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**“Becoming” and “being” a father. An examination of the fathering experiences of Irish young men who were early school leavers.**

**By**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of**

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*This thesis was motivated by the experience of Jamie, a young father of 19 years, whose premature departure from his child's life inspired a focus on the lives of young fathers.*

*"Codladh samh" (Sleep well).*

## ABSTRACT

The research study examines the fathering experiences of Irish young men who were early school leavers. The study explores how their childhood – with and without their fathers – influenced their views, attitudes and aspirations, as they became fathers themselves. A multiple case study of six men, who had their first child when they were between the ages of 18 and 23 years old, presented data in a series of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Photographs and diagrams were used to encourage the narration of relational fathering experiences in their childhood and of the men's subsequent position on becoming and being fathers to their children. The data was analysed using a structural and a thematic analysis approach.

The findings indicate that the men were emotionally impacted by childhood fathering experiences, both negatively and positively, and these influenced how they subsequently aimed to be fathers to their children. On becoming a father, each man used his perceptions of his childhood experiences to inform him of the ways in which he understands what it takes to be a father and what it means to be a father. The study highlights that being a father is dependent on being close and connected to children. When barriers impede a connection, a perceived lack of felt love from a father impacts on children for a lifetime, causing mental distress as a child and as an adult.

Relational disconnection from fathers negatively influences children's development and was seen as a contributory factor in children's engagement in, or absence from, education. Despite earlier disrupted education, the men valued further education opportunities which reinforced their intention to encourage their children's future education prospects. The change in attitude to education was education itself.

Building on the combination of Bowlby's attachment theory (1980, 1973, 1969) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), a hybrid conceptual theory of "closeness and connectedness" is suggested. The theory represents how children and fathers are individually impacted by sociocultural practices that affect their relational connection with one another. Being actively involved with their children creates positive opportunities for fathers to become "close and connected" to their children, a position which requires multi-tiered sociocultural support.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction to thesis**

This thesis examines the fathering issues which impact and influence how young men take on the fathering role. The study focuses on the experiences of Irish young men who left school as teenagers without a senior educational qualification. The men in the study were aged between 18 and 23 years old at the birth of their first child, and the study is based in the Republic of Ireland. Participants were recruited through contacts in education, training and community sectors. Six men took part in individual semi-structured interviews and one participant took part in several interviews during a year of his partner's pregnancy and up to the first four months of his baby's life.

There is an increase in the number of fathers who live separately from their children in Ireland (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2019a), and young fathers, whether living or non-living with their children, are often described as being hard to reach (Davies, 2016; Osborn, 2015) with their voices often silent in the discussion on parenting (Treoir, 2017). Their children's education outcomes are impacted by their interest and involvement (Flouri, 2007, Lamb, 2010) however, there is a paucity of research on their situation. It is therefore appropriate that this enquiry reaches out to young men and examines their views, issues and aspirations around the role of a father.

To justify this study in this introductory chapter, I present Irish policy in relation to fathers and to early school leaving. I follow this by presenting my own positionality in relation to the subject matter, and I continue with the theoretical frameworks which underpinned my approach to the study. I present a conceptual theoretical framework which I suggest as a new perspective in guiding the enquiry into the

issues facing young fathers, and I present the aims of the study and the research questions.

## **1.2 Rationale for the research study**

To begin the preliminary exploration of the need for the study, I identified the current policy documents and research relevant to parenting in Ireland and to early school leaving. The Irish Government's main policy statement on children and families, in contemporary Ireland, is set out in the policy document *Better outcomes brighter futures: the national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, DCYA, 2014). The overarching principle of this document recognises children as having their own status as citizens, with their rights to equality in all aspects of their childhood being of paramount importance to government policy. The document presents young people as those who are under the age of 25 years old. While much is said in the document about supporting "parents", and specific mention is made of mothers, scrutiny of the policy reveals less acknowledgement of fathers as having a singular contribution to this equality agenda. Feeding into the *Better outcomes brighter futures* policy (DCYA, 2014) is the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland, *Growing up in Ireland (GUI)* (Greene *et al.*, 2010). This longitudinal study of almost 20,000, infants, children and young people, along with their families and caregivers, follows children through their development since 2006, with the next cohort of data to be collected in 2020. The study presents many dimensions of child development and is a source of data for researchers, policymakers and practitioners to influence and drive policymaking decisions (Williams *et al.*, 2018). The study is the most detailed and ambitious research project ever undertaken in following children's growth and development in Ireland (Williams *et al.*, 2018) and signifies a determined interest in



assessing the needs of children and families to inform the Government's policymakers on preparing effectively for children's futures (Williams *et al.*, 2018). Ireland adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and Article 9 (the right to live with parent) and Article 18 (the right to be raised by parent) afford an importance to approaching the parenting role from the perspective of the rights of a child to equal access to care from both their father and mother. Therefore, I believe that, from the perspective of the child, it is imperative that children are given every opportunity to have access to their fathers. I also believe that the matter of how men (whether resident or non-resident with their children) take on the role of becoming and being fathers requires further investigation. Previous research studies suggest that fathers have a unique contribution to children's development (Flouri, 2005). Lamb (2010) proposes that there are three main ways in which fathers are involved with their children: being accessible to them, being responsible for them, and engaging with them. However, when this does not occur, a father's absence or non-availability can contribute to children's poor wellbeing and poor educational outcomes (Lamb, 2010). To further compound the situation, it is suggested that growing up in a single-parent family structure, without access to both parents, represents a source of inequality in children's lives (Nixon and Swords, 2016). There is, therefore, a cause for concern that in today's Ireland, where there are increasing numbers of single-parent families (CSO, 2016, 2019a), there is potentially as many as 30% of children who are not in daily contact with their fathers because their fathers are non-resident. In 2017 almost 30,000 fathers were recorded as not living with their children according to Father's Day 2017 report (CSO, 2017). Furthermore, in light of the impact of fathers on the development of their children (Lamb, 2010) how resident and non-resident fathers engage and respond to their children requires further scrutiny. Considering Lamb's

(2010) argument that the absence of fathers' involvement can contribute to poor educational outcomes, there is additional cause for concern that more children and young people who are distant from their fathers will potentially leave the education system before completing their secondary schooling. Gordon (2016) argues (in her study of learners in a Youthreach centre in Ireland – an education centre supporting young people to re-engage with education) that many early school leavers have had an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) of disconnect with a father, which may have added to multiple ACEs, which in turn contributed to poor school involvement. Felitti (2009) identified the loss of a parent and/ or childhood instances of neglect or abuse by a parent as contributing to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and he describes ACEs as falling into two main categories. These are categorised as: (1) negative experiences inflicted directly on the child and (2) negative experiences witnessed and observed as “happenings” to other people in the family. These negative experiences are further divided into 10 significant categories, which include abuse and neglect. ACEs include separation from a parent and indicates that separation from a father can cause a potential negative response (Felitti, 2009). Multiple ACEs are strongly related to risk factors for disease, such as addictions and mental health problems and can contribute to early death as a parent (Felitti, 2009), thus illustrating the intergenerational impact of ACEs. A study by Racine *et al.* (2018) of mothers who had experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) suggest that experiences are cascaded across the generations and, because of their experiences as a child, their children's health and well-being is in turn negatively affected. The same situation can be anticipated as being true to fathers who have suffered ACEs in childhood, and furthermore Anda *et al.*'s study (2002) suggests that young men with multiple ACEs are more likely to participate in early sexual behaviour and have early teenage pregnancies (Anda *et al.*, 2002).

The impact of those adverse childhood experiences has the possibility of being transmitted from childhood into adulthood and may have long-term impact on children as they become fathers (Madden, 2015). Furthermore, according to Gordon's study (2016), in an Irish context, early school leavers have experienced multiple instances of adverse childhood experiences (Anda, 2002, 2006). It is consequently of paramount importance to explore the issues facing young men who have also been early school leavers when they become fathers.

The relationship that children have with their mothers has been well researched (Bowlby, 1988, 1969) and in recent years the parenting relationship between a child and father has developed growing interest (Lewis and Lamb, 2003; Pleck, 2007; Drew and Daverth, 2007; Lamb, 2010). However, whether the father is resident or non-resident with his child, the role of fathers in society has altered significantly over the generations (Drew and Daverth, 2007). Fathers are seeing a move from the once assumed role of patriarch of the family (Drew and Daverth, 2007) to a range of situations from shared parenting to total separation from their child (Treur, 2017). Those in stable relationships are increasingly expected to create a work-life balance and to share the caring of children; to become what Kaufman (2013, p.7) describes as "superdads". However, many of those children and young people who are early school leavers may not have experienced their fathers in such a role. The transmission of values from one generation to the next was well documented in the Oxford Fathers' Study where Madden et al. (2015) suggest that intergenerational transmission of fathering influences key modes of parenting, where values and patterns of parenting are often replicated. However, they also suggest that due to socio-cultural changes, increasingly family patterns are evolving from one generation to another (Madden *et al.*, 2015) This has been evidenced in Ireland by

statistical data which shows that there has been an increase in family separation and divorce in Ireland since divorce legislation was introduced in 1995 (Irish Statute Book, 1995; Central Statistics Office, (CSO) (2016). Therefore, the patterns of parenting are subject to change because of increasing numbers of non-resident fathers. These fathers have to find a way of being close and connected to their child (Kiely and Bolton, 2018) in a different manner to the way in which they themselves may have been parented. There is a paucity of literature on the complexities of the changing nature of a father's role, especially for those young fathers who have been early school leavers, the issues facing them may not be the issues faced by their fathers and, with having had poor education experiences, their attitudes to education for their children have not been examined. It is this lack of knowledge which is the driver for my research study.

### **1.3 My positionality**

The combination of my personal life experience and my work experience motivated me to interrogate the role of fathers and to explore how fathers connect with their children. Firstly, my own experience of having a close, connected relationship with my father impressed on me how important it is for children to have a caring, involved father in their lives. I could not envisage what my life would have been like without the care, love and attention given to me by my father. His sudden death, when I was a teenager, has emphasised that the quality of his involvement in my life was the most important element in providing me with a secure base. This experience influenced and supported my values in establishing trusting, caring relationships. Secondly, my professional career, which has spanned over 30 years of working with families, brought me into the lives of children, young people and their parents. I have seen both the absence and presence of a father, in a family, as

being significant to a child's development. My first professional role began as an early years' educator in a Montessori pre-primary school. This teaching role was followed with time spent as a family support worker, a parenting programme facilitator and a manager of various early years' care and education facilities. I worked in several settings that were initially established for lone parents – the vast majority mothers – to support their access to education programmes. Seldom would lone fathers use the service, and seldom would fathers of the children be made known and stated on application forms. In the wider social setting, it was common in the 1980s and 1990s for fathers to be invisible in caring for their children. However, in recent years, the expectation of their involvement and interest in their children is accepted, as parents move towards a shared parenting approach (Kiely and Bolton, 2018; Drew and Daverth, 2007). More recently, in the last 10 years I have been the coordinator of a youth education centre for early school leavers who want to re-engage with education. The centre, known as Youthreach, is one of more than 120 such centres in Ireland (NAYC, 2017) which caters for young people aged between 15 and 20 who are availing of a second chance at education. Ireland has a high record of education achievement with 92% of the population of school leavers completing a second level Leaving Certificate qualification (CSO, 2018). Indeed, internationally Ireland has been assessed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, Report 2018) in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), as being in the top 21 out of 63 countries for education standard of young people (OECD, 2018). However, there are some young people who leave school without a senior qualification and are seen as not being in education or work. These amount to 5% of all young people aged between 18 and 24 (CSO, 2018). Of this number 7% are male and 4% are female, which highlights the need for an alternative school setting for adolescents who are not

qualified for work or ready for further education, and illustrates that males are more likely than females to leave school without a secondary education. Youthreach is the recognised programme for young people in Ireland who are not in education or employment and it provides a learner centred programme to meet the needs of students on a personal and academic level (NAYC, 2017). It is this cohort of young men who I see as the most neglected in research studies in Ireland especially when they become fathers. My attention to the role of fathers in education was increased by the fact that some of my young male students (under 21) have become parents themselves. I now find myself questioning how they can take on the role of being a father at such a young age, continue with their education, provide resources for their child and be positively and actively involved with their child. Long term, I am curious to examine their attitudes to education as I am concerned that their children will repeat the same route of early exit from school and become part of the cyclical pattern of educational disadvantage.

It is my professional practice that drives the interrogation of the father role, and is an impetus recognised by Merriam (1989), who states that the origins of research questions are often derived from practice issues:

We observe something that puzzles us, we wonder about it, we want to know why it is the way it is, we ask whether something can be done to change it and so on. (p.43)

I am concerned that early school leavers may not have positive childhood experiences to draw from. Likewise, negative educational experiences might hinder their attitude to education for their children. I believe it is important for practitioners to have some understanding of how different areas of life, from family relationships to the environment which hold the family, impact on what happens to the child. I

considered two theoretical frameworks as relevant to the development of relationships within the family and which impact on how fathers and children connect with one another. I present the frameworks of Bowlby (1980, 1973, 1969) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) in the following section as theoretical perspectives.

#### **1.4 Theoretical framework: Bowlby's attachment theory**

When I began my research study, I was influenced by the theoretical lens of Bowlby's attachment theory (1980, 1973, 1969) to consider the importance of closeness of the father-child relationship. The relationship between mothers and their children has been the subject of much research and Bowlby, and later Ainsworth, were the forerunners of attachment theory (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). Bowlby (1969) identified the attachment figure as the person who offers the infant child responsive and sensitive care. He extended this role, from initially stating that mothers were the primary carers, to include fathers and other carers. Young children, Bowlby (1969) suggested, like to explore, but at times of distress they recognise their primary caring figure and they return to a place of safety, and so the closeness of the relationship to the caring figure is reinforced. This trusting connectedness is the model of future relationships. It is described by Bowlby (1988, p.419) as the "multitude pathways along which any one person may develop" and is present in every child as their Internal Working Model. This model has been formed by the person's life experience and their experience of attachment, which has been provided by their initial carers (Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby's (1969) model identified a child to be either securely or insecurely attached. Children with *secure* attachment can leave their carers secure in the knowledge that they can return to them if they become anxious. They are not affected emotionally by the removal of the parent but recognise who to return to as their "secure base" (Bowlby, 1969). *Insecurely*

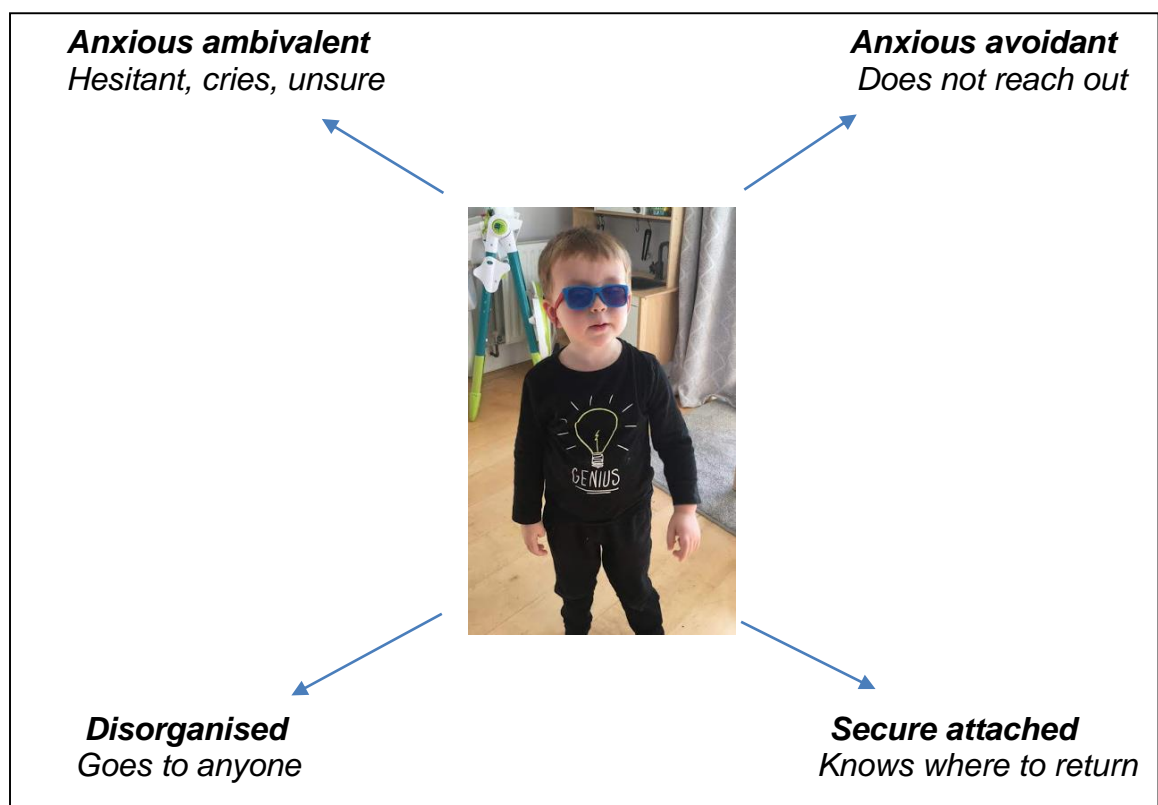
*attached* children, he states, are those who will avoid or ignore the caregiver, showing little emotion when they depart or return (Bowlby, 1969). Following studies in Uganda, Ainsworth's research of the "strange situation" (p.338) added to Bowlby's positing of attachment and she further defined attachment in the following terms (Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991):

*Anxious ambivalent* describes a child who cries in the company of strangers (or when the carer leaves the child) but is often resistant to making contact when the carer returns. *Anxious avoidant insecure* attachment describes a child who avoids all carers in the room and behaves independently; and *disorganised attachment* describes a child who is not attached to anyone, or is indiscriminate as to whom s/he goes to for comfort (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). It is useful to know what *secure attachment* looks like and Bowlby (1988) describes this as generally being a situation where the child checks out that the environment is safe: if it is, he explores and if not, he looks for the attachment figure for reassurance (Bowlby, 1988). If the adult is not available, or is unresponsive, the attachment system is activated, and the child becomes upset. When the child is regularly responded to and feels reassured the child is described as having a secure attachment (*Figure 1.1*). The outcomes of secure attachment are seen in a child who is protected and feels safe, the child becomes better able to control emotions when upset. Long term, the child learns to trust that the attachment figure is reliable and trustworthy, and, with support, the child learns to linguistically identify and describe their feelings. Attachment relationships facilitate the child in accepting their culture and to become more competent in developing relationships with peers in childhood, into adolescence and into adulthood (Bowlby, 1988). While Bowlby concentrated mainly on the early years of life, he acknowledged that this phase of development has an



impact on the child throughout their lifespan (Howe, 2011; Bowlby, 1988). Howe (2011) explains that the sense of who we are emerges from our sense of belonging: knowing that you belong to someone gives identity, meaning and direction. Personality, behaviour, human relationships and response to others are formed as a result of attachment experiences (Howe, 2011). In childhood, the child is looking for protection, but adulthood is when care-seeking and care-giving come together, and people give what they have experienced (Howe, 2011). Bowlby (1988) expressed concern that poor early childhood experiences of attachment can result in mental health problems in adolescence.

Figure 1.1: Bowlby attachment styles (1980, 1973, 1969)



It is necessary to take on board critics of Bowlby's theory, in order to have an open and non-judgemental approach to the research field. Mooney (2010) argues that our

early relationships tend to stay with us, however, living and relationship situations can change for parents and their children. Parents' circumstances can change both positively and negatively therefore attachment is not stuck, it is open to alteration and improvement, but also to deterioration (Mooney, 2010). Those who previously were seen as attachment figures may become unwell, and those who were previously unable to be attachment figures can improve their ability to be responsive (Mooney, 2010). Rutter (1972) claims that attachment only occurs when the child is eight months old and the feeling of attachment can be extended to fathers and also to siblings, even to inanimate objects such as soothers or blankets. Kagan (2004) further suggests that caution is needed if the stance is taken that a lifetime of damage is done if early attachment is poor. He suggests that people change over time and that poor attachment in childhood can be mitigated by good relationships in adolescence or adulthood. To evaluate the long-term effects of attachment, it is worthwhile looking at studies that extend across the lifespan from childhood to adulthood. Grossmann *et al.* (1999) and Grossman *et al.* (2005) are among the first longitudinal studies of the effects of attachment into adulthood. Their 20-year perspective of attachment supports Bowlby's belief that paternal contributions are vital to "secure, stable, exploratory balanced and verbally fluent attachment dispositions in adulthood" (Bowlby, 1988, p. xv) Grossman *et al.* (1999) suggest that when mothers and fathers, separately and together, show sensitive support and acceptance of the child, their behaviours are powerful predictors of how the child develops close relationships as they grow into young adulthood. Furthermore, in contrast, evidence suggests in the Grossmann *et al.* studies (1999, 2005) that insecure attachment among adults is strongly linked to a mother's and a father's rejection and insensitivity in mid-childhood. Grossmann *et al.* (2005) suggest that while attachment is an important and necessary part of development, it is not the

only prerequisite for secure children. They warn that to augment a child's attachment, parents need to support children's exploration as they grow away from the family unit. Monitoring their children's peer friendship group and other social relationships as they enter adolescence is vital (Grossmann *et al.*, 2005) to ensure they are supported from a distance. The movement from the family unit brings the child or young person, into the extended community, where they are influenced by interactions and experiences of school and connections with other social groups. A further area of attachment, according to Grossman *et al.* (2005), brings our attention to the move from adolescent into parenthood. They argue that the support given by the caregiver provides the child with a model for parenthood. Experiences of care and nurturing are therefore important for the development of secure attachments into the next generation (Grossman *et al.*, 2005). Consideration therefore also has to be given to the variables which affect a child's development, including ethnicity, culture, poverty, parents' level of education, and individual temperament (Howe, 2011). These connections link the child and father to elements beyond the immediate relationship, so it is necessary to see how these variables are situated in systems outside the family unit and how they impact on the father-child relationship. This perspective brings our attention to the theoretical framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

### **1.5 Theoretical framework: Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory**

I was drawn to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) for this study, as it was used as a baseline developmental theory in Ireland's policy document *Better outcomes brighter futures 2014-2020* (DCYA, 2014). The document takes the view that a whole community approach to collaboration of practice supports the child's development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) offers a theory of ecology which situates

variables of influences on the developing child within a series of eco-systems. He presents the argument that the systems within which the family and child live impact on the growing child. Development is hypothesised by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as a combination of influences through four aspects that need to be considered, these are: the person, context, process and time. Bronfenbrenner (1979) further explains that the attributes of the person are characteristics such as gender and age; the context is the environment or systems that impact on development; and the process is the interaction between the systems and the time is the era or age in which development occurs. The child is in the centre of his/her own universe situated with their family in what Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes as the “micro system”, where they are connected through relationships with family members and friends in their immediate environment. The individuals who link directly to, respond to, and influence the child are within this “micro level” and include their family, friends, carers, and teachers. The interconnecting relationship between these people is described as being situated within the “mesosystem”. Bronfenbrenner defines the mesosystem as “a set of interrelations between two or more settings” (1979, p.209). A relevant example is where teachers develop an individual learning plan (ILP) for a student. This can include liaising with a mother and a father, referring a child to psychological education assessment, liaising with specific health care personnel who may need to give support to the student outside the school environment and arranging with the school principal for a particular curriculum content that responds to the child’s learning needs. This collaboration and communication between the settings directly link to the child and are situated within the mesosystem. It exemplifies Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) proposal that children’s development is encouraged through exposure to multiple settings, with experienced people, who are supportive of their needs.

The child's development is also influenced by happenings in systems with which they have no direct contact. The systems, in which the child is not present, but which impact on their family or community, are described as the "exosystem". This system includes the parents' workplace, social welfare institutions, parents' GP; places that do not involve the child directly but which impact on the child's life. When, for example, a parent is made redundant from their job, the loss of salary impacts on the resources available to the family and this, in turn, affects the child's economic positioning. The child is also submerged into the environment where the cultural context of where he/she lives is influenced by the values and beliefs of family and country where they are reared; and this range of influences sits within the "macrosystem". Residents of the same country may have certain beliefs and values based on general national identifiable practices however, these are also presented through particular family accepted norms which can be open to change over a life course by different generations (Brannen *et al.* 2011). An example in the context of this study, is the ethnic group of Irish Travellers. Totalling almost 35,000 throughout the island of Ireland, they are less than 1% of the population and have only been a recognised ethnic group since 2017, however their distinct traditions set them apart and gives them a unique way of living together (Pave Point, 2019). This is further exemplified in the way that Irish Travellers' beliefs are heavily tied to Catholic religious' principles, where marriage is supported before having children, and results in a high number of young marriages, with many teenagers becoming fathers and mothers in adolescents (CSO, 2016). This occurrence is in contrast to the Irish national trend of later aged marriages and births which are predominantly in the 30+ age group (CSO, 2016) and is indicative of a change in Ireland's increased age of parenting which has gradually occurred over the last fifty years. This passage of time is represented by the "chronosystem" and demonstrates how

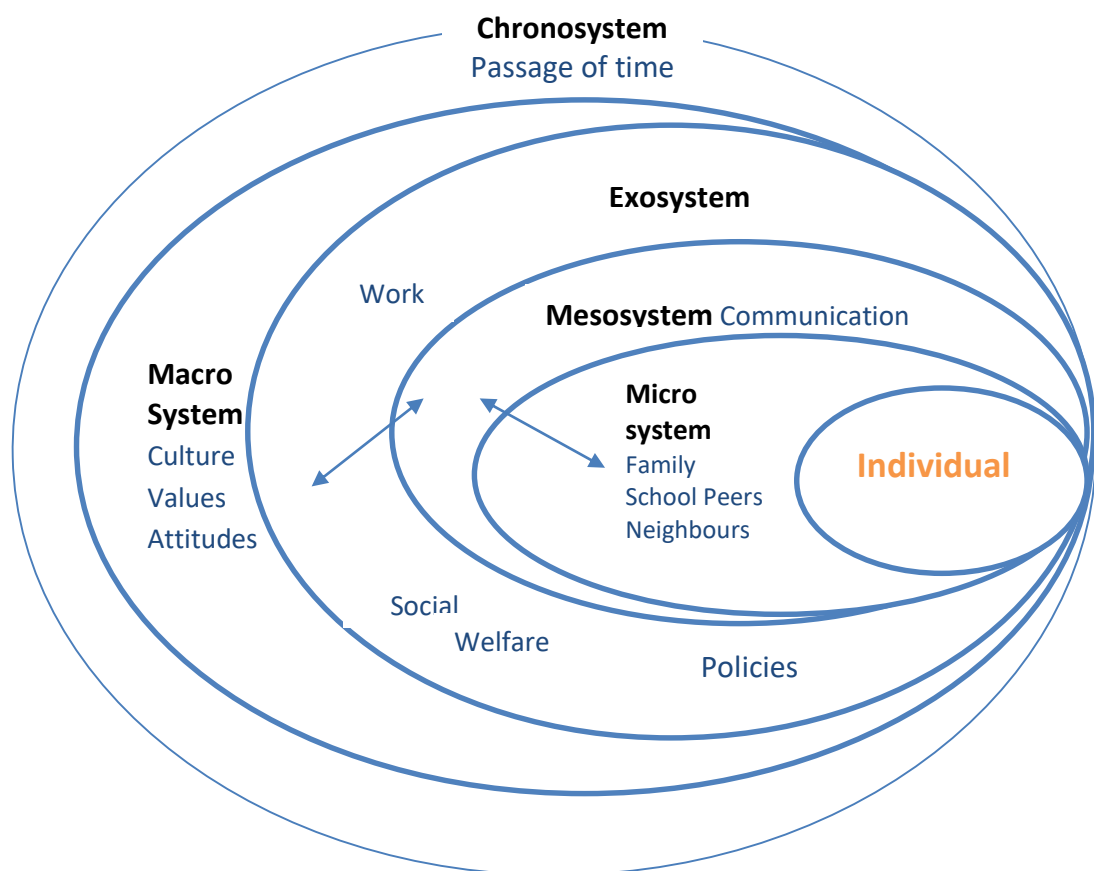
the passing of time brings different expectations to individuals, families, cultures and nations.

Overall, in order to understand human development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed it was necessary to consider the entire ecological system, the micro, the meso, the exo, the macro and the chrono, which separately and together impact and influence the child's development. Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) provides the framework with which to examine how the world around the child helps or hinders their development. This brings the child's growth beyond the closeness of his immediate relationships and extends those connections to environmental systems which can add to and affect their developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Nixon and Swords (2016) similarly explain these contexts as being systems that are structured like a series of nested multi-layered classifications, all of which exert an influence on the child's development. Family, school, and neighbourhood directly influence the child's outcomes and although the family has the most immediate influence on the child, the relationship they or their parents have outside the home (for example in school or in work) also impact on the child's wellbeing. Nixon and Swords (2016) further explain that Bronfenbrenner's theory on the impact of government policies and services on a child's development makes us aware of the importance of examining the cultural contexts, the beliefs, morals and attitudes surrounding the child. These work independently of each other, but in combination they all influence and determine the child's life experiences and has a bearing on the child's wellbeing, ultimately influencing developmental outcomes – physical, cognitive and emotional (Nixon and Swords, 2016).

As previously stated, ecological systems were explained by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as systems to which the child belongs or is linked, and all have the potential to

impact and influence their development (*Figure 1.2*). However, the theory has been criticised for failing to focus on the individual's capacity for their own development (Ettekal and Mahoney, 2017). The individual, as Ettekal and Mahoney (2017) suggest, is an active agent in his development and the systems theory does not give enough credence to the interrelated connections between the systems.

*Figure 1.2: Interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.*



Ettekal and Mahoney's (2017) argument builds on Paquette and Ryan's (2001) criticism of Bronfenbrenner's system's theory, where they argue that the individual is well positioned to develop autonomously, despite their environment. Individuals, they suggest, can be self-driven and are not wholly dependent on their environment. Individuals show a sense of purpose, aspiration and motivation which cannot be explained by systems. This aspect of development was eventually recognised as an addition to the original framework and was described by Bronfenbrenner as bio-

ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Another criticism is that the world has become smaller and more globalised, which means that another layer of systems is needed to represent the impact of globalisation on individuals (Christensen, 2016). Overall, while Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) is a valuable approach to examining and understanding child development, it is necessary, however to consider whether systems theory totally encompasses how the individual's relational development is supported.

### **1.6 Theoretical framework: conclusion and impact on study**

I set out to consider how Bowlby (1980, 1973, 1969) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical frameworks affect the individual's positioning within personal relationships of family, while also examining how the family is impacted by the systems that influence the individual's development. Bronfenbrenner's theory is seen by authorities in Ireland as a significant method of assessing the development of the child in relation to community supports and interventions, and is the underlying theoretical framework to support the policy document *Better outcomes brighter futures* (DCYA, 2014). The theory is a guiding principle to agency collaboration in interventions created by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency (2014). In cases where there is not a child protection issue, but where children and families need support, a collaborative approach to agency intervention is implemented. These proceedings called Meitheal (Tusla, 2015) involve parents and children meeting supportive agencies in one space to discuss the child's needs. They are referred to as partnership, prevention and family support processes (PPFS) (Tusla, 2018a). Tusla (2014) also recognise Bowlby's theory as an important perspective in child protection cases, as attachment to a caring figure is important for child



security. Therefore, the two theories need to be given attention, in order to consider both the environment and relationships where children thrive.

I perceive, however, that neither theory gives sufficient priority to fathers, especially in acknowledging the challenge that they face in developing close relational contact with their children. Bowlby's attachment theory was overwhelmingly directed to the attachment of mother and child, though he extended his theory to include attachment to fathers at a later stage. However, both his and Ainsworth's (1991) studies involved observing the separation and anxiety caused by the absence of the mother, rather than the father (Bowlby and Ainsworth, 1991). I believe that Bowlby's (1980, 1973, 1969) predisposition to considering the absence of mothers is linked to his own childhood of being cared for by a nanny, in the absence of his own mother. His stance in examining the mother-child relationship also represents the chronological positioning of his work. In the 1960s, where it was more accepted that mothers were the primary carers and fathers were the breadwinners, the absence of the mother was more pronounced. However, his theory does not go far enough to explain how an attachment can be supported to another person, even when that person is not present in their daily lives, as, for example, when parents live apart from one another or where the mother and father work away from home.

Bronfenbrenner (1979), I believe, also fails to acknowledge the difficulties facing separated families. In all cases each parent is impacted by the systems in which they themselves are situated, so we could have three layers of systems at play: that of the child, the mother and the father. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) use of nesting Russian dolls fitting comfortably inside one another to represent the systems does not, in my opinion, represent the constant flux and wane of movement that each person in the family is subjected to.

I chose to combine the two frameworks of Bowlby (1980, 1973, 1969) and Bronfenbrenner (1979), as there are elements in both which give guidance to personal development. From the research, it is evident that children experience different types of attachment and children are affected by the systems – the environments – to which they and their families are exposed. However, I believe there is a case for fathers and children, who are more prone to be separated by lifestyle and work balance or by relationship breakdowns, to be considered in more depth. I see a theory of “closeness and connectedness” as a synthesis of the two frameworks that apply to the relationship between a father and child. Following the analysis of data from the study I present this theory further in Chapter 5 and *Figure 5.1: Coil of closeness and connectedness* illustrates the concept.

With an openness and objectivity in exploring the relationship of father and child, I proceed to examine the research literature to view the history of fathering in Ireland, the research studies on fathers – whether resident, non-resident in Chapter 2, the literature review. I will consider if the combined variables of being a young father and an early school leaver in Ireland are represented in previous research studies.

### **1.7 Research questions**

My particular area of enquiry into the relationships between fathers and children stemmed primarily from my interest in early school leavers who become fathers. I was interested in examining how they were fathered in childhood and how that experience impacts on them as they become fathers themselves. Therefore, to explore the situation of becoming and being a father, the primary research question asked was:

*What are the fathering experiences of young Irish men who have been early school leavers?*

This question was further supplemented by the following questions:

*What are the factors that influence these men's views about fathering?*

*What are the factors that impact on their ability to father?*

Within the context of education, the following question was the definitive empirical enquiry:

*What is the impact of these fathering experiences on the men's further education and on their children's education?*

The questions were explored using a semi-structured interview technique, and photographs and diagrams were also used as a visual aid to elicit conversation. Observations and field notes were documented throughout the study and a journal diary was used to track mini interviews with one participant over a year's period of research. The methodology of the study is further explored in Chapter 3.

The following section details the plan of the thesis of the research study.

## **1.8 Structure of the thesis**

Chapter 1 has presented the rationale for the study and the research questions, and the thesis continues with Chapter 2 which presents the literature review. The next chapter explores the historical development of policy that influenced the fathering role in Ireland, followed by an examination of the meaning and interpretation of fathering. The review presents the challenges facing fathers – whether resident, non-resident or young – and considers how the fathering relationship influences children's developmental outcomes. Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the methodology of the research study which is discussed in detail. This includes

sections on participant selection, the selection procedures and the hard-to-reach participants and gives a description of early school leavers. It also includes reference to Irish Traveller fathers, as some of the participants in the study are Travellers. The chapter then presents a section on being an ethical researcher, which examines consent and anonymity, and is followed by a detailed account of the methods of data collection and giving feedback to participants. The chapter also includes a reflection on the role of the researcher and concludes with a section on the method of data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the data from the research study, which used structural analysis as a presentation model. Chapter 5 discusses the findings using thematic analysis approach and Chapter 6 concludes the thesis with recommendations for policy and practice and includes a personal reflection on the research study.

Chapter 2, the literature review, follows.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction to literature review: why fathers?**

The following review presents research pertaining to the role of fathers. This review is used to explore the political and historical background of the importance of family in Ireland. This encompasses the understanding and expectations of the role of fathering, which has changed over the decades from the establishment of Ireland as a free state in 1922 to the present day. The review then presents research that examines the current social expectations of the fathering role, and considers the barriers and challenges faced by men – whether resident, non-resident or adolescent – in fulfilling and taking on their role as fathers. It also considers how the role of fathers affects children’s developmental outcomes and, in particular, how children are impacted by the absence of a father’s involvement. The review closes with a consideration of the role of fathering transmissions of behaviour and values through the generations of family experiences. Exploring these areas of research offers an opportunity to identify gaps in the knowledge base of fathers’ involvement with their children from one generation to another and thus provides a rationale for a research study to examine the issues facing young fathers in Ireland.

The first section looks at the historical and political developments which have influenced the evolving and changing role of fathers in Ireland.

### **2.2 Historical perspectives of fathering in Ireland**

In order to situate the research study in its present context, the review starts with a presentation of the political and historical developments of policy in Ireland in relation to the role of fathers. This exploration takes on board the sentiments of Mills (1967), as cited by Brannen (2015, p.9), who argues that a “historical lens helps us

to frame questions in meaningful ways”. Brannen (2015) also suggests that it helps to look for conditions that have led to change or disruption of a past practice, to gain a historical perspective on current situations.

The exploration of the conditions of change over the last 80 years in Ireland gives insight into the many adjustments that the fathering role has experienced. Indeed, the literature suggests that the role of fathers has become lost or hidden and many fathers have moved from the patriarchal position of head of the household to the non-resident, absent father position (Drew and Daverth, 2007). To appreciate this transformation, it is helpful to examine the evolution of social constructs that have impacted on policy change. In particular, policies that have affected men have evolved from the cultural and societal changes of women’s circumstances. It is beneficial to trace the evolution of parenting roles through a gender lens and examine the changes in policy that were created primarily to support the role of women, but which have had an impact on the role of the father. The following exploration reflects on the policies relating to family and parenting from the establishment of the Irish Republican State in 1922 to the present day; and while it is a descriptive litany of events, it is presented with critical comment.

When Ireland set out to establish its independence from Great Britain a “Proclamation for the People of Ireland” (Forógra na Poblachta, 1916) was written during the Rising of 1916, which stated the aims of the new free independent state. This was the first attempt to establish Ireland’s own constitution and it demonstrated a pioneering stance in valuing men and women equally. It offered gender equality at a time when Irish and British women under British rule were not allowed to vote and is demonstrated in the statement:

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally (Forógra na Poblachta, 1916, para. 1).

Following independence from Great Britain in 1922 Ireland was established as a Republic. In 1937, the Proclamation was reviewed and a new political constitution of Ireland was written (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937). The social and moral position relating to parenting and family obligations in Ireland was strongly influenced by religious beliefs and by political principles in the first third of the 20th century (McPartland, 2010). Ireland's religious ethos of Catholicism strongly influenced the compilation of the Constitution, and the "family" in Ireland was constitutionally described as "mother, father and child within a lawful partnership" (McPartland, 2010, p.8). The traditional roles of "breadwinner" (father) and "home carer" (mother) were the dominant accepted roles of a two-parent family during much of the 20th century, with the father placed as the provider and the mother staying at home with the children (Drew and Daverth, 2007; McKeown, 2001).

Within this scenario there was general acceptance that only the mother was capable of caring for children and the father went to work and was the sole financial provider (Drew and Humbert, 2012). The amended Irish constitution of 1937 (Irish Statute, 1937) was written and accepted into Irish Law in 1937 and supported this attitude.

The family unit was protected in Article 42:1, which states:

The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law (Bunreacht na hÉireann, Article 42:1, 1937).

Continuing this ethos of support to the family Article 42: 2 states:

The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State (Bunreacht na hÉireann, Article 42:2, 1937).

The Constitution continues with its support for the woman in the family home by stating:

In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, a woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home (Bunreacht na hÉireann, Article 42:2:2, 1937).

Although the Proclamation of 1916 set out to give equal rights to men and women, the protective stance towards women and the family unit in the amended constitution of 1937 reinforced the denial of the rights of married women to work outside the home, and strengthened the significance of the man as the main breadwinner.

Within the work environment, the support of the mother as the “stay-at-home carer” and the father as the “breadwinner” was further sustained within the public service by the introduction of the marriage bar in 1932 (Duncan, 2013). This “bar” discriminated against women working, prevented married women from being recruited into public service, and ensured that single women, on marrying, left their work positions (Department of the Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG), 2015; McPartland, 2010). The discrimination against women working extended further into private business, where it was regular practice for women to be paid half the salary of men, thus not making it worthwhile for them to work outside the home (Drew and Daverth, 2007). This approach to encouraging women to be at home confirmed the father’s role as breadwinner and main financial provider (Drew and Daverth, 2007).



Overall, it was generally not socially acceptable to be a “working mother” (Ranson, 2012). Although the Marriage Bar was abolished for teachers in 1957 and for Civil Servants in 1973 (Irish Statute Book, 1973, McPartland, 2010) many women left public service work to care for children and were restricted by these cultural and societal practices. However, placing the woman in the position of home carer compromised a woman’s independence. Women did not have the funds to support children independently and many had to forego having careers outside marriage.

