

## **School as experienced by early school leavers**

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**Abstract** : This research aims at shedding light on the experiences of Early School Leavers and their families; experiences which are very often disregarded or merely neglected when tailoring policies and strategies to combat Early School Leaving (ESL). This research seeks to qualitatively obtain information related to the causes and consequences of ESL, extrapolate data on the background of Early School Leavers and their families as well as give voice to their feelings, prospects, perspectives and experiences, whilst eliciting pertinent recommendations.

The semi-structured interviews identify several shortcomings in the local educational system, including the focus on knowledge-based subjects, with little opportunities to opt for vocational subjects. In this research, the vast majority of interviewees advocate for the traditional trade schools.

Furthermore, while the working-class parents interviewed feel that they lack the necessary skills and confidence to actively involve themselves in their children's school life, they suggest an increase in communication between the school and home.

**Keywords:** Early School Leaving, Vocational Education and Training, Parental Involvement, School Experience

### **Introduction**

The European Union (2003) defines early school leavers as people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training. Early school leavers are therefore those who have only

achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years (ISCED, 2011).

After the rectification of Malta's application of ISCED levels, the rate of ESLers in Malta went down to 22.6% in 2012 (European Commission, 2014; UHM, 2014). It decreased to 17.7% by 2017 (Eurostat, 2018), while Europe's average stands at 10.6% (Eurostat, 2018). This means that currently the Maltese average is over 7% higher than the European average.

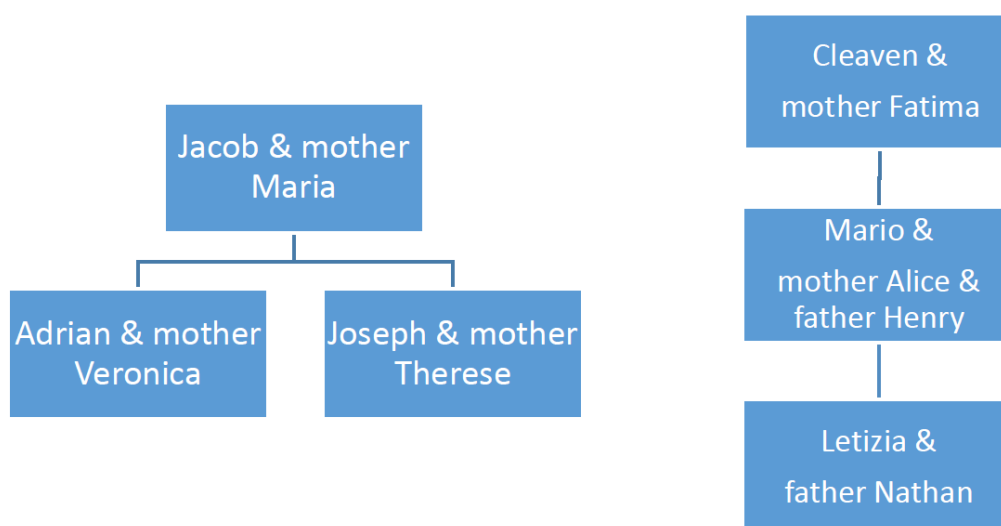
In June 2010, the Europe 2020 strategy was adopted by the European Heads of State, setting 10% as the maximum percentage target for the rate of ESLers in every EU Member State (Europe 2020, 2010; Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). Further to this, the European Commission recommends that "[Malta is to] take further measures to reduce early school-leaving by identifying, analysing and measuring its causes by 2012 and by setting up a regular monitoring and reporting mechanism on the success rate of the measures" (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p.34).

