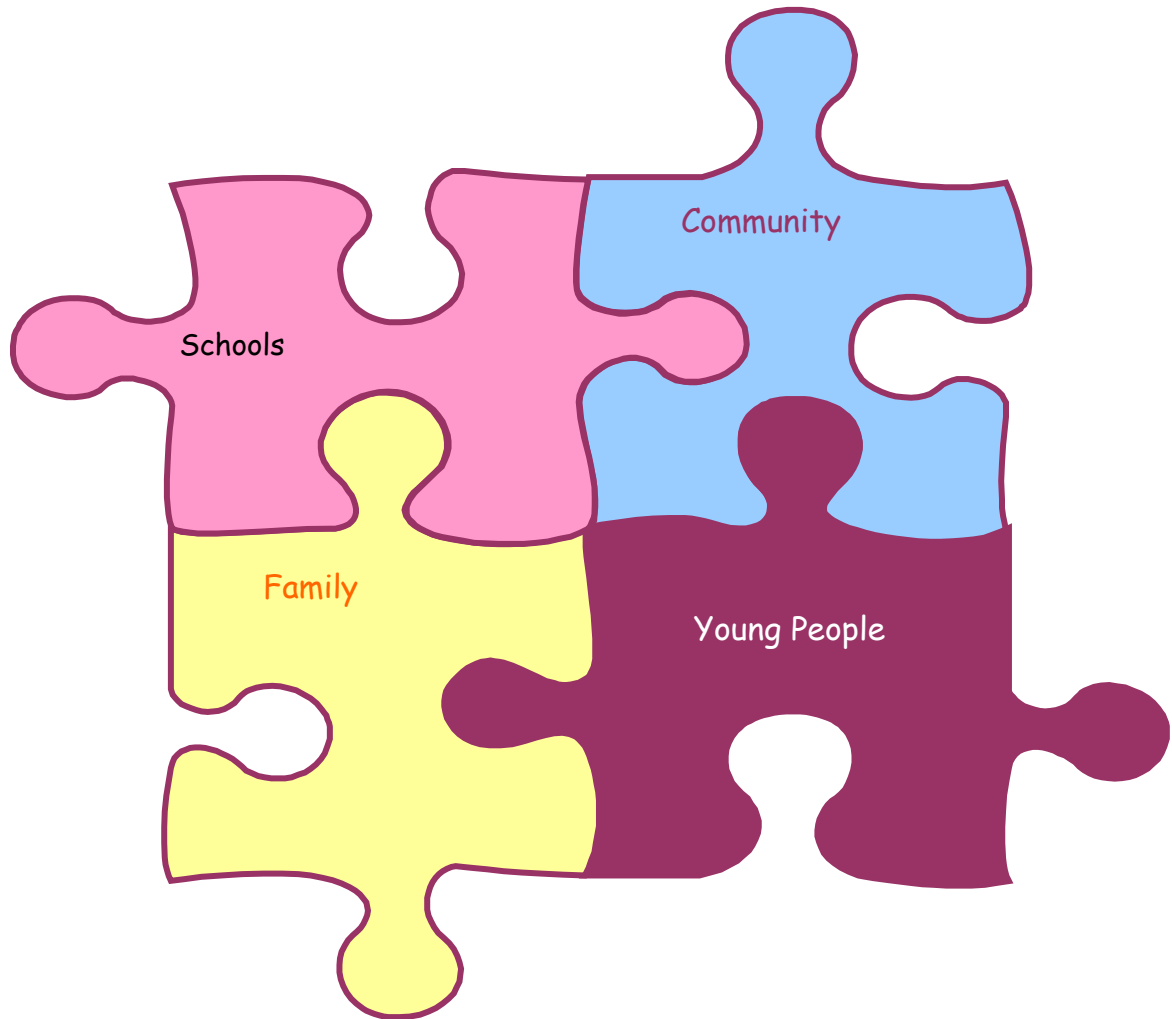


# Going to Secondary?

Creating Conditions to Support Young People to Make a Positive Transition from Primary to Post-primary School



**A Child-centred Action Research Report - Full Report**

**Sheila McArdle**

2006



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# PREFACE

Athlone Community Taskforce (ACT) was established in 1992 as an Athlone Rotary Club initiative. Our mission is to create enterprise and employment opportunities and measures leading to this, in consultation with the Athlone community, statutory and non statutory agencies. Our first action taken to work towards this mission was the purchase of premises and to develop this into the Business Development Centre, providing incubation space for new enterprise and the company headquarters since 1992. We are a not for profit company, with charitable status.

ACT is a Community Partnership administering the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) funded by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs through the national agency, POBAL, in the Athlone area. As part of our remit we have played a leading role in community development in Athlone and Co Westmeath.

In addition to the LDSIP and Business Development Centre, ACT manages ten distinct projects funded by a variety of agencies;

- After Schools Clubs
- Open Door Men's Centre
- Athlone Childminding Initiative
- Food and Health Project
- Training for Employment
- Educational Action Research Project
- FAS Job Club
- Community Employment Scheme
- Equality for Women Project
- Job Initiative Programme

Frank Murtagh

CEO

Athlone Community Taskforce

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Special thanks are due to all those who contributed to this action research project, including both primary and post-primary schools. Without their co-operation the project would not have taken place: The Management Team; the Partnership Group; the statutory and non-statutory service providers; parents and guardians and especially the young people themselves who volunteered to participate in the project and agreed to share their knowledge to potentially improve practice so other young people may benefit.

Athlone Community Taskforce would like to thank APT for their support of the project and the Grubb Institute who provided consultancy. Sheila McArdle, project manager wishes to extend a special thank you to Eileen Fitzpatrick, Project Administrator and Hubert Rooney, ACT Funding Officer for their ongoing support and encouragement.

## Chairperson's Foreword

The *Educational Action Research Project* was initiated by the Athlone Community Taskforce in 2005. Its purpose is to inform the board of the Athlone Community Taskforce and, where relevant, others on the implementation of certain initiatives. These initiatives are designed to address the recommendations arising from original research into the experience of the transition from primary to post-primary school.

The research is predicated on the doctrine that the lower the educational attainment of a person, the more likely that the person will be unemployed or prove difficult to up-skill should a job be lost.

Children who fail to make a positive transition from primary school to post-primary school are more likely to become early school leavers or under-achievers.

The research in this report is unique. It focuses on a *child centred* approach where it is felt that by working with young people *at the time of transition*, that is sixth class in the primary school and first year in the post-primary school, the children's experience influences the required action to improve the chances of remaining in school.

One of the reasons why the recommendations of the report are exciting is that in many cases money is not needed to effect change.

It is proposed to independently evaluate the recommended initiatives on an ongoing basis. The initiatives may then become a model to others who may wish to have an impact on issues affecting the transition from primary to post-primary school.

May I, on behalf of the *Educational Action Research Project Team*, extend my thanks to all parties who assisted in the research and analysis.

***Suzanne Kelly***

***Chairperson***

The Educational Action Research Project Team and Advisors

Mr. Frank Murtagh, ACT

Mr. Aidan Waterstone, HSE Midlands

Ms. Jean Reed, The Grubb Institute

Mr. Seamus Murray, Department of Education and Science

Ms. Sheila McArdle, The Educational Action Research Project

## CONTENTS

<b>CHAIRPERSON'S FOREWORD.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
1.1 RATIONALE .....	11
1.2 THE TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL .....	11
1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....	11
<b>CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION .....	14
2.2 ADOLESCENCE .....	14
2.3 THE RISK SOCIETY .....	16
2.4 RESILIENCE.....	16
2.5 EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE AND THE SCHOOL CONTEXT.....	17
2.6 THE CHILD-CENTRED APPROACH .....	18
2.7 SYSTEM THEORIES AND RESILIENCE .....	19
2.7.1. Ecological Perspective and Childhood Development.....	20
2.7.2. Social Constructionist and Childhood Development.....	20
2.8 SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL .....	20
2.8.1. Organisational Culture .....	21
2.9 THE IRISH LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK .....	21
2.10 STATUTORY RESPONSIBILITY AND CHILD WELL-BEING .....	22
2.10.1 Department of Health and Children (DHC).....	22
2.10.2 The Department of Education and Science (DES) .....	24
2.10.3 The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR).....	24
2.11 OTHER LEGISLATION .....	25
2.12 THE EDUCATION CONTINUUM .....	25
2.12.1 Early Childhood Education and Care.....	26
2.12.2 The Formal System .....	26
2.12.2.1 Early School Leaving .....	27
2.12.3 Life Long Learning - Further Education.....	28
2.13 EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE AND EQUALITY OF EDUCATION .....	29
2.14 TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO POST-PRIMARY RESEARCH .....	30
2.14.1 Motivation to Engage in Learning .....	32
2.15 THE LOCAL CONTEXT - ATHLONE COMMUNITY TASKFORCE AREA PROFILE .....	32
2.15.1 Educational Participation.....	33
2.15.2 Unemployment Rates .....	34
2.15.3 Social Class Structure .....	34
2.15.4 Affluence/Deprivation Scores .....	35
2.16 CONCLUSION .....	35
<b>CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>37</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION .....	37
3.2 RESEARCH FAMILIES .....	37
3.3 CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	38
3.4 ETHICAL FRAMEWORK .....	39
3.4.1 Parental Consent .....	39
3.4.2 Confidentiality.....	40
3.4.3 Storage of Information .....	40
3.4.4 Equality Proofing.....	40
3.4.5 Respondents under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs or other substances.....	40
3.4.6 Prevention of Harm .....	40
3.5 STRAND A – TRANSITION PROGRAMME.....	41

3.5.1 Boundaries of the Study.....	41
3.5.2 Negotiation of Access to the Primary Schools.....	42
3.5.3 Sampling .....	43
3.5.4 Data Collection Tools and Design.....	43
3.5.4.1 Activity-based Interview.....	44
3.5.4.2 Individual Projects Files.....	44
3.5.4.3 Large Group Discussion .....	44
3.5.4.4. Participant Observation.....	44
3.5.4.5 Focus group .....	45
3.5.4.6 Semi-structured Interviews.....	45
3.5.5 Data Management .....	45
3.5.5.1 Strand A Phase One - Primary Level.....	46
3.5.5.2 Strand A Phase Two - Post-primary Level.....	46
3.6 STRAND B .....	47
3.6.1 Sampling.....	47
3.6.2 Data Collection and Design.....	47
3.6.2.1 Semi-structured interview .....	47
3.6.2.2 Focus Group.....	47
3.6.3 Data Management .....	47
3.8 PARTNERSHIP GROUP.....	48
3.9 CONFERENCE – CREATING CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO MAKE A POSITIVE TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO POST-PRIMARY .....	48
3.10 SPIN-OFF PROJECTS .....	48
3.11 REVIEW SESSION .....	48
3.12 STUDY DE-LIMITATIONS.....	49
3.12.1 School One Context .....	49
3.12.2 Duration of Sessions .....	49
3.12.3 Study Scale.....	49
3.13 CONCLUSION .....	49
<b>CHAPTER FOUR EXISTING TRANSITION PROVISION .....</b>	<b>51</b>
4.1 INTRODUCTION .....	51
4.2 THE PRIMARY SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE.....	51
4.2.1 Issues regarding the Transition from a Primary Perspective .....	51
4.2.2 Perceived Role of the Primary School .....	52
4.3 SERVICES ACCESSED BY PRIMARY SCHOOLS.....	52
4.3.1 The Department of Education and Science .....	52
4.3.2 Health Service Executives .....	53
4.3.3 Other Service Providers .....	54
4.3.4 Other Primary School Issues, Needs and Concerns.....	55
4.4 POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE .....	55
4.4.1 Pre-entry Stage .....	55
4.4.1.1 Variations in Pre-entry Stage.....	56
4.4.2 Stage Two - Integration .....	56
4.5 SERVICES ACCESSED BY POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS .....	58
4.5.1 Department of Education and Science .....	58
4.5.2 Health Services Executive.....	59
4.5.3 Other Post-primary Issues, Needs and Concerns.....	59
4.7 STATUTORY AND NON-STATUTORY PROVISION OF TRANSITION PROGRAMMES.....	59
4.7.1 Specifically Designed Transition Programmes .....	59
4.7.2 Transition Supports .....	60
4.8 CONCLUSION .....	60

<b>CHAPTER FIVE THE TRANSITION PROGRAMME EXPERIENCE.....</b>	<b>62</b>
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	62
5.2 VOLUNTEER RESEARCHERS PERSPECTIVE .....	62
5.2.1 Phase One - Primary Level.....	62
5.2.2. Phase Two - Post-primary Level .....	64
5.3 SCHOOL STAFF PERSPECTIVE.....	64
5.3.1 Phase One - Primary Level .....	64
5.3.2 Phase Two - Post-primary Level .....	65
5.4 PARENTAL/GUARDIAN PERSPECTIVE.....	66
5.5 THE PROJECT MANAGER PERSPECTIVE .....	66
5.5.1 Primary Level .....	66
5.2.2.1 School One .....	67
5.2.2.2 School Two .....	67
5.5.3 Phase Two - Post-primary Level.....	68
5.6 CONCLUSION.....	68
<b>CHAPTER SIX STRAND A –THE TRANSITION PROGRAMME FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>69</b>
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	69
6.2 VOLUNTEER RESEARCHERS’ PERSPECTIVE .....	69
6.2.1.Phase One- Primary Level.....	69
6.2.1.1 Theme One - The Need to Belong.....	69
6.2.1.2 Theme Two - What Will the School Really be Like? .....	70
6.2.1.3 Theme Three - Will I be Able to Learn? .....	70
6.2.1.4 Social Networks .....	71
6.2.2. Mis-matches between the Child-centred Perspective and Adult Perspective .....	73
6.2.2.1. Special Needs .....	73
6.2.2.2 Parental Involvement .....	73
6.2.3 Post-Primary Level .....	73
6.2.3.1 Theme One - The Need to Belong .....	73
Resilience Factors .....	73
Risk Factors .....	75
6.2.3.2 Theme Two- What Will the School Really be Like?.....	76
Resilience Factors.....	76
Risk Factors .....	77
6.2.3.3 Theme Three - Will I be Able to Learn? .....	77
Resilience Factors.....	77
Risk Factors.....	78
6.2.2.4 Social Networks.....	79
6.3 PARENTAL/GUARDIAN PERSPECTIVE .....	79
6.3.1. Primary Level .....	79
6.3.2 Post-Primary Level.....	79
6.3.2.1 Theme One: The Need to Belong.....	79
Resilience Factors.....	79
Risk Factors .....	81
6.3.2.2. Theme Two: What Will the School Really be Like?.....	81
Resilience Factors.....	81
Risk Factors .....	82
6.3.3.3 Theme Three: Will I be Able to Learn? .....	82
Resilience Factors.....	82
Risk Factors .....	83
6.2.4 School Staff Perspective .....	83



6.2.4.1. Primary Level .....	83
6.2.4.2 Post-Primary Level .....	84
6.6 CONCLUSION .....	85
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN STRAND B – NETWORKING FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>87</b>
7.1 INTRODUCTION.....	87
7.2 AWARENESS OF RESILIENCE THEORY .....	87
7.3 THE EXISTING CONTRIBUTION THE SERVICE MAKES TO BUILDING RESILIENCE IN YOUNG PEOPLE .....	87
7.3.1. The Statutory Sector.....	87
7.3.1.1. The Department of Social and Family Affairs.....	88
7.3.1.2 The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment.....	88
7.3.1.3 The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform .....	88
7.3.1.4 The Department of Health and Children .....	89
7.3.1.5 Local Government Services.....	91
7.3.2 The Non-statutory Sector .....	92
7.3.2.1 Social Inclusion.....	92
7.3.2.2 Social Inclusion Not Specified as an Organisation Aim .....	93
7.4 CURRENT INTERACTIONS BETWEEN AGENCIES WHICH PROMOTE RESILIENCE .....	94
7.4.1 Formal Structures .....	94
7.4.2 Informal Structures .....	95
7.5 IDENTIFY AREAS OF POTENTIAL TRANSFORMATION WHERE INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION CAN BE ENHANCED TO BUILD RESILIENCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE.....	96
7.6 EDUCATION AND BUILDING RESILIENCE .....	97
7.6.1 Formal Education System .....	97
7.6.2 Informal Education.....	100
7.7 CONCLUSION .....	101
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS STRAND A AND B .....</b>	<b>102</b>
8.1 INTRODUCTION .....	102
8.2 THE NEED TO BELONG.....	102
8.2.1 Issues Pertaining to the Individual .....	102
8.2.2. Issues Pertaining to the Home .....	104
8.2.3. Issues Pertaining to the Community .....	104
8.2.4. Issues Pertaining to the School .....	106
8.3 WHAT WILL THE SCHOOL REALLY BE LIKE?.....	107
8.3.1. Issues Pertaining to the Individual .....	107
8.3.2. Issues Pertaining to the Home.....	107
8.3.3. Issues Pertaining to the Community .....	108
8.3.4. Issues Pertaining to the School .....	108
8.4 WILL I BE ABLE TO LEARN? .....	108
8.4.1. Issues Pertaining to the Individual .....	109
8.4.2. Issues Pertaining to the Home .....	109
8.4.3. Issues Pertaining to the Community .....	111
8.4.4. Issues Pertaining to the School .....	112
<b>8.5 CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>CHAPTER NINE SPIN-OFF PROJECTS .....</b>	<b>115</b>
9.1 INTRODUCTION .....	115
9.2 SPIN-OFF PROJECTS .....	115
9.2.1 Education Welfare Act (2000) .....	115
9.2.2 The Me, Myself I Project .....	117
9.2.3 Special Needs Survey.....	120
9.4 CONCLUSION.....	121

<b>CHAPTER TEN RESEARCH CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>123</b>
10.1 INTRODUCTION .....	123
10.2 THE TRANSITION PROGRAMME .....	123
10.3 TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL .....	124
10.4 BUILDING RESILIENCE AND NETWORKING .....	126
10.5 CONCLUSION .....	127
<b>CHAPTER ELEVEN RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>128</b>
11.1 INTRODUCTION .....	128
11.2 YOUTH FORUM.....	129
11.3 INTEGRATED APPROACH.....	129
11.4 NETWORKING.....	129
11.5 PR/MEDIA STRATEGY .....	129
11.6 SPIN-OFF PROJECTS .....	130
11.7 INITIATIVES .....	130
11.7.1 Primary Level .....	130
11.7.2 Summer Break .....	130
11.7.3 Post-Primary Level .....	130
11.8 CONCLUSION .....	131
<b>CHAPTER TWELVE ACTION PLAN TO IMPLEMENT THE RECOMMENDATION .....</b>	<b>132</b>
12.1 INTRODUCTION .....	132
12.2 INTEGRATED APPROACH .....	132
12.3 PR/MEDIA STRATEGY .....	133
12.4 PRIMARY LEVEL .....	133
12.5 SUMMER BREAK .....	136
12.6 POST-PRIMARY LEVEL .....	138
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>141</b>
.....	142
APPENDIX TWO: RESEARCH RIGHTS OF VOLUNTEER RESEARCHERS.....	143
APPENDIX THREE: TRANSITION PROGRAMME .....	144
APPENDIX FOUR: INDIVIDUAL BASE-LINE RECORD SHEETS .....	146
APPENDIX FIVE: SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPT .....	147
APPENDIX SIX: GOOD LUCK LETTER.....	147
APPENDIX SEVEN: PARTNERSHIP GROUP .....	149
APPENDIX EIGHT: CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE .....	150
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>151</b>

# Chapter One Introduction

## **1.1 Rationale**

A strategic review of the activities of Athlone Community Taskforce was held in 2003. This review led the ACT Board to a decision that an effective contribution to tackling unemployment in the long-term in the Athlone area would be to consider methods of supporting young people to remain in education. The Grubb Institute facilitated ACT, agencies and schools in 2004 to consider possible actions to work towards this strategic aim. Subsequently, the Educational Action Research Project (EAR Project) was established in 2005 and commenced a child-centred action research project:

*"to examine from a young person's perspective the experience of the transition from primary to post-primary".*

## **1.2 The Transition from Primary to Post-primary School**

The transition phase from primary to post-primary school is considered a particularly crucial stage in a young person's educational career. The recent Department of Education and Science (DES) publication DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools; 2005) states *"Pupils who fail to make this transition successfully are more at risk of early school leaving or educational underachievement"*. It was felt by working with young people at the time of the transition that the action research would provide a practical support to young people. In addition, the project could be completed in a timescale of one year between February 2005 and January 2006. The research process could potentially fulfil the following research objectives.

## **1.3 Research Objectives**

- *To illuminate the concerns and needs of young people during the transition, which may place them at risk of early school leaving, under-performing academically or negatively affect their well-being*
- *To develop existing and new skills of the young person throughout the process*
- *To support and enable primary and post-primary schools through the transition experience to identify factors influencing the current transition experience of their pupils*
- *To work with school personnel and agency workers to develop skills to promote the well-being of young people*
- *To work with young people, their families, school personnel and agencies to develop integrated responses to the transition experience*
- *To enable schools to engage with the broadest range of services to assist them to respond to the diverse needs of children and young people*

The extensive child-centred action research was progressed through two simultaneous Strands, A & B. Strand A - The Transition Programme worked with a total of 25 sixth class pupils, 9 females and 16 males, drawn from two

different primary schools in the Athlone area. Each of the pupils volunteered (with parental consent) to participate in this two-phased project.

Phase One - primary level involved the delivery of six sessions in each of the schools, during the last term of primary school. These sessions guided the volunteers to become researchers and to conduct their own research projects. Each of the volunteer researchers had the opportunity to explore their individual transition needs, apprehensions and concerns. To conclude Phase One of the Transition Programme the volunteer researchers presented their projects at a presentation evening. Subsequently a Phase One evaluation was conducted prior to commencement of Phase Two. This evaluation involved 6 males from School One and their teacher and 8 females from School Two with one of the 6<sup>th</sup> Class teachers.

Phase Two - post-primary level involved the project manager reconnecting with the volunteer researchers (with parental consent), to ascertain if they wanted to participate in a semi-structured interview. This process provided the opportunity for the young people to provide information about their early experiences of the post-primary context. Parents were also invited to provide their experience of their child's transition from primary to post-primary school. To provide a holistic picture of the transition experience, the school perspective was obtained by inviting post-primary school staff were to contribute to the research process.

Concurrently, the project manager conducted Strand B - Networking with a total of 84 network contacts. There was a multi-purpose to conducting the networking. Firstly, these interactions provided information about the EAR Project to schools and service providers. Secondly, the project was able to gather information from the schools and agencies to meet Strand B objectives:

- To identify existing transition supports in place at the time of the research
- To ascertain the existing contribution the service makes to building resilience in young people
- Current interactions between agencies which promote resilience
- To identify areas of potential transformation where integration and collaboration can be enhanced to build resilience among young people

The remainder of this report is presented in the following chapters:

Chapter Two	Literature Review
Chapter Three	Research Design and Methodology
Chapter Four	Existing Transition Provision
Chapter Five	The Transition Programme Experience
Chapter Six	Strand A - The Transition Programme Findings
Chapter Seven	Strand B - Networking Findings
Chapter Eight	Analysis of the Research Findings Strand A and B

Chapter Nine	Spin-off Projects
Chapter Ten	Research Conclusions
Chapter Eleven	Research Recommendations
Chapter Twelve	Action Plan to Implement the Recommendations
Appendices	
Bibliography	

# Chapter Two Literature Review

## ***2.1 Introduction***

At the time of the transition from primary to post-primary school a number of radical changes are occurring in a young person's life. Firstly, the familiarity of the one class teacher and early childhood friendships of the primary school are left behind. These are replaced by the unfamiliar: a variety of teachers; an imposing physical environment of a larger school building; a different learning regime and the need to form new relationships in the post-primary context. Secondly, the young person is moving from childhood into what western societies refer to as adolescence. Adolescent development is seen to involve complex interactions between three strands: 1) contextual factors (social class, ethnicity and gender); 2) physical development (biological and maturation) and 3) cognitive development (motivational and behavioural) (Adams et al; 1996). Both of these monumental changes are set in the context of the young person's daily life, which may vary considerably from individual to individual.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on factors which may impact upon a young person's transition from primary to post-primary school. These are presented under the following sections:

- Adolescence
- The Risk Society
- Resilience
- Educational Resilience and the School Context
- The Child-centred Approach
- Systems Theories and Resilience
- Social Networks and Social Capital
- Organisational Culture
- The Legislative Context
- The Education Continuum
- Educational Disadvantage vs Educational Inequality
- The Transition for Primary to post-primary School Research
- The Local Context
- Conclusion

## ***2.2 Adolescence***

It is argued that prior to the Industrial Revolution an intermediate stage from childhood to adulthood did not exist. Children were expected to contribute to the family economy through the hunting group or the farm, mining or the army. In many societies a social or religious ceremony became a rite of passage, which formally marked the transition from childhood directly into adulthood (Hollin,1988).

As the industrialised world progressed knowledge and education acquired societal value. The owners of industry realised that by educating their children it increased the prospects for securing and accumulating their wealth. The inclusion of young people between 14 - 18 years of age in full-time education led to the formation of a cohort, which society considered to be too old to be children and too young to be adults and unable to fulfil roles of mature responsibility. Society referred to this socially constructed cohort of young people as adolescents (Hollin, 1988).

The biological determinists argue that adolescence is inevitable and puberty is the defining moment for a young person. The onset of puberty causes changes in behaviour towards parents and family and the predominant "Storm and Stress" model was applied to work with young people for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Roche and Tucker, 1997).

Psycho-analytical theories promoted by Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler considered the position of young people in families. A proposition of adolescence is that a young person becomes opposed to their parents as a result of a young person trying to detach from their family. This is principally an unconscious motivator of adolescent behaviour (Freud in Gay, 1995).

The theory of psycho-social development links both bio-psychosocial factors (e.g. puberty, cognition, self-definition) and contextual influence (e.g. gender, race-ethnicity, social class) (Hill cited in Adams et al, 1996). Hill indicates there are six central psycho-social themes of adolescent development: 1) detachment; 2) autonomy; 3) intimacy; 4) sexuality; 5) achievement and 6) identity.

As adolescence progresses the young person seeks detachment from the family. The young person will seek membership of a peer group. The sense of the need to belong to a group is essential for an individual's emotional and mental health (Mental Health Association of Ireland, 2005). If acceptance is not gained in the mainstream, a young person will seek acceptance outside of the mainstream. Often mainstream society views such outside groups as sub-cultures, anti-social or threatening in some way (Roche & Tucker, 1997).

The established adult mainstream culture has used the media to negatively label youth sub-cultures. This has been seen to lead to "moral panics" about teen pregnancies, sexual promiscuity, drug and alcohol misuse, street crime and political protest (Muncie & McLaughlin, 1996). These "moral panics" have led to media-driven responses by service providers. Youth sub-cultures have included hippies, skinheads, punks, new-age travellers and new romantics. It is argued that the consumerist society in which we live and globalisation now use the media to hi-jack emerging youth sub-cultures i.e. Goths and Skaters. These sub-cultures are then turned into commodities, which are purchased by young people who have become passive consumers (Garratt in Roche and Tucker, 1997).

Despite this commercialisation of youth sub-cultures, risk-taking behaviours including dressing differently or listening to particular types of music is an element of exploring one's self, shaping of one's own identity and is a method of practicing decision-making. Bell and Bell (1995) explored risk-taking behaviours, which they divided into

three broad categories: 1) Developmental (e.g. rock climbing); 2) Dangerous (e.g. joy riding, unprotected sexual activity) and 3) Life threatening (e.g. fighting, gangs, substance misuse). The type of risk a young person is willing to take depends upon the individual's perception of gains and losses of taking the risk, but is also embedded in their family and environmental context.

### **2.3 The Risk Society**

It is argued in today's society that citizens are required to manage risk on a daily basis. Constantly it is necessary to decide what an acceptable risk is and what not an acceptable risk is. It is proposed in addition to naturally occurring risks (e.g. earthquakes, health epidemics) other risks have been introduced into our everyday lives by modern technologies, for example, the production of medicines and drugs; the processing of foods; the production of power supply; the banking systems and pesticides in farming. Often the decision of what is an acceptable risk and what is not, is based on incomplete knowledge of an abstract system and a level of trust is placed in "expert knowledge" e.g. air traffic control (Giddens, 1990).

Any abstract system involves an element of risk for the service user because trust and risk have become intertwined. The access point is the interface between the service provider and service user and the first point of contact. The service user at this initial contact will either develop a trusting or non-trusting attitude about the system or service (Giddens, 1990). From an early age we are exposed to different societal systems, e.g. health and education systems.

### **2.4 Resilience**

The resilience studies of Rutter, Werner & Smith, Garmezy, Masten & Tellegen (cited in Waxman et al, 2003) identified a variety of protective and compensatory factors common to resilient children. These factors can be intrinsic or acquired at individual, family and community level. Gilligan (2001) defines resilience as "*the healing potential that may lie naturally within children, in their normal daily experience, or their social networks*". At the individual level resilient children are seen to display the following characteristics (Pak & Patterson, 1996):

- An active evocative approach to problem solving
- An ability from infancy to gain others' positive attention
- An optimistic view of their experience
- An ability to maintain a positive view of life
- An ability to be alert and autonomous
- A tendency to seek novel experiences
- A proactive perspective



Gilligan (2001) identifies the family unit as a tremendously powerful forum for promoting self-esteem and self-efficacy. Gilligan (2001) identifies sources of resilience within the family as:

- Social support
- Positive parental childhood
- Good parental health
- Good relationship with siblings
- Education
- Work role

The term community can be defined in a variety of ways: 1) a geographical community; 2) a community of interest and 3) communities that transcend conventional geographical boundaries (Burgess et al, 1996). The wider community offers the potential to build resilience through social networks of schools, clubs, community centres, health centres and social services, churches and local neighbourhoods (McElwee, 1996). The presence of resilience sources at community level provides the opportunity for young people to form positive relationships with mentors and role models. A positive experience at a critical time in a young person's life known as a "turning point" which may result in a *"ripple effect of one strength being unearthed or harnessed may ultimately set off a positive spiral of change in the whole system that is a child's life"* (Gilligan, 2001).

Sacareno (2004) considers the need to rebalance responsibilities between private and public areas to build sources of resilience, to support positive development of children and to tackle intergenerational poverty. Sacareno (2004) outlines that family units are value-transmitters from one generation to the next. However societal changes such as increased participation of women in the workforce; an ageing population, which may shift the care-giving roles to younger members within the family; longer dependence by young people on the family, due to longer participation in education or expensive housing; flexibility in labour markets and different family make-ups, often puts a strain on household budgets and the way families can create resilience building opportunities for their children. Saraceno (2004) states *"a too exclusive reliance on family solidarity risks not only to curb individual autonomy. It also risks strengthening that process of intergenerational reproduction of poverty and social exclusion and more generally inequality"*.

The concept of building sources of resilience, which both adults and children can draw upon is particularly important as *"the more protective factors that are present in children's lives, the more likely they are to display resilience....cumulative protective factors work in the opposite direction (to adverse experience) ...and may have disproportionately positive effects"* (Gilligan cited in McElwee et al, 2002).

## ***2.5 Educational Resilience and the School Context***

Rutter (cited in Waxman et al, 2003) conducted a study over a 10 year period working with children whose parents had been diagnosed with a mental illness. Rutter *"found that the school environment contains important protective*

factors, such as fostering a sense of achievement in children, enhancing their personal growth and increasing their social contacts" (cited in Waxman et al., 2003).

Educational resilience research has mainly focused upon a comparison of outcomes for identified resilient and non-resilient students. A widely used definition of educational resilience is *"the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences"* (Wang, Haertel & Walberg 1994; cited in Waxman et al., 2003)

Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) examined factors contributing to academic performances of identified resilient and non-resilient students. These researchers *"found that the resilient students had significantly higher perceptions of family/peer support, teacher feedback, positive ties to school, value placed on school, peer belonging, and familism than non-resilient students did"*. Perhaps the foremost finding was the *"students' sense of belonging to school was the only significant predictor of academic resilience"* (cited in Waxman et al, 2003, Pg 5).

Teachers who have high student expectations and provide opportunities for students to participate and contribute to the learning processes are referred to as *"turnaround teachers"*. These teachers *"are able to focus on the strengths of all the students, and assist those students who have been labelled by school or oppressed by their families or communities"* to engage in the learning process (Seligman, 1995 cited in Waxman et al, 2003).

A U.K. example of a turnaround teacher is Tim Smith who noticed a student who was musically talented, but had been excluded because of behavioural issues from the majority of his classes. This student is now known as Dizzie Rascal, a rap star. The teacher made *"a place for Dizzie to belong, and through that enabling him to see how his aspirations could be expressed through the purpose of the school"* (Kehoe I. 2004., pg 2) by using a child-centred approach.

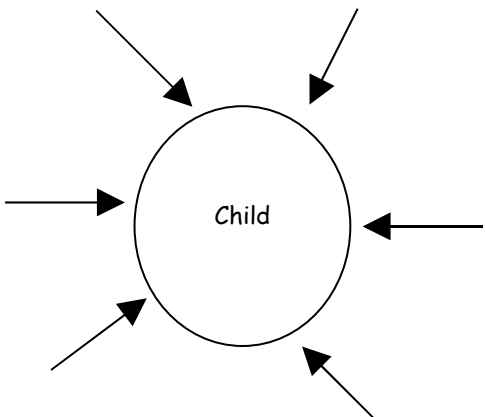
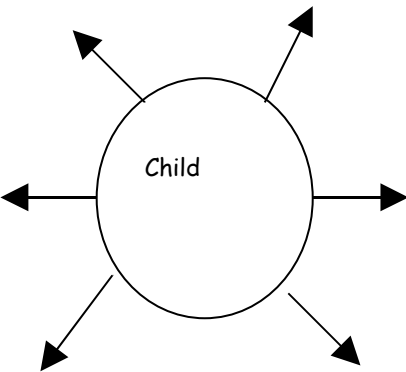
## **2.6 The Child-Centred Approach**

Traditionally, adults known as professionals and experts working with children informed and designed responses to work with young people. This method of developing responses is referred to as a "child-focused approach" (Hogan D, 1997). The utilisation of this approach led to responses to cater for the so-called "typical child". Therefore young people who did not correspond with the "typical" were at even greater risk of becoming alienated from services and were often viewed as deviant (Hogan D, 1997).