While married mothers were encouraged to stay at home and care for their children, unmarried mothers, during the same era, were ostracised by church, state, community and their own families. Many single, expectant mothers were sent to mother and baby homes, where their children were placed for adoption and others, whose families had disowned them, were sent to Magdalen laundries (Mulally, 2019). These laundries were presented by religious orders as places of rehabilitation for women but the centres were described as asylums where women were cruelly treated and had little chance of escaping (Mulally, 2019). The fathers of the babies in the laundries were rarely consulted, and they were seldom informed about decisions about their child. In the 1950s Dr Noel Brown attempted to introduce a universal free health care system to protect mothers and babies but the church intervened and the scheme was abolished (McCord, 2013). Due to the interference of state matters by the church Dr Brown resigned as Minister of Health. These events demonstrated the strong influence of the religious orders at the time. The late 1970s saw a more compassionate attitude towards unmarried mothers. Mothers outside of marriage were supported by the Irish State to parent alone with the introduction of the Unmarried Mothers Allowance in 1973 (Department Social Community and Family Affairs, DSCFA, 1973). It was the first social welfare

payment to acknowledge the existence of women bringing up children on their own and although it amounted to only £8.50 per week (Rush, 2005), it gave single mothers financial support to rear their children. Mothers were seen as capable of being single parents and no compulsion was placed on fathers to be involved physically or financially. However, by supporting the lone, unmarried mother the Government had, by default, excluded fathers from the responsibility of caring for their children and no system was put in place for women to receive maintenance. This practice encouraged fathers not to be involved with their child and, since the father's name did not need to be placed on a child's birth certificate, some children had "invisible", unacknowledged fathers (McKeown, 2001).

The allowance paid to mothers was in time changed to the Lone Parent's Allowance in 1990 and then to One-Parent Family Allowance in 1997 (Department of Social Protection, DSP, 2016). The payment was only paid to a mother if she was not co-habiting with the father and therefore did not encourage mothers to allow fathers to live with their children or to support them financially. Within a married situation, mothers were only able to access a One-Parent Family Allowance if the father was in jail or had been evicted from the family home and was not permitted to return (DSP, 2016). The negative repercussions of these policies resulted in some fathers not being in daily contact with their children and their responsibility to their children was devalued by the fact that they were not being made liable for their maintenance. In some cases, mothers took court action to pursue payments, but many did not, as they were fearful of their One-Parent Family Allowance being rescinded or reduced (Drew and Daverth, 2007).

The women's movement in the 1970s contributed to a change in workplace policy and women's access to equitable employment was improved. In 1973, the marriage

bar, which compelled women to stop working after marriage, was deemed to be an unequal policy and was abolished (Irish Statute, 1973); women were now given the option to work when married and to continue working after having children. The changes resulted in a cultural shift to the acceptance of the “working mother” (Ranson, 2012) and eventually by 2004 the Commission of the European Union, which Ireland had joined in 1973, explicitly encouraged countries to incentivise women into the workforce. The emphasis was now placed on increasing the numbers of dual-income families (European Union, 2004). This had the desired effect in the workplace, with the numbers of women employed in the years of the “Celtic Tiger” (2004-2007) – a time of huge economic growth in Ireland – increasing to 61% in 2007 of all Irish women (DCYA, State of the Nation, 2012; Drew and Humbert, 2012). After the Celtic Tiger numbers of women in work reduced in 2012 to 50% and most only worked part-time (DCYA, State of the Nation, 2012). Participation in the workforce by women increased again in 2018 to 77.2% as the Irish economy improved (EU, 2018). These figures demonstrate the move to gender equality in employment but also indicate the precariousness of women’s employment situation which is dependent on national and global issues.

Alongside these developments, in the legal domain, the availability of divorce, made possible by the introduction of the 15th Amendment of the Constitution Act, 1995 (Irish Statute Book, 1995), resulted in an increase in children in families being parented by one parent, usually the mother, a situation which is currently increasing (CSO, 2016, 2019a). Looking back on the 1990s there was an increase accessibility to the Lone Parent’s Allowance and, with the rise of families headed by mothers only, there became a need to support women to access employment or education opportunities. Following the introduction of the Equal Opportunities Childcare

Programme (EOCP) in 2001, childcare centres were established to support “lone parents”, with 95% of these parents being women (County Carlow VEC, 2011; Dublin Adult Learning Centre, 2001; Parents Alone Resource Centre, 1999). It was often the case that no details of fathers were given to the services, with the result that fathers were not seen to be involved in decisions affecting their children. The situation of not recognising fathers was further compounded by the lack of a legal requirement for the father’s name to be on a child’s birth certificate; and if mothers were not forthcoming with the name of a child’s father, his details were never requested when a child’s birth was registered and the situation continued with a lack of information on fathers when children attended school. Fathers could therefore not be traced and were continually described as being invisible (McKeown, 2001).

Despite research indicating that fathers who are financially responsible for their children are also more inclined to assert their fathering rights (Glickman, 2004), the Irish Government has been slow to identify and pursue absent or non-resident fathers. The International Year of the Family highlighted the problems of absent fathers in Ireland in 1994 and suggested that vulnerable lone parent families needed to be supported by non-resident fathers (IYF, 1994). The Law Reform Commission in 2010 (LRC, 2010) stated that children have the right to know who their parents are and that both the mother and father have responsibilities in respect of their child to make core decisions on how that child will be raised (LRC, 2010). It was only 2014 that the Irish Government introduced the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2014 to compel the mother of the child to register the name of the father on the child’s birth certificate (Irish Statute Book, 2014). This development gives children access to their father’s details and legally recognises the father, and consequently confirms his responsibilities to his child. Examining the changes to

family construction in Ireland, the *State of the nation report* in 2016 informs us that there were over 220,000 one-parent families in Ireland in 2016, equating to 25.8% of all families with children (DCYA, State of the Nation, 2016). One in five families with children in Ireland were a one-parent family, with nearly 30,000 lone fathers, as opposed to 190,000 lone mothers, thus presenting a high number of fathers as non-resident (DCYA, State of the Nation, 2016). Within the family courts system, there has been an increase in applications in the Family Law Court for maintenance, access and custody, and more requests for supervision and care orders concerning vulnerable children (Fahey, 2012), however a more positive development has seen a decrease in barring orders for domestic violence. McKeown (2001) suggests that an increase in applications for maintenance may well be linked to the increase in legalised family separation. Cabrera and Peters (2000) suggest that men who formally agree to provide child support tend to make more of a commitment to their children. However, the anomaly still exists whereby only fathers within a marriage have automatic guardianship to their child and unmarried men, not living with their child, and divorced men have to ascertain their rights to guardianship by mutual legalised agreement with the mother of the child, or apply through the courts for guardianship or custody (Treoir, 2017). The increase of fathers taking court action themselves is indicative that increasingly non-resident fathers want to make known their commitment to their children (Treoir, 2017); however, McKeown (2001) has argued that fathers have been actively striving to ensure that their rights as non-resident parents are acknowledged, thus demonstrating the approach to fathers' equality as a parent with the mother is a continuing area of discontent for over the last 20 years.

The focus on fathers' rights, as is the case with all parents and guardians, cannot be viewed without consideration for the safety and care of children. The Government of Ireland reframed the services for children into a new government department named Tusla, The Child and Family Agency (Tusla, 2014). The state agency, which was established in 2014 and is responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children, has established a formality of structures to deal with child safeguarding issues. Concerns about children's safety are evident in child protection reports collected over the last 20 years by Buckley and Burns (2015) and these have informed how family support agencies respond and support parents. A service delivery framework known as the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme (PPFS) (Tusla, 2018a) has been in place since 2016 and uses Child and Family Support Networks (CFSN) (Tusla, 2018b) to work with agencies and services in direct contact with children. Through connecting to schools, GPs, public health nurses, educational welfare officers, mothers and fathers, Tusla allows information to be exchanged regarding childcare concerns. Practice models, called Meitheals, were established whereby all who are in contact with a child share information, thus supporting the family to live in a safe supported environment (Tusla, 2015). The ultimate goal was to achieve a better life for the child. To coincide with these developments, the Children First Act 2015, enacted in 2017, made the reporting of child abuse mandatory by key professionals working with children (Irish Statute 2015a). Overall a cohesive, collaborative and all agency and family participatory process has been developed.

However, the first report on the Meitheal procedure was published in 2018 (Rodriguez, Cassidy and Devaney, 2017) and showed a gaping omission in the lack of consultation with fathers. The participants in the research review consisted of 18

mothers and only one father, thus showing an inequitable approach to collaboration with both parents. The implementation of the policy document “Towards the development of a participation strategy” (Kennan *et al.*, 2015) gives priority to inclusiveness of children’s voices and it is intended that children and young people have more opportunity to express their needs. Strategies such as the Meitheal process (Tusla, 2015) and the Child and Youth Participation Strategy 2019-2023 (Tusla, 2019, Kenan *et al.* 2015) need to be seen as equitable processes of inclusion, so that the triad of father, mother and child are all included. While the Meitheal process has provided evidence of improved relationships between mothers and their children, and has indicated that the process has added positively to maternal mental health (Rodriquez *et al.*, 2017), it remains to be seen how the strategy impacts on an enhanced inclusion of fathers in a child’s life.

The historical overview of the developing and changing policies in Ireland reveals that policies were initially established in the Republic of Ireland to protect the family unit. In safeguarding the protection of the family, these same policies and practices introduced in the Constitution (1937) deprived women of the right to work outside the family home. The policies had to change, in order that women who became separated and divorced, or who had children outside of marriage, could either work or be supported by the State to care for their child. However, in caring for the mother and child, policies have worked against non-resident fathers and those who never married the mother of their child. Access to children is now mainly determined in the courts and in many cases judges decide the limitations and extent of the father’s involvement in their child’s life (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). Despite the increase of women in employment, the traditional role of breadwinner-provider remains a strong portrayal of the fathering role, and with gender equality strived for

in the workplace, working fathers also have to be considering as part of an equality agenda in child rearing in the home. Whether resident or non-resident it is timely to consider if fathers are a necessary contributor in supporting children's development. Consideration of the different interpretations of the ways in which resident and non-resident fathers engage with their children is an important element of understanding how the father's role impacts on children and is presented in the next section.

### **2.3 Becoming a father: interpretations and understandings**

This section of the literature review attempts to trace the evolution and interpretation of the fathering role. Historically, as stated previously, the breadwinner role of the father and the caring role of the mother was the universal accepted norm for most of the 20th century (Drew and Humbert, 2012; Drew and Daverth, 2007). From the 1970s, when an interest grew in researching the part played by fathers in children's lives, observations and reports on fathers' involvement were on the whole declared by mothers (Lamb, 2010, Tamis Le Monda *et al.*, 2004). Pleck (2007), on examining the role of fathers, framed the interactions of fathering as falling into three specific categories described as: engagement, accessibility and responsibility. Lamb (2010) defined these further: "engagement", he says, is seen when fathers participate in hands-on care and have a physical and psychological presence; "accessibility" defines fathers as being readily available for direct interaction with their child; and "responsibility" is how the father ensures that the child is being taken care of with the required resources. Brown and Barker (2004) present the argument that there has been a move in the 21st century to distribute parental care between parents and that educational strategies and a more positive cultural and social empathy towards fathers' involvement has changed the role of fathers (Brown and Barker, 2004). However, they suggest that:



The extent to which men see themselves -- or others see them -- as nurturers, mentors, companions, disciplinarians, advocates, or even as important in the lives of their children -- depends largely on economic, social, political, cultural and religious factors within any given context (Brown and Barker, 2004, p.17).

Varying factors influencing the nature of fathering are visible in Ireland and McKeown (2001) has traced the evolution of terms attributed to fatherhood, suggesting that “fathers are now being judged against changing expectations of what it is to be a ‘good father’” (2001, p.4). He defines the “good father” as one who is emotionally involved with his child, as well as being a provider, but admits that descriptions of fathering are laced with ambiguity and uncertainty. Fathers in Ireland, McKeown (2001) argues, have been described as being “traditional” within the role of breadwinner-provider, but in more recent times, the “modern” father is seen as one who takes physical responsibility for the care of the child (p.3) and is seen pushing the buggy and changing nappies. Further research by Garfield and Chung (2006) has identified that the contemporary modern father is expected to be at the birth of his child. In their study of fathers’ involvement, they find that 83% of non-married fathers and 93% of married fathers attended the birth of their child, thus demonstrating a high level of involvement in the early stages of a child’s life. As the only caring task that fathers cannot physically undertake is breastfeeding, McKeown (2001) suggests that it could be assumed that all other caring tasks can be shared. However, Miller (2011) explores this expected change in sharing the caring responsibilities and questions whether parenting roles are equally shared between mothers and fathers. Over a two-year study in which men expressed intentions of sharing the caring role on initially expecting their child, demands of work and poor paternal leave resulted in these aspirations not being realised (Miller, 2011). Miller (2011) also found that the roles of mothering and fathering “fall back

into gender” after a period of time (p.1036). Supporting these findings, the study of Katz-Wise *et al.* (2010) found that gender roles were stronger after a second birth, when parents often reverted to the traditional roles of breadwinner for the father and home carer for the mother, even more definitively than after the first birth. This development would suggest that the term breadwinner is still applicable to many fathers.

While it can be evidenced that the breadwinner role is significant to fathers as they take responsibility for their child (Drew *et al.*, 2012; Drew *et al.* 2007; McKeown, 2001), there are other factors at play which influence men’s behaviours. Brannon (1976) in his study of men in the 70s and 80s argues that the role of breadwinner provider is heavily embedded in the masculinity of what it is to be a father. The male role has been historically situated in the discourse of expectations of the male being strong, sturdy, and successful, along with the possibility of the male disposition having traits of being a risk taker and adventurer (Brannon, 1976). This type of masculine discourse may still be relevant in current times (Drew, et al, 2012) where the male role is heavily linked to having paid work. There are however, two dispositions currently visible appertaining to men’s roles, one where ‘family’ oriented men work less and where ‘provider’ orientated men work more (Kaufman *et al.*, 2000, Kaufman, 2013). While a shared egalitarian parenting role, encompassing working and caring roles, is a position strived for by many modern fathers and mothers, there are still situations where men struggle with relinquishing the old traditional masculine role of provider (Thebaud *et al* 2016).

As stated in the previous chapter, historical, social, cultural and political constructs have influenced the development of the father’s role in Ireland. However, with Ireland, situated in the geographical space between USA and Europe, the role of

the father has also been influenced by family practices from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It is of value, therefore, to view how this role has been interpreted in both continents and a scrutiny of media and text representation is a worthwhile investigation. Milke and Denny's study in the USA of *Parents magazine* (2014) gives an insight into the historical changes of the perceived roles of fathers and mothers over 80 years of the publication, starting in the 1920s and moving into the 2000s. In their study, Milke and Denny (2014) use cultural textual representation by examining photography and text to track the evolution of the interpretation of the fathering role in middle-class families of America. The father of the 1920s was depicted as the authoritarian figure, while the mother's role was specific to the rearing of children, with the latter taking the view that "father knows best" (p.214). The mother was concerned with being the housewife and carer, while the father was assumed to be the dominant figure in making decisions about the children's lives. Images depict the woman as the one responsible for clothing, dressing and feeding the children, while the man of the house went off to work. Further exploration demonstrates that it was not until the 1960s that the role of the father moved to the description of being "involved" with the child, who was depicted as teaching his child the skills of chopping wood, household painting, etc. Caring tasks at this stage were not included as the responsibility of fathers and into the 1980s it was quite acceptable for the father to be depicted as the "fumbling", man incapable of performing childcare duties (Milke and Denny, 2014). Moving into the late 1990s, Milke and Denny (2014) show how the role of fathering changed from skills teaching to engagement with his child and is seen in his participation in fun activities. Fathers were now valued for their unique contribution to child development (Milke and Denny, 2014). A different interpretation of appraising the relationship between fathers and children emerged in the 2000s, with fathers willing to discuss and

express their enjoyment with being with their children (Milke and Denny, 2014). Overall, Milke and Denny's (2014) study highlights how images and texts represent cultural and societal changes and are a reminder of the societal norms of the time. The study of the parenting publication shows how the accepted social and cultural understanding of "family" is communicated through the powerful use of the popular press in text and images and demonstrates how this influences the accepted behaviour in society in a particular time and place.

King (2012), in a similar research study in the United Kingdom (UK), concurs with this analysis of text and states that the masculine role of the father was continually represented by the press over the decades. She suggests that these constructs were internalised and encompassed in fathers' identities (King, 2012). In her study of three UK National papers from the 1930s to the present day, King cites an article from the *Daily Mirror* of 1949, entitled "Remember me? I'm only the father!" The article suggests that the father's role was far more important than one which is limited to breadwinner role only and states:

He's the apple of his baby daughter's eye. The hero of his small son's imagination. He's the all-important influence - in what he says, in what he does and in how he behaves. Most men are dead keen on being a good father (King, 2012, p.9).

However, the article continues by placing the caring responsibility out of his hands, with the statement: "and while the baby may not want you to understand the intricacies of his nappy service, he will expect you to be a father" (p.9). The article, while written to represent the value of father's involvement with their child, depicts a gendered approach to parenting by excluding the father from the caring responsibility of nappy changing and demonstrates how the media represented the attitude to child 'care' responsibilities during the 1930s and 1940s as being wholly

that of the mother's. Moving to more recent times, Sunderland (2006), in her analysis of text and images of parenting and baby magazines, advises us that fathers in the 21st century are still not being represented as equal to mothers in caring for children. She argues that it is hard for any full time father (one who stays at home to care for his child) "to be taken seriously", as it is apparent that mothers still occupy this space in the media as the main carer of the child (Sunderland, 2006, p.524).

The literature on how fathers are engaged with their children has described the meaning of being a father as ranging from that of being the sole breadwinner/provider to one who shares in the caring and providing responsibilities. Text and images have depicted the changing role of the father over time and although a new understanding of the role of a "working father" (Ranson, 2012) is emerging, research suggests that parenting roles for fathers and mothers still slip back into the gendered traditional positions of breadwinner and carer. With changes in interpretations and understandings of the fathers position it is confusing to explicitly define a father's role and although the literature indicates that there is an increase in men wanting to be "hands-on" fathers (Ranson, 2012, p.753), there are challenges and barriers facing fathers in "being there" (McKeown, 2001) in whatever role is expected, and this is the area to be explored in the following sections. The sections are divided as follows: non-resident fathers; resident fathers; young fathers; intergenerational transmissions of fathering: the role model; and the benefits of fathering to children's developmental outcomes

## **2.4 Being a father: the barriers and challenges**

### **2.4.1 Non-resident fathers**

The escalation in numbers of married couples experiencing divorce in Ireland has resulted in an increase in single-parent families. We can estimate that from a population of 1,148,687 children in Ireland (DCYA, State of the Nation, 2016) there are 215,000 children who are not living with their biological father. This indicates that separated parents need to be aware of the outcomes for children if their fathers become non-resident. Cabrera and Peters (2000) argue that children without fathers are at risk of low school achievement, of low involvement in the labour market, and of being involved in delinquent behaviour. They therefore suggest that it is in the interests of the child that mothers encourage positive communication with their child's father, in order to achieve better developmental outcomes for their child. Waller (2012) supports this sentiment and establishes that a contributory factor to positive outcomes for children results from fathers maintaining a positive relationship with the mother of their child. Waller's study (2012) demonstrates that unmarried parents can work together if they support one another in their parenting of their children, even if they argue frequently. However, if there are poorer parenting patterns and they cannot communicate, conflict will result in an inability to cooperate and will result in adverse developmental outcomes for the child. Lamb (2010) also suggests that a harmonious relationship between the parents appears to be a key predictor of constructive father-child relationships. Lamb's approach to valuing the relationship between parents suggests that it is not enough for a father to show an interest in his child – he must also have the ability to foster good relationships with the mother of his child – something that may be difficult to do, if there is a history of disagreements (Lamb, 2010). Furthermore, the positivity with which other people, such as grandparents and teachers, value a child's father is important and can have a reciprocal positive impact on the children themselves (Lamb, 2010). For parents who are living separately, a positive outcome for the

whole family occurs when the father gives emotional support to the child and this, in turn, can impact on the relationship of the child to their mother in a positive manner (Lamb, 2010). Nevertheless, cooperative co-parenting is less likely when unmarried parents separate shortly after the birth or have never been together as a couple (Waller, 2012).

The study of Booth *et al.* (2010) brings an analytical approach to the type of relationships that occur between fathers and children and argues that when the father is non-resident, it can be difficult with a child's mother gatekeeping the access to the child. The study proposes that "a warm relationship with a non-resident father is sometimes superior to living with a distant resident father" (Booth *et al.*, 2010, p.10). Lamb (2010) presents the argument that it is what fathers do with their children that is important, rather than the length of time shared together. McWayne *et al.* (2013) suggest that both the quality and quantity of a father's contact with his child is important and positive parenting can be measured in traits such as warmth, nurturance and responsiveness. However, negative aspects of parenting such as harshness, punitiveness and non-responsiveness may also be present.

What is more, the literature suggests that there are challenges for non-resident fathers to sustaining closeness in relationships. Lerman (2010) states that an analysis from the *Fragile families and child wellbeing* study suggests that initially unmarried fathers spend a "considerable amount of time" (p.63) with their children but they see this time erode once they become fathers to another child with another partner. Worryingly, Lerman's (2010) study indicates that many unwed, non-resident fathers lose contact with their children after a year. Although many children cope well without contact with their father, Franséhn and Bäck-Wiklund's (2008) study,

entitled “The presence of the absent father: how lone mothers with sons construct and animate the absent father through narratives” (p. 369-381), highlights that even if it is in the best interests of the child not to have their father in their lives, a “presence” of not having a father persists and impacts on the child’s psychological wellbeing (p.374). Franséhn and Bäck-Wiklund’s (2008) study suggests that when the image of the dad as a “bad” father is supported by the mother, it is more difficult for a child to have a public narrative of his father that allows him to speak about him.

Overall, the literature shows that children are more likely to thrive well where parents, despite separation, can develop a positive relationship with one another, where the father is valued by the extended family, and where parents work together to ensure positive relationships that support children’s productive developmental outcomes. Because of their absence, non-resident fathers have particular challenges in providing consistency of boundaries and behaviours. However, this also extends to resident fathers who, while they may intend “being there” for their child, find that they face different challenges. The following section gives space to explore the challenges facing the resident father.

#### **2.4.2 Resident fathers**

It is important to acknowledge that in the context of Ireland, most fathers are resident with their children with, over 70% of families being registered as having two parents residing together (DCYA, State of the Nation, 2016). It is therefore equally of value to examine if there are specific barriers for resident fathers to be available to their children. The first study to examine is that of Miller (2011) which identified several barriers to fathers taking an equal share of caring responsibilities of their child over the first two years of life. The study in the USA showed that despite the expressed willingness and expectations of the fathers to be available for their



children, there was a decrease in their time with the child, as they advanced through infancy (Miller, 2011). One particular barrier highlighted was poor paternal leave for fathers and in some cases this was limited to one to three days. The study revealed that some men had to take annual leave when their child was born, as there is no legal requirement for USA firms to pay fathers for paternity leave (Miller, 2011). In comparison, paternity leave in Ireland has been made a legal entitlement and allows for government-funded leave of two weeks (Irish Statute Book, 2016). Since its introduction in September 2016, over 55,000 fathers have taken the opportunity to avail of paternity leave in 2018 (Reddan, 2019). However, with 61,000 births in 2018 and only 24,000 fathers taking paternity leave it would appear there are still barriers to fathers in taking time to be with their infants (Reddan, 2019). In addition to paternity leave in 2016 the Government introduced access to parental leave for fathers. The Parental Leave (Amendment Act 2019), from 2020 gives fathers an extra two weeks Paternity Benefit and gives parents the opportunity to share parental leave of 26 weeks. In a statement, when introducing the initiative, the Minister for employment affairs and social protection stated: "We are creating more opportunities for fathers to have the time to spend with their new arrivals as this greatly benefits both child and parent" (Irish Statute Book, 2019). While the intention of allocating more time for a father and child to be together is a move forward in Ireland, sharing parental leave benefits is not an increase in parenting time as its as of a shared nature with the mother, and is not always possible for fathers when they are the higher wage earner (O'Brien, 2018). In most countries in Europe, fathers' leave has been developed as an additional support to mothers' leave and has not impacted on a mother's time with their baby (O'Brien, 2018). As the payment is only €245 per week it remains to be seen if fathers will be able to avail of this opportunity to spend time with their children (Reddan, 2019). In most countries, the extended

father-care leave model has been developed as an additional support to families with young children and has not involved taking leave away from mothers. Although the Irish initiative is a welcome development, it is a lesser number of days in comparison with the Finnish practice, where a father can take 158 paid working days (Eerola, 2015). The Finnish system allows for the sharing of leave, thus enabling either or both parents to take a break from their career.

Supporting this approach, Australia takes the view that paternity leave should be seen as a long-term investment and it is believed that economic support ties the father more securely to the family. The intention of this long-term economic support from the Australian Government is perceived as reducing the need for the family to pursue financial support in the future (Australia Government Human Services, AGHS, 2016). As a result, Australians allow for one year's paternity/maternity leave, which is available to either parent. It also allows an additional 18 weeks' paid leave for either parent (AGHS, 2016). The wide difference in paternity leave policy across the world from Ireland, USA, Australia and Europe demonstrates how the value of the role of the father in the early days of a child's life has still not been established as an acceptable norm across cultures.

Miller (2011), in her U.K. study with parents over a year, suggests that where men take paternity leave, their commitment to work prevents them from taking extended leave on the birth of their child. Family commitments can be a threat to career-minded people, as career prospects are at risk if fathers are not available to work (Miller, 2011). Miller (2011) reports that the fathers in her U.K. study expressed a fear that if they availed of paternity leave their commitment to their career and workplace would be questioned by their employers. However, Ranson's U.K. study (2012) presents the idea of a new type of "working father" (p.741). In her study,

where she interviewed fathers who shared work and caring duties, she claims that some fathers are now expressing their wish to be “hands on” fathers (p.741) and they take and share the care of children, along with work responsibilities. Fathers are now accessing more ways to work from home, thus introducing a family-work balance as a priority (Ranson, 2012). Ranson suggests that just as women have had to negotiate the terrain of the “working mother” (p.758), fathers are increasingly shaking off the old interpretation of the breadwinner/ provider and developing a new understanding and meaning of the term “working father” (p.741): they are working and being fathers with equal responsibility to both roles.

The research suggests that increasingly, fathers are establishing their desire to be more available to their children. The introduction of the two-week paid paternal leave in Ireland, introduced in 2016, and the extension of access to paternal leave in 2019 goes some of the way to supporting men in their role as “working fathers”. However, overall, fathers face difficulties in taking time off from work, and while some men continue to identify strongly with the breadwinner role, some are inhibited by local arrangements for paternal leave as it can be a threat to their career prospects. While it is evident that there are barriers to the involvement of fathers in children’s lives, whether they are resident or non-resident, young dads under the age of 24 may face particular problems and this area is explored in the next section.

### **2.4.3 Young fathers**

Eerola (2015) suggests that becoming a parent is one of the biggest life changes that a person can face and the transition into fatherhood presents a challenging time for most males. Neale and Davies (2015) present the argument that the

challenges of fathering are particularly complex when a man is less than 24 years of age. This is the age when young males are often perceived as likely to participate in risky behaviour, smoking, drinking, driving fast cars, etc. (Foster and Jarvis, 2007). Considering that the birth of a baby is a stressful time for any new parent, Thompson and Crase (2004) suggest that young adults might not be prepared emotionally, cognitively or financially and can be overwhelmed by stress. In Ireland, under-24s males have been highlighted as being at particular risk of mental distress and when parenting is added to that distress, it is no surprise to see that the policy document *Better outcomes brighter futures* (DCYA, 2014) emphasises the need to support young people with this age profile. The implementation of the policy states that all children and young people's services (CYPSC, 2017) should come together in a joint effort of community closeness and support for families. The numbers of births to young people and teenagers has decreased with 1,041 births in 2017 representing an overall decrease of 66% in young births over the last twenty years (CSO, 2018). In 2012 the Health Service Executive 's report indicated that decreases could be assumed to be linked to improved Relationship & Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools and youth services along with more access to contraception services (HSE, 2012). However, the Health Behaviour School-aged Children (HBSC) report in 2014 indicates an increase in sexually transmitted diseases in young people in Ireland (HBSC, 2014), indicating poor education in relation to safe sexual activity. The critical report by the Oireachtas Committee on Education in 2018 highlights that the current programme on RSE is not appropriate enough for young people and needs revising (Nolan, 2018). In the context of this research study there is a question as to whether young people who leave post-primary school early are being educated sufficiently in safe sexual activity and birth control.

When unprotected sexual activity results in pregnancy, providing support to men who become young fathers presents particular problems, as evidenced in the following studies. In the USA, Lemay *et al.* (2010) conducted a study of young urban fathers which highlighted that financial conditions of young fathers still attending school or on training schemes impacted on their ability to contribute to their child's welfare. This influenced their mental health and a developing feeling of inadequacy caused many young fathers to opt out of supporting their child. Young fathers reported that services intended to support them often hindered their involvement in the pregnancies of the mother and the birth of their child (Lemay *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, some young fathers-to-be reported that they had at times been actively ignored at medical appointments (Thompson *et al.*, 2004), thus demonstrating that the approach to working with adolescent fathers is not always sympathetic. Lemay *et al.* (2010) suggest that young fathers require careful handling by medical and health personnel. Neale *et al.* (2015) argue that it is in having a child that young fathers use this life-changing development as a catalyst to propel them to focus on the future. In their research with young men, it was a regular response that becoming a father was cited as a reason to modify behaviour and enter the world of adulthood (Neale *et al.*, 2015). However, Thompson *et al.* (2004) present young adolescent fathers as having lower self-esteem and lower life satisfaction than those who are not fathers; and Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) suggest that in some cases young fathers may cut themselves off from their child because they feel inadequate to be the head of a new family. Barry (2007) reminds us that young men are increasingly at high risk of suicide and with Ireland having one of the highest numbers of young male suicide deaths in Europe (National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) 2019), it is imperative that adolescent fathers are given guidance and directed to support services. The research studies consistently

suggest that support structures for parents need to be created with young fathers in mind (Neale *et al.*, 2015; Lemay *et al.*, 2010; Marsiglio and Pleck, 2005; Thompson *et al.*, 2004).

In Ireland, the Teen Parenting Support Programme was established in 2000 to give assistance to young parents and, as most young mothers have partners who are of similar age (Dudley, 2007), it is important that young fathers are also included. An examination of their latest report on services shows an agency that is reacting to the needs of mothers but appears to be less successful in engaging with young fathers (TPSP, 2017). Statistics from the organisation show that over the last 10 years, births to mothers under the age of 20 has decreased but still remains at a level described as “high to middling” within the European standard (Health Service Executive (HSE), 2016). Ireland’s rate of 16.4% of all births under 20 is more favourable in comparison to the UK at 26.7% but is still very high in comparison to the best rate in Europe at 3.8% in the Netherlands (HSE, 2016). Of the 600 young mothers who looked for support with TPSP in 2017, only 55 young fathers attended the agency. The TPSP (2015) statement that the “Teen Parenting Support Programme actively seeks to engage with young fathers and encourage and support them to be involved in the lives of their children” (IFCA, 2015, p.9) shows good intentions. However, few young fathers are accompanying the mother of their child to the support agency. In my MA research study assignment, entitled “Is it cool to be a young dad?”, I conducted interviews with two fathers who were under the age of 19. When interviewed, they reported that they were ignored by support agencies in favour of the mother and despite their expressions of interest and their presence, they experienced a lack of encouragement and support to be inclusively considered at medical appointments (Osborne, 2013b).

Thompson *et al.* (2004) present a more positive approach to young men in relation to fathering. They point out that, despite adolescent males being linked to challenging behaviours, when supported these same males can develop higher self-esteem than their peers when they become fathers and they often leave their risky behaviours in favour of responsibility (Thompson *et al.*, 2004). A cross-national study by Lohan *et al.* (2013) with adolescent men in three countries demonstrates how the cultural and social constructs influence young men's attitudes towards becoming fathers. It would appear that support structures are influenced by local cultural practices and accepted social expectations in the three researched countries. In their study across Ireland, Italy and Australia, young fathers were united in their fears of unplanned pregnancy and expressed fears for the health and wellbeing of the mother of their child during pregnancy and childbirth. More than 700 males in this study (a third of respondents) expressed the view they would cope with being a father at a young age. However, there was a distinct difference across the three cultures. In Australia, young men expressed fears that fatherhood would ruin their lives (Lohan *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, most of the Irish and Italian young men in this study, expressed a more positive approach and welcomed being seen as a family man (Lohan *et al.*, 2013). Most debates on pregnancy and births regularly give voice to female reactions, as it is seen as a woman's right to decide on pregnancy and birth choices but in this study, Lohan *et al.* (2013) suggest that the views of young fathers need to be considered in equal measure to those of the mothers from the start of the pregnancy.

Generally, these research studies indicate that, although adolescence and young adulthood is seen as a time for young men to participate in activity such as risky behaviours, many welcome the opportunity to take on the role of fathering.

However, when young mothers are the centre of attention in pregnancy, there is the possibility that young fathers are ignored at this vital start of the parenting journey. Some young fathers at times may feel inadequate in providing for their children (Lemay *et al.*, 2010), so support agencies for mothers need to extend their support to ensure that young fathers are also included in the pregnancy, the birth and the development of their child.

Immediate support structures for young fathers are often initially provided by the young person's family of origin (Coutinhoa, 2016). It is therefore of value to explore how fathers of the present generation are impacted and influenced by the practices of the previous generation. The following section addresses the intergenerational transmission of fathering values and practices.

#### **2.4.4 Intergenerational transmission of fathering role.**

An examination of the historical changes to the fathering role shows that the modern father is expected not only to provide financially but to have an emotional connection to his child and to take on caring responsibilities (Kaufmann, 2013; Ranson, 2012). However, as McKeown (2001) points out, "few contemporary fathers have experienced this type of fathering themselves" (p.4). Ranson's study (2012) of three generations states the developmental changes of men in the fathering role shows there has been a decline for some fathers of the "work-focused" sole "breadwinner" father model of previous generations. The description of fathers has moved to that of a "family man" and more recently has progressed to one of a "hands-on" father (Brannen *et al.*, 2004; Ranson, 2012). The differences in generational expectations of being a father in present times are visible right from the birth of a child, since it is now the accepted norm for fathers to be present at the



birth (Coutinhoa *et al.* 2016). This is in contrast with the fathers of 40 years ago, who would not have been expected to attend (McKeown, 2001). Involvement of fathers in daily childcare duties is currently the expected practice in most western societies and the intergenerational impact of transmitted behaviours is evidenced in Yoshida's (2011) study, which shows that fathers' caring practices of their children occurred more frequently in situations where they lived as children with their own biological fathers. Wilkes *et al.* (2011) claim that with cultural and social changes being experienced by fathers at a different place and time, each generation responds to its own circumstances in different ways. Their study with seven young fathers illustrates that becoming a father made them reflect on their relationships with their own fathers; and many revealed a desire to be better fathers and to avoid the "pitfalls" that their own fathers fell into (p.184). Some expressed the negative impact of the lack of a father's involvement in their lives and did not want to repeat the scenario with their child. Mahrer *et al.* (2014) suggest that patterns of parenting in mothers and fathers are influenced by their own experiences of being parented, thus indicating that there is intergenerational transmission of parenting behaviours. This is clearly seen in Lemay *et al.*'s (2010), study of 30 young fathers aged between 19 and 25, where young men were asked to share their goals of being fathers. The majority expressed that they wanted to change previous patterns of behaviours of their fathers, in order to establish better fathering behaviours and be a positive role model for their child. Furthermore, Lemay *et al.* (2010) provide an insight into the judgements of young fathers, with 77% of the participants stating that they would not raise their child in the same way that their fathers had raised them. When asked to describe a good role model, the young fathers who had not lived with their biological father identified someone other than their own father, such as a step-father or an uncle, as examples of a "good" fathers (Lemay *et al.*, 2010).

Some cited physical and/or emotional abuse or abandonment by their father and, while demonstrating a distinct poor regard for their own fathers, their reflection on positive role models illustrated how valuable a “good” male role model is for adolescents (Lemay *et al.*, 2010). Brannen (2015) advises that: “an intergenerational focus alerts us to what is transmitted by different family generations over time and life course” (p.12) and demonstrates that fathering is impacted by family values, financial assets, political beliefs, social status, cultural behaviours, moral and emotional bonds. When these values are positive, they can facilitate constructive outcomes for intergenerational transmission of parenting.

The aforementioned studies demonstrate that the transmission of behaviours between fathers from one generation to another is influenced by social and cultural constructs. When men become fathers, it is understandable that they reflect on their own experiences of being fathered. The perceived behaviours of the role of their fathers can influence how they later behave with their own children, either taking on or totally discarding the practices from the previous generation. The patterns of involvement of fathers appear to be affected by many challenges and barriers and previous generational values can impact on the role. However, the extent to which a father’s involvement is of value to the child has not yet been covered in this literature review and it is therefore of value to explore the impact of fathers’ involvement in the developmental outcomes of children.

#### **2.4.5 The benefits of fathering to children’s developmental outcomes**

How fathers contribute to a child’s development came into consideration with Freud’s placing of the formative relationships of the child and parent as the basis of his theoretical framework on psychoanalysis (Freud, 1957). Bowlby (1969) added to

the child-parent relationship debate with his theory on attachment. Having originally explored the bond between mother and child, he later suggested that this bond or attachment could also be extended to the father (Bowlby, 1988). Lamb and Lewis (2004, p.120) propose that the majority of fathers are “elated and begin to develop feelings of connectedness” during pregnancy. When fathers of infants appreciate how unique their own child is, they adapt their speech patterns, speak more slowly and use different patterns of repetitive language from the mother, thus giving the child a more diverse language experience (Lamb and Lewis, 2004). Rowe *et al.* (2004) in their study of fathers and mothers in low income families found that mothers used directive speech whereas fathers asked more wh-questions and exploratory speech and they suggest that this method of speaking by fathers offers children “a bridge to the outside world” (p289). Various research studies referenced by Lamb and Lewis (2004) demonstrate the impact that fathers have on children’s learning and development, such as the study by Ramchandani *et al.* (2008), which revealed that family conflict consistently has harmful effects on the socio-emotional development of children and that both maternal and paternal depression has an effect on children. The study by Ramchandani *et al.* (2008) suggests that fathers who were depressed 18 weeks after the birth of a child resulted in consequential hyperactive behaviours in children at age three and above. A father being unavailable to a child as a result of ill health factors can contribute to adverse outcomes for the child and these understandings place the role of the father as central to child development and wellbeing (Ramchandani *et al.* 2008). The establishing of attachment, which assists a state of wellbeing, can be a reciprocal event and Heinowttz (2001) suggests that a father’s frequent interaction with his newborn baby encourages secure and lasting attachment relationships with his child. This, in turn, results in better mental health and wellbeing of both the father

and the child (Heinowitz, 2001). However, he warns that when fathers are left out of the relationship for too long they may retreat both emotionally and physically. This occurrence then has a negative effect on their parenting relationship and affects the child's wellbeing (Heinowitz, 2001).

Positive outcomes for children have been noted in situations where fathers are providing resources that enhance children's living and housing conditions. Cabrera and Peters (2000) suggest that fathers who provide adequate resources for their children, who have had good education experiences themselves, and who read regularly to them, have children who engage better in education. In their study, Cabrera and Peters (2000) show that fathers with resources are more positively involved with their children: they provide sustenance and a family home and, as a consequence, have children with enhanced literacy skills. Flouri and Buchanan (2004) argue that early father involvement can be a protective factor for children and is influential in preventing children from being involved in risky behaviours in later adolescence. Furthermore, Martin *et al.* (2007) argue that where both parents are involved together and are mutually supportive their children do better than in situations where one parent only is rearing a child.

There are instances where a father's absence cannot be avoided and the first noted compulsory absence of fathers, which inhibited parental involvement on a large scale, occurred during the Second World War. Stolz, in 1954, completed an analysis of the impact of a father's presence in a study of families affected by the absence of a father in war. She compared the responses of children whose fathers were absent due to war, to those of children whose fathers were present during the war years. This conceptualisation of the presence, or not, of fathers did not place blame on the father's absence; rather, it established the children's responses in

both groups (Stolz, 1954). Although the study failed to examine precisely what the fathers' roles were when present in families, it asserted that the mere presence of a father was sufficient to have added to the stability of the family. Overall, the study confirmed that a father's absence resulted in more distressful behaviours in children.

It was in the 1980s that the emphasis changed to examining how fathers' presence, or absence, affects children's developmental growth. A range of studies from the 1980s were part of a meta-analysis by McWayne *et al.* (2013), in which 21 studies between 1998 and 2008 gave a broad account of how fathers were involved with their children and examined how positive engagement was linked to children's early learning in social and cognitive areas, specifically in relation to a child's transition to school at 5 to 6 years of age. The authors present the argument that the frequency of positive engagement activities with their father, such as general playfulness or specific tasks activities like reading, are important in predicting children's social and academic success in later years (Mc Wayne *et al.*, 2013). Studies established that a father's absence contributed to the instability of the family primarily as a result of the reduced numbers of adults caring for the child. When this situation caused economic stress, there was a knock-on effect of emotional distress in the family, which added to psychological impressions of abandonment by the children (Day and Lamb, 2015). These findings are a contrast to the study of Booth *et al.* (2010), which demonstrated that the closeness of relationships between fathers and sons resulted in higher self-esteem and less delinquency in the children, with young males showing that they suffered fewer depressive episodes if they had established close ties with their fathers (Booth *et al.*, 2010).

