



FINDING IT HARDER: INSIGHTS INTO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN IRELAND

Steven Byrne¹ⁱ,

Joseph Haugh²

¹Assistant Professor,
School of Nursing and Midwifery/
School of Allied Health,
University of Limerick,
Ireland

²Social Care Worker,
Galtee Clinic,
Ballyporeen, Tipperary,
Ireland

Abstract:

Early school leaving can have a profound impact on the life opportunities of those who leave the education system prematurely. This paper investigates early school leaving through the perspectives of individuals in Limerick, Ireland, who exited the mainstream education system prior to completing the Junior Certificate. Framed within Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, the study examines how the interplay of economic, social and cultural capital shapes students' educational experiences and influences their disengagement from formal schooling. Data were gathered through conducting six semi-structured in-depth interviews (N=6) with residents of Limerick City. The interviews were analysed via thematic analysis and the results point toward the importance of the various forms of capital in shaping the early school leaving patterns of the research participants. Two themes emerge in the informants' discussion: 'A Precarious Milieu: Economic Capital and Educational Disadvantage' and 'On the Margins: The Role of Cultural and Social Capital'. The respondents' comments indicate that, when it came to early school leaving, the factors were multifarious and caused, in part, by poverty and social exclusion. This study suggests that a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of early school leaving in Ireland may be facilitated by qualitative approaches, specifically informed by young people who have first-hand experience of early disengagement from the education system.

Keywords: Limerick; early school leaving; capital; social exclusion

ⁱ Correspondence: email steven.byrne@ul.ie

1. Introduction

Early school leaving (henceforth ESL) has been recognised as one of the main challenges to be addressed by European societies (Araújo, Macedo, Santos, & Doroftei, 2019). Each year, too many young people who are poorly equipped for life and labour drop out of European education and training systems (OECD, 2014). ESL is understood to arise from a range of variables, events and interactions, which combine to create a situation where a young person feels unwelcome or alienated in school, or sees no future in the education system (Downes & Maunsell, 2007; González-Rodríguez, Vieira, & Vidal, 2019). The phenomenon of ESL is worrying, not only for its high economic costs in terms of wasted skills but also because it can exacerbate social inequalities (Fan & Wolters, 2014).

The literature illustrates that exclusion from educational attainment for young people is enmeshed in a spiral of negative outcomes. These can include health problems, criminal activity, lower wages, lower job quality, employment instability and a dependency on public assistance programs (Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Borgna & Struffolino, 2017). Thus, ESL is a direct threat to the life chances of those who are affected (Fernández-Macías, Antón, Braña, & De Bustillo, 2013). Education can positively impact on health longevity, quality of life and economic, cultural and social capital development (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Conti, Heckman, & Urzúa, 2010). The overall objective of the present study, therefore, was to explore the reasons that contribute to young people leaving the mainstream education system before the completion of their Junior Certificate from an Irish perspective, with a specific focus on the city of Limerick.¹

Terms used internationally for early school leavers include ease-out, fade-out, opt-out, pull-out and push-out (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). As such, for our purposes here, there is a need to qualify the term 'early school leaving' as it is used in this article. ESL is defined as exiting full-time post-primary education before completing the Junior Certificate examination. Thus, when presenting the results of our study, we use the term early school leaver.

While ESL has been extensively researched, this work has mainly concentrated on those leaving school after the completion of their Junior Certificate (Doyle & Keane, 2019). We know less about the views of young people who left second-level education before completing their Junior Certificate. As such, we explore the experiences of early school leavers as this group's voices are either not elicited or 'have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (Foucault, 1980, p. 82). Adding to this, Limerick is a setting in which limited academic attention has been granted in the field of ESL (see e.g., Blackett, 2016). Therefore, this article reports on the results of six semi-structured interviews (N=6) that we conducted with early school leavers in the city of Limerick. The data, as we shall describe, suggests that when it comes to ESL the reasons and motivations are diverse, complex and multifaceted.

We analyse the respondents' comments through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of capital, which serves as a powerful framework for uncovering hidden relationships of culture, power, stratification and marginalisation (Gilleard, 2020). Before describing the

study and the results, we begin with a brief overview of the research context, namely, Limerick City. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The methodology is then outlined, after which the empirical data is presented and analysed in relation to the existing literature. The conclusion combines the findings of this research to the relevant work on ESL in Ireland and further afield. Finally, the paper offers suggestions for future research.