Essentially by adopting a child-centred approach, which *"respects children's competencies, the implication is that ethically sound techniques can add to the value of research"* (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). By capturing expressed opinions, ideas and insights into the lived experiences of young people this information can inform practice and the development of responses through a youth-led approach. (See Figure One: Child-Focused vs. Child Centred

Approach). The Child-centred approach clearly identifies the impetus for change is required of adults and the systems around the child. Therefore it is necessary to consider system theory and the process of change.

**Figure One: Child-Focused vs Child-Centred Approach (Grubb Institute 2004)**

Child-Focused	Child-Centred
	
Child-focused starts with adult priorities	Child-centred starts with children's priorities
Listening to children	Listening to children and acting on it
Working with parts of the child	Working with the whole child
Education focus on teaching	Education centred on children's whole social, emotional and academic development
Impetus for change is on children	Impetus for change is on the adult behaviour and systems around children
Locating problems in children	Problems understood systemically and holistically
Tendency towards controlling children	Thinking system that free children by acting as containers for them
Thinking children's participation	Thinking children's leadership
Looking for someone to blame for problems	Developing mutual responsibility as adults and children

## **2.7 System Theories and Resilience**

System theories attempt to examine things as whole. These things can be physical, biological and social systems. Traditionally, the idea of a system is something which is in a stable balance and predictable in a state of equilibrium. Subsequent to any perturbation returns to the same state as before the disturbance ([www.hypergeo.free](http://www.hypergeo.free)). Alternatively systems can be considered to be dynamic, which are resilient in that the "system maintains its structure and ensures its continuity, not by preserving an unchangeable balance or by returning to the same state as before the perturbation, but on the contrary by integrating changes by evolving" ([www.hypergeo.free](http://www.hypergeo.free)).

### **2.7.1. Ecological Perspective and Childhood Development**

An ecological perspective related to childhood development promotes that the *"opportunities for development and risks to development do not simply arise from a deficiency in parenting skills but as a result of the interaction between the make up of the child (physical and genetic), the parent(s) and affected not only by local factors, but structural inequalities related to gender, race and disability"* (Bronfenbrenner cited in Growing Support, 2005).

Theorists offer caution regarding the delivery of school only based resilience programmes, which focus on positive outcomes which differentiate between successful resilient students and non-resilient students, as resilience *"is multi-faceted and connected to the broad context. That is, resilience is produced by the interactions among the child, family, school, peers, and community. The more interactions that are created and the more that they are child-centred, the better the developmental outcomes"* (Doll & Lyon, 1998).

### **2.7.2. Social Constructionist and Childhood Development**

Social constructionists argue that childhood development is not solely biological or psychological, but is influenced and shaped by the construction of the societal context where they grow up (Roche and Tucker, 1997). Since the 1990's the sociology of childhood has challenged psychological perspectives and suggests, that children have been judged in *"what they will become rather than what they currently are"*. Although it is prudent to consider how the early childhood experiences affect the life chances of a young person, it is essential that a future focused lens does not distract from a child's immediate need in the present (Shamgar-Handelman 1994 cited in Growing Support, 2005).

The social constructionist discourse is critical of the dominant ecological systems framework associated with the interpretation of resilience, as stated *"within an ecological paradigm, resilience has been defined as health despite adversity. In contrast the constructionist approach defines resilience as the outcome from negotiations between the individual and their environment to define themselves as healthy, amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse"* (Ungar M, 2004).

## **2.8 Social Networks and Social Capital**

Social networks are the combination of the intimate relationships with families and relations and the less intimate relationships with neighbours, clubs, churches and services in an area. Where these social networks develop reciprocal norms and values the interactions enable people to build communities; to commit to each other; form a strong sense of belonging and to knit a social fabric. It is argued these communities are rich in social capital and derived benefits include improved health, less violence and a cleaner environment (Putman cited in Smith, 2001). It is argued that social capital takes two forms: 1) bonding and 2) bridging. The first, bonding, provides a very strong sense of belonging for its membership and tends to be exclusive e.g. church. The second form, bridging, tends to be open and inclusive and accepting of diversity. The concept of social capital has been adopted by the

business sector to promote social inclusion and well-being, which in turn contributes to sustainable economic growth (Putman cited in Smith, 2001).

### **2.8.1. Organisational Culture**

The structure of an organisation is underpinned by a culture of shared values and norms which creates the lived daily reality within an organisation. *Understanding Organisations* (Handy, 1983) provided an insight into the different organisational cultures and identified four main cultures: 1) Power Culture; 2) Role Culture; 3) Task Culture and 4) Person Culture. By understanding an organisation's culture it provides the knowledge to inform positive development and change within an organisation's system.

The Grubb Institute's publication *Organisation of the Mind* (1997) considers the vision of an organisation and roles within an organisation. In the case of a school, the Grubb Institute states a positive culture can be developed by encouraging the development of mutual responsibility between staff and students. This can be achieved by creating conditions where staff and students define each others roles. This process enables an individual to assume a role on entering the school. The outcome is that the school becomes a source of resilience, but the school also becomes a container, where young people can engage in the learning process.

Under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science, the School Development Planning Initiative (Post-primary) was established in 1999. The SDPI supports schools to develop a school plan and recognises the potential of developing a collaborative culture to promote school improvement and effectiveness (SDPI; 2005). There are ongoing supports for post-primary schools involved in the initiative to review plans and learn from models of good practice adopted by other schools.

## ***2.9 The Irish Legislative Framework***

In the broader Irish context, the National Development Plan (NDP) (2000- 2006) informs the current approach to economic expansion, regional development and social inclusion. The NDP divided the country into two regions: 1) the Southern and Eastern Region and 2) the Border, Midlands and Western Regions (BMW). Through inter-regional co-operation and implementation of regional plans, a prosperous, fair and inclusive society is aspired to.

In Irish society over the past decade dramatic changes have occurred. There has been rapid economic expansion with a rise in employment from 88% in 1996 to 96% in 2002 (CSO, 2002). The population has increased from 3.6 million in 1996 to 3.9 million in 2002. A total of 827,424 young people under fifteen years old reside in the country (CSO; 2002). However in the 1990's Ireland had one of the highest levels of child poverty in the E.U. and as a group were excluded from decision-making (O'Leary, 2001). Despite the recent expansion the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) states that "*child poverty has fallen significantly over the past decade...(but) the number of families and children in relative income poverty has remained relatively static over the time*" (CPA;2005). Therefore children in

these families are at risk of being exposed to a continuous cycle of intergenerational relative poverty, unless methods of intervention can be implemented to break this cycle.

The National Anti-poverty Strategy 1997 (NAPS) provided a framework to challenge poverty. By adopting an integrated cross-departmental approach the intention of NAPS was to work towards specified social inclusion targets. This strategy was revised in 2002, which emphasised five key areas: 1) educational disadvantage; 2) unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment; 3) income adequacy; 4) disadvantaged urban areas and 5) rural poverty. The most recent update of NAPS (2003 - 2005) has a central theme to ensure that all young people leave the education system with a high level of education and qualifications to enable their participation in society and the economy (DES, 2005).

## ***2.10 Statutory Responsibility and Child Well-being***

Government departments with statutory responsibility for children are: 1) The Department of Health and Children (DHC); 2) the Department of Education and Science (DES) and 3) the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR). These departments have associated agencies and sections, which operate at regional and local level. The complexity of governance entails other Government Departments, including the Department of Social and Family Affairs; the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism to also provide for children and families through a variety of measures and services. The following sections outline significant pieces of legislation informing operations of the three Departments with statutory responsibility for children and then proceeds to highlight equality legislation.

### **2.10.1 Department of Health and Children (DHC)**

The **Child Care Act (1991)** replaced the antiquated Childrens Act (1908). The Child Care Act (1991) allocated statutory responsibility to Health Boards to care for and promote the well-being of young people up to the age of 18 in its area. The Act also provided powers to the Gardai to remove a child or children from the family home in specific cases. Since the enactment of the Child Care Act (1991) a series of complementary interventions and programmes targeting young people and families have been introduced.

Perhaps the most significant is the National Children's Strategy (2000), which is a ten year framework document to inform legislation and develop supports and interventions for children. This strategy was developed in line with the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) and states three national goals:

- Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

- Children's lives will be better understood, their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.
- Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

The strategy has adopted a whole child perspective, *"which provides a more complete understanding of the children's lives. It draws on the most recent research and knowledge about children's development and the relationship between children and family, community and wider society"* (National Children's Strategy, 2000, pg24). As such, the strategy petitions for consultation, inter-agency co-operation and the involvement of the community and voluntary sector, families and most significantly the participation of young people themselves in decision-making and identification of their own needs.

Other significant legislation includes: 1) The National Health Strategy (2001) which provides mechanisms for young people to have a voice on issues affecting their health; 2) the Children's Act (2001) increased the legal age of criminality from 7 to 12 years. This Act makes provisions for the Probation and Welfare Service, the Gardai and the Health Service Executives to convene a family conference. The purpose of the family conference is to develop a plan to prevent the pursuit of further criminal activity by the young person; 3) the Youth Homelessness Strategy(2001), a framework to develop interventions to work with young people who are homeless, semi-homeless or living in inappropriate accommodation.

Under the Health Act (2004) the dissolution of the Health Boards occurred and responsibilities for children were transferred to the newly formed Health Service Executives (HSE) in January 2005. The Health Service Executive provides a range of preventative, care and treatment services through hospitals, clinics, schools and communities. The HSE support and participate in partnerships with local drugs taskforces, youth services and other services where possible.

The DHC has close links with the National Children's Office (NCO). The NCO was established in 2001 to lead and support the implementation of the National Children's Strategy (2000). In June 2005, the NCO commissioned a significant piece of research and resulted in the publication *"The Development of a National Set of Child Well-Being Indicators"* (Hanafin & Brooks, 2005). This document recommends the application of a total of 42 child well-being indicators and seven socio-demographic indicators to contextualise children's lives. The document states *"that despite the comprehensiveness of this approach, the systemic nature of development and the integration of children's voices within the process, the developed indicator set is but the first step in the process of ensuring that the lives of children living in Ireland and measured in a comprehensive and multi-dimensional way"* (Hanafin & Brooks, 2005). In December 2005, the NCO became part of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC).

### **2.10.2 The Department of Education and Science (DES)**

The Education Act (1998) provides guidelines under the headings of schools; inspectorate; boards of management; national council for curriculum and assessment; examinations; bodies of corporate and miscellaneous. It is under the latter section that provision was made to establish a committee regarding educational disadvantage. The purpose of this committee is *"to advise the minister regarding policies and strategies to be adopted to identify and correct educational disadvantage"*. (Irish Government, Education Act, Part VI, Section 32)

The Education Welfare Act (2000) states that children are obliged to commence school by six years of age and remain in the education system until they are sixteen years of age or until they have completed three years of post-primary education. The Act enabled the development of the National Education Welfare Board, which monitors school attendance. Education Welfare Officers who operate at local level provide assistance to schools and parents to promote school attendance.

The Education for Person with Special Needs Act (2004) legislates for the inclusion of people with special needs in education and that they have the *"same rights to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs"* ([www.irishgovernment.ie](http://www.irishgovernment.ie)). The Act made provision for the establishment of the National Council for Special Education.

The youth work sector gained statutory footing for the first time by the enactment of the Youth Work Act (2001). Under the auspice of DES a National Youth Work Development Plan was published in 2003. The plan highlights the distinct role youth work can contribute to the development of young people. The plan details four national goals and associated actions to be developed over a four year period stating that *"a comprehensive youth work service is an investment in a better future for society as a whole"*(DES, 2003, pg 14).

### **2.10.3 The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR)**

The DJELR became involved in childcare by affording equality of opportunities for parents with childcare responsibilities to participate in the labour force (Duigan & Walsh, 2004). The National Childcare Strategy developed a framework for the development of quality childcare in the country and *"resulted in the establishment of the most significant national initiative to develop and enhance the provision of childcare in the history of the state - The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme"* (EOCP) (Duigan & Walsh, 2004). The EOCP programme provides capital grants to the private and community sector to upgrade or build premises to comply with regulations across the private and community sectors. Grants for staffing are considered for community-based/not-for-profit groups operating in areas of disadvantage ([www.westmeathchildcare.ie](http://www.westmeathchildcare.ie))

The established City and County Childcare Committees (CCC) are responsible for the development of a strategic plan to meet the identified needs of the area. But the plan is based upon core recommendations of staffing; staff-child



ratios; recognition of diversity; equipment and resources; parental participation; registration and formalisation of informal services and suitability of premises. Each CCC administers the EOCP at local level.

The DJELR recent publication *School Age Childcare in Ireland - Executive Summary* (June 2005) petitions that significant increases in early or pre-school provision has occurred. But this has not been paralleled by the provision of placements for school age children. The Central Statistics Office (2003) published statistics drawn from a module of the Quarterly National Household Survey (2002) which showed that 67,500 families of primary school children avail of non-parental childcare for their children. On the basis of this survey it is estimated 125,000 primary school children receive non-parental childcare.

The Working Group on School Age Childcare believes the area of childcare for school age children requires development and a range of recommendations are made to progress school age childcare. The report makes the following recommendation *"that homework support may be an element of a range of activities within the school aged childcare service; it recommends that homework support should not be the core activity of a school aged childcare service. The working group recommends that dialogue with the parents and children is critical on the issue of homework"* (DJELR, 2005)

## **2.11 Other legislation**

The Equality Authority was established under the Employment Act (1998). The Authority's work is informed by The Employment Equality Act (1998) and The Equal Status Act (2000) which outlaw discrimination in employment, vocational training, advertising, collective agreements, the provision of goods and services which the public generally have access to on nine distinct grounds, these are:

- Gender
- Family Status
- Disability
- Sexual Orientation
- Membership of the Traveller Community
- Marital Status
- Age
- Race
- Religious Belief

The Equality Authority has highlighted *"concern at the growth of Equality Authority case files in relation to educational establishments under the Equal Status Act. In 2001, 3% of case files related to educational establishments this had increased to 15% of case files in 2005"*. ([www.equality.ie](http://www.equality.ie))

## **2.12 The Education Continuum**

The transition from primary to post-primary school is a phase of radical change, but it does not occur in a vacuum, the education process is a continuum. Young people may enter and leave this continuum at different stages. Early

childhood education and care is considered as the starting point of the continuum, then the formal education system of primary and post-primary; to third level. The need to continually meet the changing demands of the labour market and to up-skill, adds a further dimension to the education continuum, that of the lifelong learner.

### **2.12.1 Early Childhood Education and Care**

The DES support for early childhood education and care has been confined to Traveller pre-schools, Early Start and the Rutland Street Project (DES, 2005). Other early childhood education and care facilities developed in an ad hoc fashion. The standards of facilities that operated privately or within the community varied considerably from one facility to the next. There was a lack of guidelines regarding curriculum, the level of training among staff and hygiene standards (Murray C and O'Doherty A, 2001).

As previously outlined the DJELR through the EOCP has provided support to develop childcare education and care facilities. The CCC's provide on-going support to the early childhood and care sector, to promote the development of quality services (Duigan & Walsh, 2004).

### **2.12.2 The Formal System**

The formal education system consists of three levels: 1) primary; 2) post-primary and 3) third level. The majority of children commence primary (or national school) at approximately five years of age, but can commence school between four and six years of age. At approximately twelve years of age on completion of 6<sup>th</sup> class, pupils regardless of their acquired level of core skills and competencies are required to transfer to post-primary school (or second level). The National Adult Literacy Agency (2002) highlights that 1 in 10 young people leave primary level with literacy difficulties.

Under the Education Welfare Act (2000) students are obliged to remain in education until they are sixteen years of age or until they have completed three years of post-primary education. Subsequent to the obligatory three years, a young person who makes a choice to remain in post-primary, depending upon the school which they attend, may avail of options like the Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied or the Leaving Certificate.

Third level (or tertiary) education provided by Universities and Institutes of Technology and a number of small institutions (HEA; 2004) is considered optional. Admission to undergraduate courses is competition-based on grades from national second level examinations i.e. Leaving Certificate (HEA, 2004).

In the academic year 2003/2004 a total of 917,767 full-time students attended educational facilities aided by the Department of Education and Science. Table One, below provides a breakdown of the number of full-time students in institutions aided by the DES.

**Table One: Number of full-time students in institutions aided by the Department of Education, 2003/2004**

Level	No. of Students
<b>First Level</b>	<b>446,029</b>
<b>Second Level</b>	<b>337,851</b>
Secondary	187,563
Community and Comprehensive	52,154
Vocational	98,134
<b>Third Level</b>	<b>133,887</b>
Institutes of Technology/Technological Colleges	53,586
HEA Colleges (excl. RCSI)	77,491
Other Aided (incl. teacher training)	2,810
<b>Total</b>	<b>917,767</b>

(Department of Education and Science 2005)

The report *College Entry in Focus: a Fourth National Survey of Access to Higher Education* (Clancy, 2002) revealed an increase of admissions in 1998 at 44% compared to a rate of 20% in 1980. The survey recorded entrants as females 52.7% and males 44.9%. This is the first time females' outnumbered males since the first published survey in 1982. Although increases in entrants from the lower spectrum of socio-economic groups are recorded, the entrants from higher professional groups is "close to saturation level" at 97% in 1998 compared to 59% in 1980. The HEA strategy (2004) document identifies students under-represented at third level as students from lower socio-economic groups; members of the Traveller Community; people with disabilities; people from ethnic minorities and mature students.

Irish society places a high value upon educational credentials as the possession of qualifications influences the entry level into the labour market. Depending upon when a person left the education system by correlating educational credentials to poverty it is possible to identify the impact the level of educational attainment may have upon a person's life chances. It is believed "20% of adults without educational qualifications are living in poverty. This declines to 12.5% for those with the equivalent of the Volunteer Certificate, and to just over 6% for those with a Leaving Certificate. Only 1% of adults with a third level qualification was in poverty (Archer cited in WAP, 2002).

### **2.12.2.1 Early School Leaving**

Available literature provides evidence that some young people leave the education system prior to the statutory requirement to attend education until 16 years of age or on completion of three years of post-primary. These young people are known as early school leavers and may leave the education system at various stages. It is estimated that on a national basis, 1,000 pupils annually do not make the transfer from primary to post-primary education (NESF 2002).

The definition used to describe an early school leaver often varies from study to study. McMahon (et al 1998) used the following definition "an early school leaver is a young person who leaves school without completing senior cycle

*(Leaving Certificate)*". Other reports use compatible definitions and provide a picture of early school leaving on a national basis. At post-primary level in 1999 it was estimated 2,400 young people left the education system without a recognised qualification i.e. Volunteer Certificate (CPA, 2003). The Higher Education Authority (HEA) stated that over 4,000 young people between the ages of eleven and fifteen years leave school before reaching Volunteer Certificate (HEA; 2004). In 1999, a significant 10,600 young people left the education system prior to sitting a Leaving Certificate (CPA, 2003).

It is well documented that the young people most likely to become early school leavers are those who experience multiple factors of disadvantage, such as:

*"a) more likely to under achieve b) more likely to leave school than their more advantaged peers. Reasons included high participation costs of education (clothes, book, meals, etc) low levels of parental support, the lack of suitability of school curricula and the failure of the system to address the needs of minority groups..."* (CPA, 2001, Pg 3).

The National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) Strategic Plan (2005- 2007) highlights that non-attendance based on 2003/2004 figures is a national issue. At primary level, a student will miss an average of 11 days out of possible 183 days. The level of average non-attendance at post-primary level increases to 15 days out of a possible 167 days.

The NEWB offers an analysis of available data providing evidence that non-attendance is higher in poor areas and that *"there is a difference of 4% in the levels of general attendance at school located in RAPID city areas and schools located in other areas. In the numbers of children who miss 20 days or more, however, the difference is more extreme at both primary and post-primary level: at post-primary level, there is a difference of 30% between the number of children missing 20 days or more in the most disadvantaged and the least disadvantaged schools"* (NEWB, pg 7, 2005). The National Education Welfare Board Strategic Plan (2005-2007) states *"there is a strong correlation between early school leaving and poor school attendance; this problem is especially acute for Travellers and other ethnic minorities who experience significant levels of absenteeism"* (NEWB, pg 7, 2005).

### **2.12.3 Life Long Learning - Further Education**

The rapidly occurring social and economic societal changes with the introduction of new technologies, work practices and the influence of trans-national companies, which can relocate from area to area, means that acquired skills from the formal education system are limited in their ability to sustain a lifetime of employment (DES, 1999).

The concept of Andragogy (Knowles in Edwards et al. 1996) is an approach to adult education, which explores the concept of lifelong learning as a necessity to participate in society and prevent poverty and social exclusion. It is well documented that individuals with a particular standard of education and who are in employment are those most likely to up-skill and return to education. People who leave school with no or minimal qualifications are less likely to return to education. The parental, particularly the mother's level of education is seen to impact upon the child's

participation in the education system. The higher the parental educational attainment the more likely a positive attitude will exist in the home setting towards education (Irish Government, 2000).

The first Adult Education Green Paper (2000) illustrated a Government commitment to lifelong learning. The Green Paper acknowledges the ability of the community education sector to engage with disadvantaged groups and encourages the return to education. However in the past societal perceptions of qualifications obtained from the community education sector were viewed as "*less than equal*" when compared to qualifications from the formal education system (Brookfield, 1986). The recently established National Qualifications Authority and the introduction of the awards framework e.g. FETAC begins to address this imbalance between qualifications obtained from the informal and formal education sectors.

## ***2.13 Educational Disadvantage and Equality of Education***

Often the terms "educational disadvantage" and "educational inequality" appear in articles and publications exploring the comparative outcomes of education. The use of these terms needs to be considered. Educational disadvantage is defined by the Education Act 1998 under section 32 (9) as:

*"the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevents students from deriving appropriate benefits from education in schools"*

The term "appropriate benefits" included in the definition is ambiguous. If interpreted as a student reaching their "full potential," a phrase which is often associated with education disadvantage. Who actually decides when someone has reached their full potential, the schools, the parents or the young person themselves? (ADM, 2004).

Policy developments informed from the stance of educational disadvantage tends to focus on the concept of under-participation and under-achievement. Resources are targeted to support students to remain and adapt to the existing education system. On receipt of targeted supports, it is then assumed, if the individual has ability and makes an effort they will be rewarded with success i.e.  $IQ + \text{effort} = \text{Success}$ . On this basis the education system is identified as a meritocracy. The outcome of this system is that there are students who succeed and those who do not. The successful students are viewed as deserving their achievements due to their superior academic ability compared to unsuccessful students. These underpinning assumptions justify the inequalities of outcomes from the education system (Lynch cited in WAP, 2002)

Gilligan (2004) stated that the language of educational disadvantage is outmoded. It fails to convey "*the scandal of the situation or the need for change*". Lynch (2004) petitions that the lack of a critical voice has led to the normalisation and acceptability of inequalities of the education system. It is argued that current targeting of resources will do little to break the relationship between inequality of educational outcomes and social class (Gilligan cited in ADM, 2003). To respond to inequality of education a multi-faceted approach is required. Educational

equality is based upon the concept that the reduction of inequality is possible by targeting and positive discrimination of resources. But, crucially, simultaneous change is required of the systems and structures that contribute to and maintain inequalities (Gilligan and Lynch cited in ADM, 2003).

The current government expenditure on education favours tertiary (third level) which is seen to support students from middle to higher socio-economic backgrounds (CWC; 2002) as they are more likely to attend third level (Clancy: 2002). Although investment in third level provides skilled graduates for the labour market and supports the on-going economic expansion. A long-term effect of this approach is the potential widening of inequalities between sectors within Irish Society (Lynch, 2004).

Recent societal trends of commercialisation and individualism are also seen to contribute to the perpetuation of educational inequality. Commercialisation has seen a growing trend in the privatisation of second level education through the introduction of fee paying Leaving Certificate grind schools. Families with resources are in position to avail of these supports for their child or children and potentially maximise the benefits a child can draw from the state education system.

There has been a decline in the involvement of religious orders in education provision. Lynch (2004) highlights that *"the State has failed to address the investment deficit evolving from the decline of religious investment in education, so parents are expected to make good the deficit with voluntary contributions. This is a grossly inequitable solution"*. (Lynch, 2004). Especially when it is considered that RAPID areas have been identified as having fewer resources and that young people residing in these areas have a higher level of non-attendance at school compared to young people from other areas (NEWB, 2005).

There is much debate regarding in-school factors impacting upon education outcomes such as the curriculum, language codes and school structures which are seen to create conditions to favour students from middle to higher socio-economic groups. Teachers play a pivotal role in the engagement of students in learning in the school context. However some teachers operate a subconscious pedagogy, with lower expectations of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As a result teachers spend more time trying to engage students who are perceived to be from higher socio-economic groups to learn (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). In some cases, teachers are seen to be ethnocentric and do not validate other cultures that are not the same as their own. The result is that these teachers tend to spend more time with students who they consider to be from their own backgrounds (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). But as previously outlined in this Chapter in the section regarding educational resilience, there are "turnaround teachers" who have high expectations of all their students.

## **2.14 Transition from Primary to Post-primary Research**

The "Moving Up" publication (Smyth et al, 2004) is an in-depth study of first year students in post-primary education, which *"sets out to examine the first year experiences of first year students in both their adjustment to*

*post-primary education and their perceptions of the curriculum and learning within volunteercycle*" (Smyth et al; 2004). The "Moving Up" study involved school management, teachers, parents and first year post-primary pupils.

In regard to the social adjustment of students to the school, the report identified that schools with a structured approach to student integration are more likely to be effective when a positive informal school culture exists. Teachers, student mentoring and extra curricular activities were seen to be particular important in supporting students to integrate socially. The study proposes that schools should be given practical supports to expand extra-curricular activities. But also highlights *"Schools with more disadvantaged student intakes are likely to be at a disadvantage in securing additional "voluntary" funding from parents for such activities"* (Smyth et al, 2004, pg 289).

The report identifies a range of issues which impact upon the curriculum and learning within the school context. It was felt both primary and post-primary schools needed to encourage and form stronger links to provide a sense of continuity for students. This report recommends *"some aspects of the preparation for post-primary school should be generic across schools. A module which tells students the kinds of things to expect from post-primary school should be developed by the Department of Education and Science, in conjunction with the NCCA and implemented in sixth class in all primary schools"* (Smyth et al, 2004, pg 288).

The U.K. review of transfer research conducted by Galton (et al, 1999) considers the transfer from primary to post-primary school and the transition between years within the post-primary context. The transfer and transition are considered crucial periods of change, which require specific attention to support students in their educational careers. The report outlines that research has mainly focused on personal and social factors or academic factors with few research studies considering a holistic view of these periods of change.

The report outlines that schools usually focus resources on smoothing the transfer from primary to post-primary school and the settling in of students, rather than ensuring students engage with learning. It is proposed that pupils experience a hiatus in academic progress at the time of transfer. The main contributing factor which distracts students from engaging in learning is the need to gain social acceptance. It is estimated that *"two in every five pupils fail to make expected progress during the year immediately following the change of schools"* (Galton et al, 1999, Pg 6). Ruddock (cited in Galton et al, 1999) outlines *"if pupils are not helped during the early period of the new school to sustain their excitement about learning and develop individual routines for learning, both on and off the school site, then they may have difficulties with progress later"*.

The report suggests that existing measures including the provision of summer camps for at risk pupils, joint initiatives between primary and post-primary schools and school induction programmes are important in supporting students to make a positive transfer. However they are not enough to overcome transition issues by themselves. The report recommends the need for a more radical approach, where attention is given to students' accounts of why

they disengage, to recognise the importance of how different groups of pupils become "at risk" and to acknowledge out of school factors which impact upon the transition from primary to post-primary.

It is fundamental that policy makers have an understanding of the transition from primary to post-primary school and the relative impact of out of school initiatives, which in conjunction with the school supports, may aid young people to make a positive transition and engage with learning (Galton et al; 1999).

### **2.14.1 Motivation to Engage in Learning**

The definition of an early school leaver as a young person who leaves the education system prior to the senior cycle (i.e. Leaving Certificate) combined with the NAPS central them to ensure all young people leave the education system with a high level of education and qualifications. It is feasible to suggest that on a national basis, young people need to be encouraged to remain in the education system to complete and obtain a qualification at the senior cycle. For this to be achieved students need to be retained in the system. But, crucial, students also need to be motivated to engage in learning.

Motivation is often divided into two categories, extrinsic or intrinsic. The first, extrinsic, is when an individual engages in the learning for the sake of attaining a reward or to avoid a punishment. In the second, intrinsically motivated students actively engage themselves in the learning process, due to enjoyment, personal goals, curiosity and interest. Brewster and Fager (2000) point out *"that most successful people are motivated by both internal and external factors, and suggest that educators build on both types when working to engage students more fully in school"*.

In the school context motivation should be considered at classroom, school and regional level and requires implementation of a range of approaches to facilitate students with different learning styles to engage in learning and to become self-managers of learning (Further reading Brewster and Fager, 2000).

Motivation is not a school-only issue as homework tasks are set to be completed outside of the school context. It is recognised that depending upon the home context young people may have different levels of support to complete homework. In some cases homework may become an issue, which actually leads to conflict between parents and their child or children. Additionally, the parental perspective and the school perspective of supporting homework tasks may vary considerably. Sometimes educators need to be sure their expectations are realistic, given parents' skills and schedules (Paulu cited Brewster and Fager, 2000).

## **2.15 The Local Context - Athlone Community Taskforce Area Profile**

Athlone is based in the BMW region of the country. The Athlone Community Taskforce Group area comprises of four Electoral Divisions (ED's): 1) Athlone East Urban; 2), Athlone West Urban; 3) Athlone East Rural; 4) Athlone West Rural.



According to the Census (2002) the ACT area population increased from 15,084 in 1991 to 16,049 in 2002. However population increase is a positive indication of expansion, but these overall figures disguise a decline in population in the two Athlone Urban Electoral Divisions. Firstly, in Athlone East Urban ED the figure of 4,765 in 1991 decreased to 4,092 in 2002; and in Athlone West Urban ED from 3,405 in 1991 to 3,262 in 2002.

Table Two provides a breakdown of the Youth Population 19 years old and under by ED in the ACT area (Census; 2002). Of the four Athlone ED's, the East Rural ED had the largest youth population of 2085 in 2002. 1 -2 years olds were the largest cohort in the East Rural ED at 228 and the same age group were the largest cohort in the ACT area totalling 508 in 2002. By combining the age groups totals for 5-6 year olds of 417; 7-8 year olds of 349 and 9-10 year olds of 381 and allowing for maturation, there will be at least 1,147 young people eligible to make the transition from primary to post-primary in the academic year of 2005/06; 2006/07 and 2007/08.

**Table Two: Breakdown of Population aged 19 years old and under in 2002 by ED in the ACT Area**

	Under 1	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10	11-12	13-14	15- 19	Total by DED
East Urban	47	86	71	77	66	85	68	105	295	900
West Urban	44	104	69	76	71	70	69	89	238	830
East Rural	128	228	209	202	150	158	163	177	670	2085
West Rural	32	90	80	62	62	68	75	66	189	724
Totals by age	251	508	429	417	349	381	375	437	1392	
Total Population of 19 year olds and under										4539

(GAMMA; 2002)

### 2.15.1 Educational Participation

The Census (2002) classified people aged 15 years and above who had ceased education by the highest level of educational attainment they had achieved. In the ACT area, 10,400 people indicated that they had ceased their education. Of this total, 2,250 people had no formal education or had received primary education only. A further 2,168 individuals indicated that they had completed their education at lower secondary education.

The overall average figure for people leaving school before the age of 15 years in the ACT area is 20.5 per cent which is lower than the average BMW Region of 25.8 per cent. Examination of figures by ED displayed in Table Three illustrates that those from the Athlone East Urban ED and the Athlone West Urban ED are more likely to have completed their education by the age of 15 years of age compared to those from the EDs of Athlone East Rural and Athlone West Rural.

**Table Three: Educational Participation by Electoral Division**

ED	Percentage of population who have no formal or primary	Percentage of population with lower secondary education	Percentage of population with upper secondary	Percentage of population with 3 <sup>rd</sup> level education

	education only		education	
East Urban	29.8%	21.2%	28.3%	20.7%
West Urban	28.7%	24.6%	26.5%	20.2%
East Rural	15.2%	20.9%	32.5%	31.3%
West Rural	16.2%	20.6%	32.4%	30.8%

(GAMMA;2002)

### 2.15.2 Unemployment Rates

The unemployment rate is defined as the "percentage of unemployed people and first time job seekers, as a proportion of the total labour force". Although the country has witnessed economic expansion the Athlone unemployment rate of 11.2 exceeds the BMW rate of 10.4 and the national rate of 8.8.

The lower the educational attainment of a person, the more likely it is that the person will be unemployed (CPA, 2005). Considering the previously outlined levels of educational participation by ED it is expected that unemployment levels will be higher in the two Athlone Urban EDs in comparison to the two Athlone Rural EDs. Available statistics confirm this is the case with Table Four providing the total of unemployed people and their level of educational participation as a percentage by ED.

**Table Four: Total Unemployed People and their Educational Participation as a Percentage by ED**

ED	Total unemployed	Total % unemployed with no formal or primary education	Total % unemployed with lower secondary education	Total % unemployed with upper secondary education	Total % of unemployed with 3 <sup>rd</sup> level education
East Urban	193	33%	34%	22.3%	10.6%
West Urban	170	30.3%	38.2%	23%	8.5%
East Rural	222	27.3%	22.9%	27.8%	22%
West Rural	63	22.6%	24.2%	35.5%	17.7%

(GAMMA: 2002)

### 2.15.3 Social Class Structure

The Social Class Structure comprises of seven social groups; Social Class 1 are based on higher professional and farmers with over 200 acres; Social Class 2 are lower professional and farmers with 100 - 199 acres; Social Class 3 are non-manual workers and farmers with 50 - 99 acres; Social Class 4 are skilled manual and farmers with 30 - 49

acres Social Class 5 are semi-skilled manual workers and farmers with less than 30 acres; Social Class 6 are non-skilled manual workers; and finally Social Class 7 are those who have never been in paid employment, or who live in households where the head of the household has never been in paid employment.

