) never stops, we are continually learning, but it never quite begins for some.

My interest in this area was sparked by attending a networking event for the Prevention and Early Intervention Network or PEIN. At that time, I was employed to manage three community childcare settings. These settings happened to be in areas of disadvantage and based in inner-city Dublin. These services catered for part-time provision of ECCE and afterschool care. The children and families that attended were from various backgrounds, both culturally, ethnically, and

socioeconomically. It was a warm, vibrant community and one I felt safe in. But, unfortunately, the northeast inner city had a reputation for high crime and subversive activities, and although a few streets away, there were shiny new buildings and wealth, all one had to do was walk for a short while. Shiny high rises were replaced with older red-bricked homes, rubbish on corners, and a large amount of dog excrement noticeable.

As I began to get to know the families, their stories and life experiences opened my eyes to the adversity they experienced. Mothers and fathers were trying to be good enough for their children despite mental health issues, addiction, immigration, poverty, and homelessness sitting on their shoulders. These are good people, good humans who just happened to have a hand dealt to them that meant they just turned the wrong corner, made the wrong choice, or possibly had no choice.

One such parent's story had a significant impact. She had a most horrific upbringing. Raped repeatedly by her father as a child led this woman to a path of self-destruction. She started drinking at an early age and quickly moved on to drug use, turning to crime to feed her then crack addiction. This substance use helped to numb the pain of her experiences. She left school without qualifications and became pregnant. Her addiction continued through this pregnancy, and her daughter was born into this world addicted too. As she described herself, this woman's saving grace was becoming pregnant for a second time some 15 years later. This time she explained that she saw her daughter's suffering and could not do that again, so she started a path to sobriety. This story her story evolved through many, many months of conversation and relationship-building. She described herself as illiterate and so wanted to get back into education. She

would say to herself that what was stopping her was not being able to read or write and crippling social anxiety. I would gently guide her to explore going to NALA and see what opportunities they might offer to help her. She was afraid and anxious and described how a relapse lurked on the horizon. She would come into my office on a Monday and often describe how she nearly took a drink over the weekend, how she battled it and went to her meetings, and how grateful she was not to have relapsed.

Nevertheless, her demons were never far away. This woman was incredibly articulate, kind, and loving to her son; she deserved a better life. Unfortunately, I did not persuade her to go to NALA (I offered to bring her), but we never did.

I had been reading about 'Adverse Childhood Experiences at the time and wanted to know more. The PEIN event happened in November 2018, and they showed the film Resilience- 'the biology of stress and the science of hope'. This movie is based on Felitti and colleagues (1998) research titled *Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study*. The movie describes how toxic stress in childhood can trigger hormones that wreak havoc on the brains and bodies of children, putting them at a greater risk for disease, homelessness, prison, and early death. It was profound and changed how I viewed myself and other people. Moreover, it helped me to understand behaviours and why so many who have experienced adversity turn to certain behaviours to numb the pain. Unsure how this might relate to this research, I feel compelled to highlight its significant existence in shaping a child's development.

And it's beautiful, really, how the things we believe have broken us become the very things that make us- Unknown

For this woman I described above, there were many more mothers with different contexts and experiences, such as their own parents' addiction and mental health issues. However, the theme of leaving education early was common to many of the mothers I had met.

Research has substantially increased in the last two decades, exploring how mothers influence their child's outcomes. Inputting 'maternal education and child outcomes' into Google yields approximately 50,000,000 results. This is an area of great interest. The relationship between maternal education and child health, height, mortality, cognitive and social ability, nutritional status, and much more are extensively explored.

Literacy is a critical component of education, and the ability to read and write is vital for participating in society. Moreover, the ability to speak and be understood, read and write are essential elements of development that, if missing or have emerging cracks in their foundations, can have lifelong consequences. The aspects that have influenced this study are my professional experiences working with early school leavers, my views, and reading the literature on literacy in education. These aspects have led to the following questions, which lie at the heart of this master's study: (1) 'Do early literacy experiences impact school experiences, particularly for those who have left school early? (2) What is the significance of early literacy experiences for women, and (3) what influence might they have on parenting practices and experiences?

## 1.1 The Research Study

The primary objective of this research is to understand how the very earliest literacy experiences shape our values around reading and literacy.

This research will explore many relational aspects, including the historical and cultural context of education in Ireland. Experiences of literacy in the context of school leaving and the emergence of literacy values later in life, particularly in childrearing practices related to reading, are also explored.

"We learn more by looking for the answer to a question and not finding it than we do from learning the answer itself." Lloyd Alexander

## 1.2 Structure of the Thesis

**Chapter two** outlines the relevant literature and is divided into ten sections.

The first section defines literacy in the broader context; the second section outlines the positionality and explores the theoretical and interpretative frameworks used. The fourth section examines how life is explored through narrative and how this lens can create narrative coherence. The fifth section outlines the Bioecological Systems Theory and its relationship to developmental outcomes. The sixth section explores the relationship between early experience and the role of relationships in this context. The following section, section seven, looks at the impact of early literacy experiences. Section eight looks at the historical context of education and how it has influenced the education system to date. The ninth section looks at the indicators and implications of leaving school early, and finally, the last section contains a conclusion.

**Chapter 3** outlines the qualitative methodology used to conduct this research. A narrative inquiry approach was taken. According to Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 67), 'narrative research as a method begins with the experience as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals. They cite Clandinin (2013, p. 18), 'the focus of the narrative inquiry is not only valorising individuals experience but is also an exploration of social, cultural, familial, linguistic and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were and are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted'. This embodies what this research aims to achieve by giving voice to the experiences of women who left their education early and exploring the relationship between their early literacy experiences. This chapter also outlines the methods for data analysis which was thematic analysis—this chapter concludes with the ethical considerations as part of this research.

**Chapter 4** presents the findings from the in-depth interviews with the five women. It commences with outlining the contexts for each person and then moves through the experiences outlining them from earliest experiences, schooling experiences, post-school experiences and literacy child-rearing practices.

**The final chapter is chapter 5;** this chapter discusses the findings, how they relate to the literature, and what that means in the context of this research. This chapter also looks at the limitations and implications of the research.



## 2 Literature Review: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present a critical analysis of existing research, demonstrate an in-depth understanding of this area, connect the current study to the existing literature, and identify potential gaps. The review gives context and meaning to the research, tells the story behind this research topic, and outlines what is already known. This chapter focuses on what is known about early literacy experiences and how these relate to schooling and later life experiences and literacy childrearing practices. The chapter consists of ten sections. In section 1, literacy is defined and explored, while in section 2 positionality of the research is discussed. In section 3, the theoretical framework underpinning the study is outlined, and in section 4, the role of narrative in our lived experiences is highlighted. Section 5 focuses more in-depth on the bioecological systems theory as an important frame for this research, and section 6 explores how early experiences may shape later life practices and outcomes. This is further explored in section 7, which focuses specifically on the role of early literacy. Finally, in section 8, the historical context of education for women is outlined, and the chapter ends with a discussion of the implication of early school leaving.

### 2.1 Defining Literacy

Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world (National Literacy Trust, 2020). Literacy more recently has been recognised to extend beyond the ability to read, write and listen but also includes an intertwined relationship to cultural, social, emotional, and economic capital that allows children to participate in society (Mullis et al., 2011; ESRI, 2013). Learning to read opens up opportunities

to be a social being and to participate in communities and school, and to learn and participate in everyday life. Literacy is one of the essential abilities for supporting participating in society: it is the basis for learning that underpins the ability to learn over a lifetime (Hanemann & Robinson, 2022), and it is a vital determinant of economic, emotional, and educational trajectory and the ability to dynamically and fully participate in broader society (Ritchie & Bates, 2013).

The scale of literacy difficulties in Ireland has been outlined by O'Donnell and McPhillips (2018, p. 4) and the ESRI (Weir & Kavanagh, 2018), the latter noting a gap in achievement between those children in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage (DEIS Band 1 in particular), and other schools has persisted and must be addressed. Students in DEIS schools average a lower reading literacy score than pupils attending non-DEIS schools. Also, reading for enjoyment was significantly less frequent among these students, contributing to poorer score outcomes. According to Sullivan and Brown (2015), reading for pleasure is more important for children's cognitive development between ages 10 and 16 than their parent's level of education. This is significant because children who score in the lowest quintile for reading at age nine (GUI, 2019) are likelier to leave school early.

Figure 4: School experiences at ages 9 and 13 of 20-year-olds who were early school-leavers (ESL) compared to Leaving Certificate (LC) completers (reading test score at 9; attitudes to school at 13; interaction with teachers at 13)

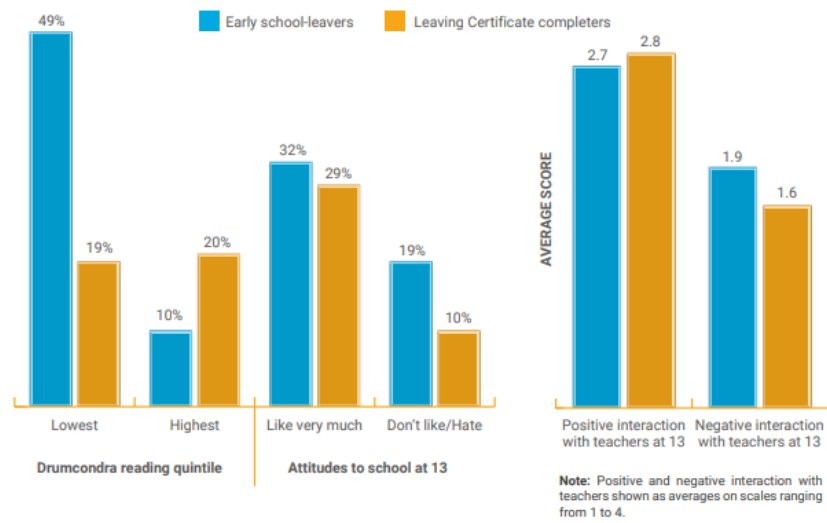


Figure 1.

*Growing Up in Ireland Key Findings (2019) with Regard to School Experiences of Early School-Leavers Compared to Leaving Certificate Completers*

This poses enormous social challenges as low literacy attainment impacts lifelong learning and has implications concerning social cohesion and active citizenship. In addition, poor literacy levels and early school leaving increase the likelihood of unemployment and dependence on the state.

This study explores the life stories of early school-leaving women, from their earliest memories of early literacy, subsequent experiences of schooling, significant life events, and subsequent childrearing practices of their own. What is the significance of any of those earliest experiences, and do they impact their schooling experience, and if so, in what way? Their current values around literacy and literacy for their children will also be examined to see if there has been any influence in this domain.

## 2.2 Positionality

In exploring the researcher as a multicultural subject, I return to the importance of exploring one's own experiences and assumptions. Creswell and Poth (2018, p

18) describe how important it is to conceptualise from the outset of the research process what the researchers' understanding of their philosophical assumptions is influenced by their personal history, view of themselves and others, and their ethics and political views. In reading this, I felt somewhat emancipated by its statement when I read it. I was so fixed on the academic construct and convention of how one does research that I stifled my personal history and view of my experiences and myself. Now I can reflect deeply on my own experiences and see where they fit within the context of my research.

According to Bryan (2021), positionality "...Involves the combination of social status groups to which one belongs (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) and one's personal experience [...] Our positionalities – how we see ourselves, how others perceive us, and our experiences – influence how we approach knowledge, what we know, and what we believe we know. Thus, positionality is paramount to the production and understanding of knowledge."

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s in a working-class community, reared on the margins of the lower socio-economic scale, I have no memories of anybody reading to me as a child. My memory of my schooling was not eventful; I did just enough to get by; I cannot say that I liked nor disliked school, and I would not have said that I was particularly bright but average. However, I do remember having a good vocabulary and a kind nature. I loved children. You would find me pushing buggies up and down the road and offering to look after anyone's child that was willing. I also have memories of the library, which I mentioned in the introduction and a mother who read avidly. I also have strong memories of receiving two books, but not just any books; these were hard-backed books with covers, Gulliver's Travels and Little Women. They had a particular earthy smell,

and I remember my feelings on receiving those books; it was a feeling of worthiness, importance, and value. I have those memories some 40 years on, and I cannot help but wonder about those experiences and their connection to where I am today. Traversing through my history, I have worked with children and families in many ways over the last 30 years, from nursing to working within the community childcare sector. In particular, I have developed an interest in mothers, maternal education, literacy, and early school leaving within the last eight years. I am also interested in how women and mothers are portrayed in research and the political landscape.

Another essential element in navigating this journey in exploring my research question was that it was essential to establish a rigorous understanding of the concepts that underpin the research process.

Navigating the many concepts and methods to conduct research is daunting. It is a bit like getting lost in an area of a city you are unfamiliar with and having no access to Google Maps, with no single path but a multitude of streets and landmarks that may or may not lead you to your destination. Crotty (1998, p 1) confirms this by saying, 'not only do you feel somewhat lost initially, but you are also alone in this journey'.

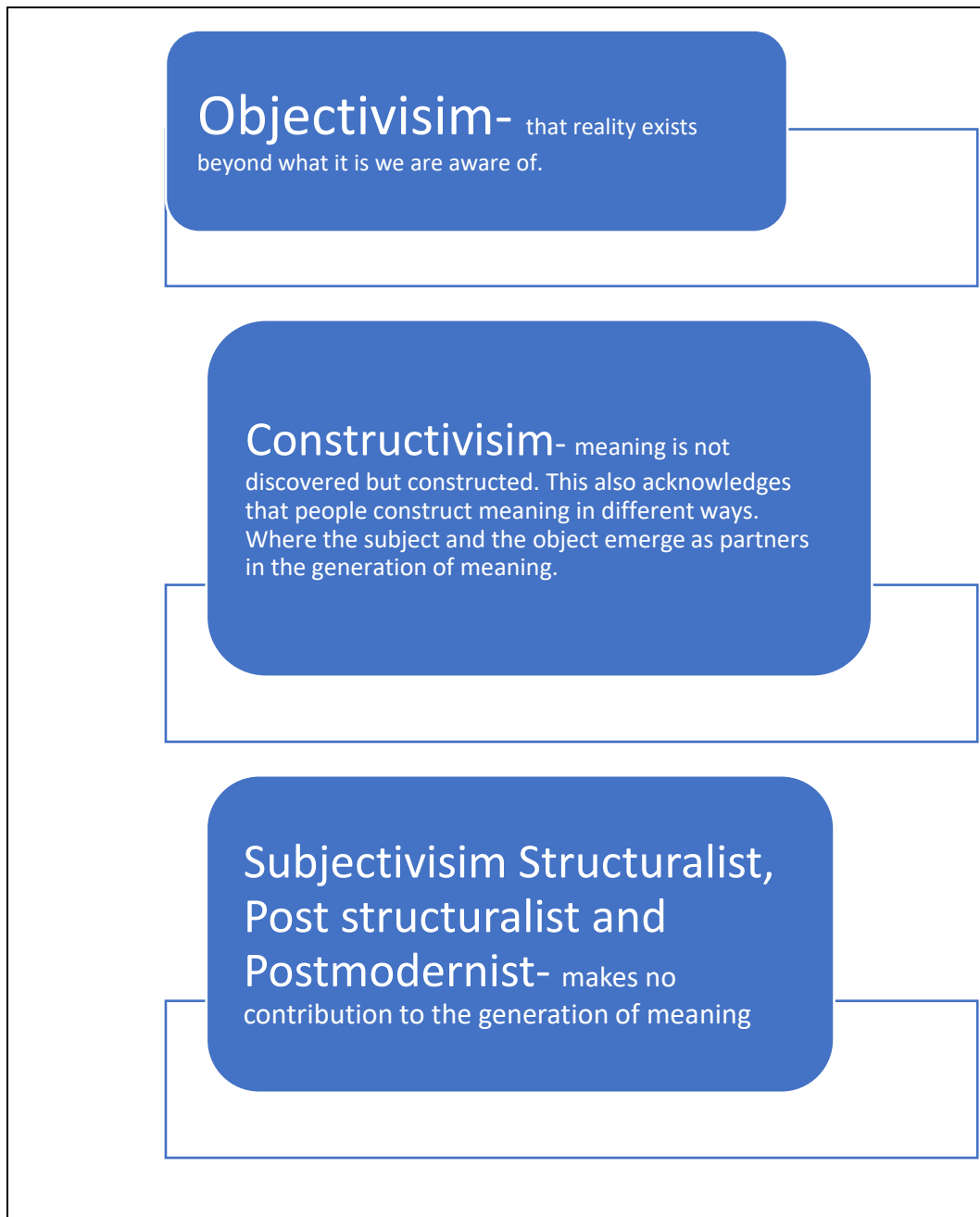
This statement by Crotty might seem stark; however, solace was found through regular supervision and connection through opportunities afforded by the academic institution through research in progress or RIP's seminars which other postgraduate students attended.

## 2.3 Theoretical Framework-Ontology, Epistemology, and Theoretical Perspective

Creswell (2018) cites Denzin and Lincoln (2011) in outlining the research process. They cite 5 phases: (1) The Researcher as a Multicultural Subject, (2) Theoretical Paradigms and Perspectives, (3) Research Strategies, (4) Methods of Collection and Analysis, and (5) The Art, Practice, and Politics of Interpretation and Evaluation.

Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 20) describe ontological issues relating to the nature of reality and its characteristics. Crotty (1998) describes ontology as the nature of existence and structure of reality, and Snape and Spencer (2003) propose that ontology is what is possible to know about the world. In the research paradigm, the researcher brings their reality, as do the participants in the research and those who read qualitative research. This qualitative study aims to report on those multiple realities with this lens. This research explores what there is to know about the early literacy experiences of a particular cohort of women and their reality; this is the fundamental question.

According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007, p. 7), epistemology is the assumptions one makes about 'the very basis of knowledge – its nature and form, how it can be acquired, and how it's communicated to other human beings'. It relates to the construction and acquisition of knowledge. There are several philosophical assumptions around the knowledge that Creswell (2018, p. 17) describes as an essential element to consider as a researcher and how our assumptions fit within this frame and influence methodological approaches taken. The figure below outlines some existing paradigms in constructing and acquiring knowledge.



**Figure 2.**

*Paradigms of Knowledge Creation- adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 34)*

A social constructivist approach to knowledge and understanding is adopted in this research study; meaning is constructed, and this varies from person to person. Dewey, in particular, shaped my worldview on how knowledge is constructed (Dewey, 1938): each research participant brought their ontological perspective, and it is through sharing their experiences and knowledge that this

research aims to construct meaning to their lived experiences. In attempting to construct meaning around their early literacy experiences and explore the multiple realities that emerge from the researcher's and the participants' joint attention to their social and cultural history, this research aims to make sense of those experiences so that we can learn from them.

### **Interpretative Frameworks**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018, p.35), social constructivism posits multiple realities constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others. It is the human experience of the participants, but what does one mean by experience? Kim (2016, p. 70) discusses Dewey's work, *Experience and Education* (1938). Experience, according to Dewey (2011, p.78), can be understood through a combination of active and passive elements; that is, when we experience something, we do something with it. This, although a simple statement, resonates with the research question of what we do with, or how we act upon, our early lived experiences, such as early literacy experiences, and what do we do with those very early literacy experiences. For example, how do the active experiences of receiving a book, being read to, or watching a loved one read impact us? Dewey (1997, p. 139) says, 'we do something with the thing, and then, it does something to us in return'), suggesting that early experiences might continue to exert an impact on us throughout life.

Dewey (1997, p.35) further explores this notion of experience of what the thing does to us in return through what he calls the 'two principles of continuity and interaction'; this is also known as the experiential continuum. The experiential continuum discriminates between what experiences are worthwhile and which ones are not. He describes this as influencing emotional and intellectual attitudes



and preparing us for events we may meet in life. Although Dewey's work explores what an educative experience signifies in an educational environment, one would argue that the educational environment is not the only context where education takes place. Kim (2016, p. 70) describes Dewey's concept of the 'experiential continuum' as a way in which every experience builds up from previous experience and modifies in some way the quality of the experiences that come after. Dewey uses Tennyson's poem from Ulysses:

**Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough**

**Gleams that untravelled world, whose margins fade**

**Forever and forever, when I move – Tennyson (p. 35)**

Kim (2016, p. 70) describes this as a 'beautiful' metaphor that describes experiences as a realm of meaning that is not static but enlarged by the new experience. Through my research, I aim to explore the realm of meaning for the women participants to establish if we can identify the active or passive experiences relating to early literacy and establish if there is a link between those experiences and subsequent experiences. Dewey (p.12) believed that the principle of the experiential continuum was to discriminate between what experiences are worthwhile. He proposed that this rests on the fact of habit and that habit is interpreted biologically. He explained the characteristics of habit in that every experience modifies the formation of an attitude towards the habit and the experience for that person or individual. These attitudes he proposes are both emotional and intellectual and prepare us to respond to the conditions we

meet in living. Within this thesis, given the potential potency of early literacy experiences and the importance of literacy for later outcomes, early literacy experiences are viewed as contexts that may help us to respond to the conditions met in later school and life experiences.

Dewey (1997, p. 15)) also states that if an experience arouses curiosity, it strengthens initiative and setups desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry the person over dead places in the future.

Although Dewey does not elaborate on what he meant by dead places, he describes it in the context of the experiential continuum. Therefore, it can be surmised that he meant difficult times in a person's life whereby the experiences and initiative are not erased but are carried through life.