1.1 Ireland, Limerick and ESL

Similar to other Western societies, ESL in Ireland poses a myriad of major challenges for young people. However, according to Byrne and Smyth (2010a), Ireland is found to have lower rates of ESL than the average for the EU 27 countries, occupying an intermediate position alongside France and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, ESL rates in Ireland remain significantly higher than in the Nordic Countries (Eurostat, 2023b).

The consequences for ESL in Ireland demonstrate the same patterns as they do internationally, as those who leave the education system prematurely are at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than their peers and are confronted with limited opportunities to develop culturally, personally and socially (Leahy, Murphy, Mallo, & Healy, 2012). From an Irish perspective, ESL exerts substantial costs not only on the individual but also on wider society (Freeney & O'Connell, 2012). Approximately 3% of young people leave school before completing the Junior Certificate each year, with the completion rate now at 96.7% (Department of Education & Skills (DES), 2017; Eurostat, 2023a). While ESL has been extensively researched internationally, we know less about the views of young people who left school early in the Irish context (Frawley, 2014; Fleming & Harford, 2023). As such, this research sets out to take into account the voices of members of communities that have often been excluded from participation in public discourses.

Although Limerick is the third-largest city in the Republic of Ireland, it is quite small in international terms and has been labelled 'a peripheral city' (Power, Haynes, Devereux, & Barnes, 2018). The city is located in the Mid-West region of Ireland and, according to the 2022 census, has a population of 102,287 (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2025). With a high level of segregation based on social class, Limerick has been labelled the most economically polarised city in the Republic of Ireland (Walsh, 2023). In addition, media portrayals have consistently pathologised certain areas of the city and their residents (Devereux, Haynes, & Power, 2011; Power, Haynes, & Devereux, 2021). Even during Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' years, economic development in the city lagged behind the rest of the country (Stevenson, McNamara, & Muldoon, 2014). Within the most marginalised areas, employment and levels of health are well below national averages, with high levels of violent crime and mental health issues (Bradshaw, Jay, McNamara, Stevenson, & Muldoon, 2016).

In terms of educational attainment, 14% of the population of the city has just primary or no education (CSO, 2025). Adding to this, the rates of ESL in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the city can be as high as 55%. This social exclusion has wide-ranging negative impacts on the young people growing up in these marginalised areas

(McCafferty, 2014). Considering this, Limerick was selected for this research as the impact of early school disengagement on a subjective level has been granted limited academic attention (see e.g., Blackett, 2016). Building on the work of Nairz-Wirth and Gitschthaler (2020) in Austria and Panagiotis (2024) in Greece, this study adopts a Bourdieusian lens to better understand the phenomenon of ESL in Limerick.

2. Theoretical Framework

As put forth by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986), the general term 'capital' refers to resources that actors use to pursue their interests and to position themselves. Adding to this, Bourdieu's long-time colleague, Loïc Wacquant maintains that '[f]or Bourdieu, a capital is any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it' (Wacquant, 1998, p. 223). Bourdieu (1986) distinguished between three forms of capital to determine an individual's position in social space: economic (e.g., money, real estate, securities), social (e.g., beneficial relationships) and cultural capital (e.g., diction, lifestyle, academic qualifications, books) (Nairz-Wirth & Gitschthaler, 2020). The value afforded to these three forms of capital is one's symbolic capital or 'meta-capital', which shapes an individual's position in a specific social space (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). We chose this lens to examine our data because, as Roth (2013) states, it is widely accepted that endowment with different forms of capital influences educational success. As such, Bourdieu's theory of capital offers a powerful lens for understanding how the unequal distribution of economic, cultural and social resources shapes educational outcomes.

According to Bourdieu (1986), economic capital is the most material type of capital. Bourdieu sees economic capital as the 'root' of all other forms of capital. From this perspective, all other forms of capital are 'transformed, disguised forms of economic capital' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 252). Møllegaard and Jæger (2015) maintain that economic capital may be used to finance the direct costs of education, for example, tuition fees, or indirect costs such as those associated with housing or extracurricular activities. Consequently, it is parents who possess sufficient financial resources that can provide their children with the necessary material goods that they require in order to perform well in school, for example, books or additional tutoring (Traag & van der Velden, 2011; von Stumm, Cave, & Wakeling, 2022).