According to the Census (2002), 18.2 per cent of the national population was in Social Class 7. In the ACT area those identified as Social Class 7 was 24.7 percent. Of this number males constitute 21.8 per cent and females constitute 27.5 per cent, indicating women are more at risk of poverty.

#### **2.15.4 Affluence/Deprivation Scores**

Affluence/Deprivation Scores utilised by GAMMA are derived from the combination of three social phenomena: 1) Demographic Decline, 2) Labour Market Deprivation and 3) Social Class. The scores range from -50 to 50 with -50 being extremely deprived and 50 being extremely affluent.

In 2002 the ACT area Affluence/Deprivation score was 15.1 which are comparable with the National Average Score of 15.4. In the ACT area the Affluence/Deprivation score improved by 11.7 between 1991 and 2002. Despite this improvement in the overall ACT area the Athlone East Urban ED scores -7.3 and the Athlone West Urban ED scores -8.6 and are described as "*marginally disadvantaged*" (GAMMA, 2002).

Statistics available on an ED's basis may conceal localised areas experiencing higher levels of deprivation. The Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) programme is an initiative which targets these localised areas for priority under the National Development Plan. RAPID operates through two strands; Strand I focuses upon 25 urban centres and Strand II focuses upon 20 provincial towns. Athlone is included in RAPID Strand II and supports the following six designated areas: 1) Battery Heights, 2) Ashdale-Woodland Grove 3) Blackberry Lane 4) Sarsfield Square, 5) Monksland and 6) St Mels Terrace.

#### **2.16 Conclusion**

It is recognised that the transition from primary to post-primary school is a crucial stage in a young person's educational career. Those who fail to make a positive transition are seen to be at risk of becoming early school leavers or under-achievers. Pragmatically, by supporting young people during this phase offers a response to the issue of early school leaving and under-achievement. However in reality an effective way of supporting young people to make a positive transition might be harder to achieve than first anticipated.

There is a complex range of in and out school factors to be considered which occur at individual; family; community and school level. The opposing perspectives regarding the outcomes of the education system: 1) A meritocracy which views inequality of outcome as inevitable and 2) The belief that inequality can be reduced by the targeting of resources. But, crucially, simultaneous change is required of systems which are seen to maintain and contribute to inequality. Essentially this means, any proposed transition initiative needs to be clear of the perspective it is

working from and what it is trying to achieve. The first perspective, informs the allocation of supports to retain students and support them to participate in the existing system. In contrast, the second perspective promotes that supports should be provided to enable young people to participate in the education system. But simultaneously this perspective seeks change of the education and other systems to promote equality of outcome among the student population.

The available literature provides evidence of a correlation between low educational attainment and social group. That young people from lower socio-economic group, members of the Traveller Community, ethnic backgrounds and young people with disabilities are more likely to become early school leavers compared to young people from more affluent groups. Therefore any transition initiative to be effective should be able to engage with all young people, especially young people from groups more likely to become early school leavers or under-achievers.

In the past, the use of a child-focused approach to develop youth interventions was seen to lead to the establishment of services for the "typical" child. A negative outcome of this approach was that the "non-typical" child became more distanced from services. Traditionally in Ireland, young people have been excluded from decision-making. A shift in legislation promoting more inclusive approaches has recently occurred. The National Children's Strategy (2000) clearly states that children will have a "voice" in matters that affect them. By using a child-centred approach, which commences with children's or young people's priorities; that they have the free will to participate or not; the use of a range of techniques to accommodate different learning styles and where young people become partners in the initiative, offers the potential to engage with all young people. The child-centred approach places the impetus for change on the adults and systems around the child.

In contemporary Irish society, commercialism and individualism means that people with resources have the choice to access additional resources. In the area of education, by a young person attending a fee paying Leaving Certificate grind school they are in a position to maximise benefits they can derive from the state system. But Resilience Theory highlights that not all children have similar opportunities, but despite this some young people are resilient. In the area of education, resilient students are able to achieve positive academic outcomes compared to non-resilient students. Resilience factors operate accumulatively and in the opposite direction to risk factors. Resilience is seen to be created by the interactions between young people, their peers, family, communities and agencies. The more interactions that can be encouraged and the more that they are child-centred the better the developmental outcomes.

By adopting a child-centred approach underpinned by Resilience Theory to inform the development of transition supports. The opportunity will be created to include the "voice" of all young people and to encourage systemic change. Sources of resilience will be created that young people, families and communities can draw upon to support the development of conditions to promote the well-being of young people.

# Chapter Three Research Design and Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter is a detailed account of the developed research design and methodology. The first section explores research families and provides a rationale for the research approach adopted for this particular study. The chapter then outlines the construction of the ethical framework. The research process for both Strand A and Strand B is then presented under the following headings:

- Boundaries of the Study
- Sampling
- Data Collection Tools and Design
- Data Management

Subsequently, the chapter details the Partnership Group, the Conference, Spin-off Projects, Review Session and Study Delimitations prior to a conclusion.

## 3.2 Research Families

The epistemologies of Positivism and Human Interpretativism underpinning different research families and inform the overall research approach adopted. Positivism, a functionalist perspective, examines causal relationships by systematically gathering precisely measurable data to test pre-determined hypotheses and is referred to as quantitative research (Bilton,1997).

The advocates of Human Interpretativism debate that rich data sources are excluded by using a Positivist approach to research. Qualitative research methods use data collection tools to acquire in-depth information regarding feelings, life experience, attitudes and perceptions. Qualitative research involves the researcher interacting with the research participants and keeping detailed notes of these interactions. These interactions usually produce significant amounts of raw data. It is from this on-going process of data gathering and reviewing in a back and forth motion, which develops emerging themes and concepts and a theory can only be formed when adequate data has been collected. Theories developed through qualitative research are seen to be less generalisable than quantitative methods, but they provide an invaluable insight into the realities and complexities of the lived context.

Traditionally research practice "*has been to exclude children from offering their own perspectives in the research process*" and adult informants have been the providers of data regarding topics involving children (Hogan D, 1997). This is known as a "child-focused" approach which has been seen to make assumptions regarding children, often denigrating children's views and opinions, de-contextualising children's lives, which afforded limited or no consideration for variation, i.e. membership of an ethnic minority or child with a disability. The potential

consequences were developed responses for "typical" children and the "non-typical" child could become further distanced from services and possibly labelled as "deviant" (Hogan D, 1997).

Recently, a shift in legislation towards ascertaining the "voice" of children in matters that affect them (See Chapter Two Literature Review) means by adopting qualitative research methods and a "child-centred" approach, which fundamentally means ensuring young people have the freedom of choice to participate or not, that space is created for the children's own agendas; communication and participatory techniques provide opportunities for different abilities and learning styles; children make decisions regarding the direction of the research; opportunities are incorporated in the process so young people can interpret the revealed data themselves and finally young people can decide how the information is disseminated (Thomas & O'Kane,1998). By promoting a child-centred approach a research process is created where young people become partners or collaborators in the research project and have a voice in matters that affect them.

As previously discussed in the literature review, it is recognised the transfer from primary to post-primary school is a period of radical change in a young person's life. In addition, the literature review outlined Resilience Theory, where some young people are able to overcome adversities in life due to the presence of a combination of resilience factors in their daily lives. Ungar (2003) states qualitative methods are *"well suited to the discovery of unnamed protective processes relevant to the lived experience of the research participants; provide thick description of phenomenon in very specific contexts; elicit and add power to minority "voices" which account for unique localized definitions of positive outcomes; promote tolerance of these localized constructions by avoiding generalization but facilitating transferability of results; and require researchers to account for their biased standpoints"*.

Action research is an approach which intends to produce change and understanding of a topic as an on-going process. As a method it provides *"the flexibility and responsiveness that are needed for effective change at the same time that it provides a check on adequacy of data and conclusions"* ([www.scu.edu](http://www.scu.edu)). The Action Research process involves a critical cyclical motion of four elements 1)plan, 2) act, 3) observe and 4) reflect and the cycle continues.

### ***3.3 Choice of Research Methodology***

A strategic review of the activities of Athlone Community Taskforce took place in 2003. This review led the ACT Board to a decision that an effective contribution to tackling unemployment in the long-term in the Athlone area would be to consider methods of supporting young people to remain in education. The Grubb Institute facilitated ACT, agencies and schools in 2004 to consider possible actions to work towards this strategic aim. The Grubb Institute through a consultation process with ACT and other stakeholders produced an original research brief. The EAR project was established in 2005 to conduct a child-centred action research project. The appointed project manager presented a critique of the original research brief document and provided a discussion paper at a Management Team meeting on Friday, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2005, with the purpose of seeking amendments to the original

proposal, prior to commencing the research. After considerable deliberation the Management Team agreed to adopt the recommended amendments to the original research brief. The overall research aim was stated as follows:

*"To examine from a young person's perspective the experience of the transition from primary to post-primary".*

The Management Team made a series of decisions, which are detailed in the following sections, which enabled the project manager to initiate the action research project.

### **3.4 Ethical Framework**

The ethical framework adopted for this study is presented under the following headings:

- Consent
- Confidentiality
- Storage of Information
- Equality Proofing
- Respondents under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs or substances
- Prevention of Harm

#### **3.4.1 Parental Consent**

To participate in the Transition Programme young people under the age of fourteen years required parental consent. The schools participating in the programme were requested to circulate to parents/guardians an explanatory letter and consent form. A signed consent form was a prerequisite for a young person to be involved in the transition programme and research (See Appendix One).

The project manager was not overly familiar with the Athlone area, but through a short induction provided by the ACT community worker and reading of the ACT Strategic Plan (2000-2006) was aware of geographical areas exhibiting social exclusion factors. To prevent the project manager forming unconscious preconceived expectations of pupils based upon area of residence, the participating schools confirmed consent and the project manager collected the consent forms near the end of the project.

In School One, the Transition Programme was delivered to a whole class context (See Negotiation of Access to the Schools, this chapter). The collection of consent forms at the end of the programme also ensured that the project manager did not differentiate between those who had parental permission and those who did not have parental permission to participate in the programme, preventing preferential treatment of one group over another (See; Study Delimitations, this chapter).

The young people involved in the research were facilitated to make an informed choice regarding their participation in the project by providing details of their rights as volunteer researchers. (See: Appendix Two).

### **3.4.2 Confidentiality**

To ensure confidentiality of schools and individual participants codes were applied to collected data and it was decided an alias would be used in the project report, if necessary. On all issues of confidentiality, the research will apply the Children First Guidelines (Department of Health and Children, 1999), which were adopted by the Board of ACT. An established reporting mechanism ensured the possibility of expedient reporting of any genuine suspicions of abuse. From the outset of the project young people were informed of this condition of the research.

### **3.4.3 Storage of Information**

All data and associated research materials, tapes, field notes, etc., will be stored securely at the premises of ACT for a period of five years. The data can only be used for the purposes for which it was collected. The data will be destroyed on the elapse of the five year period.

### **3.4.4 Equality Proofing**

The Equality Status Act (2000) prohibits discrimination on nine grounds: gender; marital status; family status; sexual orientation; religious belief; age; disability; race and membership of the Traveller Community. The research will not reinforce existing inequalities through its methods. The Management Team agreed to the provision of specific supports such as translators and a person proficient in sign language, to be accessed at any stage of the research, if required.

### **3.4.5 Respondents under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs or other substances**

The Management Team agreed that any data obtained from respondents under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs or other substances could be used, but noted in the report.

### **3.4.6 Prevention of Harm**

The research did not intentionally use methods which placed participants in any physical, emotional or psychological danger. The four ethical principles applied during the study are shown in Table Five overleaf.



**Table Five Ethical Principles of Research with Children (Hogan and Gilligan 1997, pg 5, 1997)**

Types of Rights	Research Ethic Principles
To satisfactory development of well-being	The purpose of the research should contribute to children's well being, either directly, or indirectly, through increased understanding of children which can help adults who are responsible for children
To protection from harm	Methods should be designed to avoid stress and distress, contingency arrangements should be available in case children become upset or situations of risk or harm are revealed
To appropriate services	Children should whenever possible feel good about having contributed to research as a service which can inform society, individuals, policy and practice
To express opinions which are taken account of	Children should make informed choices about : Agreement or refusal to take part; Opting out (at any stage); Contributing ideas to research agendas and processes, both for individual research projects and to the research enterprise as a whole

### **3.5 Strand A – Transition Programme**

This section of the chapter details decisions taken by the Management Team regarding Strand A of the research and is presented under the following headings:

- Boundaries of the Study
- Sampling
- Data Collection and Design
- Data Management

#### **3.5.1 Boundaries of the Study**

The focus upon the experience of the transition from primary to post-primary school necessitated the involvement and co-operation of both Primary and post-primary schools.

**Primary school inclusion** - To ensure a cross section of young people would have the choice to become involved in the programme, a list of primary schools in the Athlone area obtained from the Department of Education and Science website was supplied to the Management Team.

- Primary Schools were geographically categorised into two areas, Connaught and Leinster:
  - Connaught - West Urban Electoral Division and West Rural Electoral Division

- Leinster - East Urban Electoral Division and East Rural Electoral Division
- The optimum number of young people for the project was decided as twenty, to provide an insight into the varying experiences of young people. To allow for possible withdrawal of participants it was decided to seek twenty-five volunteer researchers.

The agreed process was that the project manager would network with the initial list of twelve schools, which included both urban and rural, gaeil scoil and a special needs school. Each of the schools was invited to contribute to the creation of a backdrop to the existing transition provision at the time of the research. As part of the process these schools would also be "flagged" to ascertain their view of potential inclusion in the proposed Transition Programme.

Subsequent to the initial networking, the listed schools were categorised by location and it was decided they would be approached in order, i.e the first school on the list on the Connaught side, then the first school on the list on the Leinster side, and then the second, and so on to invite their participation in the project with the purpose of obtaining twenty-five voluntary participants from their 6<sup>th</sup> Classes to volunteer to take part in the programme. The first two schools listed one from the Connaught side and the other from the Leinster side facilitated the inclusion of twenty five young people in the research process. Therefore it was not necessary to approach any further schools on the list. To protect the confidentiality of the participants the location of the specific ED's where the school were located is not revealed here.

**Post-primary schools** - The proposed sample of twenty five young people meant all five post-primary schools servicing Athlone could become transfer destinations. All five post-primary schools were approached with the purpose of highlighting the project and to negotiate participation in the programme. All five schools agreed in principle to participate in the programme. In the second phase of the project the sample of volunteer researchers were attending all five post-primary schools in Athlone. All five post-primary schools agreed to facilitate the project.

### **3.5.2 Negotiation of Access to the Primary Schools**

A copy of the proposed Transition Programme consisting of six sessions and a presentation session was negotiated with each of the participating schools (See Appendix Three). The young people themselves were not involved at the design stage of this Transition Programme. However to ensure a child-centred approach, the programme design incorporated a flexibility within each of the sessions, to enable the volunteer researchers to identify their own concerns and feelings and to decide the direction of their own personal research.

Each of the participating primary schools requested the following specifications to facilitate the Transition Programme in their school context.

**School One** - Required that the programme would be delivered in the "whole" class content with a teacher present. The rationale provided by School One for these specifications was that the population of the 6<sup>th</sup> class was limited and traditionally the class groups in the school were not separated. A 6<sup>th</sup> Class population of fourteen young people participated in the programme within the class. Eight had parental consent to participate in the Transition programme (See: Study Delimitations).

**School Two** - The original agreement was to offer the Transition Programme to one class, with the teacher present. However due to an unforeseen event of a staff member becoming seriously ill, this was impossible. Teacher substitution could not guarantee the same teacher for the duration of the programme, which was considered potentially distracting for the overall research process. Therefore it was renegotiated to open the programme to all 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils, with the project manager to facilitate the sessions and a resource person would be made available, if requested. A 6<sup>th</sup> Class sample of seventeen young people from two different classes volunteered to participate in the programme.

### **3.5.3 Sampling**

Sampling is a method of selecting potential research participants. It is important that the sampling technique is compatible with the overall research approach, be it quantitative or qualitative. The schools through their agreement to participate in the project provided the potential sample population i.e. Sixth Class pupils. The project, promoting a child-centred approach required that young people would self-select or to become "volunteer researchers," which is compatible with a qualitative approach (Blaxter, 1997).

The programme design facilitated the volunteer researchers to identify and selected their own research respondents. This was mainly achieved through convenience sampling, also compatible with qualitative research. These respondents would be contacted in the follow-up phase of the Transition Programme. In addition, provision was made at the planning stage to facilitate school personnel and possibly agency workers depending upon the experience of the young people involved to participate in the research, if they wished.

### **3.5.4 Data Collection Tools and Design**

The sessional delivery of the Transition Programme incorporated a series of complementary, interchangeable, qualitative data collection methods. Each method was underpinned by the principle of building resilience, facilitating different learning styles and to empower young people to critically consider their own position and seek responses to their own questions. Simultaneously, the project manager continually collected data. The utilised methods are listed below:

- Activity-based Interview
- Individual Project Files
- Large Group Discussion
- Participant Observation
- Focus Groups

- Semi-structured Interviews

#### **3.5.4.1 Activity-based Interview**

**Advantages of Activity-Based Interviews** - Provide a method of exploring topics through an activity and offer a forum for building relationships between the project manager and the volunteer researchers. Activity-based interviews such as art work, poster making, collage, write-ups also facilitated different learning styles. The utilisation of activity-based interviews was informed by previous research with children which is referenced by Tomas & O'Kane (1998) "*Although concrete, the activities enabled children to talk about complex and abstract issues and to interpret social structures and relationships that affect their lives*" (Hazel, 1996; Solberg, 1996).

**Disadvantages of Activity-based Interviews** - The project manager's ability to interpret the volunteer researchers' interactions, produced work and dialogue will impact on the extracted meaning from this data collection process.

#### **3.5.4.2 Individual Projects Files**

**Advantages of Individual Projects Files**- Individual projects enabled young people to consider issues and concerns regarding the transition to post-primary, which they chose not to share in either a small or large group setting. To ensure individual confidentiality, access to project files was confined to the volunteer researchers and the project manager.

**Disadvantage of Individual Projects Files** - A series of templates or worksheets were provided to complete and insert in the project file as the transition programme progressed. Some were more diligent at completing such sheets in the session context and/or as home task than others. As a data collection tool the individual project files probably favoured those with more developed literacy skills.

#### **3.5.4.3 Large Group Discussion**

**Advantages of Large Group Discussion** - The large group context offers the opportunity to provide feedback, consider information and exchange ideas. The process may promote a sense of inclusion, if self-realisation occurs, that other people are also feeling the same way or have identified similar issues. Thomas & O'Kane (1998) state "*by using group processes we created space where children could collectively reinterpret the research questions and do further work on the material brought from the individual interviews*".

**Disadvantages of Large Group Discussion** - Conversely a large group context may be intimidating for some individuals and more vocal participants can dominate group interactions.

#### **3.5.4.4. Participant Observation**

**Advantages of Participant Observation** - The project manager utilised participant observation to gain insights to group dynamics, group cultures or sub-cultures and methods of gathering rich data.

**Disadvantages of Participant Observations** - In a short-term project the timescale prevents the formation of an accurate assessment of culture, and sub-cultures, if used as an exclusive data collection method.

#### ***3.5.4.5 Focus group***

**Advantages of Focus Group** - The focus group is a method which involves direct participation of the young people. As a data collection method it is underpinned by the principle of equality and values the opinions of young people.

**Disadvantages of Focus Group** - The focus group as a method requires a homogeneity within the group, to build trust and create an environment where openness and the revelations of rich material can be facilitated. In the school context the class groups have been together for a considerable length of time. This suggests that the group would be familiar with each other and some relationships of trust among the group membership had been established.

#### ***3.5.4.6 Semi-structured Interviews***

There are various methods of conducting interviews including: structured; semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews associated with quantitative research intend to gather precise information. Semi-structured interviews are compatible with qualitative research which facilitates the researcher to gather "core" information from all the respondents. But by using open-ended questions enables respondents to provide rich data. Unstructured interviews are also compatible with qualitative research, but depending upon the direction taken in the interaction may produce significant amounts of raw data, some of which may be irrelevant to the topic, the extracted meaning is reliant upon the skills of the researcher.

**Advantages of Semi-structured Interviews** - The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the project manager to collect core data, but also facilitated volunteer researchers to provide rich data. Semi-structured interviews were also thought to be the most suitable interview method when connecting with parents and school staff to negotiate a time allowance that was agreeable and did not impinge on home or school schedules.

**Disadvantages** - Semi-structured interviews, depending upon the design and time allocation, may restrict the amount and type of data collected.

### **3.5.5 Data Management**

The utilisation of a series of complementary, interchangeable, qualitative data collection methods required a data management system to enable efficient organisation and extraction of material. The methods are detailed in the following sections:

- Strand A - Phase One - Primary Level
- Strand A - Phase Two - Post-primary Level

### **3.5.5.1 Strand A Phase One – Primary Level**

**Individual base-line records** (See Appendix Four) - were developed for each volunteer researcher detailing the number of Transition Programme sessions they attended, individual concerns and issues regarding their impending transition and other factors. These records informed a starting point for the follow-up of individual issues, as an element of the follow-up in October and November.

**Tape Recordings** - The project manager negotiated with the volunteer researchers to make tape recordings of sessions and interactions. The tape recordings were a method of recording dialogue, but also provided evidence of the atmosphere within the session context, such as interruptions and humours. During small group discussion, if a person did not want to be recorded, the project manager would make notes of the interactions and issues as part of the observation record sheets (See Study Delimitations).

The tape recordings were transcribed verbatim, arranged into a grid, which involved on average three hours transcription per one hour tape (See Appendix Five). Subsequently, the project manager read the transcripts to become immersed in the data. On the third reading, the project manager inserted research comments into the grid and then reviewed notes from the other sources of data obtained through participant observation, individual project files and information from wall displays used during the presentations. This enabled the project manager to add "richness" and triangulate the information obtained from Strand A. The emerging themes and identified issues enabled the project manager to follow-up "gaps" and "mis-matches" which would require further investigation as part of cyclical process of action research.

### **3.5.5.2 Strand A Phase Two – Post-primary Level**

The re-engagement with volunteer researchers was initiated by a letter wishing them "good luck" in their new school in late August (See; Appendix Six). A subsequent letter was sent in late September outlining that the project manager would be telephoning them to ascertain if the young person wanted to continue with the project. 21 volunteer researchers agreed to participate. During Phase Two - Post-primary parents/guardians were invited to provide their experience of their child's early post-primary career. 15 parents agreed to participate.

The post-primary phase involved a semi-structured interview with each individual, which took place in the school context or the home, depending upon the wishes of the participant. The majority of parents chose to be interviewed by telephone and a time was arranged to suit the respondent. Two parents chose to participate in one-to-one semi-structured interviews at home.

## **3.6 Strand B**

The mapping of services working with young people and families in the Athlone area meant networking with statutory, semi-state, voluntary, community and church organisations and is presented under the following headings:

- Sampling
- Data Collection and Design
- Data Management

### **3.6.1 Sampling**

There were two methods of sampling used for Strand B: 1) convenience and 2) snowballing. Both of these methods are compatible with qualitative research. Convenience sampling was used to network with individuals of readily identifiable services, such as the Health Services Executive, Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Youth Service, Westmeath County Childcare Committee, Barnados, ACT community groups.

Through the network interventions snowballing sampling occurred, where network contacts identified other potential respondents in different sections within a large organisation, i.e. Health Services Executive or in the non-statutory sector.

### **3.6.2 Data Collection and Design**

Strand B involved networking with a multipurpose, 1) to heighten awareness of the project; 2) to ascertain the organisation perception of how current practice builds resilience; 3) to identify existing interaction between agencies that build resilience; 4) to identify areas of potential transformation to enhance integration and collaboration. Where possible it was also intended to negotiate an agreed principle of potential participation in the development and delivery of services. Finally to gather information regarding issues raised by other stakeholders, i.e. schools, other agencies, parents, community groups, as an element of the cyclical action research process.

#### **3.6.2.1 Semi-structured interview**

The majority of network contacts were made through semi-structured interviews (See Advantages and Disadvantages at point 3.5.4.6).

#### **3.6.2.2 Focus Group**

The Social Work Team Leader requested a focus group interview with members of the Social Work Team, which met fortnightly and was the best opportunity to connect with the workers.

### **3.6.3 Data Management**

**Semi-Structured interaction** - The project manager took notes during the semi-structured interviews with the network contact's consent. Subsequent to the semi-structured interview the project manager wrote the full version

of the interaction. Network contacts codes, details and the date of network interaction were entered into a computerised system to enable formation of a mailing list and to aid tracking of filing of information.

**Tape Recordings** - The focus group interactions were tape recorded and transcribed in the same manner as under Strand A.

The project manager read each interaction and arranged the revealed information under each of the main Strand B objectives: 1) to ascertain the organisation perception of how current practice builds resilience; 2) to identify existing interaction between agencies that build resilience and 3) to identify areas of potential transformation to enhance integration and collaboration.

### ***3.8 Partnership Group***

The Partnership Group is intended *"to assist and support the programme in its different local contexts and to enable the development and implementation of the programme"*. As a child-centred approach the issues and concerns raised by the young people are the fundamental source of information to develop potential responses. The Partnership Group membership (See Appendix Seven) was drawn from both research strands and designed to be flexible, facilitating the co-opting of members from the different strands to develop and promote responses.

### ***3.9 Conference - Creating Conditions to Support Young People to Make a Positive Transition from Primary to Post-primary***

To bring a closure to Phase One the findings from Strand A and Strand B were collated and analysed. To disseminate the main findings from Phase One to schools, agencies and parents a conference was hosted entitled "Creating conditions to support young people to make a positive transition from primary to post-primary school" on Wednesday, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2005 (See Appendix Eight). The provision of this information could potentially empower attendants to consider their own practice or approaches and possibly lead to shifts in practice towards a child-centred approach. In addition, the conference was intended to promote interest among those present to consider their role in the development of any future collaborations.

### ***3.10 Spin-off Projects***

The back and forth processing of information between Strand A and B enabled the development of spin-off projects as part of the research process (See Chapter Nine).

### ***3.11 Review Session***

A review session was scheduled at the commencement of the research to enable volunteer researchers to review the draft final report to ensure that their views and opinions were reported accurately. The session was organised for the end of January 2006, initially a letter was circulated to the volunteer researchers to invite them to the session and to obtain parental consent. Parents were also invited to attend the session, if they chose. In the week



prior to the session the volunteer researchers who had not contacted the project manager about the session were connected by telephone to make them aware they were welcome to attend, if they wished.

### ***3.12 Study De-Limitations***

#### **3.12.1 School One Context**

In School One, the inclusion of both volunteers and non-volunteers researchers meant from the outset the project manager did not seek the identity of young people with parental permission to participate in the programme. This was intended to prevent unconscious favouritism or bias towards the volunteer researchers during the programme delivery. Therefore the small and large group interaction included inputs from both volunteers and non-volunteers, but the revelations by non-volunteers of a particular personal incident are not used in the report. It is difficult to provide evidence that the presence of non-volunteers had a positive or negative effect on the outcomes of the programme.

#### **3.12.2 Duration of Sessions**

In both schools the session consisted of a one hour input, but the movement of desks or re-locating from one room to another meant that actually time working with the young people was approximately three-quarters of an hour per session. The number of young people in each of the sessions and in School One particularly, with mixed volunteers and non-volunteers meant limited time was spent with each individual child.

#### **3.12.3 Study Scale**

**Strand A** - The qualitative approach sought to gain insights into the realities of young people's lived experience of the transition from primary to post-primary school. The sample of twenty-five during Phase One and twenty-one during Phase two provided rich data and illuminated individual issues and concerns, which are not met by current generic services. As a qualitative research, by its very nature the research findings are less generalisable to wider youth populations. However the project provides the opportunity for the "voice" of young people to be heard in a localised context, which can immediately inform practice.

**Strand B** - The number of services and agencies involved in the mapping exercise was extensive, totalling 84 contacts. The mapping was not intended to be an audit of available service, so it cannot be assumed that all services operating in the Athlone area were contacted.

### ***3.13 Conclusion***

The research design of a two stranded approach enabled the simultaneous collection of data from a child-centred perspective and an adult of perspective. The advantages of taking an action approach meant that needs, responses and identification of potential areas for further developed could become part of the research process.

The underpinning Resilience Theory meant that research methods had to facilitate different learning styles and work with participant's strengths. The Transition Programme also needed to create opportunities for inputs from individuals, families and communities. In addition the research design needed to potentially fulfil both Strand A and B research objectives.

## Chapter Four Existing Transition Provision

### 4. 1 Introduction

In the Athlone area between the 2<sup>nd</sup> March and the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2005, twelve primary schools based in urban and rural areas, gaeil scoil and a special needs school and five post-primary schools were contacted. The purpose of contacting the schools was three-fold: 1) to heighten awareness of the EAR Project; 2) to ascertain the existence of transition supports in place at the time of the research and 3) to identify other services schools connected with to support the whole child development of their pupils.

Through Strand B a number of statutory and non-statutory agencies were identified which offered transition from primary to post-primary school programme and supports. These measures are detailed as section prior to the chapter conclusion.

### 4.2 The Primary School Perspective

Primary schools outlined that existing transition programmes were provided by the post-primary sector. A post-primary staff member made a visit to the primary school. The person would speak with pupils about what their post-primary school had to offer. The approach of post-primary staff was viewed as professional, but it was felt that it was "promotional" or a "selling" activity, which was attributed to the competition among the post-primary schools. One principal felt that these visits meant pupil were "being bombarded with information" which added to anxiety levels for some pupils regarding the impending transition to post-primary school.

#### 4.2.1 Issues regarding the Transition from a Primary Perspective

It was expressed that there is a need for a specific programme to support young people at the time of transition from primary to post-primary school. Some principals expressed that parental anxiety levels regarding the transition were often higher than their children's. It was suggested that a specific support programme for parents might be needed. Any proposed programme should include the following elements:

- To assist children in developing study patterns
- To have timetables sent directly to parents indicating days off
- To advise on topic/subject choice
- To have an advocacy service to support parents in approaching schools
- To provide information on the emotional affects on parents and children, which
- may occur during the transition period
- Support for parents regarding transfer to special needs schools
- Students from mainstream primary school who were transferring to a Special Needs School required specific attention and support.

#### **4.2.2 Perceived Role of the Primary School**

Three additional responses delivered by the primary schools themselves were cited as positive contributions to the transition from primary to post-primary school: 1) pupils who had made the transferred to post-primary school, were invited back to the primary school to speak to the new sixth class; 2) preparation for Confirmation, explored the process of growing up and moving on and 3) a question and answer sessions regarding post-primary school are facilitated by the 6<sup>th</sup> Class teacher and/or principal.

The primary schools cited their main contribution to the transition process was to encourage parents to release their child's school records promptly to the post-primary school. Principals' believed that the choice of a post-primary school was made by the pupil, but family tradition and older sibling attendance at a school was seen to influence the choice of the young person.

### **4.3 Services Accessed by Primary Schools**

Primary schools accessed additional services to promote the well-being of the whole school population and for individual cases depending upon the identified need. These are presented under the following headings:

- The Department of Education and Science (DES)
- The Health Service Executive (HSE), previously known as Health Boards
- Other Service Providers

#### **4.3.1 The Department of Education and Science**

**National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)** - The allocation of educational psychological assessments through the NEPS was believed insufficient, with a ratio of one assessment per fifty pupils (1:50). The timescale for requesting and delivery of the service was considered inappropriate. Principals attribute both of these service limitations to NEPS being under-funded by the DES.

Some schools stated they did not receive NEPS assessments and were required to arrange private assessments for pupils with parental permission or advise parents to arrange private psychological assessment for their own child. Those who could access private assessments were able to accelerate the application process for further specific learning supports, if required. If a recommended DES psychologist was used by a school to conduct the assessments, the school could claim a rebate back from NEPS.

Depending on the recommendations of the educational psychological assessment, additional assessments may be required from the HSE i.e. speech therapy, occupational therapy. But it appears a lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of different departments existed. This led to confusion among schools regarding who was responsible for applying for assessments. The process of applying for assessments and receipt of supports could

take a full academic year. Principals outlined the lack of supports meant that some young people are limited in the benefits they can derive from the system and causes them to fall academically behind their peers.

**Special Needs** - The provision of special needs operates in three areas of work: 1) special needs assessment; 2) assistive technology and 3) transport. The Special Education Needs Organiser for the Athlone area was considered proactive in their approach of working with the schools. All of the primary schools assisted pupils and their families to apply for special needs supports where a need was identified.

**Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)** - A HSCL post shared between three of the primary schools had recently become vacant. At the time of the initial contact with the schools, all three schools emphasised the need to find a replacement person, as the HSCL post was seen as providing an invaluable link between the schools and parents.

**Education Training Centre** - was cited as a service accessed by teachers to gain specific skills that could be utilised in the school context.

**Visiting Teacher for Travellers** - Some schools linked with the visiting teacher for travellers to meet the needs of children from the Traveller Community.

**Disadvantaged Status** - The DES has designated three of the primary schools in the Athlone area as "disadvantaged" and through a variety of initiatives additional resources can be allocated to the schools.

**Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage** - One school confirmed that they were in receipt of specific funding from the "Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage" programme.

#### **4.3.2 Health Service Executives**

**General Health Services** - The Health Service Executives (HSE) delivered a range of general health services through the school system i.e. dental checks and hearing tests. Several primary schools cited a perceived gap in general health services - the issue of head lice. Under current legislation schools are unable to treat head lice in the school context. It was proposed that a proactive response by the HSE was required to deal with outbreaks of headlice. It was proposed that a follow-up call to family homes, possibly by the Public Health Nurse, would ensure treatment for headlice had been completed at home.

**Speech and Language Therapy/Occupational Therapy/Psychiatry Service** - The majority of primary schools linked into specialised HSE services, like speech and language therapy and found the services generally adequate. However a case affecting an individual pupil was recounted by a principal, where a service had been secured but the young person did not attend the appointments (See: Vignette One - Speech and Language Therapy Session).

**Social Workers/Family Support Workers** - In the majority of primary schools, a minority of pupils are connected with social care or foster care services. A school representative, usually the principal, is invited to participate in a case conference, to provide an input regarding the young person's progress in the school context as an element of a holistic approach to working with the family.