Early School Leavers face severe difficulties in finding quality work and are more often dependent on welfare benefits. Early school leaving hampers economic and social development and is a serious obstacle to the European Union's goal of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. An extensive study issued by the National Observatory for Living with Dignity within The Presidents' Foundation on the Wellbeing of Society (2015) analysed big international data and sought to fill in the gaps in existing research as well as to inform policies and measures to address early school leaving. The study compared the wellbeing and quality of life of early school leavers of different ages. Findings from this study highlighted that school leavers of different ages are less satisfied with their standard of living, social life, education and present job but are satisfied with their family life and accommodation. Also, Early School Leavers tend to feel socially excluded, lonely and disoriented, and frequently experience negative emotions and mental problems, together with a less meaningful daily life. Such a group also tends to suffer from intense health-related problems and also from extreme financial difficulties and deprivation, when compared with people who furthered their education. Early School Leavers are also prone to less favourable working conditions, tend to remain in low quality employment and, overall, experience a lower self-perceived social status.

## Methodology

Cohen (2006) declares that there exists a lack of qualitative research on how individuals experience the educational system, while the European Commission (2013) regards “small-scale qualitative studies” as an “important data source for understanding features of ESL in a specific setting or among specific groups of pupils” (p.16). Such studies, in fact, present opportunities to “capture the voices of young people leaving education” (p.17). The necessity to pay particular attention to the voices of students themselves on this particular issue is also endorsed by the European Parliament (2011).

Through snowball sampling, six Early School Leavers “between the ages of 18 and 24 who have left compulsory schooling, who do not have at least 5 SEC passes grade 1 to grade 7 and who are not in education or training” (Bartolo, 2014, p.2) were recruited for this study.



The figure above illustrates the sampling method used in the study. Jacob and Cleaven were contacted and approached by a third party and, in turn, they each recommended other participants. The names are all fictitious.

The participants were all from a working-class background, having mothers who worked as housewives and fathers doing manual jobs. All the participants hailed from villages in the south of Malta; namely Ghaxaq and Żejtun. Below is a table summarising some key information about each participant.

	Jacob	Adrian	Joseph	Cleaven	Mario	Letizia
<b>Age</b>	18	18	20	21	24	18
<b>Academic progression</b>	Completed most of Form 5, did not sit for any O' levels, took two short courses offered by ETC	Completed Form 5, sat for 4 O'levels with no passes, enrolled and attended Youth Inc. for a few months without completing the course	Completed Form 5, got 3 SEC passes, attended a course at MCAST for a few months	Completed Form 5 with 4 SEC passes, enrolled in an MCAST course for a few months, completed some training at work	Completed Form 5 with 4 SEC passes, completed some training at work (a family-run catering business)	Did not continue attending school at Form 5, did not sit for any O' levels, currently attending ECDL private lessons
<b>Current job</b>	Unemployed, has been receiving unemployment benefits since leaving school	Prepares pastry for a local pastizzeria	Machine operator	Machine setter	Aunt's Cafeteria supervisor	Currently in between jobs: fills in for employees with maternity leave at different places of work
<b>Parental situation</b>	Married & living together	Married & living together	Married & living together	Married & living together	Married & living together	Separated; currently living with father
<b>Siblings</b>	A much younger sister who does quite well at school	A brother at Form 5	No siblings	A sister who's in third year University	4 brothers all ESLers and all in the catering sector	An older sister who's an ESLer and a single mother, also living with father

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Early School Leavers and their parents respectively. The interviews provided depth and flexibility embedded in a more informal atmosphere, where participants were free to speak their mind (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

As interviewers, the authors were given the opportunity to act as "knowledge-producing participants" rather than remaining somewhat uninvolved through a pre-set interview transcript (Brinkmann, 2013, p.21). Data were triangulated since the perspectives of both the Early School Leavers and their parents were obtained.

This research is informed by social constructivism which acknowledges the researcher as a "passionate participant" (Lincoln, 1991 as cited in Guba, & Lincoln, 1994), who is actively enrolled in expediting a "multi-voice" reconstruction of their own together with the participants' experiences. Whilst acknowledging our own subjective reality, the research sought to investigate how socially-constructed day-to-day phenomena, such as the importance everyone gives to academic results, the students' experiences and interactions with teachers, peers and their parents etc., impinge on the lives of Early School Leavers as the 'crucial participants' (Crotty, 1998).