In addition to economic capital, Bourdieu also recognises the importance of social capital. This form of capital is conceptualised as the actual or potential resources associated with 'a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Social capital is generated through social processes between the family and wider society and is made up of social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital can comprise actual and potential resources that are embedded in and accessed within and across formal and informal social relationships with individuals, communities and institutions (Hawkins & Maurer, 2012b). For instance, low levels of social capital within disadvantaged communities are often reflected in

weaker and fewer interpersonal networks, which can contribute to ESL – particularly in contexts where social connectedness and trust are essential for educational engagement (Apfeld, Coman, Gerring, & Jessee, 2022). As such, social capital is clearly recognised as a distinctive resource together with financial capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital, as conceptualised by Bourdieu, is arguably the most innovative component of his theorisation of the forms of capital and equates primarily with education (Gilleard, 2020). Bourdieu defines cultural capital as ‘instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 488). Cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied as a disposition of the mind and body; objectified as cultural goods; and in its institutionalised state, such as educational qualifications. Cultural capital has been described as an ‘academic standard, a class attribute, a basis for social selection, and a resource for power which is salient as an indicator/basis of class position’ (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 156). Bourdieu (1974) conceptualises cultural capital as comprising acquired cognitive schemata, behavioural dispositions and familial attitudes toward education—essentially, the internalisation of social class values. Schools trade in the dominant cultural capital and young people with access to such cultural capital do well in school (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). For example, children of parents with high levels of cultural capital are able to adjust better to the dominant culture in schools than children of parents with less cultural capital (de Graaf & de Graaf, 2002; Giavrimis, 2022).

To conclude, ESL not only has severe consequences for the life course of individuals but also for society as a whole (Traag & van der Velden, 2011). Within this context, we sought to examine the factors that led informants to disengage from the mainstream education system before completing the Junior Certificate, employing Bourdieu’s conceptual framework of economic, social and cultural capital as an analytical lens. By adopting this approach, we aim to deepen our understanding of the processes and mechanisms associated with class reproduction both within and outside the education system in Limerick City. Using a qualitative approach, we aimed to explore the interface between respondents’ educational experiences and the circumstances that led them to leave mainstream education.

3. Methodology

Following similar research in this field (see e.g., Nairz-Wirth & Gitschthaler, 2020; Bitsakos, 2021), we chose to employ a qualitative methodology. This research was not only concerned with the experiences of the participants but also with the subjective meanings that these experiences have for them (Flick, 2018). Thus, through employing this qualitative approach, we aimed to go beyond simple description and examine complex and subtle phenomena (Denscombe, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collate the data. The semi-structured interview has been described as a method of data collection that aims to cover a specific list of topic areas, with the time allocated to each topic being left to the discretion of the interviewer. This open structure ensures that unexpected issues can be easily explored in

an informal and flexible manner (Galletta, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were considered especially beneficial given our interest in ESL because they facilitate a much more in-depth exploration than quantitative methods. In addition, participating in a semi-structured interview may lead informants to speak frankly and openly on a sensitive and personal topic to someone outside of their immediate social circle (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were utilised, as they can provide insight into the underpinnings of personal decisions individuals make (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). As such, semi-structured interviews enabled us to investigate the reflections and opinions of young people about their experiences prior to the school-leaving decision.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who left the mainstream school system in the Limerick City area before completing their Junior Certificate between 1995 and 2005. Early school leavers constitute something of a hidden population or have a 'low social visibility' (Dyson, Meagher, & Robson, 2002). Therefore, we adopted a purposive sampling strategy. Most qualitative research is guided by purposive sampling, with the sample chosen to provide conceptual richness (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). This approach enabled us to select informants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation, thereby serving as information-rich cases for the study (Flick, 2018).

Recruitment procedures involved contacting a Youth Encounter Programme (YEP) in Limerick via email.² Six participants agreed to contribute to the research: three males and three females. While the sample is small, this aligns with qualitative research principles in which sample size is shaped by the study aims and participant homogeneity as well as the depth of insight sought, rather than fixed numerical rules (Sharma et al., 2024). Moreover, we did not rely on traditional notions of 'saturation', which have been critiqued in several strands of qualitative inquiry (see e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2021; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Instead, following Malterud et al. (2016), we allowed the richness and strength of the dialogue to guide decisions about when to halt recruitment. Finally, given that the group constitutes a 'hard-to-reach' population (Brown et al., 2019), a sample of six participants was considered both appropriate and realistic.

