DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

THE VOICE OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AT THE EDGE OF SCHOOLING: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

MARIA IACOVOU

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A Dissertation Submitted to the University of Cyprus in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The present doctoral dissertation was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Cyprus. It is a product of original work of my own, unless otherwise mentioned through references, notes, or any other statements.

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ABSTRACT

Phenomena like truancy indicate that education is not understood as being inherently good by every student. Consequently, within an Inclusive Education perspective, the development of more welcoming educational practices is crucial. With students as active participants, this study set out to address the phenomenon of truancy, by giving voice to a doubly marginalised group of participants, i.e. girls at a Cypriot VET school.

The research followed a qualitative, ethnographic approach. The site was the VET school where I was working as a teacher. Fieldwork gradually converged to a class of ten girls, whom I shadowed throughout the three years of their upper secondary studies. Research questions involved the girls' school experiences, patterns of resistance, factors triggering truancy and their calculation of the costs and benefits of their decision to stay out of class/school.

Findings indicate that the social domain was a heavy determinant of school experience and that VET reputation was a determinant of the girls' vocational identities**.** Factors affecting this reputation were stereotypes, which were willingly carried by the girls in their *virtual handbags*.

Findings further suggest that attributing truancy to endogenous problems of the student is insufficient; the school's culture was such that it worked as a mechanism that used truancy to ensure its survival. This is an aspect which points to an unhealthiness and anti-romanticisation of education. *A culture of exchanging commodities was revealed, which bears comparison to economic notions.* More specifically, negotiating over their absences was for the girls a cost and benefit calculation, since leniency over excess absences was a desirable trade-off for choosing a specific vocational study area, even if that was not the one they were interested in to begin with. *This seems to have been a defining aspect in triggering feelings of meaninglessness over education, which was in turn one of the triggers of truancy*. The collateral damages seemed to be massive with regard to the girls' understanding of the purpose of education, the perpetuation of negative VET reputation and the reproduction of their vocational identities.

The idea of the 'virtual handbag' has been used to bring together the concepts and ideas which synthesise the thesis of this dissertation; the girls carried in their virtual handbags and utilised resources given to them in order to shape their own actions, but these resources were often unhealthy. The girls' subsequent interchange of the resources given to them was equally unhealthy, not always as a form of resistance, but as an eager reciprocation of the commodities been given to them. *This was a dangerous form of pyrrhic victory; the girls were particularly creative agents through their cost and benefit calculations and believed that they were in a win-win situation, but what they managed to do instead, was to reproduce social structures.*

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Despite the gloomy picture, the findings are an *indication of the importance of longer lasting ethnographic research undertaken by teachers-researchers*, as a method of delving into the underpinnings of students' identity formation. In this process, *teacher training is vital*. Moreover, *further focusing on students' voice, especially of marginalised groups*, is proposed to be a powerful future research step for the development of more inclusive understandings and interventions to truancy.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Φαινόμενα όπως οι αδικαιολόγητες σχολικές απουσίες (ΑΣΑ) δείχνουν ότι η εκπαίδευση δε θεωρείται από κάθε μαθητή/τρια ως εγγενώς καλή. Κατά συνέπεια, σε ένα πλαίσιο δημοκρατικής, ενιαίας εκπαίδευσης, είναι απαραίτητη η ανάπτυξη πιο φιλόξενων εκπαιδευτικών δομών. Με μαθητές ως ενεργούς συμμετέχοντες, αυτή η έρευνα μελέτησε το φαινόμενο των ΑΣΑ, δίνοντας φωνή σε μια διπλά περιθωριοποιημένη ομάδα συμμετεχόντων, δηλαδή σε κορίτσια μιας Κυπριακής Τεχνικής και Επαγγελματικής Σχολής Εκπαίδευσης και Κατάρτισης (ΤΕΣΕΚ).

Η έρευνα ακολούθησε ποιοτική, εθνογραφική προσέγγιση. Η έρευνα διεξήχθη σε μια ΤΕΣΕΚ όπου δούλευα ως καθηγήτρια. Η έρευνα συνέκλινε σταδιακά σε μια τάξη δέκα κοριτσιών, τις οποίες ακολούθησα στενά κατά τη διάρκεια των τριών ετών της εκπαίδευσης και κατάρτισής τους. Οι ερευνητικές ερωτήσεις περιελάμβαναν τις σχολικές εμπειρίες των κοριτσιών, τα πρότυπα αντίστασής τους, τους παράγοντες που προκαλούν τις αδικαιολόγητες σχολικές απουσίες και το πώς αντιλαμβάνονται το κόστος και τα οφέλη της απόφασής τους να παραμείνουν εκτός τάξης/σχολείου.

Τα ευρήματα ανέδειξαν ότι ο κοινωνικός τομέας ήταν καθοριστικός για τη διαμόρφωση της σχολικής εμπειρίας των συμμετεχόντων και ότι η φήμη των ΤΕΣΕΚ ήταν καθοριστική για τη διαμόρφωση της ταυτότητας των κοριτσιών. Σημαντικοί παράγοντες που επηρέασαν αυτή τη φήμη ήταν τα διάφορα στερεότυπα της τοπικής κοινωνίας, τα οποία μεταφέρονταν πρόθυμα από τα κορίτσια, ωσάν να βρίσκονταν μέσα σε εικονικές σχολικές τσάντες.

Το να αποδίδονται οι ΑΣΑ σε ενδογενή προβλήματα των μαθητών είναι τουλάχιστον ανεπαρκές, αφού η κουλτούρα του σχολείου ήταν τέτοια που λειτούργησε ως μηχανισμός που χρησιμοποιούσε τις αδικαιολόγητες σχολικές απουσίες για να εξασφαλίσει την επιβίωση συγκεκριμένων ειδικοτήτων. Το εύρημα αυτό αναδεικνύει μια ανθυγιεινότητα και αντι-ρομαντικοποίηση της εκπαίδευσης. Τα ερευνητικά αποτελέσματα ανέδειξαν ουσιαστικά μια κουλτούρα ανταλλαγής αγαθών, η οποία μπορεί να συγκριθεί με οικονομικούς όρους. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, τα κορίτσια διαπραγματεύονταν τις αδικαιολόγητες απουσίες τους, καθώς η επιείκεια όσον αφορά τις υπερβολικές ΑΣΑ ήταν για αυτές ένα επιθυμητό αντιστάθμισμα, με αντάλλαγμα την επιλογή εκ μέρους τους συγκεκριμένων ειδικοτήτων της ΤΕΣΕΚ, ακόμα κι αν δεν ήταν αυτές που πραγματικά τις ενδιέφεραν. Αυτό φαίνεται να ήταν μια καθοριστική πτυχή θεώρησης της μόρφωσής τους ως ανούσιας, η οποία με τη σειρά της ήταν μια από τις αιτίες των ΑΣΑ. Οι παράπλευρες ζημίες ήταν τεράστιες όσον αφορά το πώς τα κορίτσια αντιλαμβάνονταν το σκοπό της εκπαίδευσης, τη διαιώνιση της αρνητικής φήμης των ΤΕΣΕΚ και την αναπαραγωγή των ίδιων των εκπαιδευτικών τους ταυτοτήτων.

Η ιδέα της ‘εικονκής τσάντας’ χρησιμοποιήθηκε για να συγκεντρώσει τις έννοιες και τις ιδέες που συνθέτουν τα κύρια ευρήματα αυτής της διατριβής: τα κορίτσια, ως δρώντα υποκείμενα, κουβαλούσν μέσα στις εικονικές τους τσάντες και χρησιμοποιούσαν αγαθά που τους δόθηκαν για να διαμορφώσουν

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τις δικές τους πράξεις, αλλά αυτά τα αγαθά ήταν συχνά ανθυγιεινά. Το επακόλουθο αντάλλαγμα ήταν εξίσου ανθυγιεινό, όχι πάντα ως μορφή αντίστασης, αλλά κυρίως ως μια επιθυμητή ανταπόδοση των αγαθών που τους δόθηκαν. Αυτή ήταν μια επικίνδυνη μορφή Πύρρειας Νίκης: τα κορίτσια ήταν ιδιαίτερα δημιουργικά υποκείμενα μέσω των υπολογισμών τους και πίστευαν ότι βρίσκονταν σε μια κατάσταση αμοιβαίου όφελους, αλλά αυτό που κατάφεραν να κάνουν στην πραγματικότητα ήταν να αναπαραγάγουν τις κοινωνικές δομές.

Παρά τη ζοφερή εικόνα, τα ερευνητικά αποτελέσματα είναι μια ένδειξη της σημασίας μακροχρόνιων εθνογραφικών ερευνών από καθηγητές-ερευνητές, ως μια μέθοδος διερεύνησης των βασικών στοιχείων ανάπτυξης της ταυτότητας των μαθητών/τριών. Προκειμένου να γίνει αυτό, η κατάρτιση των εκπαιδευτικών είναι ζωτικής σημασίας. Επιπλέον, η περαιτέρω εστίαση στη φωνή των μαθητών/τριών, ειδικά των περιθωριοποιημένων ομάδων, προτείνεται να αποτελέσει ένα ισχυρό μελλοντικό ερευνητικό βήμα για την ανάπτυξη πιο δημοκρατικών και δίκαιων παρεμβάσεων όσον αφορά το χειρισμό των ΑΣΑ.

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Throughout the years of my postgraduate studies, I have noticed a remarkable pattern in my reaction when looking back at previous projects which I have undertaken; I always find numerous ways in which I could have done things better. This dissertation is not an exception to that rule. To me this is an indisputable proof of the fact that I continue to grow and to mature. Which, in turn, is an indisputable proof of the invaluable grant offered by my teachers and my critical friends at the University of Cyprus in such a consistent way through the years, namely the means to keep learning. Indeed, my studies at the University of Cyprus have greatly contributed to my insatiable thirst for lifelong learning and improvement, both on a personal as well as on a professional level. For that I am grateful to my teachers, Dr Helen Phtiaka and Dr Simoni Symeonidou, as well as to my critical friend, Dr Eleni Damianidou. I thank all three of them for leading the field of Inclusive Education by example, that way teaching me that if we want to undertake the challenge of facilitating Inclusion, we must first be willing to challenge ourselves.

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Dedicated…

to the girl with the captivating smile…

to the boy who never ceases to amaze me (and never ceases to talk)…

to my cycling companion and loving partner, who has selflessly waited for me to climb the Ventoux and has taught me the value of believing in myself…

to the woman who has selflessly been letting me stand on her shoulders for 39 years, in order to look further…

… thank you all.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

An important underpinning of traditional educational ideas is that education "is an attempt to transfer bodies of ideas from one group of society to another, more ignorant group of society. This in itself is viewed as axiomatic, and also part of the 'goodness' of education" (Corrigan, 1979, p.19). Education is thus widely - and often unquestionably - considered as being inherently good, and that everyone should have as much of it as possible (ibid). But contrary to popular belief, the concept of education may not necessarily be seen as inherently good by every student (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley & Goodlad, 2004); the lack of it, in forms such as disengagement of students from the learning process, unauthorised absences from class or school, low grades, dropouts etc., is considered to be a form of challenging behaviour, because it is a deviation from the commonly accepted norm of 'getting as much of it as possible'. It is also costly for governments, thus a behaviour which needs to be avoided or dealt with promptly and effectively. According to OECD truancy is expensive, as a non-attender is more likely to become and remain a burden to a country's benefit system than a successful student (McCormack, 2005). As a consequence, in some educational systems police is involved for dealing with unauthorised absences (Lever, 2011) and numerous intervention programs are being developed, aimed at 'at risk' students (Zyngier 2011).

Based on the above realisations, I will now elaborate on the significance of this research, as well as its purpose and objectives. I will also list the research questions and describe the outline which I followed for the written account of this study.

1.1 Significance of research

Since, unlike the commonly held belief to the contrary, the concept of education may not necessarily be seen as inherently good by every student, then its meaning need not be perceived as common sense and the lack of critical reflection on its nature and purpose is to be avoided. Lack of education can take many forms, out of which I chose to study the one of low attendance and, more specifically, unauthorised absences from class or school. I consider this to be an important subject for educational research to focus on, because it deals with students

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who are, as I call it, 'at the edge of schooling', that is, at the verge of dropping out. I am particularly interested in understanding the factors which bring the students to this edge, as well as the factors which may finally push (or pull) them out or draw them back in. Recent research data show that the percentage of early school leavers in Cyprus has increased from 5.2% in 2015 to 8.5% in 2017 (Korelli, Kyriacou-Liveri & Theocharous, 2019). Although this figure is still within the national target of 10% and lower than the EU average of 10.6% in 2017 (ibid), it is timely to focus on the students who are on the verge of dropping out. It is believed that the reason Cyprus is below the EU average of early school leavers is because of measures of focusing on restructuring the education system, upgrading vocational education, modernising the curricula and adopting measures for facilitating the integration of students 'at risk' in the school system (ibid). I believe that focusing on these students' voice can inform educators and other stakeholders as to what changes are necessary in order to decrease the now increasing percentage of early school leavers. It is the increase which should be worrisome, in my opinion, not the fact that we are currently under the EU average.

Furthermore, at the Technical and Vocational school where I had been working as a Physics teacher for eight years, there has been great concern regarding the increasing amount of students who miss their classes ('play truant'); the concern was amplified after two incidents: the first was an incident where a student stabbed another student, with the confrontation taking place at a time when they were both supposed to be in class and both students had a record of very low attendance. The second was an incident where a student beat two teachers, again with the incident taking place when he was supposed to be in class. Consequently, because of being committed to Inclusive Education, I believe that a further consideration of this subject is not only crucial for the development of more welcoming, humane and just educational practices for *all* students, but at the same time it is challenging to me personally, as well as meaningful and timely for the educational context where I work.

Finally, there has been an upsurge in the implications of involving children and young people as active participants in educational research (Messiou & Hope, 2015; Beaton, 2014), however this kind of research seems to be limited in the Cypriot educational context regarding adolescents at the edge of schooling. This is even more so when it comes to focusing on the voices of doubly marginalised groups of participants, such as girl students at a Cypriot VET school. Therefore, I believe that this research can contribute to the current state of knowledge

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in the field, in order to develop critical awareness, both for the teachers as well as other educational stakeholders, on the role of the educational system in the marginalisation of these students. As I see it, knowledge has the ability to bring about meaningful changes in the way we see both ourselves as well as the world around us. In qualitative research, which I followed for the purpose of this study, this process is synergistic, a characteristic which I consider to be of great importance in the process of trying to bring about meaningful changes in the world around us. As Graue & Walsh (1998) eloquently describe:

> …the social negotiation of knowledge is synergistic; that is, the total yield is more than the sum of individual contributions. This makes… (us) more broadly and critically informed (p. 86).

1.2 Purpose and objective of research

Low school attendance has been a widely discussed phenomenon in the educational world over time (McCormack 2005, Brown 1984, Corrigan 1979). This study sets out to address and critically examine the issue of truancy through the standpoints and voices of students themselves and converges to girl participants studying at a Cypriot VET school. The research aims to reflect on the possible role of the specific educational context in constructing and/or sustaining the exclusion of already marginalised by the Cypriot society VET students. In the same way that a lack of critical reflection of this kind can have crucial negative implications for inclusive practice, the presence of critical awareness comprises an honest attempt in creating more welcoming, just and humane educational systems.

In a discussion with a boy student during the first year of fieldwork (before I converged only to girl participants), he openly explained the reason he 'gave up' as being due to the fact that:

> **Student (year 1)**: /…/ the Ministry (of Education) considers us to be numbers; I am not a number (personal communication, May 4, 2015).

What are the characteristics of an educational system in which there is a necessity for a human being to clarify his human value? What is our role, as teachers, in such an educational system? The student was staring at me while speaking calmly, yet his words still echo in my ears as a scream. I couldn't stop myself from feeling guilty. In my opinion, any attempt to contribute to a more just and humane educational system can only be considered to be honest and genuine if

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the researcher first and foremost tries to be self-critical as well as ready to challenge their current knowledge and beliefs. Moreover, any kind of critical reflection must be *coupled to students' voices and perspectives*; students obviously want to be listened to and want to be taken seriously, as every human being does. In a context where there is a necessity for even one student to state that she/he is not a number, not only do I hold myself responsible, but I also consider it to be my duty to listen to them carefully, to say the least.

In this context of always considering the student as the center of every educational concept and praxis, the purpose of the research was to unravel the standpoints and voices of a commonly marginalised and excluded group of students, in a commonly marginalised type of school in the Cypriot society. Privileging the point of view of these least advantaged students, through their critique and participation, not only has the ability to empower students, but at the same time, as an objective, can raise *critical awareness* on the role of the specific educational context on the creation of truancy and 'at-risk' students. Students for which education is, obviously, not inherently good.

1.3 Research questions

The questions that researchers ask usually take two forms – descriptive and explanatory (Hammersley, 2014). These two forms of questions are usually coupled because producing explanations depends on descriptions. Descriptive questions are about what happens in specific types of situations, what participants believe, how they act etc. whereas explanatory questions try to determine why some events occurred, why a participant displays some behaviour etc. (ibid). In relation to the purpose and objective of this study and my priority of actively listening to students' voices and perspectives, the following research questions were chosen:

1. How do girl students define and structure their school experience?
2. How do they define the patterns of resistance they employ to oppose to the hegemony of the dominant order in the school?
3. How do they calculate their decision to stay out of class/school?

   3a. What processes, according to them, operate within the school which push them out of class/school?

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3b. What processes, according to them, operate outside the school which pull them out of class/school?

4. What are, for them, the costs and benefits of their decision to stay out of class/school?

1.4 Outline of the dissertation

In the literature review chapter, important theoretical perspectives of notions and concepts related to the research are provided, as well as the theoretical influences on the research design.

In the Methodology chapter, I offer an extensive description of the research method, which is an Ethnography, the setting, time and participant selection, the participants' profiles, research tools, data collection strategies and trustworthiness, data analysis methods, as well as some ethical considerations and dilemmas, *including a theoretical critique of pilot studies*.

The results of the research follow, along with a discussion, suggestions, limitations of the research, as well as conclusions. The appendix contains samples of documents which were important during the research, such as the interview protocol. The extensive bibliography is not a sign of profound knowledge. Rather, it has been an honest attempt to familiarise myself with the subject of this study, as well as trigger critical thinking and ideas for future research.

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CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review chapter firstly presents the theoretical influences on the research design and analysis. I then provide some theoretical perspectives concerning students' voices, their school experience with a focus on gender identities, experience of VET education, low school attendance and truancy. This analysis is an attempt to set a firmer theoretical framework, as well as to critically reflect on the ways low school attendance and unauthorised absences are defined and dealt with in traditional educational contexts. The implications to inclusive practice, types of truancy, as well as the decision and outcomes of staying out of class/school are then discussed. Finally, some approaches to low attendance and truancy are discussed (systems theory and salutogenesis, theory of deviance, sub-cultures, negative formation, resistance), as well as interventions to low attendance. A brief summary of the chapter is also provided in the end.

2.1 Theories and models which influenced the research design and analysis

In this section I present the theories and models which have ideologically influenced the research design. These are: Critical Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Reproduction Theory – Resistance Theory - Structuration Theory, as well as the Social Model of Disability. The use of Social Exchange Theory in the initial research design and the formulation of research questions have been influenced by its basic underpinning of considering individuals as decision makers. Relevant to this, is Critical Pedagogy's focus on critical agency, as well as Structuration Theory's focus on the degree of agency within social structures. It is perhaps important to note that in the course of a research, the researcher may seek further theories which elaborate or match his/her findings, in order to better analyse and explain the phenomenon under study (Le Compte and Preissle, 1993). One such theory, the study and use of which emerged in the course of the research for me, has been Structuration Theory.

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2.1.1 Critical Theory

Critical theory was developed in Germany after World War I by theorists of the Frankfurt School, as a neo-Marxist reaction to the inefficacy of the then current thinking to deal with social problems (Horkheimer, in Giorgallas, 2012; Gutek, 2004; Le Compte and Preissle,1993; Apple, 1979). The use of the principles of critical theory in education, that is, critical pedagogy (Giorgallas, 2012, McLaren, 1995; Apple, 1979), have influenced the research design. Critical pedagogy is:

> an attempt to be discerning and attentive to those places and practices in which social agency has been denied and produced... [it is an attempt] to examine the various ways in which classrooms too often function as modes of social, political and cultural reproduction, particularly when the goals of education are defined through the promise of economic growth, job training, and mathematical utility... critical pedagogy... provides a range of critiques against a traditional pedagogy operating under the sway of technical mastery, instrumental logic, and various other fundamentalisms that acquire their authority by erasing any trace of subaltern histories, class struggles, and racial and gender inequalities and injustices (Giroux, 2011, p.3, 5).

Moreover, it is important to point out that critical pedagogy attempts to transform students and teachers into critical agents (Liasidou, 2012) rather than consumers of knowledge (Giroux 2009; 1997). As Giroux (2011) eloquently puts it:

> (C)ritical pedagogy becomes a project that stresses the need for teachers and students to actively transform knowledge rather than simply consume it. At the same time, I believe *it is crucial for educators not only to connect classroom knowledge to the experiences, histories and resources that students bring to the classroom but also to link such knowledge to the goal of furthering their capacities to be critical agents* who are responsive to moral and political problems of their time and recognise the importance of organized collective struggles. At its most ambitious, the overarching narrative in this discourse is to educate students to lead a meaningful life, learn how to hold power and authority accountable, and develop the skills, knowledge, and courage to challenge commonsense assumptions while being willing to struggle for a more socially just world. In this view, it is necessary for critical pedagogy to be rooted in a project that is tied to the cultivation of an informed, critical citizenry capable of participating and governing in a democratic society. As such, it aims at enabling rather than subverting the potential of a democratic culture (p.7, my emphasis).

It is clear from the above that the underpinnings of this theoretical approach concerning its focus on students' experience and on their transformation into critical agents who do not accept education at face value, is consistent with the objective of the proposed research, which is to focus on students' voice in order to raise *critical awareness* on the role of the specific educational context on the creation/sustaining of the phenomenon of truancy and 'at-risk'

students. Such studies have the capacity not only to work towards the transformation of students themselves into critical agents but also of teachers, stakeholders and other readers of such research. A final note I would like to make is that structuration theory (see section 2.4.5.3) and critical pedagogy can perhaps be viewed as being complementary, according to literature review. Structuration theory needed to come above reproduction and resistance theories in order to show that structures need not be perceived as imposing forces operating beyond students' control; rather, students can be viewed as possessing the power to influence their schooling experience as agents (Russell, 2011). A similar emphasis of agency is also present in critical theory.

2.1.2 Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory emerged in the 1960s within family sciences, as an approach which applied economic principles to social relationships. It explains how individuals interact within groups (Pretsch and Ehrhardt-Madapathi, 2018). This theory suggests that social behaviour results from a process of exchange based on maximising personal benefits and minimising personal disadvantages (Miller, 2013; Schwimmer, 1977). A basic assumption of this theory is that individuals engage rationally in calculations of costs and benefits in social exchanges, that is, they exist both as rational actors and as reactors. Social exchange theory largely attends to issues of decision making, and considers individuals as agents in their decision making (Chibucos, Randall and Weis, 2005), in tune with critical theory and structuration theory.

As an example, Pretsch and Ehrhardt-Madapathi (2018) used social exchange theory and found that the relationship between experiences of justice in school and democratic attitudes are mediated by general trust, which can be interpreted as a social exchange process. They argue that social exchange processes do not have a limited time frame. Rather, they have a long-term perspective and thus they maintain that having experienced justice in school and supporting democracy as an adult may be regarded as a form of social exchange which is based on trust and reciprocity. They explain that:

> Social exchange theory proposes that the initial problem of possible exchange relations is to prove oneself trustworthy… The school as the more powerful potential exchange partner and representative of the public system has to initiate the social exchange and demonstrate its trustworthiness by treating the students justly. To ensure a balance in their exchange, students may feel—at least in the long run— obliged to

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> reciprocate the good deeds of their exchange partner. That is, they feel obliged to show commitment to the exchange partner by being benevolent towards the society and supporting the democratic system of which the school is representative (p. 669).

The question arising from this kind of theoretical framework is what happens when lack of trust impairs this reciprocation. If students' resistance is seen as an outcome of lack of trust towards the school system or even, as Scott (1990) sees it, as reciprocity to patterns of domination, it follows that this may have detrimental effects not only on their current school life but also on their future reciprocation of democratic attitudes as adults.

Just like Critical Theory, Social exchange theory is related to neo-Marxist ideas (Williams, 2011), and it is a theoretical model which has been largely used in the discipline of Social Anthropology (Schwimmer, 1977). Most importantly, due to its basic underpinning of considering individuals as decision makers, this theory can perhaps be used in conjunction with Critical Pedagogy's underpinning of developing critical agency. Structuration Theory's focus on the degree of agency within social structures is also relevant and it will be described below.

2.1.3 Reproduction Theory, Resistance Theory and Structuration Theory

Russell (2011) holds that student resistance is multifaceted and that its definition changes depending upon context and in accordance with the interaction between structure and agency, between school and outside community structures, student and teacher interactions, as well as peer relationships. According to this ethnographer, reproduction theory, resistance theory and structuration theory have made significant contributions to understanding student behaviour. Russell explains that according to *reproduction theory*, schools serve to maintain an unequal society and comprise an important factor which maintains the status quo, by reproducing the existing relationships between social groups and their cultures. On the other hand, according to the same ethnographer, *resistance theory* (with the typical example being the work of Paul Willis Learning to Labour) maintains that working class individuals oppose intellectual practices and reject school because of their counter-school cultures. Russel (2011) goes on to explain *structuration theory* as follows:

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> Structuration theory perceives social structures as reproduced by interacting actors. Structures are viewed as enabling and constraining, as the medium and the outcome of agents' actions… Agents are believed to know a great deal about society, which in part accounts for their actions, and they are able to alter their actions in light of the information gained from discursive consciousness. This notion compliments the idea of resistance being a dynamic concept, for agents are viewed as conscious beings able to influence their situation [typical example is the work of Giddens in the 1990s] … In accordance with structuration theory, structures aren't perceived as imposing forces operating above and beyond the pupils control rather pupils are viewed as constituting them, operating within them, being constrained by them to some extent but also possessing the power to influence their schooling experience and societal frameworks. Pupils utilise the resources given to them to help shape their own activities and life opportunities, but ironically this can (not always) reinforce the subordinate position of the pupil during and after their school days (p. 11, 49).

2.1.4 Social Model of Disability

As far as the social model of disability is concerned, it was used ideologically as a firm basis in this research. As a Disability Studies student committed to this model, my understanding of the term 'disability' is one which entails social restrictions imposed on top of physical imperfections (impairments) and not as a result of them (Finkelstein, 2007; Bolt, 2010). Oliver and Barnes (2012) rightly state that:

> [disability] is about nothing more complicated than a clear focus on the economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people who are viewed by others as having some form of impairment – whether physical, mental or intellectual… [There are ways] in which both impairment and disability are 'produced' as individual and medical problems within capitalist society (ibid, p. 21, 31).

Based on this ideological orientation, this research aims to explore the extent to which certain student impairments/individual characteristics may be used by the educational context as labels which catalyse their disablement, thus placing them at the edge of schooling. This is particularly relevant in the context of Cypriot VET since students, who often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and who are often academically low achieving, enter this context already being prejudiced against and marginalised by the educational system. This system 'throws' them in the specific context because they are perceived as not being good enough. Therefore, this research aims to explore the extent to which certain individual characteristics of the students may be used by the educational context they enter into as labels which further catalyse their marginalisation instead of aiding them to become critical agents.

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2.2 Students' voice and why it is so important

Recent literature suggests that there has been an upsurge in educational research concerning the implications of involving children and young people as active participants (Messiou and Hope, 2015; Beaton, 2014). An important parameter that should exist for this involvement to take place is the emphasis on students' voice,

> the term being applied to a wide range of activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue, and action on matters that concern students, school staff, and their communities (Bragg, 2007, p. 659).

All students have something relevant to say (Richards, 2014), and it is important that a listener is willing to encourage them to speak up, not coerce them or lead their thoughts in any way. These are attributes that all teachers need to possess (Busher 2014, Lever 2011), but as I see it, they also extend to researchers, who must encourage students to express their views. Moreover, according to Bernstein (in Arnot and Reay, 2007),

> it is crucial for students to know and feel that they, the experiences which have shaped them, and their modes of showing are recognised, respected and valued (p.318).

In this process, it is essential that the listener is alert and perceptive enough so as to be able to understand the message a student is trying to convey through her/his words and/or actions (Richards and Armstrong, 2011). Either as a teacher or as a researcher, this is equally important.

Enabling an unheard voice to come to the attention of a wider audience is a political act (Walford, 2008). Listening to students' voice has been one of the signs of the shift in the conceptualisation of power, however this upsurge has not gone by uncritisised. There is a growing concern on whether voice is a mask for adult interpretation and judgment of young people's perspectives (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). Researchers question whose interests are served when young people speak (Orner, in Clarke, Boorman and Nind, 2011). In order to avoid this danger, listening to student's voice at a methodological level requires the researcher to be self-reflective and open minded in welcoming the many ways young people express themselves (ibid).

I consider it important to further elaborate why it is important to focus on student's voices. Bell and Opie (2002) drew on an unpublished PhD thesis completed in 2000 by Gray, titled 'The framing of truancy: a study of non-attendance as a form of social exclusion within

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Western Australia'. In her thesis, Gray set out to study the culture of compulsory education and to identify cultural influences on the development and enactment of laws designed to enforce school attendance, especially laws which reflect community beliefs concerning the need for punitive measures. Gray identified these influences to be the punitive culture, the culture of dependence and the culture of difference. The punitive culture was based on the community's belief in the role of punishment in managing young people's behaviour. The culture of dependence was based on community's perceived boundaries of ownership of a problem and of responsibility over providing solutions. The culture of difference was based on community's perception of difference indicating deviance.

According to Gray's results,

> there will always be truancy. There will always be kids who don't want to go to school and always people who don't want to have some of them in school. There 'll never be a solution. Given that we 've got all this legislation, we could look at it in a negative sense and say 'We 've got this legislation and so we can do this, this and this.' Or we could say 'Well, given we 've got this problem, why don't we look at things in a different way and say "We 've got to look at things in a different way, an inclusive way, not a way which excludes a whole type of child that I would call 'different'"… If there are going to be fundamental changes, they will have to come at grassroots level and that means the teachers will need the resources to be able to implement them (ibid, p. 163-164).