Thematic analysis (TA) was adopted as it "suits questions related to people's experiences, or people's views and perceptions" (The University of Auckland, 2013) whilst seeking to "move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data" (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012, p. 10).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The personal school experience**

The decision to withdraw from schooling might be the result of a cumulative process of a prolonged interaction with teachers, peers, parents and the encircling school and community settings (Audas & Williams, 2001). Both parents and Early School Leavers describe a progression of attitudes and behaviours which rendered the decision to renounce from schooling as unsurprising. Such behaviours are brought about by extreme feelings of frustration, failure and a deteriorating self-esteem (Finn, 1989) which further elicit diminished motivation and educational attainment and an increased sense of powerlessness. These feelings, in fact, have been personified in several ways:

*"I used to go against my will! Look how I've ended up! I was unhappy there [at school]...going against my will" and "Prison! Prison. Prison." (Jacob)*

*"We were like prisoners at school, with gates like we're in a prison and the fact that it's compulsory... you're there like you're in jail...by force...that...you felt like you're in jail." (Letizia)*

The perception of classes and school as a 'prison' was common among the interviewees, and very often this is the image they chose to give when describing school (Teese & Polesel, 2003).

*"By the end of my school years I didn't want to go anymore, I was fed up...waking up early knowing that I'd have to go to school by force really bothered me...school wasn't easy for me..." (Mario)*

*"I hate it...all that time with books in your hands...I could not take it anymore...Too many books and too much studying...the brain explodes..." (Adrian)*

The intersection of underachievement, lack of motivation and commitment and poor interactions with peers lead to further disengagement. Secondary factors which play a part in this process include poor teacher relations and an inadequate school environment. Familial factors as well as the social context also feature prominently (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997).

### **School absenteeism**

Chircop (1997) defines absenteeism as "staying away from school for reasons not justified by law" (p. 355). While the literature informs us that school non-attendance may present a risk factor for ESL (Brooks, Milne, Paterson, Johansson, & Hart, 1997; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989), it is worth highlighting that the Early School Leavers interviewed in this study were regular school attendees, even if this was due to the insistence of their parents. Of all the Early School Leavers interviewed, Jacob went to great lengths to try and miss a school day:

*Maria: Because of me! I was relentless! Why would he miss school?*

*Jacob: Because of her...if it was up to me...even when I managed to get a sick certificate, war! We used to spend three days in a row not talking to each other!*

*Maria: I used to hurry and phone up doctors and tell them "He's coming! Don't you dare write him a certificate!" I forgot how often!*

*Jacob: I found lots of doctors. In four years, I've changed four...sometimes I go to one, then I go to another...depends on who does it for me [referring to the sick certificate]*

*Maria: But still he didn't miss school too often...*

Keeping their children in school was, sometimes, a major burden on parents. Nevertheless, all the parents interviewed exerted control in such situations. It is important to note that the interviews predated the fiscal incentive to

promote school attendance, which “involves a child supplement of €400 per year for the first three children in a family” (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2014a, p. 3). The parent interviewees sent their children to school because they believed in the importance of education and not because they were being financially incentivised for it.

### **Breaking the rules**

Another issue which emerged during the interviews, similar to the refusal of the dominant school culture by working class ‘lads’ in the work by Willis (1977), is the inability to conform to the school codes and regulations. Almost all participants expressed a particular degree of hostility towards schooling, a feeling which some exhibited through misbehaviour:

*“a lot of mischief, a lot of trouble...we were ill-behaved...let me tell you...if you don’t go out through the door, you go out through the window...literally.” (Letizia)*

*“all the time...some fought, some threw things...almost everyday. The discipline was good...but for those who obeyed it...” (Jacob)*

Others chose to reluctantly abide by the rules, whilst still harbouring negative feelings towards some of the aspects of the disciplinary system at school. This included, for example, having to wear the blazer all day, even in warm weather, which was perceived as unreasonable by Adrian.

Very few, like Mario, complained about the lack of discipline, while Cleaven was the only one who divulged that in the Church school he attended: *“Discipline: a lot they used to maintain discipline...too much...which was a very good thing, I like discipline”*.