#### **Vignette One - Speech and Language Therapy Sessions**

- **Identified Need**

*A child with speech difficulties was identified by the school. The parents were assisted by the principal to secure speech therapy sessions, which were due to be conducted in a HSE premises. It came to light the child had not attended the sessions. On closer investigation by the school, it was revealed the family was currently in crisis.*

- **Family Crisis**

*One parent had been temporarily removed from the home. The remaining parent was the primary carer for four young children, including a baby. The family were living on limited resources, with no car and were unable to afford a taxi, to enable the child to attend the speech therapy sessions. The parent was understandably under considerable stress at this time. A number of alternatives were explored.*

- **Alternative Approach**

*The situation was resolved by an agreement reached between the school and the HSE. It was negotiated that speech therapy sessions would be conducted in the school. This was possible because a number of other pupils attending the school were also in receipt of speech and language therapy sessions at the time. Therefore the speech and language therapist was able to shift the service into the school for one day per week. The pupils were facilitated to participate in their sessions by class release and after-school sessions.*

- **Mutual Benefits for All Stakeholders**

*The relocation of session had many benefits for the service providers, service users and the school.*

- **Service Providers**

- *Flexibility in conducting sessions regarding the number of pupils present on the day*
- *Potentially increased session participation by delivering service via the school*
- *Insight for the therapist into the learning context of the child*
- *Builds relationships between HSE and school*
- *Reduces time child is absent from school*

- **Service Users**

- *Increased participation*
- *Familiarity with surroundings*
- *Prevents absence from school for a morning, afternoon or whole day*
- *Assists parents to access services*

- **School**

- *The school knows that the young person is attending the sessions*
- *Prevents absence of a pupil for the whole school day*
- *Builds relationships with the HSE*

#### **4.3.3 Other Service Providers**

Schools provided a focal point for communities, especially in rural areas as the school is often the only public building in the area. It was related that sometimes expectations were placed upon teachers by other community members, agencies, parents and pupils to be advocates, counsellors, surrogate parents and advisors. Although schools were willing to assist where possible, they also felt it was necessary to access services outside of the school system to respond to some of these expectations (See Table Five, next page). Generally, school availed of other service "as needed". These services were often obtained through informal networks and personal contacts.

As Table Five, below illustrates schools access both statutory and non-statutory services to complement school activities. Sporting associations provided physical activity outlets; MRYS and Youth Resources provided health and information inputs; Barnardos worked with families requiring particular supports; St. Vincent de Paul provided financial supports for school activities; GP's were linked to when necessary; the library was used as a resource; Gardai provided inputs into the SPHE programme; pre-schools, breakfast and after-schools facilities were considered as valuable learning supports and ACT provided various programmes and initiatives.

**Table Five: Services Accessed by Primary Schools**

Services	
Midland Regional Youth Service	Library
External Music Tutor	Breakfast Club
GAA, soccer, rugby, swimming, basketball	Pre-schools
Barnados -family supports & counsellors	After-schools/homework clubs
Rainbows - Bereavement & Separation Support	GP's
Youth Resource Centre	Gardai
St. Vincent de Paul	ACT

#### **4.3.4 Other Primary School Issues, Needs and Concerns**

Primary principals outlined a variety of factors affecting the educational well-being of a young person, as follows:

- A lack of a local forum for primary school principals or teachers to "voice" identified issues and needs
- An expressed concern regarding the transportation of children to attend primary schools outside of their immediate community/parish
- Enrolment of non-national pupils at primary level was considered competitive, due to the additional resources that could be obtained from the Department of Education & Science to support non-national students
- The need for more opportunities for schools from the West and East of the Shannon to interact as one principal stated *"we are only a hen's kick away from each other.....but hardly get chance to interact"*

### **4.4 Post-Primary School Perspective**

All five post-primary schools in Athlone are proactive and invest significant resources in the provision of their transition programmes for new first year students. The transition programme structure involves two stages: 1) pre-entry and 2) integration.

#### **4.4.1 Pre-entry Stage**

Post-primary schools offered a similar pre-entry stage including the following elements:

- A visit to primary schools
- Invitation to pupils and parents to attend an Open Day/Night

- Student enrolment
- A request to parents to release student records from primary school
- A welcome letter to first year pupils

#### **4.4.1.1 Variations in Pre-entry Stage**

**Induction Day** - A number of schools preferred to provide an induction day in May. This could be a half-day or full day of a structured programme, offering ice-breakers, sports, exposure to new topics and class room settings such as laboratories, timetables and maps of buildings.

**Buddy/Mentoring System** - Some schools recruited 6<sup>th</sup> year post-primary students to act as "buddies" or "mentors" for incoming 1<sup>st</sup> year students. Participants were selected on the basis that the "*students would have an empathy with 1<sup>st</sup> years*" (Principal). The stated ratio was 1:3 one 6<sup>th</sup> year to three 1<sup>st</sup> year students. In some schools introduction between 6<sup>th</sup> year and incoming 1<sup>st</sup> year students were made during summer term induction days. As a principal stated "*so a 1<sup>st</sup> year student they would know at least one person entering the school in September*" (Principal).

#### **4.4.2 Stage Two - Integration**

**Induction Day** - Those schools that did not provide an induction day as part of the pre-entry stage commenced the new term with induction activities on the first day of term.

**Buddy/Mentoring System** - School staff provided ongoing support to buddies or mentors throughout the school year. The feedback between students and staff as part of the buddy/mentoring systems meant that potential issues could be identified and staff could intervene, if necessary. In some schools a prefect system is operated, with two prefects selected to work with each class, again with the purpose of supporting 1<sup>st</sup> year students and identifying potential issues.

**Social Spaces and Lunchtime Clubs** - Schools allocated particular social spaces for 1<sup>st</sup> years (in some schools other years were also allocated social spaces). In these areas lunchtime clubs were provided, where students could eat lunch and participate in activities, varying from board games, science clubs (conducted in science laboratories) and sport leagues, depending on the likes of students' and their requests for activities.

**Surveys** - Formal and informal surveys are conducted by some schools to ascertain the views of students regarding the school induction programme and other issues. This enabled schools to respond to student identified needs and issues within the school.

**Home School Community Liaison** - In Athlone, three post-primary schools have a Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) person. The role of the HSCL is to maximise active participation of children in the school; to promote active



co-operation between home, school and community agencies promoting the educational interests of young people; to assist parents to develop skills to support their children's educational progress; to enhance children's uptake and retention in the education systems and to disseminate learning from positive outcomes in the school (Department of Education and Science).

**Pastoral Care** - Pastoral Care available in the post-primary context is considered an invaluable support for students. One principal, expressed the following concern " *the supports we have for students, I believe are very good. I don't know how some of the supports in schools are going to be maintained as members of the orders/clergy decline. Who will supply their inputs then? Sometimes, I think we underestimate the inputs the clergy contribute to the education system*".

**In-house Assessments** - In-house assessments by some schools are conducted to provide an insight into student capabilities. A principal explained " *the assessment enables the school to identify students who may require supports. For example last year, five students whose parents didn't reveal they (students) were availing of supports in primary school were identified. It just meant putting supports in place, but obviously took longer, than if we had known prior to entering the school*"

**Settling-in** - All post-primary schools stated that despite the existing measures, each year a small number of young people did experience settling-in difficulties. Principals cited individual causes such as " *had trouble making friends, felt isolated, sensitive...*". Other Principals cited a combination of factors, with one stating " *there are significant factors to consider. Some pupils have the odds stacked against them.... written academic approach doesn't necessarily suit .....the topics we are obliged to teach in accordance with Department guidelines.. there are usually 4 -6 young people each year who under-achieve at these topics, even with special supports... There needs to be a way of working with these young people to enhance their skills in preparation for the working environment*".

Students who do not settled-in were believed to come to the attention of teaching staff in a number of ways, such as " *a student may be getting on alright with class mates, but doesn't settle into the academic regime*" (Principal); a student appears isolated and those students experiencing difficulties in topics such as i.e. mathematics and languages are students potentially at risk of becoming early school leaving. In some schools additional mathematics supports were supplied to students to build skills in this core competency.

Generally, principals felt it was important not to add to any existing anxiety a student might be experiencing during the settling-in period. If possible, a staff response would be developed, which was often effective. In some cases individual work with a student would be required, to support the student in whatever way possible.

**Homework/Study Supports** - Each of the schools provided supervised evening study, available to the general school population, at a nominal fee. A teacher would be present during these sessions and students would be expected to complete their homework and study by themselves. The teacher present might assist an individual student by answering a question, if the topic corresponded with teacher's area of expertise.

At the time of the research only one post-primary school indicated that they provided interactive, after school learning supports for students. Fifteen to twenty students availed of this provision and were usually students who required learning supports.

## ***4.5 Services Accessed by Post-primary Schools***

The post-primary schools identified a range of services which they accessed to support their students. These are presented under the following headings:

- Department of Education and Science
- Health Services Executive

### **4.5.1 Department of Education and Science**

**NEPS and Special Needs** - Generally, if parental consent is given to release information regarding supports received by a child in primary school to the post-primary school, this enables the post-primary school to make provision for the student entering the school in the September. The only criticism which arose regarding this process was that resource hours were provided to schools in "blocks". Allocations of specific hours to individual students were not supplied to the schools. This information was released to the parents, who were not always aware that the schools did not possess the same information.

As previously identified, some parents for whatever reason do not release specific information regarding special needs assessments. Through in-school assessment tests students requiring special supports can be identified. If a student had a psychological assessment and supports in primary school and the student's assessment is up-to-date it is possible for post-primary schools to access supports relatively quickly.

Conversely, one principal stated that some students arrive in First Year with *"an obvious need for special supports, but have never been assessed"*, which leads to potentially serious consequences for the students. A request is made to NEPS for an assessment, but there is usually a significant waiting time, before the assessment is conducted. In the post-primary setting *"these students are at a disadvantage as they may have left by the time an assessment is allocated"* (Principal).

**Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)** - Three HSCL personnel operate from three of the post-primary schools. The remaining two schools expressed a need for a HSCL type of position in their school as they felt the role was of a huge benefit to build links between the school and parents

#### **4.5.2 Health Services Executive**

The post-primary schools like the primary schools linked to GP's and HSE services.

#### **4.5.3 Other Post-primary Issues, Needs and Concerns**

**Behaviour and Bullying** - The post-primary schools provided codes of behaviour and procedures for staff, management and parents to work with students involved in unacceptable behaviour. Generally, these procedures are considered effective in working with students and parents. However a case was cited where complete disregard of behaviour codes by a student and the student's parents had led to on-going conflict within the school context, but had also led to threatening behaviour in the public context. The principal stated *"I think the Department (Education & Science) needs to take on board extra needs are required, not just academic needs, but especially around behaviour and the intimidation of staff"*.

**Competition and Media Inputs** - One principal stated that *"Athlone is well serviced with five post-primary schools.....offering similar service. However we are bit more academically based and have less practical topics, but as I said before, this is under review"*. The Principal went on to state as there are five schools the *"competition is crazy..... I think the local newspapers are driving this, they rang here looking for business. "Would we be interested in putting in a colour spread?"*

### **4.7 Statutory and Non-statutory Provision of Transition Programmes**

Strand B of the research revealed that both statutory and non-statutory service providers support young people and families regarding the transition from primary to post-primary school. These are presented under the following headings:

- Specifically Designed Transition Programmes<sup>1</sup>
- Transition Supports

#### **4.7.1 Specifically Designed Transition Programmes**

**HSE Family Resource Centre (Roscommon based) - Statutory** - Offered a specifically designed Programme called Okay - Lets Go! The programme is delivered in the school context to a whole class. During the previous year three primary schools located in County Roscommon availed of the programme.

**Barnardos - Non-statutory** - Barnardos offered two transition programmes working with families: 1) the transition from pre-school to primary school and 2) the transition from primary to post-primary school. Both of these

<sup>1</sup> National Parents Council offered a transition programme at the Athlone Education Centre. The project manager's attempts to form a network contact with the providers were unsuccessful.

programmes are delivered outside of the school context. The transition from primary to post-primary programme involves four sessions working with children and parents and a follow-up stage at post-primary level. In the past two years a total of 16 families had participated in the programme.

**Midlands Regional Youth Service - Non-statutory** - The MRYS in collaboration with after schools workers offered a programme called Stepping Over to Secondary (SOS), which was delivered in the primary school context using a workshop method. In 2004, two schools availed of the SOS programme and for the first time a follow-up in post-primary school was conducted as part of the programme.

#### **4.7.2 Transition Supports**

**The HSE Family Support Services (Athlone based) - Statutory** - A family support worker supporting a family with a child about to make the transition from primary to post-primary school. Depending upon the family needs, could offer a variety of supports. These ranged from assisting parents to apply for the Back to School Allowance, encouraging parents to release student records from the primary school to the post-primary school, where to source books and materials, to the provision of emotional support.

**The Family Literacy Service - Statutory** - As a new initiative, the Family Literacy Service were offering parents advice on how to support their children at the time of the transition and how to support their children to develop self-management of learning. As a new initiative the numbers of parents availing of this support were unavailable.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

Post-primary schools in the Athlone are the main providers of transition programmes in place at the time of the research. These programmes involve two stages: 1) pre-entry and 2) integration. The primary school perception of the pre-entry stage is that it is very professional, but is seen mainly as a promotional tool used by the post-primary schools to recruit new students. The elements of the integration stage were similar from post-primary to post-primary school.

Despite the provision of existing transition measures all schools reported that annually a small number of students experience settling-in difficulties. Schools attributed settling-in difficulties experienced by the minority of students to individual characteristics, family and community factors and that some student were unable to cope with the demands of the post-primary curriculum. The ability of primary and post-primary schools to access out-of-school services to respond to the needs of their students suggests that school may be willing to enter collaborations in the future. It is important to acknowledge that factors do exist which may affect the way a school is able to participate in any suggested collaboration. For example, DES guidelines, limited resources, the reduction of supports from the religious orders, staff unions, etc

Both statutory and non-statutory service providers offered transition programmes and supports. These programmes were targeted and used a range of techniques to facilitate different learning styles and to meet a

variety of needs. In total, five primary schools on the Connaught side of the river facilitated the in-school element of these programmes. The fact that these programmes and supports are available and accessed clearly indicates that the transition from primary to post-primary school requires specific attention.

## Chapter Five The Transition Programme Experience

### 5.1 Introduction

Phase One of the Transition Programme comprised of six one-hour sessions which were delivered on a weekly basis in two primary schools in the Athlone area. A total of twenty-five 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils, from different socio-economic groups and cultural backgrounds, volunteered to participate in the programme. These volunteer researchers worked with the project manager initially at primary level to develop their own research projects regarding their impending transition from primary to post-primary school.

The collated findings from each of the sessions were utilised to design an evaluation framework. On completion of the six programme sessions the evaluation process was initiated. This involved the project manager facilitating a focus group in each of the schools. The groups comprised of six male volunteers in School One and eight female volunteers in School Two. The two class teachers were invited and agreed to participate in individual semi-structured interviews.

Phase Two of the Transition Programme comprised of individual semi-structured interviews conducted with volunteer researchers, parents/guardians and school staff. These semi-structured interviews took place between seven and ten weeks into the autumn term of the first year of the post-primary school. The remainder of this chapter presents the experience of the Transition Programme from the following perspectives:

- Volunteer researchers
- School Staff
- Parents/Guardians
- Project manager

### 5.2 Volunteer Researchers Perspective

#### 5.2.1 Phase One - Primary Level

When the volunteer researchers were asked to sum-up the Transition Programme, responses included, it was "*fun*," "*good craic*," "*interesting*," "*excellent*" and "*it was lethal*" (slang for something good). Some volunteer researchers explained that by participating in the programme their views of post-primary school shifted i.e. "*at the start I was frightened of secondary school but after the trip and stuff like that I'm not frightened anymore*" and "*that your not to be afraid going into secondary school*". All of the volunteer researchers recommended that other young people should participate in the Transition Programme, if it were offered again.

The volunteer researchers discussed the programme delivery methods. The use of arts was cited as the most popular method, but in both focus groups, individuals voiced the opportunity to conduct interviews, the write-up of

findings and the presentations as their favourite element of the programme. The volunteer researchers made a number of suggestions to enhance the programme, such as more art work, particularly using before and after pictures of post-primary school; additional large group discussions; students from the post-primary schools to visit their school for a session and the replacement of individual folders with a booklet.

Some volunteer researchers were enabled to draw comparisons between their experiences of their attendance at a school open night<sup>2</sup> and the programme school visit<sup>3</sup> as demonstrated by the quotes below;

*"I thought the trip was good because you got to see what was going on. On open day everyone is on their best behaviour"*

*"on the open night I didn't learn much about X (school), it was great to see the class rooms, what you should do? What the teachers are doing?"*

*"I went to the open day and the induction day, it was only when we went to X (school) and we saw the corridors and the atmosphere that gave me a picture of what it is really like"*

The practical experience gained from the school visit, was standing at the side of the corridor at the time of a class change. When the bell rang, en masse the school population transfer from one location to another, with bags on back, lockers being opened and closed, chattering, laughter, pushing and shoving and the majority of the individual's making this dash were at least five to six inches taller than you. As one respondent stated *"on the trip it is like what you are actually going to be doing"*.

The young people from School One did not participate in a specific school visit. Instead they attended a school induction day.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, by reflecting upon their experience of the day, both positives and negatives were identified. Positives included different classes, nice teachers, setting of behaviour boundaries and treats. Conversely, disappointment was expressed regarding the perceived lack of an opportunity to ask prepared questions - *"we didn't get chance, we had to keep moving, say ten minutes in technology and then woodwork, then we had to move!.."*.

The volunteer researchers became adept at critical reflection regarding their experiences, for example, one volunteer researcher described the Transition Programme sessions as *"great,"* as personal apprehensions and issues were explored and answers could be obtained. Another volunteer researcher related her thoughts regarding the attendance of a post-primary staff member at a presentation evening *"I think for her to come was nice of her, but she probably wanted to learn what we thought of secondary school before we went to the school"*. The line of reasoning progressed to the revelation that the staff member was *"interested in us (as volunteer researchers/young people)"* as the young person remembered, that the staff member was aware the majority of the participants would be transferring to different schools.

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<sup>2</sup> Open night a preview of the school prior to enrolment

<sup>3</sup> School visit - specifically organised school visit as part of the Transition Programme

<sup>4</sup> Induction day - subsequent to school enrolment - planned introductory programme to the school

One volunteer researcher stated *"I think we learnt a lot, but I think we could have learnt more"*. Further exploration of this issue led the young person to confirm a sense that something was *"missing"*. This sense of *"missing"* may be linked to a lack of closure for the young person as she was unable to attend the programme presentation evening. Or possibly the use of techniques and methods to encourage young people to lead their own projects was a new experience. Some young people may find it easier than others to adapt to self-directed learning, especially in the primary context, where volunteer researchers appeared to be reliant on adults to be the suppliers of information and knowledge. This was evidenced by another volunteer researchers who asked the project manager *"tell me what to say"*.

### **5.2.2. Phase Two - Post-primary Level**

At post-primary level, the experience of the Transition Programme was revisited during the semi-structured interview. Generally, the volunteer researchers stated that they had enjoyed the programme. They felt it had assisted them with their transition from primary to post-primary school. Some explained how they had managed their first day by arranging to meet a primary school friend and they entered the school together. Another volunteer researcher outlined *"you said it wasn't going to be that difficult and you were right, it wasn't..... just let others know there is nothing to be afraid of"*.

There were two volunteer researchers who stated that they had not settled-in to post-primary school, one girl and one boy. The female volunteer researcher stated that she enjoyed doing the project in primary school, but *"Post-primary school isn't really what I was expecting; I thought I'd make loads of new friends, but I haven't"*. At the time of the semi-structured interview with the young male, he mainly expressed his unhappiness about being in post-primary school. The project manager felt at the time it was inappropriate to ask him about the Transition Programme.

## **5.3 School Staff Perspective**

### **5.3.1 Phase One - Primary Level**

**School One** - the delivery of the programme in the whole class context with a mix of volunteers and non-volunteers was considered a disadvantage, as the teacher explained *"there was about five that didn't take part.....they would usually be the ones that would cause trouble. And then the others would see them doing nothing. So in that case I definitely think a handful of them would do a good project"*. The teacher elaborated by suggesting the programme could be mainstreamed through the SPHE curriculum and any future programmes should be facilitated in the school hall with volunteers only.

In addition, the teacher felt *"it's near the end of the year, they (students) are switching off ... perhaps earlier in the year.....would be a better time to do it"*. It was felt the duration of the programme was too long at six week and if shortened to four weeks it would encourage the young people to *"be more focused"*.



The delivery methods were also considered. The introduction of more art work into the programme as *"they seemed to enjoy the art work"* would be considered beneficial. It was felt scrap books would be a more appropriate method than files as the *"information could be reviewed at any time and could be used at the presentation to assist with the delivery of information"*

The teacher felt the interview process did not suit all of the participant *"they wouldn't be going forward asking people, they would try to find information in a different way"*. It was suggested to bring people from the secondary school into school, so they could ask their questions.

At the presentation evening seven of the eight volunteer researchers and four of the non-volunteers attended. Each of the young people had at least one family member with them including mothers, fathers, siblings and extended family. The teacher was pleasantly surprised with the number of family members in attendance, stating *"X (principal) was even saying that ... If they come in it is for the school mass, once a year"* and went on to state *"They all seemed to enjoy it anyway"*. Subsequent to the presentations, the project staff and school staff commenced tidying up and immediately some of the volunteer researchers and their family members assisted.

**School Two** - the young people were drawn from two different class settings. The teacher outlined that she was not fully aware of the programme content (See Chapter Three). But at a later stage she had facilitated a whole classroom discussion about secondary school and *"what they (students) were worried about basically,.....those on the (Transition) programme were able to say "we did all this already". "*

The teacher felt the school visit was beneficial as part of the preparation for transition from primary to post-primary school and was aware that practical trips were included in the transition programmes in Scotland. The teacher felt that the volunteer researchers had derived benefits by participating in the programme and enquired was the Transition Programme going to be offered again.

There was an attendance of seven volunteer researchers at the presentation evening, which was approximately half of the sample of fifteen. Four young people had sent prior apologies, two stating they were going on holiday, another had an injury and one who had been ill on the day. Four did not provide any account for not attending. The volunteer researchers who attended were accompanied by at least one family member i.e. mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins and aunties.

### **5.3.2 Phase Two - Post-primary Level**

The staff involved in Phase Two of the project spoke about the settling-in process of the students rather than the Transition Programme specifically. However the willingness of the post-primary schools and the staff to participate in the research process suggests that the Transition Programme was viewed positively.

## **5.4 Parental/Guardian Perspective**

At primary level parents, guardians and extended family members attended the Transition Programme presentation evening. It was only at the post-primary level that parents were asked to provide their opinions and views of the Transition Programme by participating in a semi-structured interview. The majority of parents/guardians related that their child had spoken about the programme mainly at primary level more so than at post-primary level.

All of the parents stated their child had enjoyed the programme and the parents who attended the presentation evening related they thought *"it was good"* or *"I enjoyed it"*. Some parents/guardians went further to explain the benefits they believed that their child had derived by participating, *"X had mixed feelings about going to X but the programme helped him to understand why he was feeling the way he was, it was a great help to him"*; *"it definitely made her more confident"*; and *"I think it did him good and the others, I think he bonded with the lads more and now they lookout for each other"*.

## **5.5 The Project Manager Perspective**

### **5.5.1 Primary Level**

The project manager's purpose was to guide and facilitate young people to conduct their own piece of research, and as such, was not a teacher. Secondly, the project manager had a responsibility to collect data and maintain the child-centred approach throughout the Transition Programme.

The project manager always felt welcome in both primary schools, each of the schools were co-operative and interested in any potential learning from the programme, which would promote the well-being of young people. To build trust within the schools, the project manager needed to appreciate the daily school logistics and to be flexible and adaptable to each local context.

It was vital that the project manager was inclusive and respectful when working with the young people. For example; if a young person had missed a session, but attended the next, the project manager would make a point of saying to the young person, that they had been missed. The young people would often test the project manager's sincerity. One young person suggested in a later session that the project manager had not missed him the previous week. But he had actually attended the session. The project manager's response was *"no you were in, it was the week before that when you were absent and I did miss you and I had told you so"*. The young person appeared genuinely pleased that the project manager had remembered his absence and presence.

At the end of the programme, the volunteer researchers from both schools invited the project manager to their primary school graduation masses. It is reasonable to suggest that relationships and a level of trust with the participants had been established by the end of Phase One of the programme.

### 5.2.2.1 School One

**Logistics** - In School One the programme was delivered in a whole class context, with the teacher present. The formalised setting of individual desks in rows was not conducive to group work methods utilised during the programme. This necessitated the moving of desks for the majority of sessions, which was disruptive and provided an opportunity for young people to misbehave and become disruptive.

The class teacher was present for all of the sessions, except one. The presence of the teacher had both advantages and disadvantages. The teacher's perspective offered insight into the possible mainstreaming of the project, delivery methods and adaptation to the local context. In contrast, the reliance of the young people upon the teacher as a source of knowledge and the teacher's established role of providing knowledge may have distracted from the research approach on occasions. The Project manager on these occasions would emphasise that the research was child-centred and youth led and the information was to come from the young people.

**Group Culture** - In School One, the group was male dominated. The young people would mess around, become boisterous, have disagreements, use bad language and were "macho". Generally, the young people were good humoured, but portrayed a negative façade, where everything was "boring" or "crap". This attitude was not confined only towards the school context, but extended to their immediate area and Athlone in general.

On rare occasions the behaviour between class members would become confrontational e.g. a request for a pen or marker became a face-off between class participants, including the verbalisation of physical threats. An intervention by the teacher or project manager would cease the behaviour. To work with this group was thought-provoking and required fortitude.

### 5.2.2.2 School Two

**Logistics** - In School Two, a communal space was provided for the programme and no teacher was present. The young people were required to move from the formalised setting of the classroom to the informal setting of the hall. This in itself was a preparation for the young people to adapt to group work methods.

Nonetheless frequent interruptions did occur during the early sessions. As a communal space it was a necessity for the caretaker to move equipment in and out of the hall. By telephoning the school on the morning of the session and requesting equipment i.e. paper, paint brushes, glue etc., the caretaker was included in the logistics of the programme. Further interruptions did not occur during the delivery of the sessions.

**Group culture** - In School Two, there was an almost equal balance of males and female. Generally the young females were quicker to settle into a task, were more animated and enthusiastic than their male peers. In mixed groups, often the young males would sit back and let the girls progress the input. Those in an all male group would

often approach all female groups to seek assistance. Often the young females would comply and supply information to the males.

The behaviours of this group of young people were similar to those in School One. They would mess, have disagreements and swear (usually as a dare), but no confrontational incidents occurred during the session. Generally, the group appeared to have a positive outlook regarding their school and Athlone. As a group a relaxed working relationship developed during the sessions.

### **5.5.3 Phase Two - Post-primary Level**

Twenty-one Volunteer researchers agreed to participate in Phase Two of the research, two requested to be interviewed at home and the remaining nineteen requested to be interviewed in the school. The volunteer researchers had transferred to all five post-primary schools in the Athlone area. Each of the post-primary schools was approached to facilitate the semi-structure interviews and all obliged. The project manager was made to feel welcome in all the schools.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The information presented in this chapter is confined to the experience of the Transition Programme from the perspectives of the volunteer researchers, schools, parents/guardians and the project managers. Each of the perspectives was able to identify and highlight benefits that young people, parents and schools could derive from the programme.

The difference in the school contexts, the group cultures and the developed working environments illustrate the importance of maintaining a child-centred approach, by facilitating young people to conduct their own project it is possible to gain an insight into their daily lives. These projects belong to the young people and in both schools the young people were able to complete their project and gain a sense of achievement by doing so.

The two phased delivery of the programme also provided continuity for the participants between primary and post-primary school. Phase Two enabled the research to gather any information on events or issues that occurred in post-primary school that the volunteer researchers were not expecting. Fundamentally, the follow up enabled the Transition Programme to identify young people experiencing settling-in difficulties.

## **Chapter Six Strand A –The Transition Programme Findings**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the research findings of Strand A - the Transition Programme, Phase One - primary level and Phase Two - post-primary level. As the research progressed information was passed back and forth between the Strand A and B. This process led to the identification of two significant mis-matches between the child-centred perspective and the adult perspective by the end of Phase One: 1) the area of special needs and 2) parental involvement. These two areas were carried forward into Phase Two of the research for further exploration. The remainder of this chapter is presented in three main sub-headings:

- Volunteer Researchers' Perspective
- Parental Perspective
- School Staff Perspective

### **6.2 Volunteer Researchers' Perspective**

A decisive finding of the research is that the volunteer researchers, regardless of individual socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, had comparable apprehensions, issues and needs regarding the transition from primary to post-primary school. However it was the exploration of the volunteer researchers' social networks that revealed significant differences in the availability of resilience factors in the daily lives of individuals. The remainder of this session is presented under the headings of: 1) Phase One - primary level and 2) Phase Two- post-primary level.

#### **6.2.1.Phase One- Primary Level**

The Transition Programme's initial session explored feelings, expectations, things they were sure of and things they were not sure of. Three central themes emerged regarding the school context, these are;

- 1) A Need to Belong
- 2) What Will the School Really Be Like?
- 3) Will I be Able to Learn?

##### **6.2.1.1 Theme One - The Need to Belong**

The expressed priority for the majority of young people was the need to belong in the post-primary context. This was obvious from their comments such as "*will I fit in?*" and "*will people like me?*" The sense of belonging to the post-primary school was beginning to manifest at primary level for young people who had older siblings or relations already attending their destination school.

Several young people, particularly males, considered themselves in a disadvantaged position compared to their peers who had older relations already in attendance at the Post-primary school to which they would be transferring to. It was perceived these older relations could be called upon for support, if necessary. Those that lacked older relations

felt they were at risk of increased physical abuse and ritual school initiations. As one respondent explained "*for the first week when we go in we will be getting wedgies straight away*".

Peer group membership was also a concern. One young male was afraid he would "*fall in with the wrong crowd*". At the time of the research his method of identifying the "*wrong*" from the "*right*" people was based on a prejudice against a particular geographical location. Other young people used labelling techniques such as "*korn freaks*" to identify perceived undesirable peer groupings.

Bullying was acknowledged by young people. But for one young female, this was a particularly acute issue, her whole project evolved around the topic. She felt that all young people should be treated fairly in the school system. However her perception was that sometimes young people were treated differently and this contributed to bullying.

The post-primary context was also associated with the opportunity to form new friendships and intimate relationships. Young people transferring to a mixed school used the impending transfer of their peers to an all male post-primary school as a taunting tool and would tease them with comments such as "*no girls for you j*".

#### 6.2.1.2 Theme Two - What Will the School Really be Like?

**Rules** - The young peoples' apprehension of stricter rules and sterner discipline in post-primary school was evidenced by expressions of "*getting into trouble*". The young people were familiar with the terms detentions or demerits. But their understanding of what these terms actual meant or how they were applied in the post-primary context was limited.

**Teachers** - At the early stages of the programme, the young people expressed negative expectations of post-primary teachers. These negative expectations were confirmed by family members (mainly adults, parents, aunts and grandparents) when volunteer researchers conducted a pilot interview as part of the Transition Programme. These adults related experiences of "*mean teachers*" the use of a "*cane*" for discipline and "*receiving detention from teachers*" as part of the interview process.

These individual volunteer researcher findings were discussed in a large group and the following conclusions were drawn. Generally, it was felt post-primary teachers were going to be "*mean*" and possibly "*will give detentions*". But the young people accepted that the law currently prohibits the use of the cane for discipline purposes.

#### 6.2.1.3 Theme Three - Will I be Able to Learn?

**Homework and New Subjects** - There were real concerns expressed about the difficulty of homework and expectation of significant increases in the amount of homework tasks. The non-completion of homework was causing concern as the young people believed it would result in discipline. The prospects of new subjects like home economics, woodwork and computers provided excitement. But to make a choice of what language to study was causing anxiety. This was especially so for some individuals, who were already concerned about their personal capabilities to cope with the anticipated extra demands of subjects that they were already familiar with.

Research observation techniques identified young people in both School One and School Two who were in receipt of learning supports. However only one young person expressed his concern regarding his literacy levels stating "I don't like to write, no one can read it". This young person went on to describe his "mitching" (truancy) strategies for post-primary school. His intention was non-attendance, rather than considering strategies to remain in school. This young person was the only volunteer researcher to reveal concerns about his own skills level and that he was in receipt of learning supports.

The school is a system which exists at community level and as such is only one aspect of a young person's life. The programme incorporated opportunities to collect data regarding the social networks of the volunteer researchers. Information regarding the family and the community assisted the research process to gain an insight into the reality of daily lives of young people and identify the presence of resilience and risk factors.

#### 6.2.1.4 Social Networks

**Family Context** - The young people identified varying family compositions, which they considered to be their household (i.e. where they resided and considered home). These included: 1) mother, father and siblings; 2) grandparent(s), mother, father and siblings; 3) grandparents and aunt; 4) mother only 5) parent, step-parent, siblings and step-siblings and 6) mother, father and aunt. Only one young person identified an estrangement from their parents.

**Community Context** - An exploration of individual social networks provided an insight into the young peoples' lives out-side of school. (Attendance during this session: School One = 8 out of possible 8. School Two = 12 out of a possible 15)

**Out-of-School Youth Activities** - Based on the data supplied it appears young people from School Two are more likely to access more out-of-school youth activities, in comparison to their peers in School One (See Table Six). But young people in School One are facilitated to experience drama and choir in the school context.

Generally, the young people expressed a reluctance to approach adult coaches or trainers to answer their questions about post-primary school or to assist them with their research projects. All the volunteer researchers preferred to seek information from family members.

**Table Six: Out-of-School Youth Activities Accessed by Volunteer researchers  
(\*could participate in more than one activity)**

Activity	School One (n = 8)*	School Two (n = 12) *
GAA	2	2
Football	3	1
Swimming	2	1
Youth Club	1	0
Karate		1
Red Cross Training		1
Choir		2
Community Games		1
Drama/Dance		3
Computers		1
Discos		1
Summer Camps		1
Servers Club		1
None	2	2

**Neighbourhoods** - The identification of neighbours also resulted in differences. In School One, all the young people revealed neighbour relationships. Six of the eight young people identified both adults and young people, both male and female. Two young people identified only young people, both male and female.