Therefore, as Gray saw it,

> they (fundamental changes in attitude) would involve a move from the punitive culture to the culture of mediation; from the culture of dependence to the culture of natural justice; the culture of difference to the culture of awareness; from 'truancy' to 'non-attendance'. All these interlinked cultures would still lead to legislative and regulatory frameworks of a different kind. They would lead not to the culture of rejection and exclusion but to the culture of inclusion and equity.

I consider Gray's insights to be of crucial importance in leading the way to genuinely inclusive practices. Inclusion is about the fundamental changes of surroundings and beliefs in order to respect and accommodate difference, rather than changing/'correcting' of students themselves. This, in my opinion, can be realised *not* by directly aiming at the surroundings and the legislations but first by listening and knowing how students themselves perceive the world around them, as well as aiming at our own role in a reflexive way. *Perhaps we must recognise that we have been adults for too long, so long that we forgot how young people think and make sense of the world around them.* If educators have a role in that, as I see it, it is to immerse themselves, like ethnographers, in students' lives in order to try to understand *their* perspectives. Inclusion *is* about the fundamental changes of the surroundings in order to accommodate difference, but that doesn't mean that it is a

change that must come from outside; if change is based on our perceptions of the culture of dependence, as defined above, there is always the danger of displacing responsibilities and/or trying to get rid of problems rather than trying to address them. Change must start from within and as I see it, one of the first steps is to realise our responsibility to listen to students' voices.

Finally, according to Smyth (2007), engaging students as active participants in research means engaging them in meaningful schooling. Listening to students' voices is seen by this researcher as a positive response to important phenomena such as disengagement and dropouts. Mitra (2007), as well as Galloway, Pope and Osberg (2007), believe that students' voice is crucial within attempts of school reforms as well as within attempts of finding ways of reducing academic stress (ibid). Rudduck (2007) suggests that students' voice always has something valuable to offer to meaningful schooling and Sefa Dei and Opini (2007) argue that students' voice, through their experiences, may be used to shape educational aspirations. Since students' voice is often so closely related to their experiences, I consider it important to further focus on the subject of students' school experience in the following section.

2.3 Students' school experience: a focus on working-class youth and gender identities

Hammersley (1999) has argued that although teaching and learning are at the heart of education, the way they were analysed in the past was very much cognitive and instrumental, with neglect on how they were embedded in the lives of students[1], i.e. with neglect on their school experience. Historically, young people have been amongst the least represented voices in research (Clarke, Boorman and Nind, 2011). In her recent book, Lutrell (2020) claims that too many people are still unable to recognise the capacities and desires of youth growing up in working-class communities. Her creative analysis of these young people's images and narratives boldly refutes biased assumptions about working-class youth and re-envisions schools as more inclusive spaces, thus challenging us to see differently and to set our sights on a better future for all youth.

[1] And of teachers too, but students will be the focus of this study.

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From the 1970s onwards, qualitative research, and especially interactionist ethnography which deals with the processual, social and personal character of education and a documentation of what actually goes on in learning environments, has started to provide a complex and subtle picture of the experience and narratives of youth (Thiessen 2007, Hammersley 1999). What emerged from such research was the fact that this experience and narratives did not only involve the process of education, but also survival strategies and adaptations shaped both by external circumstances as well as the requirements of self (Woods, in Hammersley 1999).

More specifically, there are three orientations of research in the area of students' school experience. These are, according to Thiessen (2007):

(1) how students participate in and make sense of life in classrooms and schools (i.e. their thoughts, actions and feelings).

(2) who students are and how they develop in classrooms and schools (i.e. the formation of their identities and how they adapt to the structures and expectations of classrooms and schools).

(3) how students are actively involved in shaping their own learning opportunities and in the improvement of what happens in classrooms and schools (i.e. the challenges and possibilities of student engagement in educational aspirations, as well as the documentation of decisions and actions designed to improve their own learning).

Thiessen explains that a study dealing with students' school experience often focuses on one of these orientations, but may also include elements of the other two orientations.

Through this exploration of the perspectives of students themselves, many interesting themes have arisen. One of the earliest of these themes had to do with the oppositional behaviour of working class boys, in seminal works such as that of Corrigan (1979), Willis (1977/1981), Ball (1981) etc. However, this focus created a simultaneous neglect on the experience of girls, and this was a critique which started in the early 1980s by feminism[2] (Hammersley 1999). Feminists accused educational researchers for neglecting the experience

[2] According to France (2007), it started as early as the 1960s.

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of girls or for assuming that the results of studies in which participants were boys, could be generalised for both genders. Feminists also emphasised the use of qualitative research in tapping into the voice of women, in order to provide a real understanding of their perspectives (Clark, Flewitt, Hammersley and Robb, 2014). They also emphasised the fact that this research must be *political*, as it must align itself against the oppressions of women within society (ibid). As a consequence, this critique gave rise to a further focus and a further expansion of gender studies in educational contexts. One of the earliest was the seminal work by Griffin (1985), who followed a group of young working-class women to a range of jobs and through periods of unemployment, assessing how they viewed the world. As a result of such developments in the field, the case has been that more accounts deal with the experience of girls and/or the relationships between the genders, in the nowadays ever evolving field of researching student's school experience (Hammersley, 1999).

This expansion has not been linear or straight forward, nor without controversies. Historically, as a result of developments in postmodernist and post-structuralist work after the mid-eighties, there was also a focus on 'gender' as a category, and on relationships between the genders, as well as a clearer focus on the concept of 'masculinities' (Measor, 1999). Because of this development, feminists started fighting for political actions and understandings in the light of the new intellectual perspectives of masculinities. Critics, however, argued that this new focus depoliticises the issue of gender and draws attention away from the oppression faced by women (ibid).

Measor (1999) holds that this tension is unnecessary, as a focus on masculinities may be used to clarify the kind of inequalities faced by women. In pursuing that belief, Measor re-examined data from her 1984 study with Peter Woods. Back in 1984, the two researchers argued that gender plays a significant role in understanding students' school experience, and especially the interplay between formal and informal cultures. The re-examination focused on the role of gender in the informal culture of adolescents, in the light of new advances in gender studies. Measor used the concept of gender as being socially constructed, to argue that students actively employ aspects of their school life as symbolic resources used to develop their gender identities, i.e. their masculinities and femininities. Indeed, "(s)chools and classrooms are places where pupils and their teachers do a great deal of cultural work on the construction of identity" (ibid, p. 173).

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Measor further argues that there are a number of arenas and aspects of school life in which symbolic behaviours by boys are worked out, in order to be seen and defined by others as properly masculine as well as to maintain their status in the social ladder of peer relations. She also argues that there are certain contexts and certain ways in which the symbolic messages about gender identification are transmitted and that one of them involves their relationships with girls. Other important contexts and ways are seen by Measor to be the curriculum, peer interactions, misbehaviour and violence, teasing and joking, relationships with the opposite sex and sexual harassment. These are recurring subjects in qualitative research, from the late seventies in seminal works such as that of Paul Willis (1977/1981), to more recent, for example, Phtiaka (1997), Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007), Russell (2011), Iacovou and Christou (2011) and Iacovou (2012).

From a different perspective, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007) maintain that students' voice concerning their experience is of importance because they prompt us to address diversity in schools and stress the importance of taking into consideration both girls' and boys' experience. These researchers believe that the consideration of both boys' and girls' experience highlights the significance of gender regimes and power relations' in students' lives at school and that such voices can be used for the development of a pedagogy of difference in the reform agenda of schools.

I believe that studying both masculinities and femininities may indeed throw light on the inequalities faced by girls. Unlike Measor (1999), who focused mainly on masculinities, researchers like Phtiaka (1997), Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007), Russell (2011), Iacovou and Christou (2011) and Iacovou (2012), have given a voice to both girls and boys and examined the interplay of genders in peer relationships. Other well-known researchers, such as David (2015; 2009) in the European context and Hall (2016; 2000) in the US context, have focused on girls' experiences through a more feminist lens.

Still relatively recently, when girls speak, their mood swings are often put down to hormones and periods, but these girls do need a space to talk (Cruddas and Haddock, in Clarke, Boorman and Nind, 2011). The idea that gender equality in education has been achieved is nowadays often a staple of public debate, but renowned sociologist Miriam David rejects the notion that gender equality has been achieved in our age of neoliberalism. She puts the focus back onto issues such as changing patterns of girls' participation in education and

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argues that there is still urgent need for changes in the patriarchal rules of the game and for teacher education to pay more attention to the themes of gender and sexuality in education (David, 2017; 2016). In their paper, Ringrose and Renold (2012) critique the curative masculinity politics and neo-liberal performative cultures in western educational contexts, which often treat gender equality in reductive ways. For example, the notion that 'some girls perform better on tests equals gender equity' is considered by Ringrose and Renold as simplistic but also as dangerous, because it ends up rendering invisible the often (hetero)sexually violent social worlds of schools. Ringrose and Renold further suggest that it is crucial to begin with the highly contradictory post-feminist discourses facing girls in popular culture – on the one hand, girl power discourses that they can be 'anything' they want to be, whilst on the other hand discourses that their sexualised bodies and appearance are more important than achievement in school/work. Ringrose and Renold hold that it is this contradictory cultural reality that teachers need to understand as informing the sexual politics of schooling nowadays.

As far as Cyprus is concerned, local VET contexts are male-dominated and students often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Symeou and Efthymiou, 2004). From my experience as a teacher in such contexts, girls' voices are relatively unheard or marginalised, therefore I consider it important to focus especially on their voices. David (2014) rightly points to the fact that "(t)he question of disadvantaged and working class women in access to education and employment remains somewhat occluded" (p. 121). Hall (2000), who has focused on girl participants of a past larger scale research which involved both boys and girls, has argued that when we fail to critically explore the issue of violence against girls in classrooms, then schools become involved in the silencing and "normalising" of this abuse. For these reasons, although I initially included both boys and girls as participants in this ethnographic research, as a methodological strategy of becoming more familiar with the wider context, I wanted to converge and focus on girl participants. I further elaborate on the reasons for this decision in the next chapter.

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2.3.1 Positive school experiences

Amongst the positive school experiences reported in literature is students'[3] experience of school affordances (experience provided by the school and the nearby community) regarding their transition to university or the workplace. In the Australian[4] context, the students reported favourably about this kind of affordances, although they claimed that they could be further improved (Billett and Johnson, 2012). In one of the schools of the study, students reported that they liked their overall school experience and the range of subjects offered to them. Another interesting finding was the fact that a school transition to university was emphasised in their affordances, while vocational pathways were de-emphasised.

Forsberg, Carlerby, Norstrand, Risberg and Kostenius (2019) found, concerning the Swedish context, that self-reported positive mental health, participation in Physical Education, positive body image and satisfactory sleep are related to positive school experience. Their results also revealed gender differences, with boys more often having reported positive school experience and positive health than girls.

In his study, Nicholl (2007) showed, concerning the British context, how some students who find learning difficult and are disengaged and/or disruptive, can find a way back to school success. The students experienced that they could change if significant others, like teachers, acknowledged their efforts and their strengths, in spite of the negative reputation that they may have had in the past.

Wilson and Corbett (2007) addressed adolescents' views on teaching and the characteristics of a good teacher, in the US context. These were students who did not perform well on traditional measures of success. The researchers reported that they talked to a large number of students in mostly low-income schools, and that these students seemed to view good teaching in a very simple and consistent way; they considered good teachers those who can maintain

[3] This literature review focuses on studies which deal with experiences of secondary rather than primary school students, as this is the focus of my research.

[4] Study results from other contexts are also used in this review, in order for a possible comparison to be made with the Cypriot context.

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order during the lesson, who can make them do their homework, are helpful, are able to explain material clearly, can use many different kinds of instructional strategies and can develop good relationships with them. Moreover, for these students good learning was when they learn new things and when they were active.

2.3.2 Negative school experiences

It is clear from the examples given above, that there is an existence of dualisms in students' school experience, such that many times positive school experience is coupled with a negative one, i.e. for students to describe an experience as positive, they must have previously experienced its negative part. Examples are descriptions of how low achieving or disaffected students get back on track, as well as their descriptions of a good teacher, which only make sense in relation to certain attributes, the lack of which signifies a bad teacher. Yet some of their descriptions are more clearly linked to negative aspects of their schooling. For example, DiMartino and Clarke (2008) state that many high school students in the US context feel alone and invisible and that they neither see the relevance of what they are being taught, nor how their classes are preparing them for their adulthood.

Amongst the negative school experience is also students' critique of hierarchical power, as well as the pressure they feel to maintain their social status amongst their peers; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007) studied, through surveys, more than 900 adolescents' experience concerning gender and schooling in the Australian context. They reported that both boys and girls were very critical of hierarchical and institutional power embodied by teachers. It is this critique, the researchers content, which gives rise to resistance to schooling. Boys' resistance was embodied in this research as laddish protest masculinity (Willis, 1977/1981). Girls' resistance was reported to be more tacit and not so much through overt bodily enactment which characterises boys' resistance.

Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007) also reported the existence of particular gendered dimensions in hierarchical social relations. For both boys and girls 'fitting in' was of crucial importance. This was often linked to 'acting cool' like going to parties and being desirable to the opposite sex, having a busy social life outside school and wearing cool clothes. Both boys and girls reported that they experienced a great amount of pressure in trying to maintain such a

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status. They highlighted the effort, the self-regulation and practices such as labelling and 'othering' students who deviated from the norm, as ways to maintain their social status.

For the boys this process involved acting macho, as well as the pressure of having sex and the importance of looking after their body image, e.g. being preoccupied with their weight (ibid). For the girls, the process entailed opposing to the normative femininity of being passive and a 'good girl', by being sexually assertive and engaging in risk-taking behaviours. The girls were also preoccupied with their body image and appearance, and this, unlike the boys, seemed to be at the top of their list of priorities. They reported that they felt the pressure to be pretty, slim and have large breasts. According to them, the boys had a major role in determining a girls' social status. Teasing and harassing of the boys were seen by the girls as a means of subordinating and belittling them; this was a means by which the boys maintained their power at the top of the social ladder of peer relations (ibid).

Concerning harassment, the boys experienced physical fighting as the preferred way to enact it, whereas girls described their tendency to be more verbal and to spread rumours as a means of 'bitching' other girls and dealing with conflict. Finally, some 'sensible' girls seemed to distance themselves from the 'immaturity' of the boys and the 'bitchiness' of other girls (ibid), just like the conformist ear'ole boys of Paul Willis (1977/1981).

2.4 Students' school experience in Technical & Vocational Education

Since the setting of this research is a Technical and Vocational School, I will focus on literature dealing with how the Technical and Vocational Education (VET) context in Cyprus works, and then more specifically focus on literature concerning students' voice and experience in such settings. A comparison between VET students' voice in the Cypriot and other contexts may be made possible through such a focus, in light of the results of this study.

2.4.1 Structure of Public Secondary General Education in Cyprus

Public Secondary General Education in Cyprus is provided for students aged twelve to eighteen years of age, through two three-year cycles of courses. The first cycle is High School (called Gymnasium) for students aged twelve to fifteen (i.e. up to Grade 9). Education is

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compulsory until the fifteenth year of age, i.e. upon completion of the Gymnasium (Cedefop, 2019). The Gymnasium prepares students for the second cycle of secondary education, which is Lyceum or Technical and Vocational Education, for students aged fifteen to eighteen (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth n.d. 2; n.d. 3; n.d. 4; n.d. 5). Students up to the age of twenty years are also allowed to attend Lyceums or Technical and Vocational Schools, whereas if they are over that age, they are encouraged to study at Evening Gymnasia or Evening Technical Schools (Cedefop, 2012; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, n.d. 6).

As mentioned previously, according to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, pupils are required to attend high school until the age of fifteen. If a student leaves school earlier, for whatever reason, they are allowed to attend the Apprenticeship System (now called New Contemporary Apprenticeship), which has been in operation since 1963. The Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance has the administrative responsibility and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth has the educational responsibility. The Apprenticeship System accepts students from fourteen to eighteen years of age and provides alternative education and training (Shinis *et al*, n. d.). Upon successful completion of their education/training, trainees receive the Certificate of Complementary Apprenticeship, recognised by the government and industry. Students graduating from the Apprenticeship System do not receive a degree equivalent to that of upper secondary education. As a result, they are less likely to succeed when competing with upper secondary school graduates. This can lead to social and economic hardships. The Apprenticeship System is essentially the most frequent choice for pupils dropping out of school, with their only alternative being the Evening School.

There is, of course, the Technical and Vocational Education degree as an equivalent to an upper secondary education degree. But according to a research by Symeou and Efthymiou (2004), in Technical and Vocational schools, and more specifically in its practical rather than theoretical orientations, there are students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who have no alternative choice in the educational system because of their low performance in high school and because of their low ambitions concerning their educational as well as professional future.

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2.4.2 VET in Cyprus

VET provides a range of training programmes to gymnasium graduates. These programmes are public and they are offered free of tuition fees, in two pathways; the theoretical and the practical. The theoretical stream is for students who want to continue to higher education, whereas the practical one is for those oriented more towards entering the labour market (Cedefop, 2019a). Both pathways have a duration of three years. Students select their specialisation[5] from the first year of their studies (Korelli, Kyriacou-Liveri and Theocharous, 2019; Cedefop, 2012). Examples of specialisations in either the theoretical or the practical pathways are mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, agriculture, hotel and catering, woodwork and furniture making, graphic arts etc.

As of 2016/2017 school year, training at work environment has increased; lessons are school based, but students of the two first years of the practical pathway must work in real work environment of industry at the end of their first and second years of studies, i.e. between June and August, for four weeks. For this work they are paid a symbolic amount of money (Cedefop, 2019a; Cedefop, 2018; Korelli, Kyriacou-Liveri and Theocharous, 2019; Cedefop, 2012).

School based learning combines general education subjects like Physics, Greek language, Maths, History, etc., along with technological and workshop subjects depending on the specialisation. School leaving certificates are awarded upon completion of the three years of courses and are equivalent to those of secondary general education schools (ibid).

Cyprus has had one of the lowest percentages of student enrolments in technical schools, as most students prefer to follow general education. In 2015/2016, 83.3% of student enrolments were in general education (lyceums), with only 16.7% in VET (Cedefop, 2019a). This discrepancy is due to the prejudice against technical occupations (Cedefop, 2012). In an opinion survey concerning VET in Cyprus, conducted by Cedefop, the European Centre for the development of Vocational Training, Korelli (2018) reports that less than half of the respondents had heard about VET and knew what VET is. Given the fact that participation in

[5] The term 'specialisation' is used in the text as it denotes how the Cypriot Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth translates the subject areas (specialisms) offered in VET.

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VET in Cyprus is much lower than the EU average, Korelli suggests that this may be due to this unawareness of people concerning what VET is. She does however also report that the prejudice against VET in the Cypriot context also contributes to explain the low participation rates in VET.

This prejudice, however, seems to extend to the students who attend Technical and Vocational Schools too; the students attending upper secondary VET education, who are mostly boys, are typically academically low achieving, economically and socially disadvantaged and very often labelled as 'at-risk' students, even as 'scamps' and 'peasants' (Symeou and Efthymiou, 2004). Another reason for Cypriot students' preference of general over technical education may be because the country is characterised by an inclining services sector and a declining manufacturing sector (Cedefop, 2012). Despite the above, the economic crisis that Cyprus has faced has resulted in an increase in the number of students who opt to enrol in technical schools. This change, in combination with the limited places which are currently available, has resulted in a student evaluation system for the enrolments. This system was introduced as from school year 2014/15 (Cedefop, 2019a).

2.4.3.1 Positive VET experience and reproduction of social standards

Ferm, Thunqvist, Svensson and Gustavsson (2018) found that VET students' learning strategies in the Swedish context are such that reproduce social structures which promote vocational identities. These strategies include, according to students' experience, taking individual and active responsibility for their own learning, searching for role models in the work community during their training, positioning themselves as a resource to the work community, asking questions to gain deeper knowledge, as well as understanding and using humour and jokes in order to fit in the work community.

Concerning the British and Scottish contexts, Lawy (2010) studied young people's experience of VET and focused on the mismatch between policy concerning young people and their education and training needs and aspirations. Lawy highlighted the fact that despite OECD rhetoric of the need of "knowledge-workers" in a "knowledge-driven" economy, in the UK there are high numbers of low-skilled jobs. Many of the young people in the study were

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seen to move from one job to another in short periods of time and in and out of employment, a situation which may seem problematic on the outside but was seen as a natural part of the given culture on the inside. These young people, who were either VET graduates or students who dropped out of VET, stated that they did not value formal learning, although they were not work-shy. Instead, they valued the opportunities their job gave them to learn new things, even though the work itself was low-skilled (ibid). The reproduction of social structures is thus apparent.

Kilbrink, Bjurulf, Baartman and de Bruijn (2018) studied the interaction between learning for VET students in Sweden, at school and at workplaces. They carried out their research based on the phenomenological lifeworld notion, in explanation of which they cite Bengtsson:

> The lifeworld is everything that is possible to experience and do… (it) consists of different regional worlds in which the individual lives, for instance the family, the working place and recreational activities with friends (in Kilbrink *et al*, p. 457).

By putting the emphasis on VET students' perspectives, these researchers focused on the transfer of knowledge in and between the two learning contexts of school and the workplace. For these students, the different learning contexts could complement each other. The students also made clear their belief that integration of theory (at school) and practice (at the workplace) could make them better prepared for the unknown future awaiting for them (ibid).

It is worth noting, from the above examples of students' experience in different countries, the similarity of how well orchestrated the reproduction of social standards is in the lives of these young people, in their schooling and well prior to their exposure to the workplace. This reproduction seems to form an entity to be happily and willingly transferred by the students along with the formal knowledge that moves from school to their workplace. Daniels (2010), who studied the return of mature women in vocational learning, used the notion of 'women's virtual handbags' to describe how women's homeplace experience continued to be invisible as well as misconstrued in this cycle of lifelong learning. Although this study does not focus on mature women's school experience, I use the term *'VET students' virtual handbags'* to describe, in light of the above, how the reproduction of social standards metaphorically seems to creep in their real school handbags and be transferred, not so invisibly after all, from their school context to their future lives at the workplace. Of course this has implications to the degree of agency by the students. This will be discussed at a later stage of this review. Thomson (in Russell, 2011) used the similar concept 'virtual schoolbag' to indicate how each

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student's beliefs, skills, resources and culture are carried and are used by the student as useful resources or by teachers as a source of dispute within students' act of resistance. I will elaborate on the issue of resistance in more detail at a later stage of this review.

2.4.3.2 Negative VET experience

Rojewski (1997) studied VET students' experience in Georgia. Although it was reported that vocational track participants had a slightly higher employment rate than those with limited vocational involvement, regardless of disadvantage status, it was also found that non-disadvantaged youth were more likely to be employed than their disadvantaged peers. There were also connections between increased hours of work and negative academic and social performance, i.e. disadvantaged youth with limited or no participation in vocational education worked more hours than their non-disadvantaged peers. Postsecondary aspirations increased as level of involvement in vocational education decreased. Perhaps most importantly, economically disadvantaged youth were more likely to be involved in a vocational education program and less likely to enrol in tertiary education, a fact which seems to perpetuate certain 'norms' of who attends VET education.

Tanggaard, Nielsen and Christian (2015) studied the effects of streaming VET students into ability-based classes, in the Danish context. Their results suggest that students have different experience when placed in a low-ability class, depending on the way the schools organise streaming. Students' experience showed that the separation of students into streams involved a risk of reducing the level of engagement. The students interviewed were very critical of the fact that teachers did not require much of them, that they were not asked to do much in class and that classes were not as difficult as they should have been. The researchers found that this could be prevented by organising the streaming in more pedagogical ways. On these occasions, the students reported better relationships with peers and teachers.

Misko and Priest's (2009) study in the Australian context also focused in a much clearer way on students' suggestions for improving their vocational education and training experience. The students asked for improvements in the domains of lesson relevance and design, staff attributes and behaviours, teaching and learning practices, access to lessons, facilities and services, assessment practices, learning resources, equipment and materials, initial information provision, administration and learning support services.

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Again it is worth noting here, my problematisation over what constitutes a negative school experience. In many of the aforementioned examples of VET experience, I noted some situations which may seem problematic on the outside but which are considered an unavoidable or even natural part of given cultures on the inside. It can therefore be tricky for a researcher to decide when to label certain subjects arising from research as being positive or negative. As I see it, one needs to always ask, 'positive or negative according to whom?' and be able to distinguish whether a given experience is seen as negative by the participants themselves or if it is considered to be negative by the researcher reporting and analysing it, and on what grounds.

As Willis (2000) eloquently puts it specifically for the ethnographic approach: "(p)erhaps there is a triple dynamic of understanding: my understandings [the researcher's], of their understandings [the participants'] of an understood [conceptually held] world" (p. xviii). In other words, even what is documented as a student's positive or negative experience, is subjective as it is dealt as such by the researcher. Another dilemma arising from this is whether the researcher, when documenting beliefs which seem to be problematic on the outside but rather natural or unavoidable on the inside, has the right to alert the students of this discrepancy. If giving voice to the students is said to be able to bring about meaningful changes to a student's schooling, then does the researcher have the right to alert the students so as to start becoming more critical on what they consider to be natural or unavoidable? And if so, how and when can the researcher do that, for the alert not to be considered as leading the students' thoughts? If the students are given voice but are not taught to develop their critical thinking, are we really giving them voice? In such a case, the results reported are useful for whom, exactly?

A possible optimistic answer may be that such research results are useful for teachers to read and act accordingly in their own classes, as well as for stakeholders in order to make decisions concerning the necessary adjustments of curricula, in which case one needs to advocate for the right dissemination of research results, as well as for the advancement of teacher training programmes towards this direction. The importance of curricula as tools for a functional and humane school is stressed by Damianidou and Phtiaka (2019) and in this case, having curricula which develop students' critical thinking and enable them to have a voice as a democratic right, is of crucial importance.

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2.5 Low school attendance and truancy

Low school attendance has been a widely discussed phenomenon in the educational world over time (Gentle-Genity, Karikari, Chen, Wilka and Kim 2016, McCormack 2005, Brown 1983, Corrigan 1979). Truancy is considered to indicate a student in a high-risk life situation and is often considered to be a behavioural or a social-adjustment problem (Stattin and Andershed, in Strand, Anbäcken and Granlund, 2015). As I see it, the failure of contemporary educational systems to deal with it effectively, is a clear sign of the failure of the educational system itself; for, what kind of an educational system can be proud of itself, if there are still students who, instead of 'getting as much of it as possible', opt out of it or are pushed or pulled out of it?

Nowadays in European countries such as Britain, parents have a duty in law to ensure that their child is educated and there is a fine for parents and/or a prison sentence for not making sure their child is properly educated (Lever 2011, McCormack 2005). Truancy is a phenomenon which causes great concern to countries around the world, due to its serious consequences on students, as well as vast social and economic consequences. According to Reid (2014), the consequences are potentially very harmful for the students themselves, for the overall level of their schooling and education, for their prospects concerning their adult lives, for the long-term resource needs and economy of their country and for the quality of the future lives of their children and families. Moreover, educated people are considered to be more productive, and research has shown that there is a link between earnings and qualifications (Traag and Van der Velden, 2011; McCormack 2005; Rumberger 1987). Also, according to OECD, truancy is expensive, as a non-attender is more likely to become and remain a burden to a country's benefit system than a successful student (McCormack 2005). There is also a significant link, according to research, between truancy and social problems such as school dropouts (Traag and Van der Velden, 2011; Zyngier, 2011; Rosenblum, Goldblatt and Moin, 2008), crime (Bennett, Mazerolle, Antrobus, Eggins and Piquero, 2018; Seifert, Schmidt and Ray, 2012; Osher *et al*, 2003), premature sexual activity and teenage pregnancy (Zyngier, 2011, Cullingford 1999, Brown 1983), although, according to Parsons (2002), research which shows that there is a link between truancy and crime is inconclusive.

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2.5.1 Legislation concerning upper secondary school attendance in Cyprus

Bell and Opie (2002) rightly maintain that

> if teenagers don't want to go to school, they won't go and no amount of legislation will make them go. However, compulsory education is the internationally accepted indicator of commitment to the rights of a child and in most Western countries… that commitment is linked to a legal framework designed to enforce school attendance (p. 129).

In Cyprus, attendance is compulsory for all students at the Gymnasium, that is, up to the age of fifteen (Cedefop, 2019; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, n.d.). For the second cycle of secondary education, and in the case of Technical and Vocational Education which is the focus of this research, the legislation concerning absences (until the end of school year 2016/2017) was as follows: the students were not allowed to sit the first round of final exams in early June and were instead directly referred to the second round of exams in September (called September re-examination) (Shinis, Karallis, Kyriakides, Shiakalli, Nicolaou, Sismani and Aristidou, n.d.):

- if they had a total of 42 to 50 unjustified absences during the school year (or 33 to 40 for final year students of the practical pathway)[6].
- if they had a total of 152 to 160 absences, out of which at least 110 needed to be justified (or 121 to 128 for final year students of the practical pathway).
- in exceptional cases, students whose number of absences was less than 275, out of which the unjustified absences did not exceed 50, were referred to September re-examination, with a recommendation of the Teachers' Association of the school and following the approval of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth.
- if absences from a particular lesson, irrespective of whether they were justified or unjustified, were in aggregate greater than seven times the number of teaching hours that curriculum provides for each lesson per week.
- if absences from the school program "Creativity - Action - Social Work" were 24 or more, unless the students engaged in projects and social work assigned by their form teacher, before the June final exam period.

[6] The number of absences for graduates of the practical pathway was less because under the old legislation they only attended school four times per week, with one day per week (every Friday) working in real work environment of industry.

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Furthermore, students were not moving up class:

- if they had 51 or more unjustified absences (more than 40 for the final year students of the practical pathway).
- if they had 161 or more absences in total.
- if they had 26 or more unjustified absences during the second semester, or more than 80 absences in total during the second semester.