## 2.4 Narrative Lives

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe their approach to the narrative enquiry as consisting of a 3-dimensional space that comprises social and personal interaction of continuity, enveloping the past, present, and future, and finally, the situation, encompassing the physical place in which the participant describes. They describe their journey in creating this construct through similarities they uncovered between their work and that of Eisner, Powell, and Dewey. Through their research, they describe how they have come to understand that experience is narratively constructed and lived. They propose that narrative has both an artistic and aesthetic dimension (Clandinin & Huber, 2002. p. 169). In light of their model/approach, we can ask how the effect of adversity, such as poverty or violence in a life experience, might have an artistic quality. They describe how the

personal and social dimension points us inwards and outwards. They delineate those two constructs as inwards, about feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions, and as outwards, consisting of existential conditions (Clandinin & Huber, 2002, p. 163). There are similarities between their approach and phenomenology, specifically Husserl's writing on transcendental phenomenology.

A phenomenological approach describes a common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcendental or descriptive phenomenology is most associated with Husserl's writing and was rooted in post-modern philosophy. According to Farrell (2020, p. 2), the work of Descartes (1596–1650) would have influenced Husserl (1998), who describes a dualistic view of how human knowledge is created. He describes how the "inner" world of the mind or soul and the "outer" physical world with which it comes in contact is how human knowledge is created.

In returning to Clandinin and Huber's (2002) 3-dimensional space, it only becomes clear what they mean by artistic and aesthetic dimensions in an explanation of prior research. Clandinin and Huber describe the experiences of Darlene, an Inuit teacher. She was taken from her family at 2 years of age and fostered amongst several families with different ethnic backgrounds. In exploring her story narratively, they describe how Darleen drew inwards from her experience and how traversing through the temporality of her experience allowed her to tell and draw her story into the world with narrative coherence. This is something that they describe as having both an artistic and aesthetic dimension.

Dewey believed that art is present in the human experience and is a living process that humans experience where certain qualities of attentiveness and emotions are part of that engagement. He also described experiences and habits as being interpreted biologically as part of his concept of the experiential continuum. One could say that the human experience has artistic qualities and is not a construct unique to an object or what we might currently describe as a piece of art hanging on a wall or an installation in a gallery. Eisner and Powell (2002, p. 132, 133) describe how the concepts of art and science were separated long ago when Plato's (c.428-347 B.C.) teachings would have postulated that knowledge required the highest form of rationality and that the sensory experience could not influence this. The works of Galileo and Descartes further compounded this separation. This concept travelled through the centuries in many forms in the quest to define the conditions of knowledge to advance a conception of scientific rationality free from forms of feeling. This divergence has resulted in consequences not only in art and sciences but in the educational sphere of teaching and for Eisner and Powell in teaching science.

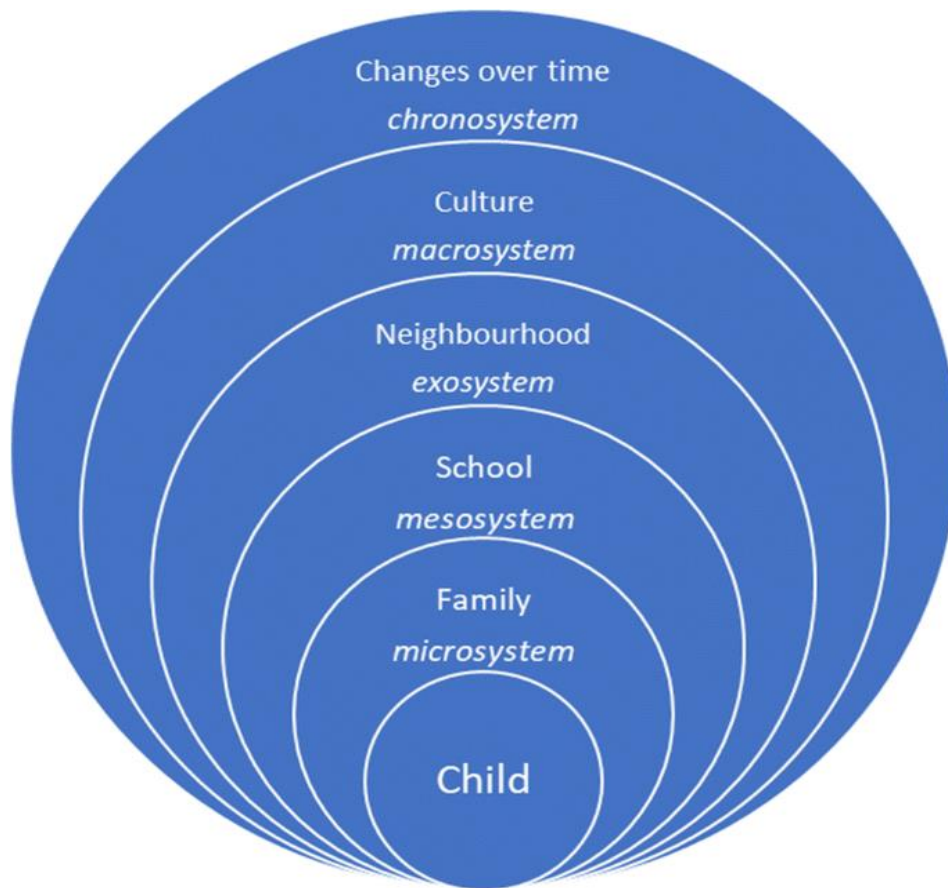
Just like Dewey exploring the art in life experiences, Eisner and Powell (2002) wanted to explore what science is as a form of human experience. They were taking Dewey's lead in exploring whether there are artistic features for scientists in the experience of 'doing' science. They hypothesise that the quality of the work created is related to the experience's quality, making possible the processes employed throughout the experience. They say if this can be understood, these processes can be effectively promoted, bringing a holistic view and converging the artistic and aesthetic modes of experience to teaching. This mirrors what this research explores: if we can understand the processes involved in early literacy experiences and establish the quality of those experiences analysed with this

conceptual framework, one might be able to link it to outcomes. What are the impacts of early literacy experiences on the schooling experience and subsequent life experiences, including literacy childrearing practices?

In their research, Eisner and Powell (2002) uncovered 5 features or themes of experience: imagination, somatic knowledge, empathic knowledge, nest building, and the sociocultural influences on motivation. These are significant in that these are important elements for growth and development and well-being. These themes emerged through the personal stories of their research participants, all crucial factors in how they engaged with their craft. Highlighting what we know about the learning process is as important an element as the product. Eisner and Powell do not mention Vygotsky, but these themes parallel what Bedrova and Leong (2007, p. 187) describe as 'tools of the mind.' This concept comes from Vygotsky, who believed that just as physical tools extend our physical abilities, mental tools extend our mental abilities, enabling us to solve problems and create solutions in the modern world. One could argue here that the features uncovered through their (Eisner and Powell's) research could indeed be tools or strategies that, possibly for their participants, have been embedded in early childhood that they return to intentionally and purposefully in their praxis as scientists, thus connecting with Dewey's concept of the experiential continuum.

## 2.5 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (1977, 1986, 1994) is seminal work that outlines the influence of the environments and the relationships that affect how the child develops within that environment. It also considers the bi-directional influence between the environments and how it impacts the child.



**Figure 3.**

*Bronfenbrenner's Biological Systems Theory*

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory is an important frame for this research study. His initial iteration of the ecological systems theory in the 70s focused on the context of the child's environment in order of importance (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). He presented it in concentric circles, with the microsystem being the environment with the most influence over the child's development, including parents, siblings, extended family, teachers and peers. Also acknowledged were the systems outlined in the model above: the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, all of which exert influence on the development of the child.

A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1645)

More importantly, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) published a comprehensive paper outlining and updating the previous model called *The Bioecological Model of Human Development*. This paper focused on a more complex analysis of what shapes development. They describe four principal components: process-person-context and time or the PPCT model. This was a significant elaboration on the original model and demonstrated Bronfenbrenner's commitment to pushing the boundaries of the theoretical evolution of his theory through constructive feedback from his peers and through recognising the influence of other theoretical perspectives. For example, he emphasised the contribution of Robert Cairns, a significant developmental psychology figure, and conceptualised the PPCT model.

The updated version emphasised the proximal processes or interactions within the immediate context of the child's environment. To develop—intellectually, emotionally, socially, and morally—a child requires participation in a progressively more complex reciprocal activity regularly over extended periods of time with one or more other persons with whom the child develops an intense, mutual, irrational attachment and who are committed to that child's development, preferably for life (Bronfenbrenner, 1989c, p. 5). He also placed

significant emphasis on not only human interaction but that on objects and symbols in the immediate environment. This supposition is interesting as this research explores objects like books and their role in early literacy experience. When exploring the notion of symbols Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p.815) posit the question as to what extent solitary activities involving objects and symbols—such as playing with toys, working at hobbies, reading, or fantasy play—can also foster psychological development. And to what degree does involvement in both objects and symbols produce synergistic developmental effects in each domain? Again, this question also fits well within this research context in that it explores the connection between early literacy experience, including books, and the potential for positive developmental outcomes over the life course.

Also, in their further elaboration of the bioecological systems theory, they posit that when engaging in solo activities with objects and symbols, a person's 'own disposition and resources play a far stronger role in affecting the direction and power of the proximal process than in the case of interpersonal interaction' (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 814). It is important to note that in the context of resources, they allude to ability, knowledge and skill that evolves, they say, over the life course.

Another significant aspect also acknowledged by Bronfenbrenner and Morris is that of attachment. This is outlined in more detail in the next section; however, for the bioecological systems theory, it is acknowledged that the creation and upkeep of repetitive patterns of progressively more complex interactions and emotional attachment between caregiver and child depend to a substantial degree on the availability and active involvement of another adult who assists,



encourages, spells off, gives status to, and expresses admiration and affection for the person caring for and engaging in joint activity with the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1989c, p. 11, in Bronfenbrenner & Morris, p. 816). They also acknowledge that a child seeks, responds and interprets events based on the experiences modelled in early infancy. This model is repeated and adapted depending on the environment. Where a child has their needs met within the home environment, this is their expectation when they move out beyond that environment. For example, when they move on to school, they expect to have their needs met by the teachers. Conversely, if the child does not have their needs met by their primary caregiver, they may exhibit more negative behaviours.

Concerning context, this dimension of the theory is related to the characteristics of the environment in the microsystem of the child and beyond. That is the Meso-, Macro-, Exo- and Chronosystems. Bronfenbrenner had given much attention to the context in previous iterations of the theory, outlining the bidirectional experiences within these environments as crucial in shaping development. However, in this version, more emphasis is placed on the Macrosystem.

The Macrosystem is cited as different from the other levels of context, including institutional systems of a culture or a subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems (1976, 1978, in Rosa & Trudge, 2013).

Bronfenbrenner (1989, p. 231) proposes that to the extent that it is practically possible, every study of development in context should include a contrast between at least two macrosystems. It could be argued that this creates a more comprehensive picture of development and support his concept of bidirectional influences across contexts, thus yielding richer data.

The last piece of the PPCT model outlines the role of time in the theory.

Bronfenbrenner (1998) had previously added the chronosystem into his theory to represent experiences and events that happened over time, such as sibling birth, going to school, or indeed experiencing illness or separation (Rosa & Tudge, 2013, p. 250). The importance of these events or experiences is that they create a dynamic that may alter or influence developmental outcomes by altering the relationship between the person and their environment. Interestingly Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p. 821) acknowledge the change in parenting practices over time and its impact on development. In this iteration, they moved beyond experiences over time, looked at them over the life course, and included the historical and developmental contexts. Thus, Bronfenbrenner acknowledges the work of G. H Elder, who proposes the life course theory. Although according to Elder (1998, p. 1), individual lives are influenced by their ever-changing historical context, the study of human lives calls for new ways of thinking about their pattern and dynamics, and concepts of human development should apply to processes across the life span. He also acknowledges through his work and encourages other researchers to consider a world in which lives are lived and where people work out development paths as best they can. It tells us how lives are socially organized in bio-logical and historical times and how the resulting social patterns affect how we think, feel, and act.

Four principles underpin the life course theory:

1. Historical time and place; a person's life trajectory is embedded and shaped by their history and events that happen over a lifetime.
2. Timing in lives; the effect of life transitions and their impact depends on the timing of those transitions on development.

3. Linked lives; there is an interdependent nature to the social and historical happenings within life contexts that are shared within the milieu of the relationships with others.
4. Human Agency; individuals construct their life's trajectory through their choices and actions when opportunities arise and within the constraints of history and social circumstances.

This influence is seen in the eco-biological systems theory, where Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p. 822) added a fifth principle, which they say reverses the direction of his first principle. Although this statement can be argued as ambiguous in that it does not necessarily mean it's reversed but broadened to include their contribution to history. It asserts that changes over time in the bioecological model's four defining properties (PPCT) are both products and producers of historical change. This is more evidence of Bronfenbrenner's theory of the bidirectional influences of the systems on development in that they impact not only the person but the person, which can shape their history.

The degree of stability, consistency, and predictability over time in any element of the systems constituting the ecology of human development is critical for the effective operation of the system in question. Conversely, extremes of disorganization or rigidity in structure or function represent danger signs for potential psychological growth, with some intermediate degree of system flexibility constituting the optimal condition for human development.

(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)

## 2.6 The Impact of Early Experiences on Later Life and the Importance of Relationships

In recent years, much literature has been on the importance of early childhood experiences (Bassok et al., 2016; Beckmann, 2017; Lehl et al., 2020; Shonkoff, 2010) and its relationship to the existing literature on child development. Early childhood experiences shape us and our ability to learn and, in doing so, shape the narrative of each child's learning trajectory. Early childhood experience is considered the basis on which all subsequent experiences are built.

Early childhood is one of the most critical times in life (along with pre and perinatal periods) (National Scientific Council for the Developing Child, 2020; Fleming et al., 1999; Sylva, Melhuish et al., 2010). Early childhood is a time when the foundational structures for life trajectories are laid. Early experiences are incredibly complex and shape our brains' form and function. According to Lally & Magione (2017) (citing Shonkoff & Philips, 2000), babies have a built-in expectation that adults will be available and care for their needs even before birth. They outline Gopnik's work (2016), highlighting that the first three years of life are a period of 'prolonged helplessness' where infants depend on others for safety, survival, and socialisation. This other for most infants is a parent or parents.

Attachment theory provides an essential frame for understanding the importance of others and relationships in early childhood. Bowlby's (1973) view of attachment is interpreted as part of a group of behavioural systems that maintain a relatively steady state between an individual and their environment

(Bretherton, 1985, p. 7). Primarily this evolutionary function is to protect the infant from danger. His experience of being sent to boarding school at a young age drove Bowlby's work on attachment. Mary Ainsworth, a developmental psychologist, is probably most famous for developing the strange situation experiment (In Schaffer, 1971). Ainsworth built upon the work of Bowlby and outlined attachment styles between mothers and their infants. She also developed the so-called secure base phenomenon and security-seeking (seeking proximity, contact, and protection/ comfort) behaviours. This proposed that the need to have the mother nearby lessened when an infant was securely attached. However, when the infant experienced danger or was upset by something in some way, they would look to draw the mother into close proximity. The mother's availability to be responsive in these situations creates that secure base (Bretherton, 1985, p. 11). The absence of a secure base, or the mother's responsiveness chaotic and inconsistent, can create disruptions in the child's life that can have far-reaching consequences.

These early experiences and interactions with an attuned caregiver ensure that we give children a solid start in life. Trevarthen and Aitken (2001, p. 3) describe this process as purposeful intersubjectivity. Infants are specifically motivated, beyond instinctive behaviours that attract parental care for immediate biological needs, to communicate intricately with other humans' expressive forms and rhythms of interest and feeling. These intersubjective experiences through attuned caregiving reinforce that secure attachment (Bowlby, 1958; Ainsworth, 1969) and create the secure base on which all subsequent learning depends.

From the outset, we are conditioned to care for and nurture the infant and encourage mid-line development of the arms, hands, legs, and feet in how we

swaddle, hold and feed our infants. However, suppose the infant is upset, as demonstrated by a shrill cry and flailing arms and legs. In that case, our immediate response is to attend to the infants by picking them up, providing a safe, secure cuddle to establish what the infant needs and attend to those needs (Stern & Loyd, 2004; Reddy, 2003; Trevarthen, 2010).

The incredible growth the child's brain undergoes in the first few years of life is well documented (Tierney & Nelson, 2009; Fleming et al., 1999). Indeed, what precedes this in the pre and perinatal period has also been highlighted as a determining factor in later outcomes ((Bakken et al., 2016; Kang et al., 2011; Pletikos et al., 2014). The fundamental structure of the brain is achieved during the first six months of foetal life and is significantly influenced by genetics (Vasung et al., 2019). However, in the last trimester, the influence of environmental factors becomes more significant. Factors such as maternal stress and nutrient and toxin exposure all impact the developing infant's brain in the last trimester of pregnancy. This is significant in that if an infant has an adverse in-utero experience such as prematurity or is born into low socio-economic status, this can have lifelong effects on brain health (Nelson et al., 2007; Raznahan et al., 2012).

However, the brain is not fixed in its development but fluid, plastic, and ever-evolving within the construct of each human experience. Indeed, it's this plasticity or adaptability that Shonkoff and Philips (2000) wrote about in their seminal publication "From Neurons to Neighbourhoods". Here, they describe "the considerable degree of developmental plasticity that characterises an immature organism is embodied in the capacity of its cells to adapt in particular ways, in both the short and the long run, to changing demands. In the first year,

the human brain doubles in size and, by the third 3 year, grows to roughly 80% of its overall growth”.

Shonkoff and Philip's study explores concepts as relevant today as 20 years ago and underpinned by 10 core concepts or principles as outlined below.

- A dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience shapes human development.
- Culture influences every aspect of human development and is reflected in child-rearing beliefs and practices designed to promote healthy adaptation
- The growth of self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development that cuts across all behaviour domains.
- Children actively participate in their development, reflecting the innate human drive to explore and master one’s environment.
- Human relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy development.
- The broad range of individual differences among young children often makes distinguishing normal variations and maturational delays from transient disorders and persistent impairments difficult.
- The development of children unfolds along individual pathways whose trajectories are characterised by continuities and discontinuities and by a series of significant transitions.
- The ongoing interplay shapes human development among sources of vulnerability and sources of resilience.

- The timing of early experiences can matter, but, more often than not, the developing child remains vulnerable to risks and open to protective influences throughout the early years of life and into adulthood.
- The course of development can be altered in early childhood by effective interventions that change the balance between risk and protection, thereby shifting the odds in favour of more adaptive outcomes.

## 2.7 The Role of Early literacy experience

In asking what literacy is, Keefe and Copeland (2011) suggest that although appearing like a deceptively simple question, it is, in fact, a question that is actually very complex. According to the National Strategy (National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life, 2017, p. 12), literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication, including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media and digital media.

NALA's (2019) definition of literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions.

However, these definitions presume that the skills are already in situ. From an early childhood perspective, Kennedy and colleagues (2012) cite Alexander (1997, 2006) in saying that the development of literacy occurs across the lifespan of the individual from 'womb to tomb' (Alexander, 1997, 2006, p. 432). Emergent literacy they further define by quoting the National Curriculum framework (2009, p. 54) as 'children developing a growing understanding of print and language as a



foundation for reading and writing. Through play and hands-on experience, children see and interact with print as they build an awareness of its functions and conventions’.

Many studies outlined the importance of access to books and shared reading experiences as critical indicators of early language and emergent literacy skills (Bus et al., 1995; Harte & Risley, 1995; Neuman, 1996; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994; Burgess, 2009; Murray & Harrison, 2011; Leech & McNally et al., 2022).

Much research examines the relationship between social, educational, and economic inequalities and how that impacts child outcomes (GUI, 2006; Harding et al., 2015; Carneiro et al., 2011; Heeran Flynn, 2017; McNally et al., 2019). There has been a strong focus in the last 20 years on outcomes related to language and literacy scores (PISA, 2000; PIRLS, 2011). However, according to Tobin (2018), the census has long given data on the literacy status of the nation. She describes data in the census identifying the link between rising education levels and literacy levels as far back as 1911. This thesis does not have the scope to explore the historical origins of reading to young children within the home. Still, it could be argued that this might be explained by the focus on education and economic growth; entry into the European Union also marked a shift into using data to inform economic and social policy (Kennedy, 2013). The last decade has seen a significant shift with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy policy and practice.

For example, 1999 saw the revision of the National Primary School Curriculum, with the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), established in 2005 and the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework *Aistear* in 2009. The latter saw the introduction of a universal preschool programme with a focus, among other

skills, on emergent literacy and numeracy skills of 3 to 5-year-olds. Subsequently, the first national strategy was launched to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People from 2011-2020.

Returning to the publication of the National Early Childhood Curriculum Aistear in 2009, this framework emphasised the role of parents in their children's lives.

Parents are the most important people in children's lives. Children's care and education from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influence their overall development. Extended family and community also have important roles to play. (Aistear, 2009, p. 9)

It has been acknowledged for many decades in the formal education system the significant role parents play in their children's education. For example, Mac Giolla Phádraig (2010, p. 73) cites that from as early as the 1960s, there emerged a significant degree of consensus among educational researchers that children's academic achievement and general development are positively influenced by the extent to which their parents are involved in their education (Douglas, 1964; Greaney, 1988; Kellaghan, 1977a; Kellaghan et al., 1993; Rutter et al., 1979). This more recent acknowledgement through policy and practice documents has placed centre stage on the importance of the role of the parent and is evident from birth and not just when entering formal education.