### **Relationships with teachers**

The quality of relationships between teachers and students has long been identified as having a bearing on the dropping-out of school (Hirschi 1969 in Audas & Willms, 2001; Croninger & Lee, 2001).

While some studies suggest that most Early School Leavers tend not to get along with teachers (Teese & Poleslel, 2003), the Early School Leavers interviewed generally report positive relationships with teachers. In contrast to the study by Drewry et al. (2010), however, none of the participants

recounted ever disclosing anything about their personal life issues with a teacher or associating a teacher's role with anything beyond the academic.

The high regard the participants attribute to a teacher's role reflects itself in the impact that particular teachers leave on their students. In fact, the effects yielded by a positive teacher-student relationship have shown to surpass that of a positive parent-child relationship, especially in the academic domain (Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green & Dowson, 2007).

Most participants' feelings sway according to the respective teachers. Letizia, in fact, discloses that:

*"There were some who were helpful...there was one in particular who gave me 'merit cards' for doing nothing and I was so happy...but then you find teachers who give you a 'bad report' for nothing. I did not care."*

Letizia, however, speaks with utmost respect about particular teachers who had really helped her academically. Their method of teaching focused on addressing the students' own needs through individualised support. This included, for example, working out the type of sums that each one finds challenging, so that in class different groups of students would be focussing on what they need the most help and practice in. For Letizia, this was a way of showing that teachers actually care about their students:

*"Whoever didn't do it, it meant that they did not care about us, that he or she was allowing you to mess up...and I appreciated that. I paid more attention to their subject, for example Maths and I used to pass [from exams]....and that helped me a lot."*

In spite of reported positive relationships with particular teachers, and in light of the literature suggesting that teachers' "supportive relationships with students has a flow-on effect of reducing bullying" (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010), none of the teachers were associated with such a role.

### **Other aspects of schooling**

Other undesirable factors pertaining to school, included having to wake up early, having to study for exams, being compulsory and having to sit down for long periods of time, the lack of hands-on activities in mainstream subjects and the lack of individualised support, the detentions resulting from non-



compliance to school rules and the focus on academia and, hence, the lack of vocational subjects.

This is especially true for working-class students, as are all the Early School Leavers interviewed, who are more prone to ESL due to the constant struggle to maintain a positive relationship towards the academic curricula followed in today's schools (Teese & Polesel, 2003). They might have heard of the former trade schools from their parents but they have not experienced them. For them, there is only the type of schools we know today; *"for studying, for the brainy and those who like books"* (Cleaven). Apart from depriving them of developing their vocational skills, today's schools are, to their mind, marginalising them, labelling them and making them feel inferior for not being "brainy".

On a positive note, almost all interviewees agree that they enjoyed meeting friends at school and acting mischievously with them. Others relished the sporting activities held at school and helping out in pageants and talent shows which enabled missing out on some lessons due to rehearsals.

### **Post-compulsory schooling**

With regards to post-compulsory education, Cleaven mentions the insufficiency of the meagre stipend, the lack of parking spaces, lecturer absenteeism and time-tabling issues, such as long hours of free sessions, as detrimental to one's motivation:

*"...these are not helpful things for sure...they used to hinder me a lot and I used to lose heart...these things used to send me a hundred years aback, even the free lessons for example 4 hours free...I used to go crazy...what do I do? I would go home and never return."*

The notion of post-compulsory schooling being unaffordable was also flagged by Letizia:

*"Depends...for those who afford it...you need to afford it because if you are going to enrol full time, the stipend is nothing...costs of living are high..."*

Adrian and Jacob are disheartened by the perceived length of the post-secondary courses adding to their perception that their chances of sustainably and successfully engaging in post-secondary education are remote. This

further enhances the notion of a differential access to education (Sultana, 1995).

### *Why quit schooling?*

The participants were characterised by the perception that they were inferior to their counterparts and, despite their parents' unconditional love for them, they came to believe that they would never get anywhere. They seemed to have no hope for the future whatsoever and settled for whatever life offered them.