Shinis *et al* (n.d.) also mention that:

> The issue of absences is of outmost importance to the school and particularly to the students and their attendance… Absences are calculated as one per each teaching hour. A student who is absent even for only one teaching hour, is required, on his return to school and anyway in no case not later than 8 days, to submit a confirmation from his parent or guardian or a medical certificate by his doctor regarding the reason of his absence, unless he was given a written permission by the Principal to do otherwise. Confirmations from a parent or a guardian are not sufficient for absences of over two consecutive days, while in aggregate cannot exceed 12 days throughout the whole year. Teachers' Association is not bound by the confirmations, when it has formed its own opinion over the untruthfulness of the pleaded reason of illness or it does not consider justified other reasons of absence. Absences are not counted as regards students who take part in a special school mission, locally or abroad, following a decision of the Ministry of Education and Culture or are engaged in school activity delegated to them by the Principal. Unjustified absences of students constitute disciplinary offence. In cases of irregular school attendance and significant number of absences by a student, his parent or guardian is informed in time (p. 80-81).

Legislation changed as from the school year 2017/2018; the number of allowable absences was reduced and the separation of absences into justified, unjustified and "Creativity - Action - Social Work" absences was abandoned. Under the new legislation, all absences need to be justified by the parents. Students are not allowed to sit the first round of final exams in early June and are instead directly referred to the second round of exams in September (called September re-examination[7]):

- if they have a total of 120 to 134 absences (or 96 to 107 for final year students of the practical pathway[8]).

[7] As from the school year 2017/2018, the re-examination takes place in late June instead.

[8] The number of absences was less for the 2017/2018 school year graduates of the practical pathway (participants of this research belonged to this group) because the old legislation was still in effect for them especially concerning their work training, i.e. they only attended school four times per week, with one day per week (every Friday) working in real work environment of industry.

- if absences from a particular lesson, irrespective of whether they were justified or unjustified, were in aggregate greater than seven times the number of teaching hours that curriculum provides for each lesson per week.
- if they have 60-67 absences in the second semester (48-54 for final year students of the practical pathway).
- in exceptional cases, students whose number of absences are more than the numbers stated above, can still be referred to the re-examination, with a recommendation of the Teachers' Association of the school and following the approval of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth.

Furthermore, students are not moving up class:

- if they have more than 134 absences in total (more than 107 for final year students of the practical pathway).
- if they have more than 67 absences during the second semester (more than 54 for final year students of the practical pathway).

The participants of this research graduated in June 2018, i.e. they were under this new legislation for their last year of studies. This research is therefore suitable for revealing possible effects of the new legislation on these students. However, further research is needed for possible long term effects of the new legislation.

2.5.2 Definitions for truancy

For different people, truancy means different things. Therefore, one may come across many different definitions for truancy. For example, according to Sälzer, Trautwein, Lüdtke and Stamm (2012), as well as Blyth and Milner (1999), truancy is when a student skips the classes that she/he wants to miss, and/or when she/he is absent from school without authorisation. Another common definition for truancy is absence from school without the approval of the parents and the school (Strand, Anbäcken and Granlund, 2015) and, yet another one, truancy is a student's unexcused and unlawful absence from 30% or more of his or her year classes (ibid). Finally, according to Sutphen, Ford and Flaherty, truancy is a legal term used for

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unauthorised absences from school over a designated period of time (in Strand, Anbäcken and Granlund , 2015).

Gentle-Genitty *et al* (2016) believe that the reason there are different definitions for truancy is because truancy does not occur in a vacuum, therefore it is a phenomenon which is contextual. They also believe that there are many challenges arising from this inconsistency in terms of its definition, which adversely affect matters such as intervention strategies, financial resources, policy matters and definitive responses. In their study, they set out to address this inconsistency.

They first conducted a literature review for finding different definitions for truancy. Many of the extracted articles used in their review stressed absenteeism and non-attendance when explaining or defining truancy. In the USA, they found that the definition concerning truancy according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention was about "a person who misses 20% or more of school days within a six-week period" (p. 66). For these researchers, as well as for Reid (2016), it is important to take into consideration both the students' view as well as the school's view when trying to define truancy. However, what emerged from the review conducted by Gentle-Genitty *et al* (2016) was that in the USA definitions for truancy were mostly influenced by the school's view of truancy, seen as an unacceptable form of behaviour. In contrast, students' view of truancy, seen as distancing themselves from school, was not favoured in the definitions.

Furthermore, Gentle-Genitty *et al* (2016) believe that truancy is not entirely the same as school absence and not every unexcused absence should be seen as truancy. The example they mention in order to make their point is that some school policies, such as those related to holidays, may result in or set the stage to unexcused absences. One such example from the schools of upper secondary education that I worked at is the fact that, unofficially, graduates stay at home from about one week before the start of their university entrance/graduation examinations, in order to start studying for the exams, with the school turning a blind eye to these specific unexcused absences. Another recent example was when a public holiday, which was on a Tuesday, set the stage to a greater than usual number of unexcused absences on Monday preceding the holiday, with the students later explaining to me that it was a good opportunity for them to have a four days in a row period off school.

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The second stage of Gentle-Genitty *et al* (2016) research entailed the selection of an international focus group, while presenting at a conference of the International Truancy and Dropout Prevention Association (IATDP), to coin a definition for truancy. As an additional step, they then formed an online focus group consisting of twenty-eight members of the association. The focus group consisted of education workers, government officials, judges and truancy expert stakeholders with multiple years of experience. The members of this focus group agreed to take the draft definition of truancy and attempt to coin a comprehensive definition for it. The researchers took the answers and amended them, then resent the cleaned up definition to each member, inviting them to vote with a 'yes' or 'no' on whether they agreed with that definition. The result was that all members voted with a 'yes', thus accepting the definition,

> truancy is a student's act of non-attendance evidenced by missing part or all of the school day without it being legitimately excused by school or per state law (p. 65).

According to these researchers, as well as Keppens and Spruyt (2018), crafting a common, uniform definition of truancy may aid the development of consistent benchmarks for systematic measurement and comparison between different contexts.

A problematisation arising from this definition is these researchers' earlier point that not every unexcused absence should be seen as truancy. According to their given example, some school policies may result in or set the stage to unexcused absences. But since the result *is* an act of non-attendance without it being legitimately excused, according to their definition of truancy, then it is puzzling why they suggest that not every unexcused absence must be seen as truancy.

2.5.3 Implications to Inclusive Practice

A possible answer to this problematisation may be given if we consider the following list, given by Reid (2016), of the factors "closely linked to" (p. 4) truancy, persistent school absenteeism and other forms of pupils' non-attendance:

- The effects of poverty
- Unemployment

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- Parents on one or more form of state support
- Single parent families
- Children on free school meals (FSMs)
- Low-quality housing
- Overcrowding
- Second-, third- and fourth-generation "familial truancy"
- Family breakdown, divorce, separation and frequent "partner" changes
- Inconsistent home discipline
- Families with poor or low child-rearing skills
- Families in which the father is often away for long periods of time
- Parents or carers who do not support their children's education or learning
- Parents or carers with anti-school attitudes
- Parents who dislike attending their children's school to attend either meetings or social events
- Parents who had their own poor experiences whilst at school, including those with their own learning, numeracy, reading or speech deficiencies or who were bullied whilst at school
- Homes which do not encourage their children's learning or homework
- Homes in which drugs or alcohol have a disproportionate effect
- Homes which do not ensure that their children do not get a good night's sleep or are not well clothed or nourished
- Families engaged in criminal activity or in other forms of deviant sub-cultures
- Disengaged and anti-social urban or rural communities
- The rise in teenage pregnancies (According to OECD, for example, the UK has the highest rates in Europe)
- The growth of both disaffected children and adults, the rise of the "gang culture" and in (sic) anti-social behavior
- Parents and children who manifest low self-esteem (see i.e. Reid 1982)
- The growth in the number of parents and/or children with mental health problems
- The rise in the number of pupils with special or additional learning needs
- The increase in the number of parents and/or pupils with either learning or psychological difficulties. These issues might include such aspects as dyslexia, dyspraxia, Asperger's Syndrome et seq
- Attending weak, poor, disadvantaged or low-achieving schools
- Attending a maintained school which has received an extremely poor report from school inspection bodies such as Ofsted or Estyn in, for example, England or Wales
- Schools in which pupils' achievement or attendance league table position are at the lower end of performance profiles and which contain a disproportionate number of pupils who fail to gain five or more GCSE's at A* to C-grade level (in the UK), have behavioural and attendance problems, a higher than average number of school exclusions, and often, above average of pupils on either their FSM's or "at-risk" registers (p. 4-5).

Reid (2014) gives a similar list in the introduction of another one of his numerous books. From the above list, I detect the unnecessary repetition of some points. It is also noteworthy that most of the points locate the problem of truancy either within the students or their family environment. Perhaps such deficit discourses are the outcome of the way schools are structured along a hierarchy of status. Reid, in the same book, is skeptical about school attendance policies which define absenteeism as a problem locating within the student and warns against this de-contextualisation from the lived experience of the students (Reid 2016).

The school environment should in my opinion be given more gravity in the above list on the grounds that it is also a very big part of the lived experience of the students. The few points/arguments concerning school (attending weak, poor, disadvantaged or low-achieving schools, attending schools which have received an extremely poor report from inspection bodies or schools in which pupils' achievement or attendance league table position are at the lower end of performance profiles) seem to perpetuate the negativity associated with certain schools instead of trying to debunk it. What these points seem to suggest is that if a student attends such a school, she/he is doomed to fail. But schools are run by people and teachers also share a big role in how students perceive their lived experience. As I see it, books focusing on managing school attendance that start with such an extensive list (which repeats itself), risk perpetuating the prejudice against certain students and certain schools. Such lists, coupled with underemphasising the role of administrators and teachers is in my opinion problematic.

The author and editor of the book does later explain that students who have challenging behaviours at school often have much in common with truants or non-attendees and that persistent absentees often have very challenging behaviours when they are at school. He goes on to explain that these issues remain insufficiently well researched, because of three reasons:

- Many teachers are insufficiently trained both in behaviour management, as well as in attendance management issues.
- Many students do not have their attendance and behavioural needs identified soon enough, thus interventions take place too late.
- There are very few interventions in place.

These points should, as I see it, be included in the extensive list at the beginning of the book. Additionally, it must be noted that it may be tricky to talk about students' needs, as this once again shifts the problem of low attendance and misbehaviour as originating merely within the student. Labels are further intensified with such lists and in my opinion they should be avoided as they may be misunderstood. For example, concerning "Asperger's Syndrome et seq", which is linked to truancy in the above list, I can attest, as a person with Asperger's Syndrome myself, that there are numerous examples of students who had a lot of success at school

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because of this neurodiversity (Marshall, 2015). It is extreme to suggest that certain inherent characteristics are "closely linked to" (p. 4) truancy, as they are often not.

Carroll (2016) notes that truancy and school refusal are often labels with a negative connotation which locate the problem within the student and do not take into consideration the fact that it is a phenomenon which has to do with a heterogeneous group of students. What I am saying is that these labels neither take into consideration important contexts such as the students' school, home, neighbourhood and the wider society. Therefore, research which focuses on these aspects through students' standpoints seems to be essential both in the Cypriot context as well as more widely, as the above literature review reveals.

In conclusion, a possible answer to the question of why certain acts of non-attendance related to school policies are not counted as truancy may be linked to how truancy is defined. By locating the phenomenon within the student herself/himself, factors outside the student are de-emphasised, e.g. school related factors such as the teachers. In other words, the extent to which some unexcused absences will not count as truancy depends on what the root causes of truancy are taken to be; if these causes are limited to students' intrinsic characteristics, or if these intrinsic characteristics have much more gravity when listing the possible causes of truancy, then one can understand why some school policies which set the stage to unexcused absences are not counted as truancy. Whether this should be the case, must be critically re-examined by educators and researchers alike.

In such a context, teachers' role may be very important. Teachers themselves often do not realise the positive impact they can have in making students feel welcomed to their school as well as in increasing their degree of engagement and feeling of belonging. Although there is a big difference between claiming that "teachers can make a difference and teachers are the difference" (Gale, in Zyngier, 2011, p. 223), in my opinion teachers would greatly benefit from realising how crucial their role is. Perhaps truancy is challenging, not because it denotes that there is something inherently wrong with the student, but because behind any unauthorised absence, there is a solid reason which may not always be so easy to grasp at first. Teachers may be part of that reason, as they may also be part of the solution; as it will later be more extensively discussed, sometimes the conditions favoured in the classroom by the teacher are such that they are not always optimum for maximising attendance. Through self-reflection and struggle for personal progress, a teacher can and should also try to be part of the

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solution. When coming across clear or subtle indicators, such as the absence rate of a student gradually rising, increase in minor ailments (headaches, nausea, etc.), skipping the odd lesson, frequently being late to school and being reluctant to attend certain lessons (tantrums, avoidance tactics, poor punctuality) (Lever 2011), the teacher should take a thoughtful stance, as well as act in appropriate ways, in order to understand the real reasons behind the student's actions.

In educational settings which wish to claim that they really struggle for inclusion, all kinds of behaviours should be recognised and respected as part of human diversity. Even silence should be considered as a conveyor of messages from students. From my experience as a teacher, I have noticed that physical truancy is often preceded by mental absence as well as regular complaints of minor ailments such as headaches. Therefore, a physical absence is usually preceded by a behaviour that the teacher must be able to decode. This can often be tricky, since the reasons of truancy are not always straightforward. For example, a student might use all kinds of excuses concerning an absence, but the real reason behind it could be something much less obvious, yet very important, such as bullying (Richards and Armstrong, 2011). It is this kind of behaviour that teachers need to address inside and outside classrooms, as well as reflect on their own behaviours and actions as a response to them. As I see it, one of the most important parameters of teacher response should be the emphasis on students' voices, as previously discussed. All students have something relevant to say, and it is crucial that we are willing to listen and respond accordingly (Richards 2014) and that we are there to encourage and support our students, not coerce them in any way (Lever 2011). It is in this communication with students that teachers need to be willing to engage constructively. Teachers need to be willing to decode such causes when the student is afraid to communicate them in a straight forward way, something that can be achieved only if the students feel that their voice is recognised, respected, valued and listened to.

Theories such as Maslow's theory concerning the level of belonging and self-esteem have tried to explain the complexity of the feelings that might be involved behind students' actions or excuses (Lever 2011). According to this theory, every student needs support, reassurance and a sense of belonging. Therefore, if students are made to feel unwelcome, they become stressed, disillusioned and disaffected. From there, truancy is a short step away as students are

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at the edge of schooling. Once a student realises that being absent removes the stress, they will probably repeat it (ibid).

Research in the Cypriot educational system has clearly shown that particular factors related both to policy and practice (e.g. attitudes of teachers, little support provided by teachers, heavy and old-fashioned curriculum) can lead to exclusion and marginalisation of certain groups of students (Iacovou, 2012; Petrou, Angelides and Leigh, 2009). These groups can be divided, according to Petrou, Angelides and Leigh (2009), into two categories. The first comprises those groups that are 'officially' marginalised according to specific laws and regulations. For example, as mentioned previously, some students are marginalised when they are separated from their peers in order to attend support classes in special settings (Iacovou, 2012; Phtiaka, 1997a). The second category describes the groups of students which are unofficially marginalised because of

> some of the normative behaviours that are socially and formally (or even informally) constructed within schools. For instance, some other children, even though they belong to the same education environment, are marginalised because of their individual differences and the consequent incompatibility with the pervasive social or individual expectations of the dominant culture (Petrou, Angelides and Leigh, 2009, p.440).

As a result, students who are labelled as different, may be made to feel unwelcome, disengaged and are consciously or unconsciously encouraged not to attend their classes.

However, according to critical transformative/empowering approaches (Zyngier, 2011) in relation to 'at-risk'[9] students, which will be discussed later more extensively, meaningful engagement as well as a deeper consideration of what the students have to say is of crucial importance because "(i)n the end, it is about what the students themselves say and think" (Zyngier, 2011, p. 226). Teachers need to problematise and realise that in order to try to "(u)nderstand why... some (students) resist school..., one needs to understand ... the way... ['at

[9] I prefer to call them 'students at the edge of schooling', a phrase which, as I see it, unlike the phrase 'at risk' students, does not imply that the cause is necessarily to be found within the students themselves. Students are of course at risk of dropping out of school, there are, however, negative connotations attached to the label "at risk"; often students are considered as *being* at risk, with their intrinsic characteristics listed as the root causes of that "state of being". In reality, these are students who may not have found themselves at the edge of schooling, but who may have been pushed or pulled there by other factors apart from merely intrinsic ones.

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risk' youth] make sense of the world (and their imagined futures through the various... lenses available to them)" (Gilbert and Gilbert, in Zyngier, 2011, p. 222).

Recently, there has been an upsurge in the implications of involving children and young people as active participants in educational research (Messiou and Hope, 2015; Beaton, 2014). Also, as argued by Busher (2014), by engaging in discourses, teachers encourage students to develop positive and pro-active identities as learners, help them understand educational decision-making processes and give them the opportunity to raise critical questions concerning these processes. An important underpinning of these empowering approaches is that it specifically attempts to privilege the point of view of the least advantaged students, through their critique and participation, since the position of the least advantaged "is a better starting-point for understanding the totality of the social world than is the position of those who enjoy its advantages" (Cornell, in Zyngier, 2011, p. 221). It is the voice of these students who are at the edge of schooling that this research aims to address, understand, empower and make known.

2.5.4 Staying out of class/school

2.5.4.1 Types of truancy

There are numerous theoretical perspectives trying to explain unauthorised absences from school. According to these, truancy can be of different types. According to Lever (2011), truancy falls into three distinct categories: *wanton truancy*, *truancy due to school phobia* and *condoned truancy* due to parents. Wanton truancy is when a student does not want to attend school simply because they cannot be bothered or they have found something 'better to do' with their time (Reid, 2014; Lever, 2011). School phobia is when a student has anxiety issues like panic attacks when he/she is asked to go to school (McCormack 2005, Reid 1999), and condoned truancy is when parents, even though the child may be perfectly happy at school, encourage their child not to attend it (Reid 1999).

Concerning condoned truancy, Reid (2014), McCormack (2005), as well as Cullingford (1999) suggest that it can also be a result of encouragement by the teachers, who aim to be

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relieved by not having to handle disruptive students. Although it is true that probably no teacher would openly encourage a student not to attend a class, McCormack (2005) suggests that due to management difficulties, especially in large classes, the climate in the classroom is such that it is not always optimum for maximising attendance. A student says:

> Well, there again, it's a boring lesson. I'll give you an instance – there was a lesson with a cookery teacher and it should have been science and we just read about cookery. Every week, she used to say, 'If you behave yourself you would have been out on the grass this week'. Well, that used to be said every week. So boys started to drift out and they got caught and told off (Corrigan 1979, p.27).

While this teacher did not consciously encourage students not to attend her class, in her effort to deal with her classroom management difficulties, she chose a strategy which proved to be a catalyst for truancy. That way she might have managed to 'get rid of' disruptive students and probably feel relieved, but that happened at the cost of lying to them by giving empty promises, thus gradually making them not wanting to attend the lesson as well as eventually depriving them of their right to be educated along their peers. This type of truancy can be linked to what is referred to as '*specific lesson absence*' (Reid, 2014; 1999), which occurs when students find the subject boring, or when they fall behind their peers and feel they cannot manage to get on, or because of the actions of a specific teacher, as seen in the example mentioned above.

According to McCormack (2005), another distinct category is *culturally motivated truancy*, which emanates from the fact that there is a great degree of diversity in multicultural societies concerning the views about the value and purpose of education. For example, in some cultures there is an expectation that young girls marry and become mothers, or stay at home and help with the raising of younger siblings, therefore there is not much value placed upon education. Apart from this, Gennetian, Rodrigues, Hill, and Morris (2018), Weiss and Brown (2013), as well as McCormack (2005), suggest that truancy can be due to economic reasons; the financial strains and the need for more money in the family might force the parents to encourage their child not to go to school, even though the child may be perfectly happy there. This situation is often worse in families where there is no history of academic success for the parents (Reid, 2016; McCormack, 2005). This can be related to the category of condoned truancy, as discussed previously, according to which parents 'cover' their child's absence, for example by

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sending fake sickness notes in school. According to Reid (1999) it is important that teachers and school administrators note that:

> A parental note, by itself, does not automatically make an absence authorised. It is the school's acceptance of the explanation offered by that note which authorises the absence. Quite often, schools expect notes from parents when pupils miss half or whole days from school, or make a visit to, for example, the dentist. They do not always ask for similar notes when pupils miss specific lessons or disappear after registration (p. 40).

Reid (1999) refers to this type of truancy as '*blanket truancy*', which occurs when the child fails to attend school and lacks authorisation for failing to do so. Unfortunately, from my experience in the school where I work, this often happens with the parents' consent, and, even worse, there are teachers who are willing to accept parental notes even in cases where they suspect or they know that these notes are not real, e.g. students forging their parent's signature on a parental note.

Reid (2014; 1999) and McCormack (2005) suggest that truancy can be *post-registration*, in which case students are absent from classes without necessarily leaving the school premises, a situation which proves that registration does not necessarily indicate attendance in lessons. At the school where I currently work, this type of truancy is very popular amongst students. In an ethnographic research I conducted in the specific school concerning the school experience of students who had been assigned with an Individualised Lesson Plan (Iacovou, 2012), I noticed that many students, when interviewed, initially argued that they benefited from withdrawing from general class in order to attend the support classes. Observation however proved that in reality they skipped both classes but always remained in the school premises. Although the interviews were conducted with their consent, I realised that it was only when I spent more time with them during break times and afternoons that they started trusting me and expressing their real feelings. Quoting an entry from my field notes concerning a student's words (translated from Greek): "if I stay out (of class) instead of going to the support class and they (the peers in the general class) see me, I feel good. Because they have to be in class but I don't". Taking into consideration that the students who attended support classes were often mocked by other students as being 'stupid' and 'slow', post-registration/inside school truancy seemed to have served as a display of power for these students, over their peers (ibid).

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In the preceding paragraphs, truancy has been defined as the physical unauthorised absence of students from class and/or from school. However, it is important to note that absence can also be mental. According to McCormack (2005, p.1), "either the pupils are not there to learn in the first place or, over a period of time, they opt out by not attending or by absenting themselves mentally from the learning process". This type of truancy is often referred to as '*near truancy*' or '*psychological truancy*' and it

> occurs when a child physically attends school yet fails to participate in any other meaningful way. For example, a pupil may 'switch off' in lessons allowing his or her mind to wander… Consequently, simply accepting that attendance means participation (or interest in a lesson) can be misguided. Some researchers have argued that physical truancy is only part of the problem. Quiet children who are present in the classroom but who do not take part in the lessons, are sometimes regarded as being just as absent as those who fail to attend school (Reid 1999, p.40-41).

Apart from 'near truancy', there are other early predictors/warning signs for truancy for teachers to detect. These may include depression, low school achievement, social problems, and decreased participation in school sports (Hunt and Hopko, in Strand, Anbäcken and Granlund, 2015). The students who begin to have irregular patterns of attendance are likely to be characterised as being:

- socially isolated
- at risk of harm during times of absence
- more likely to be involved in socially unacceptable and/or illegal activities
- less knowledgeable and competent and lacking in the understanding of even basic concepts
- suffering from low general levels of self-esteem and have low academic self-concepts
- feeling insecure, unhappy or anti-social when in school
- unable to make friends or having fewer friends than some of their peers
- isolated from social groups in school and in some other in- and out-of-school activities
- more likely to leave school early
- over-represented in the juvenile justice system
- brought to their first-start school with a range of apparent social and/or learning problems from an early age
- found to have literacy and numeracy deficiencies
- diagnosed as having special or additional learning needs
- the victim of in-school or external bullying and harassment, including cyber bullying.

> Research evidence also shows that many pupils can soon graduate from the initial and occasional levels of non-attendance to the persistent stage and truancy, with the number of causes and reasons given for missing school rising expeditiously… (Reid, 2014, p. 3)

Other warning signs are, again according to Reid (2014):

- frequent lateness
- leaving school early or without permission
- failure to return to school for the afternoon session

- specific lesson absences
- post-registration truancy
- patterned absence
- missing odd days
- missing the same days regularly (e.g. Mondays and/or Fridays)
- being the victim of bullying (any or all types) and/or harassment
- having specific learning difficulties or special or additional learning needs;
- having literacy or numeracy weaknesses
- falling behind with school work
- failing to undertake or complete homework
- having a disability or physical weakness (e.g. being significantly short, overweight or other abnormality)
- having health problems (e.g. asthma, diabetes, etc.)
- having family concerns (parental separation, divorce or a serious illness of a close family member such as mother or sister)
- having safety issues or concerns at home, school, or on the way to/from school
- having personality issues with particular staff or pupils (sic)
- having temper tantrums
- being aggressive, uncooperative or rude
- manifesting social, psychiatric psychological or mental health issues
- experiencing transition or school transfer difficulties
- having issues related to poverty or other forms of deprivation
- moving house to a different neighbourhood or area. (p. 4)

Again, we can see a list of characteristics which imply either pathology within the students themselves or problems outside the school environment (i.e. family problems). The only point referring to miscommunication between the student and staff (i.e. a teacher) is oddly characterised as a personality issue of the student. Again here there are crucial implications for inclusive practice. These implications, along with the reasons and signs of overall school dropout, are discussed in more depth in the following section.

2.5.4.2 Decision and outcomes of staying out of class/school

During adolescence, students take important decisions about their lives, always within the constraints of the social reality in which they live. Such an important and conscious decision is whether they will stay in the school system and be a part of it (Traag and Van der Velden, 2011). The decision to engage in truancy and finally to drop out of school is one of the manifestations of school failure and is a social and educational phenomenon that is causing widespread concern among researchers and other decision makers around the world (Aloise-Young and Chavess, in Rosenblum, Goldblatt and Moin, 2008). Studies show that truancy

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brings about school dropouts (Henry and Yelkpieri, 2017). As far as the European Union is concerned[10], it is a problem affecting one in seven youths (Commission of the European Communities, 2011) and is considered to have a negative impact both on the lives of these young people and on society and the economy as a whole (Traag and Van der Velden, 2011; Rumberger, 1987). The impact of dropouts is considered to be inversely proportional to the age of the pupils, meaning that younger pupils who leave school are more likely to face greater social and economic problems (Stearns and Glennie, 2006).

The fact that some adolescents take the decision to leave class/school may be due to a number of reasons. Attwood and Croll (2015) used data from a large-scale survey in the English context and found that well over one in five students reported truanting but high levels of truancy were much less common. The reasons given for truancy mostly revolved around disliking aspects of school. Henry and Yelkpieri (2017), who categorise truancy into student related, family related and school related, suggest that:

> The causes of truancy are principally peer group pressure, failure of parents to provide the basic needs of their wards and poor monitoring on the part of teachers and parents. This means that truancy is a multi-dimensional issue that must be tackled from all fronts to ensure that it is curbed or minimized in schools. Unless serious steps are taken, it has the potential to derail the youths' future. (p. 51)

Adika (2016), who conducted a quantitative research in the Nigerian context, reported that there are significant differences in the perceptions of male and female adolescents as touching causes of truancy, but did not mention which these differences are. It was, however, mentioned that male students seem to be more prone to truancy than female students. Also, significant differences existed in the perceptions of adolescents from educated and those from uneducated homes. Adolescents from a low socioeconomic background were more prone to truancy than their counterparts from highly educated homes, because they needed to stay at home to assist in their parents' home and business, thus did less at school and spent less time at school. The researcher recommends that governments should make schools more student-friendly, in order to attract students and sustain their interest in school.

[10] According to the European Union's interim report on education, in relation to its 2020 targets under the Lisbon strategy.

Teuscher and Makarova (2018) found that the decision to drop out of school is not an immediate one. Rather, the result of a long-term process of withdrawal from school, with school disengagement and truancy being among the most prominent precursors of school dropout. They also found that the migration background is of crucial importance for school engagement, while student age is an important factor in triggering truancy. In their research, which took place in the Swiss context, immigrant youths were associated with a higher risk of dropping out of school. Peer-relationships were positively related to students' school engagement, but not to their truancy. These researchers also found that a good student-teacher relationship has positive impacts on students' school engagement and is also negatively associated with truancy. The researchers suggest that teachers can promote their students' school engagement through maintaining positive relationships in the classroom; that way, teachers can prevent students' truant behaviour. As I see it, perhaps the positive relationships could extend outside the classroom environment too, during break times and even in the afternoon, e.g. with home visits or other activities such as sports. The effect of this extension needs further analysis and it is something that ethnographic research is perfectly suitable for finding out.

Stearns and Glennie (2006) more explicitly group the reasons for truancy in two distinct categories, which they call pull-out and push-out. The first category (pull-out) refers to family obligations, which may include family creation, work and/or the care of a new-born baby. These reasons mainly concern girls but also foreign students (e.g. see Chircop, 1997). As far as work is concerned, one of the findings of this research is that students are often forced to work at low wages or even no wage, for the well-being of their families. Sultana (1990) has indicated that ethnic origin, class and gender influence what kind of job a student may have, with girls being mostly involved in home-based activities such as babysitting. Being obliged to help out in household chores is also reported to exclude girls from school (Sultana, 2007).

The second category (push-out) concerns internal rules of the school, such as zero-tolerance policies, internal rules on disciplinary offenses, and the internal structure of the school. These factors lead some students to conclude that they are not welcome at school, thus they decide to drop out. Stearns and Glennie (2006), as well as Rotin (1997) suggest that during this process it is possible for schools to 'get rid' of students who were labelled as having disruptive behaviour, so as to focus on educating the more typical students. Also,

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according to Jordan, Lara and McPartland (1996), this category mainly concerns boys rather than girls.

However, in addition to the reasons mentioned above, which consider that students themselves take the conscious decision to drop out of school, there are studies which maintain that dropouts occur either due to the pathology of the students themselves or to their 'problematic' behaviour, which is thought to be a result of their past experience (Rumberger, 1987). According to Reid (2016; 2014) and Osher *et al* (2003), students who drop out of school are youths with mental and physical health problems or endogenous behavioural problems and therefore need special education programs. Other researchers suggest that these are students who come from a low socioeconomic background (Reid, 2016; Reid, 2014; Rumberger, 1995; 1983), from single-parent and/or large families, but also students who have working class, low-educated parents (Traag and Van der Velden 2011). In addition, a breakup in a family (e.g. separation, divorce) increases the likelihood of a dropout (Pong and Ju, 2000). These factors resemble the list of early signs of truancy by Reid (2014), which was previously quoted. This resemblance in turn indicates that when students are truanting, they may end up dropping out of school altogether. Indeed, there are references in literature that an early sign of a dropout is a discontinuity in student attendance (Rosenblum, Goldblatt and Moin, 2008). However, I find the often overly pathological focus of these lists to be worrisome, as the exclusionary practices of the school system itself are missing. For example, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1996), the school system is increasingly excluding as we approach the less privileged classes. It is apparent that new insights are needed when considering such lists.