Participants in the study were relatively homogenous in terms of age and ethnicity, with most identifying as White Irish and being in their mid to late twenties. One participant identified as an Irish Traveller. While the group shared broadly similar demographic characteristics, there was a slight divergence in cultural capital—particularly in educational attainment and educational experiences. Additional demographic details are provided in Table 1 below. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and July 2016. These took place at the offices of a local Youth Encounter Project (YEP) in Limerick. Each interview lasted approximately 65 minutes on average.

Table 1: Details of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	School Leaving Age	Reason for Leaving Education	Employment Status (at time of interview)	Highest Qualification Obtained	Future Aspirations
Conor	Male	White Irish	15	Breakdown in relationship with teachers	Full-time employment	Honours Bachelor's Degree (Level 8)	Continue to work full-time
Ciara	Female	White Irish	8	Impact of parental separation	Unemployed	Junior Certificate via Youth Encounter Programme	Find employment
Ryan	Male	White Irish	12	Unable to secure a place in second level education	Full-time employment	Ordinary Bachelor's Degree (Level 7)	Continue to work in education
Sarah	Female	White Irish	14	Struggled to adapt to the school environment	Part-time employment	Leaving Certificate via Youth Encounter Programme	Find full-time employment
Kate	Female	White Irish	11	Struggled to adapt to the school environment	Unemployed	Junior Certificate via Youthreach Programme ³	Find employment
Christy	Male	Irish Traveller	15	Felt like an outsider due to ethnic background	Employed (outside of Ireland)	Junior Certificate via Youthreach Programme	To return to country of employment

An interview guide was developed for the semi-structured interviews, outlining the planned topics and questions in their tentative order. This approach permitted the interviews to take an informal and conversational tone as the questioning was based upon a prepared list of topics rather than a formal interview script (Padgett, 2017). A degree of improvisation was necessary during all interviews. To support this, general probes and prompts were prepared in advance for each of the selected discussion topics, allowing for flexible yet focused engagement. These probes assisted the flow and openness of the conversation greatly. Whenever an interesting issue not included on the topic list came up but was deemed particularly relevant for the purposes of the study, it was pursued by probing the matter further. This open approach ensured that unexpected experiences could be explored.

As mentioned, we were interested in examining the factors that contribute to young people leaving the mainstream education system before their Junior Certificate. Following other recent applications of thematic data analysis in this field of research (see e.g., Beatriz Saraiva, Pereira, & Zamith-Cruz, 2011), we employed this method to identify the most salient categories to emerge from the data (Morse & Field, 1995). Thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend across

an entire interview or set of interviews (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). This systematic bottom-up approach to data analysis is a flexible technique for organising and summarising large and diverse bodies of data. Thematic analysis can also provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). In this study, the six-stage guide to thematic analysis was adhered to, which provided a detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation (see Clarke & Braun, 2013, 2019 for more).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were treated as a single collection of texts. All data were imported into NVivo (version 12). Moreover, the interview transcripts were independently coded by the co-authors to identify key themes and sub-themes. The authors also met at regular intervals to discuss the dataset and develop consensus around coding, interpretations, patterns, ideas and themes. This collaborative coding process contributed directly to the interpretation and overall thematic analysis. In this respect, the data analysis was an iterative, data-led process. Taken as a whole, the interviews provide both the context and the framework for our analysis to discern how informants interpret experiences, events and actions in order to make sense of them. Throughout the data analysis, it became clear that the informants' experiences of, and reasons for, leaving the education system were highly specific to the individual. In the following sections, we present extracts that highlight the two main themes to emerge from the analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

Using the methodological approach outlined in the previous section, we discuss two distinct yet overlapping themes that emerged from the data analysis. The interviewees' experiences revealed a complex interplay of economic, social and cultural capital, which shaped their educational journeys. These dynamics are explored through two key motifs: 'A Precarious Milieu: Economic Capital and Educational Disadvantage' and 'On the Margins: The Role of Social and Cultural Capital'. In what follows, we present selected interview excerpts to illustrate the participants' experiences. The quotes were chosen for their effectiveness in capturing the broader patterns of meaning within the data (Saldaña, 2021).