From a data perspective, the commencement of the Growing Up in Ireland Study demonstrated what was happening in the lives of young children. This is the national longitudinal study of children and youth in Ireland. It started in 2006 and

followed two cohorts of children aged 9 years (Cohort '98, formerly referred to as the Child Cohort) and 9 months (Cohort '08, formerly referred to as the Infant Cohort (Growingup.ie 2022)). For the first time, we had an insight into the lives of young children, and we had significant data on several domains, as outlined

- Characteristics of Children and their Families
- Pregnancy and Birth
- Infant Health
- Infant Routines and Developmental Status
- Childcare
- Parenting and Support
- Mother's Employment Status and Neighbourhood Environment

Through the longitudinal nature of the study, data included significant findings on early literacy practices within the home with young children. Practices include reading with young children, how many books are in a home, and engagement in play activities (Williams, Murray, Mc Crory & Mc Nally, 2013). These children were tracked, and data were recorded at ages 3, 5, 7/8, 9 and 13. For example, at age 3, lower vocabulary scores were associated with lower levels of maternal educational attainment (Leaving Certificate or less) and household income in the bottom two quintiles (McNally, McCrory, Quigley & Murray, 2019). Another measure utilised was that of the number of books in the home. There was a clear association between the number of books in the home and vocabulary scores; there was a significant negative effect of having fewer than 30 children's books in the home and a marked effect in homes with fewer than 10 (Williams et al., 2013). Another interesting finding was that contact with grandparents positively affected the home learning environment (Williams et al., 2013, 57), highlighting

the role of caregivers other than parents in the early experiences of young children in Ireland.

With this data, we see a substantial shift in our understanding of how early literacy experiences in the home shape and influence child outcomes in concert with other family characteristics. It could also be said that social media access to such materials might positively influence parental practices. Dickenson and McCabe (2001, 187) highlight that early literacy draws upon multiple inter-related developmental areas, including oral language, phonological awareness, knowledge of the graphic features of print (e.g., letter shapes, organisation on the page), understanding of how sounds map onto print, and a sense of the varied uses of print (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

More importantly, the research highlights essential home life characteristics contributing to oral language and literacy. For example, book reading between adults and children and related literacy activities such as taking trips to the library are important parental literacy supports at home (Dickenson and McCabe, 2001). Parental modelling is another element influencing positive literacy skills; in particular, maternal modelling has been linked to positive outcomes (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, Pellegrini, 1995; Jiménez-Pérez, Barrientos-Báez, Caldevilla-Domínguez, & Gómez-Galán (2020).

Bus et al. (1995) highlight that the interest in parents' book reading appears to be particularly inspired by the assumption that reading stimulates a literate orientation (Holdaway, 1979; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). They propose that without parental support, books are only partly accessible to young children who are not yet conventional readers (1995,16). So, with this assumption that parents' interest in reading is insufficient, parental engagement with their children's

reading practice is required for more successful engagement with books. Also, Gottfried, Schlackman, Gottfried & Boutin-Martinez's (2015, 30) longitudinal study confirms that the specific experience of being read to during the early years has long-term educational benefits that traverse the academic lifespan. They also found that mothers' educational attainment had a statistically significant and highly similar positive effect on reading time and materials. So those mothers were likely to spend extended amounts of time reading various high-quality materials with their children. Therefore, they hypothesised that parents who read to their children as early as infancy may launch a foundation for continuously cultivating experiences that foster and support reading achievement, intrinsic motivation, and post-secondary educational attainment. This is exciting from a research perspective, highlighting the importance of reading in early infancy and childhood.

*The findings of this extensive longitudinal investigation reveal that reading achievement, enjoyment of reading and adult educational attainment have roots as early as infancy, in the home when parents turn the first page of a book with their young children.*

(Gottfried, Schlackman, Gottfried & Boutin-Martinez 2015, p. 33)

## 2.8 The Historical Context of Education for Women

The Teaching Council of Ireland (2016) states that education systems are shaped by the historical influences of society's politics, culture, religion, and economic and social forces. This research explores the experiences of schooling in both

primary and secondary school. This next section briefly explores the historical context and how it was shaped.

Quilty, McCauliffe, and Barry (2016, pg30) describe the historical complexities of women's education as evolving through the catholic church's grip and operating within systems of privilege. It exercised Power through exclusion, coercion, and control. It was not until the Education Act of 1892 that education became mandatory. Women's education was tailored to their expected societal roles focused on domestic service.

There was significant emphasis on education during this period, as evidenced in the following figures from as far back as 1853 when 1,106 national schools with 107,042 pupils enrolled. This expanded to 8,648 schools, with over half a million children enrolled by 1900 (Coolihan, 1981). According to Houses of the Oireachtas (2020), there are currently 3,962 primary and post-primary schools with over 930,833 children enrolled (DES, 2020). This was a time when the church wielded Power over the nation in its political culture, social culture and economy. Quilty et al. (2016) cite Freier and Hook in that education is not a neutral process; it can be used to establish and maintain conformity or be part of a process of liberation and social change. This conformity of education and the church had a stranglehold on maintaining a homogeneity that was not favourable to women stifling freedom and social equality.

Quilty et al. (2016) acknowledge that current contexts have been hard-fought to recalibrate access to education, battled through the central role of women, and countless communities and development projects, in advancing a more radical, equal, and inclusive society. With this endeavour through organisations such as An Cosan, NALA and Women 4 Women, liberation through education creates the

contexts for social change a reality for these women. However, there remains an actuality that there continue to be sections of society with an educational experience that is not sensitive to their contexts or needs. As a result, they fall by the wayside.

The Evolution of Education policy and practice and its impact on the schooling experience, one would imagine that this would positively affect and influence shaping a level playing field for each child's education within the state.

Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case. As we traverse the historical contexts of education, one can see what Gouldner (1970), as cited by Lynch and Creen (2018 p. 2), describes as the influence of educated people at any given time in history are bound by domain and paradigmatic assumptions that are shaped by their biography, professional interest academic background and experiences. One would argue that our values and assumptions are the fulcra that drive many professional and personal decisions, not just in education but also in all socio-political domains.

This influence on education is evident in Walsh (2016): he cites five distinct eras' in the evolution of education in Ireland. It established the national school system in 1831 through payment by results right through to the present. Each era is affected by the political, social, economic and religious factors of its time, which will continue to be the case. However, each era has many commonalities, one focusing on literacy and literacy ability. The strength of this focus on literacy waxes and wanes between eras, but it remains a focal point for indicators and measurement of outcomes that form, inform and shape policy and practice.

From the noughties onwards, Cahill (2020, p. 3) cites Lynch (2006) and O'Sullivan (2005) in saying that in the last 30 years, Ireland has experienced such a shift

from a primarily theocentric experience of educational practice (as outlined by Walsh) to a more overtly marketized and product-driven iteration of policy and enactment. He argues that the state encourages a culture of competition, which has taken a central role in educational practice at individual, institutional, and state levels in 21st-century Ireland. Although his paper focuses on the impact of neoliberalism on policy relating to social inequality in the education system and how it is widening the gap of inequality in Irish society, it highlights elements that are relevant to this research in that the sample came from those from women that could be considered lower socio-economic status. He says that more nuanced socio-political ideas work to maintain the educational inequality that exists, such as the substantial impact of neoliberal choice policies on schools in communities experiencing poverty and academic marginalisation. However, in exploring what it is that neoliberal policies are and what it means to those looking from the outside in, Power, Flynn, Curtois, and Kennedy (2013) outline the shift in government policy engagement with transnational organisations and direct foreign investment as a turning point in an arguably already existing free market within the education system. It must also be considered that the country's economic state also plays a significant role within the contexts of revenue and the state's ability to invest and pay for its citizens' education. One could argue that the denigration of indigenous enterprises in manufacturing after Ireland entered the EU and the subsequent focus on attracting transnational and foreign investment across the last three decades can have some tangible link to the increase in those finishing their education to leaving certificate level and beyond. One would also argue that the prosperity that emerged in the economy during this time allowed those with second-level education to enter jobs that they may not acquire today. However, the prosperity of this possible working-class



generation allowed their mobility in social status to emerge into the middle class. It allowed that generation to supplement their education with extracurricular activities and additional tutoring to ensure their success within their peer group. Returning to Power et al. (2013), the construction boom and the deregulation in the noughties brought about by the government of the time allowed an enormous amount of wealth to be accumulated by a small minority.

What does this statement mean in the context of the students' lived experience engaged in education? Do these decisions at a macro and chronological level have a role to play at a micro level and perhaps permeate and infuse the lived experience of students, teachers, and families? If this is the case, then what are the consequences? For example, Byrne and Smyth (2009) found in their mixed-methods longitudinal study of predominantly working-class students that the push of negative experiences led to their decision to leave school early. Eivers et al. (2000) also cite students' experiences as a significant predictor of early school leaving.

There have been significant strides in casting a wider net of support to encourage participation in post-primary education in Ireland. This is evidenced by the Department of Education and Skills (2017) citing data on those not completing their education in 2008 at 16.8% to a current rate of 4% (CSO, 2020).

However, despite these figures seeming encouraging, Cahill (2020, p. 3) describes that there are still stark and stubborn inequalities regarding opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students from underserved social groups. There is strong evidence that educational disparities are intrinsically linked to, and caused by, structural economic inequalities between people (Lynch & Moran, 2006; O'Connor & Staunton, 2015). One could hypothesise that all students are

afforded an opportunity for an education. Yet, the student's experience of that opportunity can be impacted on so many micro and meso levels that the outcomes are not always optimal.

Cahill (2020) links the availability of resources playing a significant part in opportunities for accessing, participating in, and benefiting from education. In light of what we know about the significance of early childhood experiences, it is essential to look at structural inequality long before opportunities arise for formal education. Lynch and Crean (2018, p. 2) identified that equality of opportunity “needs to be underpinned by the principle of equality of condition, especially equality of economic condition”.

Cahill (2020) furthers his critique of the neoliberal policy implications in the Irish schooling system that further exacerbate the stratification, segregation, and distinction amongst schools that may have more profound negative impacts on society. Perhaps the most significant of these are early school leaving and the array of social, personal economic and cultural implications that can persist not only for a lifetime for that individual but also for generations to come. This is undoubtedly reflected in the multitude of studies exploring that phenomenon, such as Levin (2009) and Smyth and Mc Coy (2009) and Layte et al. (2007).

Ireland has made significant strides in the last number of decades concerning education, and one could say that from a statistical perspective, an enviable position to be in. According to the OECD (2019) and CSO (2020), we have one of the highest educated populations, with 55% of 25-34-year olds achieving a tertiary level qualification and 60% being women. Furthermore, concerning early school leaving specifically, Ireland has managed to get its early school leaving rate

down from 9.7% in 2012 to 6.9% in 2015; currently, it is approximately 4% (CSO, 2020).

## 2.9 Indicators for and Implications of Leaving School Early

Educational disadvantage is described in the Education Act 1998 as the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantages which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefits from education in schools.

Current statistics show that in Ireland (CSO, 2022), 97% of females have a leaving certificate qualification, with 65% going on to achieve a third-level qualification. However, there remains the 3% who do not, for whatever reason, do not complete their education to Leaving Certificate level.

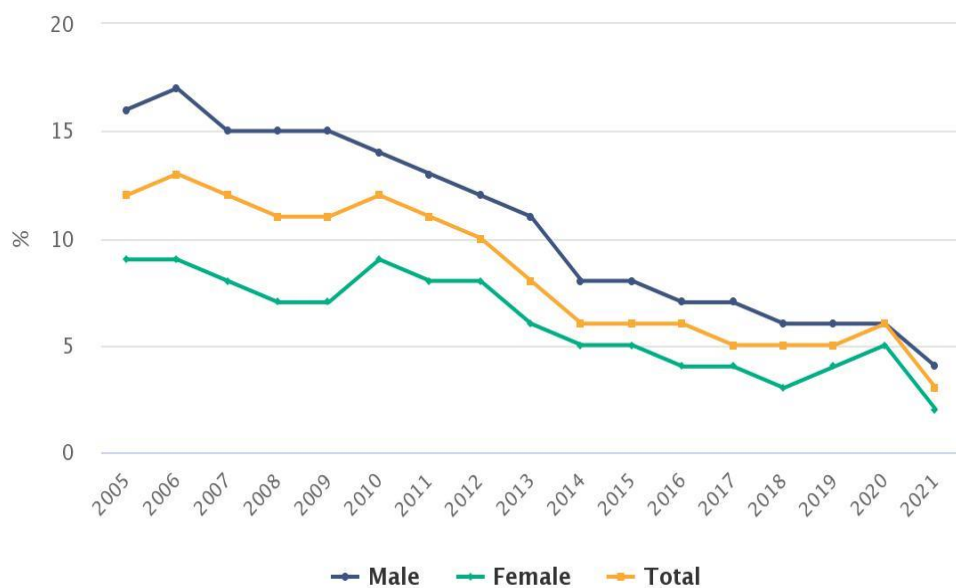
From a bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) stance, a well-educated mother would appear to be better placed from a societal and economic perspective to support her children's education and development. The historical context of the chronosystem has placed greater emphasis on education and its importance.

Thus, according to the OECD (2016), educational attainment refers to the highest grade completed within the most advanced level attended in the country's educational system where the education was received. Connelly, Gayle, and Lambert (2016, p. 1) say, 'Education is a powerful explanatory factor influencing several economic phenomena, most notably both participation and success in the labour market.' UNESCO describe educational attainment as the highest level of education an individual has completed. Tracking educational attainment levels over time provides unique insights into the benefits that can arise from

education—these range from the earning potential of individuals to the economic growth and well-being of societies at large. High educational attainment is also associated with better health (Aizer & Currie, 2014), increased civic engagement (Campbell, 2006), and decreased violence and crime (Hjalmarsson & Lochner, 2012).

The most recent statistics from the CSO (2021), this educational attainment thematic report gives a breakdown of educational attainment from 15 to 64 years.

Figure 3.4 Early school leavers as a percentage of persons aged 18–24, classified by sex, Q2 2005 – Q2 2021



Source: CSO Ireland

**Figure 4.**

*Percentage of Early School Leavers According to Age and Gender*

Year after year, up until 2018, there has been a drop in girls leaving school early. However, in 2019 and 2020, there was one percentile increase each year, dropping to pre-pandemic levels in 2021 of 3% of women leaving education early.

However, the educational gap in literacy outcomes for children who do not reach their fullest potential starts early. Most of the literature concerning early school leaving delves into literacy: the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world (National Literacy Trust, 2020). As outlined above, learning to read opens up opportunities to be a social being and to participate in communities, in school, and to learn and participate in everyday life. To have a literate society is one of the essential abilities citizens can acquire. This basis for learning underpins the ability to learn over a lifetime. Furthermore, it is a vital determinant of economic, emotional, and educational trajectory and the ability to dynamically and fully participate in broader society.

The scale of literacy difficulties in Ireland is outlined by O'Donnell and McPhillips (2018, p. 4) and the ESRI (Weir & Kavanagh, 2018), the latter noting a gap in achievement between those children in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage (DEIS Band 1 in particular), and other schools has persisted and must be addressed. Students in DEIS schools have an average reading literacy lower than non-DEIS schools. Also, reading for enjoyment was significantly less frequent among these students. According to Sullivan and Brown (2013), reading for pleasure is more important for children's cognitive development between ages 10 and 16 than their parent's level of education.

Children scoring in the lowest quintile for reading at age nine (GUI Summary Report, 2019) are likelier to leave school early. This poses enormous social challenges as low literacy attainment impacts lifelong learning and has implications concerning social cohesion and active citizenship. In addition, poor literacy levels and early school leaving increase the likelihood of unemployment

and dependence on the state. An ESRI report (2018) includes evidence that while the gap remains at the lower end of the reading scale, there is an equal lack of progression at the upper end, with Ireland performing below the OECD average.

Differences in educational attainment emerge early in life. For example, a significant gap in children's vocabulary at 36 months by levels of maternal education has been reported whereby children whose mothers had low levels of education had significantly fewer words than children of higher educated mothers by the age of three (McNally et al., 2019). Even after controlling for a range of other important factors, children whose mothers had very low levels of education still scored significantly worse in terms of vocabulary than children of mothers with the highest levels of education. This finding is particularly relevant for the current study as it highlights the importance of education in and of itself for mothers and the importance of supporting mothers' education as a pivotal way to impact children's literacy development.

Literacy outcomes are also related to family income and, thus, poverty. Hourly wages are strongly associated with reading proficiency. The median hourly wage of workers with high scores (level 4 or 5) in literacy is 94% higher than that of workers with a low score at or below level 1. In addition, the best-paid workers (at the 75th percentile) with a high literacy score earn more than twice as much as the best-paid workers with low literacy skills (Carneiro, 2013). The current pandemic has placed increasing strain on the economy, which could see child poverty rates rising as high as 23 per cent, a one-third increase relative to the start of 2020 (ESRI, 2020). This highlights the need for the achievement gap to be narrowed to allow all children to realise their full potential. There is a gap in the literature exploring very early literacy experiences of women and their potential

impact on their educational experience and subsequent life trajectories, including childrearing practices and returning to education.

These core skills are fundamental to increasing the likelihood of children at least completing their second-level education (Oireachtas, 2019). Education is the key economic and social success driver for individuals, employers, and nations (OECD, 2006). Lower educational attainment also influences an individual's social and economic position and ability to participate as active citizens; conversely, higher educational attainment can lead to substantive positive effects on individuals and society, such as better employment, higher salaries, mobility, better health, less crime, higher social cohesion, active citizenship, and lower public and social cost (Flynn, 2017).

Harding, Morris, and Hughes (2015), in exploring a theoretical framework to assess the relationship between maternal education and children's academic outcomes, describe how multiple potential mechanisms explain this relationship; however, they outline that they are underexplored. They declare that much research typically exploring maternal education centres on the language used within the dyad of mother and child. They also postulate that just because there are positive associations between high levels of maternal education on their children's academic achievement, it does not imply maternal education is the cause.

They integrate theories of human, cultural, and social capital with two developmental psychology theories to try and explain the relationship between them all; they utilise developmental niche theory (Super & Harkness, 1994) and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and they propose that this draws attention to how maternal education may influence children's academic

outcomes through various parenting mechanisms and networks of available support, some of which have been largely neglected in research.

The developmental niche theory is proposed by Super and Harkness (1986). This theory is rooted in psychology and anthropology. They describe a mechanism involved in the cultural regulation of child development. This, they say, comprises three elements;

- the physical and social environment in which the child lives
- customs of childcare and child-rearing
- psychology of caretakers

The bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) outlined earlier consists of the influence of the environments and the relationships that affect how the child develops within that environment. It also considers the bidirectional influence between the environments and how it impacts the child. In this context, the research looks beyond the dualistic nature of the mother-child dyad in the micro-system but also explores the role of social human and cultural capital in the meso and exosystem.

Harding et al. (2015) elaborate on three forms of capital mothers derive through education. Human, social and cultural capital, they propose equips mothers with proximal and distal parenting practices linked to each form of capital.

Human capital is said to be where skills and knowledge contribute to capabilities that make that person more productive; according to Schultz (1961, p. 1), this is a deliberate endeavour. Harding et al. (2015) propose that completing education is the most formal way of developing skills and knowledge and, therefore, the confluence between educational attainment and human capital. Heckman and



Mosso (2014, p. 56) concur with this hypothesis that maternal knowledge is a critical factor in explaining the number of activities in which their children are involved. In other words, through their education, maternal human capital is more likely to have more knowledge surrounding parenting practices that enrich their child's abilities. They cite Lareau's (2011) work outlining parental follow-up engagement after activity to find out what their child has learned is more likely to happen in more advantaged homes. Also, interestingly families from a middle-class background are more likely to intervene on their child's behalf. Working-class and low-income families generally allow the school to guide their child's educational decisions. Social capital, they say, is different from human capital in that a mother's human capital draws on the mother's educational experience and how she interacts with her children.

In contrast, social capital is the interaction between the mother, her social network, and her children within that context. Heckman and Mosso (2014) cite Laureau and Cox's (2011) work in this context and say that those with higher educational and professional qualifications are more likely to have social networks inside and outside the family dynamic. Conversely, those with less well-off backgrounds have social networks that tend to stay within the realm of family.

Cultural capital is what Lareau, 2011 describes as a set of preferences and behaviours that are not necessarily better than another but are valued in contexts beyond the home and likely to lead to success. Harding et al. describe Bourdieu's (1986) articulation of cultural capital as elitist or classist in that schools and institutions value privilege. They also elaborate on what they describe as educational gatekeepers as recognising and valuing individuals who prefer high culture activities and display high linguistic and behavioural ability levels. So,

suppose you have access to materials and experiences outside the home, a good vocabulary and can behave yourself. In that case, you are more likely to be accepted and succeed within that environment.