Other studies have also reported that lower school performance is closely related to truancy and finally to dropouts (Henry and Yelkpieri, 2017; Traag and Van der Velden, 2011). Attwood and Croll (2015) found that truancy, even at low levels, is associated with negative outcomes such as poor examination results and later unemployment. It is noteworthy that according to the findings of Traag and Van der Velden (2011), in schools with a large percentage of students belonging to minority populations, such as students from foreign countries, there is a bigger danger for truancy and eventual dropouts. The reason given by these researchers is that these students may be disadvantaged concerning the official language spoken and written in the specific setting, therefore there are very few social stimuli for them.

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In addition, it is worth noting that according to Rumberger (1987), the characteristics of the students truanting and eventually leaving school are largely identical to those reported for the participants in Willis's (1977/1981) research. In Rumberger's study it was also observed that these students tended to hang out with students who were less adherent to school culture than students regularly attending school. Moreover, in girl groups of truant students, the group cohesion was achieved through their emotional communication (ibid), which is also suggested by Rusell (2011). For boys, on the other hand, group solidarity was achieved through drinking and/or smoking with peers (Frances and Fanny, 2003; Rumberger, 1987) or through violent acts (Rumberger, 1987; Willis, 1977/1981).

The most immediate consequences of permanently staying out of school are, according to Entwisle, Alexander and Olson (2005), that students are separated from their peers, stigmatised by society even on issues related to their sexual relationships, and that the natural flow to adulthood is interrupted, having never taken part at the milestone of graduation. According to Attwood and Croll (2015) truancy is strongly associated with poorer levels of well-being. In their study in the English context, girls were more likely to report problems of mental well-being than boys. According to Traag and Van der Velden (2011) and Rumberger (1987), early school leaving increases the likelihood that young people will be unemployed in the future for long periods of time and that periodically will find themselves in low-paying jobs, even if this is often considered by them as a natural state of being, as previously discussed. Not obtaining a graduation degree makes them incompetent for the labour market and the development of technology implies that these individuals will find it difficult to acquire the appropriate qualifications (Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004), since in many countries an alternative is not offered (Rumberger, 1987). Because of unemployment, these individuals are considered to be more likely to be involved in illegal and criminal acts, such as theft, as previously mentioned, but also to be recipients of government benefits.

According to the European Union's interim report on education (Commission of the European Communities, 2011), the unemployment rate for people aged 20-60 in Cyprus is much higher for those who left school early than for those who received a degree. Specifically, the percentage of working population is 67.5% of those who have dropped out of school (compared to the average of 53.8% across the European Union), 74.7% of those who have completed secondary education (with the average for the whole of the European Union being

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70.4%) and 82.1% for people with a tertiary education degree (compared to the average of 82.1% across the European Union).

In addition, according to the same report, the proportion of youths dropping out of education in Cyprus was 18.5% in 2000 (with an average for the entire European Union being 17.6% in the same year), 13.7% in 2007 (averaging 14.9% for the whole European Union) and 11.7% in 2009 (averaging 14.4% for the European Union). It is noteworthy that for 2009, the proportion of these students was about 8% higher in boys than in girls. For more recent figures, the percentage of youths dropping out of school has increased from 5.2% in 2015 to 8.5% in 2017 (Korelli, Kyriacou-Liveri and Theocharous, 2019). Although this figure is still within the 10% target set by the European Union for 2020 and lower than the EU average of 10.6% in 2017 (ibid), it is timely to focus on the students who are on the verge of dropping out. Korelli, Kyriacou-Liveri and Theocharous (2019) believe that the reason Cyprus is below the EU average of early school leavers is because of measures of focusing on restructuring the education system, upgrading vocational education, modernising the curricula and adopting measures for facilitating the integration of students 'at risk' in the school system. However, the effect of other relevant factors, such as home-school relations remain largely unexplored. Moreover, I strongly believe that focusing on these students' voice can inform educators and other stakeholders as to what changes are necessary in order to decrease the now increasing percentage of early school leavers. It is the increase which should be worrisome, in my opinion, not the fact that we are currently under the EU average.

It is also worth mentioning a phenomenon reported by Rosenblum, Goldblatt and Moin, (2008), the so called "hidden dropout phenomenon[11]", where the official number of pupils who are reported to drop out of school is less than the actual one. It is a phenomenon which was observed in the Cypriot educational context too (Iacovou and Christou, 2011). Athough according to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth schooling is compulsory up to the age of fifteen, in the specific European Union survey measuring the percentage of

[11] Sultana (2006) uses this term in another way, namely as students' acts of 'hidden drop-out' before actual drop-out occurs - what I instead referred to as *near truancy*/*psychological truancy* in section 2.5.4.1.

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students who drop out of school, the sample was set differently. According to a Pedagogical Institute research officer whom I contacted via email:

> The issue of dropouts, as defined by the European Union, concerns the recording of a sample of 18-24 year olds in households which are asked to declare whether they have completed their secondary education. Therefore, for Cyprus, the sample of Cypriot students studying abroad is 'lost' [i.e. not counted in the sample] but all others are counted (as in other countries), eg. immigrants, etc. For this reason and because the methodology of this index is such, Cyprus has an increased percentage. If one explores students who are not completing their secondary education in Cyprus, that number will surely be one-digit… (personal communication, March 2011)

Although such a quantitative research is respectable, I still think that it is not enough to talk about 'lost' participants or 'counting' others. Therefore, the necessity of using a qualitative approach to the issue is of crucial importance; if and where possible, voices should not be considered to be mere numbers and not even one voice should be 'lost'. Quite simply because "when is one not enough?" (Wolcott, in Ware, 1994).

2.5.5 Approaches to low attendance and truancy: the formation of sub-cultures and resistance

2.5.5.1 Systems Theory and salutogenesis

Strand, Anbäcken and Granlund (2015) have used *systems theory* and the *salutogenesis* concept to study truancy in the Swedish context:

> According to systems theory, the interplay between factors within a system can be described as factors pulling the system in a particular direction… the different interrelated forces in different nested systems that affect a student's truancy can be discovered and described using Bronfenbrenner's… ecological systems model… The nested systems comprise the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem. All these systems are embedded in a chronosystem, which illustrates changes over time. The microsystem contains the different environments, e.g., classroom, family, where the person interacts directly with the environment. The mesosystem contains the relations and interactions between micro systems, e.g., family–school interactions and relations. The … school law … provides a mesosystem tool in the family–school interaction by forcing schools to inform parents or guardians right away if their child is absent from school. The exosystem relates to systems in which what happens affects a person even though that person is not physically present, e.g., a teacher's group or a parent's workplace. Finally, the macrosystem contains culture, laws, and regulations at a societal level that indirectly affect the person, e.g., the school law (p. 294-295).

Moreover,

> Salutogenesis, the origin of health, is a stress resource orientated concept, which focuses on resources, maintains and improves the movement towards health. It gives the answer why people despite stressful situations and hardships stay well. The theory can be applied at an individual, a group, and a societal level. It is the opposite of the pathogenic concept where the focus is on the obstacles and deficits (Lindstrom and Eriksson, in Strand, Anbäcken and Granlund, 2015, p. 296).

Using these theories, the researchers concluded that the student-participants could be separated in three groups as far as the level of the social support they perceived that they received: the winners in the school system, the unchallenged by the school system and the losers in the school system. The winners engaged adults close to them and thus made a positive difference that restored their relationship with school. The unchallenged and the losers of the school system had poor social relationships with the school staff, especially within the classroom. A scarcity of relationships with classmates was also observed for all three groups. Most of the students expressed a lack of perceived social support, but overall, when school staff was engaged, the students perceived themselves as supported, a fact which denotes the significant role of the teacher in supporting students at the edge of schooling. The researchers explain that only the perceived rather than the received social support (e.g. support in the classroom, in the school environment, and outside of school) plays a role in the well-being of the students. Therefore, systems theory, in combination with the salutogenesis concept, are ways of understanding how teachers can communicate with students with truancy problems and of respecting their voices, rather than merely using the pathogenic concept/medical model, which focus on perceived deficits of the students.

2.5.5.2 Sociology of deviance

Sociology of deviance is a theory which has also tried to explain the phenomenon of classroom misbehaviour and has also been used as a psychological approach to truancy (Franzese 2009; Phtiaka, 1997). Sociology has been greatly influenced by the work of social scientists at Chicago School, i.e. at the University of Chicago, during the first half of the twentieth century. According to France (2007), this school of thought wanted to investigate the impact of rapid urbanisation in Chicago city, when it started undergoing a massive expansion in its infrastructure, its economic growth and its immigrant population. Social scientists wanted to understand the effect of this growth on issues of social cohesion and on

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crime levels. One of the founding fathers of this school of thought, Robert Park, was a scientist by profession and was interested in what he called 'the social ecology of the city'. A range of disciplines influenced the approach taken by these scientists, but the anthropological study of human life was at its heart (ibid).

As the city developed, it was observed that a number of concentric zones could be identified where social life was differentiated. At the centre was the business zone, with rich properties and a small residential population and next to this was the zone where the poor and the immigrants lived. It was this area that interested the researchers of the Chicago School. They became focused on the 'youth problem' in this area, that is, the groups of young people who were seen as creating problems for their communities. So the hobo, street gangs, prostitution and especially juvenile delinquency became the focus of their studies. Many of these studies argued that social disorganisation is the cause of delinquency (ibid). On the other hand, social disorganisation is a 'cultural transmission' of delinquency (Taylor *et al* 1973, in France, 2007). Therefore, ever since, there has been a debate over whether social disorganisation is a sign of delinquency or delinquency is a sign of social disorganisation.

Within this debate, the concept of school as a social system was introduced in the late sixties. This had its roots in Durkheim's idea that deviance, far from being irrational, can be seen as a response to given social circumstances (Phtiaka, 1997). Researchers were therefore interested in understanding the logic of such deviant behaviour; from a sociological perspective, this was recorded from the students' point of view (ibid). This may have caused the upsurge of accounts of students' voices. One of the models that tried to explain students' deviant behaviour and truancy was the sub-cultural model, developed by Albert Cohen (ibid).

2.5.5.3 Sub-cultures, negative formation and resistance

Albert Cohen originally believed that every person is striving to achieve the values dictated by society, but soon realised that these values were far from value free, as they were dictated by the minority in power (Phtiaka, 1997). In his work with Chicago gangs, the question arose whether these values were internalised by working class people. He argued that working class boys were unable to achieve the values dictated by society, because they lacked

the necessary resources and that their frustration, due to their inability to succeed, led to the creation of a sub-culture which was dictated by a reaction and a resistance towards academic success and middle class values (ibid). Cohen's theory was later adapted for use within education, by sociologists such as Hargreaves, Lacey, Ball, Corrigan and Willis.

According to Corrigan (1979), students perceive education as valuable, they are ambitious and they try to learn. However, since the educational system has not always been able to provide all students with the same opportunities for learning, for example students of lower socioeconomic background, it is often difficult for them to be in tune with the values the school encourages (Broomhead, 2014), especially if the school fails to interact fully with their homes. Holding values which are unattainable can create psychological tension to the students, called 'negative formation'. As a result, if these students

> cannot be ambitious because the structure of education does not allow them to be, then they become deliberately unambitious… This 'sub-culture' within the school reinforces itself by recognizing that its own problems are not simply individual, but that they are being suffered by certain sorts [of students]…. In this way groups [of students] are formed whose values are diametrically opposed to those of the school because they have tried and failed to attain the school's values (Corrigan 1979, p. 20-21).

Renowned sociologist Paul Willis (1977/1981) has reached similar conclusions, but went even further in his analysis:

> (Willis) didn't just analyse society's structures. He demonstrated that oppositional forms of resistance are only partial insights into 'the lads' choosing to reject mental work; they were preparing themselves for the manual labour workplace (Russell, 2011, p.9).

Therefore, Willis did not just state that it is the school system which is held responsible for creating a resistance towards mental labour for the working class lads and an attraction towards a manual one, with the resistance of such sub-cultures often taking the form of reprehensible student behaviour such as vandalism, smoking, truancy etc., as a means of actively challenging their school experience. Willis' insight, which has made his work so renowned and, as I see it, a masterpiece of the kind, is the process through which the dominating mechanisms of school helped seal the lads' future outcome as workers, thus enabling social reproduction; it was the lads' resistance and opposition to these dominating mechanisms that led to what he called the lads' 'self damnation'. The lads chose to enter into working class jobs not merely as an inclination towards these jobs but because through their school sub-culture they ended up embracing values other than the values dictated by society,

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i.e. other than academic values. Through their partial insights, they believed that manual labour was more authentic and more sensual and for them, entering a working class job was the ultimate victory against the dominating mechanisms of school. This perceived success, the culmination of their resistance and opposition to middle class values is, as Willis called it, a 'pyrrhic victory', as it enabled and catalysed social reproduction of class. Willis' work therefore effectively captures the tension between structure and agency, a very helpful conceptual framework for studying students' perspectives (Russell, 2011).

Russell (2011) sees students as agents and argues that they can confront macro structures and gain some degree of limited power in influencing their school experience. Russell also believes that Willis (as well as other renowned theorists such as Apple and Giroux) may have overstated the link between class and resistance, as there is evidence indicating that opposition to school and class background are not necessarily linked so strongly. Walker (in Russell, 2011) also criticised Willis' conceptual framework as being paradoxical, on the grounds that an individual cannot be free to choose one's own destiny, while simultaneously being constrained by structure. Russell contends that there is a need to move into a focus on individuals seen as creative agents who are able to affect change in social structures (McFadden, in Russell, 2011).

Russell (2011) also criticises Apple's, Giroux's and Willis' work as underestimating the extent to which gender and ethnicity may affect student resistance. Examples of studies focusing on such gender differences were cited and analysed in section 2.2. Russell also cites ethnographies which show that girls and boys resistance patterns are different; girls tend to be more open and overt in their resistance in comparison to what was previously thought, and also they tend to operate together, as a collective force both inside and outside of the classroom to support their friends and emancipate themselves against certain teachers and the school system.

In her own research, Russell (2011) also found that resistance is gender divergent. She argued that this can be explained if one takes into consideration the different school and societal ideologies and practices that they are conforming to or opposing. Girls, according to Russell, unlike boys, do not tend to be so influenced by their peers and by the wider community. Rather, they tend to exhibit more engaged and collective forms of resistance and are more confrontational and aggressive in their visibility, prominence and tone. Russell

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believes that this is due to the wider societal culture which places gendered specific expectations over them, like domestic responsibilities for the girls, and notes that the school is implicated in the production of masculinities and femininities. The girls often resisted in order to provide emotional support to their friends and to secure their place within the social hierarchy by ridiculing students who conformed to school rules, although the latter type of resistance was more apparent within white boys' groups, just like Paul Willis' Learning to Labour. Russell concludes that each student has their own personality, their own gender, ethnic and national identity and social position, therefore they accept and reject different rules, teachers and beliefs, and it is the interaction of these traits that help to understand the different forms of resistance amongst them.

Perhaps more importantly, Russell (2011) lucidly explains the categories of overt and covert resistance and individual and collective resistance. To these, she adds the more innovative intentional and unintentional resistance, as well as the engaged and detached, as follows:

> ***1a)*** *Overt* forms of resistance involve rebellion and disrupt the academic achievement, thus they are likely to cause exclusion from school, e.g. disobedience concerning school uniform and presentation. These are displayed forms of resistance which show that students demand some control over their identity and make a statement both to the school as well as to their peers.
>
> ***1b)*** *Covert* forms of resistance are not so candidly displayed and they do not necessarily involve an official rule breaking. They are more difficult for teachers to manage and they are less likely to disrupt academic achievement, e.g. limited participation in the lesson, daydreaming or criticism of the teacher over certain instructional procedures. These forms usually indicate rejection and challenge toward the school, without being rebellious.
>
> **2a)** *Individual* forms of resistance are conducted by one student, e.g. a student truanting alone.
>
> **2b)** *Collective* resistance is conducted by more than one student. They are more powerful in their effect on the lesson or their consequences to educational outcome. They are more difficult for the teacher(s) to manage.

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3a) *Intentional* resistance is planned and deliberate and serves an intended purpose. It is mostly rebellious, for example overtly ignoring a teacher's instructions or visibly defying formal school regulations.

3b) *Unintentional* resistance is neither conscious nor studied. The student may not even want to resist, but is viewed as doing so anyway, for example a girl missing a lesson to help another friend who is emotionally not well or a student staying at home to take care of their siblings or help their parents.

4a) *Engaged* forms of resistance are when a student somehow engages with the lesson but is still resisting in some way, e.g. a student who sarcastically answers a teacher's question in order to undermine her/him.

4b) *Detached* resistance is when a student physically removes themselves from a lesson, e.g. because they get bullied.

Russell (2011) believes that resistance can be viewed as a social construction and that these four continua of student resistance (overt-covert, individual-collective, intentional-unintentional and engaged-detached) should not be viewed as strict categories. Rather, it should be seen as a conceptual apparatus that takes into account the various faces of resistance. She also argues that resistance and engagement should not be viewed as mutually exclusive since a student may show various degrees of engagement but still be resisting. For her, resistance does not operate alone since resistance and acceptance may both be evident in the same context. Moreover, resistance can be viewed as operating between and along the various continua, for example, a form of resistance may both be intentional and overt at the same time. Thus the four continua may be seen as a conceptual apparatus which helps make clear how the multiple dimensions of resistance operate.

2.5.6 Interventions to truancy and low school attendance

Research has shown that the majority of truants come from deprived working class backgrounds (Reid 2012). From my experience as a teacher, I have seen that this kind of students' behaviour, when taken into account only superficially, often misleads teachers into believing that it is a result of some inherent problem of the student (medical model of

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disability) (Oliver and Barnes 2012, Oliver 2009). Reflecting on such behaviours from a more social point of view (researcher model of disability) (ibid) and especially taking into account the role of the school system in inducing or catalysing them, is, in my opinion, a powerful step for the development of more inclusive interventions. Also, continuous and meaningful home-school relations (Morgan, Ellis and Reid 2013, Phtiaka, 2008; Russell 2008, Epstein 2001) are indispensable to any intervention, as they can create an enabling environment for students who come from educationally disadvantaged homes. Meaningful home-school relations can also help students feel more in tune with the values the school encourages, as well as more respected and valued. Moreover, according to research, the key factor in an effective implementation of inclusive practices is the teacher (Damianidou, 2015). The support of students by the teacher is positively associated with student engagement, which is in turn negatively associated with truancy (Teuscher and Makarova, 2018; Strand, Anbäcken and Granlund, 2015; Virtanen, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus and Kuorelaht, 2014; Zyngier, 2011). In what follows, the methods of intervening with truancy are more explicitly analysed.

Levin, Hess and Labuer (in Rumberger, 1987) have conducted a study comparing the economic costs of dropouts and the economic benefits that the state may derive from the regular completion of students' secondary education. In this study it was found that the economic costs of dropouts are huge, in the case of the USA. Also, according to OECD, a non-attender is more likely to become and remain a burden to a country's benefit system than a successful student (McCormack 2005). Given the enormous financial costs that various governments have to bear from school dropouts, intervention programmes have been launched to prevent them. Attwood and Croll (2015) used data from a large-scale survey to study the long-standing issues of truancy and the mental well-being of students in England. Most students who engaged in truancy said that it was important for them to do well at school but also that disliking school was the reason they engaged in truancy. This, according to the researchers, is an indication that school interventions should be implemented. However, these researchers also admit that the problem of truancy seems to be long standing and very stubborn, and that the very substantial sums of money spent by the UK government on initiatives to reduce truancy, had not resulted in any reduction. In what follows, different intervention programmes are reviewed, without taking into consideration punitive measures which is the norm in countries such as the USA. Even in that context, there have been calls for

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more personalised interventions which aim in bringing students back to class, since the punitive approach does not seem to result in any improvement in attendance (Alaznick, 2015).

A common intervention for students who are prone to drop out of school and have started truanting, is a change of school environment, so that they can adapt to a new context and make a fresh start, although with this move it is not certain that students will stop their previous behaviour (Osher *et al*, 2003). In addition, this method is likely to further stigmatise the child (ibid). Another intervention is the collaboration between career counselling and educational counsellors, students, their parents and other stakeholders, in order to prevent students from leaving school (Ziomek-Daigle, 2010). Such intervention programs are widely used in the case of the Cypriot educational system, in particular through the collaboration of each school's counsellor, educational psychologist, liaison officer, pupil and parents (Career Counselling and Educational Service, 2011).

An alternative program suggested by Entwisle *et al* (2005), is the gradual transition of the learner to the work environment. The results of this study were that when students who are engaged in truancy are exposed to a work environment, they are more likely to return to school than students who did not work before leaving school. This, however, does not comply with Willis' finding that the lads, through their partial insights, valued work environment more than school. It does not comply with VET philosophy of exposure to industry either. Although the researchers do not explain their position in depth, their findings may be related to the fact that if students are exposed to a work environment and see its difficulties, they may want to return to school. The age at which this intervention will take place is likely important, since we know from the work of Willis (1977/1981) that the decision to be exposed to a work environment is willingly and happily made by a certain age of adolescence. However, intervening in such a way from a younger age may also have negative implications for children's well-being, as related to laws against child labour.

Another intervention method is to provide special education to students 'at risk', for example in the form of individualised curricula in support classes or in special education units (Iacovou, 2012; Osher *et al*, 2003). The language used for these methods is such that the students are further stigmatised and labelled (students 'at risk', providing education rather than students participating in educational programmes). This kind of language implies that there is a 'pathology' in those who drop out of school, which must be 'treated through special

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programs. It is this pathology which is extensively referred in literature to be a heavy determinant of truancy and dropouts and which, in my opinion, needs to be re-examined.

In a recent study, Bennett *et al (*2018) report on an experimental study that took place in Queensland, Australia; a school–police partnership was developed, which targeted truanting youth. The youths who had taken part in a collaborative conference and were buffered by increasing bonds to school and education, improving relationships with parents, enhancing formal and informal supervision, communicating and operationalising of their prosocial expectations (e.g. donating to charity), did not exhibit an increase in offending. According to the researchers, the program kept the experimental group at status quo (offending less) while the control group, which was not buffered, increased their criminal conduct over time. The researchers conclude that interventions need not be administered by a single agency (which is typically the school or, at the other extreme, by the presence solely of punitive measures by the police), but that partnerships of agencies are vital for the success of the intervention. They conclude that:

> schools can work in partnership with police, and of course families and their children, to curb truancy and at least one of its most salient adverse consequences (p. 323).

As previously mentioned, there is a significant link, according to research, between truancy and criminal behaviour. Armstrong (2006) argues that initiatives aimed at young people identified as being 'at-risk' of becoming criminal, often stigmatise already marginalised groups as well as impose mechanisms of surveillance upon them. Students with non-compliant behaviour are often dealt with punitive and authoritarian disciplinary systems that can lead to further exclusion from school (Hill and Brown, 2013). Armstrong (2006) further argues that genuine policies of inclusion must engage with young people based upon democratic principles of participation and commitment to them as citizens. Instead, intervention policies and programs are often heavily focused around 'problem behaviours' which need to be treated (medical model of disability). Even the names given to these intervention programs, such as CAT-RPM (Contextualised Assessment Tool for Risk and Protection Management) (Bower, Carroll and Ashman, 2015), label and stigmatise already marginalised groups, as they resemble nomenclature used by psychologists.

Zyngier (2011), in his review of current research into programs aimed at 'at-risk' students, questions the implicit assumptions and the consequences of those assumptions inherent in

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these programs. He identifies three standpoints in relation to 'at-risk' students, characterised as:

- instrumentalist or rational technical,
- social constructivist or individualist, and
- critical transformative or empowering,

in relation to various and varied understandings of social justice and the goals of education.

Instrumentalist views are linked to materialistic approaches, and are characterised by a retributive view of social justice. The goals of education are largely seen as vocational in order to prepare students for productive work. Thus intervention programs which fall under this category focus on the individual vulnerability and the psycho-pathological deficits of 'at-risk' students. Zyngier rightly states that "(i)n this pathological view, these deficits almost inevitably and inexorably lead children to 'succumb' to risk" (p. 214). However, these instrumentalist views are rejected as self-fulfilling labelling (Rosenthal and Jacobson, in Zygnier 2011). Initiatives based on this approach focus on psychological strategies that aim at correcting individual behaviours, a process which draws special attention to the role of professionals in the school context. This deficit view shifts the blame for school failure onto intrinsic factors such as the inability of the student to control his/her impulses, ineffective parenting and the student's inability to cope with stress.

Social constructivist views, on the other hand, are individualistic approaches to dealing with student success or failure and often include

> the segregation of at-risk students into separate school systems (technical colleges or vocational schools for the students 'good with their hands'), streaming or setting into 'separate but equal' courses for students at-risk within an academic school…, selective specialist government schools and elite, high-fee private schools… support services and programmes for students at-risk… programmes (which) include a mix of student focus and school focus issues… maintaining student engagement… through a focus on curriculum and pedagogical interventions, including work that requires responsibility and challenge… (Zyngier, 2011, p.216, 217, 219).

Historically, a typical example which is based on this approach has been included in the well-known and well-criticised Warnock report:

> I believe that the single most effective way to improve educational provision, especially for the fragile children… is to provide small maintained schools to which students would have access if,

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> and only if, they had a statement. Statements should indeed be used as passports to these schools, and for no other purpose… If their needs were more acute, and they were still failing at school, or behaving disruptively or truanting, they should be given a statement, an entry pass to a small school. In this way parents would come to regard it as a privilege for their child to have access to such a special, or specialist, school. They would be anxious for their children to get in… (Warnock, in Allan and Slee, 2008, 32).

Social constructivist views differ from instrumentalist views in that schools and education require significant structural reform in order to provide their support services for students at risk (Zyngier, 2011). Whereas in instrumentalist approaches the psychological behavioural strategies are implemented by professionals in the already existing school systems, typical of the social constructivist approach is to highlight the call for school reform and effectiveness. The publication of examination results (Mortimore and Mortimore, in Zyngier, 2011) and truancy rates (Barton, 1997), in the UK context, are often used as proof of this effectiveness. This process, however, perpetuates the disproportionate enrolments of 'at-risk' students in certain schools, thus creating a culture of disadvantage (Zyngier, 2011; Saltmarsh and Youdell, 2004; Walker, 1990). This culture of negative stereotypes and disadvantage is often the case with Technical and Vocational Schools, both in Cyprus (Symeou and Efthymiou, 2004) as well as in other European countries such as Spain (García-Gracia, 2008), even if there is no publication of examination results or truancy rates in the Cypriot context. In social constructivist solutions, however, 'inclusion' still occurs at an individual level (Mac Grath, in Zyngier, 2011), therefore it cannot be considered as genuine inclusion. Also, this approach seems to ignore sociological factors such as class and socio-economic background, and instead focuses on the efforts that have to be made both by teachers and students so that the deficits of both can be minimised (Zyngier, 2011).

In the case of the Cypriot educational system, both instrumentalist as well as social constructivist approaches have traditionally been present. In the past, the education of disabled students has been provided in special schools. It is only in the last few decades that it has been implemented mostly in the form of integration (Phtiaka, 1997). Although the 1999 Law clearly names integration as the rule and the education in a special school as an exception (children with disabilities have the right to be integrated at the school of their locality and be educated alongside their non-disabled peers) (Phtiaka 2006; Symeonidou 2002; Phtiaka 1997a), the education of disabled children within the state (public) school still has a segregated nature (Iacovou, 2012; Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2009; Phtiaka, 2006; Symeonidou, 2002; Phtiaka

1997a). In this context, just as in the case of special education in the past, professionals (such as educational psychologists, speech therapists, physiotherapists) continue to have the upper hand. The nature of the provisions of the Law is such so as to allow the presence of different kinds of professionals and support services at state (public) schools, which mostly aim in the individual behaviour management of students and thus can be considered as instrumentalist approaches.

As an example of such approaches, in my experience as a secondary school teacher, I have noticed that there are initiatives in the state (public) schools I worked concerning behaviour management, which place professionals in the leading role when deciding ways to respond to challenging behaviours from students. Such decisions are sometimes made without genuine collaboration with parents and teachers and are often clearly instrumentalist. For example, an incident from the school where I work was when some teachers were concerned about the behaviour of a Deaf student. More specifically, they were concerned because during break times the student preferred to run rather than walk in the school premises. To address this issue, an educational psychologist was called by the head teacher to come to the school. The specific student was an athlete who had recently participated in a Pancyprian sporting event and won the fifth place, and he often liked talking about how much he liked running. What is puzzling for me is that the psychologist decided, as a solution, that the student needs to be pulled out of the general class for more support classes, as well as the fact that the decision was reached without the students' parents being present at the meeting; the parents only agreed because they were convinced, as they later said, that 'the experts know better'. What is surprising is that these instrumentalist approaches, which clearly aim in the individual behaviour management of *different* students, often have many similarities. How can completely different behaviours by completely different students be treated in the exact same way - support classes and then more support classes? How can we accept treating students categorised as having a challenging behaviour in the exact same way and at the same time claim that this is the right way of responding to diversity, or that we are working towards a truly inclusive educational system? Paradoxically, individualising and abstracting seem to go hand in hand. According to classic critical theorists, abstracting students is a mechanism of hegemonic control, in which schools engage in anonymising and sorting out abstract individuals in preordained social and educational slots (Apple 1979).

The third standpoint identified by Zyngier is the critical transformative or empowering, which is based on a recognitive vision of social justice and seeks to develop student's knowledge of their world and their ability to act within it. This approach rejects the individualistic theory of risk, according to which inclusion is defined in terms of curing the student's personal deficits, and instead considers, as one of its most basic tenets, the engagement with young people by "listen(ing) to them, without trying to cure them of their problems" (Armstrong, in Zyngier, 2011, p. 221). A critical transformative view rejects, according to Zyngier's review, the idea that the only thing which is missing is the right educational fix, and instead calls for broader changes in education, such as a paradigmatic shift in thinking about the purpose of education, pedagogy, curriculum and assessment methods for *all* students. He also acknowledges the importance of a new empowered role for teachers, because "what the teacher and school do to enhance and maintain the engagement and the involvement of students is more important than an individual student focus" (Wither and Batten, in Zyngier, 2011, p. 223). In this process, the connectedness between students and teachers is considered to be essential, as well as the ability of the teacher to listen and value the students' voice (Lamnias, 1999).