They spoke of marginalisation, innate difficulty to *like* school, to do well at school, to be happy at school; something which they fail to understand, yet, something which continuously made them feel inferior to others.

*"I never wanted school, since I was very young...I never wanted it. It's like it was in my blood", "the less I mention it [school], the better" and "They [my parents] used to send me to private lessons but I did not sit for any O' levels. I wouldn't have endured sitting down for more! As if! No more sitting down for me! I was done having to spend days sitting down!" (Jacob)*

Maria, his mother, confirms that:

*"He doesn't like school...doesn't care...having to stay sitting down...being compulsory...having to write. His pocket has been the same since Primary school. He used to tell me "Don't give me a pocket!" Even his biros are still here, he never used them. I used to buy him biros and stationary for nothing" and "He did not go happily [to school]. Everything forcibly...it was like he was going to get executioned...in class always looking outside the window, planning where to play truant".*

When asked for random thoughts about education and schooling in general, Cleaven replied,

*"studying...and being brainy I think" and gave "studying...I do not like to study" as part of the reason for quitting school. With bitterness in his voice he explains "I would have liked school to be my path but I don't think it was meant for me. I hate studying...I hate it too much. I don't know how to sit down...even sitting here is making me nervous". He further reconciles with his limitations and asserts that there was nothing he could have done when at school to change his present and future: "It's me...it's me...I don't want to study as I cannot stand it".*

Joseph used to study to the best of his abilities but he used to panic severely during exams. As he tries to explain:

*"I used to panic during exams. I used to study, even for O' levels, I used to be certain that I've studied but then when I revise the paper and I see a wrong answer, I panic and everything would become wrong".*

Joseph's mother confirms that *"He never wanted school..."* In addition to this, Joseph miserably and repeatedly claims that he found school too challenging. His tone of voice, facial expressions and attitude reveal an ingrained sense of disappointment and helplessness and a shredded dignity. Such feelings are further elicited as he feels unable to compensate for the sacrifices his parents, particularly his mother, did to see him succeed at school. He knows that despite trying hard, he could never make them proud by doing well at school; hence, the feeling of shame and worthlessness.

Further probing into such experiences helps us to really grasp the major importance of schooling in one's life. This does not just entail attending school for a number of hours daily, but essentially also a lifestyle revolving around going to school – doing homework, studying, preparing for school on the day and the next day, very often talking about school at home and away from home, with friends, with relatives etc. School is basically a child's or a teenager's life. So no wonder the lack of self-esteem of the Early School Leavers interviewed, when considering how differently they felt about such a majorly important part of life. Very often, such individuals feel incompatible to anything which has to do with schooling and not just merely *do not like* school. They perceive of school as a place where all their inabilities are accentuated. A common trend amongst these interviewees was their reluctance to talk about anything which had to do with their schooling. They sought, in every way possible, to distance themselves from school and from anything related to school. Even the uniform was a burden:

*"I never used to wear the blazer. I used to put it in the locker and then the Assistant Head "Where is it?" "In the locker" "Put it on!" "I don't want to!" "Come with me!"".*

*"And the tie!! I loosen it ...he [the Assistant Head] would tell me "Wear it properly!" as he walks around the corner, I loosen it again!" (Adrian)*

When asked about whether or not they talked about school at home:

*"Nothing. I just put the bag down and run outside" and "Once I hit the road outside school and on the coach I would already have started undressing..." (Jacob)*

*"Nothing. The less he talks about it, the better".  
"How was school?" (Veronica) "Nothing. Ok. Good. Bye I'm going out."  
(Adrian)*

### **Parental expectations**

Smith et al. (1992) argue that children whose mothers expect them to further their education are less prone to school non-completion. In fact, high parental expectations towards their children are better predictors of high school completion than parental income and education (see Rumberger, 1995).

Despite deeming education as "valuable", "useful for everything", "very important" and "good for everything", and regarding sending their children to school as their solemn duty, parents in this study were aware that their children did not benefit wholly from schooling.