Overall, it has been suggested by research that a father's presence can have a positive outcome on a child's development. A positive connection in the relationship between father and child can result in improved physical and mental health, with consequential good educational outcomes.

## **2.5 Identifying the need for further research**

Overall, the arguments that have been considered in the literature review demonstrate the complexities faced by the modern-day father. At present, there appears to be a dichotomy of expectations of fathers. They have to be available, responsive and engaged (Pleck, 2007; Lamb and Lewis, 2004) and there are increased expectations for them to be recognised as a "superdads" (Kaufman, 2013) –providers, carers and playmates. On the other hand, some fathers can be legally denied daily contact and can be excluded from decision-making in relation to their child (McKeown, 2001). Considering that research studies have identified the value that fathers contribute to children's learning, it is necessary to ensure that institutions, education centres, early years and family support services are aware of the potential challenges and barriers to a father's involvement with his child and try to overcome them. Looking at my own education centre for young people, attended by young men of 15-20, I am aware that they have experienced disruptions in their childhood, which contributed to leaving school prior to gaining qualifications. As a result of their childhood and educational experiences, as some become fathers themselves, there is a query regarding how their childhood experiences might impact on them in their fathering role. Bearing in mind that a great deal has been learned about the role of fathers and how the role has changed over historical time (Drew and Daverth, 2007), it is of value to recognise the possibility that the role of fathering will continue to change into the future. The literature is sparse, and

generalisations are difficult to apply (Brannen, 2015), however, there is a need to look beyond public policy, which only deals with the financial responsibilities of fathers, and examine the actual reality of men, as they experience becoming and being fathers.

One important constant appears to be the need for fathers and their children to be able to stay close and connected to one another. At present, there are no studies in Ireland, that I am aware of, that explore how young adults are impacted by disrupted childhood experiences when they have children of their own. Furthermore, when those young adults have been early school leavers their view of education for their children has not been examined. Therefore, the need for an investigation of the issues facing young fathers in Ireland who have been early school leavers has been made apparent. Having established a need to research this topic, I now introduce the methodological decisions I chose, together with the participant recruitment process, the ethical considerations, the interviewing challenges, and the analysis methods used.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods**

### **3.1 Introduction to methodology**

This chapter explains and justifies the methodological choices that were considered for the research study. It reflects on the issues that influenced my choices, and how I had to adapt to the circumstances arising throughout the study, as well as striving to be a flexible reflective researcher. The chapter explains the rationale for the study, my positionality as a researcher, the research questions, and the theoretical framework that framed the study. It includes sections on the sampling selection criteria and recruitment of participants, access provided by gatekeepers, and working with collaborators in the field of the research study. It also discusses issues pertaining to informed consent, data protection, confidentiality and anonymity, as well as many other features of being an ethical researcher. The chapter also presents how I decided on the chosen research methods for data collection, the interview process, and the impact of the research both on me as an interviewer and on the interviewees. It examines “interview technique”, as it was an important consideration in this study, which required considerable skills to manage the emotive issues that came to the fore. The chapter presents the argument that researchers need to be adequately prepared to interview sensitively, so that vulnerable participants are supported during and after the interview process. It also makes the case that interviewer-researchers require support too; and need to develop self-help skills to cope with the potential after-effects of emotionally-charged interactions. Overall, the chapter explains how I prepared and executed the study, how my choices dictated the process, but also how the process dictated my methods and led me on a particular path of investigation and learning. Similar to “reasons for using a particular recipe” (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p. 23), I chose



the method and contents, but the mix of ingredients did not prove to be straight forward and I had to make several adjustments to my research plan. The first section follows the route taken and displays my reflection with the process.

### **3.2 Rationale for the study, researcher positionality and research questions**

The aim of the research study was to examine the experiences of young fathers who were early school leavers, and to explore how attitudes following their experience of education impacts on their attitude to their children's education. I did this through a series of semi-structured interviews with six fathers and through a series of interviews with a young man who was journeying through pregnancy and the first four months of his child's life. The exploration answered the research questions:

*What are the fathering experiences of Irish young men who have been early school leavers?*

*What are the factors that influence these men's views about fathering?*

*What are the factors that impact on their ability to father?*

*What is the impact of these fathering experiences on the men's education and on their children's education?*

The study was motivated by my professional practice with families over many years. My current place of work, a centre for adolescents returning for a second chance at fulfilling their education, has been attended by various young fathers and mothers. In the first few months of taking up the position as coordinator, I became very aware of the young mothers, because they openly spoke about their children. In contrast, the boys were not so open and I came to acknowledge that I had no real idea of the challenges they faced every day as young fathers. Through the context of my Masters in Education in Early Childhood Education (MAECE), I completed a

research study of two young fathers aged 19. This study highlighted the young men's struggles and challenges on becoming fathers (Osborne, 2013b). As part of my thesis for MAECE, I also completed a study in a primary school with 40 boys under the age of 5, exploring their views of their fathers, to identify what they got out of being with their fathers. The study revealed that boys enjoyed the time spent with their fathers and wanted to spend more time in playing with lego, going swimming and cooking. In particular, the boys enjoyed playing physical games and going on trips with them (Osborne, 2013a; Osborne, 2016). In both studies, the research demonstrated that fathers were active in the role of fathering and the children expressed the desire for their fathers to be a part of their lives by increasing the time spent with them. However, in contrast with this data, my professional practice – in several different services for families and children – has shown that some fathers' involvement with their children, from early years to adolescence, was not noticeably visible. Without being judgemental for this absence, I was concerned that children and perhaps boys in particular were not seeing fathering role models in action. My concern for the lack of fathers' involvement has been heightened by the increase in family separation in Ireland, where large numbers of children, are not seeing their fathers on a daily basis. According to recent statistical returns, in the second quarter of 2019, 12.1% or 230,200 consisted of lone parent households (CSO, 2019a). I wanted to pursue a particular line of enquiry in this current study by examining the experiences of young fathers, to explore factors that impact on their present role as father and I wanted to further probe how these fathers were affected by previous fathering practices, which may have been a contributory factor in their early school leaving. I now outline the process I used to start the collection of data and how it led to an understanding of the issues that young men face in their fathering role.

### **3.3 A case study: factors for consideration**

My ontological viewpoint on fathering, which has been influenced by practice, research and observation, affected the manner in which I made choices to conduct the research study. Linking to a statement by Burr (2003) in relation to ontology: “It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated” (p.4), I set out to collect data on how fathers father their children from fathers themselves. In order to progress knowledge on the phenomena of fathering, I decided to choose a case study approach to capture the experiences of several fathers. A case study allows for the possibility of better understanding of a particular situation, as well as more insight into issues and circumstances (Wellington, 2000). It is a qualitative interpretivist approach that allows for a personal viewpoint by participants to become manifest and gives explanation to events and experiences, rather than the presentation of only facts (Wellington, 2000). I was conscious that each study was unique to each participant. While some had similarities none were the same, there was a mix of cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, rural and urban living and family employment and education. Therefore, the study became six case studies which were individual accounts, some with similarities but none identical to one another.

A quantitative study, which could have been used to gather statistical information in relation to fathering, may have given answers to “what”, “where” and “when” questions, but would not have given sufficient explanation to “why” or “how” questions (Yin, 2012). Denscombe (2011) suggests that a case study has particular characteristics; it explains the situation of a person within a particular circumstance, a circumstance which continues beyond the research study and, although it cannot be generalised to a larger population group, the value of the approach is that it can

“illuminate the general by looking at the particular” (p.53). Conducting six individual case studies of young fathers I saw as an opportunity to dig deeper into details of a situation that have heretofore not been totally visible, and while this approach allows for an exploration of situations, it also gives the opportunity to explore the causes and how they are interrelated (Denscombe, 2011). Thomas (2016) describes the case study as a focus, with the focus on one thing but looked at from a variety of angles and thus providing an in-depth examination. It is a study of real-life situations told by the person experiencing them (Denscombe, 2011) but framed either by discovery or theory. I wanted to get the real life stories and situations of the six fathers, their experiences, their challenges, their joys. I wanted to find out what was not visible, that is: their story; relevant to their lives; impacted and influenced by their own environment, culture and family values. Daly (2003) argues that qualitative studies can address beliefs and traditions that are adopted and put into practice, but, what influences what families do in their daily lives is often hidden from view (p.771). With this in mind, I saw the case study as not just the person, but also the circumstances surrounding each person and how their circumstances are interrelated and socially constructed.

The accounts of the men’s experiences positioned the epistemologist approach as interpretivist (Thomas, 2016, Denzin, 1997), with the participants in the study presenting their own constructed perceptions of the events and experiences where I also considered their life circumstances which impacted on their life story.

Interpretivism is a theory of knowledge and Anderson (2006) suggests that participants construct their knowledge from their own experiences: the researcher collects their perceptions and opinions, which are added to factual data and subsequently a credible narrative is presented. However, this position is challenged

by Bryman (2015), who suggests that qualitative studies often lack transparency on how data are collected, and they present a subjective report. On the other hand, he acknowledges that the qualitative approach of research gives more in-depth lived experiences constructed by participants, which adds knowledge that cannot be reported by quantitative studies alone. In an interpretivist approach, the participants' views generate broad themes which interconnect and develop within and outside the community (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). How people live and interact within their social environment leads the researcher to understand multiple social constructions and positionings, thus enabling the researcher to link the themes that are generated to create the findings from the study (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). On the basis that a qualitative interpretivist approach was the most suitable for this social science study, I set out to consider the criteria I needed to select participants and how I would recruit them.

As my lack of knowledge of a father's lived experience had ignited my curiosity for investigating the fathering role, I decided that the study should be conducted with fathers only, so that the stories of fathering and being fathered from their perspectives would be heard. I then had to decide on what sampling structure I would use; I considered the age of fathers and whether they would be from a specific cultural or life experience background. I examined policy documents that have been formulated to support families in Ireland, to ascertain if there is a particular age profile that has been identified as being vulnerable for parenting. The most recent policy document in Ireland, which calls on agencies to deliver services in a combined intervention approach, is *Better outcomes brighter futures* (DCYA, 2014) a family support policy document. It proposes a cross-governmental and inter-agency approach and coordinates policy and practices for achieving better

outcomes for families, children and young people. The policy document identifies young people under 25 as having particular needs in relation to mental health issues where “75% of mental health disorders emerge before the age of 25” (p5) and also states that parents should be offered intervention support from the wider community to fulfil their responsibilities (DCYA, 2014). Taking these two factors – mental health and parenting responsibility – into consideration, I decided that the age of the fathers would be limited to those who had become parents before the age of 25 years.

I needed to further narrow the field of study and looked to centres of education that catered for young people returning to education. These centres, called Youthreach, are for young people who have, for a variety of reasons, left school before the age of sixteen and are now pursuing a second chance to complete their education (Griffin, 2016). There are over 100 Youthreach centres in Ireland and they are seen as an alternative learning environment for young people aged from 15 to 20 years of age. The learning is done by means of a “flexible programme of integrated general education, vocational training and work experience” (NAYC, 2017, p.2). The uniqueness of the centres is that they are led by the learners’ needs and encompass a diverse range of students with varying academic abilities. Learners come from a variety of cultures and have a range of learning- and/or mental health-related challenges (NAYC, 2017). Learners are facilitated in each setting by means of individual learning plans aimed at increasing their skills and knowledge base, their employability prospects and enhancing their education qualifications (DESk, Youthreach Programme Operators Guidelines, (YPOG), 2015). The students receive an allowance for attendance, along with subsistence of mileage and food allowance, thus ensuring barriers to participation are minimised (DESk, 2015). I

focused on this cohort of learners, as I was drawn to a research study that profiled the students in a Youthreach centre in one particular year, 2016. While not generalisable, the sample of six cases was a reasonable representation of learners in any Youthreach centre (Gordan, 2016). Gordon's study revealed that students attending Youthreach, who had left their post-primary education programmes prior to completing senior cycle, were especially susceptible to having experienced multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Gordon, 2016). The findings indicated that these early school leavers were a particular group whose childhood experiences set them apart from those attending regular school. The Youthreach report identified that 65% of early school leavers attending the programme had experienced four or more adversities, such as: they had been lone parented or lived in a separated family; they had been born to one or both parents under 24 years of age; they were from a minority culture background; they had mental health issues; or they had experienced parent bereavement (Gordon, 2016). As my research study was to ask participants to reflect on their childhood, I viewed fathers who were early school leavers, who may have had multiple ACEs, as being appropriate for sampling selection. Considering all the factors presented, the profile of participants in the sampling group was limited to men who became fathers before 24 years of age, and who had also been early school leavers.

Using a multiple case study approach gave me the opportunity to consider a variety of data collecting techniques for my investigation. Initially, I planned to have two focus groups with approximately five fathers in each group. Each focus group would bring fathers together to share their experiences of fathering. Six to nine participants were recommended by Wellington (2000) as a good interactive number of participants. However, having experience of group facilitation with early school

leavers, I decided that five would be the ideal maximum number to be brought together in two separate groups. I aimed to invite 10 participants in total. Having two groups of participants would give me the opportunity to compare and contrast the data from each group and so add to the perspectives collected; it was what they said to each other that was an important element of the data collection (Morgan, 2012). This process was aimed at taking the spotlight away from each individual at any one time, to allow the group as a whole to compare and discuss their shared experiences. The aim of this sharing was to give the men mutual support (Bryman, 2015) in sharing their experiences of the role of a father and would also allow each person the space to share their childhood experiences and their experiences of becoming and being a father. Wellington (2000) states there are challenges in bringing groups together, but the synergy of the group sustains good interaction, as members can add more depth and insight than might result from an interview or survey. Group members can stimulate or “spark each other off” (p.125). This adds to the content of data, where they can debate and explore differing attitudes, and where perceptions and feelings about the same focused topic can be aired (Wellington, 2000). Morgan (2010) advises that the fundamental reason to have focus groups is for participants to share and compare experiences and, while it is quite a powerful medium in which to air opinions, it does require the research design to use the consensus and diversity issues raised as a value to the study. In focus groups, this may affect the honesty of the expression of the story; some participants might try to fit their answers into what they expect will be the right ones for the researcher (Wellington, 2000) and some may well only offer views that fit into being accepted by the group (Bryman, 2015). I had to consider these challenges when conducting the group research.



I began to fear that individual experiences would not be expressed in the focus group and, with the argument from Johnson and Rowlands (2012) that information from focus groups can be rather limited, as they do not allow for more in depth probing, I had to consider what method would encourage conversation and the sharing of experiences. My own practice of working with adolescents and adults in groups always elicited a better sharing when I used visual methods, so I began to consider the methodology of using visual aids that would add to the provocation of conversation and a dialogical exchange. Collage was the first medium I considered, as it is a creative technique that uses accessible materials and artefacts (McHugh, 2011). It involves taking mixtures of small objects together to be pasted onto a surface to create a picture representing a theme or a topic (Leitch, 2008). The use of pictures, words or symbols was my preferred choice of collage materials. These would allow the participants to source their own representations from magazines or newspapers and build a picture that would represent their story of fathering. McHugh (2011) explains that collage work “places the participants at the heart of the process, they are regarded as the experts on their own world and the focus is on what they consider as significant” (p.123). Leitch (2008) refers to the collage as acting as a “safe container” for participants, but I had to consider if this cohort of participants would be creatively or cognitively threatened and therefore feel unsafe and vulnerable. This method does not need a high level of artistic talent, but the sharing of thoughts represented by images could present a challenge within the group. As there were participants with literacy problems, who might have found sourcing materials a challenge, and I did not want to place anyone at a disadvantage, I began to explore other visual methods that might be suitable.

I changed my attention to consider using photographs, either participant-generated photographs or researcher-generated photographs (Thompson, 2008). To introduce photographs into the methodology would be useful in “promoting reflections that words alone cannot” (Clark-Ibanez, 2007, p.171) and photographic visuals could play a key role in reflecting the lives of the participants’ own lived experiences (Burke, 2008). As Burke (2008) suggests that visuals can “illuminate and release the voice of the previously unheard, and allow different stories to be told” (p.26), I was enthusiastic about using photography. For participant-generated photographs, I would have to use disposable cameras or ask the men to use their own camera phones. I had to ensure they understood precisely what they needed to photograph and what the aim was for taking photographs. I saw the goal as the opportunity to take “freeze frame” moments of their fathering role and then use the photos as a basis of conversation within the focus group. When I began to further examine this methodology, I had to consider if there was a problem about the sharing of participants’ personal images with me and with members of the group. Bringing myself into the participants’ lived world might be an intrusive force into their daily lives and practices, and furthermore photographic exchange with other group members might raise judgemental comments and criticisms. I had to also consider whether people in the photographs, such as children and family members, would need to give consent for their images to be shared, and how this would be obtained. On reflection, I realised that I could not safeguard the privacy of individuals captured in the photos, so decided to move away from this idea and consider researcher-generated photographs instead.

I did a search on Google to get a wide range of freely and publicly available photographs of fathers with their children. I also searched for images depicting the

absence of fathers. The collection of photographs that I chose included fathers of different ages involved with their children in everyday actions of care, of undertaking skills and of shared activities together (Appendix 1). Some photographs of absent fathers were depicted in photos of fathers at work or shadowy figures of men indicating a father's absence. I divided the photographs into two equal groups and, for ease of identification for analysis purposes, I categorised them. I intended to present them altogether in a mixed assortment for the participants to choose from. The list was initially coded as follows:

1. The "invisible", "absent" and/or working dads' group and
2. The visible/involved dads' group:

The group of photographs into two distinct groups, in order to have equilibrium of perceived involved and non-involved fathers, although I did not identify them in this way for the participants. I was aware that images can be deceptive and have many meanings (Thompson, 2008) and to call them "involved" or "non-involved" could have misinterpreted the image. I therefore placed both categories of father photographs together in one group, to allow the participants to make their own choices. Within the two groups of photographs, I included a selection of fathers from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. The intention of using the images was to allow the participants to choose three or four photographs that appealed to them, and about which they could explain their thoughts. The purpose was to stimulate conversation and to take the attention away from direct eye-to-eye contact with others in the group and to draw the attention to a third space, that is, the image in the photograph. Guillemin and Drew (2010) suggest that using photography can help to promote expression and communication and can bring focus to the subject

in question. I was hopeful that the use of researcher-generated photographs would be a useful vehicle for eliciting conversation within the group (see Appendix 1).

Morgan (2012) argues that in focus groups there should be recognition that it is not only what is said that needs to be analysed in the group, but it is how it is said. It is also necessary to note the interaction that occurs between people, which is of central concern. I was aware that there was a possibility that creating a space for what Morgan (2010) describes as “shared meanings” (p.162) might hit obstacles. If participants did not want to share their thought or feelings or experiences with other men in an open forum, there was potential for the study to generate insufficient/unreliable data. I was not looking for a consensus of opinion: as Morgan (2010) suggests, I wanted the men to honestly and openly share their individual narratives of fathering and being fathered. I believed that each participant was entitled to have his own viewpoint but that some might withhold their opinion, and the group might not participate in conversations. After much reflective debate, I reluctantly ruled out the focus group as a method of data collection, fearing that it might curtail the expression of thoughts and inhibit the vocal exchange. I had to refocus and look at other means of gathering data from the men. I had to consider if personal one-to-one interviews would be a better method of data collecting. Although I knew that this method would take longer, as specific times for individual meetings would be needed, I expected that each interviewee would be more comfortable in providing information on a one-to-one basis. I still held close the use of photography, to elicit conversation, but as a method within an individualistic interviewing approach.

The next section explains the sample group of participants and the recruiting process.

### **3.4 Hard-to-reach participants: factors impeding participation**

This section describes the problems experienced in recruiting participants for the study. It is a detailed report demonstrating the difficulties in pursuing “hard-to-reach” participants (Davies, 2016; Osborn, 2015; Glickman, 2004; McKeown, 2001).

Having deduced that men who were fathers before the age of 24, and who had also been early school leavers, were the best profile of participants for the study, I was better placed to recruit my specifically defined participants. I needed key players who had a similar focused experience and knew the field; therefore, the participants were not randomly selected – they were specifically chosen for their suitability to the study (Denscombe, 2011). Using the criterion of early school leavers, the first place to approach fathers was to look to my own education centre for participants. In order to approach them, I sought and received permission from the Chief Executive of my Education Board to use contact details on file to approach and invite both present and former students to take part in the study. The gatekeeper approval was an essential first step and was crucial for making contacts (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The challenge of agreeing on a shared understanding of confidentiality is discussed in a separate section.

I was optimistic in the initial planning stages of recruitment that I would be able to contact at least 10 students from the present student cohort, and from the former attendees who fitted the three criteria. However, this is where I met with the first stage of recruitment difficulty. In most years, I had several young men attending who were fathers. However, in May 2016, after receiving ethical approval from University of Sheffield (Appendix 4), I started to recruit and found that only one male student was a parent. I needed to extend the search, so I approached former students who I knew had become fathers before the age of 24. I retrieved the

contact names and numbers of several students on file, approached the young men by personally contacting them by phone, and invited them to discuss their potential participation.

Figure 3.1: Potential participants

Name	Age of father at birth of first child	Living with child	Culture Residency	Risk factors: reason for non-availability
Tim	20	No.	Settled Traveller. Social housing. Living with his mother and siblings.	Death by suicide of his father two weeks before our scheduled meeting.
Noel	19	Yes	Settled Traveller living with girl's parents. Traveller housing.	Moved to live with grandmother 100 kilometres away. Did not have a car and was unable to keep appointment.
Alan	19	No. Shared guardianship of son.	Irish, mother of child is Polish. He had lived with his girlfriend until recent breakup.	Relationship with girlfriend finished. Moved house, left his job. Not able to commit to taking part.
Tom.	20	No. Supervised access.	Settled Traveller, living with parents. Private landlord	Awaiting DNA testing to confirm parentage.
Larry	21	Yes, living with second child, father of two children by two mothers.	Irish. Living in private rented accommodation with second partner.	Newly born child with second partner causing distress with mother of first.
Luke	17	No.	Irish. Living with own family and siblings.	Started apprenticeship in different county. Not able to give his time to meet
Dara	20	Yes. Living with first child and partner. Not with second child.	Irish. Living in rented accommodation.	Had second child with different mother. Difficult time for him with two mothers of two children
Kevin	20	Yes, living with child.	Irish. Living with girlfriend and her parents and siblings.	Mother died suddenly. Traumatic time for him.
Daniel	21	Yes. Living with child.	Irish. Living in rented accommodation with girlfriend.	Awaiting trial for serious assault. Worried about outcome.
David	19	Yes. Living with child.	Irish. Living in rented accommodation with girlfriend	Started a job and dropped out of training course. Not available to commit.

While some deliberated on my request and informed me of their decision not to be involved, others came to the centre and after meeting with me either declined to take part, or initially agreed and then subsequently dropped out of the process before being interviewed.

Overall, I approached 10 men who had been known to me through my education centre. I initially believed that, as I had had a good relationship with the students and had kept in contact with some since they left the school, I would not have any problem recruiting. However, I met many obstacles on the way that impeded the men from being available as participants to start the study. *Figure 3.1: Potential participants* illustrates the outcome in the initial stage of recruitment of participants; all names of fathers are pseudonyms and some details are mixed, in order to preserve true identities.

On reflecting on the process, I identified a pattern emerging. My first initial contact was met with interest: questions were asked about the study, all individually agreed as they never got a chance to talk about their role as a father; and they were initially eager to assist me with the study. However, when it came to decide on a date to sit down and talk, I met with resistance. "I would do anything for you," I was told by one young man, but as soon as I made a specific date there was no follow-up appearance (Field notes, 2017). I encountered many unexpected "blind alleys", which included various reasons for unavailability, thus limiting the young men's ability to commit. It was apparent that many of the men were changing homes, jobs and location and appeared to have financial responsibilities that limited their available free time. However, more complex underlying problems appeared to also be a contributory reason. Some had personal issues, such as multiple births of children to present and former partners; for some, the parentage of a child was

under question; and others had experienced traumatic events such as a parent's suicide attempt or death. These situations linked into Gordon's report (2016), whereby early school leavers had been affected by ACEs. It appears that these young people who had multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were continuing the cycle of experiences in adolescence and beyond.

I was beginning to see why it has been said that it is difficult to recruit young men for research studies: participants were proving to be hard to reach (Davies, 2016; Osborn, 2015; Glickman, 2004; McKeown, 2001; *Figure 3.1*). I could make no judgements about the lack of ability to commit to the study. I had to consider that, having had a close relationship with them previously, perhaps they were embarrassed about sharing their current life circumstances with me, or that having had failed relationships in the past in personal life they did not have the capacity to bring the relationship we had as teacher and student to a different context. All I could do was direct them to support structures and agencies if they needed support and guidance. In all, these 10 potential participants, approached between May 2016 and February 2017, were unavailable to take part in the research. I had to widen my search for participants beyond my own limited range of access.

### **3.5 Gatekeepers and collaborators: support for study**

It was very valuable for me to have local support for my research study, not only in recruiting, but also as I planned to disseminate the findings in the future. I made an approach to the local Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC), an organisation with representatives from all children agencies, family services and educational centres on its Board of Management in Ireland at local and national levels (CYPSC, 2017). Through this approach, I ascertained if local agencies had



knowledge of young fathers using their services and if they would approach the fathers to take part in the study. As the information on clients' details was confidential to each service, I could not make direct approaches, but the information of the study was given to fathers via the agency personnel with whom they were working. Unfortunately, this approach drew a blank response and, although I was told the information had been passed on to several fathers, none came forward to make contact. I decided to use another avenue to spread the word of the study.

As all the agencies for family and children's services were participating in a week-long celebration to mark Parents Week in October 2016, I took leaflets describing the research study to the event (Appendix 2) and distributed them. The leaflets had my contact details, to enable interested fathers to get in touch. Alternatively, they could leave their name on the back of the leaflet and I would contact them. The attendance was poor overall and unfortunately the event did not produce any participants for the study. However, I felt that the event was a good publicity opportunity to inform the agencies present of my proposed research study.

I subsequently met with the director of services from the Traveller Community Development Group and he expressed interest in the study, as he had some Traveller fathers attending his programme. This link to the Traveller organisation was a valuable step forward and I envisaged it as being "an access relationship rather than a once off event" (Denscombe, 2011, p.89). I met and discussed the study with his local community worker, who was enthusiastic and valued the aim of the study. The location of this exchange of information took place in a camper van, which was the mode of transport that the community worker used to connect with the Traveller men, and it highlighted to me that the approach to the Travellers needed to be made from a location with which they were familiar. Armed with the

father research study leaflet (Appendix 2) and the research study information booklet (Appendix 3), the community worker approached a group of Traveller men at their residences, and in halting sites. His initial line of enquiry began with a potential eight participants. He introduced the study to the men and they agreed they would meet with me to discuss it further, on the condition that I would provide lunch for them. I had to consider if they only wanted to be fed or if they were serious about taking part, but I was prepared to offer lunch to develop the relationship of contact. I discussed this with the community worker, who assured me of their good intentions and confirmed that he would get funding for the lunch if I agreed to meet with them in a place of their choosing; I agreed. He later suggested that a health information day, which would bring together several professional people, would be the best method of engaging with the men. The health day was the “hook” to encourage Traveller men to attend and to link with other services, as well as to take part in the study. I expected that perhaps we would meet in a community setting frequented by the men, but they requested to have lunch in a local hotel near to their residences. The event day was organised in the location convenient to the men, where I could meet them individually in a separate room, away from the health promotion activities. I discussed confidentiality with the community worker and made it clear that the findings would be anonymous, and that the data gathered from the Traveller men would be included anonymously as part of the larger study (University of Sheffield, 2017).

On the event day, only two Traveller men turned up. I took comfort from the community worker, who assured me that this response was a regular occurrence and he was happy with the attendance. His approach encouraged and supported me in valuing the two men’s presence and, after an initial group discussion on

general health matters with a community nurse, I spoke to the men individually. The two participants were Jim, aged 18, a father of two children and Sean, aged 42, a father of five children, who first became a parent at 22. Both had left school without qualifications. My original plan was to have participants in the study who were under the age of 24 at the time of the study, but Sean was enthusiastic about sharing his story and I valued his input as an experienced, reflective father, and also I did not want to turn him down. Having explained the study further and reiterating the research information booklet I had a one-to-one interview with each man. Further information on these interviews is discussed in the analysis section.

Having only two participants was not a sufficient number for the study and a broader cultural experience was needed. I therefore set out to recruit more fathers. Through my work as a coordinator of a Youthreach centre, I regularly meet with other coordinators in the midlands of Ireland. A regional meeting of nine centres was planned for November 2016. I sent the coordinators the father research study leaflet about the study (Appendix 2) before the meeting and followed this up with a phone call, asking for their assistance in recommending or approaching any young fathers who were known to them. This approach yielded two names and I gave the coordinators the research study information booklet (Appendix 3) to discuss the study with them. One man decided not to proceed. I obtained a commitment from the second young man, and planned our first interview at a place convenient for him to meet me. Kevin, aged 19, a father of one child, was the third recruit and I met him in his place of study, at his request.

I now had three participants but continued in my pursuit of more participants.

Fortunately, a former student of Youthreach arrived at the centre to collect copies of

his education certificates and I asked him about his progression since leaving the programme. He told me about his forthcoming wedding and about his two children aged two and six months respectively. He was 24 years old and had originally dropped out of school at 16. As he fitted the recruiting criteria, I explained the research study and gave him the research study information booklet and asked if he would take part in the study. He agreed to come back the following day to discuss details. I planned a suitable time and he indicated that my own Youthreach centre was a suitable place for us to meet. He subsequently confirmed his consent and the interviews began. Continuing the search, I contacted a colleague who works with the men's shed organisation (Irish Men's Shed Association, 2017), and I explained how difficult it had been to recruit participants to engage in the study. When I described the criteria, he informed me that he had been a father at 23 and had also left school at 16. He offered to take part in the research study. He was called Mark and was aged 44. I decided that his age would bring balance to the study, which would now include two older fathers who could give their reflections on fathering. I met him and gave him the research study information booklet to read (Appendix 3). As I knew his family, I was happy to meet with him in his own home, at his request.

Following this event, a 19-year-old student named Josh came into inform me that his girlfriend was pregnant. He was excited and shared the news with enthusiasm for the coming birth. As his head teacher, I congratulated him. However, when he left me, my "researcher gaze" came into focus and I considered if this was an opportunity to travel the journey with the young man on his way to fatherhood. I had to readjust my research lens and consider how beneficial this development would be to the study. I felt that he could bring a dimension to the study that the other fathers might have forgotten about, that is, the role of the father during pregnancy.

But, I had to carefully consider if I was taking advantage of a vulnerable student: I was the senior person in the situation and he might feel unable to say no to me (Petrova *et al.*, 2014). I was conscious of not placing pressure on him to tell a story I wanted to hear, but wanted to give him the power to tell the story he wanted to tell (Petrova *et al.*, 2014). While his participation would obviously be advantageous for the study, I also saw that the study could provide him with a space in which he could communicate about the pregnancy and receive support during his journey towards fatherhood. With consideration for his vulnerability, it was with gentleness that I approached him to discuss the study. Following an informal chat about the study, I asked him to meet with me for a second time, if he was interested. On this occasion, I gave him the research study information booklet (Appendix 3) and he suggested that he would take it home and discuss it with his mother. He returned the next day and said that his mother agreed he should do it, as it would be a support to him during the forthcoming pregnancy. He assured me he thought the study was a good idea. We agreed to have meetings in the Youthreach centre at a suitable time, away from other students, to be spread over the waiting time for the baby. Consequently, Josh, who was aged 19 and was an expectant father of a baby for the first time, was my next participant. The profile of the participants is shown in *Figure 3.2: Participant profile*.

From the initial recruitment in May 2016 up to January 2017, I had no success in recruiting and then from February 2017 to March 2017, having slightly adapted my parameters of the study, and reaching out to collaborating agencies, I now had six willing participants. I did not anticipate the difficulties that I experienced or the length of time needed for the recruitment process.

Figure 3.2: Participant profile

Name Child residency	Adverse Childhood Experiences ACEs & School Experience	Age at interview	Age at birth of first child	Had Relationship with father?	Cultural background Residency at time of birth	Has Relationship with child?
<b>Mark</b> Suburban  Rent to buy housing 7 children	Father lifelong illness Childhood illness Several school moves  Left school at 16	44	23	Yes  Resident but absent frequently Poor relationship	Irish.  Own house in urban setting with his wife and child	Yes.  Resident  4 children
<b>Sean</b> Rural Caravan Traveller housing 6 children	Traveller Mother mental health Physical abuse Emotional abuse  Left school at 10	42	22	Yes  Resident Abusive relationship	Traveller.  In settled housing with his wife and child.	Yes.  Resident  5 children
<b>Daniel</b> Rural town  Social housing 4 children	Mother alcoholic Physical abuse Father absent Bullied in school Attempted suicide at 14 years  Left school at 14	24	22	No  Absent No contact	Irish.  Private rented accommodation with girlfriend and child.	Yes.  Resident  2 children
<b>Jim</b> Rural town Caravan 5 children	Traveller Mother mental health Several schools  Left school at 13	18	17	Yes  Resident Good relationship	Traveller. Living in caravan beside his parents' home with wife and child.	Yes  Resident 2 children.
<b>Kevin</b> Rural town Social housing 6 children	Fostered by aunt Aunt deceased Moved to father and step mother Bullied in school  Left school at 15	19	19	Yes  Non-resident good relationship	Irish.  Living in social housing with his parents.	Yes. Limited. Non resident Shared Guardianship. 2 children with different mothers
<b>Josh</b> Suburban Social housing 4 children 2 fathers	Parents separated Mother mental health problem Father attempted suicide  Left school at 13	18	19	18 months fulltime  Non-resident Good relationship	Irish.  Living in urban social housing with his mother in midlands of Ireland	Yes. Limited. Non- resident During pregnancy and into infancy of child.

The recruitment phase of the study highlighted the difficulties involved in recruiting participants to research studies who are considered to be a “hidden population” (Foster, 2004, p.119) and who are described by McKeown (2001) and Glickman

(2004) as “hard to reach”. Davies (2016) and Osborn (2015) on the other hand make the argument that rather than seeing young men as “hard to reach” we need to make services “easy to reach” for men and I considered my flexibility in venue planning facilitated their participation.

By May 2017, I had six men committed to being involved (see Figure 3.2) and, although the sample was smaller than I had planned, I valued their participation in the study. I also considered that this was a methodically sound representative sample of young men whose life experiences met the aims of the study. I was therefore in a position to begin my research study with the men. The commonality of the selection of the men was situated within the factual data of their having become fathers before the age of 24 and having been early school leavers. Of the six participants, five took part in semi-structured interviews and one was a long-term study during his partner’s pregnancy, consisting of several interviews up to the first four months of the baby’s life.

I was very mindful that it was important to offer all the men a supportive environment in which they could tell their stories. The place of interviewing was of their choosing: three participants were interviewed in a Youthreach centre, two in a hotel (so they could have their lunch) and the sixth, by his request, in his family home. Where necessary, I ensured that I had support from link workers who knew the men and I had the contact numbers of counsellors if the men needed follow-on support. I was not sure what was in store for me and was therefore in a situation of anticipation when I began to plan the interviewing process. The first step was to meet with the men individually, to read with them the research study information booklet (Appendix, 3), to ensure that they understood the study and were willing to

give their written informed consent (UoS, 2017). The details of the study and the issues concerned with being an ethical researcher are considered in next section.

### **3.6 Being an ethical researcher**

Being an ethical researcher was very important to me in this study and was an intrinsic part of the whole research plan from conception to conclusion (British Psychological Society, BPS, 2014). Ethics did not fit precisely into one distinct area of the thesis, because many ethical issues throughout the research study had to be considered: it affected every step and every decision of the research study.

“Research ethics refers to the moral principles guiding research from its inception through to completion and publication of results” (BPS, 2014, p.3) and this was to the forefront of my approach in this study. Ethics was relevant to my own behaviour and values as a researcher and involved many moments of self-reflection.

### **3.7 Ethical practice**

Social and professional commitments and personal values have their influence on research projects (Greenbank, 2003) and I was aware of how my values might influence the trajectory of the study. This awareness ensured that I would conduct the research within an ethical structure. On starting my research, I was aware of the vulnerability of the participants and I knew it was important to develop trust and present an environment in which the participants felt safe. By presenting myself as a trustworthy person, I was respecting the participants and I demonstrated that I was credible and capable of keeping to my commitment of safeguarding their privacy and wellbeing throughout the process (Petrova *et al.*, 2014, p.3). This section presents the interwoven aspects of ethical values and practices which were present in the study. It starts with my first contact with the participants, following



ethical approval from the University of Sheffield (Appendix 4), where I explained the aim and objectives of the research study. The first step was to obtain their informed consent to participate in the study.

### **3.8 Informed consent**

With the difficulties I had in recruiting participants, I was aware of being sensitive to the men who had agreed to take part. I did not want to scare them or overwhelm them with information, yet I had to be honest about the study and not omit any details. The first steps in establishing trust began with an explanation of the study. The research study information booklet (Appendix 3) that I had designed explained the research aims, my reasons for doing the research study, what was required of the participant, and what would happen to the data collected. To support two of the participants who had poor literacy skills, I gave the research study information booklet to their community worker, who read the details with them before they met me. When we met together, I reread the booklet to ensure their understanding of the study and the process involved. One participant, aged 19, took the booklet home to his mother to read it with her before he agreed to participate in the study, I reread it with him to ensure his understanding. The remaining participants read the research study information booklet with me and I answered any queries and gave clarification about the process involved. The time spent in the initial stages of the meeting proved valuable for developing a trusting relationship. The personal details of life experiences revealed might not have emerged without an honest and reciprocal relationship being developed (Petrova *et al.*, 2014). As I was working with vulnerable participants, it was important for me to ensure that the research study was supportive and non-threatening (Social Research Association (SRA), 2016). During the timeframe of the study with one participant, Josh, requiring several

meetings over a 12-month period, I was constantly reflecting on the methodology, to ensure that he did not feel under pressure to continue. I noted the times he was stressed, as a result of his personal circumstances with the mother of his child, and referred him to the school counsellor, being aware that I should not take advantage of his vulnerable state (British Psychological Society, (BPS), 2011). My priority as his teacher and programme coordinator (not as a researcher) was to support him. I did not want to coerce him into being part of the study and was aware of the presence of the power relationship, where he could have felt unable to voice his dissent (BPS, 2011). However, after every meeting he gave me reassurance that he wanted to continue to talk to me and during the time of the study he indicated that he was better able to cope with stressful situations because of sharing these happenings with me, even though it was not my intention to give him therapeutic support. We agreed that if he felt uncomfortable at any time, he could inform me or the counsellor that he wanted to withdraw from the study. The counsellor was aware of Josh's participation, but I did not share with her any his data, and I was not made aware of the contents of his counselling sessions. At intervals, when we had our planned regular research "chats", I reminded him that he could withdraw from the study at any time (BPS, 2011, p.8). This openness and continuous checking-in ensured his permission to continue and on reflecting on our meetings, I was reassured that the times we met were not an adverse intrusion on his life (SRA, 2016). My awareness of his personal struggles fostered a greater relationship between us and assisted him in expressing his emotions and feelings (Sikes, 2004). The trust he displayed in disclosing and discussing his problems is testament to the quality of the research study protocol (Petrova *et al.*, 2014) and to the supportive approach used.

All the participants were made aware that consent could be withdrawn at any time, without any repercussions (SRA, 2016). In this eventuality, discussion on what data could be included in the study would be part of an exit negotiation. It was important to acknowledge “the autonomy and agency of the individual in contributing to the research, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty” (BPS, 2011, p.8) and I made this clear to the participants. I was very aware of my position as a professional educator as being a perceived position of power and I did not want to manipulate their involvement or be perceived as doing so (Sikes, 2004). Therefore, freedom to exit the study was important.

My own experience as a practitioner with families instigated the study and my value of a father’s impact on the developmental outcomes for children was the driving force behind researching the role of fathers. The increasing numbers of fathers in Ireland who live separately from their children had given me cause for concern. However, I needed to be careful that I did not bring my personal anxieties to the study. I was aware of Canella and Lincoln’s (2007) suggestion that researchers need “to recognise the professional as the personal, while at the same time examining how this personalising of [their] work affects those around [them]” (p.329). By being aware of this potential crossing of personal values and research goals, I strove to be objective, and in so doing avoided being judgmental (Denscombe, 2011). I recognised that those same values of understanding and empathy that were the impetus for my interest in the topic of research were the driving force and motivation for instigating and continuing the study. However, these same values could influence how I reacted to the men while interviewing them. When in the research zone, I drew on my professional practice and aimed to use my personal values of fairness and justice to accentuate the role of researcher

investigator. My position, as one who had insight about fathers' involvement with their children, meant that I could not distance myself from those concerns. However, from a position of enquiry, I was able to detach myself from my own feelings, ask appropriate questions, be willing to consider alternative explanations (Denscombe, 2011) and so behave in a non-judgemental fashion. By acknowledging my own positionality, I was able to approach the study in an open and objective manner (Denscombe, 2011).