2.6 Summary of chapter

In this section I offer a summary of the literature review; to some this strategy may seem as extensive or repetitive, however I use it in order to aid those readers who only want to read the main points of the chapter without entering into details.

Cyprus has one of the lowest percentages of student enrolments in Technical and Vocational schools (Cedefop, 2019a). This is due to the prejudice against technical occupations, as well as against Technical and Vocational Schools; the students of VET education in Cyprus are typically academically low achieving, economically and socially disadvantaged and are often labeled as being "at risk" or even as "scamps" and "peasants" (Symeou and Efthymiou, 2004). However, what is often missing from research concerning VET is the students' own voices.

An important implication of involving students as participants in educational research is indeed the emphasis on *students' voice* (Bragg, 2007). Historically, one of the themes that

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have arisen from students' perspectives is the oppositional behaviour of working class boys (for example Corrigan, 1979; Willis, 1977/1981, Ball, 1981), as well as an accusation by feminists concerning the neglect of the experience of girls (France, 2007; Hammersley 1999).

According to the European Union's recent interim report on education, the percentage of youths dropping out of school in Cyprus has increased (Korelli, Kyriacou-Liveri and Theocharous, 2019). Although this figure is still within the 10% target set by the European Union for 2020, it is timely to focus on the students who are on the verge of dropping out. Korelli, Kyriacou-Liveri and Theocharous (2019) believe that the reason Cyprus is below the EU average of early school leavers is because of measures of focusing on restructuring the education system, upgrading vocational education, modernising the curricula and adopting measures for facilitating the integration of students 'at risk' in the school system. I strongly believe that focusing on these students' voice can inform educators and other stakeholders as to what changes are necessary in order to decrease the now increasing percentage of early school leavers; it is the increase which should be worrisome, not the fact that we are currently under the EU average.

Truancy is a phenomenon which causes great concern to countries around the world due to its vast social and economic consequences. There are many definitions for truancy. A widely accepted definition is the following:

> truancy is a student's act of non-attendance evidenced by missing part or all of the school day without it being legitimately excused by school or per state law (Gentle-Genitty *et al*, 2016, p. 65).

Crafting a common, uniform definition of truancy may aid the development of consistent benchmarks for systematic measurement and comparison between different countries.

To a big extent, renowned researchers of truancy have located the problem of truancy either within the students themselves or their family environment. Other factors such as home-school relations or the teachers are often much less highlighted. Carroll (2016) notes that truancy and school refusal are often labels with a negative connotation which locate the problem within the student (medical model of disability) and do not take into consideration the fact that it is a phenomenon which has to do with a heterogeneous group of students. These labels may neither take into consideration important contexts such as the students' school, home, neighbourhood and the society itself. Whether this should be the case, must be critically re-examined by educators and researchers alike.

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Truancy can be of different types (Gennetian, Rodrigues, Hill, and Morris, 2018; Reid, 2014; Weiss and Brown, 2013; Lever, 2011; McCormack 2005, Cullingford, 1999; Reid 1999); it may be due to economic reasons, it may be student related, family related and/or school related and it falls into the three main categories of wanton truancy, school phobia and condoned truancy. Another kind is blanket truancy, which occurs when the child fails to attend school and lacks authorisation for failing to do so. Truancy can also be post-registration, in which case students are absent from classes without necessarily leaving the school premises. Finally, near truancy or psychological truancy is mental truancy which occurs when a student physically attends school, yet fails to participate in classes in any other meaningful way. Stearns and Glennie (2006) have categorised the reasons for truancy as *pull-out* and *push-out* reasons. The first category (pull-out) refers to family obligations, which may include family creation, work and/or the care of a new-born baby. The second category (push-out) concerns internal rules of the school, such as zero-tolerance policies, internal rules on disciplinary offenses, as well as the internal structure of the school. During this process it is possible for schools to 'get rid' of students who were labelled as having disruptive behaviour (ibid).

The decision to drop out of school is not an immediate one, but rather the result of a long-term process of withdrawal from school, with school disengagement and truancy being among the most prominent precursors (Teuscher and Makarova; 2018). *Sociology of deviance* is a theory which has tried to explain the phenomenon of classroom misbehaviour and has also been used as a psychological approach to truancy (Franzese 2009; France, 2007; Phtiaka, 1997). More specifically, one of the models that have tried to explain students' deviant behaviour and truancy is the *sub-cultural model*, developed by Albert Cohen (Phtiaka, 1997). According to Corrigan (1979), students perceive education as valuable, they are ambitious and they try to learn. However, since the educational system has not always been able to provide all students with the same opportunities for learning, for example students of lower socioeconomic background, it is often difficult for them to be in tune with the values the school encourages (Broomhead, 2014). Holding values which are unattainable can create psychological tension to the students, called *negative formation (*Corrigan, 1999; Phtiaka, 1997). As a result, the students become deliberately unambitious. This sub-culture within the school reinforces itself by recognising that its own problems are not simply individual, but that they are being suffered by certain sorts of students.

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Renowned sociologist Paul Willis (1977/1981) has reached similar conclusions, but his insight regarded the process through which the dominating mechanisms of school help seal the lads' future outcome as workers, thus enabling social reproduction; Willis demonstrated that oppositional forms of resistance are only partial insights into 'the lads' choosing to reject mental work. It was the lads' resistance and opposition that led to what he called their 'self damnation'. Through their partial insights, the lads believed that manual labour was more authentic and more sensual and for them, entering a working class job was the ultimate victory against the dominating mechanisms of school. This perceived success, the culmination of their resistance and opposition to middle class values was a 'pyrrhic victory', as it catalysed social reproduction of class. Willis' work therefore effectively captures the tension between structure and agency (Russell, 2011), a very helpful conceptual framework for studying students' perspectives.

Russell (2011) holds that student resistance is multifaceted and that its definition changes depending upon context and in accordance with the interaction between structure and agency, between school and outside community structures, student and teacher interactions, as well as peer relationships. According to this ethnographer, *reproduction theory*, *resistance theory* and *structuration theory* have made significant contributions to understanding student behaviour. Reproduction theory holds that schools contribute to the maintenance of the status quo by reproducing the existing relationships between social groups. Resistance theory suggests that individuals reject school because of their counter-school cultures. Structuration theory perceives social structures as reproduced by interacting actors. In accordance to these theories, Russell (2011) sees students as agents and argues that they can confront macro structures and gain some degree of limited power in influencing their school experience. Russell also believes that Willis (as well as other renowned theorists such as Apple and Giroux) may have overstated the link between class and resistance, as there is evidence indicating that opposition to school and class background are not necessarily linked so strongly.

Given the enormous financial costs that various governments have to bear from dropouts, *intervention programmes* have been launched to prevent them. A common intervention for students who are prone to drop out of school and have started truanting, is a change of school environment, so that they can make a fresh start (Osher *et al*, 2003). Another intervention method is through school–police partnerships (Bennett *et al*, 2018) and yet another one is to

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provide special education to students 'at risk', for example in the form of individualised curricula in support classes or in special education units (Iacovou, 2012; Osher *et al*, 2003).

Zyngier (2011), in his review of current research into programs aimed at 'at-risk' students, questions the implicit assumptions and the consequences of those assumptions inherent in these programs. He identifies three standpoints in relation to 'at-risk' students, characterised as instrumentalist, individualist and critical transformative. Intervention programs which fall under the first category focus on the individual vulnerability and the psycho-pathological deficits of 'at-risk' students. Social constructivist views are individualistic approaches to dealing with student success or failure and often include the segregation of 'at-risk' students into separate school systems. Critical transformative or empowering approaches are based on a recognitive vision of social justice and seek to develop student's knowledge of their world and their ability to act within it.

In accordance to the above, the *theoretical influences* on the research design of this study were critical theory, social exchange theory and the social model of disability. *Critical pedagogy*, i.e. the use of the principles of critical theory in education, is an attempt to examine the various ways in which classrooms too often function as modes of social, political and cultural reproduction (Giorgallas, 2012; McLaren, 1995; Apple, 1979). It attempts to transform students and teachers in critical agents rather than consumers of knowledge. Consequently, the objective of the proposed research, to raise critical awareness on the role of the specific educational context on the creation of truancy and 'at-risk' students is consistent with the underpinnings of this theoretical approach.

Social exchange theory explains how individuals interact within groups (Pretsch and Ehrhardt-Madapathi, 2018; Chibucos, Randall and Weis, 2005; Miller, 2013; Schwimmer, 1977). The theory suggests that social behaviour results from a process of exchange based on maximising personal benefits and minimising personal disadvantages.

Last but not least, the *social model of disability* is used ideologically in this research. I use the term 'disability' to denote social restriction imposed on top of physical or mental imperfections (impairments) and not as a result of them (Finkelstein, 2007; Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Bolt, 2010). A person may be impaired for many reasons, but it is only by society that he or she is disabled, for example through an inaccessibly built environment or through labelling and self-fulfilling prophecies. Therefore, disability is about a focus on the economic,

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environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people who are viewed by others as having some form of impairment – whether physical, mental or intellectual, as is the case with VET students in the Cypriot context. Based on this ideological orientation, this research aims to explore the extent to which certain student impairments/individual characteristics may be used by the school as labels which catalyse their disablement, thus placing them at the edge of schooling.

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CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I offer an extensive description of the research method, which is an Ethnography, the setting, time and participant selection, the participants' profiles, research tools, data collection strategies and trustworthiness, data analysis methods, as well as some ethical considerations and dilemmas, *including a theoretical critique of pilot studies*.

3.1 Research Method

The research was designed to follow a *qualitative* approach to studying adolescents' school experience and the phenomenon of truancy. The qualitative paradigm (Pourkos and Dafermos, 2010; Roberts-Holmes, 2005; Bell, 1999) is based on a phenomenological framework (Pourkos and Dafermos, 2010; Gutek, 2004), in which the researcher avoids using any assumptions concerning the phenomenon under study, as well as reducing complex reality to numerically measurable variables (Lancy, 1993). *Ethnography* was chosen because of the high status it gives to the accounts of participants' own perspectives and understandings (Troman, in Walford, 2008a), as well as because gender specific research has shown that "participatory research methods can provide meaningful ways for girls to construct and better understand their own narratives" (Clarke, Boorman and Nind, 2011, p. 765). Moreover, the use of ethnography is considered to be appropriate when researching ambiguous and sensitive issues (Walker, in Russell, 2011). On these grounds, I consider ethnography to be particularly helpful for examining illicit acts or behaviours (such as truancy), because it is a method which strives to gradually gain the trust of the informants.

An important characteristic of data collected by qualitative inquiries is their local groundedness, that is, the fact that data are collected in close proximity to a specific situation which occurs in a natural setting (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). Another important characteristic is data's richness and holism and their ability to offer "thick" descriptions (Geertz, in Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014) which have a ring of truth and have a strong impact on the reader.

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3.1.1 History of ethnography and interactionist ethnography in education

Ethnography has its origins in the science of Anthropology (Greig and Taylor, 1999) but present day use also has its roots in sociology (Walford, 2008a). In the European context, Anthropology started developing at the end of the nineteenth century in order to study the cultures of 'primitive' people. The first anthropologists mainly relied on accounts gained from missionaries who travelled to faraway places. The first anthropologist who invented fieldwork is considered to be the Polish-born Bronislaw Malinowski. In the US context Franz Boas occupies a position similar to that of Bronislaw Malinowski, with his student Margaret Mead being the first one to develop participant observation.

Participant observation is connected to the sociology of the Chicago School, (which has been described in the literature review concerning the development of sociology of deviance). During the first half of the twentieth century, scientists at the Chicago University became focused on the 'youth problem' in this area. On the one hand, many of their studies argued that social disorganisation was the cause of delinquency (France, 2007). On the other hand, they saw social disorganisation as a 'cultural transmission' of delinquency (Taylor *et al*, in France, 2007). Therefore, ever since there has been a debate over whether social disorganisation is a sign of delinquency or delinquency is a sign of social disorganisation.

Within this debate, the concept of school as a social system was introduced in the late sixties (France, 2007), whereas approximately a decade earlier the second generation of the Chicago School sociologists had already started spreading ideas about the importance of participant observation. Walford (2008a) gives a slightly different account on how anthropology became interested in educational matters, explaining that in part it was due to the institutionalisation of teacher education thus the demand for academics to research and publish, and secondly due to a reaction to the heavy emphasis of psychology and quantitative surveys in education.

Another interesting fact concerning the way ethnography became interested in education, is the fact that the majority of studies in the US context have been developed by anthropologists, whereas in the European and mainly the British context by sociologists or educationists (Walford, 2008a). This may be explained as follows: in the US, renowned anthropologist George Spindler, who is considered to be the founder of anthropology of education, convened a conference between anthropologists and educators in the 1950s, to discuss their common

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problems (Wolcott, 1987), therefore in the USA the interest in education first seems to have started from anthropologists.

In the UK, on the other hand, the considerable body of ethnographic work in education has been the result of the changes which occurred in British sociology of education in the late 1960s. These changes were often labelled as the 'new sociology of education' (Hammersley, 1999). It was the focus of sociological work that went beyond social class inequalities and under the growing influence of interpretive theoretical ideas, like phenomenology, began to look in detail at classroom processes and at the perspectives of teachers and students. These sociologists, however, did not do that in a psychological way like in the past (ibid), but as a reaction to the overly psychological focus in education (Walford 2008a). Their focus was to explore the world of the classroom and to document it. This approach was encouraged by ideas of the time which presented teaching and schooling as potentially anti-educational. These ideas led sociologists to suspend belief in many of the assumptions on which the education system was founded. Out of this mix of ideas, interactionist ethnography emerged in the early 1970s (ibid).

Interactionist ethnography in education focuses on researching the experience, perspectives and actions of those involved, e.g. teachers and/or students. This is not done in an abstract way, but rather by considering the participants' perspectives and actions as socially grounded. The interactionist basis of this kind of ethnography is that people construct their perspectives about the world and build lines of action on the basis of these perspectives rather than being passive respondents to events (Hammersley, 1999). These ideas have recently been reinforced by the influence of feminism and postmodernism, with their focus on the role of the self and on the social construction of cognition and action. Feminism has also brought changes to interactionist ethnography in education, as discussed in the literature review, with its critique on the neglect of the experience of girls.

3.1.2 Characteristics of ethnography

Ethnography (Hammersley, 2018; Kelly, 2013; Walford, 2008b; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Silverman, 2000; Walford, 1998; Le Compte and Preissle, 1993) is a specific methodological

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approach where "the researchers immerse themselves as participants in people's daily lives in order to observe, record and gain insights into naturally occurring events over an extended period of time" (Kellet, 2014, p. 21). Ethnography, as a qualitative research approach, gives importance both to the way in which the participants interpret their actions, as well as to the specific contexts in which these actions occur (Greig and Taylor, 1999). Ethnographers attempt to record and report, in an orderly manner, how participants behave and how they explain their behaviour, with a special focus on interpretations of cultural knowledge (Spindler and Spindler, 1987). Wolcott (1987) has stressed that "(t)he purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and interpret cultural behavior" (p. 43).

Early on, Spindler and Spindler (1987) provided an extensive list of the key criteria for a good ethnography, amongst other the fact that observations are contextualised, prolonged and repetitive and that the ethnographer must not predetermine responses by the types of questions asked. Bryman (in Walford, 2008a) also listed the five key features of ethnography as being the following:

1. Ethnographers immerse themselves in a society
2. To collect descriptive data via fieldwork
3. Concerning the culture of its members
4. From the perspective of the meanings members of that society attach to their social world
5. And render the collected data intelligible and significant to fellow academics and other readers. (p. 3)

Troman (in Walford, 2008a) also listed basic elements of Ethnography when it is applied to educational contexts, for example:

- The recognition that the researcher is the main research instrument;
- The high status given to the accounts of participants' perspectives and understandings. (p. 3)

Finally, according to Walford (2008a) ethnography is a good tool for understanding elements of learning. Walford provides his own set of criteria, which he sees as the minimum requirements for a research to be called ethnographic, along with explanations as to how these features are relevant to research conducted in educational settings. His arguments answer the question of why ethnography is useful in educational settings and for whom. Among others, he maintains that:

- Ethnography uses multiple methods, as it demands that different places, times and people are sampled. For this to be done, the ethnographer must be willing to consider many forms of data. This process is very similar to the way students learn, as learning

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is about picking up anything that looks interesting; they generate enough data until they are able to make sense of what is going on.

- The concept of engagement is very important in ethnographic inquiries, as well as in learning environments. In particular, there has to be a relationship of trust between the learner and the teacher for learning to occur. This process of learning takes time, so ethnography is a right tool because it is able to follow that process, as it demands time spent in the field. Therefore, the principle of engagement in ethnographic inquiries entails the two elements of investment of time, as well as human connection with the participants.

Finally, another characteristic of ethnographic inquiry which is considered to be of great importance is what has become to be known as the *fight of familiarity*. One of the issues which make school ethnography difficult is the fact that the people interested in doing it are individuals who have been very familiar with the school context, first as students, then perhaps as teachers (Wolcott, 1987). Being so totally immersed in this context, they are unlikely to discover anything about school culture because what they are observing is ordinary and familiar. What is lacking is a cross-cultural or comparative basis which would help them describe a culture which is readily distinguishable from their own (ibid).

Therefore, making the familiar strange is considered to be the ultimate goal in ethnographic inquiry (Parman, in Delamont, 2014). The dilemma that each ethnographic setting imposes is how, on the one hand, to observe situations which are so familiar that it is almost impossible to remove oneself from their own cultural assumptions. On the other hand, there is also the dilemma of how to observe situations which are so different that the ethnographer may only respond to differentness (ibid).

Delamont (2014) proposes six strategies which can help ethnographers fight familiarity:

1. Revisiting 'insightful' educational ethnographies of the past.
2. Studying learning and teaching in formal education in other cultures.
3. Taking the standpoint of the *researcher* who is 'other' to view the educational process, for example, by doing ethnography from the standpoints of participants from a different social class, a different race or ethnicity, a different gender, or a different sexual orientation.
4. Taking the viewpoint of actors other than the commonest types of 'teachers' and 'students' in ordinary state schools. This can mean focusing on unusual settings in the school system, such as schools for learning disabled pupils, or the deaf or blind, or in the UK Welsh or Gaelic medium schools, or 'other' actors in ordinary schools such as secretaries, laboratory technicians, campus police, cooks.
5. Studying learning and teaching outside formal education settings.

6. Using intermediate theoretical concepts from other areas of the discipline to re-energise educational ethnography (for example, the concept of the *flâneur*). (p. 15-16).

Concerning the first strategy, Delamont suggests reading neglected ethnographies and using them as a lens through which to envision contemporary educational settings. The way I put this strategy into practice was by revisiting some of the now neglected work of the first anthropologists, knowing that ethnography has its roots in that discipline. I therefore studied some of the anthropological work of Boas and Mead. This way, I consider putting into practice the fifth strategy as well, not just by studying learning and teaching outside formal educational settings (like Delamont did with the learning of Brazilian Capoeira dance) but by removing myself to work outside education. It is worth noting however, that the word 'insightful' offered by Delamont concerning this strategy may be interpreted in a different way, that is, revisiting examples of ethnographic work which are broadly considered as landmarks; in that sense, I revisited work such as that of Spindler, Corrigan and Willis.

Concerning the second strategy, I tried to broaden my studying to the school and VET experience of students outside the Cypriot context, thus the numerous examples I mentioned, analysed and cited concerning other countries, in the literature review. Regarding the third strategy, it is considered by Delamont to be a very valuable one, i.e. the ethnographer trying to make sense of how the setting is perceived and experienced by people who act in it from standpoints other than their own. In this sense, as a middle class woman, I had student participants with a low socioeconomic background, in this way 'othering' myself and trying to capture *their* standpoints.

With regard to the fourth strategy, doing the research in the specific setting has been a conscious decision; I did not choose the particular site because it was convenient, as many ethnographers do according to Walford (2008a). I started working at the specific school seven years ago because I chose to do so. The reason was because I had already worked in schools of the private sector where mostly students of a higher socioeconomic background choose to study, as well as in Lyceums and Gymnasiums at the public sector, therefore I wanted to experience the context of VET too. I chose to work at the specific VET school which is known as the Alcatraz of Cypriot education, as I wanted to teach and give opportunities to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are marginalised by the traditional Cypriot educational system. The following comments made by colleagues are indicative of the reputation of the specific context:

Colleague (year 1): VETs are slowly going to hell.

Principal (year 2): Ours is the worst of all VETs. We must try to change that.

Colleague (year 3): When I came here I was told, who hated you enough to send you to work here?

Deputy head teacher (year 2): I called at the Ministry (of Education) and asked them why they have still not appointed all the teachers we need, that November is approaching but we still have classes without teachers. And do you know what they said? 'We understand but you have to wait, we need to position teachers at schools first'!

Already as a student of a Master's programme in Special and Inclusive Education, I was aware from relevant research as well as my experience that Gymnasium graduates who do not fit into normalised standards of Cypriot education are encouraged to continue their studies at VET and I was eager to work with them. In that sense, I pursued my Master's thesis in an unusual setting of the Cypriot educational system (ethnographic study concerning Individualised Lesson Plans) and continued with my PhD study, as giving voice to these students has been my priority.

Finally, with regard to the sixth strategy, which I consider to be the trickiest one, I have to admit that, perhaps because of my positivistic background, I have largely been unaware of intermediate theoretical concepts from other areas of the discipline such as sociology of education. Perhaps the only exception has been my eagerness to study educational aspects through the lens of critical pedagogy, social exchange theory and the social model of disability (which have been discussed in the literature review), this way making my own contribution to the re-energising of educational ethnography. Concerning the concept of the *flâneur* suggested by Delamont (2014) as one that can fight familiarity, it is used to describe a "detached 'observer' of the school, strolling around watching the teachers and the pupils working" (p. 86). In her past studies Delamont refers to having observed such students, who use the complexities of the school to avoid being taught. This clearly reminded me of an early participant of the study during the first year of fieldwork (boy) who had repeatedly been acting as a *flâneur*. He always had the most imaginative excuses at hand, e.g. blaming the fact that the school was 'too big and unknown' for him, thus rendering him unable to find the correct classroom on time and seemingly making him a permanent wanderer in the school premises, even well into the school year. The concept of the *flâneur* could, in my opinion, be also

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interpreted by using and extending Scott's (1990) idea of elementary forms of disguise. According to Scott, subordinate groups sometimes find ways to get their messages of resistance across, while at the same time staying somehow within the law. In such cases, either the message or the messenger may not openly disclosed, in order to avoid direct confrontation with hegemony. For example, student strikes over their school uniform, which were also observed in the field, could be considered as a form of mass rebellion which offers anonymity, since a specific messenger is not openly disclosed (ibid). On the contrary, in the case of flâneurs the messenger is openly disclosed but not the message, as it is hidden behind imaginative excuses.

3.2 Setting, time and participant selection

3.2.1 Setting

The ethnographic site was the VET secondary school I have been working as a teacher for the last seven years. The school was founded in the mid-seventies. As all VET schools, it offers two courses of study, the Theoretical and the Practical, as well as the option of Apprenticeship System (now called New Contemporary Apprenticeship) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, n.d. 7). Students who graduate from high school are eligible to attend the school, as well as students of the Lyceum who find the lessons there too hard.

Classes at the School begun at 7:35 and end at 13:30. The lessons were divided into seven forty-five minute periods and there were three breaks (of duration twenty minutes, fifteen minutes and five minutes respectively). The infrastructure of the school emitted how deprived it was. School buildings were old as most were in operation since the 1970s, with new classrooms gradually added. Three of them were prefab rooms in the middle of the school yard. The following is an entry from my field notes:

> The new key I was given wouldn't fit. I had to go and ask for another one while the students were waiting for at least five minutes, complaining about the heat. One curtain was on the teacher's desk and the other one was hanging loose. The whiteboard was anything but white and uneven – I could not possibly write or erase anything. Broken desks were piled at the back of the classroom - one of our three prefab storage units thrown in the middle of the yard due to shortage of teaching rooms. One of the fans was hanging loose from the wall and from the other one the rope pull knob was missing. How can I welcome the

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students in this place? Or rather, how can they feel welcomed? There must be something I can do! (September 11, 2015)

The school stretched over a wide geographical distance; it consisted of two wings and in the middle there are various laboratories. Teachers who had classes in one wing were not often scheduled to have classes in the other wing, because it took (as measured by myself with a timer) at least three and a half minutes at a relatively fast pace to get there. Punctuality of the teacher when the bell rings was always stressed by the principals, as I noticed that the lack of it was very often an excuse for students to 'disappear' and then demand that they don't get an absence because "the teacher was not present on time". The geographical distance between the two wings of the school made each wing known as 'The Other Side', often in a humorous way taken by the teaching staff to mean Death, Hell or Hades.

Every school year about seventy teachers were employed at the school, as well as about fifteen more individuals as administrative staff, cleaning staff and staff of the school canteens. The principal of the school was the same for the two first years of fieldwork, but in the third year another principal was appointed. The organisational structure of the school's teaching staff is presented in Figure 1 below.

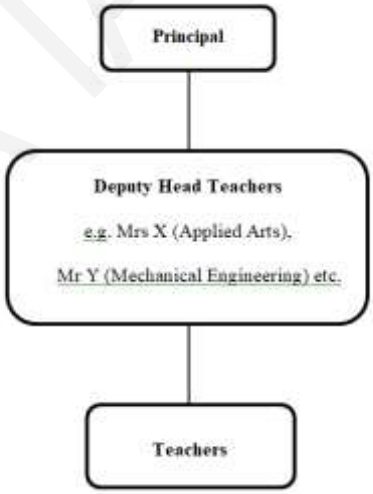

Figure 1: Organisational structure of teaching staff

The school had approximately two hundred and fifty students in total enrolled per school year, most of which are boys. According to a study by the Center for European Constitutional Law (2007), the relatively small number of girls may be due to the fact that the technical nature of

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the VET is considered by many girls to be unattractive. Many of the students were poor and received an allowance from the Student Welfare Committee, like clothes, free breakfast and food for their homes at Christmas and Easter.

3.2.2 Time and participant selection

The duration of fieldwork was three school years (2015/2016, 2016/2017, 2017/2018), *without* excluding the summer months after each school year. In the beginning of the 2015/2016 school year, I requested to be a form teacher in a first year class with many girls, as I wanted girls to be my focus. Being a form teacher in a class ensures more frequent interaction with the students. This is very important since researcher-participant familiarity is a major factor in ethnographic research (Phtiaka, 1997; Le Compte and Preissle, 1993), therefore being a form teacher of the class would increase interaction and thus familiarity with the students. The school has specialisations which are mainly male dominated, with the exceptions of the hairdressing and the applied arts specialisation. The outcome of my inquiry was that I became the Physics teacher of two classes of the latter specialisation. The first was a class of 12 students (8 girls and 4 boys). I will call this Class A. The second was a class of 13 students (11 girls and 2 boys). I will call this Class B. The students of these classes would choose between graphic design and interior design or goldsmithing and silversmithing in the second year of their studies.

Initially I was also the form teacher of both of these classes, but three weeks later it was decided, due to internal regulations of the school, that two form teachers were needed because the number of students was too large. From then on I was the form teacher of the first of these two classes (Class A), whereas another colleague became the form teacher of Class B. I still taught Physics in both classes. Many of the students of Class B expressed their disappointment concerning the change of form teacher and told me that for them I was going to be the teacher they can trust throughout the year. At that stage they already called me ‘Mrs Mom’.

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In qualitative inquiries, 'sampling'[12] is relatively small in number when compared to quantitative inquiries (Miles and Huberman, 2014) and participants are "usually not wholly pre-specified but can evolve once fieldwork begins" (ibid, p. 31). Moreover, in ethnographic inquiries obtaining permission for carrying out the research at a specific site is necessary (Gray, in Bell and Opie, 2002). This is ethically of utmost importance when children or adolescents are involved in participant selection negotiations. Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2015) note that in participatory research involving children and young people, researchers may be faced with a situation where potential participants indicate their desire to take part in the research but parents do not consent. The ethical dilemma, these authors argue, is whether the consent only of potential participants themselves is sufficient to include them in the research.

As I see it, *not* obtaining written consent from parents of potential participants was not considered as an option. Furthermore, following the possible challenge noted by the above authors concerning the possibility of a participant (or her/his parents) wanting to withdraw their consent at a later stage of the research, I included it in the written permission which was necessary for the parents to sign, namely that it was their right to do so if ever and whenever they wished. I tried to keep the permission letter in a simple, friendly, yet informative form, explaining the reasons for conducting the educational research as being "very interested in finding out about the opinions of the students of the school concerning their school life and their school experience, what they like about school, their future plans etc.!". I also noted that participation is optional and will not affect the student's assessment in the lesson that I teach them in class. Finally, I noted that they can communicate with me for further information. The English translation of the letter of permission is given in Appendix A.

Although my decision was to focus on girl participants, during the first year of fieldwork I considered it useful to start collecting data relating to all students of the two classes of the applied arts specialisation, both boys and girls, as well as from some students of other years, before finally converging only to a class of ten girl participants in the second and third year of

[12] Wherever possible, I avoid the use of the term 'sample' or 'sampling' which is often used by qualitative researchers, e.g. Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), Russell (2011), Flick (2008), because I consider the use of positivistic terminology in qualitative research to be de-humanising. I only use the term where I quote or cite these researchers.

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fieldwork. According to Flick (2008), some 'sampling' decisions are taken neither formally nor in advance but are rather taken during the progress of the research, on the background of continuous collection and analysis of data. "(I)t is more the idea of what is still missing in the data (and the insights they make possible) which drives 'sampling' decisions" (ibid, p.26). I was therefore open to such insights in the course of the research and it was this openness that led me to the decision to initially gather data from both boys and girls, in order to take a glimpse of the wider context, before converging to the class of ten girl participants.