The picture in School Two was slightly different. Seven of the twelve young people identified neighbours, both adults and young people. On closer examination of the data the participants identified smaller numbers of people compared to their peers in School One.

**The World of Work** - In general, young people did not provide information regarding future employment aspirations. The exception was a few young males who expressed the desire to become professional footballers. Later in the programme two young males identified a desire to become car mechanics.

**Formal Services** - The majority of young people from both schools identified the "Church" as a formal service, particularly "faith friends", a confirmation preparation programme. An additional two services were identified, 1) Rainbows and 2) After-schools. Rainbows is a support service for young people concerning parental separation or bereavement.

The After-schools is a community-based service offering a range of activities and homework support. Generally the Volunteer researchers appreciated this service, but near the end of the Phase One of the Transition Programme a



criticism of an after-schools facility was voiced by the volunteer researchers, it was revealed that *"they give you all the answers up there"*.<sup>5</sup>

### **6.2.2. Mis-matches between the Child-centred Perspective and Adult Perspective**

At the completion of Phase One of the Transition Programme two significant mis-matches between the child-centred perspective and the adult perspective were identified, these were: 1) the area of special needs and 2) parental involvement.

#### **6.2.2.1. Special Needs**

The volunteer researchers were reluctant to reveal that they accessed learning supports within the school. In contrast, schools and agencies highlighted the importance of learning supports to assist young people to remain in the education system (See Chapter Five)

#### **6.2.2.2 Parental Involvement**

During Phase One the volunteer researchers chose parents and immediate family members to seek information from as part of their research projects. At the presentation evening there was a good attendance of family members. But the volunteer researchers did not speak about their families or openly express a need for additional support from them.

In contrast, schools and agencies felt that a core number of parents supported their child's development, but it was difficult to connect with other parents. Generally, it was felt that parents/guardians needed to become more involved in activities and initiatives supplied by schools and agencies that supported their children.

### **6.2.3 Post-Primary Level**

This section proceeds with Table Seven Resilience and Risk Factors identified by volunteer researcher early within the post-primary context. Table Seven identifies factors of the 19 volunteer researchers, who had stated they had settled-in and factors of 2 volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in. The identified resilience and risk factors are arranged under the three central themes of 1) the Need to Belong; 2) What Will the School Really be Like? and 3) Will I be Able to Learn?

The section then offers a brief overview of the social networks of the volunteer researchers to ascertain the type of activities that the young people may have participated in during the summer between June when they left primary school and September when they commenced post-primary school.

#### **6.2.3.1 Theme One - The Need to Belong**

##### ***Resilience Factors***

**Friendship** - The majority of respondents (18) stated that they had kept friends from primary school and had also made new friendships. Table Seven illustrates that a minority of 1 of the participant, who stated that they had

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<sup>5</sup> The management of the After Schools facility were notified of this practice

settled-in, had not made friends. The young person stated *"I found it hard at first as I didn't know anybody, I'm just making friends now"*. But the young person's perception was that he was able to manage the school day, the homework and could easily identify teachers that he liked.

**A Positive Relationship with an Adult in the Post-primary Context** - All 19 of the volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, were able to identify *"nice"* teachers and those who had a *"good sense of humour"*, who they could relate to. In all five Post-primary schools, volunteer researchers related incidents of teacher's becoming *"cross"* when a student had misbehaved, but this was considered to be understandable.

One of the volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in, did identify a positive relationship with an adult in the post-primary context - the school secretary. This young girl during the interview did not reveal any positive connection to a teacher in the school.

**Table Seven: Resilience and Risk Factors identified by Volunteer researchers in the School Context**

Resilience Factors	Risk Factors	Settled-in Students (n=19)	Students with Settling in Difficulties (n = 2)
<b>Theme One: The Need to Belong</b>			
Friendships early within the post-primary context		18	
Positive relationship with adult in post-primary context		19	1
Involved in extra-curricular activity		8	
Expressed feelings of being settled		18	
	Bullied	1	
	Had not made friends early within the post-primary context	1	2
	Did not participate in extra curricular activity		2
	Expressed feelings of not belonging		2
<b>Theme Two: What will the school Really be like?</b>			
Adapted to the school physical environment		19	1
Liked the movement from class to class		17	
Understood the formal culture		19	
Understood the informal culture		7	
Accessed school counsellor			1
	Difficulty managing school day		2
	Teachers who were bad tempered for no apparent reason	4	2
<b>Theme Three: Will I be Able to learn?</b>			
Identified subjects they enjoyed		19	
Self-management of homework		19	
Accessed homework supports in the		3	

school			
Accessed learning supports		1	
	Difficulty completing homework	2	2
	Not able to identify a subject which was enjoyed		2

**Involved in Extra-curricular Activity** - 8 of the 19 volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, were involved in extra-curricula activities. These activities included soccer, basketball, rugby, computer, art club and lunchtime clubs, where it was possible to play board games. Two young people related with pride that they had been chosen to play on a school team, which appeared to provide a sense of belonging and status.

In addition, one of the volunteer researchers had been elected by his peers to be their representative upon the school student council structure. Although the young person wasn't sure of what this would involve. Another volunteer researcher had been selected by staff as a prefect type of position. These events were identified as something *"unexpected, but good"*.

**Expressed Feelings of Being Settled-in** - 18 of the 19 expressed feelings of being settled-in, included comments such as *"I'm glad I came here"*; *"I love it here"*, *"it's okay, there are lots of fun things to do"*; *"Yeah it's fine"* and *"I much prefer it to primary school"*. 1 of the 19, the young person who had difficulty making friends outlined that he liked post-primary school, but missed primary school because he knew everybody.

### **Risk Factors**

**Bullying-** One volunteer researcher <sup>6</sup> had been bullied by other girls in her year. The incidents were outlined to an appropriate adult within the school, who then intervened immediately. Subsequently the young girl did not experience any further bullying.

**Had Not Made Friends early within the Post-primary Context** - One volunteer researcher stated he found it hard to make friends at the beginning. However from Table Seven it is evident that the young person also had a variety of resilience factors present in the school context.

In contrast, the two volunteer researchers who stated they had not settled-in, did not make friends and as Table Seven illustrates both of these young people appeared to be tapping into a limited number of resilience factors in the school context.

**Did Not Participate in Extra Curricular Activity** - 11 of the 19 volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, did not participate in extra curricular activity. But there are a range of other resilience sources

<sup>6</sup> Not the girl from Phase One who had acute concerns about being bullied

identified in the school context that they are drawing upon. Neither of the two volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in, revealed that they were not involved in extra curricular activity.

**Expressed Feelings of Not Belonging** - The perception of the two volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in, were *"I don't belong here"* and *"I'm finding it difficult"* .

### 6.2.3.2 Theme Two- What Will the School Really be Like?

#### **Resilience Factors**

**Adapted quickly to the Physical Environment of the School** - All 19 volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, had little difficulty getting used to the physical layout of the school, where their classes were located, the use of the locker system and the bustle on the corridors during class change over.

**Liked the Movement from Class to Class** - The majority of the participants liked the movement from class to class, with one participant stating *"it is better than sitting in the one class all day with the one teacher"*. Although some of the volunteer researchers highlighted it took a couple of weeks to get used to the movement from class to class.

**Understood the Formal Culture** - All 19 volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, outlined that they understood the rules that operated within their school. The majority could explain the role of the year head and could identify people within the school to seek assistance from, if necessary.

Some of the volunteer researchers referred to the operation of a merit and demerit system. A small number had received merits for their homework. But one volunteer researcher felt that the system was unfair *"as you know you have put a lot of effort into a piece of work and do not receive a merit and someone else who doesn't make the effort are receiving merits, I think that should be changed"*

One young person from the 19 volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, revealed he had received a discipline from a teacher due to his misbehaviour.

**Understood the Informal Culture** - 7 of the 19 volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, provided evidence of how the informal school culture operated in the school which they attended. One participant stated *"there are rules but people break them - like not going to lockers between classes or having a mobile phone"*. A different young person stated *"I wait in the corridor as long as possible before going into class as I don't like work and you don't really get into trouble"*. In addition, a student expressed that he was aware it wasn't possible to bend particular rules, especially those regarding uniform.

**Accessed School Counsellor** - 1 of the 2 volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in, was identified by the school secretary as a young person in difficulty and referred the young person to the school counsellor. The young girl appreciated these sessions and stated *"I feel safe when X (the counsellor) is in the school"*.

### ***Risk Factors***

**Difficulty Managing the School Day** - The two volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in, exhibited different behaviours in the school context. One, a female, had become withdrawn. The management of the school day, including lockers and books was causing frustration; moving from one class to another was a chore, the lack of a positive relationship with a teacher, the lack of friends, a teacher who had become cross without an apparent reason and difficulties with subjects was almost overwhelming. As the young person stated *"I want to do well, but I just don't know how"*.

The second, a male, was considered by the school to be acting out and constantly misbehaving. In contrast, the volunteer researcher did not realise that his behaviour was viewed this way. The young person had not made any friends or kept friends from primary school and stated *"I don't belong here"*. The young person expressed that he had difficulties in concentrating and felt that teachers were *"mean"*. Generally he felt nothing was really going right for him in post-primary school.

**Teachers who were bad tempered for no apparent reason** - In all five post-primary school at least one teacher was identified as being *"bad tempered"* or became *"impatient really quickly"*.

### 6.2.3.3 Theme Three - Will I be Able to Learn?

#### ***Resilience Factors***

**Identification of Subjects that They Liked** - All 19 of the volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in identified subjects that they liked. These included German, Art, Science, English, Maths, Woodwork and French. These expressions of preferred subjects were often related to the fact that the teacher was *"good"* and the subjects were *"interesting"*.

Depending upon the post-primary school, students may be required to choose their subjects prior to entry or choose subjects after taster programmes. One volunteer researcher who attended a school that provided taster programmes explained *"I thought I'd like technical graphics, but it wasn't what I was expecting so I'm going to choose another subject"*.

Both male and female participants appreciated the exposure to different sports as part of the curriculum, such as gymnastics, cross country running and rugby. One young person stated that he missed swimming sessions which had been provided at primary level.

**Self-management of Homework** - All 19 of the volunteer researchers who stated they had settled-in, related personal perceptions that they were self-managing their homework. The actual time spend on completion of their homework varied from individual to individual, with some stating *"about 20 minutes"* and others spending *"3 - 4 hours, especially if we have tests"*.

**Accessed Homework Supports in School** - 3 of the 19 volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, utilised school homework supports to self-manage their homework. One attended supervised study, where a quiet space was provided to work and a minimal fee is paid for the service. The other two attended an interactive homework club which works with students, mainly those with learning needs. One of the respondents attending the homework club was exempt from languages and used spare classes to work on homework tasks.

**Accessed Learning Supports** - 1 of the 19 accessed learning supports. This young person had not revealed they were receiving learning supports at primary school. During the interview this was discussed and the young person outlined that in post-primary school *"at class change over you go to learning supports and there is another girl who goes and she has become my friend. You're not by yourself with the teacher"*. The young person stated a preference for the provision of learning supports as a timetabled activity rather than being extracted from a class to attend session which occurred at primary level.

### **Risk Factors**

**Difficulty Completing Homework** - 2 of the 19 respondents, who stated they had settled-in, although early within the interview stated that they were self-managing their homework changed their view at a later stage. Both revealed that they had difficulty completing their homework, depending on the subject. One of the respondents outlined that rather than tell the teacher he didn't understand the homework he would make excuses saying he *"had lost his copy"* or *"left it at home"*.

The two volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in, outlined that they did complete homework, but appeared less confident than their peers in their self-management of homework tasks. One of the respondents felt at primary school their level of mathematics was good. But at post-primary had become de-motivated when a submitted mathematics homework was returned marked entirely incorrect.

**Not Able to Identify a Subject that they Enjoyed** – During the interview process, both of the volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in spoke negatively about their experience and neither identified a subject they really liked. The young male stated *"science is sort of alright"*

#### 6.2.2.4 Social Networks

**Summer Activities** – A review of activities the volunteer researchers had been involved in during the summer break revealed that 12 of the 21 young people had not participated in any type of youth summer activity. The volunteer researchers supplied different reasons for this, including *"I stay with my Granny, whilst my Mum is at work. So usually hang out with friends and kick a ball around"*; *"not really sure what is available;"* and *"I wouldn't have anybody to go with"*.

There were 9 volunteer researchers who stated that they had been involved in activities during the summer holidays, these included the Youth Ministry, Youth Clubs, Order of Malta, Karate, Pepsi Football Camp and the Me,Myself, I programme<sup>7</sup>. Some volunteer researchers also revealed they no longer attended Church.

Since making the transition from primary to post-primary school three respondents highlighted they had joined new activities, the Order of Malta, a Foroige Youth Club and a Midlands Regional Youth Service club.

### 6.3 Parental/Guardian Perspective

#### 6.3.1. Primary Level

At primary level the parents and guardians of the volunteer researchers were invited to the Transition Programme presentation evening, but did not participate directly in the provision of information until post-primary level.

#### 6.3.2 Post-Primary Level

In Phase Two, fifteen parents agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews offering their opinions and views regarding their child's early post-primary experience, the area of special needs and parental involvement. The parental/guardian perspective is presented in Table Eight which identifies resilience and risk factors arranged under the three central themes: 1) the Need to Belong; 2) What Will the School Really be like? and 3) Will I be Able to Learn?

#### 6.3.2 1Theme One: The Need to Belong

##### **Resilience Factors**

**Settled-in** – All 13 of the parents who stated that their child had settled-in expressed that the first three weeks of post-primary school were difficult. One of the parents of the volunteer researchers who stated that they had not settled-in related that she wasn't really sure if her child had settled-in or not as *"I get mixed messages"*.

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<sup>7</sup> Me, Myself I programme 2 volunteer researchers participated in this spin-off programme of the project

**Made Friends** - All 13 of the parents were aware that their child had maintained primary school friendships and they had also made new friends in the post-primary context. One parent of a volunteer researcher, who stated he had settled-in, outlined that her son had "*found it difficult to make friends*" which confirmed what the young person had said himself.

**Parent Spoke with their Child about School** - All 15 parents had spoken with their child about post-primary school. These interactions between the parent and child led 5 of the parents to contact the school regarding different issues. These included bullying, the young person feeling lost, the young person not being their usual self, academic progression and the provision of learning supports (See The School is Approachable).

**Table Eight: Resilience and Risk Factors Identified by Parents**

Resilience Factors	Risk Factors	Parent of volunteer researcher who had settled-in (n = 13)	Parent of volunteer researcher who had not settled-in (n = 2) <sup>8</sup>
<b>Theme One: Need to Belong</b>			
Settled-in		13	1 not sure getting mixed messages
Made friends		13	
Spoke with their child about school		13	2
	Had not settled-in		1
	Sickness	5	1
	Bullying	2	
<b>Theme Two: What is the School Really Like?</b>			
Understanding of the school context their child is attending		12	
School is approachable		13	1
Contact from the school		6	
	Lack of school intervention	1	
	Social class distinction	1	
<b>Theme Three: Will I be Able to Learn?</b>			
Homework routine		9	
Homework supports from older siblings		3	
Academic progression		9	
	Limited understanding of homework topics	3	1
	Inadequate time spend on homework	4	
	Family incidents	1	1

<sup>8</sup> Three parents were involved in supplying information - in one case a mother and father participated in an interview



### ***Risk Factors***

**Had not settled-in** – One of the parents of the volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in, was aware that her son was in difficulty. As a parent, she had contacted the school to request that a member of staff "would keep an eye out for him".

**Sickness** – 6 volunteer researchers were identified as being sick early within the post-primary context. 5 volunteer researchers who stated they had settled-in and 1 volunteer research who stated they had not settled-in. There were 5 males and 1 female. 4 of the parents of the males related that the sickness was not genuine and was a sign of not settling-in. The parents generally resisted writing sick notes for the young people and encouraged them to attend school. The 1 young female had been genuinely ill and the other male was reporting constant headaches.

**Bullying**<sup>9</sup> – 2 parents identified that their children were bullied. One was a parent of the young girl who had stated she had been bullied and it had been addressed in the school. The second parent outlined that the bullying had only just come to light. The focus of the bullying was on the young person's academic ability, i.e. being called a swot, etc. The young person had not mentioned this during his interview, but it is probable it had not been recognised by the young person as repetitive action at the interview stage, which was approximately four weeks prior to speaking to his mother.

#### 6.3.2.2. Theme Two: What Will the School Really be Like?

### ***Resilience Factors***

**Understanding of the School Context their Child Attended** – All 13 parents of the volunteer researchers, who stated they had settled-in, highlighted that older siblings had attend post-primary school. 4 different parents highlighted that older siblings had experienced settling-in difficulties, which in some cases required visits to the school. One parent outlined that an older sibling's experience of settling in was particularly difficult. This young person who had been academic at primary level was unable to progress academically during the first and second year of post-primary.

The majority of parents were originally from Athlone. They had attended post-primary school in the area and were aware of the layout of the buildings, the daily routine of the school and would know the teachers. Two explained they had social relationships with some of the teachers as adults.

Another parent explained that in primary school she used to walk her daughter to school everyday. But in post-primary the young girl decided to go to school on the bus. She had travelled to school on the bus every day since. The mother outlined this was a positive move to independence by her daughter and felt it was appropriate for post-primary school.

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<sup>9</sup> See Lack of school intervention

**The School is Approachable** - All 15 parents felt the post-primary school their child attended was easy to approach. The majority of parents related that if they needed to contact the school for any reason they would approach the school immediately. A number of parents offered praise of the school their child was attending, *"I think it is the best school in town"* and *"the school is really helpful can't do enough for you"*; and *"the Principal was great, he managed to get X an assessment done really quickly"*.

**Contact with the School** - 6 of the 13 parents revealed that they had been contacted by the school HSCL shortly after their child had started attending the post-primary school and related this was a positive support. The suggestion of a specific parental programme regarding the transition was considered inappropriate. Because parents believed parental supports from schools had improved recently, schools were approachable and work commitments often meant it was difficult to arrange time off work to attend sessions.

### ***Risk Factors***

**Lack of School Intervention** - 1 parent outlined a past incident at primary level that affected an older sibling of a volunteer researcher. The young person had been constantly bullied. This led the mother to contact the school on several occasions. But she felt her requests for the school to intervene to stop the bullying were not acted upon. To emphasize the need for a school intervention, the mother and father went to the school together. Shortly afterwards the bullying ceased, but the mother stated *"the whole incident turned X off school"*. As a mother she felt the school principal at the time had not listened to her. She believed it was actually the presence of the father that had prompted the school to eventually take action.

**Social Class Distinction** - 1 parent who had experience of her children attending all five post-primary schools in Athlone felt all the schools were *"good and were approachable"*. But the parent's perception was that in one school social class distinctions did exist and felt it *"wasn't fair on students from every day families"*.

### 6.3.3.3 Theme Three: Will I be Able to Learn?

#### ***Resilience Factors***

**Homework Routine** - 9 parents related they were encouraging their child to develop a homework routine, but it was a struggle. One respondent stated *"the homework is more demanding. The school has been good and gradually increasing the amount of homework, I thought there would be more. But it is more complicated and requires more effort on X (volunteer researcher) behalf"*. Generally parents who were trying to encourage a routine felt their child was coping well with self-management of their homework, as one parent stated jokingly *"I do have to give her a little shout in the evenings about homework"*.

**Academic Progression** - The majority of respondents felt that their child was making academic progression. Some cited that their child had done well on a test or received a merit for their homework and were proud of them. One parent stated *"if they are not happy they lose interest in school"*, but her daughter was settled and happy and was

managing her studies well. One respondent felt his son was doing fine academically, but would be more informed when the parent-teacher meeting took place in the New Year. A parent of a volunteer researcher in receipt of learning supports related the school provided timetabled learning support and homework supports, which were excellent.

**Homework Supports from Older Siblings** - 3 respondents highlighted that older siblings were available to assist with homework. One mother stated "*Homework is fine - some of the things are difficult, but I have them (older siblings) giving her a hand. It's great that they are able, I wouldn't have a clue - everything has changed completely since I was at school*". Another mother stated "*I was not educated here and the system is completely different, but his older sister is able to help him*".

### **Risk Factors**

**Limited Understanding of Homework Topics** - A mother of a volunteer researcher who stated they had not settled-in revealed that she had not attended post-primary school and had low literacy skills. As a result she was not able to support her child to complete homework tasks. This particular volunteer researcher was the oldest child in the family and obviously did not have the support of older siblings.

**Inadequate Time Spent on Homework** - 4 parents stated that they felt their child did not spend adequate time completing homework. One mother stated "*I'm waiting for a note to come home from the school, but it hasn't arrived yet*". Other parents expressed concerns about the short amount of time their child spent on homework tasks. One parent explained that she had tried to encourage a homework routine but it was proving difficult "*as he would rather play music*".

**Family Incidents** - Two family incidents were referred to by parents and not the volunteer researchers. The first related to a volunteer researcher, who stated they had settled-in, where a family member had recently recovered from a serious illness. The second related to a volunteer researcher, who stated they had not settled-in, whose family experienced a dramatic change during the summer holidays.

## **6.2.4 School Staff Perspective**

### **6.2.4.1. Primary Level**

The teacher's perspective from School One had concerns about homework. The pupils "*do their homework in about 20 minutes when they leave the school at 3pm and that's it. They don't have someone to sit down and help them. It's done and that's it*". It was acknowledged that an after-schools facility operated locally. The teacher felt these had "*advantages and disadvantages. Some of them go and they get too much help. They would be nearly better off if they stayed at home and did it on their own*". This concept was explored and project manager stated "*they might have the right answers but don't understand it, someone has done it for them*" and the teacher replied "*Yes, that's not a help*".

#### 6.2.4.2 Post-Primary Level

At post-primary level, two volunteer researchers, who stated that they had not settled-in, referred to staff members who they felt they had made a connection to within the school. These staff members were: 1) school counsellor and 2) a science teacher. Both agreed to provide their own perspective with consent of the school principal.

**The School Counsellor** - The school secretary had completed a basic counselling course and came into contact with Jane<sup>10</sup> during the school day. The school secretary felt Jane would benefit by linking into the school counsellor service and made a referral to the school counsellor. Jane agreed to participate and was attending sessions on a weekly basis. The school counsellor related that Jane is a pleasant girl, undemanding and was just starting to ask questions. The role of the school counsellor is to be a listening ear, to provide time and support students.

At the time of the research social acceptance in the school was the priority for Jane. To assist Jane to gain a sense of belonging different options were explored. As a result it was felt improvements had been made regarding the formation of relationships with her peers. Jane had highlighted difficulties with the academic side of things, particularly maths, but the school context as a whole was a challenge for the young person. The school counsellor was aware Jane appreciated the service. The school counsellor felt if the service was unavailable Jane would be a high risk case of becoming an early school leaver.

**The Science Teacher** - spoke about first year students in general. He believed that first year students liked science because of the *"labs and experiments and there wasn't an awful lot of written homework"*. But it took a while for first year students to grasp the concept that study is actually homework. The teacher outlined at the end of first year, it wasn't unusual for tests scores to vary significantly from low to high scores, *"some students have realised that it is necessary to study all year, whilst others had not made that connection yet"*.

The teacher said *"in first year there is still that innocence about them (students) and they like to see new things. I suppose adolescence begins to kick in and they are inclined to show their independence of the teachers"*. At another point in the interview the teacher highlighted that misbehaviour does not really manifest in first year. There may be one or two students who would be particularly difficult. In second year, one or two disruptive people in a class can be coped with. It is when there are five or six students playing off one another then it can become extremely difficult. Teachers when working with first year students *"would nearly know the kids that come from different (primary ) schools by the way they behave.....you know the schools where good discipline is demanded"*. The area of special needs and learning supports was discussed and the teacher stated *"the kids in first year that had special help before they came here - then that disappears - they can't cope without it"*.

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<sup>10</sup> Jane - not the young person real name

The teacher felt primary student records which provide an indication of a student's ability could not be used to give an indication of how a student would progress academically in post-primary. For example, mathematics in primary school where a young person may be good at sums is quite different to learning math concepts in post-primary. Therefore academic progression in some cases may not meet expectations. It was the opinion of the teacher that at Volunteer Certificate level there appears to be a "dumbing down" in science subjects. Students who obtain a good Volunteer Certificate grade need to do an awful lot of work to achieve a good Leaving Certificate standard. The teacher felt the DES needed to ensure equal allocation of resources to schools so all students can benefit from the education system.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

The volunteer researchers came from varying socio-economic groups and cultural backgrounds and were based in two different schools. By utilising a child-centred approach it was revealed that these young people had comparable concerns, apprehensions and needs regarding the transition from primary to post-primary school. Essentially these young people needed to belong to the school; they want to know what the school was going to be really like and if they would be able to learn at post-primary school.

The Transition Programme offered continuity between the primary and post-primary level for the participants. The Transition Programme provided the opportunity to explore in and out of school factors which affect the transition from primary to post-primary school. This led to the identification of a range of resilience and risk factors present in the daily lives of the volunteer researchers.

During Phase One of the research process the child-centred approach identified two significant mis-matches between a youth perspective and an adult perspective: 1) the area of special needs and 2) parental involvement. During Phase Two these two mis-matches were carried forward for further exploration. A volunteer researcher preferred the provision of learning supports as a timetabled lesson in post-primary school compared to the provision of learning supports in primary school, where a pupil is required to leave a class.

The second issue of parental involvement, which was explored from a parent's perspective led to the conclusion that it was not necessary to have a specific transition programme for parents. Generally, parents/guardians outlined that schools were approachable. That supports for parents from schools had improved in the recent past. Most parents felt that they participated in school activities when possible, but demands on their time meant it wasn't always possible to become involved.

The two volunteer researchers, who stated they had not settled-in, had different early post-primary experiences, one becoming withdrawn and the second viewed as constantly misbehaving. But both of these young people were identified by the schools they were attended as being in difficulty. Both schools used available resources to support these young people. However it was acknowledged that not all schools have the same resources to work with

students. Where supports are not available or very limited, young people experiencing settling-in difficulties would be identified as being at high risk of becoming early school leavers.

## **Chapter Seven Strand B – Networking Findings**

### ***7.1 Introduction***

Strand B - involved the project manager networking with a total of 84 network contacts from statutory and non-statutory service providers in the Athlone area. This chapter commences with a section regarding the awareness of Resilience Theory among service providers. The chapter then proceeds to present the network contacts' perceptions of the following areas:

- The Existing Contribution the Service Makes to Building Resilience in Young People
- Current Interactions between Agencies which Promote Resilience
- Areas of Potential Transformation to Enhance Integration and Collaboration
- Education and Building Resilience

### ***7.2 Awareness of Resilience Theory***

As the networking progressed it became apparent that the knowledge of Resilience Theory among service providers, at both managerial and face-to-face worker level varied considerably, from those with no understanding to those with a comprehensive knowledge of the theory. The project manager provided a verbal synopsis of Resilience Theory as part of the interaction. Subsequently, network contacts were asked to relate this information to their own work processes. The majority of respondents could identify the building of resilience with the young people and adults with whom they worked.

A minority of one could not relate their practice to the building of resilience. This anomaly may have been caused by a number of factors such as resistance to the project; the synopsis was unclear; linking theory to practice required more time to "mull-over". The project manager outlined that the network contact could submit additional inputs at a later stage, if they wished. Another network contact was aware of Resilience Theory but did not support the theory.

### ***7.3 The Existing Contribution the Service Makes to Building Resilience in Young People***

This section is presented in two broad categories: 1) the statutory sector and 2) the non-statutory sector.

#### **7.3.1. The Statutory Sector**

Government departments and statutory agencies have particular responsibilities and are obliged to work within their specified remit and operational boundaries. The following government departments made research contributions:

- The Department of Social and Family Affairs
- The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
- The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
- The Department of Health and Children
- Local Government Services

#### 7.3.1.1. The Department of Social and Family Affairs

The DSFA, Claims and Benefit Section felt that the service provided valuable financial supports and resources for families, especially those experiencing under-employment or unemployment. This particular section was not required to work directly with people, other than processing claims. It was the opinion of the network contact that resilience was built by referring claimants to services like the Jobs Clubs and FAS. This offered the person a progression route to training and employment opportunities.

#### 7.3.1.2 The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment

A FAS representative highlighted that among communities and agencies there is a common misunderstanding that FAS has a community development brief. This is not the case and FAS have a remit to prepare people to enter the open labour market. Therefore community groups or agencies with a community development brief are required to conduct any pre-development work and produce community development plans. If the plan includes employment objectives it is then possible to approach FAS for support. These supports are usually the allocation of a Community Employment Scheme or Jobs Initiative.

It was the opinion of the FAS representative that these programmes were seen to build resilience at individual, family and community level: 1) individuals were prepared to enter the open labour market; 2) personal development and other skills learnt through training programmes e.g. childcare could be transferred into the home context and 3) the provision of employment/training service within a community, which were used to deliver a service to meet an identified community need e.g. day care facility.

The Community Training Centre worked with young people between the ages of 15 and 20 years approximately to obtain qualifications and complete pre-apprenticeship courses. The majority of their participants were early school leavers. The network contact believed that a strength of the centre is *"accepting people as they are"*. If a young person settles in within 6 - 8 weeks, they usually stay for the full duration of the programme. The respondent stated resilience is built by setting boundaries. Participants are encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and the centre provides an environment that offers balance and builds trust.

#### 7.3.1.3 The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

The DJELR has statutory responsibility for children (See Literature Review-Child Care Act). The Garda Siochana, Probation and Welfare Service and County Childcare Committee operate under the DJELR. The perception of network contacts of how their particular service promotes resilience is presented below.

The Juvenile Liaison Officer (JLO) has a remit to work with young people and their families to prevent criminal behaviour and entry into the criminal justice system. The JLO felt that through his role resilience was built at community, family and individual level as follows: 1) The JLO's participation upon Boards of Management regarding training programmes catering for young people, which provided a service within the community; 2) To facilitate families to move on in a positive way after the young person's *"misdemeanour"* and 3) when working with the young



person, always finish sessions on a positive, rather than on a negative. If necessary there is an option to develop individualised plans involving other agencies and parents to prevent the young person from pursuing further criminal activity.

The Probation and Welfare Service operates and supports initiatives with people who have *"offended or at risk of offending"*. A network contact felt that empathy was a core competency to possess when trying to create sources of resilience. The network contact had practical experience of sitting on multi-agency groups to support families already in crisis. The network contact felt that some service providers lacked empathy and had no understanding of the reality of people lives. The approach of some service providers at family meetings appeared to increase anxieties and add to an already stressful situation for the family.

The County Childcare Committee (CCC) operates a six-year strategy, which promotes seven specific strands: 1) training; 2) information; 3) capacity building at community level; 4) networking; 5) quality improvements; 6) equality and diversity and 7) capacity building at committee level. The overall aim is to address the childcare needs of young people between the ages of 0-14 years. The network contact believed that quality early childhood education and care is an effective method of promoting resilience and in the long-term decreased the chances of early school leaving.

A development worker outlined that EOCP finance has resulted in a significant number of childcare developments in the Athlone area. The network contact stated that *"staff are being trained, opportunities to progress to employment exist and facilities have improved"*. The strategy informs the work of the County Childcare Committee and resilience can be built through *"an important element which is to connect with parents and to promote the child-centred approach with service providers"*.

#### 7.3.1.4 The Department of Health and Children

The perception of a network contact at managerial level regarding a large organisation e.g. Health Service Executive, is that the promotion of Resilience Theory is stated as underpinning the overall practice approach. However the transfer of these principles into practice does not always occur. As the network contact stated *"sometimes staff conduct their duties without necessarily contemplating how their particular service fits into the wider organisational vision"*. The promotion of resilience through practice requires the *"management level to buy into the process, so they can see the benefits and support the work of people on the ground"*. In addition *"workers need to understand the underpinning values of their work and realise the potential they have to build resilience"*.

The Health Promotion Unit felt by the careful selection of personnel on *"a proven track record in their field"* combined with a thorough planning process to develop an action plan, resilience could be built at all levels, the individual, family and community. The adoption of innovative methods, such as *"peer group education, which in the past has received a bad name, but I think this was due to supports being withdrawn too quickly... enables us to work*

*with groups that can be difficult to connect with". It was felt supports from other Health Service Executive units and agencies are required to be effective in responding to the holistic needs of service users.*

A face to face health promotion worker explained that the delivery of an action plan at community level involves *"flexibility in the way the plan can be adapted to local context, but the focus needs to be on your remit, for example binge drinking".* The worker targeted parents through their approach, which was seen to build resilience, by developing communication skills, building self-esteem and confidence around the issue of mis-use of alcohol and substances. The worker provided inputs as an element of an integrated programme offered mainly through community group initiatives.

Three sections of the social work department, social workers, child care workers and family support workers participated in two different focus groups. The social workers outlined the purpose of their role is child protection. Their specific responsibilities include assessing risk; emergency referrals; children in care; foster care; and long-term cases of working with families. Social workers related a clear understanding of Resilience Theory and how it related to their practice. One network contact explained how to apply a resilience approach by *"homing-in on the strength they (child) already have and hope that's good enough to be able to get them through major life changing events".* As social workers they would liaise with other social work team members, other HSE sections, agencies and schools to respond to varying needs of young people.

Child care workers and family support workers worked with families with varying needs. A child in the family may have a serious physical illness; parents may have physical illness; families where members may have mental health issues and possibly addiction issues. Workers related that they build resilience through offering parenting courses, providing access visits for parents in child protection cases; by liaising with other HSE sections, agencies and schools to secure further supports for families and children. An example was provided *"the mother had addiction problems - family life would go well for a short while. Then everything would go into crisis. It was really when we started recognising the teenage daughters' strengths...they were running the home .. we helped them to realise and recognise their strengths and to build on those...What they have decided is their lives can be good despite their Mother's life"*

A child care worker felt that some families who availed of support had developed an intergenerational culture of dependency upon labels, such as disability or mental health issues. The perception was that some parents who have opted out of the workforce and qualified for domiciliary care (a weekly benefit payment) had a low value placed on education. As parents they actively encouraged their children to believe that they had a condition, which would eventually entitle them to avail of a domiciliary care payment. This may lead young people to *"opt out"* from the education system at the earliest possible opportunity. The network contact felt it was difficult to encourage a positive attitude towards education in these families.