### **3.9 Confidentiality and anonymity**

The terms of confidentiality and anonymity first came to scrutiny within the study when I applied to the Chief Executive of my education board for permission to approach present and past students attending my education centre (Appendix 5). After my initial request, the Chief Executive gave permission to contact potential participants, on condition that "Participants [would] not be identified in any way in the study ... any information they provide[d would] be treated as confidential and [would] be anonymised" (Appendix 6). I had to consider further the exact interpretation of this statement and strive for a shared meaning of confidentiality. Making reference to Yin (2012, p.77-78), I compiled a definition of confidentiality as follows:

*Confidentiality of identity* means not revealing the real names of people or places. *Confidentiality of information* means that no personal data will be linked to any information given. *Confidentiality of data* means that I will ensure that my understanding and interpretation of data given by participants is accurate ... only data that they are happy with will be retained for publication in my thesis; other possible publications and for use in public presentations ... no information is linked to any person involved or mentioned in the course of the research study (Appendix 7; Yin, 2003).

I asked for agreement to this interpretation, to reassure myself that we both had a shared understanding of the definition of confidentiality. I further explained that the

participants would be given full information regarding the process of the study and how the research data would be published and disseminated. The Director of Education, the assistant to the Chief Executive, replied in writing, indicating a shared agreement of understanding (Appendix 8) and granting approval on behalf of the Chief Executive.

The next step was to meet with the fathers individually, explain the research study, answer any questions and, if they agreed and understood the details, request them to sign the consent form (Appendix 9). This is what is referred to as “informed consent” (European Science Research Council, (ESRC) (2015).

Informed consent entails:

.... giving sufficient information about the research and ensuring that there is no explicit or implicit coercion so that prospective participants can make an informed and free decision on their possible involvement. Information should be provided in a form that is comprehensible and accessible to participants, typically in written form, and time should be allowed for the participants to consider their choices and to discuss their decision with others if appropriate (ESRC, 2015, p.29).

Furthermore, I was aware that informed consent applied throughout the study, not just on signing the consent form and I had a duty to ensure that the participants continued to give their consent throughout the collecting and the transcription of data, and were happy with my plans for dissemination of the study (BERA, 2018).

The potential for emotional distress was made known to the participants before they signed the consent form, to ensure that they were aware of any potential harm.

I approached the collection of data with my own self-assurance that I would strive to do no harm, I intended to safeguard the participants and support them during the process of data collection and to signpost them to aftercare supports, if necessary.

The method of collecting the data was by using a dictaphone to record the interviews and the conversations were transcribed verbatim. The spoken evidence was initiated by discussion using visual aids of photographs (Appendix 1) and I used a diagram of concentric circles to represent relational closeness and connectedness (*Figure 3.4: Closeness and connectedness diagram*). In this way, the participants' interpretations of events, their thoughts, feelings and perceived impact of experiences were confirmed, thus giving validity and reliability to the data collected (Denscombe, 2011). Fearing that the participants might feel emotionally exposed, I reminded them before starting the interview of the option of exiting. One participant queried the confidentiality of an incident that he had shared with me: "No-one will know I said that, will they?" (Field notes, 2017); and he asked for a specific part of the interview not to be repeated to anyone. I assured him that I would not include it and when transcribing his interview, I deleted the requested section. He was happy with the remainder of the interview and, as consent is an ongoing process (BERA, 2018), I reiterated to him, as I did to all the all participants throughout the process, of the option to withdraw anytime.

In exceptional circumstances, confidentiality can be overridden if any individual is at risk of harm, for example if it emerges that there is a child protection issue, a criminal action, or that the person is at risk of psychological distress (University of Sheffield, (UoS), (2017)). While there was no obvious risk to anyone, to ensure their mental wellbeing and that no harm or upset was experienced, I made the participants aware that professional advice from appropriate supports was available if they needed them. I felt morally obliged to ensure that they were satisfied after the interview event and two weeks after each interview meeting I made contact with three of the men direct. I also phoned the community worker and coordinator

responsible for the supervision of the other three participants, to check on their wellbeing. Individually and through the agency contacts, I was assured that the men were in good form and had been satisfied with the process of the research experience. One participant had requested to attend a counselling service and his coordinator expressed that this was a significant positive step forward for the young man, who was going through personal challenges. Prior to the research interview, he had declined the suggestion to attend counselling but now he was requesting the support. Another participant requested that a local fathers' group be established, as he would like to meet and talk with other young fathers (Field notes, 2017). This development highlighted the need for young fathers to be given the opportunity to assess their needs and to be given access to support, informally and formally.

To ensure anonymity for those participating in the study, I advised the participants that their personal data (name and details of geographical situation) would be anonymised. Their personal details would be kept separate from the interview transcripts and no information in the data analysis would identify the participants (UoS, 2017). Personal data was kept in a locked cabinet in my research office and the data from transcripts and the research journal was kept in a separate space in a work filing cabinet.

Ethics involves integrity, honesty, and respect of other cultures (BERA, 2011) and as researcher I was aware of upholding these values. However, I was not fully prepared for the intense degree of sensitivity that the subject of the research study would raise with individuals until the interviews began. To ensure that I was treating the participants with respect and that I was supporting them, I referred any concerns to my supervisor and her support and guidance ensured that I continually reflected on my actions and that I was acting ethically at all times.

### **3.10 Interviews: approaches, processes and problems**

When I first entered into the research space, it was with some trepidation. I was eager to collect data but was aware of my own unease about meeting with the men. I was ready to enter the research space and I needed to be personally prepared for the interaction. With reference to the humanistic approach proposed by Carl Rogers, I was cognisant of the advice: “to place oneself in the others’ shoes ‘as if’ the experience was your own but not losing the ‘as if’ quality” (1987, p 116). I was aware of the British Psychological Society’s advice that in working with people that I should “treat humanity in [our] own person and that of others always as an end and never only as a means” (BPS, 2009, p.4). The process of getting to the end in a wholesome way for all involved was my aim.

The next section considers the many aspects of the interview process, from the role and approach of myself as the interviewer, the techniques I used, the skill of listening to participants, to the impact of the study on myself as the interviewer and on the interviewees – all aspects which I found challenging.

### **3.11 Interview technique**

Bryman (2015) suggests that a good group size for qualitative research is 10 participants. However, as a result of restricted sampling criteria and difficulties in recruiting, I had to reduce the study to six men. It proved to be an adequate number for the study and sufficient qualitative data resulted to make a robust sound study. As stated earlier, I had decided that my original plan to work with two groups of men was, on reflection, not the optimum method to elicit information, so I planned to use one-to-one interviews. This approach resulted in a more in-depth study: the men came to the study as distinctive individuals and I had six different perspectives on



the role of fathering to tap into, thus giving me an opportunity to compare and contrast experiences (Thomas, 2016). Being brought together in one study made it a collective of six case studies of a shared fundamental experience (Thomas, 2016) and I subsequently had to decide on how best to conduct interviews with each of the participants. The “non-directive interview” proposed by Carl Rogers (1983) was very popular in research domains in the 1980s: it allowed the interviewer to sit back and gave the interviewee time to explore issues. The non-directive interview still holds value (Dilly, 2000) and is a method which I found supportive to the study, the interviewee and to myself, as the interviewer. Planning my approach to the interviews was systematic and fits within the description of semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2018).

I considered using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) as designed by George, Kaplan, and Main (1985) and wrote to Professor Main in Berkley University to seek permission to use the process. A reply from Professor Erik Hesse, the husband of Mary Main and co-researcher, in November 2016 advised that specialist training was needed to analyse the data from the interviews (Appendix 10). He directed that I was welcome to use the technique but would benefit from expert intervention in the analysis process. On further reading of details of the AAI protocol (Hesse, 2016) I appreciated the complexities of using the AAI technique and also realised that I could not have the range of questions which I needed to explore the phenomena of being a father. The AAI technique limited questioning to attachment experiences whereas I wanted to extend this subject within a larger context of community factors and education. I also realised that a very structured interview with questions asked in a specific order and using a detailed questionnaire (King, 2012) would not be appropriate, as it would be inflexible. It might have resulted in thoughts, ideas and

feelings being masked or the participants may not have been given the opportunity to express themselves (King, 1948) and therefore decided not to go with this choice. I also decided that an unstructured interview, similar to an unplanned conversation (Thomas, 2016), might be too open. As a researcher, I was looking for the interviewees to set the scene to tell me what their issues were, but there was the possibility that they could go “off topic” (p.189). I was afraid of not being able to keep focus on the aim of the study and therefore considered a semi-structured method of interviewing (Thomas, 2016) as the best choice of method.

Dilly (2000) suggests that within a semi-structured interview a list of questions needs to be written as a guide to exploring the subject and I considered that linking my research questions to the theoretical framework of Bowlby (1980,1973,1969) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) would be a good strategy. By linking my questions to the theoretical frameworks, I was able to apply a semi-structured framework to the protocol and still guide the questioning around topics as they arose (see Figure 3.3). Although it was convenient to have the structure to ensure that similar questions were asked to all the interviewees, I was also prepared to take a flexible approach and allow the interviewees to steer the interview in whatever way their stories took them (Denscombe, 2011). I was aware that key questions can trigger other questions and that open questions such as “tell me about...” can be limitless and can potentially end up with a “jumbled collection of areas of interest” (Wellington, 2000, p.76). I therefore needed a questionnaire protocol to provide a guide to progress and focus the interview (Appendix 11). At the interview, I was aiming to gather information, but in the first few minutes of the first interview with one participant I was afraid of losing sight of his narratives by constantly referring to the questionnaire (Dilly, 2000). As the data unfolded, I knew I had to act in a similar way

to that recommended by Rubin and Rubin (1995), who advise that preparing for an interview is similar to preparing for a holiday. I needed to make enough plans for practical and emotional possibilities but also to be prepared to “hang loose” (p.42). I needed not to be so rigid as to follow the questionnaire implicitly, but rather to use the questionnaire as a reference to guide the conversation. *Figure 3.3.*

*Questionnaire Protocol* gives examples of the main questions asked. While semi-structured interviewing gives voice to the voiceless, Silverman (1997) argues that it may not be suited for discussing emotionally charged topics for those with poor communication skills. Furthermore, Affleck *et al.* (2012) argue it can be a challenge for men who are not used to talking about personal issues. Affleck *et al.* (2012) further argue that this hesitancy among men to express themselves communicatively may be out of a fear of being perceived as feminine, vulnerable and not in control, I remained conscious of these factors as we progressed.

Coming into the interview space, I was aware of my own personal attributes that might impact on the relationship with the interviewee: my Irish culture, my identity as a woman, my spoken Dublin accent, my social and education class – all traits that Denscombe (2011) describes as the “aspects of self” (p.179). However, I saw this as a positive: it made me more objective and aware of differences such as how lives were lived and how the men’s life experiences, backgrounds and education were different from mine. In other words, it made me hungry to hear their stories and I knew I could take an interested, curious stance to the unfolding of their narratives. As a result of the outcomes of the interviews, I believe that my personal attributes did not deter the men from being open and communicative.

Figure 3.3: Questionnaire protocol excerpt

- *Tell me about your childhood and your family. Who were you close to?  
(reference to Bowlby, 1968, Bronfenbrenner, 1979)*
- *What was your childhood experience of being fathered? What memories have you of your father? (in reference to Bowlby, 1968)*
- *What childhood experiences with/without your father have influenced how you father your own children? (in reference to Bowlby, 1968)*
- *What was your educational experience? Primary, post-primary and further education? (in reference to Bronfenbrenner, 1979)*
- *Has your education experience influenced your attitude towards education for yourself and for your children? (in reference to Bronfenbrenner, 1979)*
- *What does it mean to be a father? And what does it take to be a father? (in reference to Bowlby, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1979)*

Denscombe (2011) suggests that during the interview the interviewer needs to show passivity and neutrality by not giving any clues about their thoughts. However, this is an area which I found difficult to uphold. I took value from Oakley (1981), who argues the opposite stance, and suggests that the interviewer becomes fully involved as a person with feelings who responds with an understanding of the participants' situation. Although I did not express any judgements on what was revealed by the participants, I could not be passive in an emotionally charged situation and found that I was emotionally impacted by some traumatic and sad details of experiences that were shared. My training in interview skills and my experience in my teaching practice as a mentor to young adolescents was a

positive personal strength when doing the research study. However, I did need to give myself some time to recover after the interviews were over.

My approach had been to use the skills advocated by the Rogerian method of interviewing, which allows for a client-centered approach, using the skills of reflective listening (Rogers, 1983). Rogers (1945) advises that the interviewer needs to come to the research site with unconditional positive regard, be non-judgemental, and show a respectful attitude. He also advises researchers to use reflective listening and paraphrasing, which involves restating back to the person what has been said (Rogers, 1945). This gives the interviewee the opportunity to clarify what they mean, thus preventing confusion or misunderstanding (Rogers, 1945). I used these points as direction for conducting myself within the interview space. Furthermore, in response to the information given, I mentally recreated and revised the interview protocol on the basis of details that unfolded (Dilly, 2000). The interviews became a safe space for the men and the data shared gave rich descriptive narratives. I was aware that Denscombe (2011) cautions that the interviewer needs to know when to back off, if the discussion is beginning to cause the interviewee embarrassment or unease. The advice he gives is: “bite your lip on occasion, take care not to reveal disgust, surprise or pleasure through facial gestures” (p.182), and this was to the forefront of my thoughts when being told of one incident. One participant recounted how an aunt had not helped him when she knew he had physically suffered at the hands of his parent, his comment that “she saw the cigarette burns but she did nothing” was a difficult statement to hear without expressing an emotional response. It would have been insensitive for me not to show empathy (Field notes, 2017), but a balance was needed between empathy and expression of my own judgemental stance towards the incident. I was close to

expressing my disgust at a neglectful aunt but instead, I took guidance from Rogers' statement:

The attitudes of acceptance and permissiveness upon which the interviewer bases his work are enriched by specific techniques, which avoid making the client defensive and eliminates the personal bias which the interviewer might impose on the interviewee (Rogers, 1945, p.283).

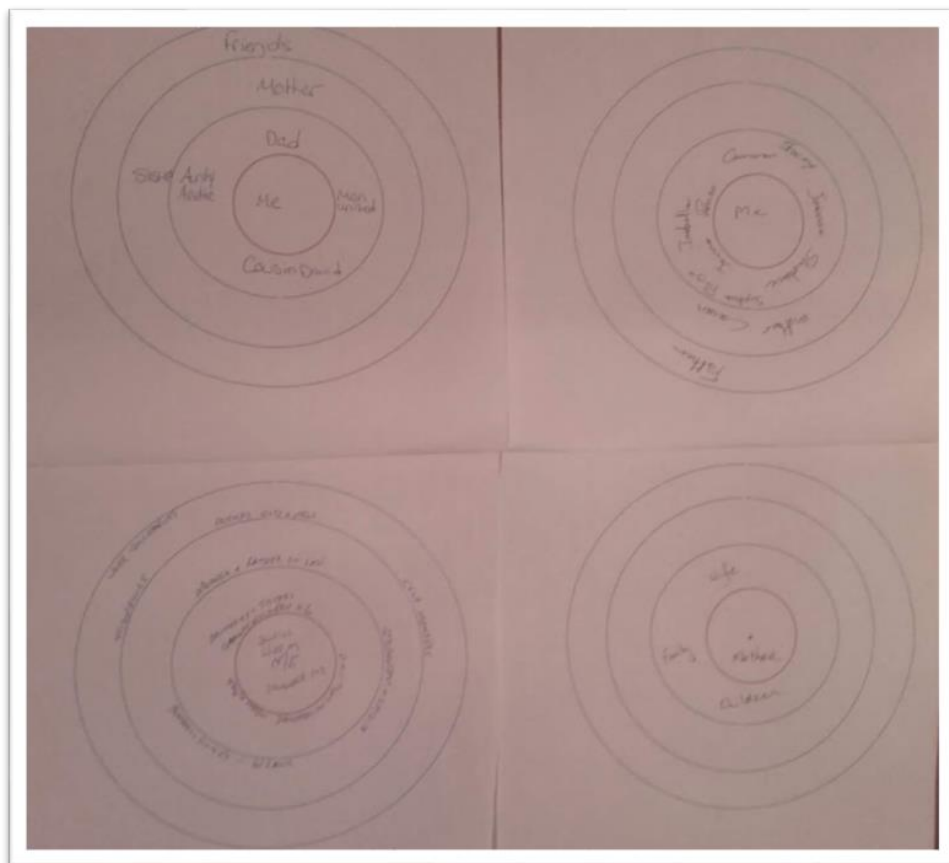
This approach ensured that I did not antagonise the participant by commenting with judgement at what was revealed. I used an accepting approach with all the men, and it was evident that one participant felt this acceptance of himself and his life story. At the end of a very emotional interview, he said to me, as he shook my hand to say goodbye: "Thank you for today; if I met you in the town I would say hello to you" (Field notes, 2017). This sentiment, expressed by a Traveller man, demonstrated his recognition of me, a settled person and a woman, and reflected the mutual respect that we had developed in the interview space. According to Dilly (2000), to have reached this state of understanding, I was "listening with a purpose" (Dilly, 2000) and as the interviews progressed I found that I was not only listening to facts, I was listening to the emotions, verbally and physically expressed and observed. It became an all-consuming process of auditory and visual stimulus that led me to adopting a supportive art of listening that encompassed using a whole person approach.

Dilly (2000) argues that there is more than just the physical voice of the interview that is in the conversation: the interviewer needs to listen to their own voice – the voice that wanders to the next question while the first question is being answered; the voice that keeps the pace going and makes judgements on moving forward, and also the voice that is not agreeing with what has been expressed in previous replies. I found, in the initial stages of interviewing, that I was trying too hard to ask

the questions; it was with time that I realised I needed to sit and listen. I was also prepared to accommodate any of the men who were hesitant in expressing their thoughts about their experiences.

When I considered how best to discuss closeness in relationships, I decided to introduce an image of concentric circles for the men to visually present their relationships. In the diagram, the men placed themselves in the middle circle and on the outer circles they wrote the names of other people who they considered were close to them and to whom they were connected to (see *Figure 3.4*). Two of the men struggled in placing their father's name on the paper: "Do I have to have him there?" asked one; and another said "I will leave him off it, but I will place my mother right next to me".

*Figure 3.4: Closeness and connected diagram.*



These comments showed that the diagram was a valuable introduction to discussing and exploring the relationships the men had with their children and with their fathers.

Using the researcher-generated photographs also proved a beneficial method of eliciting conversation. One participant, who was initially slow to respond to questioning, took a photograph of a Traveller and his children, stating: "That's me; that's what I do with my kids." This comment was the impetus to opening conversation and he became more lucid and communicative. As the interviews progressed, the responses became more intense and emotional once the men had the space to express themselves.

Although Affleck *et al.* (2012) state that men find it a challenge to express emotion in research studies, I did not find that this was the case in this present study. The participants told their stories and reflected on past experiences in an open and frank manner and were emotionally expressive. At times, the expression was laughter. "Me and my dad slid down the stairs on a mattress" was one such humorous moment. Conversely, at times tears flowed at the memory of some sad event: "Why didn't my dad love me?" was a question directed at me, as the young man looked at a photograph of a father and son (*Figure 3.5*). He added: "I wanted my father to be like that with me" and his tears flowed down his face. It proved to be a testing moment for me to stay with him without my own tears. However, I was aware that the best way to respond was to show empathy in the interview space and to check in with the participants before leaving the research field, to ensure that they were alright leaving the research area. Rosetto (2014) claims that the interviewer's role is as learner and observer, and not as a counsellor or therapist, she maintains that the process of unfolding one's story can be therapeutic without the intention being



implicit in the process. However, I found that, without specific planning for it, a therapeutic quality to the interview process unfolded and the men reported having benefited from the process.

I was aware that there is an obligation for researchers to be ethically responsible and recognise the personal change that can occur to our interviewees through our inquiries. Being aware of the potential personal developments and of the need “to do no harm” (UoS, 2017), I also considered how I could conduct the semi-structured interview within an interrogative style that would also include elements of self-care for me, the interviewer. My main focus of study was to be respectful to my participants and allow them to take the lead and direct the flow of the conversation.

*Figure 3.5: Sample photograph of father and son*



“I wanted my father to be like that with me”

“Why didn’t he love me?”

Sean.

The safe space I provided supported the participants for divulging childhood and life experiences; and the participants exhibited an openness and an honest display of emotions. I found that this approach worked best for me. I was able to have my protocol of questions but when the occasion arose, I could be attentive, allow the story unfold, to let it flow if there was flow, and to let it rest when it needed to rest (Rogers, 1983). I was careful not to become frustrated when some planned

questions had to be overlooked, as the story took a new direction. At times, when I had a participant who was too shy to answer, I thought it was better to sit with the silence, let the interviewee take his time, and honour his participation by not rushing or throwing in questions that did not sit with whatever last piece of information had been disclosed. I was in tune with the interviewees and I was empathetic to their declared situations (Rogers, 1983). While this approach went well, as individual interviews took place I found that the openness and honesty displayed in stories shared by the interviewer had an effect on me.

The interviewing relationship is a reciprocal one and in research studies the main emphasis is that the researcher needs to be aware of the effect of the interview on the interviewees. However, Rogers (1983) advises that each party can be affected by what either person says. Similarly, Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) argue that not only does the interview hold personal and emotional significance for the interviewee, but the revealing of personal information can impact on the interviewer. However, speaking does much more than transfer information from the interviewee to the interviewer, and Varello *et al.* (1998) claim that it has the potential to transform the interviewer (p.261). I was aware of the effect that the interviewee's stories were having on me during the sharing of information, particularly at one stage, when a participant, a man of 42, shed tears. I wondered to myself, "What do I say to him?" Somehow, the words of comfort came, but it was not until I left the interview location and returned home that exhaustion hit me and I realised that the physical and mental effort I had put into those moments of supporting the interviewee had taken its toll. Allmark *et al.* (2009) suggests that there is no easy route to effective interpersonal relationships and advises that the researcher needs to take a self-reflective stance on their own behaviour when embarking on

interviews. I found at times that I struggled to keep my internal voice expressing opposition to what was being heard from the interviewee – not so much in disbelief or judgement, but in awe at some event described. The role of interviewer requires self-reflection, an awareness of one's own limits and an ability to seek support for oneself. Although, it is said that we should “do no harm” to the participants (BERA, 2011), I suggest that in the research field it is also necessary to “do no harm’ to oneself and that self-care is a necessity. Wellington (2004) asks: “Is it possible to draw a line between a research interview and a therapeutic interview when dealing with vulnerable people?” (p.3). I suggest that it may not be possible to have a strict division between the two. If we step into the interviewee's life, we have to be prepared to listen and, while we do not have to be therapists, we do have a duty of care to participants. Equally, we need to ensure that as interviewers, we too are emotionally supported. Researchers hear stories of complex lives and there will be a possible impact on researchers as listeners. It is therefore possible to leave the research field with “mud on your boots” (Fielding, 1982) and I suggest that this is where the researcher also needs support. In situations that cause long-term effect, either a supervisor should be consulted to share the impact of the stories, or the researchers need to develop strategies to support themselves. I found my supervisor helpful and referred to her for guidance and support. Time out for a mindfulness restorative retreat assisted in reframing my thoughts and so enabled me to continue in an objective fashion.

Following the collection of data, I moved into the subsequent step of analysis. The next section details the steps taken and the choices I made to ensure that my interpretation of the data was an accurate representation. I present the methods I

used in identifying similarities and differences in the men's narratives, which generated the themes and ultimately the findings.

### **3.12 Introduction: analysis of data**

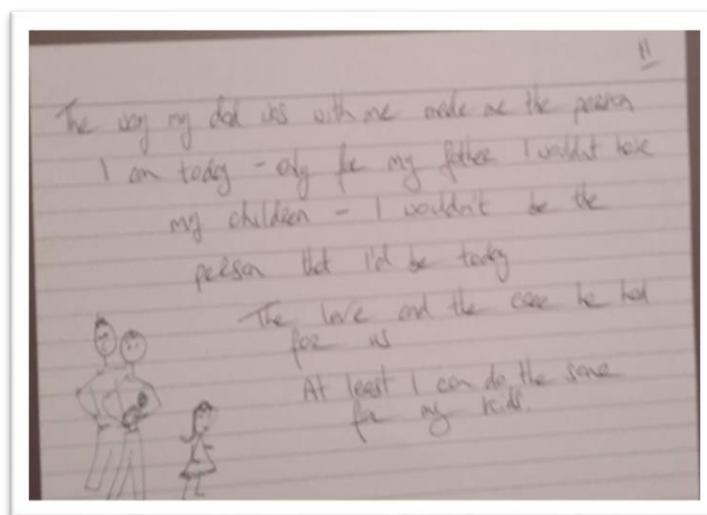
I began to analyse the data by transcribing the recordings from the semi-structured interviews with six participants - refer to *Figure 3.9 Steps in analysis* for complete plan of analysis. The interview data was supplemented by the participants' comments on researcher-generated photographs and included those made by the men in relation to completing the diagram of "closeness". In addition to this data, I had kept accounts of regular meetings with one participant who was in the process of becoming a father over the length of a year's contact and was able to make reference to a reflective journal, in which I took notes of the study as it progressed. I used the journal to record the facts and feelings of my own research journey and my observations of the participants as the study progressed. I was able to triangulate the combined data from a variety of perspectives (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). My aim was to analyse the comments made in each man's narrative, comparing and contrasting the data across the corpus of comments and reactions to photographs and diagrams, in order to find any similarities or differences that would answer the research question

*What are the fathering experiences of young Irish men who have been early school leavers?*

The data findings would, I anticipated, add to our knowledge of the factors surrounding young men's experiences of fathering and demonstrate how that childhood experience impacted on their own education and their attitudes towards education for their children. Recognising that some poor literacy readers can be better visual readers than readers of print and are capable of understanding context

and content by using images (Kluth, 2017), I had to decide how best to capture the sentiment of the spoken word in a visual format. Furthermore, as Kress (2003) argues, “the difference in meaning depends on the relation of the depicted entities to each other in the frame of the picture-space” (p.3). Visually looking at how aspects of their life stories fitted together could offer a viable method for seeing the elements of their life stories in one space (see *Figure 3.6*). I set out with a three-step approach to representing the data: first, I listened to the words; second, I transcribed the words; and third, I represented those words into images. However, Kress (2003) argues that “There are things you can do with sound that you cannot do with graphic substance, either easily or at all” (p.4) and this highlights how difficult it was to include tone of voice or expression of feelings into the pictures (see *Figure 3.6* and *Figure 3.7*).

*Figure 3.6: Jim’s story booklet: “I can do the same for my kids”*



“The way my dad was with me, made me the person I am today”

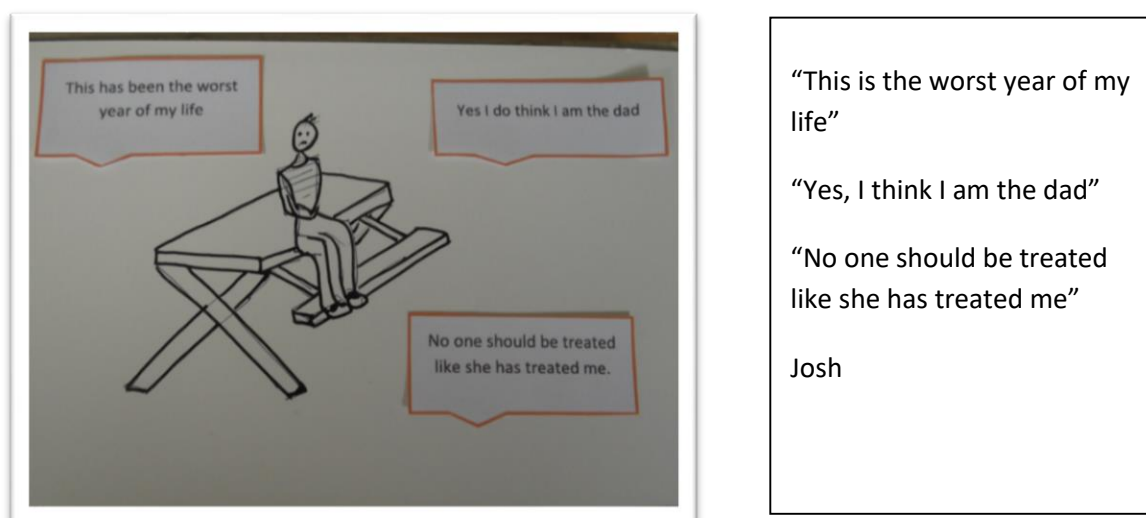
“The love and the care he had for us, at least I can do the same for my kids”

Jim

As I reread the events of each experience, I was interpreting and capturing their meaning in a visual manner; and the images brought each man’s story together. As a non-artist, I made the images simple: I drew and changed the drawings as I progressed through the interviews

I added speech bubbles to hold comments and relevant conversation “bites” when I felt that images alone could not totally represent the unfolding narratives. I placed the collection of images into a photographic album holder, where it was possible to remove any images the men were unhappy with when returned to them. I found that the act of drawing brought a deeper understanding of the men’s life experiences and that the relationship between listening, reading and drawing brought a more intimate knowing of the men’s narratives. The creation of the story books allowed for some familiarising of the memories and feelings elicited in the narratives, however, I needed to analyse the body of data collected in the interviews in more detail.

*Figure 3.7: Josh’s story booklet: “No one should be treated like she has treated me”*



Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that more than one method of analysis can be used when examining the data corpus and in this research study it was necessary to consider several approaches to analysing the data in more depth. Throughout the interviews, I had been aware that the men conversed with me in a natural dialogue and I was at first drawn to consider conversational analysis as an analytical method. I considered Hutchby and Woofitt’s (2008) claim that conversation analysis is the

study of “talk-in-interaction” and shows how “participants understand and respond to one another in their turn at talking” (p.14). The advantage of this analysis is that it concentrates on the points of interest as raised by the participants and looks at how conversation begins and closes. Edley and Wetherell’s (1999) critique of conversation analysis is that it is too restrictive, as the analysis can be too broad and not focused enough on the content and I had to agree that, as the interviews followed a definite line of enquiry, they were not free-flowing conversations. Rather, the conversations followed a definite focus of enquiry. Another approach I considered was narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is described as an emphasis on the “artfulness of talk” (Smith and Sparkes, 2005, p.226); how language gives meaning and ownership to the narrator. As Smith and Sparkes (2005) point out, it is a method of examining how interviewees “monitor, manage, modify and revise the emergent story” (p.225); and it can be especially useful to examine facets of stories that may show contradictions or those that are not consistent. However, I felt that this method had the potential for being seen by the men as judgemental of their narrative expression and I preferred to view the data as “life stories mediated through memory” (Brannen, 2013, p.3). As such, their narration used their own personal sociocultural ways of presentation and I valued their expression of this.

### **3.13 Structural analysis**

On further deliberation, I needed to take a two-pronged approach to analysis, firstly to tie the data together, from the three methods of collecting data (interviews, photographs and diagrams), into a readable presentable form and secondly I also needed to examine the data for recurring words and phrases that would indicate any themes of shared importance (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It was necessary for me to present the data collected in a clear succinct form, which would bring some

congruence to the stories as a whole, not that each story would replicate one another, but that the format of presentation of their stories in the thesis would follow a similar manner of presentation and yet demonstrate each individual's experience. Each of the interviewees had started their stories at a point that was comfortable for them; some started with their childhood and others with their role as a father. They all took their own route and once the interview was established, I guided them to questions that probed and prompted the expression of their narratives. Looking at the transcripts, I needed to restructure the data and collate the responses to give continuity in style. I considered that a structural analysis (Smith and Sparkes, 2005) that allowed for construction of evolving life events would be an appropriate tactic. I made particular use of Brock and Kleiber's (1994) and Smith and Sparkes' (2005) approach to formatting the data and presented it in a planned arrangement for each participant's narrative.

*Figure 3.8: Structural analysis of the men's narratives*

Structural analysis of data: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Personal profile:</b> person/ childhood experiences.</li><li>• <b>Incident:</b> education consequences.</li><li>• <b>Result:</b> becoming a young father.</li><li>• <b>Impact:</b> on being a father: emotional response</li><li>• <b>Reflective context:</b> looking back on how childhood fathering practices influence present day fathering.</li></ul> <p>(Source adapted from: Smith and Sparkes, 2005; Brock and Kleiber, 1994)</p>

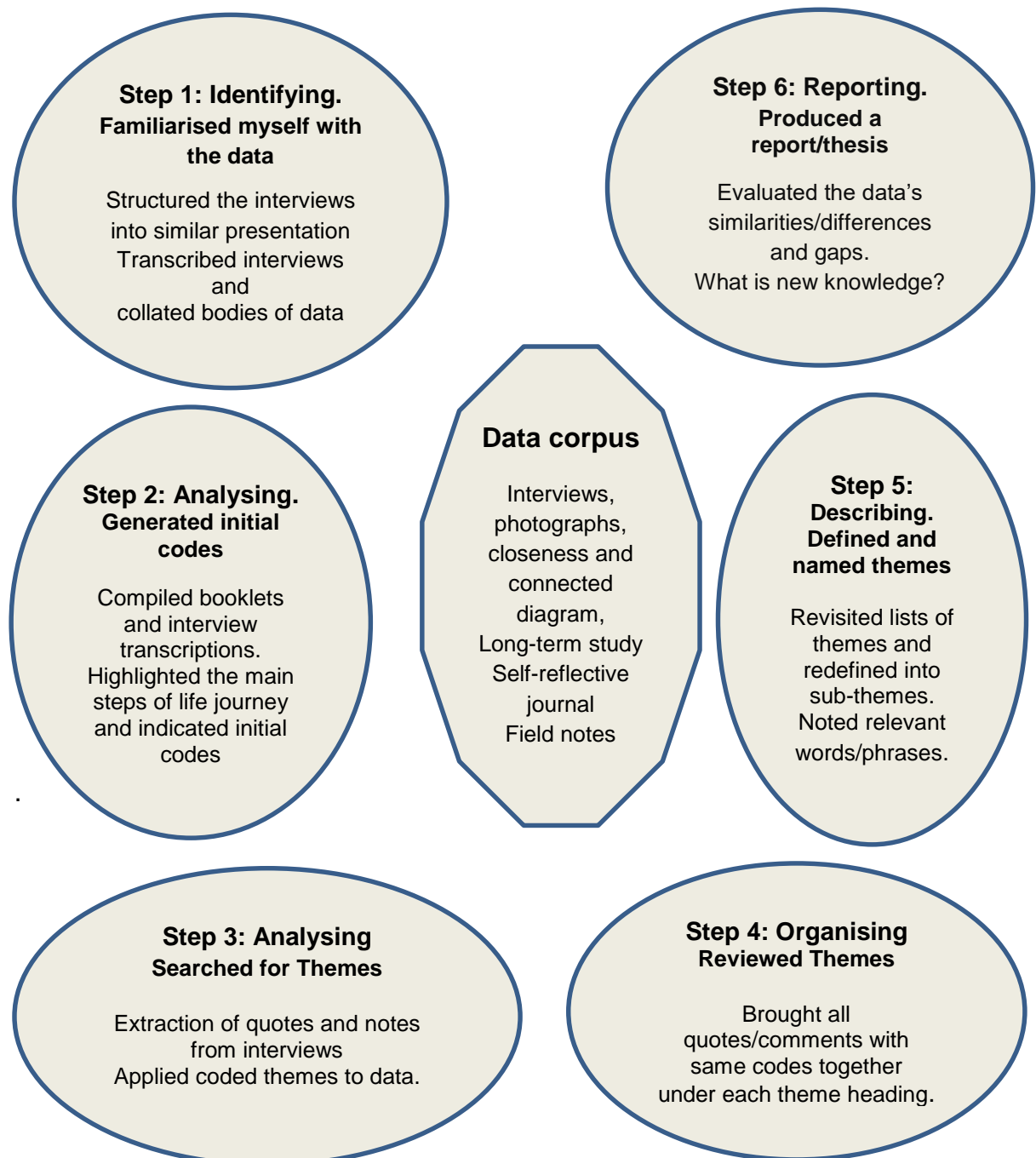


The format first began with a reflection on the person's life before the occurrence of the topic I was investigating, namely the childhood experiences before fatherhood. The next section dealt with their reaction to consequences of their childhood experience (e.g. education). It was followed by looking at the responsiveness needed on becoming fathers and examined how being a father brought new responsibilities. The structural analysis concluded with reflecting back to how the childhood experience, at the start of their story, influenced their current situated experience. The value of this approach was that it gave insight into specific events – told by this specific group of participants – and brought focus to their struggles, successes and challenges (Smith and Sparkes, 2005). The reflecting back on childhood and bringing its impact to the present gave context to their narratives (Smith and Sparkes, 2005; see *Figure 3.8*). This method of analysis proved a valuable method for presenting the data and through the process I became more familiar with the men's stories by separating the narratives into four areas on their lifeline: a personal profile; education impact; becoming a father and being a father. This structural approach helped to identify emerging themes. The structural analysis was the first part of analysing the data corpus, however, the optimum and complimentary approach was to use a thematic method of analysis.

Thematic analysis is a frequently used method that aims to highlight similarities and differences, while also generating unanticipated insights (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A drawback of this method lies in that it relies on the interpretations of the researcher and therefore can be criticised for a potential lack of trustworthiness (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). To prevent this, the approach needs to record each step taken, the coding process used, and how the data was systematically reviewed (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). To ensure that I conducted the analysis in a robust manner, I

followed the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) to confirm the reliability of the analysis procedure. This included: “identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting of the themes found within a data set” (Nowell *et al.*, 2017, p.2; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The steps taken are visualised in *Figure 3.9*.

*Figure 3.9: Steps in analysing the data set*



### 3.14 Steps in analysis of the data set

The details of each step taken are as follows:

#### **Step 1: Identifying: familiarisation with the data**

**Method:** I transcribed the interviews and collated bodies of data

The first step involved revisiting the written transcriptions of the interviews in conjunction with listening to the recordings again.

I reviewed the comments made on the researcher-generated photographs (*Figure 3.5*; Appendix 1) and the information placed on the closeness and connected diagram (*Figure 3.4*). In this manner, I triangulated the data from the corpus data (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). The long-term study with one young man necessitated meeting with him regularly over the time of the research study and I referred to my field notes about these meetings and to other reflections written about my research. I read and reread the data and began to become more familiar with the relevant chronological and specific events in each narrative. The personal stories (*Figure 3.6*; *Figure 3.7*) and structural analysis of the men narratives (*Figure 3.8*) assisted in bringing my awareness to similarities, differences and surprises across the narratives.

#### **Step 2: Analysing: initial codes generated**

**Method:** I compiled initial codes from each interview transcription, which highlighted the main aspects of each life journey. I revisited the interviews and with my research question to the fore, I moved on to applying appropriate named titles to the initial ideas that were becoming obvious in the data corpus. For example, it appeared that the sense of “being there” was repeated many times, both in relation

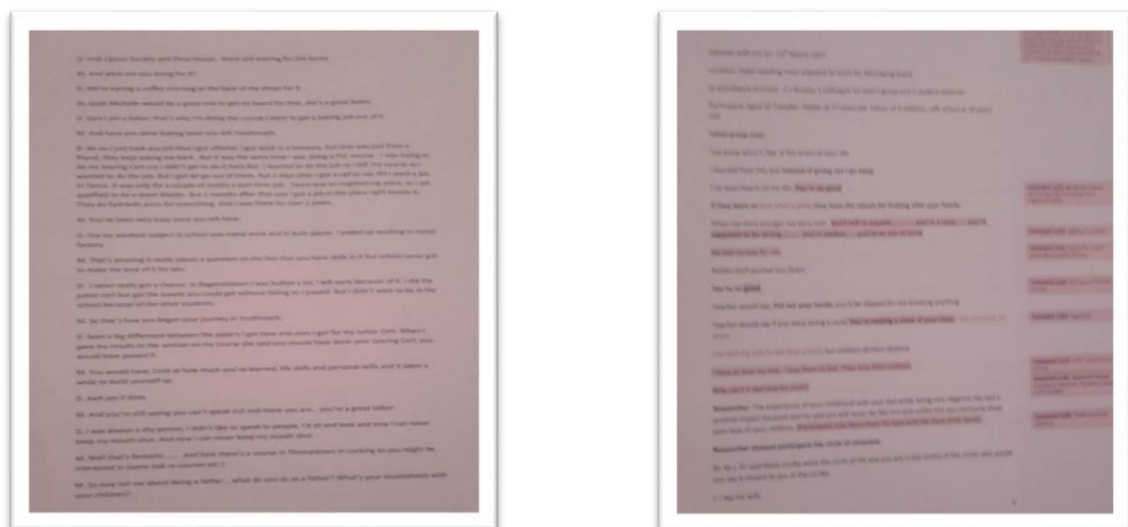
to their fathers in their childhood and to their own presences as a father. Another important aspect of experiences centred on school and education and during each interview I became aware of the emotional experiences throughout their narratives.