The class I converged to comprised of 6 girls of Class A (Efterpi, Kassiani, Marina, Monica, Nelly and Rallia) and 4 girls of Class B (Lucy, Carmen, Savvia and Daniela). All participants appear with pseudonyms in this written account of the study. These students were merged into one class as they chose the goldsmithing and silversmithing specialisation for the last two years of their studies. In the third year of fieldwork the class comprised of only nine girls, as one (Efterpi) did not pass the second year due to many absences and decided to change specialisation and move to another school to repeat the second year. I remained the Physics teacher of these girls for the last two years of their studies and I was also their form teacher in the second year.

Despite the fact that I requested to be the form teacher of this class for their third year too and despite the fact that I explained to the principal that spending more time with them was important for the purposes of the research, my wish was not granted. The reason seems to be that some teachers of the school often sought to be form teachers of classes with a small number of students, in order to avoid having too much work to do. This seemed to be an unwritten rule in the school, with more senior teachers usually achieving it, whereas younger teachers were allocated classes with a larger number of students. A colleague of mine told me that a specific colleague of ours complained to the principal about me being a form teacher of the specific class, on the grounds that he was more senior. The result was that he became the form teacher of the class, whereas I became the form teacher of a class of 23 students. Although spending more hours with the girls was very important, I kept a low profile and did not complain, as I wanted to be neutral and friendly with my colleagues. Fortunately the fact that I was not the form teacher of the class for their third year did not affect my relationship with the girls, as we had already come very close so we continued to hang out together during

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many break times as well as after school hours. The profiles of the ten girl participants I converged to are given in the following section (pseudonyms are used).

In 'sampling strategies' terminology, sampling can be considered on the one hand as not having been convenient (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014) as I did not focus on the readily available male dominated population of the school, but on the other hand it can be considered as convenient because the research took place at a site which was geographically and immediately accessible to me (ibid). Sampling was *strategic* and *purposive* (ibid) (or *purposeful* according to Collins and O'Brien, 2003), as I deliberately gradually focused on girl participants, as well as *homogeneous* (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014), as I focused on participants with similar characteristics, i.e. of the same class and specialisation. Moreover, the 'sampling' was *formalised* both for the setting, as well as for the selection of the participants to converge to (only girls), that is, it was defined in advance (Flick, 2008).

I will now further elaborate on why I considered it useful to initially gather data relating to both boys and girls, despite the fact that by the time I started negotiating participant selection, I had already decided to focus on girl participants and had started studying relevant literature:

- In order to attempt to better understand the context without making prejudgments of what information may or may not be important. Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) use the figure replicated below (Figure 1, Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014, p. 29) to explain that "(t)there is a focus or 'heart' of the study, and a somewhat indeterminate boundary defines the edge of the case: what will not be studied" (p. 28).

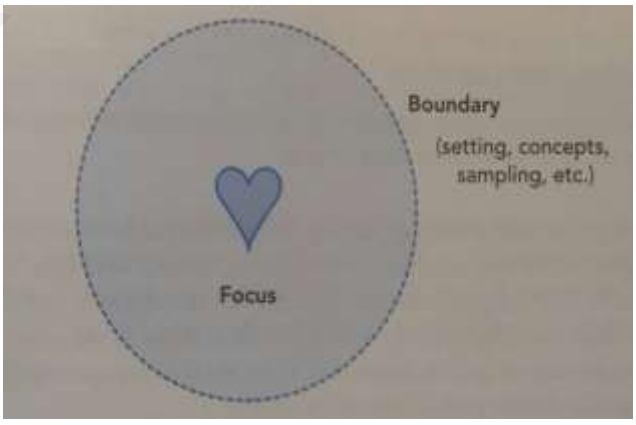

Figure 2: The focus and the boundary of a study

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Yet, within the boundary there is an area which *is* part of the study; I considered that to be important as it is that which defines and gives shape to the focus. This gave rise to what I call a *gradual convergence* methodology, which is always paired to a gradual calibration and adaptation of methods and to continuous critical thinking and building of reflexivity. This gradual convergence, which has been used in ethnographic inquiries by researchers such as Jachyra, Atkinson and Washiya (2015), is further discussed in section 3.6.1 in relation to my critique on the use of pilot studies in ethnographic research.

- In order to be fair when giving the students a voice, i.e. without excluding either boys or girls who were eager to share their perspective and even asked to participate in the study. Therefore, the research was designed in such a way so as to *modestly witness* (Haraway, in Mills and Morton, 2015) these girls' experience throughout the whole cycle of their upper secondary school years *without excluding any other voice.* I considered this decision to be ethically correct since Class A and Class B consisted mainly of girls but also of some boys; since these students co-existed, I did not want the research strategies to be marginalising for part of the students of these two classes, as that would equal to emancipating a group of voices while at the same time disregarding their peers.
- In order to allow for a possible future re-examination and re-analysis of the overall data collected, with the possibility of further using the data collected from boys too.

Ethnographic data can be very dense; this rich tapestry of data (Woods, in Measor, 1999) is never really fully exhausted by analysis and "it is interesting to attempt the reanalysis of that data in the light of new theoretical insights and advances in conceptual thinking" (Measor, 1999, p. 170). I believe that it is useful for every researcher to attempt such re-analyses, in order to examine how their beliefs have been modified, how their thought has matured and how research on the particular issue has developed. I do plan to pursue this in the future, but at the same time I could not neglect the fact that in the specific school context where I was, girls were under-represented in many ways, from their mere number as a plain fact, to the curriculum (Iacovou and Phtiaka, 2013), to the male dominated labour market specialisations

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offered at the specific VET school. I therefore consciously made the decision to focus on girls' voices for the purpose of this study.

Before fieldwork and up to the stage of the research proposal, I planned to have only boys as participants of the study. The students who attend Technical and Vocational Schools in Cyprus are mostly boys, therefore I reasoned that the findings would be more useful for the school where I work. Moreover, from my study up to that point, I had seen that most of the literature on low attendance and truancy concerned boys, therefore the results of the proposed research could be meaningfully compared to such literature. According to Robb (2014):

> (R)esearch with… young people, does not take place in a vacuum or appear from nowhere. If researchers want their work to have validity and to be *taken seriously* by the community of researchers, they need to take account of the pre-existing conversation or discourse in their chosen field. New knowledge always builds on existing knowledge (p. 239, my emphasis).

As far as I know, there is no pre-existing discourse in Cyprus concerning the experience of absenteeism from girls in VET on which to draw upon. Instead I cited the accounts that I have found concerning other countries in the literature review. I believe that despite the scarcity of research on the given topic concerning the Cypriot context, this research can be 'taken seriously' as it gives voice and therefore emancipates an under-represented population. Concerning validity and overall trustworthiness, I extensively analyse the ways I have strived to achieve it, in section 3.4.3.

Walford (2008a), as previously mentioned, calls for attention to be given to the selection of sites for ethnography as very often sites are selected for convenience and as a result their contribution to knowledge is open to question. I have elaborated on this matter previously, but here I would like to extend the question of convenience to the selection of participants. My initial choice to work with male participants on the grounds that technical schools are male dominated was a convenient one, however I realise now that convenience is not always the wisest decision, although it may be the easiest. For the change of focus towards the voice of the more under-represented population of girls in the specific context I thank my supervisor, Dr. Phtiaka. Moreover, in my quest to give voice to the under-represented population of girls at VET, I also took into consideration the fact that research has shown that boys and girls are sometimes treated differently by their teachers as a response to their behaviour (Mann, Liley and Kellett, 2014). Although ethically I would never do that consciously if I included both boys and girls in the study, I am aware that being female means that there might have been

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differences concerning the level of connectedness I would have been able to achieve with students of each gender during the study. Therefore, I consider focusing on either boys or girls to have been a justified decision.

3.2.2.1 Participants' profiles

In this section I shall present the profiles of the ten girl participants. I wish to emphasise here that all the names used are pseudonyms.

Savvia

Savvia enrolled in school when she was fifteen years old and graduated three years later. She lived in a village near the city with her parents. She had two step brothers from her mother's first marriage and one step sister from her father's first marriage. She rarely saw her siblings. Her hobbies were playing games on her smartphone, watching TV or taking strolls in the neighbourhood.

She was labelled as having moderate intellectual disability. She had an Individualised Lesson Plan (ILP) under the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Law 113(I)/1999, so she was withdrawn from her class in order to attend individualised classes in certain subjects. Her favourite subjects were Religious Studies, Physics, as well as Goldsmithing and Silversmithing. She always sat alone in class and was often seen talking to herself, something for which she was teased for by her peers.

She did not seek company from peers and did not talk much either. During break times she was seen either alone or with three specific girls from Class B. She was very polite and did not disturb during lessons. She rarely participated in my lesson or any of the other lessons which I observed, but she regularly asked me to indicate to her what exactly she should study from the handouts and the book for the tests.

She indicated that after gymnasium she chose vocational education instead of lyceum because she liked VET more. Namely, she told me that when she found out that there is a department of arts at the specific VET school, she realised that this is what she wanted to follow. In the second year of her studies she chose Goldsmithing and Silversmithing because she considered Interior Design and Graphic Design to be difficult, whereas Goldsmithing and

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Silversmithing to be easy. According to the girls of her class, she never did anything in Goldsmithing and Silversmithing class, she sat quietly, with them helping her or prompting her to start working. Observation confirmed that.

Savvia liked VET more than gymnasium because:

- there is a decreased amount of homework in VET.
- lessons are more practical, whereas in gymnasium they were only theoretical.
- teachers are better at technical school.
- classes were more difficult in gymnasium.

She was almost never absent from class or school and she did not smoke. She told me that the reason she was almost never absent was because she did not want to stress over the possibility of having to repeat the year due to many absences, and because her parents did not allow her to miss school.

She believed that the reasons some students have many absences were because:

- of the teacher who may not explain the lesson well or may make the lesson boring or difficult.
- they skip the last period in order to be at the bus stop on time to catch the bus home.

She also often reported that the way the school could handle students' absences was by deleting some of their absences, in order to help them. She also believed that teachers and the principal should ask students why they stay out of class and advise them not to engage in truancy. Moreover, she stressed that teachers must let students leave class a few minutes before the bell rings for the end of the last period, so that they can catch the bus home.

Rallia

Rallia enrolled in school when she was fifteen years old and graduated three years later. She lived in a village near the city, with her parents and her two siblings.

She enrolled in technical school after she graduated from high school. It was her own decision to study Goldsmithing and Silversmithing, although she did not see herself in that profession when she would graduate, because "people nowadays do not buy jewellery".

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On several occasions Rallia reported that she did not study at home and that she usually did not pay attention during lessons, which was verified by observation. She believed that she was stigmatised by teachers at gymnasium because she "was naughtier than most other girls". She was not sure if she wanted to study at university or college after she graduated, on the grounds that she knew many individuals "who go to university but never succeed in finding a job".

Rallia was confident and popular in the school. She liked to socialise and had many friends. She was a heavy smoker. Efterpi was a very close friend of hers, as well as Marina, Monica and Kassiani.

She preferred technical school to gymnasium because:

- at gymnasium teachers were much stricter.
- it is easier to get out of class and to smoke at VET.
- "teachers at gymnasium are worse and students there are being bullied by them".

She believed that a student may skip a class because:

- the lesson is boring.
- the teacher is boring.
- of disliking the teacher
- of "boredom"
- of personal issues, thus the student may want to be alone.
- during the last period the student may be tired.
- teachers put too much pressure on students.
- parents may be very strict and forbid the student go out with their friends much in after school hours, therefore getting out of class is the student's chance to "feel free" for a while.

Whenever Rallia skipped a class, she sometimes stayed in the school premises and sometimes went to a nearby cafeteria. She stayed out of class mostly with friends or with her boyfriend. She was often late in classes too.

At the end of the first year Rallia was directly referred to the second round of end of year examinations due to many absences. During the second year she decided to change habits because she "always had to sit the September re-examination in Gymnasium too", but she

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reasoned that if she continued doing that, her parents would no longer trust her and they would not let her go anywhere during the summer months in order to sit at home and study.

Rallia believed that teachers could control truancy rates by trying to get closer to the students. She stressed that if she were a teacher, she would talk to students who play truant and make them trust her so that they would open up and tell her the reasons for this behaviour.

Nelly

Nelly enrolled in school when she was sixteen years old and graduated three years later. She lived near the city with her mother. Her parents were divorced. Her father went abroad after released from prison. Nelly had two brothers. All the members of the family were abused by the father. At the time of the semi- structured interview (first year) her hobbies were acting and going to the gym, but these hobbies often changed throughout the three years of fieldwork.

After she graduated from gymnasium, she attended lyceum for one year but did not manage to pass the class, so she repeated the year in technical school. She was labelled as having moderate intellectual disability and on those grounds, she was entitled to certain facilitations during tests and exams like extra time and explanation of the questions, under the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Law 113(I)/1999. In gymnasium she had an Individualised Lesson Plan and attended support classes. At lyceum she only attended support classes for one month but she did not want to continue, so she stopped. She told me that "they" wanted her to attend support classes at VET too, but she did not want to. She did not know who "they" are. Her favourite subjects were Goldsmithing and Silversmithing, as well as Interior Design and her least favourite were Technical Drawing and Graphic Design.

She was often alienated by her peers and bullied concerning her weight. She always tried to socialise, to fit in and make friends. She was a heavy smoker. Even though most of the times she did not succeed in making friends, she never stopped trying to approach other peers. She often said that she felt "kind of confused" and that she wanted to get to know herself better. She was very preoccupied with the subject of boys/relationships and regularly tried to find a boyfriend through social media.

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Nelly preferred technical school to gymnasium or lyceum because “there (at gymnasium) everybody smoked” and “the teachers did not care about the students”. She stressed that at technical school teachers were simpler, easier to approach and kinder.

According to her, students play truant because:

- they are enticed into doing it by their peers.
- of the teachers who are inadequate in their lesson and in handling students.
- of being bored.
- something important happened (family or personal or peer related)

She believed that the way teachers could handle students’ absences was by advising them not to be late at class. She suggested that peers could advise them too.

Nelly did not have a large number of absences during the first two school years. When she skipped classes, it was from specific lessons such as Technical Design and Free Design - lessons which had nothing to do with her chosen field of study and which she did reported that she not like – this is consistent with what she mentioned as her best and worst lessons. In the third year of her studies she was often late during first periods because she worked until late at a bowling club, so she had difficulty waking up in the mornings. Due to this lateness she accumulated a lot of absences (teachers could use their discretion in counting lateness as an absence).

Monica

Monica enrolled in school when she was eighteen years old and graduated three years later. She lived in the city with her parents and her five siblings. She often babysat her brother who was an infant. During the three years of fieldwork she left home twice to live with her boyfriend. There were often very serious family problems and violence at home.

Monica enrolled in technical school after she completed two years in lyceum. She did not have good grades in lyceum so she realised that she “would not be able to enter tertiary education with those grades”. She decided to start all over again from the first year of courses, even though she could sit entrance exams to enter Year Two or Year Three. She wanted to study in VET after she graduated from gymnasium but her mother did not let her, on the

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grounds that “only good for nothings go there”. She was one of the best students in her class throughout the three years.

According to Monica, technical school differs from lyceum because:

- VET is easier and more effective; as she put it, with fewer tests, she could achieve much better grades.
- it will be easier for her to find a job after school, as she will enter the workforce from Year Three already.
- teachers are better in VET; at lyceum they are “distant and too polite and even when talking to each other, they won't address their colleague as Maria but as Mrs Maria”.
- “even teachers that we don't like here, we won't curse them like we did with teachers at lyceum”.
- subjects taught are “very easy and we get no homework - we learn everything in class”.

She believed that a student may skip a class because of:

- boredom
- personal problems.
- tiredness during the last period of the day, but only from classes that are “not carried out in a relaxed manner, rather one has to think all the time”.
- lack of self confidence in difficult classes.

Monica kept her absences under control. Whenever she skipped a class, she stayed in the school premises. She preferred to stay out of class with her friends.

Monica believed that truancy could be minimised in the following ways:

- having “only a few minutes of lesson per period, not a full 45-minute period or having one period of lesson and the next period discussing with the teacher about other things”.
- not coming to school on Wednesdays.

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- "if I were a teacher, I would teach the student what I do as a teacher throughout the day in order to make time go by faster or I would involve her/him in something or advise her/him not to look at their clock in order to make time go by faster".

Marina

Marina enrolled in school when she was fifteen years old and graduated three years later. She was not from Cyprus. She came to the island when she was a primary school student and since then she learned to speak and write Greek fluently. She lived in a village near the city with her mother, her mother's partner and her stepbrother, who was a toddler. She had another brother, older than her, who was living abroad. She had no communication whatsoever with her father.

Marina enrolled in technical school after she graduated from gymnasium. It was not her decision to study Goldsmithing and Silversmithing as she preferred Secretarial Studies but that option was not offered. She was one of the highest achieving students in her class throughout the three years.

Marina admitted that she had been subject to stigma by her peers when she came to Cyprus because she was from another country. She was however very chatty and liked to socialise, always finding her way into making lots of friends.

She reported that technical school differs from gymnasium because:

- in gymnasium classes are more difficult.
- in gymnasium "teachers are stricter and they treat students differently because the students are younger, like calling their parents whenever they do not get in class".
- teachers in gymnasium "demand a lot, pressurise students and forbid a lot, they do not let students freely decide for themselves whether they wish to get in class or to freely express themselves as it is the case in VET".
- teachers in gymnasium "only care about students during the lesson but never outside the classroom".
- "students cannot have a good relationship with all gymnasium teachers but only with a few whereas in VET a student can always find a teacher to discuss their problems" .

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Marina believed that a student may skip a class when:

- they are having personal problems or are in a bad psychological state so they prefer to have some alone time.
- the teacher is boring.
- they are bored.
- they are not interested in the specific lesson.

Marina kept her absences under control, except in Year Two when she had to stay at home to babysit her step brother until her mother came home from work. Other than that, whenever she skipped a class, she stayed in the school premises. She preferred to stay out of class with her friends. If she were late in class, she preferred "to stay out for the whole lesson rather than go and have to put up with the teacher shouting and asking why she had been late".

Marina believed that lessons should be made more interesting for students to stay in class, e.g. with the use of technology. She also reported that bringing students' hobbies into the lesson taught was also a way of keeping students involved.

However, she also held that nothing much can be done by the school to decrease the number of absences, on the grounds that students will react if the teachers try to impose stricter rules on them. If she were the principal of the school, she would let students know the strict regulations concerning absences and then let them do as they wish, in order to learn from their mistakes. She also held that unauthorised absences could be turned into authorised if:

- the student accepted to do some projects for the lessons from which they had many absences
- the student completed volunteer work such as painting school walls. However, she also commented that, "this way, when they are painting, they would still miss some classes in order to do it".

Lucy

Lucy enrolled in school when she was fifteen years old and graduated three years later. She lived in a village near the city, with her family and her four siblings. She used to like dancing

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but she later reported that she no longer found it interesting. She characterised herself as a lazy student because she found it boring to study at home.

Lucy enrolled in technical school after she graduated from gymnasium. She liked the specialisation of Goldsmithing and Silversmithing. She was entitled to certain facilitations during tests and exams like extra time and explanation of questions, under the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Law 113(I)/1999.

Lucy had a specific group of a few girl friends during the three school years.

She believed that gymnasium was good because "they were into recycling". She preferred VET but she mentioned that she would like to see initiatives such as recycling in VET too. She preferred VET because of its geographical position ("in the city, so students can find shops and kiosks around") and also because many teachers are good.

She believed that a student may skip a class because:

- they dislike the lesson being taught.
- the lesson is boring when they have three consecutive periods of the same class.

Lucy had her absences under control. Whenever she skipped a class, she stayed in the school premises. She preferred to stay out of class with friends, "just sitting with them or talking with the cleaning lady".

Lucy believed that the school could control unauthorised absences if:

- teachers made lessons more interesting.
- lessons had more practical nature.
- a movie was added in between when the lesson lasted for three consecutive periods.

Kassiani

Kassiani enrolled in school when she was fifteen years old and graduated three years later. She lived with her parents, her sister and her sister's husband in a village near the city. She reported that she had no specific hobbies. Kassiani and her family belonged to a minority religious group, however observation revealed that she did not seem to be subject to stigma or discrimination by her peers concerning her religion.

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Kassiani enrolled in technical school after she graduated from gymnasium. Goldsmithing and silversmithing specialisation was not what she wanted to study. Instead, she wanted to follow the Hairdressing specialisation, but she was not accepted because of the student evaluation system introduced due to the numerous enrolments in the specific specialisation.

Kassiani had low self-esteem and although she was interested in boys, she was very reluctant in talking to them. She always talked to me about this reluctance. Her closest friends were Monica, Marina and Rallia.

According to Kassiani, Technical School differs from Gymnasium because:

- in technical school teachers are less strict and do not pressurise students all the time. Also, "in gymnasium students could never talk back to a teacher or say their opinion or contradict them".
- in technical school one sees students outside class all the time whereas in gymnasium "the only times you would see students outside class was either when very few students were too bored to attend class or when a teacher was absent, so another teacher was responsible for recording who was present and perhaps let them hang out in the school premises".
- in gymnasium male students were not allowed to have long hair and teachers were strict concerning students' appearance.
- classes were more difficult in gymnasium.

Kassiani did not have a large number of absences. She believed that the reason was because her parents were very strict. She often lied to her parents concerning her absences. When she had to explain to her parents that she sometimes got out of class when she was bored, they told her that she should stay in class even when she was bored, and that she was allowed not to actively participate in the lesson, as long as she stayed in class. She told me that she was willing to do that, except when all the other girls of the class decided to skip a class, in which case she would follow them in order not to be alone.

She believed that a student may skip a class when:

- they are bored because the teacher cannot keep their interest.
- they are having personal problems which they do not wish to expose before their peers or the teacher, so they prefer to have some alone time.

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- they dislike the lesson being taught.
- being bored.

She did not skip classes alone, rather it was a decision taken by the rest of her classmates. Whenever she skipped a class with her friends, they stayed in the school premises.

Kassiani believed that teachers could keep students in class and more interested in lessons if:

- they made lessons more interesting.
- they did not to offend students and did not complain all the time about students' acts and behaviours.
- the students were not obliged to go to class and if they could go to school whatever time they wished, with no absences being recorded.
- there were no exams.
- there was no school uniform.

Efterpi

Efterpi enrolled in school when she was fifteen years old. She did not pass the second year due to many absences, so she moved to another technical school to repeat the second year in another specialisation. After the end of fieldwork she came back to the school and wanted to enrol all over again. She therefore participated in the study for only two years. She lived in a village near the city with her mother. Her mother was not from Cyprus but Efterpi was born in Cyprus. She was the victim of sexual abuse from a family member when she was a child. She had no siblings and no communication whatsoever with her father. She worked part time at different jobs in afternoons and weekends throughout the two years she participated in the study.

Efterpi enrolled in technical school after she graduated from gymnasium. It was not her decision to study goldsmithing and silversmithing. She did not want to continue her education after she graduated from gymnasium; she preferred to find a job instead, but her mother did not agree. She then asked to follow the Hairdressing specialisation in VET, but she was not accepted because of the student evaluation system introduced, due to the numerous enrolments in the specific specialisation.

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Efterpi admitted that she did not like to study at home and claimed that she could choose if and when she wanted to be the best student, the worst student or when to be a troublemaker at school. She also stressed that school wass her biggest enemy.

Efterpi was popular in the school, she liked to socialise and had many friends. Rallia was a very close friend of hers. She was a heavy smoker. She was the form president during the first school year.

She preferred technical school to gymnasium because:

- in gymnasium classes are more difficult.
- in gymnasium teachers are stricter and do not allow students to freely express themselves.

She believed that a student may skip a class because:

- of disliking the teacher
- of their current psychological state/energy levels
- the teacher puts too much pressure on the students
- of being bored

She stressed that the main reason for truancy is the teacher.

Whenever Efterpi skipped a class, she mostly stayed in the school premises. She mostly skipped class with friends and/or her boyfriend.

When it came to how unauthorised absences could be controlled by the school, she stressed that if she were the principal, she “would care more about the students and not be indifferent concerning their needs like most principals are”.

Daniela

Daniela enrolled in school when she was sixteen years old and graduated three years later. She lived in the city with her family. She had eight siblings. Her family had serious financial problems as neither of her parents worked.

In gymnasium she had to repeat a year when she had to sit the September re-examination but she refused to go, as she did not want to see a specific teacher whom she hated.

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She had a small number of good girl friends and she was very protective towards Savvia.

Daniela preferred technical school to gymnasium because:

- lessons were much more difficult at gymnasium.
- of French, which she did not like, so she was happy that she did not have that subject at technical school.
- lessons in gymnasium were not as practical.
- teachers in gymnasium were not as good.
- she did not have as many friends in gymnasium.

She believed that students play truant:

- from lessons were the teacher gets on their nerves.
- from difficult lessons which they do not understand.
- from boring lessons, e.g. consecutive period lessons.
- because of boredom.
- because of not feeling well.
- because of a quarrel with their peers.

She played truant when she knew that they "would not do something important during the lesson" or when she did not understand the lesson or when she had personal problems. She stayed out of class with a specific friend from Class B during all years of fieldwork. They went to a nearby cafeteria or kiosk or stayed within the school premises, hiding somewhere. Daniela had a large number of absences during the second and third year, mostly because she regularly stayed at home in the second year and because of a health problem which kept her out of school in the third year.

She believed that the way teachers could handle students' absences was by talking to them and also by asking them if they wanted some help with the lesson. They could also "offer to take the student from another lesson in order to help them with these difficulties".

Carmen

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Carmen enrolled in school when she was fifteen years old and graduated three years later. She lived in a village near the city with her mother, her father and her three siblings. She stressed her responsibility over her younger sisters and over her parents when they would grow older.

Carmen enrolled in technical school after she graduated from gymnasium. It was her own decision to study Goldsmithing and Silversmithing.

She believed that technical school differed from gymnasium because:

- she had fewer friends at gymnasium, she used to be teased by other girls and she engaged in fighting with other girls.
- students' behaviour is much better at technical school – students are more fun and more modest.
- she got lower grades in gymnasium.

She believed that a student may skip a class because of disliking certain teachers who are incompetent in their lesson or because it was a "cccool" act.

Carmen kept her absences under control. Whenever she skipped a class, she stayed in the school premises. She preferred to stay out of class with her friends, listening to music or sleeping or smoking.

Carmen believed that "deputy head teachers should take students more seriously with regard to their complaints concerning incompetent teachers; that way students will stop playing truant".

Table 1 below summarises the participants' profiles.

Participant	Age when entering VET	Years she attended the school	Difficulties in keeping absences under control	Smoker	Other characteristics	Did she initially wish to register in the specialisation of Goldsmithing?
Savvia	15	3	No	No	• labelled as having moderate	Yes

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					intellectual disability • entitled to certain facilitations under the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Law • did not seek company from peers	
Rallia	15	3	Yes	Yes	• confident and popular • close friends with Efterpi, Monica, Marina and Kassiani	Yes
Nelly	16	3	Yes	Yes	• labelled as having moderate intellectual disability • entitled to certain facilitations under the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Law • often alienated by her peers and bullied • often seen around Lucy • serious family problems	No
Monica	18	3	No	Yes	• close friends with Kassiani, Marina and Rallia • serious family problems • was the form president in year 1 • confident and popular	Yes
Marina	15	3	Yes	No	• close friends with Kassiani,	No

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					Monica and Rallia • very chatty and liked to socialise • not from Cyprus	
Lucy	15	3	No	Yes	• entitled to certain facilitations the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Law • her closest friends were from another class • often seen around Nelly	Yes
Kassiani	15	3	No	No	• low self-esteem • close friends with Monica, Marina and Rallia	No
Efterpi	15	2	Yes	Yes	• did not pass Year 2 due to many absences • confident and popular • close friends with Rallia • her mother was not from Cyprus • serious family problems • was the form president in Years 1 and 2	No
Daniela	16	3	Yes	No	• protective towards Savvia • serious family problems	Yes
Carmen	15	3	No	Yes	• her closest friends were from another class	Yes

Table 1: Summary of participants' profiles

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3.3 Research tools

Qualitative researchers usually make use of many different data sources (Kelly, 2013), which can be divided in the two broad categories of verbal tools and written tools (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). The three principal data sources are considered to be interviews and observation from the verbal tools and artefacts from the written tools (Graue and Walsh, 1998; Lancy, 1993). In addition to these I used, therefore I also include here, conversations from the verbal tools, as well as the researcher's diary and questionnaires from the written tools. The combination of different methods, widely known as the Mosaic approach (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015) or as triangulation (Bell and Opie, 2002; Graue and Walsh, 1998; Walker, 1990), allows the researcher to fill in gaps that would occur if she/he relied upon only one source of data collection and creates a tightly woven net which can support the arguments raised during the analysis of the data (Lancy, 1993). The underpinning of this strategy is that often the flaws of one method are the strengths of another (Denzin, in Lancy, 1993) and that by combining and comparing different sources of data collection, the researcher can reach a better understanding of the topic under consideration (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). In this section I will describe each of the research tools I used and outline their main advantages and disadvantages as given in existing literature. Then, in section 3.4.2, I will further elaborate on the data collection strategies related to these research tools.

3.3.1 Conversations

In this approach a topic is introduced and participants comment on the topic, as well as on the view of other participants. In order for this group approach to be effective, researcher intervention is kept minimal, i.e. the conversation is directed mainly by the group of participants (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). The defining feature of this approach is reciprocity, as it requires continuous interaction among the participants, whereas

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the researcher is an active listener (ibid). I used this method for shared experience of the participants, by giving them the topic and then keeping my intervention to the minimum, while actively listening to the conversations. Only a few times were these conversations recorded, as I wanted to keep the context as natural as possible. An advantage of this approach is that it is a familiar format of interaction for the participants, whereas some disadvantages are that the conversation can move away from the topic and also that when recorded, transcription can be lengthy and difficult (ibid). I decided to use this approach despite the disadvantages, as the familiar format of interaction and the natural context within which it occurs is consistent with ethnographic inquiries.

3.3.2 Interviews

There are many forms of interviews. These include, among others (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015; Flewitt, 2014):

1. Informal interviews
2. Semi-structured interviews
3. Individual interviews
4. Group interviews

Some positive and negative aspects of the above types of interviews are that semi-structured and informal interviews offer the participant the opportunity to talk about other related topics but are time consuming and may move away from the central topic. Group interviews can decrease the influence of the researcher but need effective management from the researcher to ensure that all the participants will have the chance to express their thoughts. Individual interviews provide an opportunity for an in depth focus on the perspectives of the participant but may be confronting for a teenager (ibid).