In contrast with the findings of Drewry et al.'s (2010) study, most of the parents interviewed claimed that they did not impose any expectations on their children.

*"I've never told him "become this or that!". I wished he's successful at whatever he chooses. For example, when he attended MCAST, I wished he'd graduate but I've never told him "Become a doctor or a lawyer or something like that". He chooses for himself." (Fatima)  
"I've always let them choose their own path...that's the best...whatever they decide...their life is in their hands." (Nathan)*

Letizia narrates how her father "knew what I was"; knew that she was not 'school-oriented' and often told her: *"You are not going to care about school...so it's like you're going for nothing...you're going for nothing...but I want you to go just the same."*

Other parents, depicted the meagre wish that their children would get something out of all those years of schooling.

*"I would have wanted him to be something...somewhere...or go to MCAST or study something or ...nothing too big...just to be sure that people won't laugh at him." (Veronica)*

*"I would have wanted him to become an architect...but it won't make a difference what I wish...but at least to continue school so as to find a suitable job in which he's happy, not like the one he's in right now." (Therese)*

*"I wished he would become better than me, for sure...but to no avail...and to be a bit good at schooling." (Maria)*

Upon investigating further, it seems, that the parents themselves had limited aspirations towards their own future. For example, Fatima, whilst encouraging and supporting her son to sit for exams at work, reflects upon her life:

*"Sometimes I wonder what if I continued to study...I am satisfied right now in , at least, seeing that Cleaven has a job and his sister studying. That is my satisfaction." And "...for me, personally, today, I say that if I continued school, I'd be better off".*

### **Educators' expectations**

A study by Rose and Shevil (2004) highlights the power of teachers' expectations in terms of educational success or failure of marginalised groups. Lamb et al. (2004) speak of a general helplessness amongst educators to better accommodate these students in an attempt to keep them in school. Educators have identified these Early School Leavers as having no clear goals for the future and not wanting to stay at school so much, so that they either dedicate themselves to disrupting lessons or to playing truant on a regular basis.

Maria recounts how *"the teachers used to find things for him to do...either run errands for them, or send him for something at the other side of the school..."* She is totally fine with this, if not grateful for the teachers who used to ease the discomfort for her son at school.

She also speaks of some teachers who

*"used to understand that he could not keep up with other children and treat him accordingly, because of his...and other teachers used to let him be, ignore him and he regressed. I took him to Floriana to see if he is dyslexic or so...some told me it's how he is, some told me so and so...you have to live with him to truly see how he is."*

Another teacher, who used to give Jacob private lessons in his early primary years, reinforced the lack of aspirations towards him. Maria quotes the teacher's words:

*“You are bringing him here for nothing. You are paying money for nothing” and she used to give him handicrafts to pass the time, which he would eagerly complete. This brought both the teacher and the mother to the assumption that “the boy wants handiwork [and not the academic]”.*

Therese discloses how the teachers’ feedback helped to confirm her perceptions that her son *“is showing that he is not into school”*.

Despite speaking about some teachers who showed genuine interest in their students and urged them to live up to their potential, Letizia narrates how teachers’ attitudes impacted on students when the former project their discouraging perceptions on the latter. This results in students acquiring a sense of worthlessness and incompetence which further dampens their motivation and potential. Letizia does not restrict this to educators but extends this to society in general:

*“Even the way they look at you...with just one glance they tell you that you will never amount to anything in life. Not only teachers...other students, parents...it used to enrage me, it used to infuriate me...I wanted to kill them for that glance...then you start believing that they are right and that angers me even more.”*

### **Experiences of bullying**

The participants, except for Cleaven who describes the environment of the Church School he had attended as ‘friendly’, have experienced bullying at some point in their scholastic life. Such experiences have hugely and negatively impacted both the Early School Leavers and their families, particularly the mothers.