4.1 A Precarious Milieu: Economic Capital and Educational Disadvantage

Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital, the data revealed a strong pattern of educational 'inheritance'. Early school leavers from less privileged backgrounds—who lacked economic capital—were particularly vulnerable to educational disadvantage. As Kate explained:

“Some families are struggling to keep food on the table and money on the electric meter. If their kid falls behind, they can't afford extra help or books to help them catch up.” (Kate)⁴

The reasons that the informants gave for leaving school were multifaceted, wide-ranging and interconnected. However, as we can see from the above excerpt, issues relating to the availability of economic capital were at the forefront of the discussion for many of the informants. This is perhaps unsurprising, as numerous studies have shown that low socio-economic status is a key factor contributing to ESL (Downes & Maunsell, 2007; Araújo et al., 2019).

In line with previous research, informants emphasised the importance of financial resources in terms of providing material goods required to be successful in school, for example, books and other learning materials (Traag & van der Velden, 2011; Bitsakos, 2021). Discussing the issue of financial strain and its impact on their education, the informant below stated the following:

“If the education system is serious about helping people from disadvantaged areas, they need to look at areas like the cost of school uniforms and books. I mean, a family on the dole can’t afford things the same as people on big money, ya know. They need more teachers who grew up in poverty, who know what it’s like to grow up with fuck all, ya know goin’ to school hungry, holes in the knees of your school pants. That’s the reality for some people.” (Christy)

The excerpt below provides another example of the difficulties that a lack of economic capital posed for the research participants.

“Another thing is that some kids struggle because of a lack of money in the homes they come from, especially when there are more kids in the family. Kids whose parents have a lot of money will find it a lot easier to get through school and that is unfair. The prices of uniforms, books, bags and laptops are going up all the time.” (Sarah)

The above excerpts illustrate the importance and consequences of financial support when the informants discussed their experience of the education system. Smyth and McCoy (2009) point out that students from low-income families may struggle during their school years because of the absence of books, educational toys or other learning materials in the home. Touching on this issue, one interviewee said:

“Kids are growing up in houses with no money, books and reading aren’t the most important thing. So, it’s easy for them to get caught up in robbing or drug dealing. Parents find it hard to cover the cost of books and uniforms, which causes extra pressure on those parents.” (Christy)

Highlighting the significance of economic capital for full participation in the school environment, the extracts above illustrate the challenges students faced in accessing basic educational resources, such as textbooks. Adding to this, another interviewee, who now works in the education system, stated the following:

“Another thing is that kids from disadvantaged backgrounds find it harder to succeed because money makes it easier for parents to get their kids through school. It’s still happening, just even a small example when the schoolbook fair is on, kids come up with two euro, but the cheapest book is a fiver and you know that they would never read books at home.” (Ryan)

The comments above are representative of the overarching narrative of the research participants. This is insofar as respondents uniformly emphasised that children were not on ‘an equal playing field’ and many were already economically disadvantaged relative to their peers. The excerpt below provides another example of this.

“There is also the financial strain on families in disadvantaged areas, they have to pay for books and uniforms that are way too expensive, especially if you have more than one child. You also need money for lunches and school trips. Some people wouldn’t have this money, which would cause stress in those houses and the kids would pick up on this.” (Sarah)

Extensive research has shown that socio-economic background significantly influences ESL. Unfortunately, the findings of the current study align with this trend. It was clear that the socio-economic status affected the respondents’ participation in education (Byrne & Smyth, 2010b). When discussing the cost of the cost of attending school informants frequently referred to the financial pressure that education put on their family unit. This concern extended not only to the primary costs of education, such as books and uniforms, but also to secondary expenses, with school trips frequently cited as a burden by interviewees. Participants’ discussions about their families highlighted how limited economic capital played a crucial role in their ESL. Collectively, these narratives underscore a central theme: economic capital—or the lack thereof—was a decisive factor in shaping participants’ educational experiences. The cumulative impact of poverty, as reflected in both participants’ accounts and the existing literature (Araújo et al., 2019), contributed significantly to ESL. The remainder of the discussion will be devoted to an exploration of the responses regarding the availability of cultural and social capital to the research participants and its impact on their educational experience.

4.2 On the Margins: The Role of Social and Cultural Capital

The previous section indicated that the processes associated with economic capital and school disengagement in Limerick are illustrative of the broader trend in this field of research (see e.g., Borgna & Struffolino, 2017; Nairz-Wirth & Gitschthaler, 2020). However, research on ESL also highlights that children from higher socio-economic backgrounds benefit not only from greater financial resources but also from the cultural knowledge and social networks that support educational success (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005). Adding to this, Bourdieu states that ‘the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). From this perspective, capital includes the level of parental education, varying

investment in and commitment to education and an awareness of the dividend to be gained from participation in education.