Considering the above, I decided to use both formal and informal interviews, as well as semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Informal interviews were unstructured and formal ones were semi-structured. Group interviews (Flewitt, 2014; Lancy, 1993) were used when a group of the girls happened to hung out in a clique, so most of these interviews were unstructured. I let the girls decide if they wanted the formal, semi-structured interviews to be

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group interviews, i.e. with (an)other peer(s) from their class or another class that they would identify or if they preferred them to be individual. I tried to use group interviews because I wanted to decrease my influence, despite the difficulty of having to be careful in order to effectively manage the interview to ensure that all the participants would have the chance to express their thoughts.

I preferred unstructured or semi-structured group interviews (usually of two girls) because I have noticed that the setting was more natural when my role was decreased. The interactions in that setting were in accordance with the aim of the study, of actively listening to their voices. The more formal, semi-structured interviews were used for that set of questions which all the respondents were to be asked (ibid) and I chose that method too in order to have a set of closely comparable data. Nevertheless, semi-structured interviews were not set in stone; open-ended questions were asked during them when considered necessary from the course of the interview, in order for the participants to be able to express themselves more freely and openly (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015; Pourkos and Dafermos, 2010; Silverman, 2000; Bell, 1999). Moreover, discussing elements of biographical methodology, i.e. elements of narrative interviews (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015; Rojas, Susinos and Calvo, 2013; Tsiolis, 2006) in formal or informal interviews was helpful in order to gain more insights to their experience, perspectives and backgrounds.

In accordance with the four research questions, the interview guide of the semi-structured interview was developed. It contained questions regarding:

- their school experience
- class/school absences and truancy, both regarding themselves as well as from what they observe around them.
- their interaction with peers, teachers and their parents.
- their ideas about what they would change in their school in order to improve their future school experience.

Questions were both closed, especially at the beginning, in order to develop more familiarity and make them feel at ease, as well as open-ended. All but three of the semi-structured interviews were conducted during the first school year. The rest were conducted in the second year, as I waited for the girls to feel at ease with the idea of recorded interviews without being

pushy. The three semi-structured interviews which were conducted in the second year were with Lucy, Savvia and Daniela, all students of Class B. This points to the fact that trust and familiarity grew much more rapidly with the girls of Class A, which can in turn be explained if we take into consideration that I was their form teacher, therefore I spent more time with them than with the girls of Class B.

More unstructured group interviews were also conducted during the second year. Later, as familiarity kept growing, I was increasingly a participant observer when I mingled with them in or out of school. Samples of questions of the semi-structured interview were:

- I would like to know more about you, where you live, your family and your hobbies!
- When is your birthday?
- Which are your friends at school?
- Could you please compare a bit your previous school with this one?
- How would you describe yourself as a student?
- I saw (you/name of a peer) (I state the day) out of class during the (n^{th}) period. What was she/he/were you up to?
- Where do you hang out when you stay out of class?
- What would you like to see changing in our school?
- How would you handle students' absences if you were the principal of our school?
- Are teachers different in this school compared to your previous school?

The interview guide that I have used for the semi-structured interview can be found in the Appendix B (translated from Greek).

3.3.3 Observation

Sustained observation is a very powerful tool for ethnographers. It enables the researcher to engage with young people in a more naturalistic setting, i.e. in ways that respect their interests, their choices and their independence (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). If the researcher is known and trusted by the participants, observation has the capacity to provide insightful data and can be used to complement other methods, considering what is said as well

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as what is done (ibid). For researchers who are outsiders, observation (perhaps non participant at first) may be the medium through which they will familiarise with the setting and with the participants (ibid).

Observations can be participant and/or non-participant (Montgomery, 2014; Roberts-Holmes, 2005; Walker, 1990). Participant observation allows the researcher to get close to the participants and interact with them in order to learn about their worlds, understandings and feelings (Montgomery, 2014). Although sustained observation is time consuming, limited observation can miss relevant and important data. A big part of the observation that I utilised was participant. Non-participant observation is more distant than participant observation, and I used it mostly for refinement, verification and reflection on the research process as well as the data collected from other sources (Lancy, 1993). Researchers who utilise observations often do so in an overt rather than covert manner (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015), for example in pre-set observation sheets (see Appendix C for an example). Although at first I used these observation sheets, I soon stopped using them because they proved to be very restraining for me. I decided to use a more free-style way of writing as I found that I could be more expressive this way; I could have as much free space as I wanted for scribbling and/or drawing the girls' whereabouts or sitting arrangements. Moreover, I preferred to write my field notes as reconstructions rather than on the spot (Lancy, 1993), in order to make the setting of the observation as naturalistic as possible – I did not want the participants to see me scribbling in a notebook but rather I wanted my full attention to be on observing, on interacting when the observation was participant and on the feelings that were arising in me because of these observations.

3.3.4 Researcher's diary

A researcher's diary (Roberts-Holmes, 2005; Le Compte and Preissle, 1993) is a very powerful tool as it provides the space for the researcher's reflective thoughts to be expressed. Reflection is a process in which the researcher actively and purposefully considers their feelings, knowledge, reactions, thoughts, beliefs, responses and experience (Dewey, in Vinjamuri, Warde and Kolb, 2017). Research has shown that regular reflective diary writing deepens researcher's thinking as, at best, the reflection process enables learners to critically

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analyse their experience and develop new approaches and ways of thinking (ibid). Delamont (2008) explains her preference in keeping 'factual' field notes separate from her reflections, but explains that "other researchers, who want their bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings to be rolled up into their fieldwork might only keep one multifaceted record" (p. 51). She goes on to explain that qualitative data analysis software packages nowadays make it easy to tag and mark passages in order to keep different types of text clearly labelled for clarity.

I am one of those researchers who often like to keep 'facts' and reflection in one space as I make better sense of the data when my bodily sensations and feelings are rolled up into the fieldwork. I used Atlas.ti software package to clearly distinguish 'facts' from feelings/reflections, as I believe that there would always be the danger of prejudging 'facts' in case I did not distinguish them clearly. However, keeping 'facts' and feelings at the same place, positively influenced my analysis skills, for example when trying to actively listen not just to words but to the diverse ways that students express themselves and share their experience and perspectives, as well as simultaneously record my feelings in response to them. The awkwardness I felt during some moments of silence between the girls (which will be discussed in the next chapter) is one such recorded example which I kept rolled up into my field notes and helped me reach a plausible interpretation. Whenever my mingled technique induced more thoughts, I noted them in a separate file, which was my researcher's diary. As I can often express myself better with pen and paper instead of using a computer, I uploaded these diary handwritten entries as photos in Atlas.ti for further analysis.

Keeping 'facts' and feelings at the same place positively influenced my building of *reflexivity* as it kept me aware at all times of my presence in the field and the possible ways I may have contributed to it. Delamont (2008) above rightly places the word 'factual' in inverted commas; the researcher tries to capture the reality of the participants rather than his/her own reality (Gergen, in Graue and Walsh, 1998) but, as Willis (2000) puts it, and as previously stated, in the ethnographic approach: '(p)erhaps there is a triple dynamic of understanding: my understandings [the researcher's], of their understandings [the participants'] of an understood [conceptually held] world' (p. xviii). Moreover, it is a process where researchers bring their own experience, their own baggage (Papadakis, 2005), their own intellectual and personal histories. This is closely connected to the building of reflexivity, a notion which signifies the importance of systematically attending to the context of knowledge

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construction, especially the researcher's part in the social context which is being investigated (Hodgson, in Rapley 2018). In other words, reflexivity signifies the fact that the researcher's background does indeed affect parameters such as how language is used, the formulation of questions, the filtering lens used and the ways in which meaning is made (Berger, 2013).

3.3.5 Artefacts

An artefact is an object which is made or developed. Artefacts are diverse in nature, for example they might be a map or a toy or an image or they may contain textual material (Hearn and Thomson, 2014; Lancy, 1993). They contain data which has been produced independently of the researcher and are available for analysis (Hammersley, 2014). As cultural constructions and as representations (Hearn and Thomson, 2014), they may prove to be very useful for an ethnographer. Insider researchers, as is the case of researchers in a school context who are simultaneously teachers (Menzies and Santoro, 2018), may have access to artefacts which may not be publicly available (ibid). I used textual materials, i.e. documents, both from the school (archival material, records of absences and internal regulations of the school) as well as from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth and the media (circulars and newspaper articles). Unlike many researchers who routinely begin their study by collecting a range of texts in order to familiarise with the context of their study (Hearn and Thomson, 2014), I preferred to collect them throughout the study in order to look for trends, changes and similarities. As an 'insider' who worked in the specific context, I had access to documents which would not be otherwise available – especially the students' records of absences, therefore being both a teacher and a researcher proved to be very helpful. Samples of artefacts gathered are given in Appendix D.

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3.3.6 Questionnaires

Questionnaires often resemble the format of structured interviews (Flewitt, 2014) and are popular methods in research with young people (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). Questionnaires can combine a range of types of questions such as closed questions that may require a yes/no response or a ticked box, rating scales and open ended questions. A well-designed questionnaire is short, has simple instructions and can yield a great amount of comparable data in a short period of time, with a downside being that they require good literacy skills (ibid).

Instead of using structured interviews, which use a specific order of a standard set of questions, with the same questions being asked to each participant so that responses are comparable, I preferred to administer some questionnaires in order to save time and also because I wanted to let each participant reflect and answer at their own pace. The questionnaires were paper-based and were administered to the participants face to face. I used questionnaires on two occasions. The first questionnaire combined closed questions and open ended questions, whereas the second was a shorter one with just one open ended question. I kept the questions as simple as possible, because most of the girls did not have good literacy skills. These questionnaires can be found in Appendix E.

3.4 Data Collection strategies and trustworthiness

3.4.1 Establishment of rapport and familiarity

The choice of the specific setting has been a conscious decision. The fact that I have worked in the specific school for many years of course made the setting familiar, on the other hand I took into consideration that the setting is in itself not an ordinary one in the broader Cypriot educational context. Moreover, having already pursued another ethnographic research there in the past for the purpose of my Master's thesis (Iacovou, 2012), I knew from the results of that study that the students appreciate having their voice listened to. Another advantage was that as an insider, I did not have to familiarise myself with school regulations or school

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premises, thus directly focusing to building rapport with the participants. However, I made freshmen students as the focus of my study, in order to challenge the previous familiarity of the setting.

Both teachers and students knew that I was a PhD student and a researcher from the University of Cyprus. I told students and colleagues that the research was about getting to know aspects and experience of students' school life. A special permit was received before carrying out the research, as well as written permits from the parents of all the participants.

Both Delamont (2014) and Russell (2011) cite Becker's classic question 'Whose side are we on?', therefore as an individual who was already familiar with the setting, I made the decision to appear to be more on the side of the students whom I focused on, e.g. by be willing to listen to them extensively during the three break times of the day as well as out of school, by not transferring confidential information to other teachers or other students and by spending more time with them rather than in the staff room during school days, as well as meeting them in afternoons, talking to them over the phone and going out with them wherever I was invited, e.g. hanging out at coffee shops, birthday parties, for a drink at pubs etc. 'News' spread fast at school, so for the three years of fieldwork even students who were not participants in this study chose to come and talk to me about personal issues during break times; 'I was one of the few teachers they could trust', as they often put it. I relied heavily on trying to build an honest, trustful and never pretentious relationship with the students. Indeed, ethnographers like Russel (2013) point out the importance of a trustful relationship with participants when researching marginalised young people.

However, I also tried to be friendly and never hostile with my colleagues as well as neutral over my comments concerning the participants when I happened to be asked about them by colleagues who knew that I spent a lot of time with them. Being accepted by other teachers was of crucial importance, as this helped them be relaxed around me in the staff room, thus freely talking about their experience from their classes with the participants of the study. This way I could gather more information concerning the other teachers' insights relating to the participants' acts around other teachers.

Once again in order to fight familiarity, considering the fact that I was both a researcher as well as a teacher in the setting, I decided on the one hand to gather information from participants from all three years of classes in order to 'get the vibe' of the general setting. On

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the other hand, I made the focus of the study to be a class of girls in their first year at the school; these were at first complete strangers to me and they were completely unfamiliar with the new school setting. I thus shadowed them for all the three years of their studies up to the night of their graduation ceremony, including summer school holidays, when our communication was mainly in the form of phone calls and texts. I kept contact with many of them ever since as a result of the familiarity that was built during these three years.

The fact that I came to be both the girls' teacher as well as their friend did not seem to inhibit class discipline during the lesson. On the contrary, they seemed to readily distinguish the time of talking and hanging out with the time of learning. Only rarely did I have to use the Greek saying 'friendship is friendship but work is work' during class time, for them to realise that they can talk to me about things unrelated to Physics during break time or during our after school meetings or on the phone. Overall, being a good listener and a friend during break times and allowing the girls to talk without criticising them, proved to be strategies which promoted respect between us and inhibited indiscipline in the class.

Menzies and Santoro (2018) rightly argue that the power imbalance between a teacher-researcher and the students must not be taken lightly as it may indeed be a concern regarding the nature of data collected and its trustworthiness, but they add that this can be counterbalanced by advantages such as ease of access to the research site and to insider knowledge, as well as the existing strong rapport with members of staff who may support access arrangements. Despite that, unlike what researchers such as Corrigan (1979) and Russell (2011) have reported, gaining valid information from the students did not seem to be threatened by my teacher role. Students found it novel that they could be open and friendly with a teacher of theirs. They chose to open up about their personal lives and the issues bothering them in the presence of the few teacher-friends they could have. These were, excluding me, two specific colleagues for the three years of fieldwork. I considered it crucial to be very close especially to these colleagues and to be seen outside the staff room with them, not only to gain more information but also to make it clear to the students too, on whose side I was on. In other words, my strong rapport with the specific staff members facilitated a lot of trust between me and the students.

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3.4.2 Data collection strategies related to the research tools

Informal and unstructured interviews were used alongside other activities (Hammersley, 2014) and were rarely recorded. These activities were usually hanging out during break times or at cafeterias/pub. The difference of these kinds of interviews from simple conversations was that in the case of informal and unstructured interviews I already had in mind/written down some specific questions that I wanted to ask. These were often questions concerning school incidences, for example I once asked questions relating to a recent fight between two students. During conversations a topic was introduced (for example concerning school uniform or a school incident) and the girls commented on the topic, as well as on the view of other participants. In order to be effective, my intervention in these cases was minimal and I only focused on being a good listener, despite the fact that many times I did want to ask questions. I soon realised that by keeping quiet, the conversation can be directed by them into interesting paths, from which important information can be gathered. An example was when three girls directed a conversation about a school fight between two students into a discussion about their experience in smoking illicit drugs – a subject/experience that I did not plan to ask about at that specific time. Due to this advantage, I soon started to use this research tool routinely, at least once a week, mostly during my cafeteria meetings with groups of girls. Usually each group consisted of four or five of the participants, i.e. those who could turn out in that particular after school meeting. This tool also proved to be effective as a 'backup plan' on the (very few!) occasions that a group of girls was not particularly chatty; introducing a topic always fired up the conversation and the exchange of opinions between them. To these I was always a very quiet but eager and attentive listener.

Semi-structured individual and group interviews were recorded; participants had to voluntarily agree to be recorded during the interview and all of them agreed. In fact, many of them were very enthusiastic about it. They often took the recorder in their hands, asked me where I had found it and how much I had paid for it. Although the presence of the recorder and their enthusiasm over it deviated the context from a more naturalistic one, I believe that their enthusiasm had the advantage of showing them that their voice was welcome and was worth being listened to carefully and, more importantly, revisited. Concerning the structuring and wording used for the interview questions and the questionnaires, my teacher role aided me

considerably since it offered me the awareness that most of the participants of my focus group did not have good literacy skills, therefore I had to structure my wording so that my questions were not complex.

I asked the ten girls to indicate when they would like to be interviewed as I wanted them to feel at ease. I gave them sample questions in order to show them that this would be a friendly communication and not an interrogation. I also gave them the freedom to indicate where they would like to be interviewed. Five of the girls chose to be interviewed at school premises and the other five at nearby cafeterias after school. The two questionnaires were handed to the girls during the third year of their studies. In order not to mix my teacher role with my researcher role, I did not use my class time for handing out the questionnaires. Instead, I spent time with the girls at break times and on numerous occasions I asked to supervise them in class when another of their teachers happened to be absent, so that we would spend more time together. It was in such a free time of absence of a colleague that I handed them the questionnaires. On some occasions the girls asked me to take them from lessons they disliked for the interviews – while I write this, it still amazes me how inventive they could be in order to miss specific lessons!

The artefacts I chose to analyse were circulars from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth as well as documents from the school concerning absences. These were gathered throughout the three years of fieldwork and were stored as image documents in a separate file in Atlas. ti. The fact that I liked to keep 'facts' and feelings/thoughts mingled, meant that these feelings/thoughts were recorded as often as my observation records did and any further extensive thoughts induced were then extracted in my researcher's diary. In retrospect, I realise that frequent writing helped me enormously in clearing my head, re-structuring my strategies, reflecting on dilemmas and generally recuperating and catalysing my drive. If there is one piece of advice that I would like to stress to new student researchers, is the frequent use of a researcher's diary.

Concerning observations, Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) indicate that important sampling parameters include the setting, the participants, the events and the processes. Sequences of events were meticulously observed more than once, for example the girls' whereabouts during truancy, their behaviour during assemblies, their acts during break times etc. At first I used a pre-set observation sheet but later I decided to use a more free-style way

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of writing, as I found that I could express myself more freely that way. I preferred to write my field notes as reconstructions rather than on the spot. There were some instances when I was afraid that I would forget something by the time I got home, so on those occasions I immediately wrote down my observations or discussions with the girls/colleagues as soon as I entered the staff room after my break time conversations. I carefully kept these notes private, although in any case my writing would probably be illegible to outsiders as I used abbreviations in order to be faster. I tried to note not only what the girls said and did but also describe their body language, clothing, hair style, makeup etc. I also wrote down the place and time, who was present and I tried to indicate my feelings/thoughts in parentheses so that I would not mingle them with 'facts' during analysis.

3.4.3 Trustworthiness

Concerning data quality and quality of conclusions, I followed Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's (2014) guidelines concerning the criteria of objectivity/confirmability, reliability/dependability/auditability, internal validity/credibility/authenticity, external validity/transferability/fittingness and utilisation/application/action orientation. Regarding objectivity/confirmability, I followed their suggestions of:

- Describing methods and procedures explicitly and in detail and providing 'backstage' information concerning the setting.
- Retaining data for future re-analyses.
- Being self-aware about personal assumptions, values and biases.

Especially concerning biases, Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) explain that "(b)ias detection and removal take time" (p. 298), therefore in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, I set the avoidance of biases at a central focus throughout the three years of fieldwork. I followed many of their suggestions on avoiding the biases stemming from the effects of the site on the researcher, e.g.:

- By spreading out my participants at first to individuals outside the focus of my study, thus avoiding the 'elite' bias.

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- By avoiding going native through spending time thinking about things outside the site.
- By trying to keep the research questions in mind and not wandering too far from them.

Moreover, I followed many of their suggestions on avoiding the biases stemming from the effects of the researcher on the site, e.g.:

- By spending some time simply hanging around and taking a lower profile, i.e. not always inquiring.
- By using unobtrusive measures where I could, such as reading publicly accessible documents rather than asking for them or by observing from natural positions, e.g. during school assemblies.
- By doing some of the interviewing off-site.

Sequences of events were observed more than once, and this established the consistency (often known as reliability) of observations (Spindler and Spindler, 1987). Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) describe reliability as the attribute of the process of a study to be consistent and reasonably stable over time. I followed many of their guidelines considering this issue of integrity, e.g.:

- By making research questions as clear as possible and the features of the research design compatible with them.
- By ensuring and welcoming reviews from my supervisors and critical friends.

I also used qualitatively oriented tools and processes, which were appropriate for the kind of research questions being asked, this way ensuring that the data would describe the true state of affairs within the setting, i.e. ensuring internal validity of the findings. Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) explain that the term 'validity', due to its quantitative origin, is a contested term among qualitative researchers. They instead offer the alternatives of 'verisimilitude'/'persuasively written account'/'credibility'/'authenticity'/'truth value'. They do however explain that the term 'validity' is still purposefully used by some qualitative researchers, as it suggests a more rigorous stance toward our work. As I see it, accepting the latter position means equalling rigorousness specifically to the use of positivistic expressions which, in reality, are not readily present in a qualitative research. Accepting the latter position means considering the quantitative paradigm as more superior. I am thus in favour of

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eradicating quantitative terms from qualitative research; perhaps we should move from the question of which paradigm is more superior to which is more suitable for the kinds of questions being asked on a specific occasion (without of course excluding the much respected mixed methods approach, when suitable).

My goal was not to assert any external validity (generalisability), as it is very often not an expected attribute in qualitative research. Instead I focused on its utilisation/application/action orientation. I do believe that more studies of similar phenomena and in similar contexts are needed, i.e. studies of student's experience/truancy/dropouts/resistance, especially in Cypriot VET contexts. From what I know, such studies are missing from the Cypriot educational context, therefore these students' voice is largely silenced or marginalised. In order to allow a future adequate comparison between such studies (often called meta-ethnography), I tried to be explicit throughout my account concerning the description of the characteristics of the setting, the participants and the processes used. I would like this study to be part of a future synthesis of similar studies, which will reveal VET students' voice and will lead to their emancipation and the improvement of their overall school experience.

3.5 Data Analysis and stance

I followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) and Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's (2014) social anthropological approach to analyse the data. I found myself a good laptop computer (gift from my aunt) and decided to use ATLAS.ti CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) after the suggestion of one of my supervisors, Dr. Symeonidou. I thank her for her advice, as, due to the large amount of data gathered, handling the data manually was out of the question. The downside of using the specific CAQDAS was that it is not free of charge, but it has many advantages; I found it to be an excellent way to store the corpus of data in a particularly organised manner. Moreover, it was relatively easy to learn using it as there are many online tutorials. Furthermore, the ability to create memos and comments has been very helpful, as well as the ability to store handwritten notes and analyse them in the form of photos. Other advantages noted by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) which I found to be correct, is the presence of the search function which permits rapid access to nodes, as well as the ability to create displays which show interrelationships between data chunks.

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The three steps of *data condensation*, *data display* and *conclusion drawing/verification* were followed (ibid). Data condensation was the process whereby the data appearing in the full corpus of my field notes, questionnaires, interview transcripts, research diary entries and documents was selected, simplified, abstracted and organised into conceptual categories. Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) warn against the use of the term 'data reduction', as they believe that the process of selection, simplification, abstraction and organisation makes data stronger. They also stress that data condensation occurs continuously throughout the project and even before data is collected, as the researcher makes decisions concerning which conceptual framework, which research questions and data collection strategies to use. Apart from the processes of selection, simplification, abstraction and organisation occurring within data condensation, I would add the process of *clarification*; especially in ethnographic enquiries, raw field notes are often illegible to outsiders and full of abbreviations (in my case even of sketches of locations where participants were spotted). These were first re-written in order to be clarified, before they were further abstracted into conceptual categories. This process has been very time consuming.

Data was first abstracted through a first cycle of coding, as a way of initially summarising segments of data. The second cycle of coding, called Pattern Coding (ibid), has been a way of grouping those summaries (codes) into a smaller number of categories or themes. That was a very important step as large amounts of data were condensed into a smaller number of analytic units. These pattern codes were summaries of categories/themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people and theoretical constructs (ibid). I repeated the first and second cycles of coding more than once and found that by reconsidering, reshuffling and redistributing first cycle codes, often more meaningful categories were brought forth.

The second stage of data analysis was data display. In the past, at least in qualitative research, the most frequent form of display has been the extended text, which however entails the danger that the researcher may jump into hasty or partial conclusions (ibid). I therefore followed Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's (2014) clear guideline that some displays in the form of tables, networks, charts or matrices "are a major avenue to robust qualitative analysis" (ibid, p. 13). The use of CAQDAS has been very helpful in constructing such networks.

As a third stage of data analysis, I then used the displays and focused in interpreting what they meant by noting patterns, causal flows, propositions and explanations. At first I held

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conclusions lightly and maintained skepticism and openness, however conclusions were verified or dropped altogether through multiple waves of analysis. Their validity was examined through reference to existing data and/or further data collection. Results and conclusions were also compared to relevant information gathered from the literature review; for each research question a table was formed, in which I listed both the findings from the literature review, as well as the findings from my research, this way making the two sources of information comparable. An example of such a table is given below (Table 2), regarding the third research question. Overall, data analysis was a continual process rather than just one to be carried out at the end of data collection. I considered having collected enough data when a point of saturation was reached, i.e. when further data analyses were adding only in a minor way to already identified patterns (Clark, Flewitt, Hammersley and Robb, 2014).

Decision to stay out of class/school	**Push out reasons**	**Pull out reasons**
From literature research	School phobia – anxiety	condoned truancy – encouraged by parents
	condoned truancy – encouraged by teachers	culturally motivated truancy, e.g. girls raising younger siblings
	specific lesson absence	economic reasons – need to work
	'near truancy' or 'psychological truancy'	found something 'better to do' with their time
	disliking aspects of school	Working class, low educated parents –low regard for education
	internal rules of the school, such as zero-tolerance policies	Migration background - minority populations
	low school performance	family creation
	hidden dropout phenomenon	problematic' behaviour, which is thought to be a result of their past experience - mental and physical health problems or endogenous behavioural problems

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		single-parent and/or large families
		separation, divorce in the family
From data analysis	the teacher (disliking a teacher, incompetence of the teacher, teacher putting too much pressure on students)	practical matters (in order to catch the bus after school)
	the lesson (boring lesson, lack of interest in the specific lesson, difficult lesson)	personal issues (lack of energy, boredom, tiredness, illness, other health issues, travel)
	peer related issues (quarrels with friends, enticed by friends)	family related issues (problems in the family, parents being too strict, need to work)

Table 2: Example of data display during analysis

Ethnography implies producing such a rich tapestry of data, which allows ethnographers to make seemingly whopping conclusions from rather modest observations of a few 'cases' (in Measor, 1999). The reason, according to Wolcott (1987), is both because they have come to know those 'cases' exceedingly well, as well as because they recognise and they are careful of the critical distinction between generalising and overgeneralising. Instead of 'generalising and overgeneralising' I would instead use the phrase 'concluding and generalising', as asserting generalisability (external validity) does not always need to be (and perhaps cannot be) a goal.

In writing the dissertation, I purposefully tried to choose and follow specific stances concerning its overall tone, mode and orientation. Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) explain that choices must be made when it comes to how the researcher 'speaks' to the reader. Different stances can be "compatibly mixed and matched within a single report" (ibid, p. 327), but it is important for the researcher to be aware of and to point out these stances. Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) draw extensively on John van Maanen's *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* to analyse and reflect on a long list of different stances in writing: realist, confessional, impressionist, critical, formal, literary, jointly told, structural, poststructural and advocacy. Following their guidelines, the pervasive writing stances in this report are:

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- *Confessional*: includes accounts from the field-worker's viewpoint; I include ethical issues and dilemmas, admission of errors and behind-the-scenes glitches.
- *Impressionist*: accounts start out in a largely descriptive way, so that the reader can vividly relive the experience step by step and draw their own conclusions.
- *Critical*: critically examines some sociological and cultural underpinnings of human dynamics.
- *Structural*: combines some theoretical reflection with first-person accounts.

3.6 Ethical considerations and dilemmas

"The inclusion of reflexive questions and considerations promotes ongoing discussion … and encourages researchers to revisit their own and others' experience of ethical challenges and dilemmas" (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015, p. 44). Especially when it comes to research which involves children, ethics is a matter that should be taken very seriously. Graham *et al* (in Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015) present the following Ethics Charter, which is a guide comprising of seven commitments to be followed in research with children:

- Ethics in research involving children is everyone's responsibility;
- Respecting the dignity of children is core to ethical research;
- Research involving children must be just and equitable;
- Ethical research benefits children;
- Children should never be harmed by their participation in research;
- Research must always obtain children's informed and ongoing consent;
- Ethical research requires ongoing reflection (p. 42-43).

Taking into consideration the above and since the research involved adolescents, it was conducted with prior permission from the administration of the school. Students participated in the research with their informed consent (Montgomery, 2014; Roberts-Holmes, 2005), as well as with written permission from their parents. Likewise, participants voluntarily agreed to be recorded during the interview, and it was explained that they would appear in the written account of the study with pseudonyms (Rojas, Susinos and Calvo, 2013). All participants accepted to be recorded and only on two occasions did a student (Marina and Kassiani) asked me to stop recording for a few minutes in order to share something very personal and confidential. The dilemma I faced was that four of the participants asked to appear with their

real name and surname. Although this may be considered as a right to be respected, and indeed in high quality research the rights of children are to be respected (Clark, Flewitt, Hammersley and Robb, 2014), I could not grant their wish because this would affect the anonymity of all the other participants and of the context of the research, as well as my promise to their parents for anonymity and confidentiality.

The ethical concern of camouflaging the school (or trying to do so) in the small community of Cyprus in order to minimise identification of the participants, who were promised anonymity, was continuous and sometimes overwhelming. Similar concerns are reported by researchers of other small communities, for example the Icelandic one (Gunnþòrsdòttir and Bjarnason, 2014). Although ethical commitment is central to high quality research, Walford (2008) believes that

> The use of anonymity may not always be the most ethical decision. Whilst anonymity is still the most common option … it can have negative influences on the conduct and reporting of research and can lead both researchers and readers to make false generalisations… (p. 36)

My decision was to defend the anonymity of the participants and the context as much as possible, while at the same time striving to achieve the trustworthiness and rigour of the research. The question, however, still remains; the participants were promised anonymity, which is about the lack of identifiers which can potentially indicate which persons provided the data and in which context, but it is still possible that if other individuals within the context read the case, they may be able to identify the participants (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). Moreover, in disseminating results, there are questions concerning the promised confidentiality concerning what will be done with their data.