### Step 3: Analysing further data: theme search

**Method:** I extracted quoted quotes and notes from interviews and applied coded themes to data.

To confirm these initial themes which I identified, I returned to the transcription of the interviews and began to extricate quotes, phrases and sentiments which I considered to be relevant to each individual case. Using the review tab on the Microsoft Word programme, I placed the highlighted statements in a separate column.

Figure 3.10: Transcribing and applying initial codes on interview sheets



These direct quotes, when written in isolation from the questions asked in the interview, made it clearer about the areas that were relevant, and I began to get an idea of some similar themes. Rather than the themes “emerging”, I felt that I used a

controlled, steady and precise method of sifting through the information. I also used my judgement in selecting the more obvious repeated themes (Braun *et al.* 2006). I placed codes on each of the extracted comments. These codes matched the initial ones I had observed in Step 2, where I had three main themes, and I allocated anything that did not fit into the first round of coding, as it was important not to disregard any information (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

I applied four codes to the interview transcripts: “BT” for Being there; “EM” for Emotional aspects, “ED” for Educational importance. In this way, I confirmed that my identification of the suggested themes had substance (see *Figure 3.11*).

*Figure 3.11: Codes applied to identify themes*

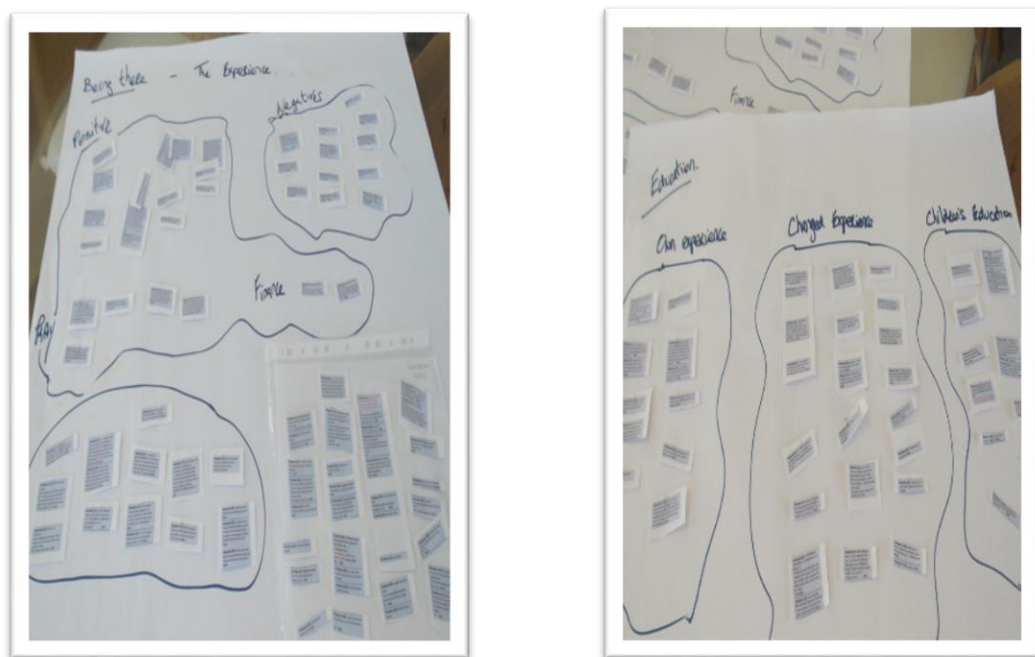


#### **Step 4: Organising: themes reviewed**

**Method:** I brought together quotes and comments with the same codes under the main theme headings.

I proceeded to cross-check the coded extracts from the six participants' experiences and brought together all the similar quotes on each theme. As I did not use a computer package, I used a "cut and paste" action and manually cut out each quote and assembled all the similar quotes under the three main identified themes. I used large sheets of paper and placed the cut-out quotes and comments under each designated code (Figure 3.12).

Figure 3.12: Themes: being there, emotional aspects and education experience



The themes identified were: Being there; Emotional aspects of fathering and Education impact. I revisited the excerpts to ensure that each one was appropriate to the designated coded theme. I became aware that some quotes or comments were relevant to more than one theme (Nowell *et al.*, 2017) and I applied a double code, where appropriate. For example: "he was never around" was relevant to "Being there" (BT) and to "Emotional aspects of fathering" (EM).

### **Step 5: Describing: themes defined and named**

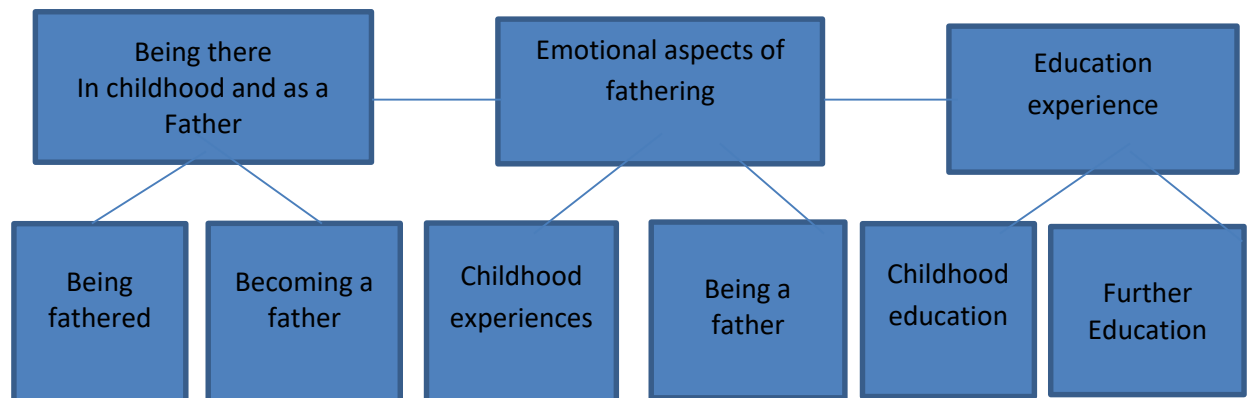
**Method:** I revisited lists of themes and redefined them into sub-themes.

When I used all the data from the six experiences, I examined each theme again.

The data was indicating that there were similar themes relevant to two different time spaces. For example, a father “being there” in childhood for a participant and a participant “being there” in fathering a child. I divided the themes into sub-themes.

Of the three themes identified, I now had six sub-themes. I gave these new names and began to further analyse the categories (*Figure 3.13*).

*Figure 3.13: Sub-themes identified*



A more detailed examination of these sub-themes then brought my attention to “stand-out” words and expressions associated within the sub-themes (Nowell, *et al*, 2017). I followed Nowell *et al*’s (2017) advice by using the exact words from the participants’ interviews, in order to assure the authenticity of the themes. In some cases, one word was not enough to capture the thought of the theme: a few words or a phrase were needed. I was also conscious of not only choosing repeated words but also examining words and events that were not common to all, but that might indicate a difference or a challenge for an individual young man. I was aiming to give an objective unbiased analysis of each person’s point of view (Goldie, 2003). I then noted that there were significant times when the men expressed they had met

with impediments to being with their children, while this was not a theme of their childhood, I believed it was important to include it as a fourth theme in fatherhood.

The first categorised theme was the theme of **Being there in childhood and in fatherhood** and was relevant to the men when they were describing events with their father and when they became a father. The sub-themes were: (1) Being fathered: “I had a great childhood” and (2) Becoming a father: “I don’t want a child to not know its father”. The second theme of **Emotional aspects of fathering** had two sub-themes (1) Childhood experiences: “It was the love, nothing but love” which was a reflection on childhood and the emotions of being a father; and (2) Being a father: “It means the world to me” covered the emotional aspects of being a father. A third theme dealt with **Barriers to father involvement** which had the first sub-theme of (1) Gate closing by partners: “She put me through a lot” which demonstrated the difficulties of access to children and the second sub-theme was (2) Environmental impediments: “I was sent home” which showed the problems with agencies and services not supporting fathers. The fourth theme was the impact of these fathering experiences on education. The theme of **Education experience** with the first sub-theme (1) Childhood education “I hated school” which showed the impact of childhood experiences had on their reasoning to leave school early and the second theme was (2) Further education: “They were lovely teachers” which showed how new education experiences changed the views on education.

### **Step 6: Report production: the main findings**

**Method:** I discussed the themes in relation to the research questions.

In preparation for the next step of reporting the findings from the analysis, I evaluated the themes that emerged from the data by examining the similarities and

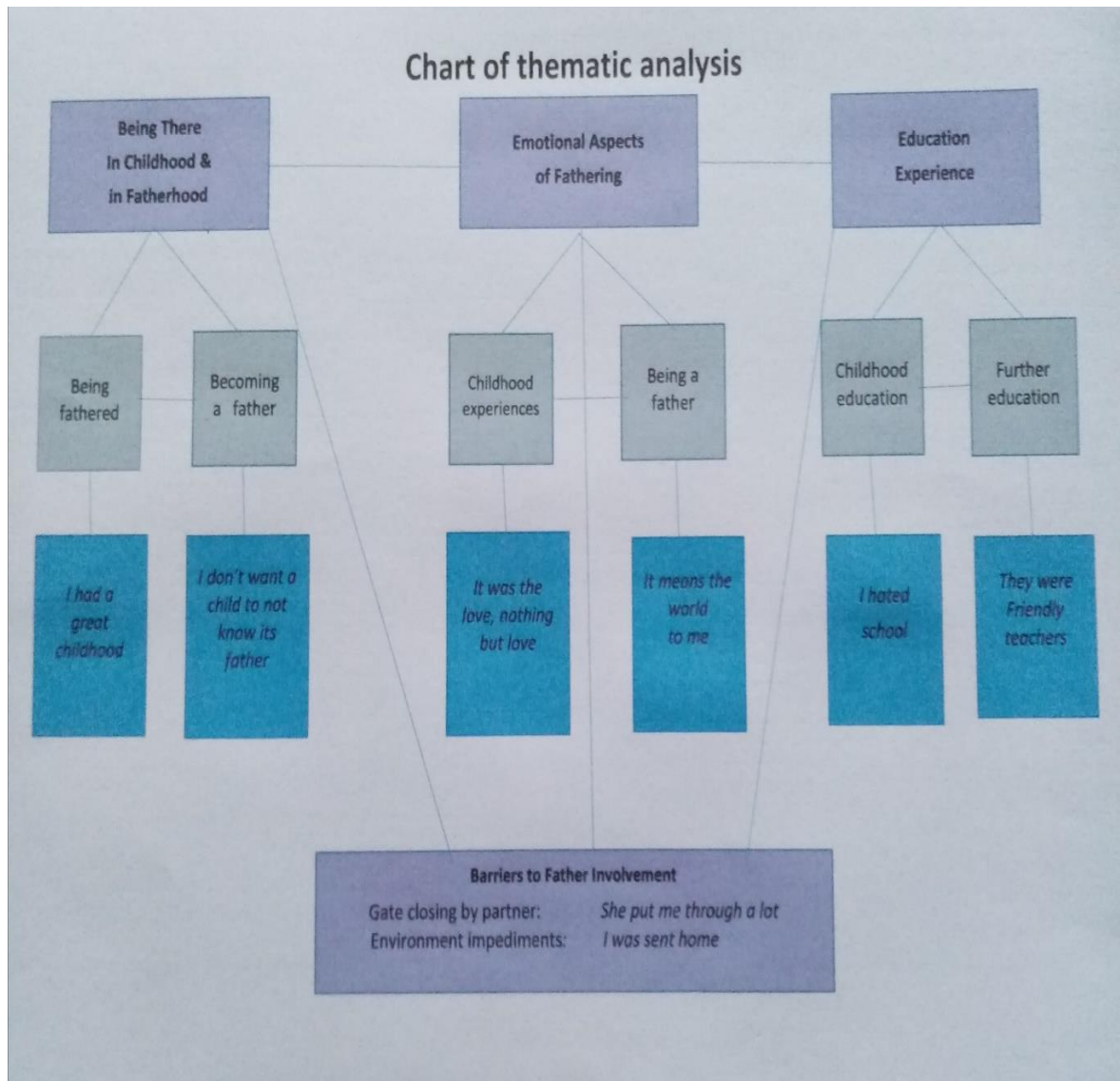


differences among the interview data sets. By examining the themes, I was able to establish if there was a link between the experiences and events; and I was conscious of any happenings in the men's lives that were similar or common to all the men. I was also interested in what did not fit into the general findings explored these in relation to the overall study. In examining and re-examining the analysed data, I was looking for something that was common to all the experiences. I was looking for something that could answer the research question

*What are the fathering experiences of Irish young men who have been early school leavers?*

A diagram of the analysis representing the themes and sub-themes gives a visual of the analysed data at a glance (*Figure 3.14*). Chapter 3 has explained how I approached and analysed the data using two methods: structural analysis and thematic analysis. The data was collected from one-to-one interviews, field notes, diagrams of closeness and connectedness, photographs of fathers and their children and from a year-long study of a young man on his journey to fatherhood. Chapter 4 presents the men's six narratives in a structural format (Smith and Sparkes, 2005; Brock and Kleiber, 1994; *Figure 3.8*). These set the scene for Chapter 5, which discusses the findings of the data and Chapter 6 presents a reflection on the study and how the findings and the methodology adds to our literature on researching fathers. The limitations of the study, and the possible implications of these findings for policy and practice are also presented.

Figure 3.14: Chart of thematic analysis of the data



## Chapter 4: The men's stories

### 4.1 Introduction to the narratives

This chapter presents the experiences of the six men in the research study in narratives which were told by the six men in a series of semi-structured interviews. One participant was tracked for a year during the pregnancy and birth of his baby and through the first four months of his child's life. The participants' summarised profiles are presented in *Figure 3.2. Participants profile*. The data was collected by using a flexible questionnaire protocol (Appendix 11), researcher-generated photographs to encourage conversation, and a "Closeness" diagram (*Figure 3.4*) to elicit perceptions of relationships. The data collected answered the research question: *What are the fathering experiences of young Irish men who have been early school leavers?* The original interviews were not always fluid: they ebbed and flowed and responded to the natural flow and evolution of individual conversations. The questions built on the data presented by the interviewees, as they were expressed and did not follow the same structured schedule in every interview. However, each interview had the research question at the core.

To bring congruence to the presentation of the experiences, I analysed the experiences in a systematic and comparative way. I adopted the methodology of Brock and Kleiber (1994) and Smith and Sparkes (2005) as a guide to analysing the narratives in a structural manner. The suggested five headings guided me in presenting the data: personal profile, incident, result, impact, and reflective context (Brock and Kleiber, 1994, p. 417-419). I start the narratives with a profile of the participants, which explores their childhood and deals with their fathers' influence and their childhood experiences, including school. This is followed by examining how their childhood experience impact on the incident of education in their lives, it

continues with resulting lifestyle changes of becoming a father and notes the impact of those changes on being a father. Each narrative presents a context to the study by looking at the present circumstances of fathering, while reflecting on the past experience of being fathered (see *Figure 3.8*). Linking into the theoretical frameworks which framed this investigation, each narrative responds to questions which were constructed in relation to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988, 1973, 1969) and to questions which linked to Bronfenbrenner's (1978) ecological systems, which situate the child within social and cultural contexts (Appendix 11: Protocol Questionnaire). The experiences of each case study presented are my interpretations of what was shared with me. I was aware of Reissman's (2008) approach to narratives, that there is a "challenge to find ways of working with texts so the original narrator is not effaced, so he does not lose control over his words" (p.34). I was therefore conscious of presenting the narratives in a way that honoured the facts and feelings expressed to me. The presentation begins with Mark's story, it continues with Sean, Daniel, Jim, Kevin and finishes with Josh's story. In line with Nowell *et al's* (2017) argument that direct words add credibility and reliability to data collected, every story starts with a direct quotation which is relevant to a particular aspect of each individual's story.

#### **4.2 Case study 1: Mark's story**

*"It was great being a dad; it was great to have a boy"*

##### Personal profile

Mark's first child was born when he was 23 and he is the father of four children. Three were his own birth children and the fourth was a child who was adopted. Mark was the second child born into a family of seven children and he was the eldest boy of five brothers. His father was a travelling postman-sorter, working long

hours on the Post Office train and was absent from the house up to four days at a time. Mark described him as “a strict man who believed in doing what was right”. Mark’s father was influenced by his own mother, who Mark described as “a control freak”. Mark felt that his father was intimidated by his (Mark’s) grandmother, to whom he (his father) insisted on bringing the children to visit every Sunday. In granny’s house the children had to sit quietly and “drink orange from coloured glasses”. Mark’s dad suffered chronic illness and spent many times in hospital with a respiratory problem before eventually dying when Mark was 19 years old. His father’s poor health and long working hours affected his ability to spend time with the children in the family. Mark remembered occasional holidays in Butlin’s and going to the beach on day trips. He described his relationship with his father, saying that “it was not a buddy relationship: he was feared mostly”. He saw his father as a disciplinarian and his mother often threatened the children with the old words: “Wait until your father gets home.” Mark reiterated often that his father was away working and was strict with the children when at home, but one enjoyable memory the family shared together stayed with him. It was Christmas, when his father came home with extra cash from working overtime and he made a long line of money notes from the kitchen to the hall door while the seven children stood on the stairs and watched in wonder. Mark’s father was usually frugal with money and always advised that people should work for their money and never borrow. This was a value that Mark held onto for himself.

### Education

At four years of age, Mark started school, he lived in the suburbs of Dublin at the time. His first school was near his house but, as he had many bouts of asthma, he missed a lot of school. His paternal grandmother intervened and insisted that he

went to a school nearer to where she lived. This was a 25-minute bus journey away from his family home twice a day, and he had to go to an aunt for his dinner at lunchtime. Mark said he initially did not mind changing school, as he never liked the first one, and he saw it as a “bit of an adventure” to go on a bus. However, he did not like the second school, as it was an all-boys school with large classes, and he did not get on with the teachers. An incident he remembered with a teacher (now deceased) caused Mark some distress and when remembering back, he said: “I hated school; I couldn’t wait to get out of it.” At 12, he moved to secondary school, but again his parents did not send him to a local school: they sent him to one they believed had a good academic reputation. This necessitated him again going by bus. He sat his first state exams at 14 but “didn’t want to continue”, so he left shortly after turning 15 years of age. Mark was fortunate to successfully apply for an apprenticeship at 16. He had also applied to work in the Post Office, where his father worked, but he turned down that offer as he felt he was better suited to mechanics. Mark enjoyed doing his apprenticeship, as he was learning something he was interested in. He was with men who were older than him and he said they looked after him; and he recalled having mugs of tea and smoking cigarettes with these older men. Mark said, with a sense of pride of his achievement: “once a mechanic always a mechanic.” He did not think his father objected to him not taking the Post Office job, but he admitted that they never discussed his decision, and with reflective contemplation, he said he thought his dad was happy that he had got an apprenticeship. Mark is proud of the fact that he has continually worked full time from 16 years of age. He learned new skills throughout his life, changed careers when he had to, because of redundancy and ill health, and was never unemployed. When choosing education for his own children, Mark sent them to local schools. At post-primary level, he let the children choose where they wanted to go. Mark never

forced his children to go to school, but he was happy that they all completed their Leaving Certificate as he said he had never done that final exam. He admitted, though, that he was not there for them when they came home from school. He took an interest in their schoolwork and frequently asked them if they had done their homework and he liked to encourage them. He admitted that his father never showed any interest in his education, but Mark felt that he wanted his children to do well in school and by the time his daughters were attending he went and met their teachers at parent teacher meetings. However, Mark believed that teachers were only concerned about results, whereas he felt that education was about life experiences. He frequently stated “life is an education”, he was proud that his children were doing well in school and that they also had interests in sport and art and had many friends.

### Becoming a father

Mark was a little embarrassed when thinking back to when he first became a dad at age 22. He never went with his young wife to her prenatal appointments and he stated that his biggest regret was not being present at the birth of his firstborn child. A nurse on duty told him to go home when his wife was in early labour and his baby boy was born while he was absent. He said he has always regretted listening to the nurse and not taking the decision to stay. Mark thought that “It was great though being a dad; it was great to have a boy,” but remembered that reality hit him very quickly after the birth and he said to himself at the time: “Oh shit, what do I do now?” Mark had a second boy quickly after the first. He had little time to stay at home with them as babies, as he had to work to provide for them. Mark always worked long hours, so he did not spend a lot of time with the boys when they were young. When they were eight and nine, they joined the local football club and he

was with them more often, as he went to their matches on Sundays. Mark said his relationship with his sons and subsequently his two daughters was based on his own understanding of having a standard of behaviour, saying: “I didn’t want them to be a ruffian; I would say to them, always think ‘what would my parents say if they saw me now?’” Mark always wanted his children to show respect and was reassured now that “They all turned out okay.”

### Being a father

In reflecting on what does it take to be a father to children, Mark listed: someone who they can rely on; give them guidance; support them and be there to bounce things off. He believed that a father is “one who has the wallet ... to look after them”. Mark declared it takes a father to have patience and a nurturing nature, be responsible, and show courage. Fathers themselves need to show children how to act in a manner that demonstrates how to behave in life. Mark said that as his children got older, he was strict with them, but “not as strict as my dad”. He never wanted to be as harsh with his children, as his father was with him and his siblings. On reflecting on his father’s role, Mark thought he had been very critical of his father and believed that his father had done his best to provide for his family. Mark had felt the pressure himself of having to provide for his children and, in hindsight, appreciated the struggle his dad had made. He would have liked his father to have known his grandchildren but, he admitted, he “left us too soon”.

### **4.3 Case study 2: Sean’s story**

*“Why didn’t he love me?”*

### Personal profile



Sean, who was a member of the Traveller community, married at 20 years of age and his first child was born when he was 22. He was a father of five children and as a child he travelled Ireland and England living by the roadside or on Traveller only halting sites. He eventually lived in a house in a settled community of Traveller families in the midlands of Ireland. Sean was one of seven children and lived his childhood years with both his mother and father. Sean did not have a happy childhood with his father. He said: "I've been put down all my life; I've been hearin' all me life: 'you're no good.'" Sean's father wanted him to be a boxer but he never wanted to attend any boxing fights, a favourite past time of Travellers. Sean refused to take part in it, even though he said his father had made life difficult for him. He said he "put a lot of fear into me, yea a lot of fear, I suffered". A particular insult targeted at him still caused him distress: his father often described him as a "skirt" a derogatory term, meaning a girl. Sean was always fearful that his father would be cruel to him and he still felt angry with his father for the names he called him. Sean used to escape to his grandfather when he needed to get away from his father: He explained: "When I couldn't hack it at home I'd go up to him. I'd jump on a bus and head down to him ... he wasn't all good, but he was a bit better than me dad." Sean felt degraded by his father and unloved. Repeatedly, he would ask the question: "Why can't a dad love his child?" And, this rhetorical question brought tears to his eyes. Sean believed that the thoughts of not being loved had turned into "rotten stuff being pushed down". The lack of felt love had remained with him throughout his life.

### Education

Sean travelled around Ireland from halting site to halting site and therefore he did not attend school regularly. As a result, he did not learn to read properly. Sean remembered a teacher being cruel to him. On one occasion, the teacher shouted at

him, when he was losing in a race: “You’re making a show of your class.” This really embarrassed him. His family travelled continuously and Sean hated the constant changes in the schools he attended. He found it difficult to keep up with the other children and his last time in school was when he was 10 years of age, he remained at home and he stated, in a sad voice, “no one looked for me” so he never went again. He later attended a Traveller training centre where he found great support from the male course co-ordinator, he found that the education centre organised courses that he was interested in so he kept attending.

Sean always wanted his children to go to school, but he was never one to force them: “It’s not about what we want for them; it’s about what they want for themselves.” Sean made sure they had their uniforms, went to swimming and always went on school trips. Sean said he sent his children to the best schools but was disappointed when he saw they were struggling: Sean stated:

I could have bursted out crying ‘cos I was so disappointed like. All you can do is your best. But they got assessed by a big person, and they said they all had dyslexia ... they said it would take them a long way but to remember that some people are born with it and they will never be able to read

However, his eldest daughter was nearly ready to sit her Leaving Certificate and he was very proud of her: she would be the first to do so in the family. Sean believed that education is important: “education is everything to me” and wanted his children to do well at school.

### Becoming a father

Sean became a dad for the first time at 22 years old and his wife was sixteen and he remembered the challenges of being a first-time father: “I couldn’t believe he was in me arms.” He went on to have four more children and although he and his wife

belonged to a large extended family, he always felt they were on their own rearing the children. They felt they could not rely on anyone. When the children were small, Sean's wife had depression, which resulted in her being hospitalised. He had to take over the caring of the children, as he said his wife was not able to love the children, but Sean stepped in: "I have to love my kids, I love them to bits." Sean was subsequently diagnosed with depression himself, but he says he threw the tablets away and took charge of the children when his wife was in hospital. At times, Sean felt the pressure of looking after the children on his own, but he coped with this by going to his horses. He would never shout at the children, but he could shout at the animals: "It's like your own space; the horses gives me a break." Sean always fed the children, and even though it was hard to provide for them, he made sure there was always food on the table.

### Being a father

Being a father meant "everything, yes everything" and he believed that if he had not had children: "I wouldn't be here, 'cos the kids keep ya going and ya have to show them good example. I struggled too, ya know." Sean believed it takes a lot to be a dad but the basic thing he believed you need as a father is to have love and children need to know they are supported by their parents. He further explained:

Ya will get by if ya have love in your heart. If you've love in your heart for kids ... and even there's not much money there, but at least if you have a smile and a love for them you'll get by. And if you're saying ya have some money say: that's what I can give ya and that's for me. Share it out, that's the only thing you can do,

Remembering his childhood, Sean shed heavy tears, and held his hands over his face while he sobbed and remembered how his dad treated him, and was determined never to treat his children in the same way. Having his children meant

the world to him, he wanted his children to know they were loved. Sean was never cruel to his children: “I was never as cruel as my father was; I was never, never as hard on them. I love my kids.” Sean never benefitted from love from his father and constantly queried why his father did not love him: “Love, love, that’s all I’d wanted, love, yes love: that’s all I’d wanted. Love, just love.” Sean reiterated that all the money in the world meant nothing, “unless I show them love”. He wanted to tell other fathers that “There’s always Travellers out there and they’re not doing it, but the message is love” and he wanted his children to experience love and to pass on that message to their children. Sean’s childhood experience with his father made him more adamant that he would not treat his children the way he was treated and that his children would always know that he loved them.

#### **4.4 Case study 3: Daniel’s story**

*“You have to be a part of your own child’s growing up”*

##### Personal profile

Daniel became a father at 20 years of age and had two children, one aged two years and the other was six months old. As a child he lived in a council house in a rural disadvantaged town in midland Ireland. Daniel was the youngest child of a family of four. His eldest sister was reared by his grandparents and he was reared with his two other sibling sisters by his mother. Daniel did not know his father until he turned nine years old and after meeting him he only had sporadic visits to him as a child. Daniel did not have anything positive to say about his father. He wondered why his father did not keep in touch with him when he was younger, as he had lived locally. He did not remember much about his childhood, but he did remember his aunt asking him how he got cigarette burns on his body. He always wondered why his aunt did “nothing about it” to look after him. Daniel’s mother was cruel to him

and his father was not in his life: he therefore felt that “growing up [he] had no one there”. Daniel felt that it would have made a big difference if he had been given some encouragement in his life and having a father figure growing up would have been a great help. He had terrible anger issues and at one stage, when he was “going downhill pretty fast”, he attempted suicide but luckily he was stopped and got help from his friends’ families. Daniel became close to the fathers of two of his friends and he said: “I just needed someone to talk to.” Daniel developed a good relationship with one father and when he died, he “even got emotional over it ... he was the father figure” he had longed for. Daniel believed that because he grew up without his father being there, he had no one to teach him to defend himself. He believed that his father “was not very good, not very good at all”. Daniel had the impression that even now, his father would not want to talk to him, and he said if his father moved into the town where he now lived, he would move out.

### Education

Daniel never liked school and went to two primary schools because he was bullied in the first one he attended. He went to the local secondary school, but the same group of children went there, and he was bullied again. As one of the bullies lived near to Daniel, he could not get away from him, so he used to pretend to go to school but did not: “I never really got a chance; in Ballymade, I was bullied a lot. I left school early because of it.” He felt let down by his mother, as she never did anything about sorting the bullying problem, so he had little regard for her. He left home several times and often stayed at friend’s houses, sleeping on their sofas. At 17 years of age, Daniel self-referred to Youthreach, a centre for early school leavers. He heard others had gone and he wanted his education, and he also wanted to get as far away as possible from his family. He did not want to stay in his

home with his mother, so decided that the only way to escape was to get an education, get a job, and get out of the environment. Daniel had fond memories of his Youthreach experience, with one special memory of going to Dublin to win an award, he travelled for the first time on a train with a male teacher. He remembered another male teacher who at regular times would make a “fry-up” for all the students. He commented that everything in Youthreach was an education and that “Even going on a trip was an education ... you’re still learning about things there.” Daniel saw a big difference between the results he got in school and those he got in Youthreach. He passed the Level 4 QQI exams, a senior qualification in further education in Ireland, but he did not tell his family about his achievement, as he had never been supported by them in getting his education. After Youthreach, he went straight into a job in a steel factory, but he injured himself. He returned to further education to reskill and at the time of the interview he was doing a course in baking, an interest he has always had, and he planned to become a pastry chef. His school experience never put him off education and he wanted his own children to do well in school. Even though his children were young he looked forward to them going to school and learning. He would support them and most importantly he intended to show them how to defend themselves. He felt that it was important for them not be bullied in school.

### Becoming a father

Daniel was delighted when his partner became pregnant with his first baby and he attended all the pre-natal visits with her. He wanted to know everything about the pregnancy from the medical staff and he attended all her medical visits and scans. At the time of pregnancy, he was employed in a factory but he had to leave that job and relied on social welfare allowance. He was with his girlfriend when they were

told the baby would be born with a cleft palate and would need an operation very soon after birth. Daniel's first response was shock, but his second response was to call her Bella, as that is what she was to him: beautiful. The first time he saw his baby after her birth he started crying: he was happy to see her and was overwhelmed with emotion. Bella had several facial operations and Daniel kept before-and-after photographs on his phone which he freely shared. He remembered in detail the operating procedures and his baby's recovery afterwards. When Daniel heard he was having another child, he was "over the moon" and was delighted that it was a healthy boy.

### Being a father

Daniel and girlfriend and children lived in rural Ireland and were planning their wedding for the near future. They both shared the caring of the children and when they went out he would always have one and she would have the other. With both children, he made sure there were no family links to their names, as "we don't want people coming up to us after and saying oh you named him after me". Daniel described himself as "a stay at home daddy", I do a lot with them I have to say". Being a dad meant everything in the world to him. He believed that it takes a lot to be a dad. He explained the dedication needed in terms of playing with his children:

Basically, you have to be there for your child. If your child wants to put something on your head, you have to do it. If your child wants to dress you up, you have to be prepared to do it. You have to be willing to be a princess. You have to be a part of your own child's growing up.

Daniel wanted his children to grow up to take opportunities, to be themselves and to take chances as they came along, because he never got the chance. He said wistfully: "I never even left the country," but he aimed to share the

experience of travel with his children in the future. He wanted to bring them to Eurodisney when they get older. Daniel believed he was a good father and many had said to him that he was a lovely daddy. Daniel said that his experience as a child was the complete opposite to what he wanted for his children. He said: “[I don’t want them to] experience what I experienced growing up ... I want to be there for them.” “To be there” was a lot for Daniel, he said, considering that he had “never really had that father figure” when he was young. This made him more determined to provide for his children and they meant the world to him: “I love them to bits: they are my life.”

#### **4.5 Case study 4: Jim’s story**

*“If you have a kid you have it for the rest of your life”*

##### Personal profile

Jim was aged 18 years and was a father of two children. He was married at 16 and was from the Traveller community. Jim had four other siblings and he was very close to his father and he knew they had a bond between them: “it was the love” he said. Jim and his father spent a lot of time together with the horses, and they would go haring with the dogs. Jim was very thankful to him, he stated:

Everything he done was perfect. He couldn’t have done anything better than he has done. He reared me and I’m glad and grateful for what he done.

Jim’s dad had shown him nothing but love and kindness and even though Jim was married, he still felt close to him. His first child was born when he was 16 years old. Jim was unemployed and was living in a caravan beside his parents’ house. As both he and his wife were very young he was glad his father was there to help them.

##### Education



Jim never liked school. As his family travelled a lot when he was young, he never got to know the children in each of the schools he went to. Poor attendance and dyslexia meant that Jim struggled in school and he had difficulties with learning. He left at 13 without any qualifications. Jim attended a Youthreach training programme for early school leavers for a year, but left the centre when he got married at 16. Jim did not think he missed out on anything from leaving school without qualifications, as he believed he had everything he needed to provide for himself and his children. Although he never liked school himself, Jim wanted his children to go to a good school and to learn to read and write. He had a goal that they should go to college and get themselves a job. Jim wanted them to do something in life that they would be interested in.

### Becoming a father

When Jim first knew he was going to be a dad, he was excited but because he was very young, it was nerve-wracking. From the beginning, Jim did not go to the GP or hospital visits with his wife during her pregnancy, as he believed that it was private for her. He waited outside the medical centre during her visits and commented: "I thought it was only manners for the woman. I didn't feel left out." Jim knew there was going to be a lot of responsibility and he thought: "If you have a kid you have it for the rest of your life" and he was committed to his children. Jim believed that not many people get the chance to be a father and for him it was "knowing you have someone, a child of your own is very special". Jim always got up during the night with the babies and he and his wife took it in turns, so they could both get some sleep. When going out together, he would take the eldest child and she would have the other boy. Sometimes, they would go to the local park especially, if the weather was nice, and he often took the children to the shops. Jim acknowledged this

activity when he saw a photograph of a dad with a child on his shoulders: “That’s me: I went to the shops yesterday and that’s what I was doing; he was up on my shoulders.” Although Jim helped with the children, he did not do nappy changing, as he said that was a job for their mother, however, he did feed the children.

### Being a father

It meant the world to Jim to be a dad and he said he would not change it, even though he knew he was very young to be a father. Jim made sacrifices to be with the children all the time, this was what it takes to be a father, but he was happy to do so. When reflecting back on his time with his father he had fond memories using a “sulkie” (a horse carriage) with his dad. He wanted to pass on to his children this skill of working with horses: “I’d like to show them what I was reared up with, the old tradition; the horses and the sulkies.” Jim was very sure that, like his father, he would always be there for his children, if they ever wanted anything. Jim was of the opinion that his father had a huge influence on who he was as a person: “Only for [if it wasn’t for] my father, I wouldn’t have children, and I wouldn’t be the person that I’d be today”. Jim wanted the love and the kindness that his father had for him to be something that he could give to his own children. His father had loved him and he wanted his children to know that they too were loved.

## **4.6 Case study 5: Kevin’s story**

*“He’s a good man; he loves children and I love children”*

### Personal profile

Kevin had become a father to a daughter when aged 18. In his early childhood years, he did not live with his parents. He was not sure why, but he was reared by his aunt and lived with her and her children in a council owned house in a rural

village in south east Ireland. His aunt had two children living with her in Ireland and three more had moved to live in the UK. Kevin was very close to his aunt and her own children, his cousins, had told him that they knew he was her “favourite”. His cousins were like siblings to him and he was very close to one male cousin in particular, who was eight years older than him. He would see his dad nearly every day, when he called in to him after work. Kevin described his childhood as being a “great childhood”. Although he lived apart from his father in his early childhood, Kevin stated that the relationship with his father was very close: “Me and me father are best friends.” Kevin recalled that his father would have Sunday off from work and he would play football with him, his cousins and his friends. Kevin’s dad used to collect him from his auntie’s and they always played soccer together. Sometimes, they would play wrestling, using pillows and “having imaginary fights with things that weren’t really there”. Another game to play was sliding down the stairs on a mattress. When remembering his childhood, Kevin said that he had a big treat one time when his dad organised a surprise trip to see Manchester United football team play in the UK. Kevin did not know why or how he was able to organise it, but they went together, and he would love to do it again. As a child, even though he lived in a different house from his father, he was able to see him any time he wanted. Kevin stated that if there was anything wrong in the family, he would leave with his dad and he would be happy, as “there’d be just him and me together”. Kevin considered his dad to be his best friend and “I know he will always be there for me and he will always look after my young one.”

### Education

Kevin had no problems in primary school and got on well with everyone. He got the bus to school, which passed his house. He had good attendance at school: his aunt

made sure he went and he would only stay off school if he was sick. However, his aunt died suddenly when he was 11 and he had to move to live with his father and his wife. Although he loved being with his father he found it hard to settle into a new school. At thirteen he started to “mitch” (play truant). He would pretend to go when he did not: “In some of my teenage years, I just thought it was cool to be dossing [playing truant], telling me step-mam there was no school on, when there was.” After some time when he missed out on school, “it all became a struggle”, and he eventually fell backwards and could not cope, so he stopped going. He stayed at home doing nothing but realised he wanted to get a Leaving Certificate, a senior post primary qualification. Kevin eventually went to Youthreach, an early school leavers’ programme, as he said: “My head was telling me to go back”. He attended Youthreach from the age of 17 and was eagerly looking forward to completing his Leaving Certificate. He found that the Youthreach education programme suited him better than school and he got on really well with the male wood work teacher. He encouraged him to make plans to apply for a course in mechanics after completing the exams. His success in school was very important to him and he wanted his daughter to be proud of him. He looked forward to the day when she would be in school and hoped that she would like it and have friends there.

### Becoming a father

When Kevin was first told he was going to be a father, he was shocked, and he admitted that he was also scared. At the time of the pregnancy he was attending school and he received a training allowance. Kevin did not live with the mother of his daughter, he lived with his father and step mother, two siblings and a baby nephew. His relationship did not go well with his girlfriend and they split up when she was six months’ pregnant. This resulted in a strained liaison between the two

and he did not continue to be involved with her pregnancy visits. The night the baby was born, the former girlfriend's mother phoned Kevin's father and told him the news. Kevin was out celebrating with friends after a football game and it was not until the following day that he realised he had become a father. The thought then occurred: "Jesus! The child is after being born." Kevin wanted to see the baby, but he was not given permission to see her by the girlfriend's family, because they said the girl had had a rough birth. When he texted the following day, they continued saying he should not visit. Kevin decided that he and his step-mother would sneak up to the hospital at 8am to try to get in to see the baby. Kevin brought flowers and chocolates and managed to get into the ward. He cried when he saw his daughter. The following day the mother of the baby texted him for maintenance but she did not allow Kevin to see his daughter again. Kevin was unable to get to the baby, as his family did not own a car and she lived out in the countryside with no bus access. Kevin had to take his former girlfriend to court to gain access to his daughter and, as a result of the hearing, he was given joint guardianship. It took ten weeks before he saw his daughter again. He began looking after his daughter mainly at weekends and more frequently during school holidays. Kevin said he loved his daughter "to bits" and had always tried to be hands-on and care for her. While in the beginning he got help with changing her nappies, Kevin was able to feed her and put her to bed. He did not make personal contact with the ex-girlfriend after his experience of going to court. They organised visiting and care arrangements through their parents. Kevin did not see his daughter during the week, and he missed her when she was not around: "Yes, it's genuinely heart-breaking when waking up and she's not there ... that's the killing part." It was especially hard for him, as his sister had her baby living in the family home. Kevin was under a lot of stress in the relationship with his former girlfriend and at times he had to resist voicing his opinions about the

care of his daughter. Kevin said that if he spoke out, her family would only say that he had done something bad and he could end up in trouble with the Gardaí (police).

### Being a father

Despite the pressure, Kevin said that being a father had been the best thing that ever happened to him. He believed that a lot of lads in his position would have walked away, but he would not call them a man to do that. Kevin was taught how to rear a child and the only thing he would like to be different was to have more time with her, to take her down the street to shop, and to go to the beach. Kevin was hopeful that in the future, when he gets his own place with his present girlfriend, he will have his daughter to stay longer. Kevin was expecting a second baby with a new girlfriend and was hoping this time it would be a boy, but the main thing was that the baby would be healthy. He was able to see the new girlfriend every day, as they were both attending the Youthreach education centre. As she lived locally, he could go to her house as much as he wanted to. His daughter would be two years old when his next child was born. With the new pregnancy, he had been to every appointment and scan. He was very excited about the prospect of knowing the gender of his new baby, especially if it was a boy. However, he was fearful that with another baby, he might not be able to give as much money to his first child's mother as he was giving to her now. As he was only getting a training allowance he planned to cut his maintenance money in half, as he had to be fair to both children.

Kevin believed being a father did not change him, but he knew it took sacrifices as well. If his friends were going out, sometimes he had to have a glass of coke, rather than going drinking, as he had to be home to put her to bed. He stated that being a father meant a lot to him had definitely made him a better person. Kevin wanted his

daughter to know that he would always love her, and he wanted her to grow up to be whatever she wished to be. He wanted her to know he would always be there to help her. He learned from his father that playing with your children is important and he looked forward to a time when he could slide down the stairs on a mattress with his daughter. Kevin had been influenced by his father in rearing his daughter and was thankful to his father for being able to help him to be the dad that he had become: "He is a good man; he loves children and I love children."