When discussing their experience of the education system, many of the interviewees stressed the importance of their parents' level of education and the community in which they lived on their own school leaving process. Our findings mirror the results of previous studies across a range of countries and education systems, where a strong relationship has been found between levels of parental education and their children's educational level and academic achievement (Piscitello, Kim, Orooji, & Robison, 2022). For example, the respondent below stated the following:

"Ya, my parents left school early to work back in them times [and] that was normal. You were expected to work at sixteen, keep the family goin' ya know. Someone had to put bread on the table [...] my mam was gone when I was young, so I can never remember her helping me much. My father didn't finish school either, so he hadn't a great grasp of reading, writing, sums ya know, the basic stuff you need in school. I suppose other kids had parents who could help them, I didn't have that. I dunno' if the school realised that, or if they even cared, who knows." (Ciara)

Adding to this, Christy—who comes from the Irish Traveller community—recounted how he was systematically sidelined during his schooling, which significantly hindered his ability to engage meaningfully with the education system. Reflecting on his experience, he shared:

"The schools I went to, you'd go to a room where the kids who were [falling] behind were sent. Travellers would be sent there whether they needed to be there or not. It broke us off from the rest of the class even more. The other young lads would laugh at us and make out we were slow. I hated the way it made me feel. They'd be better off not leaving us in at all if they weren't going to treat us the same as everyone else. The only people I mixed with in school were other Travellers." (Christy)

The testimony above reflects the argument that cultural differences are frequently perceived as deficiencies. When individuals fail to conform to dominant cultural norms and knowledge systems, they are often subjected to marginalisation and symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Panagiotis, 2024), as was the case for Christy.

Adding to the above, Ryan's account illustrates how shifting circumstances at home significantly impacted his ability to engage with school. He describes a lack of emotional support during a difficult period, which ultimately led to his expulsion:

"After my mam left, I was so upset and found it hard to concentrate in school, I kept getting in trouble for not listening and eventually got expelled. I didn't want to leave school, I just wish someone could have taken the time to understand what I was going through instead of seeing me as a problem child. My head was all over the place and I hadn't any one to talk to about what was going on for me, then I started acting out, nothing serious just messing,

talking when the teacher was talking, ya know the usual. The biggest influence was the school not being able to meet my needs, ya know how to handle me emotionally.” (Ryan)

This narrative highlights a lack of access to cultural capital that might have helped Ryan navigate the dominant norms and expectations of the school environment (de Graaf & de Graaf, 2002). The data also suggests a cultural mismatch between home and school, reinforcing findings from previous research (Byrne & Smyth, 2010a; Mikiewicz, 2021).

Similar to other studies (see e.g., Robison, Jagers, Rhodes, Blackmon, & Church, 2017), the data indicated that parental cultural capital had a negative effect on the educational attainment of the interviewees. The comments above also seem to reflect the reality for sections of Limerick City, where in terms of education, up to 70% of parents are themselves early school leavers (Humphreys, McCafferty, & Higgins, 2011). Considering this, parental educational levels are frequently cited as a key factor that relates to individuals leaving the education system early (Byrne & Smyth, 2010b; Piscitello et al., 2022). Adding to this, our research demonstrates that parents who left school early themselves, may not have the required skills or confidence to get involved in their child’s education (Gazeley, 2012). For example, when discussing the role of her parents in assisting with her schoolwork, the informant below stated the following:

“Ya, my mother left school halfway through first year and my father never went to secondary school. It definitely had an impact on their ability to help me with schoolwork, my mother had nine kids and there are only two left in school. So, seven out of nine left school early and we kind of relate it back to her [...] if we came back with homework, she wouldn’t be able to help us. It put us at a disadvantage to other kids whose parents would have more experience in the education system.” (Sarah)

Similarly, the informant below recalled how his parents’ level of education had an influence over his own ability to succeed in the school system in Limerick.