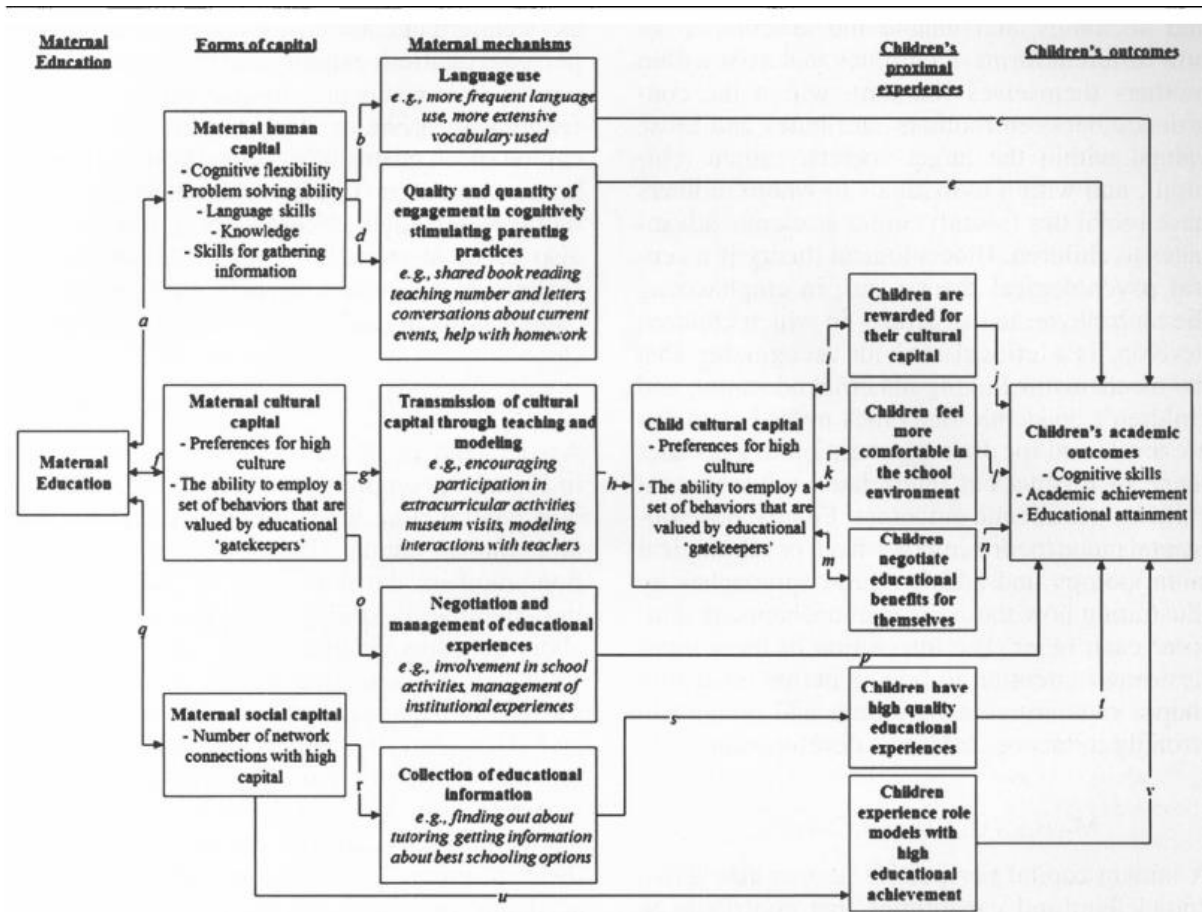


Figure 5.

*Theoretical Model of Mechanisms of the Influence of Maternal Education on Children's Academic Outcomes.*

Within this model, Harding et al. (2015) outline that it is not one particular factor influencing child outcomes, but many factors are coming together.

## 2.10 Conclusion

This research was instigated on foot of perceived inequality in how mothers with lower educational attainment are positioned in research. However, as previously discussed, the research (e.g. McNally et al., 2019) does indicate poorer cognitive outcomes for children whose mothers have left school early (i.e. before the Leaving Cert). Yet the vast amount of studies linking educational attainment to children's outcomes does not provide a complete picture of what early school leavers experience and how the experience might relate to later life experiences and subsequent parenting practices. Qualitative data on the lived experiences of early school leavers is no in its absence in literature exploring early school leaving. In particular, literature asking women about their literacy experiences, likely to impact their parenting behaviours with young children substantially, is under-explored.

The research questions underpinning the study and arising from the literature are, therefore:

- What were their earliest literacy experiences of early school-leaving women?
- Did these experiences impact their schooling experiences more widely?
- Did these experiences affect their life experiences?
- Did these experiences affect their child-rearing practice if they went on to have children?

Overall, the key aim of this study is to give voice to women who left school early and explore the role of early literacy experiences in their lives, both currently in

their parenting practices and in their past school experiences. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute essential and rich data on the experiences of women with lower educational attainment, who are often highlighted in quantitative studies as more likely to experience adverse outcomes. Thus, this study aims to provide previously missing data on early school leaving mothers to more richly inform our understanding of the role of literacy and school experiences for this group of women.

The research question underpinning the study establishes the relationship between the early literacy experiences of my participants and the relationship between their schooling experience, leaving school early, and subsequent life experiences, including early literacy childrearing practices in the home.

This research explores a link between early literacy experiences, recounting memories or values established in early childhood literacy experiences, and whether they have the potential to impact later life experiences.

We know that early and emergent literacy experiences are essential indicators of language development and subsequent emergent reading skills; therefore, several questions arise from existing literature in that;

- do these experiences influence women's school experience, or do other phenomena affect the schooling experience and early school leaving?
- Do those early literacy experiences manifest themselves in later life?
- and do they have the potential to impact subsequent early literacy practices with their children?

### 3 Methodology: Introduction

This section aims to describe the methodology used in my research and show how and why they were applied to demonstrate the rigour of the data collection and analysis processes.

This study examines the relationship between the early literacy experiences of participants and schooling experience, early school leaving, and subsequent life experiences, including early literacy childrearing practices in the home. The research, therefore, focuses on exploring early literacy experiences in-depth, including recounting memories and views of literacy established in early childhood experiences. Given the established links between early literacy experiences and later literacy and language skill development, this study explores these early experiences. It examines how early school leavers view these experiences in light of later school and life experiences. Because personal history and experiences are at the heart of this study, a narrative methodology was adopted and is outlined in detail in this chapter. This approach was adopted as the most appropriate to help answer three key research questions:

- (1) What are the early literacy experiences of early school-leaving women?
- (2) Do these experiences influence mothers' school experience, particularly their early school leaving?
- (3) Do early school-leaving mothers view those early literacy experiences as impacting or shaping their literacy practices with their young children?

### 3.1 Methodological Considerations and Impact of Covid 19

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic substantially impacted research students and researchers globally. For my research, the impact was particularly substantial around the methodology and data collection, and similarly to others, the public health restrictions to reduce the spread of the virus had significant implications for the research. I initially intended to use a grounded theory methodological approach and to collect several iterations of data with participants. However, this approach was not possible as the restrictions imposed on movement prevented meeting with people in person in a planned way: it was not possible to anticipate when we could meet in person to discuss personal histories, for example.

The ability to connect with research participants and collect data in a timely fashion was thus severely interrupted. This resulted in a hybrid approach to collecting the data from face-to-face interviews when permitted to online and phone interviews.

I initially selected grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Charmaz, 2014) to tell the participants' stories and their impact on their lives. These stories needed to be told with an unbiased lens to be accurate and authentic. A constructed grounded theory approach could honour the stories and experiences of the sample group in that this approach is grounded in the data, the data being the experiences. In recognizing the multi-faceted nature of human experiences and establishing a rigid frame to ensure no stone was left unturned, I believed this to be the most appropriate approach. However, the size and availability of the sample group required were problematic during the COVID-19 restrictions in

Ireland. The restrictions imposed through public health measures meant that in-person meeting with participants was no longer viable.

When choosing a methodology, hearing that an approach is grounded in the data and the data meaning the individual's experience sat well with my values. What I was looking to explore was significant in that the lived experience is authentic, its capture must also be true and accurate, and it was not the researchers accessing the experiences of another, but what is captured was the experience itself through the words of the participants. In addition, the potential to generate new theories sets grounded theory apart from the other qualitative approaches. I initially chose grounded theory because I believed this methodological approach could generate a new theory.

However, working within this approach, I grew increasingly concerned about recruiting participants and sampling. Creswell and Poth (2018), in their analysis of contrasting data procedures and outlining forms of data collection, describe using interviews of approximately 20 to 60 individuals. Equally, a grounded theory methodology requires an iterative collection of data analysis until a point of saturation is reached. Unfortunately, the practicalities of returning to the participants to follow up on further inquiry domains was not an option due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The sample size is contingent on several epistemological, methodological, and practical issues. Thompson (2011) reviewed over 100 grounded theory articles to establish a benchmark for what is a 'good enough' sample size. He states, 'sample size for grounded theory relies on the point of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001; Goulding, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thompson proposed that saturation typically occurs between 10 and 30 interviews. This

establishes validation of the patterns, concepts, categories, properties, and dimensions the researcher developed from the previous interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

While I was disappointed to realise that my data collection would be much smaller due to Covid restrictions and recruitment challenges during lockdowns, I found interrogation of the appropriateness of a grounded theory approach very helpful in deciding on the most ethical and rigorous research with a vulnerable population during a national and international crisis. Therefore, I discuss in the next section my adoption of a narrative inquiry approach as a preferred methodology for the current study.

### 3.2 The Road to Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry originates in literature, history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and education (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 68). Elliot (2005) describes narrative inquiry as stories with a clear sequential order that connects events meaningfully for a definite audience. It thus offers insights into the world and people's experiences of it. This definition outlines three critical features of narrative inquiry: they are (1) chronological, (2) meaningful, and (3) social. The social aspect is that they are produced for a specific audience. Reismann (2008, p. 3) describes how one is positioned in a world of experience and how that shapes the personal narrative when personal lives and social institutions intersect in the "ruling regimes,". These she describes as educational institutions, social welfare departments, work environments' hospitals, and governments. In my research, I wondered whether the ruling regime might extend to the home and how this shapes the personal narrative. Essential ingredients for narrative inquiry are the events the speaker perceives as necessary: these are then selected, organised,



connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience. These narratives of events relating to early literacy experiences will be evaluated to establish their importance for the participants in this study.

As a method, Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 67) describe narrative research as beginning with experiences expressed in lived and told stories of the individuals. Citing Clandinnin (2013, p. 18), they then highlight the context in which the narrative is located as adding weight and value to the individual stories and view the context as an exploration or a window in which to explore the social, cultural, and familial, linguistic and institutional narratives within which the individuals' experience were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted.

### ***3.2.1 Defining Features of Narrative Enquiry (adapted from Creswell and Poth, 2018)***

Narrative researchers collect stories from participants about their lived experiences. There is a co-construction between the researcher and the participant. In addition, there may be a collaborative feature where the story emerges through dialogue between the two. Though I did not initially intend that my research would be viewed as a collaborative venture, as the stories were told, I asked questions and posed thoughtful suggestions to gain a deeper understanding, and this opened up the potential to explore the subjects more deeply.

A crucial part of narrative inquiry is that narratives may also shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves. This concept was evident in my interviews and became a key part of the narrative inquiry.

Narrative stories occur in specific places or situations, including physical, emotional, and social descriptions. The stories can be analysed using a variety of

strategies. For example, they can take the shape of a thematic analysis of what was said, structural analysis, the nature of the storytelling, or visual analysis through interpreting the images and the words. This is discussed more in the data analysis.

The narrative may not be told chronologically, but the researcher may shape the story this way. Narrative stories may contain turning points, tensions, transitions, or interruptions highlighted by the researchers in telling the stories. Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 69) describe these as incidents that serve as organising structures for recounting the story, including the lead-up to consequences. In addition, they cite Daiute (2014) in identifying four types of patterns across several participants that involve meaning-making related to similarities, differences, change, or coherence. This last feature of a narrative methodology is essential for my research, and answering the research questions resonates with my research.

Creswell and Poth (2018) differentiate narrative inquiry along two lines. The first is considering the data analysis strategy, and the other is considering the types of narratives. First, identifying the story's function is critical to narrative inquiry (Reissman, 2008); a narrative can tell stories for individuals, support group identity formation, or mobilise marginalised groups and initiate political action. In my research, the most important function was to provide a way to tell the story of the women who left school early and explore their literacy experiences.

There are many types of narrative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 70). The choice of which type to be used can be influenced by three elements, the nature of the experience, the story-generating process, and the audience for the narrative. In reflecting on the audience, I was struck by the importance of sharing experiences to redress a lack of consideration of the lived experience of mothers

in the research literature, especially where literacy experiences and parenting practices are concerned. Exploring what function the narrative story serves for the participants (Reissman, 2008) is to study individuals' and communities' cultures and lives. Concerning constructing identities, the fluidity of the identity that narrative stories allow individuals to produce creates an identity through processes of being, becoming, belonging, and longing to belong (Reissman, 2008). Reissman describes how a narrative emerges early in the human experience, and indeed, the need to tell stories is humanity's natural and universal trait. However, she goes on to say that transforming a lived experience into language and constructing a story about it is not straightforward but invariably mediated and regulated by controlling the vocabulary of one's culture. This is a particularly important aspect for consideration and reflection throughout the use of narrative inquiry and the reason for including a positionality statement and reflections on my views and experiences in particular.

Freeman's observations about research are very relevant to my methodological decisions (2016, p. 142). First, he describes how we can think about the impact of events on us as individuals. This includes reflecting on how we have had an event and the opportunity to look backwards. In doing so, we are trying to determine the impact of the former event on the latter (life experiences). Then, he proposes that it 'is the idea of discerning the vast panoply of reasons, both proximal and distal, for why we become this rather than that, taking us into the heart of narrative hermeneutics'. He goes on to say that 'for these reasons extended in and through time, narratives can only come together in and through the process of interpretation. This process of interpretation, this process of discerning, from some current vantage point, a past that might conceivably have led to it, finds its home in the form of narrative.' (Freeman, 2016, p. 142)

In trying to explore the impact of my participants' early literacy experiences, I sought to explore the life events that contributed to their life experiences and the occurrences of leaving school before their education would have been considered complete. In doing so, the research investigates the processes that occurred, shaped participants' being, becoming, and belonging, and why they became this rather than that. Freeman (2016) describes this as the very heart of the hermeneutic narrative to interpret the experience.

### 3.3 Procedures for conducting Narrative Inquiry

In exploring the procedures for conducting narrative research, there is no fixed approach but a fluid one, as described by Clandinin (2013). This type of research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or a small number of individuals.

Daiute (2014) outlines a set of seven practical techniques or items to apply to conducting research within a narrative approach. Firstly, the research question must fit with narrative research: Daiute proposes that narrative is best suited to capturing a single individual's detailed stories or life experiences or the lives of a small number of individuals.

Secondly, a considerable amount of time should be spent with this small number of participants; she also describes how a researcher may use artefacts like photographs, letters, and memory boxes to elicit memories. Thirdly, data collection and recording can take different shapes. For example, Reismann describes how the transcription of the stories can highlight the researchers as a listener or a questioner, emphasise the interaction, and convey a conversation that might move through time.

Fourthly, the stories' context should be embedded in data collection, analysis, and writing. Czarniawska (in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 72) describes this as being context-sensitive and an essential feature of narrative research. This locates the participants in personal, cultural, and historical contexts. Fifthly, re-storying is an essential and recognised marker of narrative inquiry. Here the researcher takes an active role and may re-story the stories into a framework that makes sense by framing the story within a time, place, plot, and scene.

Another critical step is to embed a collaborative approach to the process. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the narrative approach as a way of understanding experience and collaboration between researchers and participants, over time, in a place or series of places and social interaction with milieus. This can be an encounter that can potentially change the participant and the researcher. The story's meanings are negotiated and validated in the encounters through this process. Creswell and Poth (2018) also describe turning points, disruptions, or epiphanies that unfold through the chronology of the experience set within the lived experience's personal, social, and historical contexts. Finally, the participants' narratives should be presented in written form.

Throughout the analysis and findings sections, all steps of the narrative inquiry process were implemented and structured to meet these expectations for a narrative approach. In this way, a narrative inquiry methodology adopted in this study seeks to place the experiences of early school leavers at the heart of the research and prioritise their lived experiences and stories of early literacy, education and later life events.

### ***3.3.1 Recruitment***

Yin (2011, p. 88) describes that in qualitative research, samples are likely to be chosen intentionally, known as purposive sampling. The goal is to have participants in a study that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data. The criteria for my sample were that the participants, as described previously, would be women who had left school early. Three per cent of the population do not go on to finish their second-level education, and of those, 40% are young women. It is this sample that I was trying to identify and explore the experiences of some of these early school leavers. Participants were not stipulated to be mothers; four women who came forward were mothers, and one was not.

Concerning the recruitment strategy, participants were recruited through what Miles and Huberman (1994, p.28) call a criterion: the participants needed to meet the specific criterion. It was also opportunistic in that leads were followed, and the researcher would take advantage of the unexpected and yield the richest narratives. Guest and colleagues (2013) cite four recruitment strategies: media-based, investigator-initiated, socially-based, and panel list based. I chose media and socially based techniques to advertise the research and a call for participants broadly, and I outline elements of recruitment in the next section.

### ***3.3.2 Reflections on Recruitment***

I have worked in the voluntary sector for the last seven years. I have built up connections within the community with organisations that work to build on the capacities of disadvantaged and marginalised communities. It was through these connections that I was able to advertise my research. However, I was conscious that my target audience might be reluctant to approach a stranger to discuss potentially sensitive issues. My journey was helped by what is known as a

gatekeeper (Yin, 2011, 115). Creswell and Poth (2018, 156) describe the gatekeeper as someone who can share study details with the target marginalised groups and let them know the opportunity to contact the researcher exists.

Another source of participants was social media which emerged through an opportunistic event. Twitter and LinkedIn were used to share study details and recruit participants.

Finally, details of the study were shared with an early years' service with which I had worked professionally and had some support from the manager (gatekeeper) in recruiting early school leaving women who met the criteria. Participants who got in touch were contacted by phone, and I arranged to meet with them. I explained the process around what the research involved and that they were free to withdraw from the research if they no longer wished to participate at any point in time. I also explained that I would record the conversations to capture their stories accurately but that this data would be kept securely and destroyed.

### ***3.3.3 Methods Procedure***

Intensive interviewing was used to gather data from my participants. Charmaz (2014) describes this type of interview as a gently guided, one-sided conversation that explores a person's substantial experience with the research topic. These interviews focus on the research participants' experience and what it means to them, as indicated during the interview. This was an essential element of the research based on the experience and captured accurately.

Five one-hour interviews were conducted with the participants. The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions exploring early experiences of literacy and

schooling, the experiences leading up to the decision to leave school, and literacy child-rearing practices. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder.

Two Dictaphones (in case of malfunction) were used to record the interview, and consent was granted. In preparation for the interviews, I looked to establish what I wanted to discover. That is the earliest memories of literacy experience and then explore the emergent stories of the participants on their life's trajectories based on that starting point. However, I did not want to ask questions that would move the inquiry into an area that might compromise the interview's purpose.

King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019, p. 63) recommend developing an interview guide to explore the participant's perspective as helpful. This allows for flexibility and for the interviewer to respond to issues that emerge during the interview.

Charmaz (2014, p. 63) elaborates further that this helps to prepare for conducting the interviews. Through conducting interviews, researchers can then grapple with creating, revising, and fine-tuning interview questions. King et al. (2019, p. 64) recommend three primary sources that researchers can draw on when outlining the questions: personal experience of the research area, looking at what the current literature says about the area, and conducting some preliminary work to concentrate on the areas of focus.

The areas of focus were the earliest memories of literacy, followed by the experiences of starting school, the experiences through the transitions from primary to post-primary, and the experiences in post-primary. I also explored the social connections of close family, extended family, and friends and how those might have been viewed and experienced by the participants at the time. In recording the data, I was cognisant throughout about the participants' facial expressions and tone of voice. This guided me to decide when to let the



conversation flow and when to move to the following questions. For example, if a topic was sensitive or a participant was upset, I had planned to gently guide them back to questions that brought them into a safe space to tell their story and minimise upset. In addition, the debriefing material prepared contained several support services they could access if needed. I also arranged follow-up calls with the participants, where required.

Charmaz (2014, p. 61) affirms that how you appear to research participants affects their response to your topic and questions and that appearance can mean much more than attire and demeanour. She also describes how status as a researcher appears to the gatekeepers and prospective research participants and can affect your effectiveness in finding suitable participants to conduct interviews.

Four of the five participants lived in areas high on the Pobal Deprivation Index. The index is based on three relative affluence and deprivation dimensions: Demographic Profile, Social Class Composition, and Labour Market Situation (Gov., i.e., 2020). Thus, I was acutely aware of the importance of sensitivity to the potential power imbalance and participant perception of me as a researcher regarding status. To help establish a link and offset potential challenges, I connected with one of the managers of an early years' service that I knew well and where I had looked to recruit participants. I asked if she would discuss the research advertisement with some of the mothers and explain who I was. At the time, I was coordinating a free book gifting program in the area. This gifting programme delivers a high-quality, age-appropriate book into the homes of nearly 5,000 children every month. I had been to the service to help register some children and families into the programme. I hoped this connection would

help establish an identity of a researcher and someone who contributed to the community as a whole.

As discussed in Chapter 2, building a relationship and developing rapport were essential in this research. I wanted the participants to know that their stories mattered. Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 49) describe the three characteristics of good qualitative research: the researcher must situate themselves within the study to reflect on their history, culture, and personal experience and how those domains influence all aspects of the qualitative project. This was essential to establishing rapport and trust in sharing personal stories of early literacy and early school leaving.

### 3.4 Deciding on Data

Deciding on data analysis is a critical next step in the methodology. There are several considerations when thinking and setting out a conceptual framework to establish a coherent yet robust data analysis approach. First, the researcher has to be mindful of the data, being more than just that, data, not just words on a page but authentic representations of human experience, and ensuring that they are treated with the respect they deserve.

In exploring the literature on narrative analysis, Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the process of analysis involves an interconnected process that includes organisation, preliminary analysis looking at emerging ideas, coding and extracting themes that represent the data and forming an interpretation of them, and finally representing and visualizing the data.