A representative of a Family Resource Centre (based in the Mid-Western HSE area) outlined that they offered needs-led preventative programmes. The centre worked with specific target groups including women, teenagers and children. Depending upon the need at the time and the type of intervention required the service could offer home-based or centre-based supports. The centre was a resource for the community and assisted with the creation of sources of resilience.

The Midland HSE Community Alcohol and Drugs Service initial network contact was an administration person. This person provided details of the service, how to make a referral, that the service could only work with people over the age of 17 years and the availability of staff. At a later stage it was possible to speak to an adult addiction counsellor who also worked in the service.

The adult addiction counsellor outlined that usually in the early stages of working with a person with addiction issues the initial goal is to stabilise the client. By using a person-centred approach the individual is encouraged to take on responsibility for themselves and supports them to consider ways to build positive relationships. The overall process of working with a person in this way was seen as a method of building resilience.

#### 7.3.1.5 Local Government Services

The Regional Sports Centre provides a range of both competitive and non-competitive sporting activities. These activities were availed of by the public, sporting organisations, primary schools and three of the five post-primary schools in the Athlone area. The network contact felt by the providing an annual timetable incorporating a full range of services for all age groups was a positive community service.

The offered services facilitate people to be physically active, which is important for health and well-being. There is a specifically designed programme for 5 -7 year olds called the "Sports Academy". This academy encourages young people to develop their motor skills and builds confidence. A part of the programme includes sport homework tasks, which requires involvement of the parents/guardians. The representative outlined that *"a young person needs to be exposed to at least six different sports to develop the full range of motor skills"* and that they have noticed young people tend *"to drop out (of sports) at the age of 10 years of age"*.

There are membership fees for use of the centre, but reduced rates are available for use of the volunteergym 15 - 17 years old, under-age clubs (hockey, football, GAA) and a crèche is available at minimal rates. The centre also provides a range of camps during school holidays, one week at Easter and Halloween and four weeks during the summer catering for 5 -7 year olds and 8 -12 years olds.

A network contact of the Aidan Heavey Library felt by offering a range of facilities to the public and supporting the development of reading skills among young people was a way of promoting resilience. The library service had operated a successful reading challenge programme during the summer months with primary school children. The library had noticed a decline in post-primary pupils attending the library. To encourage use of the library by this

age group a young adult section had been established. The Aidan Heavey library at the time of the research was actively seeking connections with other agencies to increase membership and to highlight the range of public services which were available at the library.

### **7.3.2 The Non-statutory Sector**

The non-statutory sector is not a homogenous sector. A wide range of different perspectives inform service providers' approaches and delivery of services. The findings regarding existing contributions to building resilience are presented under the broad headings of: 1) social inclusion and 2) social inclusion not specified as an organisational aim.

#### **7.3.2.1 Social Inclusion**

The networking process revealed a number of initiatives targeting particular groups, women; the long-term unemployed; Travellers; the homeless; youth; asylum seekers; people with disabilities and people mis-using alcohol and substances. The stated purpose of the majority of these service providers/projects is to promote social inclusion.

The process of social inclusion is seen to be achieved by working across a range of areas including education, health, training, employment and accommodation. Each of these areas has particular characteristics, but rather than being viewed in isolation are considered to be inter-linked and responses need to be holistic. It is intended through social inclusion processes that people are empowered to seek social change, if they so chose.

A number of network contacts who were practitioners in the area of social inclusion expressed a complexity in relating risk to resilience; demonstrated by the following quote *"I'm used to focusing upon risk factors, to turn it around and think about resilience..hmm... give me a while"* (Community Worker). The majority of network contacts were subsequently able to relate their own practice to the building of resilience, through holistic practices at all three levels, the individual, family and community.

The existing contributions to building resilience were related to practice values, principles and skills. A variety of examples were provided including the promotion of equality, commitment, respect for others and themselves, non-judgemental attitudes, personal development, building trust and respect for culture and diversity; and influencing policy to name a few. Network contacts explained how they believed their service contributed to the building of resilience as follows:

*"one element of our programme focuses upon family life, each person has to meet expectations within a family unit..... they will probably have to negotiate with partners, children and other relevant people.. we support them in how to do this"*

Skills Facilitator

*" I think we have a good project here. Our soft skills are second to none, ....we follow people up, we are committed.. like if someone misses the course, I'll pop around to see them..."*

Community Based Womens Initiative

Other practitioners referred to models of practice applied by their organisation. The Simon Community used the the Continuum of Care. The Midland Regional Youth Service used the Critical Social Education Model to work with young people. Each of these organisations had a stated organisational vision, aims and objectives, underpinned by values, principles and models of practice. The network contacts were able provide examples of how their practice could be linked to Resilience Theory, as evidenced by the following quotes:

*"We take a holistic response, providing bricks and mortar isn't going to work, we need integration, regarding health, wealth, case management, each service is linked to work with individual service users needs"*

Simon Community

*"Individual workers and their ability to build relationships - some young people say X and Y's club, not the Midland Regional Youth Service.....young people can identify and have ownership of the project"*

MRYS Personnel

One network contact involved in community arts stated the approach of creating a safe environment for people and involving participants in projects using manual and construction skills, which are practical, are particularly effective when working with young people in their teenage years. Usually young people who become involved maintain an attachment to the community arts group and can be called upon as adults to assist with projects.

A network contact of the Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) outlined that the needs of their membership, as young people, were rarely sought. The fact that this research project had made contact with the association was viewed positively. Specific youth initiatives with their membership had recently commenced and there was great support from the parents. However the network contact felt there was more developments to be made and was aware that some parents were frustrated about the lack of facilities and supports for their children in the education system. The IWA felt by supporting young people and families and lobbying for policy change their association contributed to the building of resilience.

#### 7.3.2.2 Social Inclusion Not Specified as an Organisation Aim

The St. Vincent de Paul and the Samaritans traditionally did not promote specific organisation aims of social inclusion. However network contacts outlined that they often supplied supports and services to target groups that other organisations with a social inclusion focus worked with. Regarding Resilience Theory the majority of network contacts could identify how their work promoted resilience, at all three levels, individual, family and community.

One network contact outlined their organisation "erred on the side of charity". The same families were seen to continually tap into the service for financial or resource supports. It was suspected some families concealed the fact, that they were receiving assistance from other sources, like the church or the friars. The network contact was aware that some people "developed a dependency, we have clients now, whose parents were our clients thirty years ago, it's a continuous cycle". The organisation felt by supporting initiatives through community groups and schools that the previously developed dependency could be counteracted in the long-term. However it was inadvisable to withdraw individual supports at this point. An example of the way the service helped build resilience was provided (See Vignette Two).

#### Vignette Two: Consumerism & Advocacy

*A case of a lone parent with one small child, living in rented accommodation, has six items on higher purchase from the X I don't think companies should give credit so easy, but I suppose they don't care as long as they get their money one way or the other. At the moment we are negotiating on her behalf to reschedule payments.*

The Samaritans felt that to engage with young people is an important element of their work. By attending festivals where large numbers of young people gathered e.g. rock concerts and fleadh's it is possible to raise the profile of the Samaritan service. If young people are aware of the service it is hoped they will make contact prior to any crisis becoming all-consuming. The Samaritans offer outreach programmes to Transition Year students in post-primary schools, which promotes peer education programmes regarding the prevention of youth suicide.

A network contact of the Scouting Association of Ireland believed positive child development was provided through the programmes, activities and the merit system offered to young people from the age of six years and upwards. At different times during the year participants are asked to "bring the whole family along" to events and "usually we have a really nice time". This was a method of encouraging parental participation, but also intended to encourage parents to become involved as leaders. The network contact outlined that the younger age groups, that attend Beavers and Cubs are easier to cater for. The older age group of Scouts require more challenging activities to keep them engaged and volunteer leaders do not always possess the skills to provide these challenging activities.

## **7.4 Current Interactions between Agencies which Promote Resilience**

Statutory, non-statutory and community and voluntary services felt that improvements in co-operation, forming collaborations and integration of services have improved significantly in the past five to eight years. These improvements were attributed to the building of trust, relationships and interaction through formal and informal structures.

### **7.4.1 Formal Structures**

The formal structures included boards of managements, steering groups, management teams and inter-service groups. Initially, the make-up of these decision-making groups appeared similar, but on closer scrutiny, strong

alliances could be identified. The basis for these alliances may be due to underpinning political beliefs; the overall purpose of coming together in the first place; or as one practitioner stated *"there is a geographical tradition in Athlone, of two communities, one in the West and the other in the East"*.

#### **7.4.2 Informal Structures**

Informal networks were established and utilised by individual workers, which relied upon personal contacts. This individual approach was seen as an effective method of potentially maximising positive outcomes for individuals or groups. These informal structures appeared to transcend the West and East geographical boundaries.

The type of interactions which were identified as taking place during the research included:

- RAPID
- The provision of face-to-face services, but funded by a number of different government agencies.
- Referrals from one service to another
- Integrated programmes involving a number of stakeholders, e.g. community group, health promotion unit, literacy service, IT training providers, personal development coaching, access to childcare and counselling.

Network contacts provided practical examples of interactions, which were considered particularly positive and created sources of resilience. These included a designated GP to provide services to the women's refuge; an anti-drugs play, which was a joint initiative between the HSE and community arts group; the scout hall is used by other agencies and services; after schools facilities connected with the VEC, the family literacy service and the healthy eating programme; and the Samaritans linked with a private telephone provider to use text messaging to contact young people regarding their services at times known to increase stress levels for some young people, i.e. examination time.

The HSE social work department felt that schools in the area were co-operative and helpful. They valued the school system as a way of linking into progression of "at risk" children on their case files. The child's general well-being can be gauged by their attendance, participation and behaviour in the classroom. It was felt on the rare occasion that schools would be resistant to accommodate and support particular students; the perception among workers for the lack of co-operation in these cases was attributed to the negative labelling of the family that the child was part of.

However network contacts did identify interactions which were seen to be tokenistic e.g. Dail na Og. But it was acknowledged it was possible to make changes to such structures, improve interaction and increase participation. Other network contacts provided examples of withdrawal of support which led to disappointment and created mistrust towards a statutory service (See Vignette Three - Community Based Response - Training Programme, next page).

### Vignette Three - Community Based Response - Training Programme

*A community based response delivering training applies a holistic approach to working with participants. The representative stated "it was obvious there was a need for counselling.....we were lucky that the X operated a pilot project, which proved very successful, The following year we were fully funded. The evaluation was positive. Then the funding was pulled....it was a slap in the face ... no consistency.... I was disappointed and hurt when something which had worked well, then X pulled out, but left a reduced rate of funding of Y".*

*The lack of notification regarding the reduction and non-explanation added to the hurt. The received reduced rate of funding totalled one sixth of the annual amount received in the previous years, but it was obvious there was a need for the service. The project managed to provide an on-going service, by linking into counsellors wishing to work up their counselling hours for accreditation purposes. However in other scenarios where funding is terminated or reduced it cannot be assumed other projects will be able to make similar arrangements.*

*The network contact related that their perception of the agency that had withdrawn without an adequate explanation diminished within their eyes. Therefore future collaboration with the same partner would be difficult to establish, due to lack of trust and feeling of insecurity based on the previous experience which might impact on the relationship.*

## **7.5 Identify Areas of Potential Transformation where Integration and Collaboration can be enhanced to build Resilience among Young People**

Generally, all network contacts agreed there is a need to improve existing relationships and possibly develop additional collaborative approaches. The formation of a Partnership Group to contribute to the overall purpose of EAR Project meant different things to different network contacts, as outlined below:

- To participate in any suggested collaborative measures required tangible evidence of potential benefits for the children, but also the target group or agency.
- The formation of the suggested action research Partnership Group would be required to act as a mechanism to ensure the application of existing legislation, e.g. Education Welfare Officers, Equality Act,
- An opportunity to influence policy.
- To deliver a range of quality services within the community

Network contacts from the social work teams outlined that in some cases, schools or other sources would identify that a child's well-being was at risk. The HSE, schools and other agencies depending upon the situation would collaborate to respond to needs and assist families. However these interventions were usually as a result of a crisis and it was felt that early prevention would be more beneficial for the child and the family.

Network contacts highlighted other trends and issues which were viewed as affecting the well-being of young people as follows:

- Young people loose interest in sport at around 10 years of age
- Young people who do not develop a joy of reading tend not to use the library after primary level
- Lack of supports for primary school pupils with special needs attending after schools facilities
- Lack of after-school placements for post-primary students
- Young people view available learning supports as something negative
- Gap in services for 12 - 15 year olds



- Lack of supports for children experiencing domestic violence to cope with the crisis and to remain in school
- Difficulty in accessing speedy mental health supports for women and children experiencing domestic violence
- Lack of preventive programmes regarding suicide
- Lack of supports for young people 16 - 18 year olds with addiction issues
- Lack of consideration for the needs of young people with disabilities when developing initiatives
- Service providers find it difficult to connect with some parents. to offer supports
- Support services should be offered in a non-stigmatising way, i.e. that a service is for "everyone" not for "disadvantaged" groups only.
- More paid positions to assist voluntary organisations to work with young people

## **7.6 Education and Building Resilience**

This section presents the views and perceptions of network contacts involved in the provision of educational supports through: 1) the formal education system; 2) the informal education system and 3) lifelong learning.

### **7.6.1 Formal Education System**

**National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)** - *A respondent from NEPS outlined "that as a service we do not have the full complement of staff.....and an educational psychologist works with particular schools, unfortunately which leaves some schools without a NEPS service.....,but these are supported by providing a refund system for the payment of private assessments"*

The NEPS network contact went on to clarify the procedures for gaining multifaceted assessments for children. A child who has more than educational psychological needs, who might have a particular syndrome or behavioural issues requires additional inputs from the Health Service Executive. The psychologist makes a referral to the appropriate section, but *"it must be said some sections are better than others at making appointments"*. Therefore schools without a NEPS allocation either make the recommended appointments themselves (with parental consent) or rely on the private psychologist to refer the child to the appropriate Health Service Executive Section.

**Special Needs and Learning Supports** - The allocation of special needs supports was under a transition at the time of the research. This involved the introduction of a weighting system at primary level only. Potentially this means that pupils who do not qualify for supports under the weighting system at primary level could apply at post-primary level and receive supports. However it was stated an inconsistency in requests for supports between primary and post-primary level exists. There was a need to improve the transfer of information from primary to post-primary school to ensure students could avail of any possible learning supports at post-primary level. The provision of special needs and learning support was seen to build resilience as it *"enables young people to gain skills and coping strategies to maximise the benefits obtained from the school system"* which increases their capacity to remain within the mainstream.

**Visiting Teacher for Travellers (VTT)** - The VTT works mainly within the community and liaises with schools to assist Traveller families to access the education system for their children. This involves assisting transient families to enrol their children in a local school. As well as making sure that the children has been removed from the register of the school the child previously attended.

It was felt "*mis-information*" regarding rights and availability of supports led to frustration within the Traveller Community and schools, which could result in negative outcomes for children. The VTT speaking in general felt it is important to acknowledge the existence of covert discrimination, where "*schools appeared to utilise stalling tactics regarding entry of Traveller children to the education system*". Through supporting families to overcome such barriers and encouraging a belief in education it was felt it was possible to build resilience.

It was believed that for members of the Traveller Community to remain in the education system was particularly challenging. It was felt most teachers were dedicated to their profession, but inconsistency in the provision of special needs and low literacy levels in the home meant less support to complete homework. Generally there were low rates of transfer from primary to post-primary school. This combined without of school factors of few prospects of gaining employment, possible discrimination and low educational attainment led the VTT to state "*so it's understandable when parents say there's no jobs*".

The ability of the VTT to connect with other personnel such as the Education Welfare Officer enabled further supports to be accessed to assist young members of the Traveller Community to remain in mainstream education. However it was felt the allocation of special needs required a long-term approach e.g. "*three years rather than on an annual basis to provide a consistent support to develop skills*".

**The Education Welfare Officer (EWO)** - The EWO has a remit governed by the Education Welfare Act (2000) and the Education Act (1998). The National Education Welfare Board is responsible for monitoring school attendance and following up cases of reported absenteeism. EWO's use a welfare approach, but when absolutely necessary letters under Section 29; Education Act (1998) will be issued. This is when cases can be progressed to court.

To enable EWO's to fulfil their role schools are required to make attendance returns to the National Education Welfare Board. As with most procedures anomalies do occur, such a case is the registration of asylum seekers as the respondent outlined "*often asylum seekers move on without leaving any further address or notification of enrolment at a different school, therefore they become "ghosts" in the system.....they remain on the school register preventing registration of another student... this isn't really an issue affecting Athlone regarding the demand for school places like other areas in the country*".

As previously outlined in Chapter Four some primary principals outlined the competition among primary schools to recruit asylum seekers as a method of obtaining additional resources for school is seen as a real issue. It is possible that people move from one area to another and maybe unaware that they are required to inform the school that they are removing their child from the register. However in local incidences where the move is from one school to the next it should be possible to rectify any inconsistencies in registers (See Chapter Nine).

**Third Level** - The Athlone Institute of Technology offers varying courses with certification at certificate, diploma, degree and masters level. A network contact indicated that social care courses accommodated learning opportunities for four hundred and fifty students. It was estimated 80% of human services (young people, people with special needs, the elderly, etc) in Athlone benefited from student placements, which occurred in three contexts: 1) residential; 2) community and 3) day care settings.

A network contact felt *"to progress the strengths-based approach a fundamental shift from the "at risk" lens to a "resilience" lens needs to occur"*. The development of a youth care philosophy and teaching practice based upon resilience is essential to contribute towards such a shift. It was also felt an improvement in communication between agencies and service providers will be required to improve the potential to build resilience within organisations, communities and families.

The Access Office in AIT targets groups under-represented at third level: people with disabilities; mature students and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The access office offers taster programmes; access courses; foundation courses; and primary school initiatives. These initiatives are seen to encourage people to participate in third level and become life-long learners. To maximise resilience through education it was felt that the promotion of a positive perception of education needed to be supported from early childhood and throughout the education system. It was felt the potential existed to offer a pre-college transition programme as an element of the continuum of education.

**Life-long Learning** - A representative of VTOS outlined that the majority of their participants would have had poor experiences of the education system. Therefore it is necessary to build the confidence of the individual prior to engaging them with the learning on the programme. The network contact stated there is an obvious increase in their confidence as the programme progressed. This has a knock on effect as the participants share their learning experience with their children. The parent becomes a positive role model for the child and there is also an increase in the presence of reading and writing materials in the home.

The network contact expressed concerns regarding a recent worrying trend that had developed. Young men who already had a poor experience of the formal education were leaving the programme. The network contact felt that by leaving the programme this might reinforce the sense of failure and *"I would be particularly worried about the long-term effects, especially considering the increasing rates of suicide among young males"*.

Network contacts from the VEC adult and family literacy service outlined the importance of promoting literacy skills as a way of promoting resilience with adults and young people. The VEC service also provided teachers to work for a number of hours per week in after-schools facilities to support homework.

The Shannon Bank Training Centre offers FETAC accredited training to members of the Traveller Community. The network contact did not support Resilience Theory and felt that regardless of the supports made available, it really is the individual's choice, if they access them or not. Progression routes for participants from the training centred into further training had been achieved through liaison and networking with agencies and service providers. Despite further opportunities some participants, because of legitimate reasons, were unable to avail of them.

### **7.6.2 Informal Education**

**Early Childhood Care and Education** - The early childhood care and education was seen as an important stage in building resilience of children. Structured programmes offered opportunities for physical activities enhancing physical development and language and cognitive development. In addition, attending early childhood care facilities increased the potential for the child to remain in the formal education system.

**Breakfast Clubs** - The operation of breakfast clubs is seen to promote resilience, by providing nutritious breakfasts, which increases the capacity of a young person to concentrate. Potentially the young person can participate more actively in the learning process and gain more benefits from the school system.

**Community-based After-school Facilities** - The after schools facilities are seen to build resilience by encouraging young people to complete homework and offer opportunities to socialise outside of the school context. Adults working in the facilities gain new skills and provide a service which enables other adults, with childcare responsibilities to access employment or training.

**"All Children Learn Differently"** - The network contact believed that in the formal education system inadequate learning supports for children led to the establishment of "All Children Learn Differently" in Athlone. A post-primary school provides the premises for the group to meet. A specialist teacher works with primary and post-primary students using methods which suit the individual learning styles of the young people. Through the individualised work plans used during the sessions, the children learn to develop learning techniques, which they could use to self-manage their learning in and out of the school context. The network contact felt sure that other children would be able to benefit from this group, but a lack of finance was preventing the group from expanding.

**Community Based Adult Learning** - A visit to one employment and training project resulted in a spontaneous group discussion between the project manager and the training programme participants. The majority of participants revealed that they had left school early. One respondent (approximate late thirties) stated "*I left school at eleven ..... this course has been the best nine months of my life.*". The participant outlined she had secured part-time employment in a retail outlet, which she was due to commence subsequent to completing the programme.

The group went on to discuss how their experience of childhood differs significantly from their own children and grand-children. It was felt the expectations of young people today are much higher than in their day of playing traditional games such as hop-sotch. A change in the sense of community was also described "*our mum's would watch over each others children, but now people don't really have a lot to do with each others*". It was felt the lack of facilities and amenities, particularly for the young people between twelve and fifteen years of age, meant that young people were open to experimentation, drinking, drugs and a particular concern expressed by the group was early initiation of young people into sexual activity.

## **7.7 Conclusion**

Through the continuing process of networking with statutory and non-statutory service providers it was apparent that the knowledge of Resilience Theory among service providers varied considerably, ranging from those who had no or a limited knowledge to those who had a full understanding of the theory. Once provided with a synopsis of the theory the majority of network contacts could relate how their own practice contributed to the building of resilience. One network contact understood Resilience Theory but chose not to support the theory.

It is clear that statutory and non-statutory agencies and groups do collaborate and interact to provide services to meet the diverse needs of young people. The network contacts recognised that inter-agency relationships could be improved. Secondly, there is most definitely potential to form additional collaborations. This willingness among agencies offers the opportunity to develop measures to respond to the needs of young people in the Athlone area. Any proposed initiative underpinned by Resilience Theory would potentially increase the availability of resilience factors at individual, family and community level.

There is evidence of existing adaptability, flexibility and innovation within agencies to meet the needs of young people. The increasing use of new technologies in our every day lives has been maximised by an organisation. The organisation entered a collaboration with a private mobile phone company, the resulting initiative uses text messaging to communicate and engage with young people. By using a child-centred approach and gaining insights into youth trends and their needs. It is possible that agencies and organisations can work with young people to provide services that they want and can access independently.

The observation that as young people mature they require different kinds of experiences and challenges to keep them engaged. But it is not always possible to respond to these changing needs due to the lack of resources or specific skills, is a valid one. By encouraging the constant exchange of information between statutory, non-statutory service providers, community groups, schools and young people. It should be increase the chances of securing resources, or sharing existing resources and skills to respond to some of the identified needs.

# Chapter Eight Analysis of the Research Findings Strand A and B

## 8.1 Introduction

The volunteer researchers during Phase One of this project examined their own transition experience and have regardless of socio-economic group or cultural background, identified comparable needs, apprehensions and issues regarding the transition from primary to post-primary school. This information led to the development of three central themes, as follows:

- The Need to Belong
- What Will the School Really be Like?
- Will I be Able to Learn?

The remainder of this chapter utilises these headings to develop an analysis, by combining information from the volunteer researchers, the parents/guardians, schools, network contacts and current literature. As the research is under-pinned by Resilience Theory, each of the three central themes is considered under the sub-headings of issues pertaining to the individual: the home; the community and the school.

## 8.2 The Need to Belong

The psychological sense of belonging "*to be suitable or acceptable, especially socially*" (Collins Dictionary, 1994) is particularly important in the promotion of an individual child's or adult's well-being. The Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) educational resilience study states that "*students' sense of belonging to school was the only significant predictor of academic resilience*" (cited in Waxman et al, 2003, Pg 5). Therefore the earlier a psychological sense of belonging can be achieved for the student the better for them and for the school.

### 8.2.1 Issues Pertaining to the Individual

A sense of belonging enables a student to develop a self-identity within the school; to trust the school system and to trust themselves to operate within the system (Whelley et al, 2005). On entering post-primary school some students do not develop a sense of belonging. As a result they can feel alienated and isolated from others in the school and from the educational process. Eventually some pupils become early school leavers or underachievers in the system (McMahon et al, 1998). Leaving school with no or minimal qualifications, as previously outlined is seen to limit life chances and places a young person "at risk" of poverty (CPA, 2005).

Young people, who do not feel accepted in the mainstream, will seek acceptance outside of the mainstream. The sense of the need to belong is so vital, that it is better to belong to what society might perceive as an anti-social group, than no group at all (Kaplan and Johnson, 1992). In more extreme cases the lack of belonging for some individuals can develop into feelings of rejection. If this occurs, a person either internalises the rejection, learning to hate themselves or externalises the rejections and learns to hate others. Both of these processes may lead to negative long-term outcomes, including mental health issues, substance mis-use, suicide, high-risk sexual activity and

violence (Beck and Malley; 2003). These outcomes place demands upon health and other services as the young person matures, possibly resulting in a need to connect with services at different stages throughout a lifetime.

For young people at primary level, a real pre-entry anxiety is the fear of not being socially accepted at post-primary school. As adolescent development progresses friendships and peer group membership becomes increasingly significant. Emphasis is placed on physical appearance and social presentation. Those with a low self-esteem and a poor self-concept, especially young females, are more likely to have low self-confidence, which affects their ability to form new friendships and to form a sense of self (McElwee et al, 2002). This provides an explanation why the young females were generally more articulate and eager than their male peers, to complete Transition Programme tasks. By gathering information about post-primary school it helped to build their self-confidence and to be more positive about their own abilities to gain social acceptance in the post-primary context.

This fear of not gaining social acceptance also offers an explanation for the mitching (truancy) strategy proposed by a young male. This young person could not visualise a place for himself in the new academic learning environment, because of his low literacy levels. It would be taking a significant risk to identify himself as "*different*" from other students, by virtue of his need for learning support. This would potentially expose himself to being bullied and being excluded from the social structure of the school. Rather than taking such a risk, to preserve his self-identity it would be easier to "mitch".

To be "*different*" in the school context may be perceived as "*less than*" or "*deficient*" when we consider that policy allocates resources "*to provide deficient individuals with additional supports and resources to build their participation and achievement within the existing system*" (ADM, 2004). This approach contributes to and reaffirms the notion that students with specific learning needs are "*less than*" in comparison to other students, who do not require additional support from the state education system. The volunteer researchers, who did not reveal they were in receipt of learning supports, may simply have forgotten to mention it. But as possessors of the knowledge that they may be viewed "*differently*" by choosing not to reveal a need for support potentially reduces the risk of being excluded by other young people in the post-primary context.

The commercialisation of education has witnessed the recent growth in exclusive fee-paying grind colleges, which offer Leaving Certificate and revision study programmes (Lynch in ADM, 2004). Students, who are in a position to access these additional supports, rather than being considered "*less than*" they are instead considered "*privileged*" (CWC, 2002). This suggests that those with wealth and power are in a position to socially construct the meaning of difference, for example "*less than*" or "*privileged*". Social groups who can afford to access out-of-school learning supports can then potentially derive more benefits from the state education system. This process is seen to contribute to the reproduction of educational inequality (CWC, 2002).

It is proposed that existing educational policy, which seeks to respond to educational disadvantage by supplying supports to individuals to succeed in the existing education system, will have little effect on reducing the

relationship between low educational attainment, social class and social identity (ADM, 2004). The inequality of educational outcome is seen to be a symptom of wider societal inequalities. To break the relationship between low education attainment and social group will require an approach that believes inequality can be reduced. The promotion of equality of educational outcome will require the simultaneous targeting and positive discrimination of resources. But, crucially, also change to structures and systems that are seen to maintain inequality. It is argued if these two processes take place equivalent levels of educational outcomes by different social groups and social identities will be achieved (ADM, 2003).

### **8.2.2. Issues Pertaining to the Home**

Previous transition research has identified the parent's pivotal role in supporting their children to make a positive adjustment to post-primary school, by "*support of their child's autonomy, the quality of the affective relationship between parents and adolescent, and the parent's investment in providing opportunities for the children outside of the home*" (Lord cited in Smyth et al, 2004).

The volunteer researchers did not openly identify or name the family as a support. But it appeared the young people accessed different types of supports from the family as they required them: asking questions to gain information; social support at the presentation evening; freedom to make personal choices, such as, the young person who decided to travel by bus to post-primary school, instead of walking with her mother to the school as she had done in primary school and the interactions between parent and their child which led the parent to contact the school. Ungar (2004) refers to these type of actions as "*unnamed protective processes*" and are particularly important in building resilience.

In contemporary Ireland, societal changes are seen to place increasing pressures on families. These changes impact on the way families can support their children. In the research parents highlighted they have to arrange time off work to attend school functions, but it wasn't always possible to get the time needed. This is an example of one barrier that limits the way people can participate in their child's education. However for some families there may be a multitude of factors, such as: low literacy levels; parents with addiction issues; separation within family units; physical illness or a family crisis. It is argued that the public sector needs to take more responsibility to create sources of resilience that will support families to play a pivotal role in the development of their children (Saraceno, 2003).

### **8.2.3. Issues Pertaining to the Community**

Social networks are considered to be informal relationships, which can produce resilience through the interactions that occur between intimate social connections with family and friends, and less intimate relationships in local neighbourhoods, activities, civic life, work and the church. These networks are also capable of building trust, and where norms are reciprocal, a strong community identity is developed, providing a sense of belonging for its membership. A community is described as being rich in social capital when the members of its network actually receive supports or perceive supports to be available (Putman, 2000).



## **The Church**

Communities which are rich in social capital can be either exclusive or inclusive. Exclusive communities form strong allegiances such as a religious belief or an organisation with a strong identity. The Church can be related to the whole child perspective which states spiritual and moral well-being is required as one of the nine dimensions of child development (National Children's Strategy, 2000). The research revealed that some young people, post-confirmation drift away from the Church. The rejection of a belief and the exploration of other beliefs by young people is seen to be part of adolescent development. But at the time of the transition young people are becoming distanced from a community, the Church, that provided a strong sense of belonging at primary level.

Traditionally in Ireland, the Church had a strong association with mainline youth work provision. The Church often provided premises, personnel and operated management structures. In recent years the relationship between the Church and the youth work sector has changed, due to an ageing and decline in religious orders (DES,2003). The reduction in support is not confined to the youth work sphere, but was also raised as an educational issue.

Post-primary principals raised concerns about the reduction of church contributions to the education system, e.g. pastoral care, counselling supports, which are seen as vital supports to assist some young people to remain in the education system. A similar point is raised by Lynch (2004) *"The State has failed to address the investment deficit evolving from the decline of religious investment in education, so parents are expected to make good the deficit with voluntary contributions. This is a grossly inequitable solution"*. If this process is left unchallenged it is likely it will contribute to the widening of the existing gap between educational outcomes based upon social class.

## **Out-of-School Youth Activities**

As the research revealed, not all young people accessed out of school youth activities. This was especially the case during the summer holidays. Previous research highlights a range of youth identified barriers which prevent them from accessing available youth services. These included, not being aware of the availability of services; non-attendance of friends; no real alternative to sport and the expense of attendance. Non-participation in youth or sporting activities means there are less sources of resilience in a young person's life. The sense of belonging has to be gained elsewhere.

## **Rainbows - Community Based Youth Counselling Support**

Rainbows is a service which supports a young person to work through the grieving process of a significant loss of a parent(s) due to bereavement or separation. The provision of supports services such as Rainbows is particularly important for the mental well-being of young people. The Mental Health Ireland organisation highlights a need to promote the mental health of young people. *"To enable young people to possess mental, physical and emotional well-being to live a full and creative life, and also possess the flexibility to deal with life's ups and downs. During*

*childhood and adolescence, mental health is developed, in addition to physical need young people also require love, security to make them feel safe, happy and confident” ([www.mentalhealthireland.ie](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie)).*

The importance of positive mental health for young people should not be underestimated. Yet the research highlights that young people experiencing domestic abuse and those with addiction issues have very few options to access support. This does not mean to imply that all young people who experience domestic abuse or have addiction issues will have mental health issues. But it would be beneficial for a young person to have a support available, if they wanted to access it.

#### **8.2.4. Issues Pertaining to the School**

The school context has been identified as the last remaining strong-hold of developing a sense of belonging for children, who do not develop a sense of belonging elsewhere (Beck & Malley; 2003). Teachers, who work face-to-face with new students, possess an important role in promoting a sense of belonging within the school context (Smyth et al, 2004). It is argued that a pedagogy of belonging should be embedded into a school culture, to benefit the students, the staff and the school.

Fortunately, for one of the volunteer researchers who stated they had not settled-in a sense of belonging was promoted in the school she attended. The young girl had formed a “key” relationship not with a teacher, but with the school secretary. The school secretary then directed the young person to the school counselling service. It was through the ongoing relationship with the school counsellor that the young person was able to find a way of negotiating the school day.

Howard and Johnston (1998) state that interventions that promote resilience do not necessarily have to be carefully planned or structured. Often simple acts of caring and attentiveness demonstrate to a young person that they are cared for and are included. The volunteer researchers during the evaluation of Phase One of the Transition Programme identified the attendance of a post-primary teacher at their presentation evening as something positive. The volunteer researchers’ perception was that the teacher’s presence demonstrated that she was actually interested in them as young people.

It is feasible to suggest that the teacher’s attendance has a far reaching “ripple effect” beyond illustrating an interest in the young people. It commenced building trust of the system that she represented, in this case the post-primary sector. Illustrating the powerful position representatives of a system (e.g. health, education, justice etc) can exert at an access points, to encourage trust or lack of trust of the system by the service users (Gidden; 2000).

### **8.3 What Will the School Really be Like?**

The second central theme to emerge from the child-centred information was regarding the reality of the school or "What Will the school really be like?" The recent publication of "Moving Up" (2004), a comprehensive study in the Irish context of both social/personal factors and academic factors impacting upon the transition phase states "*the existence of developed integration programmes within the school helps students to settle into school with greater ease. However a schools "formal" policy on student integration appears to be successful only to the extent that it is underpinned by a positive informal climate and provides students with a realistic view of what to expect from post-primary school*" (Smyth et al, 2004, Pg 258).