“My mam finished [primary] school but never went on any higher than that because she got married, she had me, etc. I suppose it has shown in a sense, because my father’s siblings have all went on to college and they’ve all excelled and they’ve all now got big jobs, big homes, whereas my dad probably got left behind, but that’s the choice he had to make. So, they could never really help me with my homework and things like that. It’s not that they didn’t value it; it was that sometimes they just didn’t understand what I was doing.” (Conor)

For the two respondents above, the opportunity to acquire the ‘institutionalised’ cultural capital afforded by formal education was constrained by their parents’ limited ability to support them. This, in turn, deprived them of the chance to convert that cultural capital into other forms of capital, such as financial or social (Bourdieu, 1986; Broer et al., 2019). In addition, informants frequently mentioned that they were stigmatised and treated differently as a consequence of where they were from. This was due to the

significant social problems associated with these communities or neighbourhoods. For example, when asked what it was like to grow up in a socio-economically disadvantaged area of Limerick, one interviewee stated the following:

“Looking back on it now, I can see that it was a dangerous place to grow up. I grew up in a poor housing estate where nearly everyone was unemployed, [there was] crime and nothing to do. A lot of people drinking, getting high ya know, too many bad influences for a young lad. It was too easy for a kid like me to slip through the cracks, my dad wasn’t too interested in the whole school thing. The rich people, teachers and Guards⁵ looked down on kids like me and saw us as ‘scumbags’ because of where we lived, I mean we were only kids, but we were already labelled.” (Ciara)

Building on this, Ryan reflected on his experience of the education system and the challenges faced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds:

“The education system needs to do a lot more to help people from disadvantaged areas. A big problem is that most people working in education come from well off backgrounds and can’t relate to the kids they are supposed to be helping. Like, if there was something upsetting you there was no way you could have went in and said it to the teacher. You felt like you couldn’t trust no one, so you would just keep it to yourself. You’d be wary of talking to teachers in case they said something to the Guards or social workers, you could get someone in trouble or kids could end up getting taken away. I don’t think they would have the kids’ best interests [in mind], it would be more about covering their own back. Another thing that makes it hard for families from disadvantaged background is not having enough money, especially these days now.” (Ryan)

Ryan’s comment closely aligns with Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, highlighting how a lack of trust, connection and shared understanding between students and teachers can restrict access to the kinds of support often available to more privileged groups. This illustrates a broader *social mismatch* between the dominant group (teachers) and the marginalised group (students from disadvantaged backgrounds). The absence of social capital—manifested in limited networks of trust and institutional recognition—appears to have hindered the informant’s integration into the wider school system (Bourdieu, 1986; Mikiewicz, 2021).

The above comments reflect the reality that it is predominantly students from lower socio-economic groups who experience poor relationships with teachers, with students claiming they are unfairly ‘picked on’, embarrassed or ignored (Byrne & Smyth, 2010b). In this respect, the informants did not possess the social capital required to succeed in the school system, where teachers lower their expectations of socially and culturally different children (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). From this perspective, our findings mirror Thomson’s (2002) argument that parents and students in areas that are stigmatised perceive that they are categorised as being somehow deficient and can potentially be distressed and angered about being regarded in this fashion.

To sum up, most of the participants who contributed to the current study had low social and cultural capital at the time they left the school system. The data indicated the informants' school-leaving processes were influenced both by their parents' level of education and by the communities in which the informants were raised. Our findings align with those of previous studies, which similarly portray early school leavers as 'burdened by family' (Stamm et al., 2011), 'swamped in family turmoil' (Lessard et al., 2008), or as 'involuntary dropouts' (Na, 2017). The issues raised by the informants echo findings from previous research, which shows that individuals from disadvantaged areas often cite a lack of support, experiences of stigmatisation and the absence of encouragement in their schooling as key factors in their decision to leave education prematurely (Doyle & Keane, 2019; Power et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion

This study engaged with the under-researched views of young people who left school early in what has been labelled a 'disadvantaged' city (Power et al., 2021). We aimed to investigate the reasons behind and processes related to young people leaving the mainstream education system before the completion of their Junior Certificate, with a specific focus on the city of Limerick. To unravel the complexities of the situation in Limerick, we adopted Bourdieu's theory of capital. As previously mentioned, multiple factors contribute to ESL (see e.g., Conti et al., 2010; González-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Consistent with prior research, this study supports the assertion that ESL is strongly associated with social disadvantage and low levels of parental education (European Commission, 2011b; Gubbels, van der Put, & Assink, 2019). Moreover, the core message from the informants was that the financial cost of attending school proved to be a major barrier for them and their families. From this perspective and echoing previous research in the area (see e.g., Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2015), it was clear that the participants' lower socio-economic status (e.g. parents' unemployment, poverty rate) had a profound impact on their disengagement from the school system. In addition, the findings reflect the assertion that despite 'free education'⁶ being available to students in Ireland, the relative costs of schooling are likely to be higher for working-class or low-income families (Byrne & Smyth, 2010b). The persistence of exclusion and inequality over time appears, for some, to have reinforced the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. However, the informants' lack of various forms of capital at the time they exited the school system did not prevent some from pursuing further education later in life (see Table 1 for more). In this respect, our findings align with previous research suggesting that transitions between education and employment are often non-linear and reversible. That is, failed transitions can be overcome or compensated for when appropriate support is available (Nairz-Wirth & Gitschthaler, 2020; Kiprianos & Mpourgos, 2022).

The informants also discussed the influence of their parents' level of education and its impact on their school disengagement process. Our data suggests that children of parents who did not complete their schooling are more likely to leave school early (Lyche 2010; Morrow & Villodas, 2018). Similar to previous research (see Panagiotis, 2024), a

number of participants also articulated strong feelings of being ‘pushed out’ of the education system either by acrimonious relationships with teachers or as a result of the stigmatisation associated with the communities in which they lived. In this respect, their lack of cultural capital not only made the process of acculturation difficult but also hindered their overall inclusion within the school environment. Moreover, our findings support Doyle and Keane’s (2019) assertion that what they term the ‘significance of place’ has a profound impact on educational attainment. In line with this, our data appear to confirm the claim that low levels of social and cultural capital in disadvantaged communities are reflected in fewer and weaker interpersonal networks, which can contribute to early school leaving (Bourdieu, 1986).

This research has added to our understanding regarding the impact of intergenerational and community disadvantage. Discussing the importance of these issues, Doyle and Keane (2019) stress that until this form of entrenched structural inequality in society is addressed, young people of disadvantaged communities will continue to be excluded from the education system and the subsequent opportunities that stem from it. As such, the results of this study are perhaps unsurprising given that parts of Limerick City have been described as having a multitude of social problems, high levels of deprivation and childhood adversity (Bradshaw et al., 2016; Power et al., 2021), with exceptionally high unemployment rates, antisocial behaviour and organised criminality (McCafferty, 2011; McCafferty & Humphries, 2014). Considering this, those we engaged with could be described, in Bourdieusian terms, as the most ‘disadvantaged’ of the ‘disadvantaged’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Doyle & Keane, 2019). To conclude, the primary limitation of this study is the small sample size (N=6). Considering this, a further study, with even more qualitative data, may help us go deeper into the experiences of young people from ‘disadvantaged’ communities who left the school system early. This may contribute significantly to our understanding of the complexities of educational disengagement in socio-economically polarised regions.

Notes:

- 1) The Junior Certificate is an educational qualification awarded in Ireland by the Department of Education and Youth to students who have successfully completed the first three years of second-level education.
- 2) In Ireland, the Youth Encounter Projects (YEPs) were established specifically to engage with children considered to be at risk.
- 3) Similar to YEPs, in Ireland Youthreach Programmes are full-time education, training and work experience programmes designed for young people (aged 15–20) who have left school early without formal qualifications.
- 4) Pseudonyms are used throughout and details have been removed to anonymise informants.
- 5) The ‘Guards’ or *An Garda Síochána* are the national police and security service of the Republic of Ireland.
- 6) The free education scheme in Ireland was introduced in 1967 to facilitate the provision of second-level education for all young people. Essentially, this means

that in the majority of the second-level schools recognised by the Department of Education and Science, there is no charge for tuition.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

About the Author(s)

Steven Byrne is an Assistant Professor in the School of Nursing and Midwifery and the School of Allied Health at the University of Limerick. His research explores social exclusion, the social context of chronic illness and health inequality, community-based health interventions and the social aspects of ageing. He has published his work in *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* and *Age and Ageing*.

Joseph Haugh is a Social Care Worker at the Galtee Clinic in Ballyporeen, Ireland. He holds a Research Master's degree from the Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, alongside a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Social Care Work. With more than a decade of experience, he has worked extensively with young people across youth residential care and educational settings. He has also facilitated and contributed to a number of social care conferences, workshops and committees throughout Europe.

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