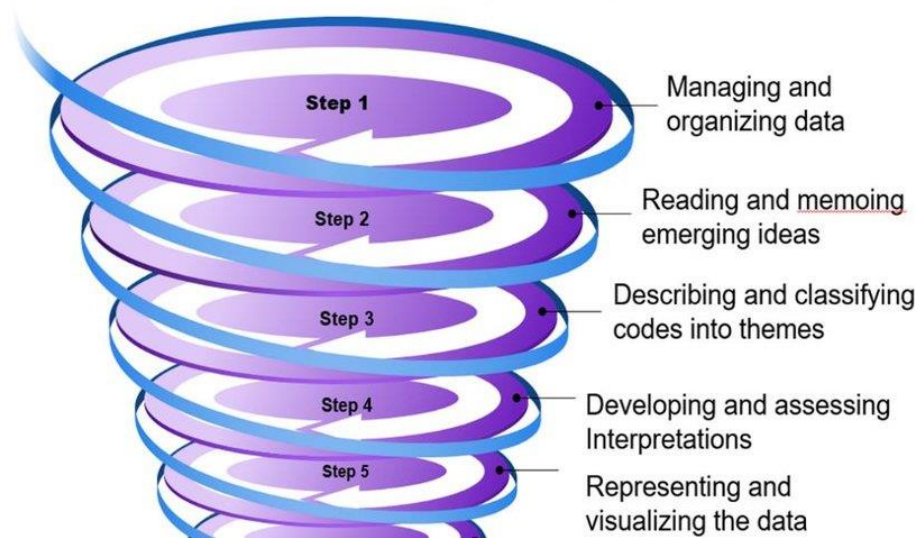
According to Mills, Huberman and Saldana (2018, p. 61), the fundamentals of qualitative data analysis not only begin with collecting the data but also recommend simultaneous analysis of the data as it is being collected. This allows

for gathering new data if gaps emerge and testing or rivalling a new hypothesis. Their recommendation of simultaneous analysis strikes me as having parallels used in a grounded theory approach, where theoretical sampling is used. In this approach, the researcher visits the field to gather data. This data is then analysed for emerging themes. Finally, the researcher may return to the field to gather more data and engage in a cycle of constant comparative analysis until saturation occurs. This occurs when no new ideas emerge from the data. This iterative relationship between researcher and data, irrespective of the methodological approach, must be at the forefront of the researchers' mindset. The parallels are evident in the systematic analysis, focusing on the surface-level themes and drilling down into the data to fully develop those themes. Howitt (2013, p. 177) agrees with this hypothesis, saying, 'in some respects, thematic analysis is most similar to grounded theory'.

### 3.5 Analysis of Interview Data

Creswell and Poth (2016, p. 181) describe this as a process involving organising the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and organising themes, representing the data, and finally forming an interpretation of the data. This can be done either manually or assisted with various technology. For purposes of this analysis, I chose the manual route. This maintains connectivity to the data and in helping to story the narrative. We don't ask computers to write stories or to tell our tales and publish novels; as Patton (2015, p. 530-531) says, 'the real analytical work takes place in your head'.

## The Data Analysis Spiral



**Figure 6.**

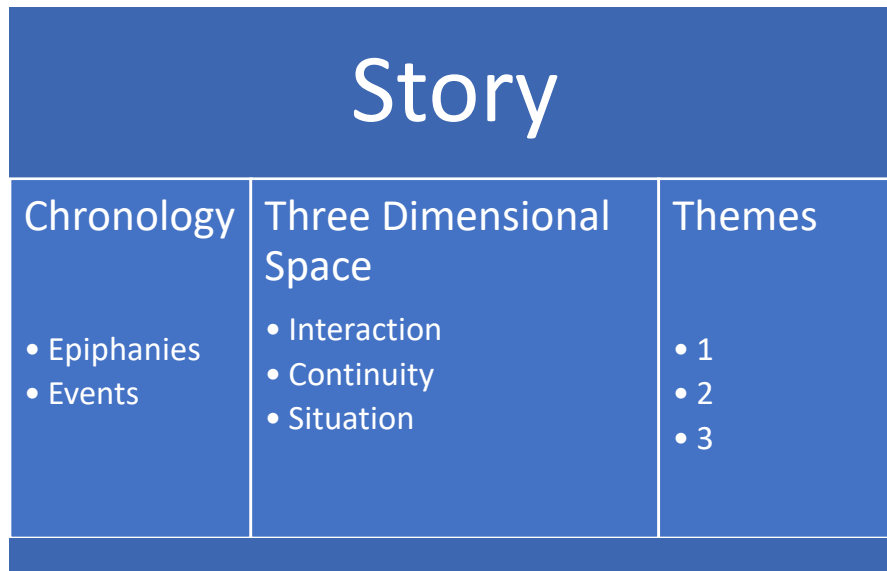
*Data Analysis Spiral-Taken From Creswell And Poth (2018, P. 186)*

Five research participants agreed to be interviewed. Each interview lasted up to an hour. These five interviews generated 106 pages of a transcript with 46,406 words. It is essential to acknowledge the quantity of data that informed this study and to be mindful of understanding and trying to make meaning of the experiences documented within the scripts. Each page is saturated with a lived experience. Polkinghorne (1998, p. 1) describes narrative meaning as ‘a cognitive process that organises human experience into temporally meaningful episodes’.

For this process, I coded the data by reducing the data into meaningful segments and labelling those segments. From these segments, themes were identified. For example, Creswell and Poth (2016, p. 189) cite Reismann (2008, p.11) in saying that narrative analysis refers to a ‘family of methods for interpreting texts that have a storied form’ in common.

Much has been written about analysing qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kim, 2016; King, Horrocks & Brookes, 2019; Howitt, 2013; Reissman, 2005). The

figure below has been adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 218) to outline the different data analysis approaches or a combination.



**Figure 7.**

*Data Analysis Approaches*

Although the interviews were semi-structured, the participants traversed their life stories, moving back and forth between experiences and these experiences were evidenced in the text. With this text, a context for the narrative is critical.

For this research, it was essential to explore the lived experience of the participants' early literacy experiences and if subsequent schooling experience, leaving school, and life experiences were impacted by those earliest experiences.

Denzin (2003, p. 87) describes lives and their experiences akin to stories represented as performances. Performance has connotations as an actor taking on the role of a character that may not be a true reflection of oneself. However, Denzin describes stories like pictures that have been painted over, and when the paint has been scraped off, something new becomes visible. Perhaps lives are

coloured over by experience that affects the person to hide a piece of themselves, with pieces becoming exposed and covered back up again through the telling and the told.

For the data analysis, interviews were first transcribed. Transcription is converting recorded material to the text and becoming familiar with your data (King et al. 2019). It is essential to capture what the interviewee says and the interviewer. Although there was little input from the researcher in this instance, the context was set through this dialogue, and indeed an element of co-construction or a provocation/reframing to think about what was discussed. Langdridge (2004) also describes different types of approaches to transcription, from a simplistic system to a more complex system. This can encompass an analysis that includes prosodic aspects of dialogue, including phonological nuances such as intonation and stress, and paralinguistic elements, such as jokes like utterances or weighty utterances. Also, up for consideration is what he describes as extralinguistic, including non-linguistic aspects, for example, gestures. Although when transcribing the data script and listening to the ebb and flow of the conversation, one could identify with these concepts. Through listening, relistening, and recalling conducting the interview, I could connect with the emotion, and indeed where they were evident and felt were the turning points, or epiphanies. It was researching and reading what King et al. (2019) and Langdridge (2004) had to say that I understood how those prosodic, para and extralinguistic communication elements could connect with the significant elements of the story. For this purpose, these elements have been included in the analysis framework.

An app called Otter.Ai uploads the recording to help transcribe the recordings from Dictaphone to a Word document. This was useful because the data was transcribed quickly and efficiently. However, there were significant errors in the transcript where the app could not identify certain words due to accents and slang terminology. In addition, once the transcript was uploaded, there was still significant editing while listening to the recordings. Working through the errors to ensure accurate transcription gave me a deeper insight into the recordings each time I listened.

After transcription, the data script was read multiple times. This was to facilitate the familiarising, as a whole, the entire story. This is to identify those parts of the transcript likely to help address the research questions (King et al., 2019). From reading and re-reading, it was evident that a life course timeline was emerging. This is why earliest memories, primary school, secondary school, post-leaving school, and childrearing practices emerged as key points in the chronology of storytelling.

Having established these parameters, the next stage of the process was highlighting anything in the script that helped to identify the participant's views, experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.203). This was achieved by using a highlighter pen and memoing in the column of the document. Alongside these strategies, the document pages were numbered, and each line on the page was allocated a number. This was to facilitate locating the original text, what excerpts were extracted for the descriptive coding, how that text was interpreted (and coded), and how the overarching themes were arrived at.

This was then translated into a framework that was adapted from one used by King and colleagues (2019, p. 204)

<b>Chronology</b>	<b>Descriptive Coding-</b>	<b>Prosodic, Expressions- Facial, vocal</b>	<b>Interpretive Coding</b>	<b>Overarching Themes</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Earliest Memories (EM)</b>					
Primary School (PS)					
Secondary School (SS)					
Post Leaving School (PLS)					
Child Rearing Practices (CRP)					

**Figure 8.**

*Adapted Comparative Analysis Framework*

Following the descriptive coding, the next phase was interpretive coding. King et al. (2019, p. 205) describe this as grouping descriptions that seem to share a common meaning and creating an interpretive code to capture it. This is an



iterative cycle whereby one returns to the transcripts to ensure that the context does not get blurred in the process. They also caution against applying any theoretical concepts at this point as it may lead to the analysis being blinkered. The final phase was to identify overarching themes.

### 3.6 Ethics

This section outlines the ethical considerations of this research. Dublin City Universities' code of good research practice (2021) outlines that research integrity relates to the performance of research to the highest standards of professionalism and rigour at all points of the research process and the accuracy and integrity of the research record in publications and elsewhere. This sentiment could not be more critical than in conducting research with women who may have experienced marginalisation and difficult early experiences. Also cited within this document is that it is expected that the research community pursues their research activities in a manner that is consistent with the highest standards of ethical and scientific practice and seeks to maximise the benefits and minimise the harm associated with their research. It was with this lens and the principles underpinning quality research practices that this research was conducted. The principles consist of;

**Reliability:** Reliability ensures the quality of research, reflected in the design, the methodology, the analysis, and the use of resources.

**Honesty:** Honesty in developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting, and communicating research in a transparent, fair, complete, and unbiased way.

**Respect:** Respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and the environment.

**Accountability:** Accountability for the research from idea to publication, for its management and organisation, for training, supervision, and mentoring, and for its broader impacts (Taken from DCU Code of Good Research Practice p. 2)

Throughout the research, I was acutely aware of the need to show respect and honesty to the whole process, not only the participants. By this, I mean the processes from the advertisement for the recruitment of participants to the first phone call and informed consent. The interview process, the transcription, the analysis, and the thesis's writing up are replete with opportunities for ethical decision-making.

Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 53) cite a common misconception that ethical issues only arise during data collection. On the contrary, research integrity starts from the outset in designing, planning, and applying for ethical approval, whereby each step of the process is outlined in detail. Once approved, the professionalism and rigour to ensure that the following processes are strictly adhered to as per the ethical application are paramount.

Before any research begins, a robust application must be presented to the research ethics committee for approval. This application is rigorous and contains elements that King et al. (2019, p. 33) outline as critical issues that need to be addressed in that process. For example, participants need to be fully informed about the research procedure and give their consent to participate in the research before any data is collected. Participants also need to be aware of their right to withdraw from participating in the study, either from the interview process or withdrawal of their data after the interview, and this is without consequence.

Confidentiality about participants and their data is paramount. This involves anonymising data so the participants cannot be identified easily. King et al. (2019, p. 45) propose this can be achieved using code numbers, pseudonyms or similar. In this instance, participants were given pseudonyms, and any identifiable information changed. Where there are details of actual names, they needed to be kept in a password-protected computer file, separate from the transcriptions, and GDPR guidelines were strictly adhered to. Concerning the transcription of the data, this can pose ethical challenges. Transcription services can be utilised, but the platform's security before use must be considered. In this instance, Otter.AI was used, and this platform uses encrypted Amazon Web Services S3 security.

Assessing the risk of harm is another consideration, especially whereby there is a question of the sensitive nature of the research. This could also be described as participant vulnerability. Although not anticipated, there could be emotional vulnerabilities for some participants in this study. Exploring experiences, in particular potentially harmful experiences, could expose sensitivities and vulnerabilities in the participants in some way. However, supportive, respectful interaction between the research participants and the researcher could minimize such vulnerabilities while providing an opportunity to share more experiences that contextualize more quantitative reporting typically. Debriefing materials were also prepared to ensure available supports were in place, and the supervisor's role was also highlighted as a potential contact.

Honesty and integrity are other critical aspects of ethical considerations in research. As researchers, we have an ethical obligation to participants, the research community and broader society to conduct research fairly and honestly. Therefore, conscious misrepresentation of the findings and failure to declare

conflicts of interest or to recognise the contribution of others in authorship is considered dishonest and lacks integrity. This is especially important in telling the stories of participants whose voices may be historically or traditionally missing from the research literature.

Another aspect of maintaining ethical standards in research practice is achieved through adequate supervision (DCU, 2021). During the research process, effective supervision was maintained through many media, including phone calls, face-to-face meetings, Zoom, and email. This created a research environment that supported good research practice and research integrity.

Overall, this research study prioritised ethical considerations as paramount in rigorous data collection on a historically under-researched topic and with participants who may not have had an opportunity to share early literacy and educational experiences as part of research previously.

## 4 Findings

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the interviews with the five participating women. The findings are presented both chronologically and thematically. There are four chronological periods (a) earliest literacy experiences, (b) schooling experiences, (c) later life experiences, and (d) literacy child-rearing practices.

Within those periods, themes were identified. The main themes identified during the course of the analysis were: (1) Positive and vivid memories of literacy experiences where these occurred; (2) Significant transitions with clear indicators of stress and disruption; (3) the importance of relationships with teachers in primary and secondary schooling experiences; (4) the role of support from a significant adult in returning to education; and (5) literacy child-rearing practices as highly valued.

Themes are discussed chronologically to best answer the research questions around early literacy experiences and the potential relationship between these experiences and later schooling and child-rearing practices. Before discussing themes, each participant's profile is presented to give context to the findings for the participants individually and collectively as a participant group.

### 4.1 Participants' Characteristics and Contexts

The age profile of the participants was from their early 20s to early 40s. Four of the five participants came from what could be described as socioeconomically less advantaged backgrounds. They all had left education just after their 3<sup>rd</sup> year or during the 5<sup>th</sup> year of second-level education. Only one had a diagnosis of a learning disability, and all except one had children. Each participant has been allocated a pseudonym for anonymity to protect their identity.

## Participant Contexts and Key Excerpts

***'In school, I was told I was stupid and could never do anything right. I left after my JC. I had my first child at 17 and 4<sup>th</sup> at 25, destined to be another statistic. I decided to return to education. I just finished an honours degree with First Class Honours.***

**Anne** was the first participant and was interviewed in person.

Anne was 34 at the time of the interview. She has four children and is about to embark on a Master's Degree program. We spoke for over an hour and a half about her earliest memories of literacy and significant periods in her life up until this point.

From the outset, she shared her earliest memories of a typical family for the time and that she lived in a rural area with several siblings.

Early in the interview, it became evident that her grandfather and older sister played a vital role in introducing books and reading. She references her grandfather specifically: 'he was book mad, constantly posting books to us, and he would say, 'read your book, and you will do well in life.'

Concerning her sister, she described her vividly, retelling memories of how they would act out stories: 'My older sister was a bookworm (would read); she used to drive me insane. She would stop at every full stop. I don't know if it was because I wanted to hear the next part of the story. She always had a book.'

Anne went on to describe how she still has a book cover upstairs: 'he (grandpa) sent it to us (he moved to Australia)'; she remembers saying, '*I'll have to keep this forever*'- but just ended up with the cover. 'So, I read it every single night (as a girl)'.

Although this account is rich with literacy and book experience, she described herself as not really into books and preferred numbers at the time. However, prosodic cues in Anne's recounting indicated that the memories of books were joyful.

This joyful tone changed to a painful one when she described her initial primary school experience. She recounted how the school was a small school with mixed-age groupings and how she had to wear glasses and an eye patch and, as a result, was teased by the other children. The teacher knew this teasing, but he never dealt with the issue. She had also hidden the teasing from her parents. Finally, her father came to work in the school, and the teasing became apparent; however, she was told not to tell 'tales.'

Anne recalled how they moved to a more urban area: her tone was much more upbeat when talking about this move. This period is recounted positively, including a story of a teacher who made a considerable effort to make Anne feel welcome and whom she described as 'brilliant'. Anne also said she was not the only one to wear glasses, and 'everybody' wanted to be her friend because she had a different accent.

Before finishing primary school, she spoke of how excited she was to attend secondary school and the trust afforded as she would have to get a bus. It was a school her grandpa wanted her to go to and had a good reputation.

Anne's tone again changed as she described how one of the teachers strongly disliked her and that this substantially impacted her. Even all these years later, it was evident that this was a painful period in her life. *She was evil-if I hadn't met her, I would have done good in school and stayed on.*

Like the other participants, Anne had a part-time job before leaving school and quickly found full-time employment once she left school. She worked in a hairdresser. However, the next event would also shape her life's trajectory. One evening, while at a friend's house, she was the victim of a serious assault that left her with a skull fracture. Unfortunately, there seemed to be little support for her at this time, and she was told that it would not have happened if she hadn't been drinking.

Unsurprisingly, Anne described her life as going off the rails at this point. She had an unintended pregnancy at 17, and though it was an important and positive experience, it was also associated with shame. She described the next period of her life as just being 'a mammy'; she met another man, married at 21, and had four children by age 25. She describes her role as being a mother and



keeping the children alive. More tragedy struck when her sister died suddenly, and her marriage broke down, finally separating.

It was at this point she described thinking to herself, *'it kinda dawned on me I just cannot stay here; I had nothing, nothing to fall back on; I had a junior cert and very little work experience that I did between 15 and 17, so I knew I had to do something.'* This subsequent period of her life was transformational: by chance, she found a course providing childcare and payment. However, this wasn't the only 'godsend' as she described it. She met two people whom she describes as her earth angels. Two women ran the course she enrolled in and were pivotal in encouraging her to stay and finish the programme with distinctions. They also encouraged her to enrol in 3<sup>rd</sup>-level education, where she truly flourished, finishing her undergraduate programme with first-class honour. At the time of the interview, she had won a scholarship to complete a Master's Degree.

In reflecting on the impact of her parenting and approaches to literacy, she described her children as book-mad and loving school. She recounted how her mother would visit the children and bring them to the charity shop where they could buy eight books for two euros; they loved this experience. One of her final statements was, *'I can be more than I ever thought I was- and I am worth it'.*

**'I think also because I was exposed to cultures, that got me thinking, you know, education is the key to everything. It opens doors, like, I never knew.'**

**Barbra** was the youngest participant in the group at just 23 years of age and the only participant who was not a mother. This interview also took place face-to-face. Barbra described herself as having a privileged background. She was also the only participant who disclosed her learning disability, dyslexia. Barbra is the eldest of three children and comes from a loving family. She described her siblings as being academic and that she was not. She described herself as being a practical and very hands-on learner. She remembered being read to as a child, and bedtime stories were a regular occurrence. She also recounted her love of singing and dancing. However, observing a significant figure reading in her immediate family did not emerge as with the other participants.

Barbra described herself as shy during her primary school years and having extreme fear and anxiety over having to stand up in class and read. She also explained how she hated being taken from the classroom to go to learning support: *'I felt very, you know, picked on, but it wasn't; I just didn't really get it. I just wanted to just be a nobody, you know, in the class'*.

Barbra also described herself as being in the lowest reading group in the class, and she felt the pressure of being looked at by the top reading group and did not like this feeling.

When describing her secondary school experience, her opening statement was, '*I loved classics. That was my all-time favourite subject*'.

It was apparent that the secondary school did not provide the learning support she received in primary school '*I was never an A student. I'd try, and I'd try. It's just school wasn't for me*. Despite her difficulties, Barbra made it through the Junior Certificate exam. She described how she did not want to do a transition year. Barbra decided to go to a dancing college during this time. Once the year had passed, she outlined how she didn't want to return to her former school choosing to go to a different one. Her time there was short; soon after, she left mainstream school for good. Barbra relayed that she felt she was being treated like a baby, having to put her hand up, and felt out of place in her peer group.

in the next phase described after leaving school, Barbra outlined how she contacted various colleges to apply for a PLC in Personal Training. During this period, she also worked part-time as a children's entertainer. She had also done some promotional work, which sparked interest in this work's business side. Her boss encouraged this, and she then did a PLC in Business.

Again, despite having been told by the college's career guidance that she would probably not be ready or able to go on to do a degree in college, Barbra sought out colleges and was given a place on foot of the distinctions she received in the PLC courses.

What was significant was that this institution gave Barbra the needed learning support. As a result, Barbra thrived and finished her degree with a 2.1 honours degree.

Barbra describes this experience as different because

*I wanted to be there. It's the work experience I have got; it got me where I am today.*

***I wanted to learn Macbeth. So, they were learning all this great stuff, and I wasn't.***

**Cara** was in her mid-thirties at the time of this interview and a mother of one. This interview took place over the phone. Cara described how her mother supported book reading from an early age. Cara's opening statement was, *'I love reading, so I remember the first book'*. Next, she recounted how her mother read to her from a young age, reading Roald Dahl and the bible and prayer books. She recalls these experiences from three years of age.

Cara came from a large family with ten siblings, whom she also described as loving books. Cara described a positive experience in primary school. One particular experience was the mobile library

visiting her school every Wednesday. She remembered the librarian as '*a lovely old lady who would ensure you got the books you wanted to read, and if they were unavailable, she would get them in for you*'.

Cara also recounted needing learning support for reading. She remembered being taken from the class for this: she described it as a club and enjoyed going. Cara outlined how some children used to ask her if she was a bit slow; however, she knew she needed help. Despite this, it appeared from retelling her experiences that she enjoyed her primary schooling experience.

Cara described her secondary schooling experience as quite different. She explained how she felt like she was invisible and just blended into the furniture. Cara also explained how she was placed in the middle class while her friends all went into the higher class. As a result, she found herself with classmates she didn't want to be with or fit in with. The class she described as '*the bold kids, and I just felt intimidated*'.

Cara expressed how she *just wanted to sit, read, and learn*. Instead, she was called names when she couldn't hear in the class and spoke up to the teacher.