In the school context, the formal and informal dimensions interact on a daily basis. A school culture of accepted norms and values develops, which inform the daily reality of the school. Not only does this process create the reality within the school, but is also governs how a school relates to the wider community. A school culture is not static, but fluid and is capable of change.

#### **8.3.1. Issues Pertaining to the Individual**

The volunteer researchers' expectations at primary level were that post-primary school was going to be stricter. But by the time the young people participated in the semi-structured interview at post-primary level, the majority had a full understanding of the school's formal culture. Some of the young people demonstrated a clear understanding of the informal culture, so much so, that they used their knowledge for their own purposes i.e. waiting around in corridors for as long as possible between classes.

#### **8.3.2. Issues Pertaining to the Home**

Most of the adult stories about post-primary school reiterated by the volunteer researchers were negative. It is a possibility some of these stories were told to the young people as jokes or exaggerations. But these adult stories illustrate the long-term impact teachers may have on a young person's life, which are then carried into adulthood. These experiences can be passed onto the next generation, which assists with the development of a preconceived idea of what post-primary school will really be like.

The parental, particularly the mother's level of education is seen to impact upon the child's participation in the education system. The higher the educational attainment the more likely a positive attitude will exist in the home setting towards education (Irish Government; 2000). It is recognised that adults, some of whom may be parents, with a poor experience of school, are reluctant to re-engage with training and education opportunities (Irish Government; 2000). Yet lifelong learning and upskilling is seen as a necessity to maximise employability in a constantly changing labour market and ensure social inclusion. This suggests that the inequality of education experienced in childhood is likely to continue into adulthood.

Under educational legislation, a range of initiatives have been created to increase links between the home, community and school e.g. Visiting Teacher for Travellers; the Education Welfare Officer and Home School

Community Liaison Personnel. One aspect of each of these positions is to encourage the development of a positive attitude towards education in the home setting. Generally network contacts from these initiatives felt most parents were receptive to suggestions made to encourage young people to remain in the education system.

The evidence from the parental perspective is that supports for parents from school have improved in the recent past. There are parents who take a proactive approach to promoting their child's education, especially where supports for specific needs are seen to be lacking e.g. All Children Learn Differently. So it is feasible to suggest that parents in general want their children to do well in school. Therefore it is important to create as many opportunities as possible for parents or guardians to participate in any proposed initiatives. But also to accept it may not always be possible for parents to attend.

### **8.3.3. Issues Pertaining to the Community**

At community level the school, as a system, provides a forum for a variety of service providers to interact with students. As such, a school with the ability to link positively with other service providers should be viewed as a positive community asset. Both primary and post-primary schools in the Athlone area identified a range of statutory, voluntary and private services they engaged to respond to the diverse needs of their students.

Some schools felt they could provide additional services to their local community, by providing computer classes for pupil's parents or cookery programmes. It was felt such programmes would enhance existing community relationships and promote a positive attitude to the school and education. Unfortunately inadequate resources curtailed the delivery of these programmes. However through the on-going networking process it may be possible to find a project partner to work with the schools to provide programmes for the local community.

### **8.3.4. Issues Pertaining to the School**

The government established the School Development Planning Initiative (Post-primary ) in 1999, *"with the purpose to stimulate and strengthen a culture of collaborative development planning in schools, with a view to promoting school improvement and effectiveness"* (SDPI; 2005).

The SDPI is a positive step to improve the effectiveness of schools, but as previously highlighted particular groups are identified by NEWB as having poor levels of school attendance, such as young people from the Traveller Community and young people from ethnic minorities for example. The IWA highlights that the needs of students with disabilities are often overlooked. So for the SDPI initiative to be particularly effective it needs to find methods of obtaining the "voice" of these young people and ensure that school councils and student participation structures maintain an equal representation of groups among the student population.

## ***8.4 Will I be Able to Learn?***

Fundamentally, if a student does not develop a sense of belonging, which is encouraged by a positive school culture, it is doubtful, if a young person will ever commit to becoming a learner in the school context. Even when a sense of

belonging has been achieved *"if pupils are not helped during the early period of their new school to sustain their excitement about learning and develop individual routines for managing learning, both on and off the school site, they may have difficulties with progress later"* (Ruddock cited in Galton et al; 1999).

#### **8.4.1. Issues Pertaining to the Individual**

Previous transition research highlights the social acceptance within the post-primary setting as the dominant concern of young people, which the volunteer researchers also identified as their main concern. As a result of the process of trying to gain a sense of belonging and social acceptance a pause or hiatus in academic progression occurs. For young people who have had little opportunity to practice literacy and numeracy skills during the summer break it is a possibility that they actually experience a deterioration of their skills (Galton et al; 1999).

It is argued that young people who have gained a sense of belonging to the school, but are not challenged adequately to engage in the learning process may in peer groups develop an anti-work culture leading to bored and restless students. These students may become labelled in the school system as "non-learners". It is difficult to lose this label if at a later stage a student decides to try to engage with learning.

A number of volunteer researchers early within the post-primary context had already associated themselves with non-learning groups. Another volunteer researcher was being bullied for being a "SWOT" as he was engaging in learning. Therefore it is reasonable to suggest that a culture among some of the volunteer researchers was that to engage in learning was considered a negative thing. It is not surprising that a number of these young people reported spending limited amounts of time on homework. As individuals they appeared to be extrinsically motivated, as they were doing just enough to complete the task to avoid discipline from the school.

For students who choose to avoid work it is quite possible by the end of the first academic year in post-primary that some of these students who experience tensions between getting on with their work and mucking about will be aware that they have fallen behind their peers, who have been working. At this point, if supports are lacking, students often find it easier to give up than catch up (Galton et al; 1999. Pg 21)..

In contrast, other volunteer researchers identified spending up to four hours on homework and significant effort was made to complete homework tasks. These young people appeared to be intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. The fact that the volunteer researchers were able to identify interesting subjects and good teachers illustrates the role teacher play in motivating students to engage with learning.

#### **8.4.2. Issues Pertaining to the Home**

The family as a source of educational support to a young person has a pivotal role to play in motivating a child to commit to learning in the school and at home. To consider the family roles three sub-headings are utilised 1) Homework 2) Special Needs and Learning Supports and 3) Parents and Links to the School.

## **Homework**

In the home context, parents can encourage a positive attitude towards education and encourage their child to organise and self-manage their homework. Doing so provides an opportunity for the young person to take responsibility for their own learning and encourages positive adolescent development. In deed a number of parents outlined how they were encouraging their child to develop a homework routine.

However a parent's perception of assisting children with homework may vary considerably from a teacher's perspective (Paula cited in Brewster & Fager 2000). If a parent provides so much support that a child does not grasp the understanding of a topic the teacher may consider this cheating or not helpful. Conversely, teachers are seen to expect parents, to check spellings, grammar and sign-off on homework tasks. This assumes all parents possess literacy skills, which may not be the case (Paula cited in Brewster & Fager; 2000).

In fact the National Adult Literacy Agency (2002) highlights *"1 in 4 adults have low literacy skills, and a recent survey has shown that 1 in 10 children are leaving primary school with reading difficulties"* (NALA; 2002, pg 5). This confirms that some parents, who may be willing to assist and support their children, do not necessarily possess the skills to do so.

As the research demonstrated some parents were aware that their child was not spending adequate time on their homework. But they believed it was the role of the school to ensure homework is completed and checked. Therefore suggesting there is a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for completion of homework. Is it the school, the parents or the young person themselves or all three?

A resilience factor in the home which perhaps is not readily identifiable is the support provided by older siblings to assist with homework tasks, especially in households where parents have a limited knowledge of the curriculum. The two young people who were experiencing sustained settling in difficulties and having problems with completion of homework tasks were both the oldest child in the family. One of the parents openly stated that they had a low level of literacy themselves and were unable to assist with completion of homework. Therefore a holistic picture for these two young people begins to emerge that apart from not tapping into resilience sources within the school context limited resilience sources are available to them outside of the school system to progress academic tasks.

## **Special Needs and Learning Supports**

Parents are required to give consent to release their child's primary school records to the destination post-primary school. This is particularly important where a child has been in receipt of special needs and learning supports at primary level. The child-centred perspective suggests that young people do not like to reveal their need for learning supports (See Need to Belong this chapter).

Unfortunately, post-primary schools reported incidents where student records are not released. In cases where students had been in receipt of learning supports in primary level, often difficulties manifest quickly in the post-primary context, especially in maths and language classes. It is possible for the post-primary school to make an application for the renewal of supports, but significant delays may occur.

The schools identify the provision of learning supports as a vital resource to retain students in the education system. However some students arrive in post-primary without ever being assessed, but with an obvious need for special needs learning supports. These cases were attributed to the lack of resources of NEPS and the inadequate allocation of psychological assessments of one per fifty students.

Individual schools often applied for funding from charitable organisations and partnership companies to access private assessment for some students and suggested to parents to avail of private assessments. This is an inequitable solution to this issue, in that some parents have limited resources to access private assessments. The fact that schools are applying for funding from different sources, is seen to conceal the extent of the issue. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of schools and parents not all children who require assessment are assessed (See Spin-off project Chapter Nine)

#### **Parents and Links to the School**

The Network contacts from schools and agencies believed that a core group of parents and guardians were active in the support of their child's development. But it was felt that the parents of children perceived to be most "at risk" were less likely to attend meetings, appointments and events despite attempts by schools and agencies to encourage them to participate.

The research has demonstrated that some parents are not in a position to support their children and in some cases it is actually the children who take on responsible roles in the household. The promotion of Resilience Theory focuses on strengths and what can be done rather than what can not be done. If parents are not available, may be a young person has a close positive relationship with an auntie or cousin who could be invited to attend instead. From the Transition Programme presentation evenings a variety of family members attended to support the young people. By supplying transport or childcare or inviting young siblings to all attend may also increase the greater attendance at events and illustrates to a young person that they are supported.

#### **8.4.3. Issues Pertaining to the Community**

In Athlone, some years ago, it was recognised that some families were not in a position to create a home learning environment. This led communities to establish supervised homework clubs, where young people could go after school to complete homework in a supportive learning environment.

Some of these home work clubs were supported by County Childcare Committees to avail of grants under the Equal

Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) to expand the service into an after school services. These services offer social, personal and homework supports for primary school pupils, which release people with childcare commitments to participate in the labour market or further training.

The volunteer researchers from School One identified that the after school service that they attended provided answers to their homework. Through the Transition Programme evaluation process, the class teacher also raised the same issue, believing it would be more beneficial for the pupils *"to try to do the homework themselves at home"*. The practice of providing homework answers in the long-term will be detrimental to a student's overall education. The homework may be completed correctly, but the understanding of the topic or how to arrive at an answer is lacking. Therefore when a student is required to complete a task by themselves, they are unable to do so.

The after school facilities provide a valuable service offering opportunities for social interaction, development of skills and homework support is only one element of the service. But if the practice of providing homework answers is left unchallenged, the service is actually contributing to the process of educational inequality. The management of the after schools service was notified of the practice during the research process.

Many services developed at community level are progressed through a collaborative approach, which is positive as it is a method of working together to provide services in local communities, but does not imply that these services are perfect. A network contact highlighted that multi-agency responses sometimes led to some of the partners misunderstanding the role of other partners involved in the collaboration. This resulted in a lack of clarity regarding who is responsibility for exactly what. Therefore continuity and quality of a community operated service may be inconsistent and require on going evaluation to improve practice.

#### **8.4.4. Issues Pertaining to the School**

In the school context, teachers have a pivotal role in motivating and engaging students to commit to learning. In addition, teachers are required to deliver a national curriculum, maintain behavioural boundaries, and fulfil their role to an acceptable standard of the school.

Each teacher is similar to students and other staff members in that they bring their own personal biography into the school. It is personal biographies which inform some teachers to subconsciously operate an invisible pedagogy, which is based upon on a student's social class background (Drudy S & Lynch K; 1993). It is proposed that teachers who operate from this stance have lower expectations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As a result the teacher spends more time trying to engage students who are perceived to come from higher socio-economic backgrounds to commit to learning.

Fortunately, educational resilience studies have identified teachers who have high student expectations of all students. As teacher they create opportunities for students, with different learning styles to participate and contribute to the learning process. These teachers are referred to as "turnaround teachers" and *"are able to focus*



*on the strengths of all the students, and assist those students who have been labelled by school or oppressed by their families or communities” (Seligman, 1995 cited in Waxman et al, 2003) to engage in learning and to benefit from the education system.*

School structures also play an important role in facilitating learning and encouraging students to take on responsibility for self-directed learning. All five post-primary schools offer supervised homework sessions at a minimal cost to students. Even at the minimal cost it is a possibility that some families on limited budgets would not be in a position to pay for this support.

The one post-primary school that offers interactive homework classes targeting student with special needs were appreciated by the young people and their parents. This illustrates that interactive homework classes are a positive intervention to support young people in the education system. However to develop and delivery such a service requires resources and some schools are not in a position to offer the same type of service, although there maybe students with similar needs.

It may not be possible for schools to secure resources to provide interactive homework supports, but existing out of school homework support could be adapted to work with young people, particularly those experiencing homework difficulties, to consider study skills and to encourage the young people to manage self-learning. The role of the schools would be required to refer young people to the service.

## **8.5 Conclusion**

It is clear through the action research process that a range of in and out of school factors impact on a young person's transition from primary to post-primary school. Some of these factors young people are aware of and others that they are not aware of. However from a child-centred approach it is obvious that three central themes are relevant to all young people; 1) the need to belong; 2) what will the school really be like and 3) will I be able to learn? By consider methods and implementing actions to support young people to gather information regarding these themes would be a positive step to aid a positive transition of all young people from primary to post-primary school.

The Transition Programme does not claim that all those who participate in the programme will not experience settling in difficulties in the post-primary context. But the Transition Programme does provide continuity for participants from primary to post-primary school; enables young people to develop skills that they can use in other contexts; provides an insight into the daily lives of young people, facilitates young people to express their views and opinions and identifies young people experiencing settling-in difficulties, who with agreement from the parents/guardians can be referred for additional support, if available.

For parents/guardians the Transition Programme creates an opportunity to gain an insight into what their child is thinking about post-primary school. As parents/guardians they can become involved in the transition phase by attending presentation sessions or by possibly being chosen by their child as research project respondent. Through the re-connection phase at post-primary level the Transition Programme offers the opportunity for parents/guardians to provide their own opinions regarding their child's transition experience.

For schools the Transition Programme provides a programme that complements the school's existing transition provision. Information gathered through a child-centred approach regarding the experience can be related to schools and offers the potential to enhance their existing transition support to respond to the identified needs of young people.

The application of Resilience Theory enabled the research to identify the significant differences of available resilience factors in a young person's daily life, by exploring the school context and the young people's social networks. The lack of resilience factors becomes particularly significant where a range of risk factors are also presented. This knowledge enables service providers, schools, parents and young people to work together to consider methods of creating sources of resilience.

There is able evidence of statutory and non-statutory groups wishing to promote services for young people and families. The child-centred information supplied through the project can inform the practice of these groups to create services, young people want and will access.

## Chapter Nine Spin-off Projects

### 9.1 Introduction

The adopted action research methodology meant it was possible to respond to some identified need almost immediately. By considering information from both Strand A and B it was possible to identify potential projects outside of specific remit of this research project. By bringing different partners together the project acted as a catalyst, which enabled others to consider the possible development of further initiatives. The remainder of this chapter is presented in two sections:

- Spin-off Projects
- Networking

### 9.2 Spin-off Projects

There were four main spin-off projects developed: 1) The Education Welfare Act (2000); 2) the Me, Myself I programme; 3) the Special Needs Survey and 4) Principal's Forum. Each of the spin-off projects is detailed under the following headings:

- Rationale
- Links to Overall Project
- Initiative Aims
- Initiative Objectives
- Methods
- Building Resilience
- Outcomes of Action
- Critique of Initiative
- Potential Positive Follow-up Actions

#### 9.2.1 Education Welfare Act (2000)

**Rationale** - The networking of Strand B identified that some community groups were concerned with the lack of follow-up of school attendance issues under the Education Welfare Act (2000). Further networking activities identified that some agencies felt their organisations would benefit from an input regarding the Act to ensure the provision of accurate information.

The National Education Welfare Board at the time was disseminating information through existing structures such as County Development Board's Social Inclusion Measure (SIM) committee. To heighten awareness of the Act it was proposed by the Educational Action Research Project at the Athlone SIM meeting that the National Education Welfare Board would facilitate a session for schools, agencies, community representatives and parents regarding the Education Welfare Act (2000).

### **Links to overall project**

- Children during the transition identified the home (family unit) as their main source of support and information
- Education Welfare Act (2000) governs school absenteeism interventions
- Low attendance rates are a recognised factor contributing to early school leaving
- Parents are cited in the Act as being responsible for their child's school attendance.

### **Initiative Aim**

- To provide accurate information regarding the roles and responsibilities under the Education Welfare Act (2000)
- Project supports National Education Board to disseminate information

### **Initiative Objectives**

- To survey parents at the information session to ascertain their perspective on parental supports for potential transition period. It is intended to use a survey which can be filled-in independently or if people can discuss the open ended questionnaire with a worker

### **Methods**

#### **Promotion of Session**

- Selection of post-primary school to facilitate delivery of the session. This would assist with the breakdown of barriers for some parents to access secondary schools as identified in the research process
- Media campaign, posters, websites, letters to projects, letters to schools, visits to projects try to connect with parents that may not usually attend information sessions

#### **Building Resilience**

- Through the provision of accurate information community groups can respond to information needs of their service users.
- Parents become aware of their rights and will be able to identify a potential support if an issue arises regarding school attendance.
- Young people can potentially benefit from parents being better informed

#### **Outcomes of Action**

The information session was poorly attended with a total of nineteen people as follows;

- Two women from the Traveller Community
- Five members from an asylum seekers or refugee background
- Two Visiting Teachers for Travellers - Westmeath & Roscommon
- Representative of the HSE - Family Support Unit
- Representative of Athlone Community Services Council
- One representative of a post-primary school

- One representative of a primary school
- One unidentified male
- Five representatives of ACT

### **Critique of Initiative**

#### Possible Reasons for Poor Attendance

- Inappropriate location
- It was revealed that a number of the schools did not circulate invitation to parent population - (some circulated only to parent councils)
- The home coming of the Eurovision representatives coincided with date - unforeseen circumstance
- Time - childcare issues
- Communication techniques did not reach all the target groups

### **Parental Involvement**

- The parents that were present did complete questionnaires, some with the assistance of an ACT representative, which confirmed the need for literacy supports to be available at the delivery of information
- The type of inputs required by parents regarding support around transition could not be proved or disproved. Therefore identifying parental involvement as an area of further investigation

### **Positive Follow up Actions**

#### 1) Asylum Seekers and Transfer Issues

A positive link created between the EWO and the Athlone Accommodation Centre. At the information session the issue of non-attendance at school was highlighted by one of the attendees.

### **Links to research findings**

- The research has identified the issue of "ghosts" in the system when people move from one school to another without removing the name of a child from the register of the previous school. (EWO)
- The primary schools also identified an issue regarding competition to recruit asylum seekers to seek additional resources.
- Discrimination and racism experienced by school children causes parents to move children (Community Worker)  
Parents are unaware of the need to remove their children from the school register.

### **9.2.2 The Me, Myself I Project**

**Rationale** - During the transition programme and the networking interviews the issue of lack of summer activities for teenage young people was raised. The booking manager (maternity cover) of the Dean Crowe Theatre had been connected with through the networking process. Subsequent to the initial networking contact, the booking manager approached the EAR Project to collaborate on the "Me, Myself I Project". The Arts Council were funding a teenage summer arts programme in the Dean Crowe Theatre, which was going to be facilitated by an experienced artist and

instructor. The booking manager felt because the Me, Myself I Project complemented the overall ethos of the EAR Project, the project could recruit the programme participants.

### **Links to the Overall Project**

- Volunteer researcher identified lack of summer activities
- The proposed programme facilitated teenagers (transition age approximately) to explore their own lives, using visual arts

### **• Initiative Aim from Educational Action Research Project Perspective**

To gain a child-centred perspective of what young people need during summer holidays

### **Initiative Objective from Educational Action Research Project Perspective**

- Initiate contacts with other agencies - youth service, HSE, community groups, etc
- Build relationships with schools offering links for students to programmes
- Heighten awareness of the EAR Project in Athlone

### **Methods**

#### **Recruitment Methods**

- Posters
- Notification of programme to all post-primary school art teachers
- Leaflets
- Advert in County Westmeath Arts Programme
- Newspaper articles
- Connect with community representatives

#### **Research Method**

- Focus Group with Art Programme Participants

### **Building Resilience**

- Provided a support which was not previously available
- Methods encouraged young people to manage their own projects
- Parents were invited to attend opening of exhibition of young people's work

### **Outcomes of Action**

- A total of eleven young people participated in the project (13.5 - 17 years)
- Pieces of art work created
- Exhibition attended by Parents and Family

### **Outcomes of Focus Group**

- A total of eight young people participated in the focus group comprising three females - five males (three ethnic minorities)
- The young people felt there were a limited number of activities available for 13 year olds, such as cinema and bowling for example, but these were expensive.
- Young people did self-organise trips to the swimming pools, they would walk out to the pool and share a taxi home (usually 7 -8 young people)
- A Young person was a Dail na og representative, but felt there was no real formal local structure in place to gather or feedback information to other young people in Athlone
- Summer programmes provided the opportunities to meet new friends and try out new things
- Most of the summer programmes were for younger people and not their age group. The participants related there should be more activities for their age group 13 - 15 year olds as they are not old enough to work.
- Work was not a priority at the moment, but something for the future
- A once-off project had been operated the previous year with a mixed programme, computers, soccer, arts, music, personal development, cooking, etc. Some of the young people had participated on this programme, which they said *"was really good as it gave a bit of everything"*
- One female focus group participant attending post-primary school and about to go into 3<sup>rd</sup> year had been sent for assessment for dyslexia at end of 2<sup>nd</sup> year as a result of an English teacher identifying possible dyslexia. The young girl outlined that she felt nervous at first, but not so concerned now, if it will help her study. Her family cannot afford evening study and she is doing the homework herself at home, sometimes she thinks it would be useful to have a bit of additional support.
- A young male participant had a similar story to the young females, as his need for learning support was not identified until post-primary school.
- The art facilitator outlined that they had discussed different learning styles as part of the *Me, Myself I* programme.
- One young male related that he had experienced racism in the school context and found himself expelled from post-primary school. In the new academic year the young person was going to an alternative training programme.
- Sign Language - one of the participants had an older brother who is profoundly deaf and had initially enrolled for the programme. Attempts to source funding to pay for a "signer" from Irish Links were unsuccessful. In the meantime the young person had been offered a position on a sports team, which he decided to participate instead. The young person outlined specific needs of peoples need to be considered when offering programmes i.e. equality

### **Critique of the Initiative**

The focus group information is not sufficient by itself to inform the development of initiatives, but provides evidence that supports findings from the main research project : 1) A lack of summer activities for young people of

the transition age and 2) Young people do reach post-primary without ever receiving an educational psychological assessments when a need does exist.

#### **Positive Follow-up Actions**

To consider the development of summer activities as part of the two year action plan.

### **9.2.3 Special Needs Survey**

**Rationale** - Young people were reluctant to reveal that they were attending learning supports in primary school. During the transition from primary to post-primary for a variety of reasons student records are not released to the post-primary schools. Schools highlighted where supports are not in place for students entering post-primary. They develop difficulties quickly, especially in mathematics and languages. The allocation of 1 educational psychological assessment per 50 students was highlighted by schools as inadequate to meet the demand.

#### **Links to the Project**

- Students who require special needs and learning supports and who do not receive these supports are at risk of becoming early school leavers or under achievers.
- The networking strand of the research revealed that individual schools and community groups were applying for funding to access assessments. This meant that the information regarding the number of young people in 6<sup>th</sup> Class waiting for reassessment or presenting for assessment for the first time was fragmented

#### **Initiative Aim from the Educational Action Research Project Perspective**

To ascertain the number of 6<sup>th</sup> Class pupils waiting for educational psychological reassessment or presenting for first time assessment.

#### **Initiative Objective from the Educational Action Research Project Perspective**

To provide an accurate picture of the issue of assessment need in the Athlone area to consider methods of responding to the issue

#### **Method**

Special Needs Organiser to design and circulate a survey to all the primary schools in the Athlone area

#### **Building Resilience**

Promotes relationship between the schools, National Council for Special Needs and the EAR Project.

#### **Outcomes**

17 schools responded outlining the need for assessments in their school. Totalling 38 young people.

#### **Positive Follow-up Action**



The development of the Special Needs Initiative (See Chapter Twelve)

#### **9.2.4 Principals Forum**

**Rationale** - The Principals highlighted a variety of issues and concerns. Although some of the concerns were similar from school to school. There were few opportunities for schools to interact and a need for a forum was proposed.

One of the school raised issues related to the area of educational psychological assessments and access to special needs supports. By convening a meeting of primary and post-primary principals and providing information about special needs was a way of providing feedback to the schools about one of their concerns. Secondly, at the meeting it would be possible to confirm, if there was a need for a principals' forum.

#### **Links to the Project**

- A research objective is to enable schools to engage with the broadest range of services to assist them to respond to the diverse needs of children and young people.
- Networking and interactions are seen to create sources of resilience
- To consider the role of the primary and post-primary sector in the Partnership Group

#### **Initiative Aim**

- To ascertain a need for an Athlone principals' forum

#### **Initiative Objectives**

- To provide information about the area of special needs

#### **Methods**

- Letter sent to all primary and post-primary principals outlining the purpose of meeting
- The Special Needs Organiser and a special needs support person presented information at the principals' meeting.

#### **Building Resilience**

- Promoting interaction between the Special Needs Organiser and schools

#### **Outcomes**

- The Principals appreciated the information about Special Needs, but it was decided not to establish a Forum

### **9.4 Conclusion**

The creation of four spin-off projects demonstrates how networking and exchange of information can inform the development of initiatives using existing resources within quite a short-time scale. These initiatives in some case

led to the identification of further need. Other agencies then carried out follow-up actions. Through the cyclical research action process it was also possible to identify where additional follow-up was not required.

## Chapter Ten Research Conclusion

### ***10.1 Introduction***

The EAR project as a one year action research project set-out with an overall research aim: *"to examine from a young person's perspective the experience of the transition from primary to post-primary"*. The research was progressed through two simultaneous Strands A and B. Strand A: the Transition Programme utilised a child-centred approach to guide 6<sup>th</sup> Class primary pupils to conduct their own piece of research into their own experience of the transition from primary to post-primary school. Strand A consisted of: 1) Phase One - primary level and 2) Phase Two - post-primary level.

Strand B involved the project manager networking with statutory and non-statutory service providers that worked with young people, families and communities in the Athlone area. The purpose of Strand B was to gather network contacts perceptions of: 1) the way their organisation currently contributed to the building of resilience; 2) to identify interactions which create resilience and 3) to identify areas of potential transformation and collaboration to respond to the child-centred needs identified through Strand A.

The research process produced significant amounts of information, which has been presented in the previous chapters. The following conclusions are based upon this research report and are presented under the following headings:

- Transition Programme
- The Transition from Primary to Post-primary School
- Building Resilience and Networking
- Conclusion

### ***10.2 The Transition Programme***

The volunteer researchers at primary level stated that by participating in the Transition Programme their confidence increased. As a result they were not afraid of going to post-primary school. At post-primary level the majority of volunteer researchers reiterate the benefits they believed they had obtained by participating in the programme. The volunteer researchers recommended that the Transition Programme should be offered to other young people. The parental, guardian and school perspectives reaffirmed this recommendation made by the volunteer researchers.

It is feasible to suggest that the Transition Programme did provide practical support to young people at the time of the transition. As a method of working with young people, the programme encouraged self-management of learning and it was evident that some participants had become adept at critical reflection. These skills can be applied in other contexts, including the post-primary school. The programme definitely illuminated the young people's concerns, issues and apprehensions regarding the transition experience at both primary and post-primary level.

Through the holistic approach the programme was able to identify the presence of individual resilience and risk factors in a young person's daily life.

This research does not claim that all young people who participate in the programme will make a positive transition and not experience settling-in difficulties. This would be unrealistic, especially when we consider the complex range of in and out of school factors, which impact upon the transition phase. One of the programme strengths is that it can identify young people who have not settled-in at post-primary school. The opportunity then exists to consider further options of supports with the young person and parents/guardians, if they wish. If appropriate, interventions can then be implemented which may potentially prevent the young person's situation from worsening.

### ***10.3 Transition from Primary to Post-primary School***

All five post-primary schools through the pre-entry stage of their transition programmes made visits to primary schools in the area. These visits provided information to potential new students about the post-primary school: the activities; subjects and what other services the school had to offer. As the first point of contact with potential new students, these visits are important in building trust of the post-primary school. However these visits were not designed to facilitated primary pupils to explore their own personal concerns and apprehensions about post-primary school in an in-depth way.

**Need to Belong** - This research revealed that at primary level the volunteer researchers were using sophisticated methods to commence the construction of ways to belong to the post-primary context. In contrast, the young person with concerns about his literacy levels was making decisions of how not to belong to the post-primary context. The main priority for the young people was to be socially accepted in their new school. The sense of belonging is particularly important for a young person's well-being and should not be under-estimated.

At the end of 6<sup>th</sup> Class, young people are aware that they no longer belong to the primary school. But they are also aware that they do not belong to the post-primary school. A sense of belonging for the majority of young people can be obtained through the family unit and/or through participation in out-of-school activities. However through the research it becomes apparent that some young people are not involved in any out-of-school activities. During the summer months they can become distanced from social contacts that once provide a strong sense of belonging at primary level i.e. the Church and After school facilities.

**Summer Holiday** - Essentially the summer holiday is a vulnerable time for some young people: 1) those young people who relied on the primary school context to provide a sense of belong; 2) young people with few sources of resilience and a presence of risk factors and 3) young people with low literacy levels who may experience a deterioration of their skills during the summer holiday. It is obvious that these young people would benefit from some support during the summer holidays to enhance their possibility of making a positive transition from primary to post-primary school. However from a child-centred perspective and adult perspective the research reveals existing

summer camp activities target younger children. There is a need to consider the development of summer activities for young people of 11-15 year of age (approximately).

**What Will the School Really be Like?**- At primary level the young people were concerned about the reality of the school day. By post-primary level the majority were able to negotiate the formal and informal culture of the school that they attended. A constructive criticism of a school induction day attended by some of the volunteer researchers was the perception of a lack of opportunity to ask their own questions. The school was informed of this observation. As a result the school stated it would consider incorporating different opportunities for students to ask questions in future induction days.

**Will I be Able to Learn?** - At primary level the volunteer researchers had significant concerns about homework and new subjects. At post-primary level the majority were satisfied with their choice of subjects. Generally, the young people were happy with their self-manage of homework tasks. However the length of time spent completing homework tasks varied considerably. From individual's completing homework in twenty minutes to other young people stating they could spend up to four hours on homework, if they had tests. Some young people's initial response of being happy with their self-managing of learning, changed at a later stage. They revealed that they were having difficulties with their homework. In some cases rather than telling the teacher that they did not understand, they would make excuses, saying they had lost their copies or left their at home.

It is debatable if some of these young people had chosen to affiliate themselves with non-learning peer groups within the school. Or the non-completion of homework would eventually lead to the young person becoming labelled as a non-learner by teachers. In the home context, some parents had concerns about the lack of time their child spent on homework. In other cases, parents felt that they did not possess the skills to assist their child in completion of homework tasks. Without creating the opportunity for the student, parent and school to consider why the homework is not being done. A possible eventuality is that the young person will fall behind his or hers peers. If this occurs, they might decide to give up and not bother trying to engage with learning.

**Special Needs and Learning Supports** - The child-centred approach revealed that young people are reluctant to reveal that they access learning supports. The literature review and analysis considered educational disadvantage policy and the provision of special needs and learning supports to young people, who are perceived to be "disadvantaged" or "less than" than their peers in some way, to remain in the existing education system. For a young person who is aware that supports are supplied in this way, they are taking a significant risk to reveal a need for learning support because it may affect the way their peers might view them, especially in a new context where social acceptance is the priority.

Primary and post-primary schools highlighted the lack of access to educational psychological assessments as an on-going issue. The actual extent of 6<sup>th</sup> Class primary pupils requiring assessments or re-assessment was unknown. The

Special Needs Survey was developed as a spin-off project to respond to this issue. This survey found that at the beginning of the academic year 2005/2006, a total of 38, 6<sup>th</sup> Class pupils were either presenting for assessment for the first time or waiting for re-assessment. These students were all transferring to Athlone post-primary schools. The schools viewed the provision of learning supports essential for students with special needs to settle-in and to engage with learning in the post-primary context.

By raising awareness within schools, families, communities and agencies that people have different learning styles, possess different aptitudes and need the opportunity to develop skills to self-manage their own learning. Eventually this approach should help counteract the existing negative perception of students with special needs. By promoting a positive perspective of different learning styles, a learning environment which is accepting of diversity would be created. Therefore young people might not be so reluctant to reveal their need for learning supports.

**Parental Involvement-** There was a mis-match between the child-centred and adult perspective regarding the involvement of parents/guardians. The volunteer researchers did not request at anytime a need for additional support from their parents. In contrast, the majority of adult respondents felt that parents should become more involved in the activities of their children.

On further investigation with parents and guardians, the majority felt that they participated in their children's school and other activities when they could. Generally, parents and guardians were happy with the supports they received from the schools i.e. HSCL, which they believed had improved in the recent past. Parents and guardians stated that they would approach their child's school immediately, if the need arose. As parents they were confident that the school would act on any requests that they made. The suggestion of a specific transition programme for parents was considered unnecessary.

It was recognised that some parents are not in a position to support their children in the same way as other parents. HSE family support workers outlined that in these families often the older children are taking on responsibilities with the household. It is by taking a strengths based approach that resilience factors can be introduced in the family setting, which has positive benefits for the children and the parents.

#### ***10.4 Building Resilience and Networking***

Through the exchange of information between Strand A and B it was possible to identify and respond to child-centred needs, with existing resources. This required collaboration between statutory and non-statutory services, schools, communities, parents and young people themselves (See previous chapter). Some of the spin-off projects acted as a catalyst, where further needs were identified and other agencies offered additional support.