#### **4.7 Case study 6: Josh's story**

*"I wouldn't like to see a child grow up without a father"*

##### Personal profile

Josh was 19 years old; he lived with his mother in a council house in an urban town in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. Josh was the youngest in his family and he had three half-siblings (they had a different father). Neither of the two fathers ever lived with Josh in the family home. From the time he was born, Josh lived with his mother but when he was seven years old, she became mentally unwell and he went to live with his father. Josh stayed with him for 18 months. During the time Josh was with his father, he only saw his half-sister on Sundays, when they would meet to visit his mother in hospital. He did not see his brothers, because they stayed with other relatives who were not related to Josh. Josh declared that he had a "great childhood" and despite not living with his father full time, he had a good bond with him. Josh remembered his dad taking him to the park to play conkers. He described his childhood as "great" he said it was a traditional childhood, with playing football and bat and ball in the fields with his brothers. When he was young, Josh's father recorded him playing games on his VCR and Josh remembered how they used to put the tape into the television and watch it together. Both his mother and

father told Josh that when he was a baby his father used to place him on his chest so he could hear his father's heartbeat and fall asleep. Josh's father was a large part of his life and he never let Josh go without anything he needed; he always gave him the best of everything. Josh liked being with his father, but because the children were split among the extended families he felt that the family was not connected together when his mother was in hospital. He was relieved to return home to his mother when her health improved as he was reunited with his other siblings. When the children all lived together again, they were a much stronger family unit. He became close again to his half-sister and two half-brothers and continued to see his father whenever he wanted to.

### Education

Josh attended primary school and got on well in school in academic subjects. However, when he went to post-primary school, he did not have friends and found that he was isolated and alone. He completed his Junior Certificate, a national junior school achievement in Ireland, however shortly after when he was 14 years old he left school. This was younger than the legal age of sixteen but he felt safer at home with his mother. Josh at 17 decided to return to school as he wanted to get his Leaving Certificate. He was accepted into a Youthreach education centre, and at the time of his interviews he was studying for his Leaving Certificate the following year. He got on well in Youthreach and stated the programme teachers were "like a family" to him. His long-term intention was to complete his studies and pursue an apprenticeship in mechanics. Josh believed that education was important and through his work experience programme he was able to save money in order that he could provide for his baby.



## Becoming a father

Josh was awaiting the birth of his first child, he did not know his girlfriend for long when she became pregnant. At first it came as a shock, especially as he heard it from her friends. Josh got a Facebook message one evening to say she was pregnant, and he spent the night panicking and crying. He was unable to break the news to his mother. A few weeks later, the girl's mother contacted Josh by phone. He expected her to be angry but she said to him: "I know it's a very hard time for you and Susan" and she wanted to know if he was going to support Susan and the baby. Josh said he had to face the fact that he was to be a father and he did not want to see any child grow up without a father so he went to Susan and discussed the situation with her. Josh's mother was shocked at first, but she eventually accepted the news and when he told his father some weeks later, he was pleased about becoming a grandfather for the first time. His half-sister, half-brothers, aunt and uncles were all supportive and they offered to buy the baby's clothes and blankets. In the early months of the pregnancy, the relationship between Josh and his girlfriend became settled and they were positive about being in a relationship together. Josh did not go to any GP or hospital visits with her, because she was only 16. Instead, she went to a hospital visit with her mother. Susan sent Josh the scan of the baby by phone and he showed it to friends. Josh was "amazed to see the scan; it's definitely a baby", he stated, adding: "Before the photo it wasn't real, it was phoney, but now it is so real."

A few months into the pregnancy, Josh fell out with Susan, but he tried to stay friendly with her. He hoped that Susan "might catch feelings" for him but his main concern was the baby. Josh's thought was: "I don't know the feeling of growing up without a father, but I wouldn't like a child feeling it only has one parent." Josh was

excited about the baby and believed that the only thing a child needed was to be loved and cared for. He was looking forward to getting up at night and having the baby in his arms and rocking it back to sleep. Josh planned that his child would be an outdoor child rather than being a child, dependent on using a computer. He planned to take recordings on his phone of his child just like his father did of him as a child on the VCR. The baby would be able to look back to see what its life with him was like. Josh was fearful that he might not be able to cope as a father, as he did not have any experience of babies, but he was reassured by his mother that he would be able to take on the father role as soon as he had the baby in his arms.

Josh worked part time in a local pub doing bar work and as a DJ assistant, so that he could buy a cot in the local nursery shop for the baby. He planned to buy a 'memory-foam' mattress, as he was told this was the best type. Josh wanted to have all the equipment needed for the baby in his house, in preparation for when the baby stayed over with him. When Josh got a second scan sent to him via text message attachment, it was confirmed that it was a baby girl and he was very happy: "I can't stop smiling," he declared. Josh decided that he and his girlfriend Susan were going to make a "go" of it again. However, two weeks later they had fallen out again. He wanted to keep in contact with Susan so he could see his child. Shortly afterwards, Susan stated she had another boyfriend and Josh regretfully decided: "If he's willing to be there for her then I don't have to worry about it. I can just get on with my life and do my studies and I'll let him on. I don't need to be involved." Despite saying this, he was sad and frustrated. He wondered how to keep in touch, so that he could be around for his baby.

Two weeks later, Susan had split from the new boyfriend and Josh went to see if they could be friends again. He was pleased about the changing situation, because

it gave him a chance to be with Susan in the final stages of pregnancy. He went with the girlfriend to hospital one night, as they thought she was in labour, but it was a false alarm. Following this event, they argued, and Susan told him he was not the father of the child and that he was not to visit her. Josh was in shock and did not believe her. He wanted to keep in touch but did not know what to do and he was despondent about the situation. Susan's mother contacted Josh, as she wondered why he was not visiting her daughter. He told her about the question of his being the baby's father. She was not aware of any problem. Josh believed "Her mother doesn't know how bad her daughter has been to me." He was adamant that he would support the baby, but he needed to be sure he was the father. "I will do the right thing, but she has to prove it". The continuing difficult situation and Susan's behaviour was causing Josh a lot of distress. At one stage, Josh was very depressed and believed that he had had "the worst year of his life". To add to his distressed situation, he had to deal with his father's admission to hospital when he had tried to take his own life in an attempted suicide.

### Being a father

Two weeks later Susan's mother informed him of the birth of the baby and told him he should visit his baby daughter in hospital. Josh went by train and he saw the baby and felt sure that the baby was his. He proudly took photographs of the baby on his phone. Josh's mother bought pink ribbon for a christening blanket she had crocheted. Josh visited the baby as often as he could but he wanted his name to go on the birth certificate and Susan refused to do it. She requested maintenance first and Josh refused because she would not name him on the birth certificate, she then said he was not to visit the baby anymore. Josh was distraught and insisted on paying for DNA testing to prove he was the father of the baby. While he was waiting

for the results, he decided not to visit the baby. He did not want to “waste his money going by train and having the front door slammed in his face”. His mother fell out with him for this decision, as she was anxious to see the baby, believing it to be her granddaughter. Josh now felt that no one was speaking to him: he had fallen out with Susan, his mother was upset with him, his father was unwell, and overall he was stressed, and he felt very isolated.

When the baby was four months old he got the results of the DNA test; it showed that he was not the father. Josh was in shock. He had spent a year thinking he was going to be a father and then he was not. It took him a while to adjust to the fact that he was not going to be a dad. He admitted to being disappointed but eventually he was relieved to bring the situation to a final conclusion.

Some weeks later, he met a new girlfriend and she made him happy, he said. A month later, Josh announced that his new girlfriend was pregnant; he excitedly looked forward to the baby's birth. Josh's mother and his half-sister were shocked about the news and he decided that he would not announce the pregnancy to his friends for a few months. He did not make any comment about his situation on Facebook, wishing to keep it private for as long as possible. Josh firmly believed that he was the father of this baby and he wanted to be there to support his new girlfriend through the pregnancy and birth. This time he was delighted and was looking forward to being a father. His plan was to be there for his child and to give the baby everything he or she needed. He looked forward to walking down the street pushing the buggy and saying to everyone “This is my baby.” He wanted to be involved with the child from birth and be a good father to his child, just as his father was to him.

#### **4.8 Comparative summary of experiences**

The experiences of the six case studies have been presented as the men's individual life stories and the data have been examined and presented by means of structural analysis (Brock et al, 1994; Smith et al. 2005). Using structural methods allowed for the narratives to be presented in a similar way and demonstrated a life journey of two halves, the men's childhood experiences of being fathered and their life when they became a father to their own children. The narratives showed that childhood experiences formed their perception of what being a father entails, and the occurrence of becoming a father revealed the issues they felt were important as they took on the role of being a father themselves. While there may have been similarities among the six case studies, for example: the men were all early school leavers and were all under the age of 24 at the time of birth of their first child- their story of childhood and fatherhood was unique to each person. The profile section showed that two of the men were travellers, yet their fathered experiences were very different-one had a father who was cruel and abusive while the other had a father who showed his love to him. There were similarities with the two nineteen year olds who both had fathers who were non-resident, and both described their childhood with their fathers as being a 'great' experience. This experience of a 'great' childhood appeared to be heavily constructed by means of playful situations shared with their fathers and exemplifies how non-resident fathers' input with their children can have a positive long lasting impact on them as they grow into adolescence and adulthood. This positive experience was in contrast to the final two men who were 22 and 23 years old when having their first child. One had lived with his father all his life while the other never lived with his father. Both expressed negativity towards their fathers and demonstrates how the outcomes of living with or

having an absent father can be similar, when the childhood relationship experiences are negative. This outcome in the quality of relationships sits with Bowlby's theory of attachment (1980, 1973, 1969) where he describes attachment as being "a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" and was evidenced in how their father-son relationship was described by the men: "he's my best friend", "he gave us the love", "I was never close to him", "if he came into this town I would leave". What was obvious with all the personal profiles was how the impact of experiences of connectedness in childhood was felt into adulthood. For some, the experiences resulted in disregard for their fathers where the child had experienced distress, and positive regard was expressed for their fathers where the child had experienced warmth and safety. These behaviours are reflected in attachment styles described by Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) as secure, organised, disorganised or ambivalent.

The attachment behaviours appeared to impact on the men's responses to education in childhood, where all of the men expressed poor experiences and a dislike for school. They all faced challenges with coping with either bullying peers or unsympathetic teachers. Some expressed that they hated school and missing and parental known absence was a common feature. What was apparent was that the men, as children, did not see their parents supporting them through difficult times in school. To cope with the instability in school all the narrators left school prior to receiving an educational qualification. What appeared to be lacking was the communication link between home and school, the space described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as the mesosystem. With the lack of communication there was no identified method in use to share what was happening to the child in each micro space. The men appeared to have little resilience to cope in both spaces

therefore they did what they could to keep themselves safe and left school. This feeling of staying safe illustrates Bowlby's idea that children when feeling threatened return to a space of safety (1980, 1973, 1969) for comfort and reassurance. For some that meant staying at home, for one it was going to his grandfathers, for another it was staying with friends.

The draw towards education manifested in the men subsequently joining further education programmes, where life skills and personal development were central to their education. These programmes were seen as places where teachers took a learner-centred approach and where the men identified positive relationships with significant teachers and mentors. The approach by the further education programmes mirrored Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) which gives consideration to the occurrence of activity in one system impacting on another activity in another system. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that by considering and being aware of these systems' separate activity adds to understanding what the person is wholly experiencing in life and their impact on one another. The impact of these further education programmes for these men resulted in an improved educational experience, so much so, they wanted positive education experiences for their own children. It appeared that the change in attitude to education was education itself.

Becoming a father was an emotional experience for all the men, for cultural reasons two men did not attend medical appointments or the birth of their children. Some of the other men were actively encouraged to stay away and resulted in two men pursuing a legal route to establish a presence with their children. Experiences of non-resident fathers highlighted the particular difficulties facing young men to be involved fathers when they do not live with the mothers of their children. Two young men in the study demonstrated different approaches by medical staff in supporting

them with their partners at the birth of their child; one being sent home before the birth and the other being very involved with nursing staff so he could in turn support his child who needed hospitalisation in a paediatric ward. What was very obvious was that all the young men felt a strong need to respond to their child immediately after the birth, to step into action to support their children, either by providing resources or by taking on the caring tasks. As they became fathers they each were endeavouring to establish a connected relationship with their child, similar to establishing an attachment response (Bowlby, 1980, 1973, 1969). When the opportunity to establish a close relationship was thwarted there was considerable emotional upset. The ecological systems which impeded this occurrence, were seen in the nursing systems, the maternal family systems, and cultural systems. Each of the six men demonstrated that they wanted to do their best for their child, to show them love, to be a provider and to spend time with them, and here the theories of Bowlby (1980, 1973, 1969,) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) demonstrate that neither theory, separate or together, fully encapsulate the motivation and need for fathers to establish a way to be close to their child, thus leaving attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980, 1973, 1969) impossible to enforce where a parent is not supported to be present in the systems which support the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The data requires further scrutiny and a thematic analysis of findings is presented in Chapter 5 where I review the data and present a discussion on the issues and factors facing young fathers.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion of findings**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter presented the six men's life experiences in a structured narrative format (Brock and Kleiber, 1994), where the narratives presented reflections on being fathered in childhood and progressed to the men's own views and experiences of becoming and being fathers to their own children. The link was made between the impact of their childhood experiences and how that experience influenced their own current ways of being a father. The total blend of evidence gave a distinctive perspective of the intergenerational transmissions of the fathering role, viewed by each participant. The purpose of this chapter is to propose a synthesis of the findings through a thematic presentation. The research question interrogates the fathering issues facing young Irish men who were early school leavers and the thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke's methodology (2006), identifies patterns and themes within the data. The most significant themes are placed within the context of broader literature and discussed in more detail. By sifting through the themes a range of findings evolved and these are brought together to add to new knowledge of how young men manage the fathering role.

The narratives articulated how the men's relationships with their fathers impacted on the child-father relationship in childhood and how the memories of those experiences influenced how they want to father their children. The six case studies demonstrate the complexities of the father-son relationship and indicate that while the theories of Bowlby (1969) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) explain how attachment and ecological factors impact on child development, in this study they do not provide a solution to address the cause (environment) and the impact (attachment) on the quality of the father-son relationship.

In order to explain the findings, the following section reviews the data in relation to four themes identified. Each theme presents sub-sections, and captures the men's relevant childhood experiences and their experiences on "becoming" and "being" fathers. Direct quotations from the men's narratives represent the sentiment of each theme and follows Nowell *et al.*'s (2017) argument that to use direct quotes adds to the veracity and reliability of the data. A thematic chart Figure 3.1.2 in Chapter 3, provides a visual of the analysis of the themes. The four themes are as follows: (A) Being there in childhood and in fatherhood (B) Emotional aspects of fathering (C) Barriers to involvement and (D) Education experience.

## **5.2 Theme 1: Being there in childhood and in fatherhood**

Reflecting on their childhood experiences, with and without their fathers the sentiment of "being there" was repeated by the men in the study. This was made in reference to their fathers being present or absent, temporarily or permanent, in their childhood and it referred to themselves to being there as fathers to their own children.

### **5.2.1 Being fathered: "I had a great childhood".**

Memories of how their fathers interacted with the men as children were vividly recounted by the men, whether or not they lived with their fathers. "I had a great childhood" was a personal summation by both Josh and Kevin reflecting on their individual experiences with their non-resident fathers. Despite not living fulltime with them they insisted that their fathers were consistently "there" for them and they explained this as being part of activities as well as being a resource for them for finances, "My dad still gives me anything I need" added Josh. This statement of "being there" was also referred to in a positive statement by Jim of his resident father: "my father was there for me, he was always there". On the other hand, the

notion of not being there was expressed by Daniel who stated: “he was never there - I never knew him”. His experience was of an absent father who never established a relationship with him. The final two men, Sean and Mark, lived with their fathers and had mixed experiences of their fathers being there, one was absent due to work while one “was never around” yet both were resident fathers. These variations demonstrate that the notion of “being there” had multiple meanings and had degrees of “being”.

Research by Lamb (2010) suggests that fathers have three ways of “being there” with their child: being accessible; being responsible and being engaged with their children. More specifically the way of being is illustrated by Milke and Denny’s historical study (2014) which explains that the role of the father is more defined as involvement in a range of participatory activities with the child; from teaching skills, such as wood chopping to sharing fun activities, such as playing football together. However, Lamb (2010), asserts that it is not the activity or the time spent with a child that is of importance - it is how the father does what he does with their child during that time, that will contribute to the child’s experience and development. It is of value, therefore, to see what the men interpreted as to how a father was there for each of them in childhood.

It is in the realm of playful pastime activities that the men in the present study perceived as the most common ways that their father engaged with them. This position was particularly evidenced by Josh and Kevin who, as children, did not live with their fathers but saw them regularly. While non-resident fathers usually have a limited amount of shared time together and might therefore impact on the quality of the experience, Josh and Kevin declared that they had a “great childhood” with their non-resident fathers despite the limited access to them. Their fathers’ irregular

presence did not perturb them as the non-resident nature of their living arrangements was the norm to them as they did not live with them from birth. They believed they had a very close relationship with their fathers. Josh further explained how this close relationship started. He told the narrative of how his father used to place him on his chest: "I was able to listen to his heartbeat" he said "and that helped me sleep". While this was not a memory he had of the event, it was however said to him often and he referred to it to confirm how closely he was attached to his father, "he is my best friend" he repeated often. In all the men's narratives it is the only mention of a caring activity. All the other ways of "being there" involved physical activity. The common activity for most of the men was exploratory and action based play which for Mark was football, Kevin was "pretend" wrestling and sliding down the stairs on a mattress, Sean and Jim told of riding horses on a "sulkie" (a type of cart) with their fathers and Josh remembered climbing trees to collect conkers which he described as a "traditional childhood", one which was based in the outdoors. All these activities connected father and son in a mutual space of being together. Coming together connected each father and son in a shared space of positive exchange and communication. Fun and excitement, as described by the men as children, appeared to have been necessary elements of this shared activity.

This close connectedness, which was part of their relationships, sits well with Bowlby's (1980, 1973, 1969) attachment theory where a child is responded to and the child knows that the person is available to return to. However, looking more astutely into these events, for some of these men that immediacy was not always possible in their childhood. Looking at the cases of the boys with non-resident fathers for example, both boys had to wait for their fathers to visit them, they were

not available to them as needed, yet they said they had a close relationship. Also what stands out is the fact that both Josh and Kevin dropped out of school which may be an indicator that the “great childhood” might only reflect their memory of good times. Therefore, selected memories cannot be taken as a summary of all events in their childhood; other factors were at play which contributed to their childhood experiences which resulted in early school leaving.

The shared activity between father and child also appears to need an extra dimension to the time spent together and, considering that the effects from childhood attachments can permeate into adulthood (Bowlby, 1969), the impact of negative experiences may also have long-lasting effects. This was demonstrated by Sean from the Traveller culture. Although the elements of shared activity together were present, such as boxing and horse riding on a “sulkie”, the participation of father and son together did not always result in positive processes and outcomes. Sean explained: “he wanted me to box, but I didn’t want to do it, I didn’t want to hurt anyone”, this caused disagreements between him and his father. Despite boxing being a valued sport in the Traveller community (Quinn - McDonagh, 2012) Sean disengaged from it, however, his father objected to this attitude and was abusive towards him in a physical and emotional manner. His father, he says, continually insulted him and described Sean as a “skirt” – a derogatory name to describe an effeminate nature and resulted in Sean’s disregard of his father. This brings to the fore the need to safeguard children against the pressure of engaging in any activity in which they are uncomfortable, and for fathers to acknowledge children’s preferences. It also brings our attention to cultural norms that over time can be changed by individuals, some traditions may be held close but they can also be adapted and lost, sometimes for good reasons (Cudworth, 2019). The finding

highlights that it is not just time and activity that is needed in relationships: the quality of the relationship between father and child also needs to be close and respectful.

These transgenerational impacts of behaviours in childhood alert us to examine how influential the child and parent relationship is. Even with his own children grown into teenagers, Sean still held vivid memories of a life with his father, whom he described as “cruel”, and about whom he declared he had “nothing good to say”. Mark too, reflecting on his father, described him as a disciplinarian who was to be feared and he stated: “I don’t want to be like my dad” in response to this lasting impact. These negative memories lasted into adolescence and adulthood and demonstrated the potential of causing long-term damaging impact as shown by Sean’s distress. His perception of a harsh father, was ingrained in his memory, “he was a cruel man” he said. However, he was determined to turn the negative experiences into positive ones, when he stated: “I never want to be like him; I want my children to know I love them”. The retelling of his experiences demonstrated the long term effect of a damaged relationship. What was evident in the childhood situations was that the men, as children, did not appear to have a voice in speaking about the difficulties they had faced with their fathers, they did not share their fears, the absence or loss of their fathers with any other adult. It has been acknowledged that structures to support children have been found wanting in the past in Ireland, such as seen in the Ryan Report (2001) which identified many failings in identifying and dealing with abuse of children (Ryan, 2001). For these men it could be assumed that there may have been an opportunity for communication directly with the child through the school process but as this did not occur the impact of their fathers’ behaviours went unnoticed. The communication between family and school

has been described by Bronfenbrenner as the meso-system (1979) and represents the model of interaction between systems which hold the child. In the instances described by the men the communication process was lacking, resulting in the men, as children, being unable to form lasting relationships in school, and they became disconnected from other children and adults.

The narratives of Mark and Sean also cautions us not to assume that all fathers who are resident with their children are positive, considerate parents, who take more care of their children than non-resident ones (Yoshida, 2011). Both Mark and Sean's fathers were resident with them full time, but both were "to be feared" and "cruel", whereas Josh and Kevin's fathers were not resident but gave the boys, as they perceived it, a great childhood. This confirms that no assumptions should be made regarding the superiority of resident fathers over non-resident ones. Nor can it be assumed that an absent father has no impact on a child. The total physical absence of a father left an imprint on Daniel who never lived with his father. He had anger towards his father for his absence explaining: "I never had a father figure, I never had anyone to put me right". Franséhn *et al.* (2008) argues that even when a father is continually absent there is still a presence in the mind of the child. When he is continually referred to negatively, it makes the absence of a father more difficult to deal with. The impact of this loss of a father for Daniel left emotional scars, and is more fully explored in another section on the emotional aspect of fathering.

Reeves *et al.* (2009) draws attention to concerns that the transmission of behaviours can continue, through the generations, negative behaviours will result in negative outcomes. Worryingly, he suggests that children who are abused go on to abuse others. Therefore, the idea of a secure base is not only relevant to childhood - it has implications for adulthood as well. Bowlby (1969) also argues that the

different types of attachment developed during childhood can continue into other relationships, with peers and with partners. It is important then that the secure base is provided to a child as it adds to the ability to form trusting relationships in adulthood. This view is supported by the longitudinal study of Grossmann *et al.* (2005), which states that positive interactions during childhood activities have a long-lasting effect on attachment in adolescents. The experience of shared activity presents an opportunity for fathers to support children and Flouri (2005) argues that when children feel supported, it is enough for them to feel an attachment and this brings into focus how important it is to make positive memories in childhood (Maloney, 2004). In the current study, the adolescents, who had positive relational communication with their fathers, drew on those memories as inspiration for their behaviour with their own children

By contrast, in this study the fathers, who had poor fathered experiences, set out with a determination to rear their children in the opposite manner to that in which they were fathered. The positive aspect of the men's narratives on becoming fathers demonstrates that the men appeared to have turned their own negative experiences into opportunities for building positive relationships with their children. Three of the men, Daniel, Mark and Sean were determined to support their children in what they wanted to do and evidenced that they took them swimming, to football matches and participation in role play. Daniel explained his pretend play with his daughter when he stated "If she wants you to be a princess, you have to put on the tiara". Although the activities of father and child together were similar in each generation, it appeared that the present day fathers were more attuned into the enjoyment of the activity together and to taking the lead from their children. The positive response to the negative interactions they themselves had experienced as children, represents



the ability of young men to evaluate what is good in their childhood, which they would want to repeat, and to disapprove of those experiences that are negative, which they would want to discard. This trait of resilience and self-motivation does not feature in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), and Bowlby's attachment theory (1968) does not incorporate how attachment types can change over time. It therefore leaves the question as to how these men develop productive relationships with their own children, following poor childhood experiences, when they become fathers themselves. This development into "becoming" a father is dealt with in more detail in the next section.

### **5.2.2 Becoming a father: "I don't want a child to not know its father"**

The sentiment of "being there" was a repeated notion when the men were speaking about becoming a father, for example "I will be there" said Josh, "I don't want a child to not know its father". Kevin also stated he would always "be there" for his daughter explaining further: "if she needed a kidney I'd give it to her" and Daniel, who never had a father figure was determined to be there for his daughter and followed this through with explaining in detail the several medical operations in her infancy which indicated how he was there for her during a traumatic experience. For all the men becoming a father was an exciting anticipated event for them. They were all under 24 years of age when they had their first child, their ages ranged from 17 to 23 years and their partners and wives were in the age range of sixteen to 21 years old. This age range is highlighted in Ireland's policy document "Better outcomes, brighter futures" (BOBF) (DCYA, 2006) as being an age needing particular support, as young people transition from one life stage to another, from adolescence to adulthood. This transition is made more difficult when adolescents become fathers (Eerola, 2015) as they deal with the stage of growing away from their families to

assert their independence yet have to deal with a child being dependent on them. For some of the men being there as a father was fraught with relationship difficulties, for example Josh and Kevin never lived with their partners and had to deal with relationship breakups while also dealing with becoming fathers. The men's experiences highlight the need for personal development education to better equip them for relationships and the need for pregnancy information so they can support the mother, even if they are apart.

One method of support for young adults is through the Relationship and Sexuality Education curriculum, known as RSE, for senior cycle in Irish schools (Department of Education and Skills, DESk, 2018). This part of the curriculum has the potential for enhancing young people's confidence and knowledge of relationship skills while informing them of family planning methods. Education can also prepare them to be a supportive presence following their child's birth by understanding the pregnancy and birthing process (DESK, 2018). However, young fathers, who are also early school leavers, miss out on this vital part of their education due to non-attendance. Despite the men's knowledge of their partner's pregnancy, with the exception of one, the young men did not attend antenatal classes or medical appointments with their partners. The lack of knowledge of baby growth in pregnancy was evidenced by Josh. Josh's first response to receiving a scan by telephone sums up his lack of knowledge and experience:

I have the scan. At first I thought it can't be, like it can't be, how is that my child? 'Cos like, I wasn't realising that's how pregnancy works, it's just like, I kept looking at it. It is so clear, it's definitely a baby.

Josh's response to the scan indicates that he had little knowledge of the process of pregnancy and is a situation which needs to be taken into account by the mothers of

children. Attendance at GP and hospital visits by young mothers allows for medical staff to support and inform them about pregnancy, whereas young fathers may not be as informed as mothers are, thus indicating a slower rate of acquiring knowledge of the pregnancy progress.

This awareness of lack of information brings our attention to a more modern method of contact between partners. Despite not being physically situated with the mother; the use of the phone by Josh and Kevin was a helpful aid to keeping them connected to partners. It brings to the fore how social media is a new system of connection which was not previously a component of Bronfenbrenner's systems theory (1979). New technological contemporary methods of social contact are common for many young people. It is apparent that in this study the use of social media for men, who could not attend hospital or GP appointments, felt closer to their child when scans and photographs were shared with them by their partners.

There are other situations where fathering practise of absence from pregnancy visits and birth are part of a cultural tradition, such as seen in the Traveller culture where men in the study declared that pregnancy and birthing were "women's business". They appeared uncomfortable discussing this aspect of child development. The transmission of fathering practises in the Traveller culture are seen as differing to the regular population in Ireland, with early marriages and multiple pregnancies being an accepted part of family make-up. The Central Statistics Office in 2016 recorded that 44.5% of Traveller women had 5 or more children whereas only 4.2% of non-Traveller women fell within this range (CSO, 2016). The average family size in the non-Traveller cohort is less than three children according to the Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 (Department of Justice and Equality 2017) and within the Travellers families they

follow the Catholic ethos of children within marriage therefore many marry at a young age and have multiple births. Jim in the study was one such example, at eighteen he was the father of two children and his wife was sixteen on the first birth.

The education of young men and young women, from all cultures, in sexuality and relationship knowledge has recently been criticised for a lack of up-to-date information on birth control, abortion and on lesbian and gay issues. The Oireachtas Committee on Education, in an investigation of Relationship, Sexuality Education, (RSE), criticised the content of the existing course as being inadequate for young people in modern Ireland (Nolan, 2018). Given that evidence suggests that school-based relationship and sex education programmes can be effective in sexual health outcomes and can reduce the likelihood of crisis pregnancy and abortion (Nolan, 2018), there has been a call to have the RSE curriculum in schools redrafted. It is timely that the Department of Education and Skills has responded to this request with a new curriculum being planned for 2020 (DESk, 2018a). It is imperative for young men, similar to those in this study, who have missed out on senior post-primary education, to be educated in RSE course content when attending further education and centres of second-chance education. The building of meaningful relationships is a vital component of RSE and a lack of knowledge and competency in this area was demonstrated in Josh and Kevin's narratives of new partners and subsequent new pregnancies within the year-long research study. Their lack of birth control education could be a contributory factor, which indicates the need for young men to gain knowledge about managing relationships in a sexually safe manner. It is obvious that young people who have left school early miss out on academic education, but it appears they are also missing out on vital personal life skills information. There is further risk that young men without birth control education will

proceed to have multiple births which will add to their stress in providing resources for their children. Sipsma *et al.* (2010) further argue that sons of adolescent fathers are nearly twice as likely to become adolescent fathers than are sons of older fathers. They call for a need for interventions specifically tailored for young men who may be at high risk for continuing this generational cycle.

Despite being young themselves, and even for those whose pregnancies were not planned, becoming a parent was an exciting event. In particular, there was extra excitement in becoming a father to a boy. While all of the men had mixed genders in their family of origin there appeared to be a gender preference shown in favour of sons. Mark's response to becoming a father sums this up "It was great to be a dad, especially great to have a boy". When talking about the anticipated birth of his second child Kevin said: "the next scan will tell us if it's a boy or girl, I don't mind, but it would be great if it's a boy" and Daniel also spoke of having a son, "having my daughter was brilliant, but it just added to it, having a boy was extra", inferring that it was more special to have a son. This occurrence is not that unusual, as in most continents of the world there is a gender bias which favours males (Ritchie, 2020). However, in this current study it would appear that for these men, having sons might have been particularly important as they appeared to want to undo the wrongs that happened to them, Mark confirmed this saying: "I didn't want to rear my kids like my dad did with me", having a son might have been seen as an opportunity to show how to become the father to a son in a way that their own fathers had not been to them. Nevertheless, all six men also had daughters and having daughters was never diminished by them, they were equally proud of their daughters, exemplified by Daniel "even before she was born I decided on her name, Belle {*pseudonym*}, because she is beautiful to me" and Sean, an older father said he was proud of his

daughter who was doing well in school: “she will be the first to do a Leaving Cert”. The men demonstrated their positive regard for all their children, males and females.

Another area of becoming a father was the degree to which each of the men was prepared to be there to be the provider for their children. The role of the father showed that responsibility for the breadwinner role still holds importance and was an accepted part of the role of these fathers, Mark explained: “as soon as he was born I was delighted but then I said: shit what do I do now?” he further explained that he saw the role of the father as the “one with the wallet”. As illustrated in the literature review, in the historical perspectives section of Chapter 2, the traditional roles of breadwinner father and home- caring mother have, for the most part, given way to a shared parenting model (Drew and Daverth, 2007; McPartland, 2010). Generally, this transition has seen fathers and mothers move to a position in which both strive to take more equal shares of caring duties and work responsibilities (Miller, 2010; Ranson, 2012). In this study the mothers were all young women and were either in training or not working full time and the men, nevertheless, had expectations for themselves to be carers and breadwinners. Daniel and Mark both intimated that they were capable of taking on shared caring responsibility, with Daniel describing himself as a “stay at home dad” and Mark saying that there were times when he was his children’s full-time carer when he lost his job. However, both men valued being financial providers as well and saw it as a means to an end, for example Daniel stated he wanted to save “to go to Euro Disney”. The men’s opportunity to take on both aspects of the fathering role sits with the notion of the “good father” (O’Brien, 2003) a position which depends, not only on the intentions of the men, but also on shared parenting possibilities with the mother of the child. This

is in line with Dermot and Miller's study (2015) of young fathers, which states that the "breadwinner" discourse remains embedded in expectations of the fathering role.

The first steps for becoming a father as a carer presented problems of newness to the role. Most of the men stated that caring for their child included being involved in feeding, nappy-changing, and/or attending to their child during the night. This type of caring was particularly noteworthy, considering that the data also indicated that many of these fathers did not remember receiving this kind of caring from their own fathers. Those who were resident with their children appeared to be more confident with personal care tasks, whereas non-resident fathers leaned on their mothers for support and guidance. Kevin, at 19, best illustrated this situation, stating:

I'd have tried me best, but at the start I was young and I was only trying to get used to it. My mother changed her, and I'd hold her and feed her the bottle.

This lack of competence, was understandable with his lack of access, and suggests that fathers need time to adjust and learn how to respond to children when they are infants. A slight variance in the delineation of caring was noted within the Traveller men's narratives in relation to nappy-changing, with both men stating that it was a "private" matter for their children and it was the woman's role to do this job. Jim explained he did not think it "right" to change nappies, however, for other tasks he stated: "you have kids for the rest of your life," so he added that it was appropriate for a father to do his share of all the other responsibilities. Sean, a Traveller father of five children, stated that "being a dad was exciting, but it was nerve-wracking". He explained that he did not know how to respond to his daughter, but that he got better at it with his son. Jim, also a Traveller father spoke of sharing the caring tasks

of feeding his children: “she [ his wife] takes one and I take the other, and then we swap”. This insight into Traveller men taking on caring tasks is a more modern aspect of Traveller men who traditionally would only express their masculinity in their own communities of practice with male orientated tasks (Cudworth, 2019). However, this insight demonstrates that gender identity with caring responsibilities is evolving and changing lifestyles are changing for Travellers just as they are in the general population (Cudworth, 2019).

From examining the childhood experiences of how their fathers were available to them, looking at how the men took on the responsibility when they became fathers themselves, and looking at how the men want to be responsible for their children’s welfare has shown that these fathers want to be there for their children.

From the data the following findings can be deduced:

- Childhood experiences, with or without a father, create memories of knowledge from which young men perceive how they will be there for their own children.
- Early school leavers miss out on vital relationship, sexuality and family planning education which assists in building competency in developing romantic relationships and prepares them for becoming a father.
- On becoming fathers, men see participation in caring tasks and play activities as accepted norms of the contemporary father, however, they also identify strongly with the male traditional breadwinner role.

These findings demonstrate that in childhood children learn from, remember and are impacted by both positive and negative experiences of childhood and can carry the impact of these experiences into adolescence and adulthood to influence their



own eventual fatherhood practice. Relationship and sexuality education prepares young men for family planning and relationship building with partners and children. Early school leavers miss out on this part of education and may lack knowledge and competency in providing support to their children. On “becoming” fathers, men identify with the need for the caring of children as well as the provision of financial resources through their self-defined role as breadwinner. The experiences of relational closeness are aligned with Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969) and their impact has clearly been seen to be effecting the men as adults, although many said they would not repeat the experienced traits of their relationship patterns with their fathers. In addition, their ability to be there for their children is reliant on many factors in the ecological domain (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), individually (by taking responsibility for becoming a father), through family (by family transmission of experiences) through school (by lack of relationship education) and by culture (by traditional values). These findings acknowledge how the influences on fathering are not just personal they are also impacted by other factors from their environment.

Although shared parenting may be the goal for these fathers, how they are able to act in “being” fathers will depend on how their fathering role progresses through the emotional impact and practical ways in which they can and are enabled to respond to their children. The emotional aspects of dealing with these developments of fathering is discussed in the next section.

### **5.3 Theme 2: Emotional aspects of fathering**

Throughout the recounting of childhood events the emotional experiences of childhood with their fathers came to the fore. The experience of becoming a father was also emotionally felt and being a father continues to be an emotional journey for them all.

### **5.3.1 Childhood experience: “It was the love, nothing but love”**

Being part of the research study was an emotional journey for the men, as they reflected on the events in childhood and their passage into their current role as fathers. A positive statement by Jim sums up a positive felt emotion from childhood: “it was the love, nothing but love” and the opposite was also stated with Sean asking: “why didn’t he love me?”. Both extremes of felt emotion demonstrate how children hold felt emotions experienced in childhood into adulthood. The process of the study itself gave space for the men to expand on their experiences and to examine how their emotions about fatherhood impacted on them. The emotional happenings of childhood were not just cognitively remembered with recounting the facts: they were emotionally remembered and were described with the expression of emotion of tears and at times with laughter. Kleres (2010) argues that emotion is present in the core of remembering the event and “it is part of the event” (p.186). Therefore, the process in the study of reflecting back to their childhood not only unfolded their experiences, but also unleashed the emotion that was present within those childhood experiences. This occurrence tallies with Nussbaum’s (1998) argument that emotionality cannot be fully understood unless the history behind it is exposed. However, he advises that the actual process of remembering events also causes an emotion and this was exemplified throughout the interview process. For some it was a pleasant emotional journey for others it was a sad event.

Jim, Kevin and Josh were enthusiastic about their childhood with their fathers. Jim, who had lived with his father all his childhood, showed high praise for his father which was visible in the gratitude he showed towards him. He claimed that his father had contributed to making him the man he became, and that he owed

everything to him. Fredrickson (1998) suggests that positive emotions as shown through a simple smile, an approving glance, or by participating in shared joyful experiences, contribute to and develop a sense of bonding, and it is this bond that results in a child feeling loved. Dermot (2003) proposes that this type of closeness in a father and child relationship can be described as “intimate fathering”, which encapsulates the idea of what is essential as part of a good fathering description. The participants in this study demonstrated from their own felt experiences, the importance of intimacy to the relational connection between father and child. Relational connections which have been inspired by love help to build and strengthen social bonds and attachment (Frederickson, 1998) and the three men who indicated that they knew they were loved demonstrated a positive relational connection to their fathers. Kevin summed it up “My da loves kids and I love kids; if he was to go away, I’d go with him.” The accounts provided by the men in the study demonstrate that as children the men benefited from paternal love. This may have been the key to establishing a felt sense of closeness in their father-son relationship.

Bowlby (1969) asserts that a child without love will not develop a secure base, and will be more likely to exhibit sadness, anger or anxieties, which can indicate a lack of nurturing and a loss of belonging. This was evident with Sean, who demonstrated a deep loss at not having had the love of his father. Although he stated his father was cruel, it was the fact that he was not loved that caused him to shed tears and ask: “Why didn’t he love me?” He further illustrated his feelings by saying:

No one will ever know when they don’t have love from their father; it’s as simple as that; no one ever knows what it’s like. There’s a hole there [said as he placed his hand on his heart].

Sean's depth of feeling is all the more poignant when he added to his comments "The love of a mother is not the same as the love of a father" – an impactful statement, considering that he described his mother as his queen, who showered him with love, but he still yearned for his father to love him. His sadness at this loss of paternal love was physically shown when, having buried his face in his hands, he removed them to show tears flowing. Again, he asked: "Why didn't he love me? He loved others, but not me." Bowlby (1988), when speaking of maternal deprivation (a situation that stops attachment occurring due to the absence of a mother) gave credence to the child as going through stages of anxiety, grief, anger and mourning, which can turn into despair. What is obvious in Sean's situation is that he, a man in his forties, was, many years later, still going through these stages, he had developed depression from anxiety, and he still held anger towards his father and expressed his story through tears and despair; all symptoms which I suggest can be attributed to paternal deprivation. Rohner (2001), in his study of literature on research into fathering, also asserts from the various findings that a father's love can be more powerful than a mother's love, and that it is through love that the child feels accepted or rejected. Sean's expression of needing love and Jim's acknowledgement of love from his father were all the more unexpected because of their Traveller culture background. Expression of emotion of this type is not normally seen as a masculine trait with males where masculine traits to withhold emotion is the accepted norm (Berke *et al.*, 2018), and particularly in Traveller culture the masculine notions of being strong and capable are the usual traits associated with Traveller men (Cudworth, 2019). This is similar to findings in Levinson and Sparkes' study (2003) where consideration, compassion and kindness were not mentioned as laudable traits for masculinity in Traveller men. Therefore, Sean and Jim's stories are all the more poignant because of their home and cultural situation. Sean

summed up his feelings by saying: “all the money in the world means nothing, unless I show them love”, he continued saying that “there’s always Travellers out there and they’re not doing it, but the message is love”. This notion of loving responsiveness between fathers and their children is aligned with Dermott’s (2003) argument that contemporary fathers are now sitting in a space that can be described as intimate fathering.