When she spoke to her friends in the higher class, they were talking about Macbeth, and Cara remembers that she wanted to

be learning subjects like Macbeth: *'my friends were talking about Macbeth and all like, why am I not learning that in English, I want to learn Macbeth. So, they were learning all this great stuff, and I wasn't.*

The final straw in her decision to leave school was her fourth year as part of Transition Year. She did some work experience, which needed documentation from the placement. This documentation went missing. *I think that was the last straw of me feeling invisible, and I just felt too awkward, and I left.*

Cara found employment quickly enough and worked in a Supermarket there for several years. Then, when she was in her mid-twenties, she decided to re-enter education. Cara decided to do a childcare course. She completed a level 5 and then a level 6. This experience was enjoyable because you *'got to do field work and have classroom experience; I loved it'.*

It was after this that Cara became a mother in her late twenties.

She described how she has loads of books at home for her daughter and has set up a little library. Cara said that she reads tactile books with which her daughter can engage. She also described how she sings to her every night before bed: *'So sometimes she takes them out, and you will see her sitting there turning and looking at the pages, so I do be delighted with that. I*

*will definitely get her into reading*'. Cara also described how she had enrolled her daughter in a book gifting scheme available. This programme delivered a free book every month to her daughter, and she would receive this until her fifth birthday.

Cara finished the interview by outlining her regrets about leaving school early, describing herself as young and silly, and how she would love to return to education but only when her daughter has settled into school.

***'The light finally hit me; you know you need something for them and show them that there are other ways of being and life.'***

**Dara** was in her early 40s at the time of the interview. This interview took place via Zoom. This communication medium presented challenges as it was hard to pick up on cues while not being face to face and the time delay involved with such technology.

One of the first statements from Dara was, *'I've actually no good experience with literacy when I was younger at all'*. She described her home life as strict, with a father with a short temper. She had no memory of being read to or having books. However, Dara described her mother as someone with piles of books by her chair, where she would observe her reading every evening.

Dara recalled having an excellent primary school experience until the third class, saying, *'I loved school- till 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> class. So, I have fond memories of them two years that were really good interactive; she (the teacher) was very creative; I have a lot better memories as she had a lot of time for each of us, you know, you will get it, don't worry if we didn't know.'*

Dara's experience of secondary school was less pleasant. She recounted how,

*'I didn't have a good experience with the teachers. I had very, very strict teachers and just didn't seem to have time to give each student what they needed, you know, and if you didn't know something, you got scolded, **you'd be terrified to ask a question.**'*

So, she described how going into the first year was like going back into first class, and she didn't like how she was treated. Her description was of really vivid memories of having to stand up and put her hands behind her back and say a prayer in the morning and at the end of every class: 'it was like being a machine'. She also described stressful encounters with teachers who *'would be getting up in your face and screaming, and if they are in the horrors, they would take it out on you; it was just crazy'*.

Dara described how she didn't feel safe and didn't want to be in a place that didn't support her and belittled her. In addition, Dara described how she didn't feel that she struggled academically; it



was down to how the teachers treated her, resulting in her decision to leave school.

When asked about her parents in this regard, she said they didn't want her to leave but didn't encourage her to stay either. She also recounted how she would not have been allowed to leave if she didn't have a job. At that time, she was working as a lounge girl and also found work in a factory. She described this period of employment as *I loved it. I loved every minute of it (work)*.

However, the next period for Dara was very bleak. She found herself and her small children victims of domestic abuse. This drove her into homeless accommodation, where they remained for 15 years. After this period and now settled in a permanent home, Dara described how her third child was born with significant health issues.

During this period of observing her child overcome many medical obstacles, she had an epiphany. She described how *'the light finally hit me; you know you need something for them and show them that there are other ways of being and life, you know'*. Dara described her motivation to return to education as purely being motivated by her children. She didn't want them to go down the wrong path, and seeing her studying would be good for them.

When asked about reading to her children, she said she always encouraged it by reading and buying books. However, she said it was difficult when they were homeless and could not always bring

their books. Dara described how she has finished a degree and is looking to go on and do more studying, reflecting, *'I love the community sides of things; anything to do with community and grassroots organisations, anything I can that **help improve people's lives?**'*

Her children have also completed college degrees, and her younger child is doing well in school.

**Oh, I used them loads; it was the ones with the most pictures; I would have read them a lot. That's all we had (Encyclopaedia)**

**Evelyn** was in her late thirties at the time of the interview. It was conducted face to face. She described her early experiences in school as very happy. However, when asked about her home life and reading, she said, *'I don't ever remember anyone reading; it wasn't a thing'.*

When asked about books in the home, she recalled, *'there were like encyclopaedias, and we always had children's encyclopaedias and stuff like that, not so much novels or story books; my mam and dad wouldn't be readers. But, you know the book club things, they were always in that, and books were brought into the house'.*

Not only were the books brought in, but Evelyn also described

them in her words: *'Oh, I used them loads; it was the ones with the most pictures; I would have read them a lot. That's all we had; it was whatever was in them for information. I did enjoy it but don't ask me to stand up and tell everybody'*.

Evelyn recounted how she would have been timid and did not want to stand in front of the class to speak. This fear of speaking in front of the class would stay with her throughout her school days. However, the happy memories of primary school faded after moving home and school when she was about seven years old. The new school she described as more academic, and the subject of Irish taught in such a way that she describes it as *'beat into us'*.

Her fear of standing up and speaking in front of the class was realised as she described in her own words: *'They would demand that you stand up and say your piece, follow the book, and read your lines. I remember being so nervous and mixing it up because I was standing up, and everyone looked at me more, and I knew the words. It was like a blur that scared me for everything, reading and learning- I'd rather not be in school then cause I knew that would be the day I would have to stand up and read or stand up and do something.'* She described how teachers would shout at her, which is when she *'switched off'*.

Evelyn also described her home life. Her parents worked outside the home, and the responsibility for her siblings, house cleaning, and dinner-making fell on her shoulders.

Evelyn described her experience in a secondary school as one without too much trouble. She was placed in one of the lowest classes she described as a messing class. She also told me how the teachers wouldn't give her too much attention, and if she didn't want to read aloud or get involved, she didn't have to. However, she was never asked if there was something else she might like to do.

Evelyn, unlike the other participants, made it into the sixth year. The stumbling block came when it came to paying for the exams. Her mother told Evelyn that she could pay for her exams because she was working and earning her own money. Evelyn described how this left her feeling: *'I was really annoyed. I was like, I don't want to pay. I didn't want to do it (the exam). What am I paying for? And me Boss, in the job said don't do it then come and work here full time right? Don't do it. See you later, leaving school; I am gone'*.

Evelyn then described how she felt about that decision: *'now it's my biggest wish; even if I failed, I don't care. But I wish I had have done it right'*. She described in her own words being told how she *'could do better, knuckle down, but I didn't knuckle down. **No, you are never going to amount to anything.*** After leaving school, Evelyn left home and began working full-time. Soon after, she met

her husband and became a mother. On becoming a mother, Evelyn described her ideas on motherhood: *'One thing I always said was that I was not going to work; if I could avoid it, I would be home with the kids. So I always remember I wasn't going to work because I was going to look after them because I wasn't; my kids weren't going to have to do all I had to do, you know. That school was going to be important, and they were going to do their leaving, and then they were going to go to college, you know because I didn't.'*

When asked to describe her literacy child-rearing practices, Evelyn said she always read the children bedtime stories because she didn't have that experience. Evelyn also describes how she kept the encyclopaedia and her children have used them too. She describes this in her own words: *'I still have the kids, the children's one. My kids have gone through it. We still have them like my baby, 16, and he has read them; I still have them; I won't get rid of them; they are in a box in the attic. All my children used them'.*

Evelyn returned to education when her children started to use the internet. She described how she wanted to keep them safe. So Evelyn enrolled in a six-week computer course. Now that her children are older, she went on to do a degree and currently teaches others computer studies.

Looking back on her experiences, she wishes her teachers had encouraged her and instilled more confidence.

## 4.2 Theme 1: Earliest Literacy Experiences

Each context of the participants is unique to that person, and for the most, there appeared to have been positive experiences associated with this period of their lives. In conversation with the research participants, this was evident, and I have outlined the findings from each research participant below.

They were asked to think back as far as they could remember their earliest experiences. When asked what age they would remember their earliest literacy experiences, most responded between 3 years of age and commencing primary school.

### 4.2.1 *Observing an adult reading in the home and being read to*

A theme that emerged was the relationship with significant adults, such as mothers, a grandfather, and a sibling, who were seen to read regularly in the home. Participants could recount vivid memories of piles of books beside a bedside locker or where that person sat in the evening and also being read to.

#### **Anne**

Anne readily recounted her early memories of literacy in her home. It was evident that she had a significant relationship with her grandfather and older sibling.

***'We would go to his house, and you would sit up, and he would say do you want to hear a story? You know it was all about reading and stories, and if he didn't have a book, he would tell you as story off his head like, do you know he would be just yapping away all the time, ye good memories.'***

Anne also recounted significant memories of her older sibling reading to her and stories then getting acted out among the other siblings. Anne recounts this time

with such joy and warmth. She also spoke of how her siblings still recall those memories in adulthood.

The delight was evident in her voice and her enjoyment of the anticipation of what would come next in the story, and she was willing her sister to read without stopping at every full stop.

There was no mention of either of her parents reading to her. The significant findings were the availability of an adult, in this case, her grandad, who engaged in book reading and a sibling who also read stories to her.

### **Barbra**

Barbra didn't recount much detail about her earliest literacy experiences. Nor details of the relationships closest to her in those earliest days. Instead, she described her family as being a great family and privileged. However, Barbra described how she loved to sing and dance and that bedtime stories were a regular occurrence. She also recounted in preschool how she would love to dress up and sing and recalled positive experiences from this time. Unfortunately, she did not recall being read to in preschool.

***'I remember we did the bedtime story. And then I did singing when I was younger. I loved dressing up; that was like my thing. I loved dressing up in character.'***

The most significant thing here was the disclosure of bedtime stories, which suggests that there was an available parent with whom she had a significant relationship and who regularly read to her in her early childhood.

### **Cara**

The interview's outset revealed Cara's enthusiasm for reading and books. She described a warm relationship with her mother, who encouraged reading early on.

***'Mam read the Bible to me when I was young, age three or four. She would give me the little prayer books, and I would read them. So it's all down to my mam, really.'***

Cara recounted how she had a large family, but her mother was the most significant person discussed in her early life. She recalled going to preschool also but remembered not liking separating from her mother. However, apart from not liking the separation from her mother, the preschool experience was reportedly enjoyable, with fond memories of the blocks, sand and playing with puzzles. However, she did not recall being read to in preschool.

The significant elements for Cara were her mother's availability to read to her and, indeed, for her to observe her mother reading within the home.

### **Dara**

Dara's initial description of her earliest experiences was quite bleak. She first described how her mother had four children quite close together and a father with little patience. Next, Dara disclosed few, if any, experiences of being read to as a child.

What Dara did disclose, and the melodic prosody of her voice elevated slightly in her narration at this time, related to her mother indicating it was a positive memory. It was about her mother and her relationship with books.



***'I always remember her reading books, always and beside her bed, she would have a pile of books. My mam she would read anything. She would always be sitting on the couch with a book in the evenings reading.'***

Dara did describe that her dad read too, but she articulated that they were army books. Although I did not pursue the response at the time, I am unsure if she described that her father was reading for work and not necessarily for pleasure, which it seemed her mother did. Also mentioned several times was that reading was never encouraged among the children. Dara had no memory of being read to by a sibling or any memories while she attended preschool.

The significant aspect here was for Dara that there were no positive interactions with her parents in reading to her. What was significant was that she observed her parents reading, and in particular, her mother. Dara's description, as mentioned earlier, had a warm, elevated tone. This behaviour was observed repeatedly and frequently during her early childhood.

### **Evelyn**

Evelyn also had no explicit memories of being read to or experiencing someone reading at home. She described that both her parents worked. I tried to elicit more from Evelyn concerning any other memories, but unfortunately, none were forthcoming, and I sensed it was time to move away from the subject. She described no memory of being read to by a sibling or a grandparent or attending preschool.

#### *4.2.2 Having access to books in the home and being gifted books*

**Anna** described a grandfather who significantly influenced her earliest literacy experiences. She recounted how he would buy books for her and her siblings and encouraged them to read. She also speaks sadly of when her grandfather moved to Australia when he was married. However, he sent home the gift of a book. This book had gold leaf pages and an inscription for the children. She recounted how special this book became to her, how she still has the sleeve of the book with the inscription, and how special it made her feel.

The significant finding was that Anna had access to books and the memorable experience of being gifted many books. Still, one of particular significance was the last book she received from her grandfather.

**Barbra** did not recount having particular books in the home but recorded that she was read bedtime stories, suggesting that books were available in the home.

**Cara** described being given books by her mother, thus suggesting that she had access to books

**Dara** had no memories of having access to books when she was younger.

**Evelyn** recounted that there were not many books at home, but they did have books delivered by the 'book club' as she describes. These were encyclopaedias, one set for adults and another children's set. She recounts vivid descriptions of the pictures and images within these texts and how she would have always used them (the children's ones). She went on to say that she still has them, and her children have used them also. Finally, she describes how they are in her attic and how she will never get rid of them.

## 4.3 Theme 2: Transitions School Experiences

In this section, I outline the participants' findings concerning their primary and secondary school transitions.

### 4.3.1 *Anne's Experience*

**Anne's** experience describes her initial experience at a rural school, where she was brutally teased for wearing glasses and an eye patch. This made her reluctant to go to school, and she recalls arguing with her parents about going.

I didn't like school. I don't remember a whole lot; I didn't like it.

Anne described her teacher as not caring and never addressing the teasing. She also never disclosed the teasing to her parents, and when it came to light appeared to have received little support on the issue from them. So when Anne discovered she was moving to another school, she told herself it would be better. Here she outlines her experience of the new move.

I remember feeling it was good there. I loved that school. It was definitely better, it was. There were a lot more children in the class. Because you were also new, I think we were a fascination cause we had different accents to the people in school, so everyone wanted to be your friend. It didn't matter what you looked like cause you weren't the only one in the classroom with glasses on, do you know, and you weren't the only one wearing a patch. So there was always somebody else that kind of looked like you or do you know, ye it was. So I remember the feeling it was good there. I loved that school.

This subsequent transition from her old school appears to have been successful, and in part, to the relationship she had with the teacher she encountered.

I remember Ms \_\_\_ was my teacher's name she was lovely she was really nice, she used to fill up all my stamps as well, cause I think cause you were new, somebody different you, weren't on her nerves yet. But, still, I remember she was brilliant; she was an amazing teacher, and that school itself was brilliant. I think it is still there.

This experience starkly contrasts her initial experience of primary school; little else emerged as significant at this time.

The findings about her secondary school experience are outlined next.

Anne described the excitement she felt before starting secondary school. For Anne, the transition to school should have been a smooth one. She was aware of what was happening, for example, with transport and the type of school renowned for its good reputation that she would attend. Her grandfather, whom she deeply admired, was cited for having said 'getting into this particular school would be 'the making of them. She also had a couple of friends who were attending the same school. So, the scene would appear set to facilitate a smooth transition.

#### **4.3.2 Barbra's Experience**

**Barbra's** experience did not describe any distress around transitions in her primary school experience. Instead, what was found was that she was very shy and did not enjoy getting up in front of her peers to read.

***'I just remember I was really shy like you know, when we had to stand up and read out loud. I didn't like that.'* (Barbra)**

Barbra was the only participant who had a diagnosed disability in that she had dyslexia. Her narrative describes the lack of learning support during her

education. She initially describes herself as hating to have to go the learning support and felt the pressure to succeed and receive good grades.

***'(Learning Support) I hated going. I felt like you know, when the Learning Support teacher came to the room, she knocked on the door and say, okay, x,y,z and come with me. And I just didn't really like that I felt very, you know, picked on but it wasn't I just didn't really get it- I just wanted to just be a nobody, you know, in the class'***

The findings from her secondary schooling experience are similar to those in her primary school. Barbra struggled academically, and the resources required to support her were not consistently available.

#### **4.3.3 Cara's Experience**

**Cara's experience** - The finding for Cara in her transition to primary school and her experiences there were mainly unremarkable, although she did say she missed her mother.

**I remember I didn't like it; I missed my mam (Cara)**

There are no particular references to negative experiences. Instead, she appears to have been supported primarily in receiving learning support. The school principal kept her behind for a year because she was small for her age and felt this was in her best interest.

Cara describes her experience of learning support;

***I remember walking out of class, but I don't remember feeling bad about it. It was like it because I enjoyed it. Yeah. I enjoyed getting taken out of the class and getting special attention. And people helping me, you know.***

However, in the findings, Cara struggled to transition to secondary school, landing in a class segregated by ability and not desire. She describes how she blended in and just felt invisible. She narrated a powerful testimony of wanting to learn – **‘I wanted to do Macbeth too.’** She describes her friends in the higher class engaging in subjects she was intrigued by and wanted to learn. However, her experience made her feel invisible, unseen, and unheard, resulting in disengagement. She described it as feeling lost.

***‘Like you have the higher class and a lower class. I was in the lower class like it really was more about the bold kids and I just felt intimidated. I felt like didn't belong in that class even though mentally I did like I didn't have the brain for the higher class but it was just they put all the bold kids in one class. And the kids that aren't actually bold in the same class’***

#### 4.3.4 Dara's Experience

Dara's experience when asked about her primary school experience, the findings are often distressing and chaotic. Initially, she recalled starting school, and her mother said she cried, kicked, and screamed for about four weeks. Dara did not transition well initially to primary school.

In the findings, Dara recalled having to stand up, put her hands behind her back, and say a prayer in the morning and at the end of every class.

***You know, it's like you're a machine that what I have to do, and there's no change in it, and I think this is the way things will go, if you don't get along with it. We don't learn that way. So you may forget about it.***

#### 4.3.5 Evelyn's Experiences

***Evelyn describes school- I loved it (school). I remember loving it all, it was easy-going, and everything was new; I absolutely hated it when we moved.***

This was Evelyn's description of her experience of transitioning into primary school, and it appears that it was successful. However, she reported that even at this young age, she was incredibly shy and did not like to stand up in front of the class to speak. At seven, her parents moved from social housing and bought their own home.

For Evelyn, this meant a double transition seeing her move from her familiar neighbourhood into a new home and change schools. First, as you can see, she described her old school as new and loved it. Then her environment changed then considerably.

***'The school was more academic, and we did Irish, and it was bet into us; it was the nuns, and I hated it. It was strict; the teacher was at the top of the class, and we were all sitting down at those old desks. I never like any of that'***

This transition marked the end of childhood, and having responsibility rested upon her above her years. She described how she had to tidy the house, cook meals and look after her siblings.

#### 4.4 Theme 3: The Importance of Relationships

In this next section, I outline the findings regarding relationships and their significance for each participant.

##### 4.4.1 Anne's Experiences

Anne's experience joyfully recounts ' I was excited you know you were moving away from being a baby into the big school and because we had to get the bus down to school it was like going on a journey, it was just going to be amazing and we were being trusted in getting the bus down and going to school every day, yes I remember feeling so excited to be starting '.

However, the reality told was a particularly harrowing experience in which one teacher took what can only be described as an obscene dislike for Anne and made her life, as she described, ' hell '. This story recounted over a decade ago remained as viscerally painful as if it happened only yesterday. She described her as Evil.

*She was just awful from day one. Never from day one did she leave me alone. She was evil-if I hadn't have met her; I would have done good in school, I would have stayed on. She was my year head too, so I couldn't escape.*

Anne would endure significant hardship under the watch of her year head. This hardship lasted for three years. Anne also recounted how she tried hard to please this teacher. Here she describes one such attempt; *everything was just never good enough, even if I tried my hardest to be nice to her; I remember I brought her a present one Christmas, and she wouldn't take it off me. She told me to bring it home. I don't know if I was trying to manage or resolve conflict or something, like did I do something that made her not kind of like me? I think it was a cup or a pen holder or something and it had the best teacher, you know these things, as I said maybe if I bring this in Mam, things might get a little bit better, she said ye you can try it, and she told me to bring it home, she wasn't allowed take presents, but she took presents off everyone else.*

Anne recounted many events throughout her time at school.

*There was always essays coming back or work coming back, just look at the scruff of that writing, ye and you know, it was just like there was nothing ever good enough. I know there was loads of good stuff, I know I didn't fail school cause I passed my junior cert, but it's just that stuff that sticks with me, like ya know her always sending home notes that I didn't do this or I didn't do that when it would*



*be done, but it wouldn't be done to her standard, or something like do you know, everything was just never good enough even if I tried my hardest to be nice to her.*

All that Anne recounted was not painful. She also had some positive experiences. For example, she described how she loved music.

*I used to love Wednesdays and Mondays; it was like music day, and I knew I had a doubler on Monday and Wednesday; we got a half day, and the last class was music, and I was always happy coming out of school on a Wednesday you know music was the last class.*

She also describes her music teacher warmly. Although she describes not remembering his name, the memory of this positive experience stays with Anne. Some of these memories are outlined below.

*He used to turn on the opera music all the time and turn on like Beethoven and all in the class and he used to tell you to sit there, close your eyes, and just listen to music. It's just so relaxing when you went into his class, and then he'd tell you to do the exercises and what notes did you think where at a certain time.*

*He would ask if can you write you own bit of music from what you listened to, you know what notes you thought was that you had listened to and you would play them on the piano like you know, and if it sounded good he would say 'oh we will keep that one. One of the girls was brilliant, she was an amazing singer and piano player, and he always used to pair us up together, so I always knew this was going to be great, you know, cause she is brilliant at everything. You know I loved music, it was brilliant and maths.*

Music was not the only subject Anne enjoyed; she also describes enjoying Maths and Business studies. However, the memories always come back to her year head. She described how she coped at the time as *'I just floated through'*.

Anne described how she had decided not to return to school after the Junior Cert.

*I had it in my head and told myself; I am not doing this anymore; I am not going back; I am going to stay working*

Anne left school after her third year.