Therese, in fact, passionately narrates how her son would come home after being physically assaulted by his peers:

*“He used to come crying and say that they’ve punched him in his eyes. Then I went to talk to his friends and told them “I’ve let you making fun of him for this year, but I won’t let you do the same next year!”*

This led to other parents confronting Therese and advising their children not to talk to Joseph anymore, which may have resulted in Joseph being further excluded.

Joseph explains that:

*"I sort of did not want to go to school, I wanted to stay at home...I used to say – that's me, I will always stay at home" and "I used to be scared of going to school and in class; I used to stay far away or be afraid to talk".*

Suffering from a sense of helplessness, humiliation, irritability, loneliness, psychological distress and anxiety are other effects of bullying, possibly eliciting further future maladjustment and psychological stress (Rigby, 2003; Peskin, Tortolero, Markham, Addy, & Baumler, 2007; West & Salmon, 2000 in Donoghue et al., 2014).

Jacob's mum voices her sorrow:

*"During Primary school he was bullied a lot because he took longer than usual to talk...he used to be bullied...then he sort of started getting angry, acted rebelliously and used to take the blame for everything that happened at school...he was labelled...it was year 6 or year 5...I used to be called for all the time...I suffered a lot...I have been through a lot."*

Alice recounts how indignant she used to become, having to see her children go through so much:

*"Then he does something wrong and they phone you up...just because he lost his head after having made his life hell...he went through so much...I used to know...although some of the things they used to keep to themselves so as not to worry me (referring to Mario's brothers as well). One of them even threw a chair at my son!"*

Victims of bullying tend to fit a particular profile, characterised by poor assertiveness skills and low self-esteem (Schwartz et al., 1993; Boulton & Smith, 1994; Rigby, 2000; O' Moore & Kirkham, 2001). These characteristics would be, or become, so innately embedded in the intimidated party that victimisation may extrapolate itself away from the site where bullying occurs.

Episodes of bullying for some of the participants, in fact, seem to have happened outside the educational institutions. Mario used to be chased off the bus on the way to school and has settled in a job where he is barely appreciated, whilst Joseph has settled into a dead-end job with dire conditions. Furthermore, the consequential effects of bullying seem to have shaped the victims' lack of self-confidence, contributing, for example, to Joseph's inability to make friends.

## Conclusion

In general, the participants shared negative experiences of their lives at school, some of which were characterised by episodes of peer bullying. Early School Leavers expressed a degree of discomfort or incompatibility with the school culture and some seem to have resisted through minor misbehaviour. The participants exhibited negative attitudes towards specific practices at school, mainly having to sit down for long periods of time, having to write, study, do homework and sit for exams, having to wear a blazer, having to wake up early, having no hands-on activities but most of all not having the opportunity to learn trades or vocational subjects. Their experience at school had negative effects on their future aspirations and self-esteem.

Despite not necessarily being happy at work, very few of them were willing to better their position. Adrian, for example, kept postponing getting his driver's licence whilst Letizia planned to start attending private lessons in order to sit for Ordinary level exams at an unspecified period in the future.

While acknowledging that they are not as successful as they wished to be or as others expected them to be, little do they believe in the possibility that they could have furthered their education, so much so that they do not even manage to conceive of 'what might have happened' had they continued to attend school.

The experiences highlighted in this research confirm that ESL is not a decision Early School Leavers consciously make, but rather a process of disengagement from school initiated in the very first years due to a failure in internalising the ways of formal schooling.

Hence, Early School Leavers tend to discontinue their educational process for a much complex interplay of reasons than just to find employment, for example. The most assertive of them, with the encouragement and support of their parents, look for a job as an alternative to their situation at school. Most Early School Leavers tend to make do with the jobs they find, some are also willing to train and learn from their working place, but few are willing to give formal education a second chance.

The schools the interviewees attended systematically marginalised them through their sole focus on knowledge-based academic subjects. Hence, the



Early School Leavers themselves suggested that students should be given the opportunity to opt for a vocational route.

Overall, this study has shed important light on the experiences of early school leavers. The main finding points to the fact that school in many ways was irrelevant to these individuals as students, and failed to provide stimuli for them to be successful learners.

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