The absence of love results in negative feelings of rejection (Bowlby, 1969) which can impact on mental health, and many of the men spoke about feeling anxious, depressed, and even suicidal as a result of the loss of love. Indeed, a suicide attempt by Daniel at 14 years old was attributed this to the fact that he “had no one to put me [him] right” and he was “going downhill pretty fast”. Similarly, the expression by Sean of sadness, with tears falling, said: “he loved others, he didn’t love me” in relation to his father’s abuse, demonstrates that children can hold “felt” emotions long after the event or experience into adulthood (Bowlby, 1969). This may explain why Ireland is listed as the fourth highest of 42 countries Europe-wide in “death by suicide” statistics, which indicates a serious situation for the mental health of youth (CSO, 2019b, 2016). It also implies that children and young men need support to deal with family neglect, trauma, mental ill health and isolation, referred to as adverse childhood experiences (Fellitti, 2003). Daniel initially said he had no memory of childhood, indicating perhaps that the trauma of childhood was too painful to remember (Freud, 1957). However, he added later that he often wondered why no one did anything about the cigarette burns on his body, demonstrating a hidden painful memory of physical abuse and emotional neglect. At 14, when Daniel attempted to take his own life, he explained:

I had terrible anger issues. They riled me so much I nearly tried to hang myself. Only the guards [police] called that day I would have been gone.

In this instance, Daniel admitted that he was lucky he was stopped in time by community intervention by the police. The link to community and relational connection is part of the approach identified in *Connecting to life – suicide prevention strategy 2015-2020*, which was introduced in Ireland in 2015, to develop mediations to counteract suicide (NOSP, 2015). The strategy suggests that a variety of risks usually contribute to suicidal actions, but the most significant common factor identified has been the lack of relational contacts, especially when individuals have experienced the loss of family members, peers, and friends (p.21). The linking to supports in the community lies within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), where the mesosystem suggests that a child's development is linked to the people in the environment in which they live and these connections affect how they grow and function. The experience of Daniel and the reconnection to concerned adults sits within this community response where he was supported in his recovery and assisted in making decisions that helped him to eventually to return to education in a supported space.

The emotional impact of being fathered and not being fathered have been seen as equally impactful on a child, and both experiences contributed to the model of fathering the men wanted to embrace for themselves as fathers. The emotional aspects of being a father were visibly expressed in the data also and are presented in the next section.

### **5.3.2 Being a father: “It means the world to me”**

Transitioning from adolescence to becoming a father had an emotional impact on these young men. On becoming fathers, the men experienced a range of different felt emotions which is overall summed up in Jim’s statement that being a father: “means the world to me”. While five of the men did not state whether their first pregnancies were planned, one scenario of a response to an unplanned pregnancy was highlighted by Josh. Josh’s journey to fatherhood was observed and documented over a year-long period of short interviews, which took place from the start of the pregnancy until the baby was four months old. His reporting of events during that time occurred on a weekly basis and therefore gives a distinct insight into the changing moods of elation and depression experienced by a young father as he awaited the birth of his child. At the time of the pregnancy, Josh was aged 18 years, his girlfriend was sixteen. He described his first emotional reactions to being given the news:

She came to me one night and said ‘you got me pregnant’ [pause]. That’s it. I said to her don’t be stupid, go away from me. I was kinda getting annoyed with her [pause]. You’re talking rubbish [pause]. So, it’s later, about two weeks later she started to get serious. She started getting sick and showing signs that it could be, that she is [pregnant]. Her friends called me [by phone] and said: ‘You’re going to become a father.’ I wasn’t expecting that news straight away but then I kinda got really upset and I started to get panicking and started crying. I was on me own, I got up, I started running around, I was panicking. I kinda got worried, didn’t want to contact them. I didn’t want to know what was going on with her and her family. I just wanted no communication ‘cos, like, at the time it was upsetting me, like, and I wasn’t prepared.

The frantic reaction of Josh was vividly evident in his rapid speech and he used over 300 words without stopping and indicates an intense emotional response

which left him in a vulnerable state of confusion. He continued to add to his response by saying: "I still have to tell people and it's hard; I'm afraid of telling people in case of losing friends", which indicates the position he was in as a young man, his priorities at that particular time was to be part of his peer group and this unplanned pregnancy was a fearful situation for him. Eerola (2015) contends that when young men move into adulthood and a move into fatherhood happens simultaneously, they have no time to grieve the loss of adolescence, their freedom and their social standing as an adolescent is in question by their peers. For some being a father can sit comfortably with their friendships. It was evident from Kevin's story that he took the role of fathering above the need to be with his friends. Kevin, aged nineteen, spoke of going out with his friends when he had his daughter in his care but it meant leaving them when he had to be at home to put her to bed. Kevin confirmed this in his statement: "When I have her I can't go out with my friends, they'd be out drinking, but I wouldn't do it. Not when she's with me, I don't mind." This statement indicates how he had risen to the role and taken a responsible attitude of fathering his child. For some young men, becoming a father can signify a change from previous lifestyles, and becoming responsible means reducing alcohol consumption and turning to focusing on training and work opportunities (Wilkes *et al.*, 2011). Their previous adolescent behaviour is stemmed, as they take the role of fathering seriously. In Northern Ireland, practitioners working with young parents identified similar situations, where one adolescent stated: "You lose a lot of friends over it. No one asks you to go out anymore." The worrying part of this transition returns to mental health issues, where isolation can trigger an increase in such problems. There is, unfortunately, no fast-track method of mental health provision for young people who are dealing with taking on the role of parenting (National Childcare Bureau, NCB, 2016). In the absence of this support, families, both of the



father and the mother, need to be aware of the stress that a young man is facing when pregnancy, birthing and fathering have changed his landscape. Three of the young men in the study referred to their parents continued support to be there for them. Jim lived beside his mother and father in a caravan “because we’re young we need to be beside them” and Josh said his mother was excited about her new grandchild and was making a blanket for her, and Kevin spoke of how his step-mother “sneaked” into the hospital with him to see his daughter. This sense of being there was recognised by the young men as being a necessary responsive support, it does however show that mothers were the preferred parent when the young men needed extra help to cope with their child. It leaves open the query whether fathers’ primary role is that of play companion and finance provider whereas the mother is still the primary carer no matter what age the child is. Interestingly the three young men who returned to their mothers for support were those who said they had good relationships with their fathers. This raises the question whether the men specifically saw a more detailed gendered delineation between the roles of their mothers being the nurturer and their fathers being the provider, with their mothers being the ones they call when in an emotional state. The men who did not have a good relationship with their fathers acted in a more independent manner without assistance from either parent, suggesting that having felt rejection in childhood, they wanted to stand on their own feet to be responsible and responsive fathers themselves.

However, being independent was not without emotion, as explained by Mark who soon after the birth of his son said he felt under pressure to “set a standard as a father”, to be the provider, and to care for his baby and wife. Daniel too felt the pressure and he explained that he needed to finish his training programme and be a baker so he could provide for the family. This response to be the provider appeared

to be an instinctive reaction even with non-resident fathers moving into that role. Josh explained his plans for his child to stay with him: he bought a cot, blankets and toys prior to the baby's birth, and stated that he wanted to be ready for the child to come and stay with him. While all the practical issues appeared to be of paramount importance, the fear and anxiety linked to being a father was also palpable. This development has implications for support agencies, family networks, medical staff and mothers themselves, who need to be aware that becoming a father is an emotional journey. Similarities were identified in an Australian study of 154 new fathers, who identified that men in early fathering role are often reluctant to seek help themselves (Giallo *et al.*, 2012). Thus, signposting to mental health agencies or men's groups is vital for enabling men to feel supported. In this study, one of the young men, Jim, who was 18, following the research interviews, asked for information to join a fathers' group. He said it would be good to talk to other young fathers, which illustrates the need for agencies to offer support to fathers.

For some, becoming a father was a positive emotional experience and being a father to their children appeared to enhance their lives. Identifying the emotional connection of father-to-child, as previously stated, brings fathering into the realm of "intimate" fathering, a term identified by Dermott (2003) to describe the emotional bond that fathers have for their children. Sean and Daniel exemplified this state when they admitted that their children had become a crucial part of their lives. The statement from Sean confirms this stating: "I think if I hadn't got the kids I wouldn't be here ... the kids keep ya going" and likewise, Daniel who intimated that his life was "nothing" before he had his children, and that his life would "fall apart if anything happened to those kids", demonstrating that the father-child relationship was mutually dependent. These statements by Sean and Daniel indicate a sense of

co-dependency and demonstrates that the emotional need in childhood, which was not responded to, is now still present and is being responded to by the relationship with their children. Calvette (2014) argues that emotional abuse in childhood has been linked to depression in adolescents and is another reason why young men who are fathers need support for mental health wellness.

Overall, the data implies that children are impacted emotionally by their fathering experiences in childhood and these experiences subsequently effect their mental health and behaviours as children. We have seen that the long lasting effects of emotional feelings transfer into adulthood and can impact on how they connect to their children. Being a father is an emotionally charged as indicated in the following findings:

- The emotional impact of being fathered in childhood has a significant influence on a child's well-being. A lack of love from a father can have serious mental health consequences for children in childhood and adulthood.
- Being a father is a highly emotional time for young men as they transition from adolescence to adulthood, where new responsibilities add to stress and mental health problems.
- Fathers want their children to know they are loved, and strive to be responsive, responsible and resourceful.

The narratives show that childhood events are not just cognitive memories that hold factual information, they are emotionally felt happenings that hold feelings of love, sadness, fear and admiration. The one resounding feeling that was continually referred to was love, the lack of which sits within the description of an adverse childhood experience of neglect (Fellitti, 2009). In childhood the feeling of not being

loved caused anxiety, fear and low self-esteem and ultimately these feelings resulted in suicidal thoughts and actions. The fathers in the study welcomed their children but found that becoming and being a father was an emotional process, nevertheless they wanted their children to know they were loved. As men they struggled with their own feelings of stress and some expressed they would not be able to survive without their children. This demonstrates how important it is for secure attachments to be developed in childhood (Bowlby, 1980, 1973, 1969), however, where the presence of the father is not consistent and responsive the lack of love has been seen as detrimental to well-being in childhood and extends into adulthood as they become fathers. The isolation felt by a child demonstrates that the child is alone within the environment when ecological systems are not reaching out to support the child. While Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains the impact of the ecological systems on a child's development there is a need to be more proactive to protect individuals. This brings our attention to the fact that fathers and children need to be supported to be close and connected so that children feel their father's love.

While all the men welcomed becoming fathers, there were challenges for them in being an involved father with their child which caused further distress. The next section will deal with the theme of barriers to father involvement.

#### **5.4 Theme 3: Barriers to Father Involvement**

The analysis of the narratives established that all the men were determined to be involved with their children and that they had good intentions to care and provide for them. However, there were barriers for them all in being able to respond and be

responsible for their children. These are divided into two areas that deal with gate closing by partners and environmental impediments.

#### **5.4.1 Gate closing by partners: “She put me through a lot”**

The data showed a distinct difference in the difficulties between resident fathers and non-resident fathers in accessing their children and Josh’s statement “she put me through a lot” represents the difficult experience that a father can face. None of the four men who lived with the mothers of their children expressed any difficulties with relationships with their partners or with access. However, the two young men, Josh and Kevin, who did not reside with the mothers of their children encountered difficulties with the relationship with partners and this situation impacted on the way they were able to access their children. The two young fathers’ wishes to be present with their children were thwarted by gate-closing actions of the mothers. Both of the fathers were non-resident with their child as a result of the relationship with the mothers ending before the birth of their babies. The problems with access highlighted the difficulties they had in establishing themselves as fathers. Josh was informed by text that his baby was born, and he was sent a photograph of her, but was told not to visit her at the hospital or at the mother’s home immediately following the birth. Similarly, Kevin heard about the birth of his baby the day after she was born, and he was told to stay away from the hospital. Following nine months of anticipation, “becoming” a father was realised, but neither young man was able to take on the role of “being” a father. The barrier to accessing their children was not only physical, it was emotional as well. In the same way as the men who, in childhood, experienced the loss of a father’s love, these two men experienced the loss of a child and were in the dichotomous situation of becoming but not being a father. George *et al.* (1985) suggest that internal working models of

attachment styles of childhood (Bowlby, 1969) remain in the adult's behaviour patterns, and in the case of these two young men, who both had suffered loss of a parent in childhood, feelings of loss would have been triggered again. Josh had lost his mother through mental health problems and was separated from his father as he was non-resident with him and Kevin lost his foster mother through death and had lived apart from his father for several years. Describing this state of loss, Bowlby (1988) argues that these feelings can be reduced into a condition described as "missing someone who is loved and longed for" (p. 61). This statement particularly fits with Josh's situation where he had difficulty in attending the hospital and he had no travel means to visit his daughter, who was a long train journey away from him. Even though he had a cot and baby items for the baby the girlfriend would not allow him to have her stay with him. He went through four months of anxiety trying to assert his rights and was very distressed throughout this period. When feelings of distress, loss, grief, and mourning occur in a child/parent relationship, it would also be expected, according to Bowlby (1988) that feelings of defensiveness would follow, which could explain why Kevin was determined to defend his role as a father. Kevin was denied visits and only saw his daughter because he sneaked into the hospital early one morning with his mother. Following that incident, he had to wait until his daughter was 10 weeks old, when he had legally acquired shared guardianship, to see her. The latter case demonstrates that fathers are disadvantaged from asserting their rights to be present with their child. The Children and Family Relationship Act 2015 does not give automatic guardianship, even when the father is named on a birth certificate (Irish Statute Book, 2015b). If a father has not been living with the mother for the previous year, and for three months with the baby, he is not considered as a legal guardian to his own child. This presents an obvious inequality of rights, where mothers are automatic guardians despite the fact

that they have never lived with the other parent. The worrying aspect of the situation is that these mothers, who were acting as gatekeepers, were only 16 and 18 years old. They faced the onerous responsibility of decision-making about the beginnings of a lifelong relationship between a father and child. Schoppe-Sullivan *et al.* (2015) state that in strained relationships, it is generally the mothers who dictate the suitability of fathers to be with their children. Gate-closing places young mothers in a dominant position and leaves young fathers powerless (Schoppe-Sullivan *et al.*, 2015). Rather than the mothers disengaging fathers in the early days of birth, which is a “crucial window of opportunity”, in order to develop relational connection, Reeves (2009, p.8) suggests that support for young mothers and fathers to co-negotiate this access is needed. A harmonious relationship between a mother and non-resident father is a key requirement for good relationships to develop between fathers and their children (Lamb, 2010). However, when that former relationship is broken, the second relationship, of father and child, is curtailed.

Even after guardianship is legalised in court, mothers still hold the power in making decisions about a child. One incident highlights how excluded Kevin was in decisions affecting his child’s attendance at crèche. He described the incident as follows:

I didn’t even know she was there. I was going past and I saw her, and then I actually saw her again through the gate and she came to me and I was chatting to her through the gate. And the woman said, ‘Who are ya talking to?’ and I said ‘She’s talking to her father.’ The people were aware [of me] and sure once she looked at me, I know she [the person in charge] knew, ‘cos she’s very like me. So, they knew straight away, she was gooin and gaaing at me. I was able to go in and the lady let me put her on the slide.

Kevin’s discovery about his daughter’s whereabouts exposes how decisions about daily activities are not always discussed when couples are no longer together.

Kevin's use of words "the lady let me..." indicates how little social capital this father had in asserting his guardianship rights. Kevin confirmed this state of powerlessness when he expressed he had "to hold back" from confronting his former girlfriend because he loved his daughter and he was afraid of being denied access if he "caused trouble". The stress of visiting rights also took its toll on Josh who, tried to visit his daughter but was told to stay away. At one stage he stated that it was "the worst year of my life" – a statement that required him to be referred to a counsellor for support. Josh appeared to be on the periphery of the pregnancy and birth and was powerless to intervene and bring himself into the child's life. There appears to have been a chasm of communication in these instances and a lack of support from family and community supports. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that development for the child occurs through the mesosystem of communication from one person to another in the microsystems of spaces that hold the child. Therefore, these situations exemplify the disadvantage that the child is being placed in when those around them are not in that space of communicating with one another. This situation serves no one in delivering positive outcomes; rather, it indicates that mothers have to work extra hard in building social capital for the child to thrive, the father is powerless, and the child is disadvantaged from not having maternal support to develop a relationship with their father.

#### **5.4.2 Environmental impediments: "I was sent home"**

Concerns about how they could be there for their children generally arose for the men from the moment they learned of the pregnancy of their baby. "I was sent home" said by Mark, prior to the birth of his first baby, which can be seen as a representation of the poor social capital that these young fathers had in dealing with



problems where in this instance Mark had no voice in asserting his wishes to be present with his wife at the birth of his first baby. In a study of three countries, including Ireland, Lohan *et al.* (2013) suggest that young Irish men welcome being seen as a family man and this included their intention of being present throughout the pregnancy and birth. With Lamb and Lewis (2004) suggesting that feeling connected to their child during pregnancy is important to fathers, it is surprising that only one of the fathers successfully attended antenatal appointments and the birth of his child. Being part of the early involvement in pregnancy and birth is generally seen as part of the “new father” role and helps to develop closer links between father and child (Coutinho *et al.*, 2016, p345). However, most of the men, for social and cultural reasons, were not part of this process. Mark, an older father, who reflected back on his first child’s birth when he was 23, was told to go home from the hospital during his wife’s labour, and in his absence his child was born. Medical staff may have thought the birth was not imminent, but Mark felt that leaving his young wife alone was something “to this day” that he regretted; he felt that he had abandoned her at a crucial stage. While there was no evidence from the interview that Mark was unable to assert himself against a “professional”, it was an upsetting experience for him to miss out on the birth of his firstborn child, and it does demonstrate how little social capital the young man had in expressing his own desires to stay with his wife. Lemay *et al.* (2010) suggest that young fathers need careful handling by medical and health personnel, and it may be necessary for medical staff to take the lead and encourage young men to stay nearby, when birthing is imminent.

The one exception was Daniel, in whose case the nursing staff actively encouraged his presence because of his daughter’s complicated health. Daniel attended

medical visits, supported his daughter who needed surgery immediately following her birth, and he responded to her needs with attentiveness and concern. A remark from a nurse encouraged Daniel and he reiterated the statement, stating: “she said I’m a lovely daddy.” The affirmation of valuing Daniel’s inclusion demonstrates that medical staff can have trust in young men to respond to difficult birth situations and supports the notion that the inclusion of young fathers allows them to be a helpful presence in the birthing room (Deslauriers, 2011). Daniel’s experience validates the assertion of Longwirth and Kingdon (2011) that often in a time of crisis fathers take on the responsibility of the protector role thus, strengthening the relationship between father and child. Daniel’s experience also indicates that when young men are given the opportunity to be responsible for their children, they can reciprocate accordingly.

Throughout the narratives the young men inferred that there were a number of other issues which impeded their involvement with their child. The two men who were not with their partners spoke about the sleeping arrangements they had to make to accommodate their babies to stay over with them. Kevin told about his daughter sharing his bedroom and how at times when she was not there he said “I look at her little bed, on the floor in my room, and I would miss her”, this was particularly hard for him as his sister had her child living in the family home. He expressed a wish to have his own house where he could have his daughter stay more often. Another young father, Jim, spoke of living in a caravan with his young wife and their two children, “we live right next to my father’s house, cos we’re very young”, he was on the list for social housing. There are 30,000 Travellers in Ireland and many still live in caravans and mobile homes (CSO, 2016) and overall there is a severe shortage of social housing in Ireland (Taylor, 2020). The government has been accused of

failing to provide adequate and suitable housing that meets the need of the specific cultural group of Travellers, the result is that housing conditions for Travellers are poor and families are over-crowded (Independent Expert Review Traveller Accommodation, 2019). This inadequate supply of social and affordable housing in Ireland (Taylor, 2020) has repercussions for many non-resident fathers to have a suitable space for a child to visit. Only one father in this study, Mark who was in his forties, had his own private house with a mortgage, for others the reliance on rented accommodation and the shortage of housing does not give security for fathers and their families. The development of social policy sits within the system of the macro system of Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) and describes the spaces that include dealing with policy decisions, adequate finances, and policy. Lack of proper living facilities is usually linked to poverty and causes increased stress for families. Young men who want to have accommodation for themselves and their child are in a poor situation which is not supportive to the needs of their children. It does not allow them to produce a physical space to establish a secure base (Bowlby, 1969).

Overall there are barriers for young fathers to be with their children and to provide for them. Non-resident fathers struggle with asserting their rights to their children and family and community difficulties impede the responsiveness of fathers to their children's needs. The data indicates the following findings

- Young fathers lack social capital in asserting their legal rights when becoming a father, and a child's mother holds significant influence over a father's ability to be close and connected to his child.
- Young men lack financial and housing resources to facilitate connecting to their children.

The men in the study expressed their wishes to be there for their children, for some this meant being there with the mother of the child through pregnancy, child birth and rearing of their child. It is clear that for some there were community services which presented impediments to their ability to connect with their children and was obvious in the maternity settings where three out of the six men who wanted to be present were denied access. This crucial time was difficult for the men who were willing to take responsibility but they met with barriers which impeded a positive start to a relationship with his child. The particular barriers to access posed by the mothers in two of the cases demonstrates the power that young mothers have in dictating to and inhibiting fathers. For resident and non-resident fathers housing availability was an impediment to their ability to provide safe secure spaces for their children and demonstrates the difficulties in being responsible and resourceful.

The next section looks at how childhood experiences affected the men's education as children which resulted in early school leaving and reveals how further education became a positive educational experience.

#### **5.5 Theme 4: Education experience**

The men in the study were recruited because they had been early school leavers. It is therefore of value to see how their childhood experiences impacted on their education in childhood which contributed to leaving school and to examine if their attitudes and experiences of education changed over time.

##### **5.5.1 Childhood education: "I hated school".**

As the criteria for involvement in the study was being an early school leaver, it was no surprise to hear that all the men had difficult negative experiences of school.

Mark's declaration "I hated school" was representative of the attitude that all six men had toward their primary and post-primary school experience. In analysing the men's reasons for school absence and early school leaving there were several difficulties in the men's childhood which were contributory factors. There appeared to be external school reasons linked to family behaviours and family decisions, and there were internal reasons linked to happenings in school. On analysing the narratives both factors appeared to influence and impact on the other. One external reason for failure to settle in school was the multiple schools attended by many of the men, other reasons were linked to childhood illness, family illness, family breakup, domestic violence or because of the cultural family tradition of being a Traveller. Internally school absence was linked to bullying by peers and poor relationships with teachers which contributed to feeling isolated and victimised in school. The impact from home life appeared to impact on their school life.

The multiple school experience was particularly experienced by Traveller children. Traveller children had many school changes as they moved from place to place. The Traveller men told of "not fitting" into the school system and some experienced bullying when they did attend school, which added to feelings of anguish and isolation. Seventy-five per cent of Traveller children in Ireland leave school before the statutory minimum age of 16, compared with fifteen per cent of the population as a whole (Rose, 2013). Nixon *et al.* (2012) argues that children who are part of a different cultural grouping, for example Traveller culture, who have long or frequent, intermittent absences will experience a disconnection from school. Travellers, according to Levinson and Sparkes, (2003) often perceive school environments as a threat to their cultural tradition therefore their parents decide to keep the children at home. Sean was kept at home from the time he was ten years old and while he

had not liked school his lasting thought of not being brought to school was that “no one looked for me [him]”. This experience demonstrates how children have no voice in decisions and also indicates that there is room for schools and family support services to reach out to ensure that the child stays connected to society.

Mark too went to several schools and also had a lot of absenteeism and haphazard attendance due to suffering childhood asthma. He stated that he “hated school”, he went to three primary schools but never liked them and while he was happy to change schools he did not settle in any of them. Mark explained that he did not get on with teachers and in one school the intimidating approach by teachers, who he described as cruel, contributed to his statement: “I couldn’t wait to get out of school”. Most of the men spoke about bullying in school and this contributed to poor attendance. Daniel told of being bullied in school but as his bully lived close to him he said he was bullied twice. He stayed away from school to avoid him and said: “I never really got a chance; in Ballymade, I was bullied a lot. I left school early because of it.”. He moved to post-primary school at twelve but did not settle and eventually left school altogether at fourteen years old. Sulkowski *et al.* (2014) argue that the emotional impact of feeling victimised by bullying behaviours is negatively associated with school connectedness. These case studies demonstrate that the men as children were not supported to stay in school by their parents. However, their parents might not have had good social capital themselves, which would have given them confidence in entering a school environment. Their parents might not have been able to communicate with a school, especially when they may have had poor school experiences of their own. All the men had attended schools in DEIS areas, (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, 2005) schools set up in areas described as “disadvantaged” due to their poor socio economic positioning (DESk,

2005) an indication of family disadvantage. This finding demonstrates that teachers need to find alternative ways to reach out to parents so that children are supported to connect to the school.

Relational 'disconnect', that is the break in a relationship, was visible within all the men's families, such as the death of a foster mother, the mental health of parent, estranged fathers, and a lack of extended maternal and paternal family support. This lack of relational connection in the home would have contributed to their inability to link into community and society, with one noted result being a possible lack of school readiness (Pleck, 2007). These relational differences added to the men's feelings of insecurity, which in turn added to the inability to form friendships or alliances with peers and teachers. The Closeness diagram (see Figure 3.4), based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979), proved a valuable tool for discussing relationships and contacts, while it showed who the men were close to it also demonstrated how limited their social and community links were, which demonstrates how the men had little social capital (Pleck, 2007). On the closeness diagram, the nature of the relationship to fathers was significantly made visible. Sean, for example, when referring to his father, asked: "Can I place him outside the circles?" and likewise, Daniel asked, with reluctance: "Do I have to place him on the paper?". It is therefore valid to suggest that a combination of factors such as problems with attachment, ecology and social capital all contribute to children and young people's ability to connect to school. Attachment and connectedness are terms in Libbey's (2004) literature review of health and wellness of children in school, and she suggests that children perform better academically if they feel part of the school system. However, none of the boys in the present study identified school as their "secure base" – the description Bowlby (1969) gives to the space to

which children emotionally return in times of stress. In this study the isolation experienced by the men in school appears to have forced them to call on their coping mechanism of “fight or flight”. They made the decision to leave school of their own accord; none of the men in the study were expelled from school.

Reverting back to Bowlby’s description of a secure base (1969), it is clear that these men, suffered multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Fellitti, 2009), and had insecure or even disorganised attachment. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) impact on a child’s poor connectedness to school (Fellitti, 2009) and in this study the men, as children, experienced and/or witnessed some or all the following: physical abuse, aggression, mental and physical illness, and separation from a parent by living circumstances, death, work, and illness. Their resulting behaviour of early school leaving can be understood to have occurred in reaction to their felt insecurity. It is difficult to trust new relationships when the closest relationships you have are unstable and Fellitti (2009), suggests that an ACE score of three or more has been deemed as relevant to poor outcomes for children (Fellitti, 2009). Gordon (2016) identifies ACEs as being significantly present in learners on a second-chance education programme, called Youthreach, for early school leavers in Ireland. Within this current study, the ACE scores ranged from three to seven for each of the participants (refer *Figure 3.2 Participants Profiles*). For these men it was noticeable that these adverse experiences contributed to poor attendance and eventual early leaving from school. Therefore, a holistic approach and an awareness of potential home difficulties is needed in schools. Ireland’s Education Act (1998) (Irish Statute Book, 1998) advocates for a child-centred curriculum, and subsequent amendments have increasingly emphasised the holistic development of the child. However, the rate of school leaving indicates that there are situations in



which the school curriculum is not meeting the needs of all children.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of development captures the interplay of the dynamic relational factors between school and home and thus places prominence on how relationships in the systems, and between the systems, connect together and impact on the child. However, in all these cases communication between the family and school appeared as lacking.

One common response by the men to reasons why they left school was the blame they placed on their teachers or peers for behaviours towards them which they could not deal with. However, on analysing the data it was seen that the men's childhood experiences have to be considered as the primary cause of personal insecurity which did not give them confidence or self-esteem to deal with school problems. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's representation of systems theory (1979), where he argues that development unfolds within social systems that connect and nest within one another, it was evident that the children were impacted by the poor relationship between themselves, the family and the school, and communication appeared to be lacking (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

### **5.5.2 Further education: "They were friendly teachers"**

The men all left school before sixteen years old, the age at which children are required to attend school in Ireland and were therefore called early school leavers (NAYC, 2017). However, that was not the end of their education and they subsequently attended further education in a variety of settings. For all the men in the study, the one consistent common trait presented was the negative relational environment that existed in post-primary school. However, moving to further education their attitude changed and one contributory factor to this change was the

teaching personnel's attitude to students which was summed up by Daniel in his statement: "they were friendly teachers". The complex narratives show that early school leavers in this study did not leave school because they did not want an education; rather, the reasons appeared, as stated previously, to be strongly linked to relational difficulties emanating from home, which impacted on their relationships in the school environment. Finding a supportive, relational environment was necessary to encourage them as young people to remain in school. Despite not liking school all the men eventually wanted to improve their education and sourced training and education opportunities within two years of initially leaving. Mark completed an apprenticeship in mechanics, Sean attended a Traveller training centre for skills training, and the four other men attended Youthreach centres where they all received qualifications in skills, and three attained Leaving Cert standard.

These new centres of education placed priority on positive relational connections which supported the men's self-initiated need for education. One significant factor in the new places of learning, which appeared to be pivotal to changing their perspective on education, was the relational influence of one specific teacher or mentor. This acknowledgement of "one good adult", as described by Winnicott (1964), demonstrates how a young person can be supported outside the family unit by a considerate adult. It is exemplified by Mark, who explained how his mentor treated him as an "equal", he would "share smokes with him" he said and Daniel explained how the relationship with a teacher, who made a "fry-up" every Friday and took him on educational trips, was the encouragement that he needed to stay in education, "Paul was great", he acknowledged. The relational attitude of teachers on the Youthreach early school leavers' programme is supported by the statement from the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills (2019)

in its report on inequality, disadvantage and barriers to education. It was noted in the report that there is a “strong preference for teaching styles associated with non-mainstream education settings, such as Youthreach” (p.26). The Youthreach approach provides teachers who are focused on the needs of the learners, who respond to personal issues as they occur, and strive to provide a holistic programme that meets emotional and social needs, as well as academic learning (NAYC, 2017; OGYP, 2015). Josh exemplified the holistic approach which he experienced he stated: “Youthreach is like a family to me”. While some may criticise that schools are not meant to be centres of care, as argued by Eccleston (2019) who states that therapeutic care is not what schools are meant for and that schools’ focus should be on providing an interesting stimulating curriculum. While her emphasis on academic achievement is a valid point in relation to a child’s learning, children with disrupted childhoods may not be in a position to take part in the academic curriculum when feelings of insecurity and isolation dominate their thoughts and feelings. Libbey (2004) confirms my attitude to understanding childhood disruptions in relation to education when she states:

Some contend that the business of school is teaching for knowledge acquisition and that attention to the non-academic aspects of school is low priority, however, the health and education literature indicate that these features contribute significantly to school success (Libbey, 2004, p. 281).

It is obvious with these men that it was the holistic approach to care in Youthreach which compensated for their lack of emotional care and which supported them to focus on learning.

Another supportive action to re-engage the men with education was identified in the approach to planning for determined goals and having specific education and career

progression. Focusing on completing a Leaving Certificate, the national qualification for post-primary education in Ireland, presented a goal of achievement, with both Josh and Kevin extolling the realisation of success in attaining the standard. They both drew attention to the fact that they “have nearly finished the Leaving Cert”. Having a career focus such as following bakery training and an apprenticeship, was also visible in the responses of both Daniel and Mark. The inclusion of career goals has been argued by Polidanoa *et al.* (2015) in Australia as an important element to re-engaging young people with educational success and was more important than literacy or numeracy. The men’s success in further education gave them the opportunity to see adults as a support and they thrived on the respectful relationships established in their new environments.

On becoming fathers, the men’s focus shifted to education aspirations for their children. Memories of school are reactivated when parents have to plan and prepare for their own children to attend school (Miller, 2015) and considering the men’s primary negative school experiences, it was enlightening that they did not hold a poor attitude towards schooling for their children. On further investigation, it appeared that the change in attitude to education came about by education itself. The men’s second chance at education had improved their attitude and appreciation for learning and they wanted educational opportunities for their children. Mark demonstrated the change in paternal involvement in school. Having admitted that his father had no interest in his education, he said he always checked on his sons’ homework, and although he might not have been able to help them individually by the time his daughters were attending school, he was confident enough to meet their teachers to receive and discuss their progress reports. Considering that poor past experiences of school can prevent new parents from engaging in their

children's education (Doyle and Keane, 2018), there was a considerable change in attitude to education this bodes well for children. Similarly, it has been suggested by Taylor *et al.* (2004) that memories of a parent's schooling in childhood are reactivated when they prepare their own children for similar experiences. However, in this study we have seen the movement from negative to positive responses, all the men stated they wanted their children to attend school and three expressed the view that they would like them to go to college. The change in the relational environment in further education centres had impacted a shift in perspective on education and demonstrates the importance of teachers developing interpersonal methods of communication that reach out to fathers, mothers and children, and which includes them in the conversation about their children's education.

Nevertheless, memories of poor schooling experiences for Mark and Sean resulted in a cautious approach to education and demonstrated a protective gaze over their children's wellbeing. They stressed that they wanted their children to be listened to and responded to in an empathetic manner in school and felt that their children would continue in school only "if they wanted to". This approach was mirrored in Doyle and Keane's study (2018) of parents' views on their children's schooling in Dublin. In that study, parents made the point that children and families have to cope with significant personal traumas, and, at times, surviving everyday life is a priority for them, and education is not (Doyle and Keane, 2018). In another study of parental involvement in Dublin, which focused on social class, it was noted that "the voices of parents of educationally disadvantaged pupils are unheard" (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002, p.36) and the study called for the inclusion of a "parental voice from the more marginalised sections of a community" (p.46). Fathers, like those in this

current study, if consulted, have the capacity to inform how their children's educational environment can best support their children, and their inclusion will also give the message to children that fathers are important and are interested in their children's education.

Overall, the data indicates that children's home life has significant impact on the child's ability to stay at school. However, leaving school is not the end of education and attitudes to education can change with appropriate support. The findings are as follows:

- Relational disconnections in families are part of multiple adverse childhood experiences which impact on children's ability to engage in school and which contribute to early school leaving.
- Further education programmes incorporating life skills and personal development learning gives young people the opportunity to experience learning in new holistic environments, with dedicated teachers who can connect relationally to students.

Overall, the study highlights that relational communication which Bronfenbrenner describes as the meso-system (1979) is an important element of a child's education and it indicates that fathers, mothers, children and teachers need to stay connected to one another, so that an enhanced understanding of children's childhood experiences can inform how best to support their educational success.

The study has indicated that a new theory needs to be considered, one which supports father and child to be in a relationship which is responsive to the child's needs and where the father can be responsible and resourceful. The next section discusses the argument that a theory of closeness and connectedness is appropriate to consider in light of the findings.

## **5.6 Coil of closeness and connectedness: new theory**

The study set out to examine the issues facing young fathers and the findings indicate that the quality of the father – child relationship is varied, multifaceted and is dependent on a variety of factors in the environment. The two theories of Bowlby and Bronfenbrenner were used as a reference framework in considering the father-child relationship. However, the attachment theory of Bowlby (1988, 1973, 1969) and the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), while appropriate to be considered as frameworks for studying children's and young people's development, do not sufficiently address the issues of the relationship between father and child in this study, particularly in the context of the challenges facing young men. I present the argument that a hybrid theory of "closeness and connectedness" which brings together the work of Bowlby (1988, 1973, 1969) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) is a relevant advancement in considering how the personal, social and community influences which impact on the father-child relationship can be supportive and positive.

The first stage to understanding the need for a new view on the father – child relationship is to see the gaps in the Bowlby and Bronfenbrenner theories. Bowlby (1988, 1973, 1969) argued that attachment is the deep and enduring emotional bond which occurs between a child and mother, a father or other carer. He proposed that attachment begins in the first nine months after birth and is based on the parent being able to respond positively to the child's needs, for example: needing to be fed or changed. Regular responding establishes a trusting relationship and the child's attachment is described as secure. This secure attachment has implications for the child's well-being as it leads to the child developing good self-esteem and confidence in childhood which further impacts on

future relationships with friends and partners in adulthood. Although Bowlby (1988, 1973, 1969) said that children can develop this secure attachment with their fathers, the theory loses relevance when fathers are not consistently able to be available to the child, whether through work commitments, by living apart or having impediments to access. Therefore, another way of examining the relationship between father and child is required. It is therefore why I propose that the description of “closeness” between the two is a more appropriate description of the relationship. This state of “closeness” needs the father to be able to respond to the child, therefore both need to be able to connect to one another. However, fathers need the support from other elements of the environment, for example the family, the community and society to establish the ability to connect.

Elements of the environment surrounding the child are part of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979). His theory argues that the child is influenced by elements of an ecological system which surround the child. Bronfenbrenner uses the example of a Russian doll, babushka, to represent his idea of the child nesting inside and being surrounded by the systems. The systems link and impact on one another and influence how the child develops. The microsystem is the first system which surrounds the child and consists of family, school, friends and neighbours in which he lives. The communications between these elements is referred to as the meso-system and the quality of interactions that is present impacts on how the child develops. The next system describes the areas where the child is not personally situated but where the happenings therein impact on the child, for example the parents’ workplace, housing policy, laws of the country or the social welfare regulations which provide finance to the family, this is called the exo-system. The next system is called the chronosystems and shows how time influences the



happenings in a child's life, for example the age at which s/he goes to school, or the decade in which s/he is living has a particular resonance on her/his development.

While these systems influence the child's development, the current research study has shown that these same systems can also be barriers to development, for example when a father is a legal guardian but is not able to see his child. The theory therefore, falls short on considering how a father can work through these systems to have the best outcomes for the child. It is apparent that the child and father need to connect in order that a close relationship can develop. I therefore argue that both theories of attachment and ecological systems need to be brought together in a new theoretical hybrid framework called "closeness and connectedness". The image of this theoretical framework can be seen in *Figure 5.1*. The theory of "closeness and connectedness" is relevant to this study of fathers, where "closeness" can be understood as providing a responsive, responsible attitude to the child and where "connectedness" allows for the presence of all family members, school, community and society to work collaboratively and cohesively together, to support the father to provide resources that meet the child's needs. The Russian doll image, used by Bronfenbrenner (1979) to show the systems which surround the child, does not represent the response needed to care for the child. Rather, what is needed to capture the fluidity of relationships and connections is a coil, where the systems move and change and are impacted by each person, and each system where the child moves through. By considering how the components of the coil of closeness and connectedness impact on a child, an understanding of how the father is also situated, is affected by and also affects these systems emerges. It clearly demonstrates how decisions in all areas of life are "impacted by" and "impact on" one another.

Figure 5.1: Coil of closeness and connectedness



By understanding the positioning on the coil of the child, who is both an observer and an active agent in life happenings, professionals and fathers and mothers can support the child with a view to ensuring the least disrupted movement on the coil. If activity on the coil is overstretched, the father becomes distant from his child, physically and relationally, and the child is “shaky” in his relationships with all other elements. Reducing adverse movement on the coil adds to the stability of the relationship between father and child, family and community. The coil also depicts how the child moves from the parents into other areas of life, as he moves downwards he is growing in age and eventually he gets to the end which then

marks the beginning of his own life as an adult and eventually a father. The movement on the coil demonstrates how the child of today is the father of tomorrow.

This study of fathers and their experiences highlights the challenges that young men face in being responsible, responsive and resourceful. Their ability to do fathering is impacted by the events in their own childhood which impact on them in adulthood with their own children. When both parents are placed on the coil and work together in unison, and in relation to other areas of life, then a stability of closeness and connectedness in family relationships can be experienced by the child. This stability supports the child to feel secure within relationships, in the family, in school, with peers and with future partners, and so establishes positive transmissions of the fathering role to the next generation of fathers. The image of the coil illustrates how a father and child can be supported to be close and connected where the child benefits from the supportive mechanisms that have permitted both to relate to one another and where the father moves from “becoming” a father to “being” a father.

The following concluding chapter will present a reflection on the research study and will highlight the contribution to knowledge.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The concluding chapter brings together the research question and findings in a synthesis of knowledge and understanding of the factors facing fathers in establishing relationships with their children. This concluding chapter sets out the substantive findings in relation to the research question, it describes the challenges of the methodological approaches used in the study, discusses the value of using two modes of analysis and reflects on the issues facing researchers in emotional interviewing. How this thesis adds to new knowledge in the wider literature and methodology field is included, along with recommendations for policy and practice changes. The limitations of the study are addressed and areas of further research are suggested. An overall reflection on the study concludes the chapter and the thesis.