The willingness of different groups to support the EAR Project demonstrated the interest that statutory and non-statutory services have in youth issues. A number of groups expressed interest in becoming involved in the development of further initiatives. It is evident that some organisations are flexible, adaptable and innovative in the way they are currently providing services. The awareness of Resilience Theory and a strength-based approach varied. From those who had no or a limited knowledge to those who possessed a full understanding and the theory underpinned their practice. One network contact who understood the theory chose not to support the approach. It is feasible to suggest that an opportunity exists to create conditions to support young people to make a positive transition from primary to post-primary school in the Athlone area.

The process of networking with schools, service providers, families and young people involves the exchange of information, which is a method of building resilience and social capital. When considering the development of child-centred initiatives, which build resilience, by being transparent, accepting of diversity, promoting equality and inclusion, it can promote a sense of ownership and belonging.

### ***10.5 Conclusion***

The EAR Project within one year has fulfilled the overall research aim and objectives. It is clear from the research that a complex range of in and out of school factors impact upon a young person's transition from primary to post-primary school. The young people who were involved in the research process have been generous with their opinions, views, needs, concerns and apprehensions. It is from their information that a range of child-centred needs have been identified.

To respond to these child-centred needs will require collaboration by statutory and non-statutory agencies, schools, communities, parents and young people themselves. To date all these parties have been more than willing to co-operate in the on-going process of the EAR Project. A number of spin-off projects were developed without the need for additional resources. Illustrating that by networking and sharing information resources and skills can be shared for the common good. However it is also important to acknowledge that some of the child-centred needs cannot be met with existing resources and will require additional financial support.

Resilience Theory states that resilience factors act accumulatively and in the opposite direction to risk factors. It is clear that when a holistic child-centred approach is promoted it can reveal the presence of resilience and risk factors in a young person daily life. By building sources of resilience at individual, family and community level that a young person can draw upon, potentially will assist them to become resilient. However through a child-centred approach it is equally important to ensure that impetus for change is on the adult and the systems around the young person.

# Chapter Eleven Research Recommendations

## 11.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines recommendations to inform the development of a three year action plan with the overall vision:

*"to create conditions to support young people to make a positive transition from primary to post-primary school"*

The recommendations are based on the extensive child-centred information documented in this report. The three central themes of: 1) the Need to Belong; 2) What Will the School Really be Like? and 3) Will I be Able to Learn? regarding the school context were relevant to all the young people who participated in this research. The whole child perspective illuminated additional factors beyond these three central themes. These factors were located in the family, the community and school. To respond to these child-centred identified needs, it necessary to create supports in and out of the school context. This will require the co-operation of statutory and non-statutory agencies, parents and guardians, schools and young people themselves.

The following core principles of practice ensure that partners who wish to collaborate in the development of any initiative are aware of the practice approach:

- **Child-centred approach**

All initiatives should commence with children's priorities. As young people they have the freedom of choice to participate and they agree to become partners in the initiative. Equality and respect is promoted and adults and children develop mutual responsibility for project outcomes.

- **Targeted**

Proposed initiatives can target communities or young people with the most need, but without re-enforcement of any negative labels that may already exist.

- **Reflective practice**

This is essential when seeking change and transformation. Therefore all individual initiatives will have set indicators and require evaluation. An overall independent evaluation will be required of the Action Plan in its entirety.

- **Resilience Building**

Each initiative is designed to create source of resilience at three levels; individual; family and community level.

- **Promoting Success**

Dissemination of information regarding initiatives that have been proven to be a good model of practice.

- **Collaboration**

The factors are complex which impact on the transition from primary to post-primary school and require an integrated response.



Support structures will be required to sustain the on-going development of the EAR Project and to assist with the long-term aims of the action plan: 1) to mainstream initiatives and 2) influence systemic change:

- Youth Forum
- Integrated Approach
- Networking
- PR/Media
- Spin-off Projects
- Initiatives

### ***11.2 Youth Forum***

The research demonstrated in Athlone, outside of the school context, few opportunities exist for young people to forward their opinions and views. Yet the National Children's Strategy states children "*will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given weight in accordance with their age and maturity*". To ensure child-centred practice informs the on-going development of the EAR project:

- It is recommended that the EAR Project takes an active role in the development of the Athlone Youth Forum.

### ***11.3 Integrated Approach***

As part of the action research a Partnership Group was established from representatives from both Strand A and B. This group actively supported the on-going development of the project throughout the research. As Partnership Group members they were able to provide feedback to their own organisation or group about research developments. The provision of this information could enable organisations or groups to consider their own practice and make amendments, if they chose.

- It is recommended that the existing Partnership Group is retained

### ***11.4 Networking***

Networking is a method of exchanging information, promoting trust and building relationships between schools, agencies, communities, families and young people. The more interactions that can be encouraged the greater the potential to create sources of resilience:

- The EAR Project will continue to network with schools, agencies, communities, families and young people for the duration of the three year action plan.

### ***11.5 PR/Media Strategy***

The EAR Project as a pilot initiative has received tremendous support from schools, agencies, organisations, parents and young people themselves. To maintain and gain support for the project and implementation of the Action Plan, a PR/Media strategy is vital. By informing schools, agencies, organisations, parents and young people of the initiatives

and (providing free choice to different stakeholders to take part or not where opportunities exists) illustrates the project is being transparent and adhering to its principle of equality.

### ***11.6 Spin-off Projects***

During the research project four spin-off projects were developed.

- Education Welfare Act Information Session
- Me, Myself I - arts projects
- Special Needs Survey
- Principals Forum

The first three initiatives listed led to further actions for other agencies and also informed the ongoing development of actions as part of the EAR project. The fourth spin-off project the principals' forum did not require further action:

- It is recommended that for the duration of the three-year action plan. If additional needs are identified, these will be considered. If a need can be matched with available resources a spin-off project will be developed.

### ***11.7 Initiatives***

The three year action plan is designed to offer continuity to young people during the transition phase. Initiatives are proposed for the primary level, summer break and post-primary level. These are listed below:

#### **11.7.1 Primary Level**

- Transition Programme
- Transition Programme Training for Facilitators
- Special Needs Initiative
- Sports and Education After School Programme (S.E.A.)

#### **11.7.2 Summer Break**

- Multi-dimensional Summer Camp
- Enhancement of Existing Summer Camps

#### **11.7.3 Post-Primary Level**

- Youth Event
- Study Skills Programme
- Connect Us - IT Pilot Initiative (link between Primary and post-primary)
- Web Information Regarding School Activities
- Advocacy/Mediation Service

### ***11.8 Conclusion***

If these research recommendations are implemented the framework of initiatives offers the opportunity to create conditions to support young people to make a positive transition from primary to post-primary school. This will be achieved by working directly with young people, parents and other adults. Training will be provided to agencies and organisation that wish to collaborate in any of the proposed initiatives. Training opportunities will be provided to agencies and organisations where the new knowledge can be applied to their own practice. To offer initiatives that can be delivered in primary and post-primary schools.

## Chapter Twelve Action Plan to Implement the Recommendation

### ***12.1 Introduction***

In this chapter a three year action plan, for the academic years 2005/2006; 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 is detailed for implementing this research report's recommendations. This plan is presented in five main sections:

- Integrated Approach
- PR/Media Strategy
- Primary Level
- Summer Break
- Post-primary Level

### ***12.2 Integrated Approach***

This section considers the structures and networks required to progress the on-going development of the EAR Project with the overall project vision:

*"to create conditions to support young people to make a positive transition from primary to post-primary school"*

**The Partnership Group** - The existing Partnership Group which comprises of representatives from schools, statutory and non-statutory service providers, and the Community and Voluntary Forum should be retained. This would provide support for implementation of the going development of the project. The Terms of Reference designed and agreed by the Partnership Group are:

- To assist and support the transition programme and spin-off initiatives
- To encourage support for the programme among agencies and other groups
- To supply information regarding the sector/agency current initiatives
- To supply information regarding the sector/agency proposed initiatives
- To take a proactive approach to influence legislation to correspond with identified needs for transformation
- To be committed to the processes of the partnership group

It is proposed that the Partnership Group will play a pivotal role in supporting the implementation of the three year action plan.

**Project manager** - A project manager will be required to facilitate and co-ordinate the Three Year Action Plan outlined in this research report.

**Networking** - To maintain relationships with network contacts is an essential method of exchanging information and building source of resilience. In addition networking is a method of identifying further agencies or services that may be willing to participate in additional specific initiatives, if a need emerges.

**Athlone Youth Forum** - For the one year duration of the EAR Project, the views and opinions of young people were ascertained from the volunteer researchers. The EAR Project will take an active role in the establishment of the Athlone Youth Forum. This should provide an opportunity for a wider cross section of young people to provide their views and opinions in matters that affect them.

The establishment of the Athlone Youth Forum provides a structure for young people, which can feed into the County Westmeath Youth Forum, when it is established. Subsequently information from the County Westmeath Youth Forum will be provided to the County Development Board.

### ***12.3 PR/Media Strategy***

The PR/Media strategy is vital to maintain an on-going support for the project. The dissemination of information is a method of promoting equality, social inclusion, building sources of resilience and sharing knowledge of methods that have proven to be good models of practice. This potentially provides other agencies with child-centred information to inform their own practice.

Each of the proposed initiatives will require PR materials depending upon the initiative, the type of action, the aim and objectives, the target group and the expected outcome of the measure will inform the choice of communication methods.

### ***12.4 Primary Level***

At primary level it is proposed to progress four initiatives for the 2005/2006, 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 academic years. However these proposed actions may be transformed depending upon the on-going collection of child-centred information, availability of resources and evaluation processes. The four proposed initiatives are shown below. The detail of each initiative is supplied in Tables 9 -12 (Page 136 and 137)

- Transition Programme - Going to Secondary?
- Transition Programme - Going to Secondary? - Training for Facilitators
- Special Needs Initiative
- Sports and Education After Schools Programme (S.E.A.)

<b>Table Nine: Transition Programme - Going to Secondary?</b>	
<b>Academic Years: 2005/2006; possibly 2006/2007 &amp; 2007/2008</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, family and community
Target Group	6 <sup>th</sup> Class Pupils
Purpose	To deliver Transition Programme with amendments To enable young people to participate and manage their own transition from primary to post-primary school
Duration	Four sessions - to be negotiated with the schools
Timing	Depending upon each of the schools which agrees to participate
Indicators	Provision of programme expanded to at least four Primary schools who agree to participate in the programme in 2005/2006 Depending on evaluation expand service to additional schools in 2006/2007
Recruitment of Participants	Schools in co-operation with EAR Project, Barnardos and MRYS
Required Resources	Photocopying of booklets, personnel to deliver the programme
Lead Agency	ACT - Educational Action Research Project, Barnardos, MRYS
Budget	Existing programme resources
Evaluation	External evaluator - call for tenders
Theory	The pilot has provided evidence that the Transition Programme facilitates young people to explore transition issues for themselves and manage their own transition. The young people who participated upon the project recommended that other young people should do the programme
Links to Mainstream	School Completion Programmes; ACT social inclusion targets; Barnardos strategy of working with children and families; MRYS services; The programme is under pinned by the "Whole Child Perspective" of the National Children's Strategy.

<b>Table Ten: Transition Programme - Going to Secondary? Training for Facilitators</b>	
<b>Academic Year: 2005/2006 possibly 2006/2007</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Community (Agencies)
Target Group	Workers from agencies who have agreed to facilitate delivery of the programme
Purpose	To ensure continuity of programme delivery in different schools by different agencies To promote quality of the programme
Duration	One day
Timing	Late February/Early March 2006
Indicators	Agencies who agree to delivery programme attend the training
Recruitment	ACT - EAR Project
Required Resources	Premises, Trainer - Project manager - EAR Project
Lead Agency	ACT - EAR Project
Budget	Existing Programme Resources
Evaluation	External Facilitator - from one of the agencies involved but not a participant upon the training programme
Theory	Different levels of awareness regarding resilience among Strand B - respondents To ensure Child-centred theory informs Child-centred practice to promote positive child-development outcomes
Links to Mainstream	Schools Completion Programmes; Programme can be incorporated in the CSPE strand of the curriculum; Builds relationships between agencies and schools to respond to the diverse needs of students.

<b>Table Eleven: Special Needs Initiative</b>	
<b>Academic Year: 2006/2007</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, family and community (schools)
Target Group	6 <sup>th</sup> Class Primary Pupils waiting for reassessment or presenting for educational psychological assessments for the first time. Parents/Guardians Schools
Purpose	To assist the most vulnerable families to access educational psychological assessments To quantify the level of additional supports accessed by supporting assessment The findings of this initiative to inform a submission to the DES regarding the allocation of resources for students with special needs.
Duration	Academic Year 2006/2007
Timing	To enable learning supports to be accessed for the 2007/2008 academic year for pupils entering post-primary school assessments need to be completed and submitted by March 2007.
Indicators	Based on previously completed survey figures - potentially 38 young people - but to gain support from this initiative particular criteria is required. This is to ensure the most vulnerable families are supported.
Recruitment	Schools and Special Needs Organiser
Required Resources	Educational Psychologist, Project Staff to form links with schools/parents
Lead Agency	National Council for Special Needs / ACT EAR Project
Budget	2005/2006 38 assessments @ €330 each = €12,540 2006/2007 38 assessment @ €340 each = €12,920 (allowing for inflation)
Evaluation	ACT - EAR Project
Theory	Young people who require supports fall behind rapidly in the post-primary context if learning supports are not in place when they arrive as first year students. Preventative measure against under achievement and early school leaving Assist students to engage with learning
Links to the Mainstream	NEWB policy to improve school retention; National Council for Special Education to provide supports for students with special needs; ACT social inclusion; School Completion Programmes

<b>Table Twelve: Sports and Education After Schools Programme (SEA)</b>	
<b>Academic Year: 2005/2006; 2006/2007 &amp; 2007/2008</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, families and communities
Target Group	6 <sup>th</sup> & 5 <sup>th</sup> Class Pupils attending after schools facilities
Purpose	To promote sport as part of a healthy life style To provide a positive experience of 3 <sup>rd</sup> Level Education for young people who may not view 3 <sup>rd</sup> level as an option for them selves To provide practical experience for 3 <sup>rd</sup> level students to work with young people and connect their practice to their own studies
Duration	Six week programme
Timescale	To be negotiated with after schools and AIT
Indicators	30 young people participate in the programme
Recruitment	After schools
Required Resources	Use of AIT facilities 3 <sup>rd</sup> level students to become programme mentors & participation of after schools
Lead Agency	AIT - After school Projects, ACT -EAR Project and Westmeath Sports Partnership
Budget	Funding Application has been submitted to Westmeath Sports Partnership
Evaluation	Feedback from participants, programme mentors , AIT access officer, etc
Theory	Sport does not need to be competitive and being active is part of a healthy life style Exposure to 3 <sup>rd</sup> Level through fun activities illustrates college is for everyone
Links to Mainstream	National Health Strategy. Higher Education Authorities Equity of Access to Third Level, Westmeath Sports Partnership, ACT promoting social inclusion

## 12.5 Summer Break

The research revealed that the summer break is a time when young people become distanced from sources of resilience. Some young people have few opportunities to practice literacy and numeracy skills or to socially interact. It is proposed to develop three initiatives as shown below. The detail of each initiative is supplied in Tables 13-15 (Page 138 and 139).

- Multi-dimensional summer camp - Connected?
- Meeting among youth worker providers to progress the Multi-dimensional summer camp
- A one day workshop for summer camp providers to enhance existing summer camp activities

<b>Table Thirteen: Multi-dimensional Summer Camp: Connected?</b>	
<b>Academic Year: 2005/2006, 2006/2007 &amp; 2007/2008</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, family and community
Target Group	12 - 15 year olds with limited access to summer activities (6 <sup>th</sup> Class Primary and 1 <sup>st</sup> Years post-primary )
Purpose	To provide opportunities for social interaction To encourage the use of literacy and numeracy skills during summer break To encourage skills for self-care into adulthood To provide skills to consider future options of employment To provide a link between June and September To produce pieces of work which can be celebrated with parents/guardians etc
Duration	2 days per week from June to August (depending upon the lead agency)
Timing	Planning April 2006
Indicators	To be agreed
Recruitment	Youth services, family support workers, posters, school circulars etc
Required Resources	Premises to be provided by lead agencies Tutors possible cool dude programme, sports coaches, etc
Lead Agency	To be agreed
Budget	To be agreed
Evaluation	To be agreed
Theory	Lack of supports for young people - provides a connection with vulnerable young people at risk of not making the transition to Post-primary
Links to Mainstream	Whole Child-perspective informing programme plan contributing to the National Children's Strategy. ACT working towards strategic aim of supporting young people to make a positive transition to working life. School Completion Programmes. MRYS strategy. ACSC strategy.



<b>Table Fourteen: Meeting of Youth Service Providers to progress agreement regarding summer camps Academic Years: 2005/2006; 2006/2007 and 2007/2008</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Community
Target Group	Potential Service Providers
Purpose	To agree progression of the proposed Multi-dimensional Summer Camp To annually review programme
Duration	1 afternoon
Timing	Planning February Reviews September
Indicators	Attendance of Youth Service Providers
Recruitment	Partnership Group
Required Resources	Premises - ACT
Lead Agency	ACT
Budget	Minimal
Evaluation	Outcome that an agreement is made
Theory	Lack of supports for young people - provides a connection with vulnerable young people at risk of not making a positive transition programme
Links to Mainstream	National Children's Strategy as a framework outlines the need for collaboration and interagency co-operation

<b>Table Fifteen: Enhancement of Existing Summer Camp Provision Academic Year: 2005/2006</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Community -Individuals and Families
Target Group	Youth Leaders and Providers existing summer camps
Purpose	One day workshop to up skill youth leaders and providers to enable them to enhance existing summer camp activities to encourage young people to practice literacy and numeracy skills
Duration	One Day
Timing	Planning February/March Delivery of workshop April
Indicators	Two or more organisation incorporate methods into exiting programmes
Recruitment	Partnership Group, letters, posters, existing network contacts
Required Resources	Premises possibly the youth service, ACT or other facility
Lead Agency	NALA for planning and advise VEC Family Literacy supports ACT - Educational Action Research Project
Budget	Minimal fee to cover expenses of the day
Evaluation	Feedback sheet at end of workshop Follow-up with providers after completion of summer camps Outcome of evaluation will inform the action for the following academic year
Theory	Hiatus or decline in skills during summer holidays, due to lack of opportunities to practice literacy and numeracy skills
Links to Mainstream	NALA strategy; NEWB, Youth Work Organisations, ACT, After school facilities

## 12.6 Post-primary Level

At Post-primary level it is proposed to develop the following five initiatives;

- Youth Event
- Web information regarding School Activities
- Study Skills Programme
- An Advocacy/Mentoring Programme
- Connect Us - IT Pilot Project

The youth event; the web information and the study skills programme will be progressed in the academic year 2005/2006.

It is proposed to investigate existing models of advocacy or mentoring programmes in the academic year 2005/2006. Subsequently the implementation of a suitable model for the Athlone context will be progressed in the academic year 2006/2007 as a pilot.

The Connect Us - IT Pilot Project will be promoted in the academic year 2006/2007. Details of each of the post-primary level initiatives are supplied in Tables 16 -20 (Pages 140, 141 and 142).

<b>Table Sixteen: Youth Event Academic Year: 2005/2006</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, Family and Community
Target Groups	Young People, Families and Agencies
Purpose	To highlight the range of services that are available to young people and families in the Athlone area To create links between service providers and young people To create links between different service providers
Duration	Once off event
Timescale	December 2005
Indicators	Attendance of service providers
Recruitment	Youth Organisations/Schools
Required Resources	Premises
Lead Agency	ACT - Educational Action Research Project
Budget:	Costs of stands to be covered by individual exhibitors
Evaluation	Feedback from exhibitors
Theory	Research revealed some young people do not access any out of school youth activities. Therefore indicating that some young people have limited sources of resilience to draw upon. This becomes particularly relevant if there are also a range of risk factors present in a young person daily life
Links to research	Involvement in youth activities is seen to meet developmental needs of young people - National Youth Plan

<b>Table Seventeen: Web information Regarding School Activities Academic Year 2005/2006; 2006/2007; 2007/2008</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, families and Communities
Target Group	Primary Students Post-primary Students Family information
Purpose	To provide up to date information about school sporting fixtures and other school activities Provides an insight into the reality of school activities
Duration	On going
Timing	First Entry to be negotiated with schools
Indicators	Information is supplied by schools
Recruitment	ACT -the Educational Action Research Project to liaise with schools initially
Required Resources	Schools to provide information
Lead Agency	Athlone.ie
Budget	Athlone.ie role of information officer
Evaluation	Web survey-
Theory	Information sharing and networking promotes the promotion of social capital The usage of IT technologies promotes social inclusion
Links	IT use on school curriculum - National Children's Strategy highlights the need to promote usage of IT

<b>Table Eighteen: Study Skills Programme Academic Year 2006/2007</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, Family and Community
Target Group	First Year Post-primary Students - who have been identified by school or parents as not settling in or having difficulties managing homework
Purpose	To provide out of school study motivation To encourage self-management of school day To encourage self-management of homework To increase opportunities to socially interact in small groups
Duration	Four weeks - two evenings a week (5.00 - 6.00 approximately)
Timescale	Programme Preparation - May Programme delivery October/November 2006
Indicators	10 - 15 participants
Recruitment	Schools, Families, Family Support Services, Barnardos Partnership group
Required Resources	Premises, Staff, educational psychologist, course materials e.g. examples of marked assignments indicating different grades and why
Lead Agency	To be agreed
Budget	Depending upon availability of Educational Psychologist
Evaluation	End of programme Feedback from schools about students homework and self-management of the day
Theory	Motivation required in and out of the school context to engage in learning
Links	NEWB, school retention policies, ACT, HSE Family Support workers

<b>Table Nineteen: Connect Us - ICT Project Pilot Initiative</b> <b>Academic Year; 2006/2007 &amp; 2007/2008</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, community (School)
Target Group	Post-primary students (possibly media transition project) and 6 <sup>th</sup> Class primary pupils about to make the transition
Purpose	To create an opportunity for 6 <sup>th</sup> Class pupils to gain an insight into the post-primary school to which they are transferring to Increase social (virtual) interaction to promote a sense of belonging to the school To build links between the primary and post-primary school To increase usage of IT
Duration	To be negotiated with the schools - pre-designed course by the Educational Action Research Project or Students as Transition Students
Timescale	Depending upon schools
Indicators	1 post-primary school and 3 primary schools
Recruitment	EAR Project
Required Resources	Access to computers in school with e-mail facilities & IT instructor (Schools or the Project manager) Task Sheets
Lead Agency	Schools
Budget	Role of Project manager
Evaluation	Participants upon the programme
Theory	An insight to the reality of the school provides opportunities for students to gain a trust of the system Promotes a sense of belonging prior to entry
Links	National Children's Strategy identified the need to promote the use of IT skills as a social inclusion tool

<b>Table Twenty: An Advocacy/Mediation Service - Further Investigation</b> <b>Academic Year 2005/2006 Possible pilot project 2006/2007</b>	
Resilience Delivery Level	Individual, Family and Community
Target Group	First Year Post-primary Students - who have been identified by the transition programme, school or parents as not settling in or having difficulties.
Purpose	To provide a support for young people at risk of becoming early school leavers To provide a space to identify what it is they really need. To have an advocate who can provide this information to the relevant people, be that the school or parents etc
Duration	Academic Year 2006/2007
Timescale	Further Investigation March 2006 Planning April/May 2006 Funding Application Depending upon deadline and potential sources of funding
Indicators	Young people identified as in difficulty are referred to advocacy service
Recruitment	
Required Resources	
Lead Agency	
Budget	To be decided
Evaluation	To be decided
Theory	Young people are often in situations where they may be in difficulty, but they are also aware of a power imbalance. The provision of an advocacy service provides the opportunity for young people to "name" their main issues - in or out of school issues. Child-centred decisions inform the follow up sections.

Links	Lack of services to support young people with emotional and behavioural issues.
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## APPENDICES

## ***Appendix One: Consent Letter***

### **Moving from National School to Secondary School**

For young people, the transition from national to secondary school witnesses a number of dramatic changes in a relatively short period of time. The familiar surroundings of the national school are left behind; often childhood friendships are replaced by the need to find new friends in secondary school. All this coincides with the development of the young person from a child to becoming an adolescent.

It is proposed to deliver a six session programme through the School. This programme works with young people, so they can tell their own story of the transition from National School to Secondary School. The young person becomes a "researcher" by asking questions of teachers in National and Secondary School, parents, brother and/or sister and friends.

This information will be kept in a project folder as a record of what they expect of secondary school. What they think will help them to adjust to secondary school life. The project will be presented at a short social function.

The follow-up in Secondary School, involves the project co-ordinator Sheila McArdle, speaking to the young people, to find out how the transition went. How are they settling into their new school? Young people will be asked who else was involved in the transition, e.g. teachers; parents etc these people will also be approached to give their opinions about the young person's transition from National to Secondary School.

The information gathered from the young people's projects and the follow-up in Secondary school will be presented as a book, with suggestions to develop services in the Athlone area for young people. The name or title of the book will be taken from one of the young people's projects.

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#### Consent Form

I do agree for my child (name of child) \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the transition programme outlined above. I understand as part of the project as a parent/guardian I may be asked to provide my own opinions and views.

Parent/guardian signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact No \_\_\_\_\_

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## *Appendix Two: Research Rights of Volunteer researchers*

### Your Rights as a Volunteer Researcher

- Individual Confidentiality - personal files are your own
- The purpose of the research is to promote your well-being
- The research should be enjoyable
- Your project will assist schools, parents, and others to learn about the needs of young people
- An opportunity for you to contribute ideas to the research
- It is your choice to participate or not



### Appendix Three: Transition Programme

Sample of session plan for session one and two

Session One					
Time	Activity	Resources & materials	Methods	Aims	Potential Outcomes
5 min	Icebreaker - name and word	Labels Pens	Interaction between project manager/ respondents and teacher/class assistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To commence building relationships between project manager and volunteer researchers</li> <li>To provide an opportunity to be express a positive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fun experience - to commence</li> <li>Initiates interest as unexpected activity</li> </ul>
10 min	Form Project Teams	White board/flipchart/ markers	Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Young people to develop negotiating skills</li> <li>Provides opportunity for young person to gain ownership of the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing new skills</li> <li>Young people are part of the decision-making process from the beginning</li> <li>Sense of ownership promoted</li> </ul>
10 min	Outline Project Purpose	Handouts Ethics Agreements	Interaction between groups and project manager/classroom assistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To set overall task/goal of the research project that the young people are involved in as researchers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A picture of the project is formed among respondents</li> <li>Inform further design of group task</li> </ul>
25 min	Expectations, Challenges Opportunities Not so sure of..	Envelope - key words e.g. excited, happy, sad, nervous, future, job, subjects etc Flipchart Sellotape etc	Group Work Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To generate "feeling" as a starting point for the participants to commence the research</li> <li>Researcher can observe group dynamics to inform further interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial Expectation, challenges etc gathered</li> <li>Group roles identified</li> <li>Facilitates pupils to discuss their transfer as a group to generate ideas for individual projects</li> </ul>
10 min	Feedback	Group feedback Handout with key words and grid for individual task for project file - homework complete individual grid	Discussion between researcher and volunteer researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To facilitate different learning styles through discussion</li> <li>To reaffirm the value of the volunteer researcher opinions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feedback completes kolbs cycle of learning</li> </ul>



Session Two					
Time Mins	Activity	Resources & materials	Methods	Aims	Potential Outcomes
5	Re-connect - Name a good thing.....	Researcher, volunteer researcher and teachers	Whole Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To introduce group work methods at the centre</li> </ul>	Continues to build relationships with the participants
10	Don't like or like  Research Handouts	Signs don't like and like  Predetermined questions regarding research ethics  Pre-prepared handout with research ethics	Questions - walk to sign - questions  Ask volunteer researchers why they chose that particular sign  Talk through handout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To introduce the topic of research ethics in an interactive way</li> <li>Facilitates volunteer researchers to answer and ask questions</li> <li>Enables researcher to gain an insight into the opinions of volunteer researchers</li> <li>Reinforces the importance of research ethics</li> <li>To promote empathy among the researchers by relating to personal experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants consider ethics of research</li> <li>Development of negotiation skills</li> <li>Facilitates verbal exchange of ideas</li> <li>Relate personal feelings to research process</li> <li>Promote empathy</li> </ul>
5	Preparing ethics points	Flipchart paper - coloured markers	Researcher compiles a list - (Typed up by researcher for project file)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To agree an ethics framework for the research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ethics Framework is agreed</li> </ul>
20	What do we want to find out?	Preamble provided by Researcher - relates to previous weeks activity - expectations, challenges etc	Group discussion Young people through group discussion generate core research questions and collage Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To ensure all projects have core information</li> <li>Facilitates young people to design the research to meet their own specific concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitates different learning styles</li> <li>Empowers young people to control the direction of the project</li> <li>Includes all young people in the process</li> </ul>
10	Pilot project				
10	Closure - game	Chinese whispers	Commence whisper	To wind down the session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Session Closed on a positive</li> </ul>

**Appendix Four: Individual Base-line Record Sheets**

Participant Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Category	Information revealed	Researchers Notes
School	Quiet in school – led by others in core group  Identified 5 school friends	
Household Unit	Mum –Dad Siblings Older sibling suspended from school	
Other Family	10 7 females 3 males	
Youth Activities	Football Club Gaelic	
Formal Services	“Faith Friends”	
Neighbours/friends	Young people both male and female	
Transition Sessions Attended	1 – 2 – 3 -4 –X- 6	

### **Appendix Five: Sample of Transcript**

(Example taken from Session One: refers to group exercise to explore 1) expectations; 2) feelings; 3) sure of and 4) not so sure of)

Code	Transcription	Researchers Notes	Comments
R	Who are you?		
P	I'm C		
R	Okay C		
PC	My brothers and sisters in family.		
R	Why you have put them there		
PC	I know I can trust them.		
R	You have learning and clubs there, why is that ?		
PC	I know I can learn in secondary school.		
R	I know I can learn in secondary school okay and what about Clubs, why have you clubs there - are there clubs in Secondary school		
PC	I can make friends through them		
R	Are there clubs in secondary school		
PC	I'm not sure		
R	Are there clubs in secondary school		
Pg	Yes		
R	Who is next in the group ?		
P	O		
R	Ok what box are you doing, pet?		
P	I feel		
R	Okay what do you feel?		
PO	anxious, good, delighted, happy, nervous, excited ....		
R	Can you explain? There appears to be quite a lot of different emotions in there? You're excited and nervous at the same time about going to secondary school?		
PO	Yeah, Some people might like it , but other might be nervous as well		
R	Okay yeah. You're also feeling good about it as well. Why are you feeling good about it?		
PO	I moving on from primary school and I'm getting a bit older		
R	You've had enough of primary school alright then ( laughs) - okay		
R	Who is left An? What are you going to do An?		
Pan	Stuff I expect		

### **Appendix Six: Good Luck Letter**

Thursday, 25 August 2005

Dear

Hope you had a lovely summer and are now all set for your new adventure into secondary school.

I am sure you will enjoy it and all the experiences it brings.

Best of luck and looking forward to talking to you later in the year.

Regards.

---

Sheila McArdle

## ***Appendix Seven: Partnership Group***

Eamonn Farrell	Midlands HSE Family Support Manager
Patricia Spollen	Special Needs Organiser - National Council for Special Needs
Linda Jo Quinn	Community Development Officer, Athlone Community Taskforce
Joyce Furlong	Youth Development Officer, Athlone Community Services Council
Caroline Lambden	Athlone School Retention Initiative
Antoinette Hynes	HSCL, St. Joseph's School, Summer Hill, Athlone
Jim Belton	HSCL. St. Aloysius, Athlone
Mary Kilmartin	Community Representative, Athlone Community and Voluntary Forum
Joanne O'Connor	Midland Regional Youth Services
Sheila McArdle	Project manager, Educational Action Research Project, ACT
Parent Representative	Vacant

## Appendix Eight: Conference Attendance

Name	Organisation
CEO	ACT
Jobs Club	ACT
Co-ordinator	ACT After Schools Co-ordinator
Board Member	ACT Board
Chairperson	ACT Board
CEO	Aontacht Phobail Teoranta
Project Manager	Athlone Childminding Initiative
Acting Vice Principal	Athlone Community College
Youth Development Officer	Athlone Community Services Council
Family Support worker	Barnardos
Family Support Worker	Barnardos
Midlands Regional Office	Department of Education and Science
NEPS	Department of Education and Science
NEPS	Department of Education and Science
Primary School Inspector	Department of Education and Science
Visiting Teacher for Travellers	Department of Education and Science
Social Work Team Leader	Department, HSE Midlands
Aidan Waterstone	Director of Child Service, HSE Midlands
Manager	Dr. Stevens Centre
Educational Welfare Officer (Athlone Based)	Education Welfare Officer (Athlone based)
Co-ordinator	Equality for Women Measure
Regional Development Officer	Foroige
Project Manager	Health Eating Project
HSCL	HSCL St. Aloysius College
HSCL	HSCL, St Joseph's
Health Promotion Unit	HSE Midlands
Manager of Family Support Services	HSE Midlands
Youth worker	Midlands Regional Youth Service
CEO	Midlands Regional Youth Service
Education Welfare Officer (Tullamore Based)	National Education Welfare Board
Representative	New Horizons
Project Worker	Open Door
The Linkage Programme	Probation and Welfare Service
Co-ordinator	RAPID
Principal	St Aloysius College
First Year Head	St. Aloysius College
Representative	St. Vincent de Paul
Representative	St. Vincent de Paul
Project Manager	The Educational Action Research Project
Bruce Irvine	The Grubb Institute
Colin Quine	The Grubb Institute
Jean Reed	The Grubb Institute
First Year Head	The Marist College
Representative	Tonnta
Project Manager	Training for Employment
Family Literacy Co-ordinator	VEC
Manager	VTOS
Co-ordinator	Westmeath County Childcare Committee
Development Officer	Westmeath County Childcare Committee
Administrative Officer C & E	Westmeath County Council
Fr Gearoid	

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