#### **4.4.2 Barbra's experiences**

Barbra did not identify or report any specific relationships that helped or hindered her experience in primary or secondary school. Instead, what was found was Barbra's ingenuity and resilience in the face of the lack of resources. These were her ability to source alternative experiences that supported what she was good at. For example, she took a term to attend dance school instead of a transition year. She also found employment in school in areas that she enjoyed, like being a children's entertainer.

It was found that because the school Barbra attended did not meet her needs and support her with her additional need, she decided to leave school.

Barbra left school in 5<sup>th</sup> year.

#### **4.4.3 Cara's Experiences**

**Cara's** experience gave some insights into her relationships with her teachers.

Cara did not recount a specific relationship in primary school that stood out, but she did describe her relationship with the school librarian.

*We used to have that library van outside our school every Wednesday. And we would go there, and there was a lovely old lady, I remember that. And she would give you a little library card. She was very supportive; she welcomed you in and ensured you could get home with a card or a book. She asked what books you liked, and she kept a book; if she didn't have it, she would keep it there for the following week. So this was nice, I thought.*

Concerning her secondary experience and her relationships, there were poor primarily but with one exception.

*My English teacher actually took a particular interest in me. He gave me the Lemony Snicket collection and I loved that, and the series of unfortunate events and ever since then everything, ye I love reading.*

Although this appears to be the extent of her experiences of positive relationships during her secondary schooling with just one teacher.

This environment made it difficult for Cara to learn; even when she tried and spoke up to the teacher, she was called names like 'teacher's pet'. In addition, Cara found it hard to concentrate. It was found that a culmination of these factors led to Cara deciding to leave school.

*I decided I am leaving I am going to go off and get a job, and I left and I got a job working in Dunnes Stores, and worked in supermarkets and stuff and kept going. I didn't go back. I didn't even try. I wanted to leave that school behind me - But my mind was made I was young and silly.*

Cara left school after 3<sup>rd</sup> year.

#### 4.4.4 Dara's Experience

Dara's experiences describe a positive experience with her teacher in the third and fourth classes.

*In primary, in the 3rd and 4th classes, they were okay. We had a teacher that did a lot of singing, so she used to play the guitar. I have really fond memories of those two years that was really good and interactive; she was very creative; I have a lot better memories as she had a lot of time for each of us, you know, you will get it, don't worry if we didn't know.*

Converse to this experience described, it was found that Dara's experiences of secondary school consisted of mistreatment, fear, and not feeling safe. Despite citing being able, academically, there appears to be another overriding factor of no one in her corner, no one to champion her ability. The resulting factor, unfortunately, was disengagement

*I just didn't have a good experience with the teachers; I had very, very strict ones and just didn't seem to have time to give each student what they needed, you know, and if you didn't know something, you would be kind of scolded, you'd be terrified ask a question you know.*

*'I got into the second year, it was like going back to first class, I'm gone. I couldn't. I just finished 3rd year. I done my JC (and I was pushed) and as soon as I done that i said that was it'.*

What was interesting was that Dara described how she missed most of third year and still managed to finish her exams and receive six honours and two passes.

She described how school was supposed to be a safe space but did not feel safe.

*'If you got something wrong or you done something you weren't supposed to you were screamed at, or belittled in front of people. I don't know if it was that some of them are nuns, I don't know '.*

She also describes how, although her parents said they did not wish her to leave school, they offered no encouragement or support.

Dara left school after her 3rd year.

#### **4.4.5 Evelyn's Experience**

Evelyn's experiences echoed similar experiences and articulated her memories of the relationships with some teachers, including episodes of verbal abuse, shouting, scolding, and belittling if a student got an answer wrong.

*'If teachers shouted or started giving out, I just switched off; I was definitely not gonna listen.'*

She described her disengagement as having commenced in primary school. A perpetuating factor was the extreme anxiety she experienced around standing up and speaking in front of the class and her relationship with her teachers.

*'They (the nuns) would demand that you stand up and say your piece, follow the book, and read out your lines. I remember being so nervous and mixing it up because I was standing up, and everyone was looking at me more so that I did not know the words. It was like a blur that scared me for everything, reading and learning- I'd rather not be in school then cause I knew that would be the day I would have to stand up and read or stand up and do something '.*

The secondary school findings show that Evelyn ended up in what she describes as the second lowest class. Here she received little attention and described the class as a messing class. However, the teachers appeared to be more

understanding of her anxiety about reading in front of the class. However, she still remembers what she was told-

*'I was always told I could do better and knuckle down, but I didn't knuckle down. You are never going to amount to anything.'*

However, the crux came for Evelyn regarding paying for her leaving cert. Her mother indicated that Evelyn could pay for her leaving cert exams because she was working part-time. This appears to have annoyed and hurt Evelyn.

*'I was really annoyed. I was like, and I don't want to pay; I didn't even want to do it. What am I paying for? And me, Boss, said don't do it then come and work here full time? Don't do it. See you later, leaving school, I am gone '.*

She describes how no one was pushing her, and when she told her parents that she was leaving school, they responded with apathy.

Evelyn left school in her sixth year.

#### 4.5 Theme 4: Return to Education and the Support of a Significant Adult

Another finding from the thematic analysis was the women's return to education. Four participants had entered third-level education; four completed degrees at levels 7 and 8, and one woman subsequently completed a Master's degree. The other woman engaged with accredited training such as QQI level 5 and 6. There were varied reasons for the return to education, which the findings are outlined below;

#### 4.5.1 Anne's experience

Anne cited fear of being unable to give her children what they needed- *it dawned on me I could not stay here, and I have nothing to fall back on* (education). Anne returned to education with a level 5 course in social care. Anne excelled in this course achieving distinctions in all her modules. She was encouraged by the course facilitators to apply to a Third Level institution. Having been accepted to study at the university, she completed this with a first-class honours degree and then did a Master's Degree. Anne cites the influence of the facilitators in her success;

Anne described the two facilitators as earth angels- *' we just connected, and they listened to my story; nothing was ever a problem; it was just an amazing experience. But, obviously, it was hard at the start to adjust; it was like you had to use your laptop all the time, and my spelling was atrocious, and you know, they showed me all the little tips and tricks '*.

Even when things became uncertain with childcare and Anne thought she would have to drop out

*Their motto was ' the door is always open; all you have to do is knock' so I could knock at the door once a week, or I could knock at the door every day, you know, and then things happened with the creche where the kids couldn't go before school, so we had to start in the course at 9:30, but the kids didn't start school till 9:20 so when it happened that the bus couldn't bring them to school, I had to say to them look, I am not going to be able to start at 9:30 so if you want to give someone else the place? No, not at all; come in at 10; you're after telling us it was everything, nothing was ever a problem, if something came up, we would work*

*around it, don't worry. So there was never any barrier; there was always a solution to everything, do you know?*

She also described how she read her first proper book as part of a college assignment.

*'My god should I even be here (University)- but it was amazing the first book I ever read from cover to cover ever, sat and actually read it from front to back.'*

This experience she described as giving her purpose, more than just 'a mammy'.

*'You get stuck in a vicious cycle – they call you in (social welfare), telling you are useless, yet you cannot work, and they brand you and put you in a box. Being a lone parent, you have no childcare and it's a vicious cycle and you cannot get out, they expect you not to be educated '.*

*Education opens up your mind to the barriers. We need to Un stigmatise supports, it's not even lone parents and it's the married women too.'*

The return to education had a transformative effect on Anne.

*'We need an education system to let (them/women) reach their potential. Not everyone wants to read books not everyone wants to learn how to write an essay. Let them do stuff that they feel good at, let them feel good about themselves.'*

#### **4.5.2 Barbra's Experience**

Barbra cited a drive to succeed in her career and acknowledged that qualifications led to success.

It was the influence of a work colleague that spurred her to seek out a third-level degree.



*'I made friends with a girl from Taiwan; she's 11 years older than me. So, she really had an impact on my life, you know. She explained about money, and I never knew about 'K' and how much 'K' you can earn a year. I never knew about salaries; we never learned about this in school how you know if you want to make this is what you need to do and I never learned like that in school it was just you need to do a leaving cert, and then you go to college, but there is no, nothing about money practical stuff. So she told me you need a degree to make this money. So that's the only reason I went back because of her and the promotions. I really liked it '.*

She described how returning to education would allow her to understand the business side of things. Barbra initially completed three PLCs before completing a level 8 programme with a 2.1 class degree. Describing her experience at third level, they're amazing; they have learning support too; they have a glass room and helped with my issues and dyslexia. This was the first time Barbra had consistent learning support.

#### **4.5.3 Cara's Experience**

Cara's return to education manifested after some time on social welfare.

However, she had a prior interest in this area, completing a period in an Early Learning and Care service during the transition year of secondary school. Cara completed QQI levels five and six in Early Childhood Care and Education.

*'Oh, I loved it; I liked that you got your work experience. And your training. Yeah. You got to do fieldwork and the classroom experience '.*

Cara has since left the workforce to care for her young daughter and does not rule out a further return to education.

***I would love to go back and continue.***

#### 4.5.4 Dara's Experience

Dara's experience unfolded when her third child was born with a condition requiring a period in the hospital with multiple surgeries. Dara had an epiphany; *'I think having my little girl. She fought for her life for months in the hospital. And I was like, you know what, she can actually get over what she's been through in her little life; oh, my God, I can get up off my arse and do something, you know '.*

She also revealed that the boys were starting to go down the wrong path, and she said *'I can't let them think that it's okay. So, I just went back and done a little course; it was only like a six-week computer course. So, yeah. And I just didn't stop. I think so; it's kind of when the light finally hit me; you know you need to do something for them and show them that there's other ways of being and life '.*

Dara spoke about the facilitator she encountered when she finally decided to return to education.

*'I remember she was just a nice nice girl that kind of; she was on the same level as the people in the classroom. But, you know, I just felt that she was able to talk to you, you know, you could be yourself. And just made you and the classes interesting. You felt welcome. Okay, and just getting supports, you know whether you know who you are kind of backed to be successful rather than be made feel stupid '.*

Dara went and completed a QQI level five and six and recently completed a degree in Community and Addiction Studies. Her boys have completed third-level education, and her daughter is reportedly doing well in school. When asked if she would go on to study more

*' So, I just finished a degree. I'd like to go off and do something else. I just don't know what yet I won't stop. But I don't think I'd ever stop '.*

Both of Dara's older children have gone on to third-level education.

#### **4.5.5 Evelyn's Experience**

Evelyn's narrative in her return to education was through the advent of technology and mobile phones, and she wanted to keep her children safe from harm.

*' I just know I really want to do it. So, it outweighed everything because I needed it; it was for the kids, going back to do a computer course. We got a computer, and they were flying on it. I said I'm gonna have to learn what this is, you know, I'm gonna have to see what's going on. I need to be able to know what they're doing '.*

She describes the encounters with her facilitators below;

*' I remember the very first one when I came in; it was a man. He was really, really understanding, and I was really, really slow and had loads of time for everybody. And yeah, it was so good. Then there was Susie. And I was just in love with Susie. She was the nicest she was; Susie from here was the only one who properly encouraged me to go on. So, when I found things difficult, she would say like of course you can do it '.*

Evelyn went on to complete some computer and business courses and has recently completed a degree. Of her three children, all have completed their education, with two completing third-level degrees and the third an apprenticeship.

## 4.6 Post Leaving School Experiences

In this next section, I outline each participant's findings after they left school. The key findings were: access to employment was relatively easy; most had children (discussed in the next section of literacy child-rearing practices); some experienced life-changing events; and, more significantly, all returned to education.

### 4.6.1 *Access to Employment*

In this period after leaving school, all participants had access to employment either before the decision to leave or immediately after. There does not appear to have been the same level of disruption to the participants during this transition. These were jobs in retail, hair and hospitality. Some of the women had two jobs.

### 4.6.2 *Life Altering Events*

One of the findings from the participants was the occurrence of what can be described as life-altering events. These consisted of an assault, an experience of domestic violence and homelessness, an unfortunate injury, an unplanned pregnancy and a life-threatening disease.

**Anne** was the victim of a vicious assault that left her with a skull fracture. She described how she went off the rails and manifested behaviours resulting in an unplanned pregnancy.

*'My life went off the rails a bit, I was told- if I hadn't been drinking, it wouldn't have happened (the assault); then I got pregnant at 17 for all the messing around I did.'*

Anne also experienced the death of her sister, and her marriage ended.

**Dara** experienced domestic violence, sending her into homelessness to escape with her two young children. Dara would spend the next 15 years waiting for a new home. She subsequently was rehomed and went on to have another child.

**Barbra** sustained an injury that would keep her from pursuing her ambition of being a dancer, but this pushed her along other paths of opportunity and education.

**Evelyn** was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease not long after she re-entered education. Finally, after a few years of treatment, she could return to education with a full bill of health.

## 4.7 Literacy Child Rearing Practices

All of the participants had children except one. Each describes their children and wanting a better life for them as impetus to their decision to return to education. This section looks at what was found in the data when the mothers described their attitudes and practices towards the early literacy experiences they provided for their children.

### 4.7.1 *Anne's Experience*

Anne describes how *' I was mammy from the day I had my baby and felt like I had a role now. All my kids are book mad. So, this is their room up here (points to the ceiling and the room above us), and the wall is the full length here to the chimney breast, and they had to turn all the wall into shelves, and all that side is just full of books, there are books everywhere. Any book they will read it. I remember the little baby book things, but I cannot say that I said, come on, it's story time, I didn't do that with them, you know, it was more about singing a song, and we had songs that we sang rather than stories that we read like do you know ' . What was surprising was the role her mother, the children's grandmother, played in*

bringing books into the home. Anne recounts how *' their treat from nanny was when we went over to the charity shop, and they used to sell books 10 for 2 euros, so they got 2 euros. So, if they went in with 2 euros, they came out with 10 things, not just one thing, and that's kinda how it started with R; when he was smaller, all these books just kept on being brought home, just bags and bags of books. Now it's just kind of, C has all the Harry Potter books, and he loves the storyline-type books. They just love them; D is more of a comic book with pictures; he would read a little bit, but he wouldn't be interested in reading a story kind of book, and E the Dork Diaries is her latest thing now, so she's going through all of them at the minute, R Guinness book of records all these types of books, he read the Harry Potters as well when he was younger but kind of drifted away from that like, you know, so he loves all that kind of action kind of stuff '.*

#### **4.7.2 Cara's Experience**

Cara described how she *'wants her (daughter) to get into reading definitely, and I have loads of books downstairs and a little books station for her, a little light she can switch on, and a little table and chairs beside it '.* Having also described her experience with the librarian in her childhood, Barbra expressed an interest in bringing her daughter to the library. Barbra also described how she enrolled her daughter in a book gifting programme where she receives a book in the post every month.

*' Sometimes (read to her), but she's very young. So, I take down the books that you can feel, you know. They have to be colourful books, and I leave them around; if she wants to read them, she can, they are easily accessible to her, or sometimes she takes them out. You will see her sitting there turning and looking at the pages, so I do be delighted with that. I will definitely get her into reading. I sing to her*

*every night before she goes to bed ye. I sing Twinkle, twinkle, and stuff like that, and she loves the actions of it. It gets the imagination going, doesn't it '?*

### **4.7.3 Dara's Experience**

*When asked whether she reads to her children, Dara's response was, ' always, and they all love reading; yeah, my daughter just doesn't go to bed without having her book; she loves books. I remember reading to them at about three or four, and my daughter was the exact same; they just liked the interaction and sitting down in the evening with the story, so yeah '.*

*Dara's situation was particularly challenging as she disclosed that she spent many years homeless with her children. She described the difficulties ' it got harder then and then as we were going through homeless accommodation, you couldn't bring your stuff, your moving every few weeks and you lose books, that was hard*  
*But I kind of encouraged it and always bought her books the same when they started school, but it got harder then and then as we went through homeless accommodation, you couldn't bring your stuff, you know? Yeah, yeah. You are moving every few weeks, and you lose books, which is hard. Yeah. You just couldn't do what you wanted to do '.*

### **4.7.4 Evelyn's Experience**

*Evelyn described in her interview how she would always stay home with her children. She didn't want them to experience the responsibilities put upon her as a young girl. Regarding literacy practices with her children, Evelyn describes how ' we always had a bedtime story for the kids; one or other of us would read a story to them. We always bought books for them. I always encouraged them to read, probably cuz I didn't have it '.* Evelyn also described the encyclopaedias she had as a child and how her own children had read and used them. *'My kids have gone*

*through it (the encyclopaedia). We still have it like my baby, who is now 16, and he has read them; I still have them; I won't get rid of them; they are in a box in the attic. All my children used them.*



## 5 Discussion

These stories are not unique; it's just that there has never been a platform for these amazing women to tell their stories

(Lizzo 2022)

The findings show that the most reported and powerful earliest literacy experiences for the participants were observing an adult reading in the home, being read to, and having access to books or gifted books in early childhood. The findings also clearly show the role of significant adults in supporting or adversely impacting participants' educational experiences and feelings of self-worth and inclusion in the education system. Primary school was generally a positive experience, but as participants reached middle childhood and older, the effect of teachers and parents on participants was incredibly impactful concerning whether participants felt supported to engage in and attend school. The importance of these findings is explored in this chapter.

### 5.1 Earliest Literacy Experiences

The main findings have shown some common aspects among participants in describing their earliest literacy experiences. A key finding was the positive impact of being read to or observing someone reading at home and having access to books at home.

It is striking that most of the participants, through the open-ended discussion, focused on describing their memories of observing someone close to them read. The intensity varied between stories; however, participants discussed these memories in their interviews. Some of the relationships described by the women elicit a narrative of warmth or closeness to the person in question. For example, Anne describes a close relationship with her grandfather and sister in the context of the experiences shared through reading; Cara describes a mother who actively encouraged and fostered a love of reading from an early age. Both also describe how those who encouraged their involvement in early literacy experiences also enjoyed and were observed modelling reading themselves.

For the other women, the narrative was quite different. There was no apparent encouragement of reading within the immediate contexts of the relationships described. For example, Dara recounts how she observed her mother reading in the evening and had a pile of books beside her bed; however, she also recounted how reading was never encouraged among the children. Dara also describes a problematic relationship with her father, who would often get angry and annoyed with the children if things were not done to his liking. Evelyn does not describe anyone she observed reading at home; however, her parents bought books from the book club. Although Evelyn does not describe her parents as readers, they (the parents) appear to value having books in the home by demonstrating this in their participation in the book club. With Barbra, there are also no explicit memories of seeing someone close to her read, but she was the only participant who describes having read bedtime stories read to her; she describes this as a 'thing'.

In looking at the literature, experience, according to Dewey (2011, p. 78), can be understood through a combination of active and passive elements; that is, when we experience something, we do something with it. So, Dewey (1997, p. 139) says, 'we do something with the thing, and then, in turn, it does something to us in return'. It is the combination of elements that influences us. He calls it the 'two principles of continuity and interaction,' also known as the experiential continuum. Kim (2016, p. 70) further explores the 'experiential continuum' in which every experience builds up from previous experience and modifies the quality of the experiences that come after. So, for example, these early literacy experiences of being read to or seeing someone engaged in reading are significant and often embedded in the conscious or unconscious self. Dewey believed that the principle of the experiential continuum was to discriminate between what experiences are worthwhile.

Thus we can infer from the retelling of early literacy experiences that the participants viewed these experiences as worthwhile. Dewey proposes that experience modifies the formation of an attitude (in this case, a positive attitude) towards the habit (in this case, literacy behaviours) and the experience for that person or individual. In the findings reported here, it could be inferred that for each participant, the habit of being exposed to observing someone reading or being read to leads to the formation of a positive attitude toward the experience.

This concept includes the availability or gift of books, for example, Evelyn's experiences with encyclopaedias. This is a positive association between the experience and the habit. Other examples include Anne's experience of her grandfather and sister reading to her habitually, which led to a positive attitude to those experiences over time. For Barbra, the habit of bedtime stories can also be attributed to its inclusion in her interview.

Dewey (p. 12) says that habit, in this instance, the experience of being read to, observing someone reading, and the experience of gifting a book or books being repeatedly used, is interpreted biologically. Queensland Brain Institute (2018) states that our memories are inextricably linked with our identities. There are also several types of memories, some of which are fleeting and others that last a lifetime. It is these memories that have lasted a lifetime for the participants.

Bus et al. (1995) and Jiménez-Pérez et al. (2022) describe how parents' interest in books creates an orientation within the home towards books, and they also ascribe that this influence was reinforced through shared book reading with the child. This was indeed a necessary experience for Cara. She observed her mother reading and was read to regularly. It was also confirmed that the role of the extended family was crucial in Anne's experience with her grandad and sister. This is in keeping with national literature in Ireland, whereby grandparents have been found to play a vital role in young children's early learning (Williams et al. 2013). However, the role of siblings in reading is less researched and is an area worthy of further investigation in qualitative research on early literacy experiences.

Though the intensity of early literacy experiences varied across participants, some experience was common to all. For example, in Dara's experience, she does not report being read to; however, she powerfully recounts observing her mother reading regularly. In Evelyn's experience, she does not report being read to nor observing someone in the household reading. However, the literary orientation was evident in her parents' investment in purchasing encyclopedias for their children.

These narratives around experiences with books support the primarily quantitative, both correlational and causal, literature on the role of books and shared reading in children's language development (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, &

Pellegrini, 1995; Harte & Risley, 1995; Neuman, 1996; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994; Burgess, 2009; Murray & Harrison, 2011; Leech, McNally, Daly & Corriveau, 2022).

In exploring access to books, we know that the availability of the attuned caregiver supports that attachment. If the child is more securely attached, they are more likely to explore their environment (Bowlby, 1973). They do this because they feel safe. This supports positive dispositions and learning, thus promoting social-emotional, cognitive and physical development. Though I did not explicitly investigate the relationships between the participants and their primary caregivers (i.e. mothers), the narratives of each woman indicate a generally positive relationship.