### **6.2 Becoming and being a father: substantive findings**

The aim of this research was to understand the issues faced by young men who are fathers, taking into consideration their education experiences and their childhood events of being fathered. The use of semi-structured interviewing as a method of research enabled me to explore the perceptions of six men who shared their stories of fathering experiences. The method gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their childhood relationship with their fathers exploring negative and positive events. The continuing stories illuminated joys and struggles on becoming a father and allowed for an exploration of the transmission of values and beliefs from one generation to another. The initial analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three distinct areas which contributed to the

development of the men from childhood to adulthood. These themes were 'being there', 'emotional aspects of fathering' and 'education'. These themes encapsulated the growth and awareness of the men who evaluated their fathers' presence or absence, expressed the emotional feelings of events past and present and gave credence to education experiences which were positive and negative. The analysis of findings gives insights into fathers' and children's relationships and adds to our understanding of how ways of "becoming" and "being" fathers were enacted by this group of men. The study demonstrated the issues and factors that impede and support the process of becoming a father. Most importantly the study demonstrates how the childhood experiences of relational connecting or disconnect with their fathers impacts on children's expectations of what it means to be a father, and what it takes to be a father, as they become fathers themselves. The open and honest narratives demonstrated the need that children have in being part of a father-son relationship, one which supports the son in a positive manner. This relationship is a complex one and is inhibited and/or supported by family, community and environmental circumstances. The negative and positive experiences gave the men identifiable figures to develop their impression of what the position of a father involves. The transmission of values was at times seen as a positive assimilation but as these men reflected on past events, it also brought insight into how they wanted to change what was negatively experienced and build on what was positive. This aspect of fathering holds positive inferences that children with negative occurrences of adverse childhood experiences can become loving fathers to their children. Those children with non- resident fathers or absent fathers and those with positive relational connection to their fathers can aspire to be the fathers they want to be. However, if the mental impact from trauma in childhood and adulthood

is not given the attention needed then mental health in Ireland will continue to be a concern, particularly as high numbers of young male suicides have been on the increase (NOSP, 2019) resulting in Ireland being placed high in Europe with numbers of death by suicide (CSO, 2019b, 2016). There is an urgency to changing these figures, and through this research it is evident that action is needed in childhood which instigates an appeal to teachers, mothers and to fathers themselves to support and encourage children to have positive and meaningful relationships with their fathers. It is through education that changes to children's lives can emanate, from early years, through to primary school and into secondary school, interactions with fathers by teachers regarding their children's development has the potential to value fathers input in children's well-being and education.

### **6.3 Methodological reflections and contribution to knowledge**

There were a number of areas of the research study process that were important features that have contributed to new knowledge, both in the methodological approach to the thesis and to research findings. The main areas included using two models of analysis, having an awareness of the impact of emotional interviewing and the development of the coil of closeness and connectedness to understand the factors impacting on child and father relationships. These are discussed in the following sections.

#### **6.3.1 Two models of analysis**

In this study I used two methods of analysis to present the findings. The first method used was a format described as structural analysis (Brock *et al.*, 1994) which was followed by thematic analysis (Braun *et al.*, 2006). The structural

analysis methodology gave me the space to familiarise myself with the men's life stories and it made it easier to make comparisons between the narratives. Using a planned format of dividing the interview transcript into distinct areas helped to organise the interviews into a structure. The areas of the framework were: personal profile, incident, result, impact and reflection (Brock *et al.*, 1994). The narratives had evolved organically during the time of interviewing, having been asked "tell me about yourself" each man's story elicited different responses through different areas of importance to them. The structural method contextualised the data, added realism to their experiences and presented the narratives in a biographical approach (Brannen, 2015). The value of structural analysis lay in being able to segregate the verbatim interviews and compartmentalise the data. It subsequently made it easier to compare and contrast experiences. The process highlighted how unique and different each case was. I thought that the three criteria for recruitment: being a father, aged under 24 and an early school leaver, would bring the men into one familiar case study but I was mistaken. Their structured narratives demonstrated how unique was each man's story and therefore proved that there were six individual case studies to be further analysed.

Moving the analysis into a thematic approach (Braun *et al.*, 2006) defined the data in a clearer manner and allowed for more in-depth assessment. The interviews were recorded and written verbatim and I extracted repetitive words and phrases in each interview by highlighting them within the word document. I moved to cross checking if similar words and phrases were in all the interviews. The stages of thematic analysis can be seen in Figure 3.5: *Steps in thematic analysis*. The repetitious words and phrases allowed for comparisons of how lives

were lived. Sifting out the common words and themes re-enforced the important elements of the stories and brought four themes to the fore. Using the thematic approach allowed for a more in-depth comparative manner. Nowell *et al.* (2017) suggest that one way of capturing the sentiment of the themes is to use direct quotations from the participants. This approach personalises the data and I found that by using the exact words brought me right back into the space and time of the interview and these brought the men's voices into the study. Their words also brought the emotion into the narrative analysis and added to the data as a felt experience. I believe this mirrored Atkinson's (2009) approach where he says it is important to bear witness to what actually happened and present it as a simplistic reflection of lived experiences.

Overall the structural analysis was useful in presenting the narratives in a consistent, regular manner and the thematic analysis built on that structure to bring the interviews together, differentiating between them allowed for details to be teased out and for the common themes to be identified. As the stories were personal and unique they may have been lost if I only had used one approach, however, using both methods gave a richer presentation of the men's lives. By using the two different approaches to analysing and by presenting the data using direct quotes I have added credibility and reliability to the data (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Often qualitative research is criticised for not being transparent and only provides a subjective report (Bryman, 2015) but I wanted to ensure that the data represented the men's thoughts, views, and feelings in an honest presentation and I believe the methods used proved to be a successful mode of delivery.



The role of the researcher is meant to be impartial and objective and that is what I strived for but it did not stop me from feeling the emotion of the interviewing event and this is discussed in the next section.

### **6.3.2 Emotional interviewing**

As a female researcher, working on my own, I thought I was well prepared and ready for the meeting with the men, I knew their life experiences would be different to mine and I embraced that difference as I am inquisitive and I wanted to understand their viewpoints. However, the interviews presented unforeseen challenges. Situations where the men told of childhood memories, upsets and harsh treatment took me from the space of being a researcher to a situation of being a confidante of personal life stories and almost into the role of counsellor – roles that I did not foresee as relevant when I started out. The moving from a space where I thought men did not want to talk to me, as a result of difficulties in recruiting, to one in which these men opened up and shared their personal experiences, was at times an overwhelming experience for me. I ensured that participants were cared for during the study, as I was concerned that having given me their personal accounts of their perceptions of childhood and fatherhood, they would be in a vulnerable space. To ensure that I had behaved in an ethical manner, and to ensure that no harm had occurred regarding their well-being, I checked after a few days with the participants and their mentors. I was assured that the research process, rather than being an upsetting experience for them, had turned into a cathartic practice. All participants gave an assurance that the process of sharing the narratives of their lived lives was beneficial to them. This experience shows the importance of ethics not being a single-point-in-time

process but a continuous ethical encounter in which dialogue and relationships evolve dynamically.

The men's narratives were first recorded and written verbatim. The initial idea was to have a questionnaire protocol to guide the "interview" and, although I used the questionnaire as guidance, the answers from the men developed into narratives which were "variable and unpredictable" (Brannen, 2013, p.3). When there was a flow to the narration, sometimes up 300 words non-stop, I did not interrupt but allowed each man to follow his own way of explaining "his" story. Some stories started with the participants reflecting on their childhood, for example Kevin, who stated "I had a great childhood" and Daniel, who started his narration with the story of the birth of his baby daughter: "I love her to bits". Sometimes, referring to photographs of men and their children (see Figure 3.1) triggered a memory or a wishful occurrence of father and child events. Using the diagram of closeness (Figure 3.2) gave the men the opportunity to represent the relationships within their families but also opened up deep emotional reactions for example: "do I really have to put my father on the page?", said by Sean whose clenched fists reflected the emotion held within. Using the photographic images supported the men in conversation and encouraged dialogue, Jim who had been verbally hesitant looked at a photograph of a father with a child on his shoulders and exclaimed joyously: "That's what I do, I bring my lad to the shops like that!", it proved the trigger to supporting dialogue. I leaned on Carl Rogers' (1983, 1945) client-centred approach to interviewing to listen to their stories and to understand that their stories were their truths, they were not corroborated by other testimony but they were the men's truth of what happened to them.

As discussed in Chapter 3 Methodology, I found the process of interviewing an emotional experience for myself. Listening to experiences which were upsetting were emotionally draining and left me feeling tired and sad after leaving the research site. I have many years of experience of dealing with emotional experiences of students but this was different. Being a sole researcher placed me in a position of not having colleagues to debrief to at that particular moment, and knowing that I had to uphold my confidentiality agreement meant I did not wish to express my responses to other members of my family. It highlights the need for training for researchers, especially novice students, to be prepared for emotional expression throughout the study and to be encouraged to seek out support for themselves from a supervisor afterwards, an avenue which I found beneficial. This aspect of emotional interviewing needs more attention so that researchers know how to respond in the moment, in this way a study that reveals traumatic situations is dealt by an approach that supports the interviewee in the immediate space and which supports the sole researcher in the moment and after the event.

The interviews left an emotional impact on me but was the motivation to represent how necessary it is that a father and a child connect to one another and that all the domains in life that impact on that relationship have to be considered. This was the inspiration to developing an image which could represent how fathers and children need to have close connected relationship. This concept was introduced in Chapter 5 and I give a brief description in the following section.

### **6.3.3 Coil of closeness and connectedness.**

The findings present the factors that impact and influence father-child relationships and in order to capture the active relationship of a child and father a

theory of closeness and connectedness is suggested. A coil is used as a visual mechanism to demonstrate how the life of a child, a father and a mother are placed within environments and relationships, refer Figure 5.1: *Coil of closeness and connectedness* for image. The data suggest that the way forward for fathers to be active in “becoming” and “being” parents lies in developing positive relationships, where the father is responsive, responsible and resourceful. To ensure that this is possible the father and child need to be close and connected. I have suggested the image of a “coil” to represent the systems and relationships that connect the child to the father. The coil represents the social areas of spaces through which the child journeys through life. The child is situated on the coil, observing, experiencing and responding to the familial, social and cultural systems in his environment. However, the coil is fluid and flexible, which allows for the child and the father to meet with changing circumstances as each lives their life together or separately. In order for the child to have a secure relationship, the least amount of movement is recommended. When the child experiences too much movement from impediments, that prevent a positive relationship occurring, then instability on the coil occurs. This movement impacts on the child’s feelings of safety and security, and the father likewise experiences disruptions. When all the elements on the coil inter-relate positively the coil is steady, and the relationship between father and child can flourish. In relation to the father’s position on the coil, he is seen as present as the parent of his child in equal positioning as the mother. If he can respond to the child in a positive manner by being a positive resource, by responding to the child and if he is responsible for his development the coil is steady and the child feels supported and loved. However, if barriers are placed in his way by familial or environmental factors, for example limited access, medical issues, legal prohibitions, work

commitments, or if he cannot respond or if he behaves in a manner that does not support the child, the coil becomes shaky. The unstable nature of the coil is a beneficial image to convey the idea that mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, family support workers, cultural and legal domains, need to work together, and separately, to ensure the stability of the father-child relationship. In doing so, the child will potentially feel secure, loved and cared for, and acquire a secure base from which they can establish multiple attachments (Bowlby, 1988), thus adding to their sense of wellbeing. In present times, with increased family separation, and more working parents, children need to have several secure bases from which they are supported and sustained. They move to domains outside the home – to nursery school, after-school, primary and post-primary school, and need to forge personal connections with people who, as Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests, are “crazy about them”.

The concept of the coil of closeness and connectedness builds on the attachment theory of Bowlby (1988.1969) and the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) to bring a new approach to assess children’s development and children are situated in relation to family and environment. It is a dynamic visual image, simple but effective, which can be used by children, fathers, mothers and services to evaluate relational connection to one another and to assess the blockages to inclusion. The approach adds to our literature on child development and brings a particular focus on relational connections. It has added a new concept of considering systems and attachment in a hybrid theoretical framework of “closeness and connectedness”. The coil represents the concept that the child of today is eventually and potentially the father of tomorrow.

## 6.4 Personal reflection

On reflecting on the research process I had to consider if there was anything I would have changed about the research study. The most significant part of the research that presented a problem was the recruitment of participants. It was discouraging to spend a year on recruitment and to meet many obstacles and disappointments. I reflected on my progress throughout that time and on several occasions I questioned if I was doing something wrong with my approach. I wondered if I was failing in recruiting because of my gender, perhaps men did not want to talk to a woman, and I had to consider that men are presumed to be not good at talking about personal details (Affleck *et al.*, 2012) so perhaps they did not want to talk about their own individual situations. The recruitment phase was a very challenging time for me but I persevered and eventually had six case studies. The key to recruiting successfully was using colleagues, already known to me, who were gate openers, they were able to introduce the study to four participants and support the men throughout, and two other participants had very good relationships with their further education centres and were willing to take part.

The next challenging part was when I started the interviews and they unfolded to be emotionally charged events. I believe, with reflection, that I was probably expecting the men to be guarded and not forthcoming about their lived experiences (Affleck *et al.*, 2012) so I was surprised at how open and emotional they were. However, I felt that I should not fall into pre-conceived ideas about male masculine roles and I was encouraged that they wanted to be open, talkative and share their stories. I felt I had to react in the moment, be a good listener, be non-judgemental and be supportive to them. My professional

experience of working with emotional situations supported me, and I consider that the interviews flowed and permitted the men to present a rich account of their lives. My persistence and patience in recruiting and eventually establishing a good relational atmosphere with the men was worthwhile in the end.

One part of the methodology which worked very well in the study was the use of Brock and Kleiber's (1994) structural analysis format to present the narratives in a structured manner. On reflection if I was doing a similar study again I would plan the question protocol in relation to the five areas recommended for analysing in the structural analysis approach. The areas of: personal profile, the incident, the result, the impact and reflection on the impact (Brock *et al.*, 1994) would be a good framework for compiling a questionnaire and conducting an interview. This framework would have given me a more structured format and furthermore, would have made the presentation of narratives easier and the analysis less time consuming. I will consider it again in the future.

A positive outcome of the research study was the effect of the process on the participants. I had set out with the aim of the study to gather information and I had planned that the study would do no harm to the participants but I did not plan that there could be positive outcomes for the participants. One example was Traveller Sean who, after a very emotional interview, thanked me for spending the time with him and giving him space to speak and told me he would say hello to me if we met again in the local town. I took this intention as a compliment as it would not be regular occurrence for a male Traveller to acknowledge a female settled person in an open public space in this manner. It demonstrated how cultural barriers can be removed with good communication. Another incident was Jim, father of two and aged 19, who asked for a fathers group to be formed as he

would like to be part of a support group to share experiences, for this young man to admit he could do with support was a significant step forward for him. There were two examples of men benefitting from viewing their fathers with a different attitude. Mark reflected on what he had said about his father and changed his previous critical attitude of his father to a more benevolent view by acknowledging that his father “was only doing his best”, and when I checked back with Daniel, who had issues with his father being absent throughout his childhood, he told me he had asked his father to attend his wedding, qualifying it with the statement “I want my children to know their grandfather”. These two acts of benevolence by the two men to their fathers, whom they had initially seen as causing harm towards them, was a constructive action for them to take. These incidents demonstrate that there were benefits for the men in being involved in the study, and were all the more noteworthy as they were not pre-planned as an objective of the methodology. The time given to men to express their emotions and tell their stories was a worthwhile exercise for all.

Another unplanned outcome was the impact of the research findings on my practice. The results made me question whether I had an egalitarian approach to fathers in my education centre. I had to consider was I as a head of an education centre reaching out to fathers of my students in an equal way as I did to mothers. I considered ways in which our centre could support students to be close and connected to their fathers. I reviewed our policies on our application procedures, the issuing of reports to parents, notifications to parents and our parent - teacher meetings. I changed the word parent to ‘mothers and fathers’ and ensured that wherever we previously only had a mother’s name we now asked for the father’s name as well. In the first term, after these changes, two students informed me



that their fathers who lived away from them wanted regular reports sent to them and they wanted to be regularly informed of any events in the centre. This was done to their fathers' satisfaction and the students started to share stories about their fathers more often than on previous occasions. However, I did have a student's place turned down by a mother when her son asked that his father be included as a contact person. This occurrence has made me aware about the dynamics within a family and qualify that any change in practice needs to be done within a cautionary and sensitive approach. Bringing my theory of relational connectedness to my practice was a case of reflecting on practice and eliciting change, however, change needs to be an evaluated process and reflection in action (Schon, 1984) is a necessary continuous component and one which I embrace as a sign of good teaching practice and now good research practice.

Overall, even though the research study had a slow start and at times the emotional aspect of the study needed much attention, the study went according to the planned methodology, and the study added to our previous little known knowledge of young fathers in Ireland.

### **6.5: Implications for practice, policy and research**

The rationale for the requirement of participants in the study to be early school leavers was to examine how father factors in their childhood had impacted on their education and if that education experience impacts on their attitude to education for their children. The findings from the study has brought attention to how influential a father is in a child's life, whether present or not, and how a child brings those experiences of a father in childhood into how they father their own children. It has placed an emphasis on the need for children and their fathers to

be supported to be an inclusive part of family support and education policy in the future. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1979) has been adopted in several policies in education and social care arenas for guiding professionals working with children and young people in Ireland. *Better outcomes brighter futures* (DCYA, 2014) is the principal policy, which uses a cross-departmental approach to supporting families, assessing and responding to children's needs. However, the policy document does not give credence to blockages in society that prevent or inhibit the child's growth (Downes *et al.*, 2006) such as legal and familial barriers. Fathers are seen today as part of a shared parenting role (Drew and Daverth, 2007) and therefore need to be included as equally as mothers in the education of their children and in support services where needed. Arising from the study, there are suggestion in areas of practice, policy and research that can be adapted to provide pathways to improve the role of fathers with their children. They are as follows:

### **6.5.1 Practice changes**

1. Education fields and family support services need to see the family as a triad situated on the *coil of closeness and connectedness* which can be a visual stimulant to supporting families, assessing blockages and ensuring all parties, fathers, mothers, and child, are involved in communicating their needs. The fostering of positive relationships and the well-being of all parties need to be a focus of attention.
2. Both fathers and mothers contact details should be on any form for activities or services that include the child. Application forms, progress reports need to be sent individually to both mothers and fathers. The term "parents" in all documents should be altered to include separate mention of "mothers and fathers".

3. The success of the *Youthreach* education programme (Solas, 2019) is based on the ethos of learner-centred education, where the curriculum responds to individual needs, and is a good exemplar of a pedagogical holistic approach to working with children who have suffered adverse childhood experiences. It is recommended as a method from which teachers in other sectors of education can use.

### **6.5.2 Policy amendments**

4. Teachers need to be trained to respond to mental health issues and to seek professional support to implement the *Wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice 2018-2023*. Teachers need an awareness of the negative impacts of adverse childhood experiences that result in school attendance and engagement and which impact on a child's well-being.
5. Unmarried registered fathers need to be given equal guardianship rights under the *Children and Family Relationship Act 2015* and recognise the child's father as a legal parent from birth in an egalitarian way as mothers are.
6. In reviewing the *Better outcomes brighter futures 2014-2020* policy document, aimed at young people under the age of 25 years, the specific mention of fathers needs to be included. Blockages to their inclusion need to be acknowledged in the policy document so that they can be addressed.
7. The review of the curriculum for *Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE)* is a welcome development, and early school leavers and frequently absent children and young people need to be targeted learners.

### **6.5.3 Research considerations.**

8. Researchers working on qualitative interviewing need specific training in emotional interviewing skills, care of the client and care of the researcher are paramount.
9. Qualitative interviewers should consider multiple models of analysis to ensure credibility and reliability to findings.

### **6.6 Limitations of the study**

The study was limited by the sample size and cannot therefore be taken as a generalisation of all young fathers' experiences. The study captured the views of the fathers in this particular sample of six fathers. Their stories were their own perceptions of events and experiences in childhood and fatherhood and were not corroborated by other individuals, such as mothers or professionals. The accounts of fatherhood gave examples of the factors that influenced a particular cohort of young men, early school leavers, as they took on the role of fathers. Nevertheless, the sample of men's narratives gave a trustworthy account of the experiences of these young fathers, which adds to our knowledge of the issues and factors that impact on young men becoming and being fathers.

### **6.7 Further research**

There is room for further discussion and testing of the hybrid theoretical framework of the coil of closeness and connectedness. Examining how components of the coil (e.g. schools, family support agencies, medical institutions, and education centres) support fathers in staying "close and connected" to their children would bring to the fore inclusive approaches that work, and highlight areas that need improvement. An examination of strategies, policies and practices of these agencies would provide a

view of the attitude to inclusion of all genders in the parenting position. This is an area of research I would like to pursue in the future.

Further themes that need to be examined include how agencies “reach out” to fathers; what strategies have been used which have been successful; and how improvements can be made within organisations. Without further examination of policy and practice, men will struggle with “being” fathers and children will miss out on their fathers’ positive involvement in their lives. Conversely, a comparative study of how mothers and their children are supported to be “close and connected” to their children within agencies’ approaches would add to the body of knowledge and provide comparative data. Also a similar research study, to this present study, with a focus on fathers’ impact on daughters’ education and wellbeing would add to the body of knowledge in relation to fathers’ influence on children.

To conclude: further research into the value of the conceptual framework of closeness and connectedness has the potential to influence policy and practice for children, their mothers and their fathers.

## **6.8 Final words on the study**

I came to this study with the positionality of the practitioner – an educator of children, adolescents and adults. By researching the experiences of young fathers, I have seen their lives through their eyes. I have looked back in anger at the poor childhood that some described to me, and have laughed at happy memories of how fathers and sons enjoy their time together. Being with a young man through a pregnancy and experiencing his joy and his sadness was a privilege and I am now more understanding and supportive of men’s difficulties in asserting their rights. I have sat in the space where stories were told of experiences that I would never have in my own

life. I expected to be a gatherer of experiences, a collector of stories, and an onlooker to someone else's life. I was all these things and more. What I did not expect to be was emotionally moved by the experiences. I did not expect the men to talk about the loss of love in childhood, and the impact of negative life experiences. The most significant impact on me was how the men shared their intimate details of sadness, fears and emotional upsets. I was shocked and dismayed at times, yet I revelled in the dedication and resolve of the men to stay close and connected to their children. From this sharing of experiences, I began to understand their battles, their challenges and their barriers to becoming and being fathers. I have aimed to give a trustworthy account of the men's experiences and I am confident that the thesis has highlighted the issues of young fathers who have been early school leavers, and has been presented in a manner that is fair to all parties. By highlighting the stories, I am hopeful that agencies will reach out to fathers and, in doing so, more fathers can be "close and connected" to their children.

To bring our final attention to connecting fathers and children together in supportive relational space I give the final words of the thesis to one young father in the study who said:

"You have to be part of your own child's growing up" (Daniel, 2018).

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**Appendix 1: Sample Photographs**

# ***Father Research Study Leaflet***

*You are invited to join the research study to gather and share stories of fathering.*

\*\*\*\*\*

**Would you like to share your experiences of the fathering role and what it is like for you to be a Dad?**

**Did you become a father before you were 24 years old?**

**Did you leave school before completing secondary or primary school?**

**If you would like to share your story of being a Dad please join a research study of fathers to tell your story.**

The sharing of your life story will be done through one to one interviews or may be done as part of a group activity with other fathers.

The study will ask questions about your childhood, your experiences of being fathered and how you have been or are now involved in your child's life.

The aim of the study is to investigate how fathers pass the values and customs of the fathering role from one generation to another.

*The main research question asks:*

**What are the fathering issues facing young men who have been early school leavers?**



**Please contact: Martina Osborne, 05991\*\*\*\*\* or 083 \*\*\*\*220 or leave your contact details on the back of this leaflet and I will contact you.**

**Appendix 2: *Father research study leaflet***



### **Will the study involve my child directly?**

It is not planned to directly include your child however your child will be referred to in the study and you might decide to include or share photographs or videos of your child as the study progresses. I will work together with you to ensure your child's identity is not revealed and nothing regarding your child will be included in the final research report without your permission.

Permission in writing from the custodial parent/guardian will be required in the event of your child being involved. The participation of your child will be monitored in order to ensure that s/he is happy to take part.

### **What is the purpose of the research study?**

The aim of the study is to discuss the impact of fathering throughout the generations. It is intended to give young men an opportunity to tell their story of fathering and to explore their own experiences of being fathered.

The research question is:

How do young fathers, who are early school leavers, perceive the inter-generational role of fathering?

### **Who will be taking part in the study?**

- Young men, in the age bracket of 18 to 24 and
- who have been early school leavers and
- who are fathers.

I will be making contact with 10 young fathers and work with two groups of 5 people.

### **Will the study involve my child directly?**

It is not planned to directly include your child however your child will be referred to in the study and you might decide to include or share photographs or videos of your child as the study progresses. I will work together with you to ensure your child's identity is not revealed and nothing regarding your child will be included in the final research report without your permission. Permission in writing from the custodial parent/guardian will be required in the event of your child being involved. The participation of your child will be monitored in order to ensure that s/he is happy to take part.



### **What are you asking me to do?**

You are being asked to take part in several meetings and workshops over a four month period with other young fathers. Each session will take up to 90 minutes and will take place in the Youthreach centre or at a local community centre at a convenient time for us all.

The group will work with myself and an artist to collect information that tells the story of your role as a father and which reflects on the role played by your father in your life.

This type of study is known as 'intergenerational' as it concerns people from different generations i.e. you, your child and your father.

To record this information, I will arrange group discussions, interviews and workshops. Our first meeting will be a time to discuss how we will work together to record your comments in a way that works best for you.



### **Is the information I give to you private and confidential?**

Personal details of your age and where you live will be kept confidential by the research team and stored separately from what is researched in the study. The information shared in the sessions will not be linked to your identity. Your identity will be given a pseudonym (pretend name) which means your responses are anonymised and not traced back to you. This means that your taking part in the study is confidential and your information shared is anonymous.

When in the group with other fathers you are asked to only share information which you are happy for others to know about and to be confidential yourself about sharing any information which is told to you by others in the group. At the first meeting we will discuss and agree together a set of 'ground rules' and at each meeting we will revisit these ground rules as a reminder of what we have agreed to share. You will be asked to sign an agreement that you understand the ground rules.

If you have information to share privately with me this can be arranged and the information shared will be anonymous and will only be used in the study if you are ok with it being included.

#### Important Note about Information Sharing:

The protection of children is very important to me therefore, if any issue comes to light during the study which suggests a child is at harm or at risk of being harmed I have a duty to report my concerns to the designated authorities. Also if information disclosed indicates criminal activity or intention the information will be passed onto the relevant appropriate authorities.

### **How will the information be recorded?**

The information will be collected through my recording of interviews by dictaphone or video and by my observations of the group working together. We will use different forms of art such as collage; writing; photography; verbal accounts or woodwork pieces which you are comfortable in using to communicate your thoughts and experiences.

Verbal conversations and interviews will be written and brought back to you for reading and approval. My interpretations of what is said and what is shown in art images will be discussed with you to make sure that I have understood your meanings. Anything you are not happy with will be taken out. The information that you have shared and which you agree can be included in the final study report will not be linked to your identity in any way.

### **What will happen to the information?**

The information from the study will be published as a thesis (a report book) as part of my Doctorate in Education. This thesis will be examined by my tutors in the University of Sheffield and afterwards it will be placed in their library and on the internet for public reading.

I will share the information from the study by publishing it in articles for journals, magazines, newsletters and other publications and I will use the study to highlight the needs of young fathers and their children by making presentations to family and education professionals.

### **Why do you want to share my information with others?**

Young fathers are not often asked for their opinions and views on fathering therefore this study will give you and other fathers the opportunity to share your views with one another and for those views to be presented to a public audience. It is hoped that this sharing will result in agencies, school professionals and support staff understanding the issues that affect fathers and their children.

### **Are there possible disadvantages or risks to taking part and will I come to any harm?**

At times it might be uncomfortable to reflect on life experiences during the project however the personal safety of each participant is very important to me and I will ensure that the research is conducted within an atmosphere of care and responsibility. It is your experience and your story which interests me. There are no right or wrong answers and you do not have to answer anything which makes you feel uncomfortable.

Throughout the study you and the other participants will have the opportunity to discuss any developments which may cause upset as they arise. If you feel you need further support the services of the counsellor on the Youthreach programme will be available to you and I will ensure that if extra personal care is needed I will direct you to the necessary supports.

### **If I am not happy with any part of the study can I withdraw?**



You can withdraw your consent to be part of the research study at any time and there is no problem if you decide to withdraw any information shared with me in the study.

**What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

In the event of the research study ending early all participants will be informed and information gathered up to that point will only be used if all participants agree, if not the data will be destroyed.

**What happens with the data after the study is completed?**

All original material collected will be kept securely in my possession in a locked cabinet and will not be linked to personal details. Personal information will be totally destroyed one year after publication of my thesis.

**Will I be able to contact you with any queries or concerns after the study is finished?**

When the study is finished I will contact you to ensure that you are okay after being involved in the project, if we need to discuss anything I will be available to you for support. You can contact me in person anytime at the training centre or by telephone as below, or if you would rather speak to someone else then I will make sure I have a list of contact numbers and organisations who you can contact instead.

***Thank you for taking the time to read this leaflet, if you have any queries please let me know. I attach a consent form for signing if you think you would like to take part in the research study.***

**Please note:**

*If you have any queries, complaints or concerns about the research study please contact me immediately at: 086 \*\*\*\*\*  
Martina Osborne 4<sup>th</sup> April 2016*

*If you feel that your query or complaint has not been dealt with appropriately you can contact my supervisor Dr Jools Page at the University of Sheffield at **j.m.page@sheffield.ac.uk** or you can contact the chairperson of the Ethical Review Committee at the University of Sheffield: Professor Daniel Goodley at **edu-ethics@sheffield.ac.uk***

**Thank You**

**Appendix 3: Research Information Booklet**



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

Downloaded: 16/05/2016  
Approved: 16/05/2016

Martina Osborne  
Registration number: 130235901  
School of Education  
Programme: Doctorate of Education EdD

Dear Martina

**PROJECT TITLE:** The inter-generational effects of fathering; how young fathers, who are early school leavers, perceive the fathering role

**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 006730

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 16/05/2016 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review

- University research ethics application form 006730 (dated 05/05/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1013752 version 2 (04/01/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1016993 version 1 (07/04/2016).
- Participant consent form 1013753 version 1 (25/11/2015).
- Participant consent form 1013754 version 1 (25/11/2015).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation, please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

Professor Daniel Goodley  
Ethics Administrator  
School of Education

#### ***Appendix: 4: Ethics Approval***

c/o Youthreach XXXXX,  
Tullow Road,  
Carlow.

29<sup>th</sup> October 2015

Dear XXXXXX,

As you may be aware I am currently pursuing a Doctorate in Education through Sheffield University. I have successfully completed two years theory and am now embarking on my research study.

I am writing to you to request permission to initiate a research study with current and former students of Youthreach XXXXXX as I am aiming to do a work based thesis that is of value to my practice. I intend to recruit up to 5 young men who are fathers and who are either currently Youthreach students or who have been students in the last three years.

The study will have as its focus the intergenerational effects of the fathering role on outcomes for children. Research indicates that a contributory reason for young people to become early school leavers is the absence or non-involvement of fathers in a child's life. I therefore intend to explore how young fathers, who are themselves early school leavers, father their children. I will be asking the research question: how has the relationship with your father influenced how you parent your child? The aim of the study is to give participants the opportunity to consider how past family behaviours influence their own behaviours and in turn may affect future outcomes for their children.

The students will be given information sheets on the study and will be advised that they can withdraw from the research study at any time. Only data that is approved by the participants will be analysed and included in the study and participants' anonymity will be safeguarded.

I kindly request your permission to proceed with approaching the identified participants and to use known facts about the Youthreach programme and XXXXXXXXXX ETB's role with early school leavers in my research study.

I will follow up this request by phone call within the next few days to clarify any queries you may have.

Yours sincerely,

---

Martina Osborne

**Appendix 5: Permission application to CE of \*\*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\*\* Education and Training Board**

Permission from CE for research study  
By email on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2015

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**From:** \*\*\*\*\* <\*\*\*\*\*@\*\*\*\*\*etb.ie>  
**To:** Martina Osborne <Youthreach\*\*\*\*\*@yahoo.com>  
**Sent:** Monday, 9 November 2015, 13:36:16  
**Subject:** research

Hi Martina

Thanks for your letter of 29 October and your follow-up call. Sorry for delay in replying, I was on leave last week.

It is good to hear that you are making such good progress with your doctoral studies – I know that it takes a lot of commitment and persistence, so well done on getting this far!

The study you propose is very interesting, and I am sure it will produce important insights into the influence of fathers on children's educational outcomes.

I am prepared to give permission for you to approach the identified participants subject to the following conditions:

- Participants will be provided with information about the study and will give their signed consent (if they are under 18 years old, parents' consent will also be required)
- Participation is voluntary and a participant may withdraw at any time
- Participants will not be identified in any way in the study – any information they provide will be treated as confidential and will be anonymised
- You may include known facts about \*\*\*\*\* & \*\*\*\*\* ETB's role with early school leavers and the Youthreach programme in the study
- The conduct of the research will not interfere either with the learning of students or with the performance of your professional role.

I wish you well with the research and I would be very interested in reading your findings when you have completed the study.

With kind regards  
\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*

**Chief Executive**  
**\*\*\*\* & \*\*\*\* Education & Training Board**  
**Telephone: \*\*\*\*\***

**Appendix 6: Permission approval by CE of \*\*\*\* & \*\*\*\* ETB**

**17th March 2016,**

Dear \*\*\*\*\*,

I am grateful for your granting of permission to approach young people who have attended the Youthreach programme of \*\*\*\*\* Education & Training Board for possible inclusion in my research study for my EdD. I am currently applying for ethical approval and I need to clarify with you the understanding of your statement: "that any information will be treated as confidential and will be anonymised" as stated in your email of the 9th November 2015.

My intention to conduct the research study will be with the following understandings:

**Confidentiality:**

Confidentiality of identity means not revealing the real names of people or places.

Confidentiality of information means that no personal data will be linked to any information given.

Confidentiality of data means that I will ensure that my understanding and interpretation of data given by participants is accurate and I will in consultation with participants edit their contribution as is needed to ensure it conforms to their satisfaction. Only data that they are happy with will be retained for publication in my thesis; other possible publications and for use in public presentations.

Participants will be given full information regarding the publicity of the research data and that every effort will be made to ensure that no information is linked to any person involved or mentioned in the course of the research study.

It will also be made clear that confidentiality can be compromised in focus groups by participants themselves and this potential will be explained to them. They will be asked to only give information which they are happy to share and that confidentiality within the group is the responsibility of each participant.

**Anonymity**

Anonymity of information and personal data will be safeguarded by ensuring that informants are given pseudonyms from the start of the research study; that no information given will be linked to identifiable person or persons; ages of respondents will be given by year of birth only and precise geographical location will not be divulged in the study.

Personal data, e.g. contact names and consent forms, will be kept safely and separately from the research data and all data will be kept on an encrypted laptop which I alone will have access to.

**Important Note:** The protection and safeguarding of children overrides all aspects of the research. Therefore, the only time when confidentiality and anonymity could be compromised would be if an issue came to light during the study which suggested a child was at harm or at risk of being harmed. If this happened then I would have a duty to report such concerns to the designated authorities and comply with them as appropriate.

I would be grateful if you could confirm in writing that the above is an agreeable understanding of the terms 'confidentiality and anonymity'. I am available to discuss the matter with you at your convenience if you require any clarification.

I appreciate you giving your time to my request.

Kind regards,

---

Martina Osborne; EdD Candidate; Sheffield University.

***Appendix 7: Clarification of confidentiality and anonymity***

**Ethical Statement from Education Director \*\*\*\* & \*\*\*\*\* Education and Training Board**

31st March 2016, 4:31 PM

Ethical Statement from Education Director

Dear Martina

The ethical statement which you provided is broadly in line with \*\*\*\* & \*\*\*\*\* Education and Training Board's requirements in respect of research projects.

Please note the following:

- In line with good practice in circumstances where parental consent is required it should be sought in writing.
- All other consents should be sought in writing.
- Data used should be only that which is agreed by participants and completely anonymised.
- Focus groups members should be requested to sign confidentiality agreements indicating their understanding of requirements.
- Personal data should be destroyed following completion of research and participants should be given the timeframe within which this will occur.

Please note that while \*\*\*\* & \*\*\*\*\* Education and Training Board is facilitative of your request to carry out research it places full responsibility for the ethical conduct of such research on you as the researcher.

I trust the above will be of assistance and I wish you well with your studies

Yours sincerely,

\*\*\*\*\*

Education Officer \*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\* Education and Training Board

***Appendix 8: Confirmation of approval from Director of Education***

**Title of Project:** The inter-generational effects of fathering; how young fathers, who are early school leavers, perceive the fathering role.

**Name of Researcher:** Martina Osborne  
Participant Identification Number for this project: TBA

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/letter  yes  no  
(delete as applicable) dated 4<sup>th</sup> April 2016 for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. The contact number of the lead researcher is 059\*\*\*\*\* or 086\*\*\*\*\* if I wish to make contact for any reason.

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

4. I agree to take part in the above research project.  yes  no

**Name of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
(or legal representative)

**Name of person taking consent** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
(if different from lead researcher)  
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

**Lead Researcher** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

**Copies:**

A copy of this consent form is for you and a copy will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by Martina Osborne as chief researcher.

**From:** Erik Hesse, University of California, Berkeley.

**To:** MMsobrne1@sheffield.ac.uk

Attachments

Mon, 21 Nov 2016, 01:15

Dear Ms. Osborne,

I am Professor Erik Hesse, Mary Main's husband and collaborator and co-author on the system of AAI analysis.

Thank you for your interest in using the AAI in your research. If you write to Professor Bahm at the address I copied above she will send you the AAI protocol.

I am also attaching a copy of the third edition of my comprehensive chapter on the AAI and its applications. You might want to write to me again after you have read it. (Please don't give out my e-mail address as you can imagine what would happen!)

Your research sounds very interesting but I fear that unless you use the AAI in a traditional way, i.e., collecting AAI's and scoring and classifying them or having it done by someone certified to do so, you will introduce confusion into your study and it will not be easy to draw clear conclusions from your results.

The AAI is a highly validated instrument (see e.g., van IJzendoorn, 1995) and to use it in the context and the way in you are proposing (at least as I read it) could lead to real complications and confusions. Once you use the AAI in an altered form or derive conclusions about your results that are not based on formal classification, you will lose all the validity correlates that go with it.

Please read my chapter and write to me again if you still feel you see a way to productively integrate it into your research. Again the only way I think it would be of use to you would be if you administered it conventionally, had it scored and classified by a certified coder and looked for correlates of attachment status with other outcomes of your study.

Best,

Erik Hesse

**Dear Martina,**

I wish you good luck with your work. There is far too little research on fathers even in the attachment domain.

We will welcome you at an AAI training sometime in the future.

Best,

Erik

Berkeley University of California, Berkeley.

**Appendix 10:** Prof. Erik Hesse Adult Attachment Interview: emails November 2016



## **Participant Questionnaire Protocol**

Welcome and Thank you for taking part in this research study.

**Tell me about yourself, your childhood, your education experience and your family.** Who were you close to? (Bowlby, Bronfenbrenner)

**Tell me about your family you grew up in.** Who did you live with? Where did you live?

What was your childhood experience of being fathered? What memories have you of your dad?

Did you live with your Dad? How would you describe your relationship with your Dad? (Bowlby)

How was your dad 'involved' in your childhood? How did your Dad spend time with you? Any other memories?

Was your Dad accessible to you?

Were there other people to whom you had a good relationship or received support growing up?

(Bowlby, Bronfenbrenner)

**What was your educational experience?** Primary, post-primary and further education? (in reference to Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

How many schools did you attend? When did you leave school? Why did you leave school?

**Tell me about your own current family story.** What has the journey to becoming a father been like for you? (in reference to Bowlby, 1968, Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

What age did you first become a Dad? What age is your child? Do you live with him/her?

What has been your involvement with your child/ren? How do you spend time with your child?

What do you like about being a Dad? Is there anything you have found challenging about being a Dad?

Is there anything you would like to be different?

**What childhood experiences with/without your father have influenced how you father your own children?** (in reference to Bowlby, 1968)

Has your education experience influenced your attitude towards education for yourself and for your children? (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

**Summarising your role as a father:** is there anything you would do differently?

Is there anything you would have liked your Dad to have done differently?

**Overall:** What does it **take** to be a father? (referring to supports in systems, Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

What does it **mean** to be a father? (referring to developing close relationships, Bowlby, 1968)

It is expected that the answers here will reflect the experiences of being fathered in childhood and how that experience has impacted on the values and expectations they have on becoming a father.

**Finally: Message in a bottle.**

If you were to talk or send a message **to your Dad** today what would you say to him?

If you were to talk or send a message **to your child** today what would you say to him/her?

Is there anything you would like to add or to retract from what you have said?

If you find that after this interview you need to speak further about any of the issues raised please contact me or your support person in your organisation and we can talk with you in confidence or direct you to other supports.

Thank you for your input into the research study.

**Appendix 11: Participant Questionnaire Protocol**