Literary orientation could be seen as the culture within the home, which connects with what Super and Harkness (1986) say about the developmental niche theory. This theory, they say, is influenced by three elements: the physical and social environment in which the child lives, the customs of childcare and child rearing and finally, the psychology of the caretakers. These three elements are what they describe as subsystems that come together to interact with the family's culture as a whole. Super and Harkness (2004, p. 117, in Eldering & Leesman) propose that the developmental niche framework asserts that regularities in both the physical and social settings of daily life and customs or practices of care carry cultural meanings that are evident to the growing child. It is this acquisition of cultural knowledge that they say gives power to those cultural messages that are inherent in those events. It could be argued that those cultural messages through not only the shared book reading but the availability of books in the home (albeit minimal) and the observation of a significant person reading regularly are potent influences for children concerning their long-term attitudes and practices relating to literacy. It was evident in each situation that there was a literary orientation within these women's homes. This was very strong for Anne Cara and Barbra; for Dara and Barbra, it was less evident.

## 5.2 The School Experience: Transitions and the Role of Significant Others

The interviews showed that participants did not link early literacy experiences to their schooling experiences. Literacy skills were a critical factor in the later school

experiences of some participants, but the early experiences at home were not discussed in the context of later schooling experiences.

The importance of transitions was a standard feature of school and education for most participants, although the types of transitions and the timing of the transitions varied between participants. Also evident within these transitions were the relationships the participants encountered with their teachers during this time. Again, there were variances between experiences that were positive and ones that were much less so.

The women described such experiences as missing their mothers (transition from home to school), moving houses and then schools during their primary school years. All are significant transitions in the life context. The theme of transitions emerged in the analysis and was not anticipated in the study's literature review. Thus it is considered in this chapter for the first time. According to Peters (2010), although children make many transitions in their lives, the move to school has important implications for their learning and is, therefore, worthy of particular attention. The importance of smooth transition outlined below is a critical determinant in how a child settles into the new environment and thrives. An environment of discontinuities that does not make a child feel welcome or belong within the environment creates a stressful situation that makes learning difficult. In this context, arguably, whatever emergent literacy practices are embedded before the transition to school, the impact of a problematic transition could create a discontinuity in the emergent literacy process. If a child is in coping mode or stressed, this impacts the child's learning ability. It was evident in the findings that this transition was difficult for many participants, particularly for Dara, who only cited positive experiences from the third and fourth classes.

Transitions are a complex field of theory and research, dealing with the change process in the life context (Niesel and Griebel in Dunlop, 2006). However, much research (Margetts, 2007, Brostrom et al., 2010; Kagan, 2010; Ladd & Price, 1987; Kagan & Neuman, 1998) suggests that the successful transition to school and social context can be critical determinants in future development and progress. Indeed, it could be said that the skills to navigate life's journey through major and minor transitions is essential. Some children appear to have the ability to manage

these transitions well. However, for those who do not, it can manifest in negative behaviours as a mechanism to cope with the situation.

According to Vogler and colleagues (2008), transitions (i.e. key events and processes occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course) are generally linked to changes in a person's appearance, activity, status, roles, and relationships, as well as associated changes in the use of physical and social space and changing contact with cultural beliefs, discourses and practices, especially where these are linked to changes of setting and in some cases dominant language. For the participants, the transition to primary school brought about significant challenges. For example, for Anne, the change in appearance for her when she needed to wear glasses and an eye patch; for Cara, the change in relationships when she cited missing her mother.

The literature also describes two types of transitions, horizontal and vertical (Vogler et al., 2008, Kagan & Neuman, 1998). This notion of vertical transitions demonstrates the more significant changes for children, for example, when moving from the familiar home to the school environment. On the other hand, horizontal transitions are those small transitions within the construct of the vertical transitions and often go unnoticed. An example would be moving from one activity to another or moving to the yard for break time. It was the horizontal transition that presented challenges for the participants.

Corsaro (1996, p. 419) foregrounds the importance of children's environments and home life in saying, 'the habitual taken for granted character of routines provides actors with the security and shared understanding of belonging to a social group.' So one would argue that the transition from the habitual routine of home life to a change of setting, i.e., primary school, and then subsequent horizontal transitions, including change in social status, activity, and roles within that environment, can be unsurprisingly challenging. Another research element outlined in the literature, though not the focus of this study, is the relationship between developmental readiness and each participant's temperament and characteristics... Nevertheless, we know that for the participants' there was evidence of what Vogler et al. described as changes in a person's appearance, activity, status, roles, and relationships, as well as associated changes in the use of physical and social space.

In returning to what Corsaro (1996, p. 419) says about the importance of children's environments and home life, 'the habitual taken for granted character of routines provides actors with the security and shared understanding of belonging to a social group.' It is arguable that where there was habitual exposure to books in the home or experiencing someone reading habitually within the home, it could present an opportunity to promote security and belonging as part of the transition process in providing for that continuity in the school context. However, it is also possible that the difficulty in transition for some of the participants was that they had a shared understanding of belonging to the social group that was their family and then had to move beyond the familiar into the unfamiliar of the school context. This can create significant uncertainty and stress for a young child. If that child is then met with an adult who is not attuned to their needs in this situation and helps them to regulate, this further compounds the situation.

The relationships described by the participants during the school years emerge as another key feature. Again, there were some positive experiences but equally challenging relationships with teachers. Remarkably, an educational disadvantage is described in the Education Act 1998 as the 'impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools'. I would argue that some participants were prevented from deriving appropriate benefits from education within the school. The place where they should have felt safe became where they felt unsupported and afraid.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1996) spoke about the reciprocal interaction between individuals and environments; incorporating persons, objects, and symbols are defined as a proximal process; it is these proximal processes or positive interactions that they say contribute towards positive outcomes for children. The proximal processes between a mother (or other primary caregivers) and child are arguably the most significant. (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998 p. 815). Proximal processes in school between children and peers and between children and teachers are also very important. This was reflected in the interviews where teachers and peers were seen to have a substantial impact on the participants' school experiences as children.

A child who has experienced a secure attachment is more likely to expect security and responsivity with others (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 816). It can be true of teachers, so when this does not happen, the effect it has on the internal working model of that child can be disruptive. Indeed, if a child already has a poor working model of themselves, they may not believe that they are worthy of responsivity in another context, and this can then be confirmed to them through ambivalence and shouting, as was experienced by many of the participants. They described how they wanted to feel invisible and eventually switched off.

Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) proposed that the dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience shapes human development, and this unfolds only through continuities and discontinuities in life. One can view this as stability versus instability. It is not only the experiences, but the people and relationships experienced that shape who we are, how we can manage the stability, and, more importantly, the instability.

Also relevant here is what Harding and colleagues (2015) cite as cultural capital. They describe educational gatekeepers (Teachers) as recognising and valuing individuals who prefer high culture activities and display high linguistic and behavioural ability levels. It is possible that because Anne was from a particular area and spoke in a particular way, that did not conform to what this teacher viewed as good enough. This placed Anne as an outsider and fits with Bourdieu's (1986) articulation of cultural capital as elitist or classist in that schools and institutions value such privilege.

However, it is in the small moments of interaction with just one person who appears to be enough to build on their emotional, social and human capital, and that is enough to carry them through what Dewey calls the dead spaces.

There is significant evidence that most of the school-going population stays in school longer, with 97% staying in education until the end of upper secondary school (CSO, 2022). And the rate of early school leaving is down to 3%; however, that still indicates a number of women who are not having their educational needs met. This is the cohort that this research represents. Byrne and Smyth (2009) found in their study of predominantly working-class students that the push of negative experiences led to their decision to leave school. Eivers et al. (2000) agree to cite students' experiences as a significant predictor of early



school leaving. The cascade of negative transitions and relationships transferred into a self-fulfilling prophecy, and each woman left their education.

Another contributing factor cited in the literature around early school leaving is literacy ability. The scale of literacy difficulties in Ireland is outlined by O'Donnell and McPhillips (2018, p. 4) and the ESRI (Weir & Kavanagh, 2018), the latter noting a gap in achievement between those children in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage. Also found in the GUI survey (2019) also found that children in the lowest quintile for reading at age 9 were at higher risk of leaving school early. However, in the findings, there were only two participants who described their difficulties with literacy, that being Barbra, who had a diagnosed disability and Cara, who described her positive experience of receiving learning support. None of the other participants raised early literacy difficulties as negatively impacting their schooling experience. Also evident was that Dara had described herself as being able and, despite having missed most of the school during her third year, she successfully passed her Junior Certificate. So in this instance, it cannot be said that the participant's literacy ability impacted their schooling experience or their decision to leave school early.

### 5.3 Child-rearing literacy practices

Although the literature points to maternal education as the strongest predictor for children's academic outcomes, above and beyond the contribution of demographic and income/deprivation-related variables (Harding, 2015; Kealy, *Nd*; Harding et al., 2015; McNally et al. (2019), this research demonstrates that these women who had left school early and had lower levels of education, provided rich home learning environments for their children.

In this study, the four participants who had children described how books were an important element of their children's lives. Anna described her mother's influence on her grandchildren's enjoyment of books. It could be said that the modelling of Anna's grandfather around his enjoyment of books and sharing and focusing on this with his grandchildren did not go unnoticed by Anna's mother. Indeed it appears she replicated this with her grandchildren. The literature

reflects this in finding that contact with grandparents, positively affected the home learning environment (Williams et al., 2013, p. 57), highlighting the role of grandparents in the early experiences of young children. Anna reports that her children are 'book mad'.

Cara also described how she wanted her daughter to love books and how she had many books and would bring her to the library. Cara also described a book programme she signed her daughter up for, where she received a book a month delivered to her home. Dara describes how she always read to her children. She described it as reciprocal in that she encouraged it and was prompted by the children to read. This was particularly challenging for Dara as she and her children had been subject to domestic violence and homelessness, but despite this kept reading and buying books. Evelyn described too how she always encouraged her children to read and bought books for them. She also cited that a bedtime story was part of a routine; she pointed out that she did not have this experience. Evelyn also described how she would stay at home for her children because she did not have this experience with both her parents working outside the home.

This provides qualitative evidence supporting research indicating that early shared reading and other literacy activities, such as taking trips to the library and buying books, are essential for children's literacy values (Dickenson McCabe, 2001). Furthermore, this study suggests that it is not enough to protect children from adverse outcomes such as leaving school early but that that early literacy environment becomes embedded and replicated in the parenting practices of those children when they grow up. So these attitudes and practices are passed on intergenerationally.

## 5.4 Return to Education

The theme of returning to education emerged in the analysis and was not anticipated in the study's literature review. Thus, it is considered in this chapter for the first time. Moreover, returning to education appears to affect their children's trajectory in education positively. For example, among four participants in the study, three reported that all of their children had completed their second-level education. And several had gone on to third-level education. Indeed, researchers such as Zhang (2022), who explored the relationship between the cumulative effect of maternal human capital and their children's outcomes,

obtained robust findings on children's general health, mental health, and cognitive ability. However, Zhang also cited that this phenomenon has not been well explored in the research context and warrants further investigation.

In looking at Harding et al. (2015) again, their framework assesses the relationship between maternal education and children's academic outcomes and explores the complex relationship between both. They integrate human, cultural, and social capital theories with two developmental psychology theories. The first is the developmental niche theory, proposed by Super and Harkness (1994) and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory. Their work is a significant piece of writing relevant to this research. It explores the complexity of maternal education's effect on children's academic outcomes but potentially creates a lens to which early experiences can also be attributed.

Concerning human capital, this is said to be where skills and knowledge contribute to capabilities that make that person more productive; and according to Schultz (1961, p. 1), this is a deliberate endeavour. Harding et al. propose that completing education is the most formal way of developing skills and knowledge; therefore, there is a confluence between educational attainment and human capital. Therefore, it was a deliberate endeavour for each woman to return to education. However, one cannot say whether this coincided with or explained their attitudes and behaviours towards their literary orientation with their children. Heckman and Mosso (2014, p. 56) agree with the hypothesis that maternal knowledge bolstered by education is a critical factor in explaining the number of activities in which their children are involved. For the women in this thesis, this was not the case. Instead, it was the experience of literacy at home and their reflections on the impact of adverse educational experiences which drove a return to education and provided a book-rich environment for their children.

## 5.5 Limitations of the Study

As with any research, limitations need to be taken into consideration.

Unfortunately, there were several limitations concerning the timing of the research and the Covid 19 pandemic: this significantly affected data collection, especially the recruitment of participants and how those participants were interviewed.

Not knowing about their relationship with their primary caregivers is a limitation. Although, however, one might make an assumption based on the level of detail described, this was not captured and is worthy of further investigation.

Another limitation was not asking about reading for pleasure; it would have been informative to know if they enjoyed reading or being read to. However, again one can infer from some of the conversations that it was enjoyable; for example, in Cara's and Anne's situations, you get a sense of enjoyment, but for Barbra and the others, there is less of a sense or no sense at all. Reading for pleasure in middle childhood has been established as an important variable in predicting literacy skills and academic attainment in later childhood (Sullivan and Brown, 2015).

Another limitation was not including questions exploring why the mothers engaged in the literacy practices they did with their children. For Evelyn, this information was volunteered; she said it was because she didn't have those experiences growing up and wanted her children to have those experiences. However, if motivations around current practices were explored, it would have provided more insight into the link between early literacy experiences and parenting literacy practices.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research aimed to answer three key research questions: What are the early literacy experiences of early school-leaving mothers? Do these experiences influence their school experience, particularly their early school leaving? And do those early literacy experiences affect, impact or shape their literacy practices with their young children?

This research found that the intensity of the early literacy experiences of the participants varied. Some had very scarce exposure and some richer experiences than others; however, they all had some exposure or experience of either being read to, observing someone reading regularly or having access to books. These appear to have been considered significant enough to stay with the participants and influenced their values around literacy.

Concerning the second question, participants did not identify early literacy experiences impacting their schooling experience or decision to leave school early. That is to say that early experiences were not protective against early school leaving, but these emerged as influential in how participants approached their literacy practices with their children. However, literacy and educational difficulties that emerged in school for some participants did impact early school leaving. In all situations, the role of supportive adults at crucial points in schooling made a substantial difference in returning to education in later life and dealing with adverse life events in adolescence and later life.

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## 6 Appendices

### Appendix A -Debriefing Material

Dear Participant, thank you so much for taking part in this research; your participation is greatly appreciated. If you feel you need any mental health/wellbeing and confidential support after taking part in this study, please see the supports you can access below. If you would like to gain further information about this research study you can contact me on the information below.

Once again thank you for your participation.

Best wishes Emma Reilly

Principal Investigator [emma.reilly45@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:emma.reilly45@mail.dcu.ie)

Samaritans	<p><a href="https://www.samaritans.org/ireland/branches/dublin/">https://www.samaritans.org/ireland/branches/dublin/</a></p> <p>Call Freephone 116 123</p> <p>Text: 087 2 60 90 90 (standard text rates apply)</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:jo@samaritans.ie">jo@samaritans.ie</a></p>
Aware	<p><a href="https://www.aware.ie/">https://www.aware.ie/</a></p> <p>Call 1800 80 48 48 (Mon- Sunday 10am till 10pm)</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:supportmail@aware.ie">supportmail@aware.ie</a> (expected response within 24hours)</p> <p>Offer support and self help groups</p>



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## Appendix B- Informed Consent

### **Research Study Title - 'I didn't finish school- an exploration into the early literacy experiences and experiences of early school leaving'.**

#### **Purpose of the Research**

This research is trying to find if there is a link between very early literacy experiences and experiences of schooling and early school leaving. The research will explore the earliest experiences of reading and exposure to books and what kind of influence these experiences may or may not have had on school experience. The research will also look at the events leading up to the decision to leave school and the impact this has had on the lives of the participants.

#### **Requirements of Participation in Research Study**

You will be asked to fill in a survey first. You will then meet with me for about an hour to discuss your early experiences of books and reading, and what school was like for you. We will also discuss the experience and events leading up to your decision to leave school. The interviews will be audio taped using a digital recorder and I will produce a written transcript. The interviews will last about one hour. Finally, you will be asked to take part in a focus group discussion with other people who have not completed their schooling. This will also be audio taped and a transcript produced. This is so I capture the conversations correctly.

#### **Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary.**

I am aware that if I agree to take part in this study, I can withdraw from participation at any stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

**Arrangements to protect confidentiality of data, including when raw data will be destroyed, noting that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.**

Every effort will be made to ensure that your identity will be protected but this cannot be guaranteed. It is unlikely that you will be identified as all details will be anonymised. This just means any potential identifying information will be changed so you cannot be identified. Your responses will not be seen by anyone other than me and my research supervisor. All information you provide is confidential however information provided can only be protected within the limitations of the law. All data collected will be stored safely in a locked press. Data from this study will be destroyed two years after the study is completed unless you are otherwise notified in writing. I will ask your consent if I would like to use the data for any other purpose.

**Participant – Please complete the following** (Circle Yes or No for each question).

- Have you read or had read to you the Plain Language Statement? Yes/No
- Do you understand the information provided? Yes/No
- Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes/No
- Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes/No

Signature: I have read and understood the information in this form. The researchers have answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Name in Block

Capitals: \_\_\_\_\_ Witness:

\_\_\_\_\_

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

## Appendix C - Plain Language Statement

### Plain language statement/Information Statement

1. Introduction Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. This means that you are happy to take part and understand what will be expected of you throughout the process. Outlined below is an explanation of why the research is being conducted and what will be expected of you if you decide to take part. However if at any point during the process you wish to stop taking part this is absolutely fine. The title of the research is 'I didn't finish school- an exploration into the experiences of early school leavers'. This research is being conducted by Emma Reilly as part of a research Masters in the School of Language Literacy and Early Childhood Education in DCU. Emma Reilly can be contacted at [emma.reilly45@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:emma.reilly45@mail.dcu.ie) she is supervised by Dr Sinead Mc Nally [sinead.mcnally@dcu.ie](mailto:sinead.mcnally@dcu.ie)
2. What is this research about? This research is about exploring the early literacy experiences and experience of education and schooling for those who have not completed their second level education. This involves looking at very early experiences with reading and books. The research would like to look the reasons and events that brought about the participant leaving school. The research will then explore the impact of early school leaving has had on their lives. It hopes to give a voice to those experiences and see what can be learned and how this might help others who find themselves in a similar situation.
3. Why is this research being conducted? The research is being conducted because there is little research available about the early literacy experiences of those who have not completed formal education and the impact it has had on their lives.
4. What will happen if the person decides to participate in the research study? If you decide to participate in the study you will be asked to do 3 things. Fill in a survey, participate in a focus group discussion and have a one on one discussion/interview. Both the focus group and the discussion/interview will be informal and somewhere you feel comfortable. There will be no right or wrong answers as it will focus on your experience, and if there are questions you do not wish to answer that is ok. I will record the sessions with an audio recorder, which

will last about 1 hour. This is so I can transcribe the conversation and remember all the details and capture what you are saying correctly.

5. Potential risks to participants from involvement in the Research Study (if greater than that encountered in everyday life) There are no serious risks beyond everyday life to participating in this study. However if your experience as been difficult it may be emotional or upsetting to revisit those experiences. I will make sure that you are directed to the most appropriate service to help you should the need arise.

6. Benefits (direct/ indirect) to participants from involvement in the Research Study. I cannot say whether participating in the research will benefit you. I do hope that by being able to tell your story and have someone listen in a non judgemental respectful way helps you feel heard. I hope that your involvement will help us understand the reasons why some people do not finish their schooling and the impact it has had on them. This I hope will potentially influence policy and perhaps more research that might benefit others in similar situations to you.

7. How will your privacy be protected? Your identity will be protected, as no names or identifying features (example school or names of other people) you discuss will be used.

8. How will the data be used and subsequently disposed of? Research and Innovation Support Last updated August 2018 Page 18 The survey and audio transcript of our conversations' will only be seen by me and my supervisor. The information will only be used for the intended use in this research. This information will be destroyed 2 years after the study has been completed, unless I write to you and ask your permission to use it in a further study.

9. How will participants find out what happens with the project? Once the study has been complete, I will make it available to you and will be happy to meet with you to discuss my findings if needed.

10. Contact details for further information (including REC contact details) If you have any concerns and would like to discuss them with someone other than myself you can contact REC Administration, Research Office, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9.

## Appendix D - Possible Interview Questions

Tell me who cared for you when you were young?

- Tell me about all the people who were important to you when you were younger?
- Where did you live? What was your neighbourhood like?
- Tell me about your early relationship with your parents/important people?
- Tell me about your earliest experiences of books or reading?
- Tell me about your earliest experience of Pre School and school?
- Tell me about your relationships with your teachers?
- Tell me about your experience of primary school and secondary school?
- Who were your friend like during this time, and what types of things did you do together?
- What did you enjoy?
- What did you find a challenge?
- Did you feel you could ask for help if you needed it?
- How did you feel about yourself when you were in school?
- What influenced you in your decision to leave school?
- How did you feel after leaving school?
- If you were giving someone advice about a similar situation to yours, what would you say to them?

## Appendix E - Recruitment advertisement for research participants

Did you leave school early? Would you like to participate in some research? My name is Emma and I am a student in Dublin City University. I am researching the experience of those who did not finish their secondary schooling and what that has been like? I would also like to ask about your early experiences of books and reading.

Did you leave school early? Would you like to talk to me about your experience?

What would you need to do?

This research involves having a conversation with me that would take about 1 hour to talk about your school experience and your experiences of books as a young child.

Then you might be asked to take part in a group discussion with others who also have also not completed their schooling. If you would like to find out more or take part in the research please contact me on

[emma.reilly45@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:emma.reilly45@mail.dcu.ie)

Thank you.