Some of the interviews were conducted within the natural environment of the school grounds (Rojas, Susinos and Calvo, 2013). However, some participants asked to be interviewed at a time when they were seen outside their class or even outside their school (I made almost daily visits to the nearby cafeterias in order to check if any of the participants was hanging out there when truanting). Every participant was asked where and when they wished to be interviewed, as I believe that this made them feel more at ease. The dilemma arising was that I could be spotted with them at a time they were out of class, and instead of prompting them to go back in class, as some other colleagues were seen doing whenever they spotted students playing truant, I would be seen hanging out with them. Despite that, it was

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soon apparent that my lack of criticism concerning their act of truanting made students feel more at ease and trust me to a degree that they could open up and share their perspectives.

Concerning interviews, at first I planned to give participants their transcript of the interview to read it and agree with what I transcribed (Rojas, Susinos and Calvo, 2013). There was however the issue of the limited literacy skills of most girls – I was worried that anything more than a length of a few paragraphs might alienate them. I therefore took the decision to give them only the main points of their interview responses, as well as ask them directly when I needed a clarification. This is the method followed by Gray (in Bell and Opie, 2002) but for another reason, their lack of time. The participants were happy to give me their clarifications and all agreed with the written notes of the main points of their interview responses.

Flewitt (2014) points out that some young people may find certain approaches patronising or awkward during the research, therefore as a researcher I always strived to be sensitive, responsive and creative in my approach. This kind of methodological flexibility is of great importance within an inclusive educational setting (Rojas, Susinos and Calvo, 2013). The most important guideline that I always kept in mind is that participants, even though they are not adults, are to be treated as equals, not as objects to be studied (Clark, Flewitt, Hammersley and Robb, 2014).

Another dilemma that I faced during - and especially after- the research was when non participant students found out about the research and approached me, asking to contribute to it. This increased the number of interviews that I conducted. These interviews comprise data that may be used for a future reanalysis. However, it was not always possible to grant other participants' wish to participate in the study, both because of lack of time, as well as because a high level of convergence and focus is needed in ethnographic research in order to be able to see the big picture and reach the insights concerning the culture one is studying. I did promise to make them participants in a future study, I am however worried that these may only be empty promises if in the meantime they graduate or I move to another school/job. Connected to this is the challenge explained by Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2015) concerning the exit strategy. After the girls graduated and fieldwork came to an end, and up to this day, I still communicate with them and sometimes meet them. The question is, "how can you continue to provide support, but not create dependency? " (ibid, p. 43). The fact that they graduated has thankfully prevented dependency to arise, however I do want to keep supporting

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them as much as I can and even conduct another research with them in the future, in order to follow the way their perspectives have evolved.

Finally, Flewitt (2014) rightly indicates that sometimes students with negative school experience need to be convinced that their voice *is* worth listening to prior to their participation and interviewing. To this end it was important for me to explain the research goals to participants (Rojas, Susinos and Calvo, 2013), as well as listen to them, get to know their opinion and learn from them about how their school experience can become more meaningful. Montgomery (2014) rightly urges every researcher to reflect on the benefit of their research (apart from their personal intellectual curiosity, interest in other people or wanting to make a contribution to knowledge in their field of research) with respect to the benefits of the research for the participants. Also, as Miles and Huberman (1994) rightly point out, since this process requires the analysis of data obtained from many different sources, there are analytic choices to be made by the researcher as to which material to include or exclude in the process of analysis. The decision of what is important to be included is therefore subjective. Ball and Barton (in Allan and Slee, 2008) recognise the struggle that they faced as researchers in trying to represent and do justice to the voice of participants. Doing justice to the voice of participants also means that views of students who at first had to be convinced that *are* worth listened to, should not be excluded at a later stage of the research. This is directly related to the use of pilot studies. I offer my critique concerning pilot studies in the following section.

3.6.1 Pilot studies - a critique

3.6.1.1 Addressing the issue of pilot studies: drawing from experience accumulated within the ethnographic research under discussion

Pilot studies are typically considered as being of great importance in conducting both quantitative and qualitative research, nevertheless they are at the same time reported as being under-discussed in qualitative research literature (Ismail *et al* 2018; Kim 2010; Sampson 2004). Bell and Opie (2002) maintain - and stress that they "make no apology for doing so" (p. 192) - that pilot studies are "essential, not optional" (p. 35) and can save the researcher from

"real trouble" (p. 16). Pilot studies, as small scale versions/trial runs prior to the main study or pre-testings of particular research instruments, can alert the researcher as to whether their research questions, approaches and methods are specific, ethical and doable and can prevent serious pitfalls (Roberts-Holmes 2005; Van Teijlingen and Hundley 2001; Lewis and Lindsay 2000).

Sampson (2004) eloquently debates against sudden and total immersion in the ethnographic field and discusses the benefits of "putting a toe or two in the research waters before diving in" (p. 399). To make her point, she draws on her experience of boarding a ship for her ethnographic work 'ignorant' and 'blind', and only then realising and fully appreciating the complexity of the relationship between the ship's captain and the marine pilot, as well as the importance of good knowledge of local conditions by the marine pilot in bringing a ship into the port. The researcher then adds that:

> the experience led me to understand how a pilot study can enhance research […]: How a pilot is just as important in finding the way through the 'waves' of the field as one is in navigating the somewhat more physically formidable waves of the ocean (ibid, p. 384).

Since Sampson's findings were made while she was immersed in the field, one wonders how this can come to terms with her call for a 'gradual' immersion. One is, as I see it, either *in* the field or *out* of it and perhaps the art of immersing oneself in the fieldwork partly lies in the realisation that there is no middle ground. My little experience has taught me that when the researcher is in the field, witnessing/being part of the story might indeed become overwhelming at times, and that is when she/he must take time to stand above it when reflecting, in order to try to see the big picture, and modestly report on it. She/he should take a deep -and critical- breath, make the necessary modifications, discuss with supervisors and/or critical friends and then repeat the procedure. As discussed below, this is the context which helped me better understand and value both the participants as well as myself as a researcher. And this realisation lies, for me, in the heart of ethnography.

The 'great importance vs under-discussed' paradox concerning pilot studies is also puzzling. I can still clearly recall my confusion during the early days of developing the research design. Interestingly, my background in a quantitative science where pilot studies are

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considered to be self-evident before 'real' research, was not of much help[13]. While writing the research proposal, I was tempted to go with the flow on the simplistic logic that since everybody does it, both in qualitative and quantitative research, so should I. I therefore included the pilot study as a part of my research plans when entering the field.

Despite this, the temporary character of piloting did not seem to resonate well with my ethical standpoint that although convergence and selectivity are endemic to data collection and analysis (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014; Miles and Huberman 1994), it would be unethical to eliminate the initial contributions of participants to the pilot study simply by 'starting fresh' with new participants, especially since the first contributions were from participants who were already marginalised and labelled in their educational past, and were now eager to keep sharing their perspective. During the first interviews, I noted that some students seemed thrilled with the idea of the recorder, wanted to take a closer look at it and asked 'Now, really?! This thing traps my voice?' (personal communication, September 14, 2015, translated from Greek). It was then that I started considering altering the research design so as to try not to exclude any voice which would be eager to share their perspective. What I found particularly upsetting, was that some participants initially had to be *told* that their voice is worth listening to and that they have the *right* to be listened to.

Many of the participants seemed enthusiastic about further contributing to the research and some initially asked why their real names could not be included in written accounts under their opinions. I translated this as their first reaction to a feeling of empowerment, exactly because someone actively listened to what they had to say and considered it important not only to listen to them once, but also to revisit their voice through the recorder. Thankfully, however, such comments ceased after a while, which for me, as I noted in my researcher's diary, was seen as an indication that familiarity started growing, the setting was more natural and our conversations could thus be gradually considered as deep hanging out, as characterised by Geertz (in Wogan 2004).

[13] For a detailed account of an ethnographer openly reflecting on how her positivist background affected her thinking, see Rapley (2018).

Despite the above, the suggestions from relevant literature review were clear; pilot studies should as far as possible involve respondents who are different from, though as close as possible to, the participants of the main part of the study. This is usually stated either as a straight forward prompt, for example in Bell and Opie (2002) or as part of the methodology of a research (Hemming 2018; Rosvall 2015; Dicks 2013; Phtiaka 1997).

The words of one of my students also echoed in my ears, when he told me that he wants to "give up trying" because "the Ministry (of Education) considers us to be numbers; I am not a number" (personal communication, May 4, 2015). As his teacher, I couldn't stop feeling guilty. To this day I also remember one of my first random encounters with social anthropology and ethnography while reading a Penguin book about Freeman's refutation of Mead's 'anthropological myths' (Freeman 1984). For me, it was the beginning of a new world, in which meaning is not necessarily derived from numbers and arguments have nothing to do with Mathematics equations or laws of Physics. It was also the beginning of a new understanding of a crucial strategy for inclusion, namely that when participating in a research with other human beings, merely hearing their voice has nothing to do with being an *active listener*. In such a context, it was not easy for me to exclude initial contributions of participants.

Of equal importance is that in an educational system any form of critical reflection from a researcher should be coupled to students' voice and perspectives. Students obviously want to be listened to and want to be taken seriously, as every human being does. In a context where there is a necessity for even one student to state that 'he is not a number', not only do I hold myself responsible, but I consider it as my duty to listen to them carefully, to say the least. The temporary character of piloting, then, does not seem to resonate with one of the most important aspects of the ethnographic approach, which is its synergistic character (Gergen, in Graue and Welsh 1998).

It does not seem to resonate, either, with the fact that in ethnography the researcher tries to capture the reality of the participants rather than her/his own reality (Lancy 1993). Taking into consideration this understanding of the participants or, better, considering their understanding to be interwoven with the researcher's understanding, how could I come to terms with the temporary character of pilot studies and the exclusion of their contributions? Therefore, after my first ethnographic encounters I kept questioning whether it would be ethical to initially *use*

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certain participants in order to 'calibrate' methods to be 'thrown' on *other* participants. If I did so, whose voice would be heard? Or rather, would it still be my understanding of *their* understanding?

Unsure, I kept discussing with my supervisors and my few critical friends, and attempted to critically reflect on the matter in order to try to see at least a few layers beneath its surface. I kept studying relevant literature but suspected that no matter how much relevant literature I kept searching for, there seemed to be no real substitute for diving myself in the field and taking into full account the participants' voices. I decided that there was no point for me to wait until I was prepared. Instead of following 'degrees of immersion' when it comes to engaging participants in the research, I took the whole immersion as taken for granted - in spatial, temporal and ethical terms - and rather benefited more from a continuous calibration of my own critical thinking, while being immersed in the field *and* while out of it.

While discussing and reflecting a bit further, I became aware of the fact that *any* decisions made during research *are* a form of selectivity, and so was my decision to try not to exclude any voice which would be eager to share their perspective. It is a fact that selectivity *is* an inextricable part of research, but what is important is for the researcher to make informed decisions, as well as be ready to accept the necessary modifications that this might cause. Indeed, Mills and Morton (2015) stress the "importance of thinking about research design at every stage of a project" (p. 9), of reflecting on it and making the necessary adaptations. As I see it, the development of the research design itself, just like data analysis or because *it is* a part of data analysis, is a process of multiple waves. It is a gradual calibration and adaptation simultaneous to continuous critical thinking.

The decision that "modestly witnessing" (Haraway, in Mills and Morton 2015, p. 38) the participants' understandings cannot ethically be coupled with purposeful exclusion of any voice eager to further contribute to the research was an informed one, as I see it, because I took into consideration not only my ethical standpoints but also the students' responses during their initial ethnographic encounters. This was a valuable lesson which I learned only after I 'boarded the ship', which in turn led to the necessary modifications. The first modification which was noted was an extension of the duration of fieldwork in order to make room for more voices to be listened to. Even after focusing on the class of the ten girls, other students who initially took part in the research (and helped me understand and get to know the field

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better) still approached me and wanted to contribute to the research. Not once did I reject their voices. By learning to be patient, to slowly converge, and to be ethically consistent in the inclusion of all eager voices, data was gathered for the context of interactions within all the three years of the girls' upper cycle of secondary education (something that was not initially planned) while at the same time gathering data that may be used in a future analysis.

This, retrospectively, also seemed to aid the formation of thicker descriptions during the waves of analysis and, maybe even more importantly, has empowered these students. The inevitable result of an organised chaos of overwhelming piles of data from three years of fieldwork found a solution, amongst other, in Atlas.ti from the early steps of the research.

Finally, another valuable lesson was that my willingness not to exclude voices has helped me better appreciate the importance of the surroundings rather than only of the focus group. This has influenced the way I dealt with data, by first starting to analyse data from the periphery, before converging to data gathered from the focus group. This approach made better sense for me. As discussed in section 3.2.2, Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) phenomena to be studied by qualitative researchers ('cases' as they call them) always occur in a bounded context. The boundary *is* of importance and must be studied. Moreover, these authors rightly note that this boundary is somewhat indeterminate but is "defined further by sampling operations" (p. 29), as well as that "the bounding is also by time" (ibid). The words 'sampling' and 'further definition' denote a gradual convergence, but this, I believe, should not be mistaken as necessarily implying a gradual immersion in the field. What is gradual is our adaptation, our informed decisions and our understanding. What is continuous, is our critical thinking. Trying to picture myself spatially, temporally and mentally in regard to the above context, either way I would be either wholly immersed in the field or out of it.

3.6.1.2 Addressing the issue of pilot studies from another angle: drawing from articles published within the Journal of Ethnography and Education.

Delving further into the matter, I used the search term 'pilot study' at 'Taylor & Francis Online', specifically within the Journal of Ethnography and Education, in order to examine how the term has been used in the past. My aim was to try to answer the question of why

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initial ethnographic encounters are commonly labelled as 'pilot studies', and to offer some insight towards the characteristics of the term. The search turned thirty-one results and of them one was irrelevant as it used the word pilot as an aircraft operator. Table 3 below summarises how the term is used in the remaining thirty articles.

Group name	Number of papers	How the term pilot study is elaborated
A	**11**	As a formal local or international initiative in schools by governments or other formal agencies.
B	**1**	As a small scale project done *after* a PhD study (Stan and Humberstone, 2011).
C	**18**	As trial runs of the research *prior* to the main study or as a pre-testing of research instruments.

Table 3: How the term 'pilot study' is elaborated in articles published in the Journal of Ethnography and Education.

It is apparent that on most occasions the term pilot study is taken to mean a trial run prior to the main study or as a pre-testing of research instruments. The use of the term within each of the three groups is further elaborated in the following sections.

3.6.1.2.1 'Pilot studies' as initiatives

In the eleven articles of group A, pilot studies are seen as an initiative, however there is a disparity on how or if the notion of 'pilot studies' is further elaborated. Table 4 below summarises this point.

Group A	How the term pilot study is further elaborated
9	No further elaboration.
1	The researchers entered the field after the initiative, to study its success, through accounts from participants (Craft *et al*,

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	2014).
1	The researcher justifies the selection of a specific school for the study due to the fact that it was previously involved in many initiatives (Lance, 2006).

Table 4: Articles published within the Journal of Ethnography and Education which take the term 'pilot study' to denote a formal local or international initiative in schools.

3.6.1.2.2 'Pilot studies' as preliminary research steps or pre-testings of research instruments

In more than half of the thirty articles, i.e. Group C, the term 'pilot study' is used to denote preliminary research steps or pre-testings of research instruments, which is the usual definition of the term. Only in one article (Group B) does the term denote a small scale study done after a bigger research. Table 5 summarises how the term is further elaborated within Group C.

Group C	How the term pilot study is further elaborated
5	No further elaboration.
5	As a form of justification of certain discussions and/or validation of certain suggestions.
6	Discussion of the advantages of pilot studies, of their uses or of the challenges faced during them.
1	Discussion of the transferability of results beyond the pilot study.
1	Discussion of the extension of participation of people who previously participated in the pilot study.

Table 5: Articles published within the Journal of Ethnography and Education which take the term 'pilot study' to denote trial runs of the research *prior* to the main study.

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3.6.1.3 Discussion

3.6.1.3.1 The term ‘pilot study’ going by uncritisised

It is worth noting that in nine articles of Group A, the one article of Group B as well as five of the articles in Group C, the term goes by completely uncriticised and/or as taken for granted, even though the articles were published in a leading journal of educational ethnography. The question thus arising is, does merely mentioning piloting somehow accredit value to the writing? Indeed, there is literature outside the context of the Journal of Ethnography and Education, e.g. Ismail *et al* (2018), in which it is maintained that “pilot studies can encourage methodological rigour and ensure the validity of both the study itself and the methodology applied” (p. 2), and this again seems to be taken for granted. Further questions on the nature of the term are outlined below.

3.6.1.3.2 Pilot studies as a form of justification of certain discussions and/or validation of certain suggestions

In one of the articles of Group C, a Master’s dissertation is regarded and named as the pilot study which informed the relevance of the concepts which were used in the main study, with the researcher stating that:

> (t)he concepts are partially informed by my Master’s dissertation, which I consider a pilot study, and that suggested their initial relevance to the research and by my general experience of the setting. However, the data collection, the analysis and the reflexive processes during the research have proven their validity while narrowing them down (Galeazzi 2018, p. 3).

Here, the reference of the term ‘pilot study’, is used to justify the researcher’s decisions. Without in any way de-valuing or arguing about the truthfulness of the statement as seen by the researcher of the articles under consideration, which indeed seem to be high quality papers, what I am rather querying is, (how) would the significance of the above statement alter had the phrase “which I consider a pilot study” been missing and instead, some additional elaboration of the Master’s dissertation was provided?

In another of the articles of Group C, the researcher justifies the discussion of a specific case study “since patterns of interaction observed reflected both the pilot study and also the

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more general picture accumulated by researchers" (Dicks 2013, p. 305) whereas in yet another article, what seems to validate the researcher's proposals is that "(s)imilar views were also voiced by pupils at other schools during pilot fieldwork undertaken for this research project" (Hemming 2018, p. 166). In other words, the term seems to be used in order to justify choices/suggestions. Perhaps an even more interesting and useful account, as I see it, would be of a context where *different* views were voiced by pupils at the other schools. How easily can one find such published work? Would such work be valued?

There is also an article where the researchers draw on data both from an ethnographic study and from an "international pilot study" (Chawla-Duggan *et al* 2012, p. 346) and further mention that "(a)s this was a pilot study there were no existing research relationships between researchers and participants, and we began by being observers of play" (ibid, p. 354). It is clear that in this case the term 'pilot study' is used to denote a setting where one has not avoided entering the field 'blind' - so there is nothing much to do initially but to observe. Apart from the 'blind'-'observe' dualism, I believe that the way in which concepts such as blindness/unfamiliarity/no research relationships might shape the meaning of a 'pilot study', should also be questioned. In turn, another important point of discussion could be related to how this might limit/point to very specific initial methods of interaction of the researcher within the field, thus leading to the loss of valuable data which might have been gathered by other methods had the researcher been more open minded.

A different dimension of justification will be illustrated by the examples below, namely that researchers often find it necessary to warrant the presence of data from a pilot study in their published work. This justification seems to be succeeded in many ways. One way, as seen above, might be by coupling the term 'pilot study' with the word 'international', possibly in order to make its presence in published work more loaded. In another article of Group C, the researchers justify the presence of data from the pilot study in terms of its relevance:

> This observation was part of a pilot study for an extensive study[14] [...] The data of the pilot study hence became part of a larger body of research and the extracts presented here remain part of the sample because of their relevance (Wischmann and Riepe 2017, p. 7).

[14] One might also ask what the duration of a pilot study should be in order to separate it from an 'extensive study'.

In this light, and outside the context of Ethnography and Education, Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), who have a more positivist background in medical sociology maintain that the reportage of data from pilot studies is less attractive to publishers. However, they go on to explain that *it is* important to ensure that lessons learned regarding the research method *are* reported so that participants are not exposed to poorly developed tools and so that no money is wasted. This is a very different angle from which to examine the ethics of pilot studies than the points I am trying to raise here, but understandably of equal importance to the representatives of certain disciplines. Morse (1997) on the other hand, editor of *Qualitative Health Research*, explains that when a qualitative pilot study is submitted for publication, to her it only signals an unfinished work and therefore cannot be published:

> Why submit unfinished work? As a pilot, it is of little use to the readership. And the article cannot be accepted for publication; one criteria (sic) for publication (albeit, not on the review sheet) surely is that the work be completed (p. 324).

3.6.1.3.3 Papers elaborating on the advantages of pilot studies, their use or the challenges faced during them

In six articles of Group C, the researchers either only mention or further elaborate on how they used pilot studies in their research, on the advantages of using pilot studies, namely in advising them of certain modifications to be made, or on the challenges they faced during them. In one of these articles the researcher explains that the "pilot study was conducted to trial the research and to identify a suitable teacher participant" (Mills 2007, 306). In another article, the researcher elaborates on the fact that his pilot study has shed light on his understanding of how individuals and groups affect each other and how their interactions might affect the result of the study (Rosvall 2015). In yet another article, the researchers refer to the use of pilot interviews in a gradually converging focus during fieldwork. They further discuss how observations from their pilot interviews helped them make specific modifications concerning, for example, the physical space of the interview setting and the positioning of the interviewer, which in turn made participants feel more at ease (Jachyra *et al*, 2015).

There is also another article where the researcher openly discusses both the advantages, as well as the challenges she faced during her pilot study. She eloquently explains that this was a

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"stage (which) turned out to be pivotal in terms of determining the future direction of the study" (Rapley 2018, 187) and elaborates on how her positivist background "influence(d) the pilot methodology design and the approach taken when collecting and interpreting pilot data" (ibid). However, as I see it, the fact that the term 'pilot study' *itself* finds its roots in a positivist tradition could also be taken into account. This may also prove to be helpful in future discussions amongst ethnographers concerning the qualitative and/or possible quantitative characteristics of ethnographic research, something which has been suggested, for example, by Walford (2018), who characterises his view that ethnography is quantitative to be 'polemic'. Such matters, as I see it, are crucial and need to be discussed amongst ethnographers, ideally through interdisciplinary enquiries and within careful epistemological accounts rather than brief, provocative or polemic ones.

Indeed, there is relevant literature outside the papers from Ethnography and Education, in which the positivist background of pilot studies is discussed. For example Sampson (2004) maintains that:

> (T)he haphazard use of pilots […] has perhaps encouraged researchers, *particularly but not exclusively the inexperienced*, to overlook the benefits of pilot studies altogether or to imagine that they are only of relevance in more positivist methodological approaches […] In discussing the use of pilots… the article attempts […] to initiate a discussion […] (and) stimulate greater awareness of their uses and abuses and to encourage other researchers to offer reflexive accounts of their experiences (p. 385, my emphasis).

Such accounts[15] are also of importance when it comes to many more terms which have a root in the positivist tradition, e.g. 'validation', 'verification', 'rigour'[16], 'calibration', 'case', 'research tools' etc. I believe that it is crucial for researchers (experienced *and* inexperienced) to openly share their thoughts, suggestions, uses and mistakes as they understand them, if there is to be a development of a possible definition of such loaded terms. Even if the very word 'definition' [17] is considered to be restricting and/or of positivist background, ethnographers might benefit from attempts to develop our re-conception of such terms and attempt to clarify their characteristics as used in qualitative research. In any case, definitions

[15] Hammersley (in Burgess 1984/2012, 41) also analyses the importance of reflexive accounts in qualitative research as being helpful in indicating the nature of a range of potential threats to its validity. Indeed, it is through such reflexive accounts that the validity-mania can be meaningfully dealt with by the qualitative researcher.

[16] See, as an example, the account by Golafshani (2003).

[17] Willis (2000) has prompted ethnographers to refrain from precise and neat definitions of concepts.

should not be taken lightly. Hammersley (2018, p. 12), in his insightful attempt to define 'ethnography' in a manner that indicates its systematic relations with other styles of social inquiry, maintains that:

> (w)hether this helps in trying to ensure that ethnography survives remains to be seen. There is also the question of whether it should survive […] But the answer to this depends upon how 'ethnography' is defined.

Further considering the challenges which may arise during a pilot study, Kirby (2011), in an article of Group C, states: "(g)aining access to community members was not easy and being an outsider further complicated my ability to collect data" (p. 165). She further goes on to explain:

> I first conducted a pilot study in which I interviewed four community members […] I gathered information […] Later I entered the community, watched events in and out of school and picked up as much written material as was available. I conducted 28 additional interviews […] (ibid, p. 165).

What can be deduced from this excerpt, apart from the use of pilot studies in gathering relevant information about the field, is another subtle feature of the term: the researcher explains that she interviewed some community members during the pilot study but *then* entered the community, and conducted *additional* interviews. She might have *physically* entered the community only after the initial steps of her pilot study, but the fact that she interviewed community members before that, means that she had already interacted with the community in a *meaningful* way. Therefore, it can be argued that the researcher had been part of the community from the very beginning. And within that community, she then admits to have conducted *additional* interviews; so the first interviews are also seemingly taken into account. Consequently, what denotes the beginning and the end of a pilot study, the 'degrees' of immersion, what is valuable information, its spatial and temporal characteristics, what is reported and what/who is or is not part of it, seem to be unclear and subjective.

Moreover, there is an article in Group C where the researchers reflect upon their difficulties in the face of access. Rather than merely reporting that access was not easy, they instead eloquently offer possible explanations as to *why* they were denied access to sites they had worked within and previously studied under the pretext of 'pilot studies':

> […] other than being told that our studies were too 'invasive' […], we are resigned to speculate as to why we were not granted access […] (p)erhaps we were blocked in our attempts because we were not insiders and the institutions were not convinced we were 'on their side' […] Perhaps they were afraid […] (T)here simply is not enough literature to answer these questions sufficiently (Cipollone and Stich 2012, p. 31)

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This analysis is, in my opinion, very insightful and doubly useful exactly because of the fact that the researchers *openly* discuss issues which often simply go by uncritisised in literature. The fact that 'pilot studies' have the capacity to grant access as being less threatening than 'real/full scale' studies, is indeed troubling. At the same time that a mere reference of the term has the power to justify decisions or even accredit the value of a research, it can also grant access as being less threatening because it is considered to be of less value than a 'real' study and of no publishing interest.

3.6.1.3.4 Discussion of the transferability of results beyond the pilot study and of the extension of participation of people who previously participated in the pilot study

The two last articles from Group C seem to engage with the term from a different angle. In the first of these articles the researcher analyses the extent to which qualitative tools for equality audits in educational contexts are transferable and applicable beyond the pilot study (Morrison, 2007). The researcher concludes that the qualitative tools do provide helpful starting points in areas of equality legislation, provided they are considered alongside other approaches and beyond their debatable implications.

In the second article, Clapham (2013) elaborates on his efforts to extend the participation of the people who previously participated in the pilot study. This has been the only one of the thirty articles where there has been an apparent hint of not purposefully excluding voices from research. There are however social researchers outside the context of Ethnography and Education, for example Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), who describe this situation as a "concern for contamination" (n.p.), along with situations where data from the pilot study is included in the main results. They maintain that such data should not be used in situations where modifications were made, since data might be inaccurate or flawed. Chenail (2011), on the other hand, has introduced the 'interviewing the investigator' approach as a substitute on occasions where piloting is not possible, and as a way to address concerns for bias in qualitative research. In this approach,

> the researcher assumes the role of a study participant and enlists a colleague to conduct the interview or the investigator can play both the role of the interviewer and interviewee […] [This] can lead to more ethical and responsible research (pp. 258, 261).

Once again, this is a very different angle from which one can view both the ethics as well as the role of the researcher in qualitative inquiries.

3.6.1.4 Conclusions

Culinary metaphors have often been used when writing about ethnographic research design, which can be viewed either as a recipe to be closely followed or as tasting as the researcher goes along (Mills and Morton, 2013). According to the first view, pilot studies are commonly used only as an initial step of the research. However, the fact that understanding can equally define the design, and given that understanding is an on-going reflective process throughout the research, then the definition and the meaning of the term has to be critically re-examined. The researcher, according to Willis (2000), invents or develops ideas and throws them, in a 'what if' kind of way on the participants. This alteration of tasting as one goes along is not merely about the researcher's understandings or the necessary modifications which need to be made; as I see it, it is also about committing oneself to the synergistic character of ethnographic research, and about attempting to truly privilege the participants' voices.

In a context where a pilot study is considered to be an initial, temporary tool, the participants of the study are often *used* by the researcher to alert them of their methods, which when calibrated, are 'thrown' on *other* participants. The term 'preliminary' which usually characterises pilot studies suggests that the initial ethnographic encounters of the researcher and the participants of the pilot study can be freely erased, whereas the researcher can arrogantly move on with a calibrated approach to be thrown on other participants of a seemingly similar context. This, however, cannot come to terms with an ethnographer's quest of always striving to maintain a 'naturally occurring' and 'ethical' setting. And this at a time when at the other end of the spectrum, one finds numerous accounts concerning the dangers of the transferability of results of qualitative inquiries from one context to another. Instead, since researcher-participant familiarity is a crucial factor in ethnographic research (Phtiaka 1997), pilot studies could be seen as encompassing the very first steps for the development of an on-going relationship between the researcher and other participants. Therefore, a discussion of the

advantages and disadvantages of the use of the term itself in qualitative enquiries is useful, since pilot studies, in their heart, contain initial ethnographic encounters which, as context definers and meaning makers, are too valuable to be discarded.

In ethnographic research, every step counts but also needs to be fair. It's true that no matter how many hours the researcher spends in the library, nothing can prepare them for the exposure to the fieldwork (Sampson 2004). But the ethnographic field is one of interactions, in which the researcher is not the only human present. And as she/he might want to hide behind the loaded term of a 'pilot study' in order to prepare themselves/justify decisions/accredit value to a research, she/he must also stand back and ask: how about them? Wouldn't the participants ideally also want to prepare themselves for the researcher? How natural would that 'ideal' setting be? In any case, why reduce or magnify the ethnographic beauty, the dynamics of the initial encounters and the equilibrium which should 'ideally' exist between the researcher and the other participants in a 'naturally occurring setting'? In my opinion, no matter how much we try to prepare ourselves by shifting and calibrating the 'beginning' of 'real' ethnographic work, there can never be an 'all set now, you are good to go' plan. There *will* be setbacks, there *will* be challenges, along with good moments, as well as moments of epiphany. All these, as seen through the lens of the ethnographer, *are* important for the development of meaningful and thick descriptions.

In an account by Ball, it is suggested that doing ethnographic fieldwork is like riding a bicycle: no matter how much one prepares themselves theoretically, there is no real substitute for actually getting on and riding the bicycle (in Burgess 1984/2012). Ball then cites Rock, who maintains that too much theoretical preparation might make the researcher "positively handicapped" (ibid, p. 71). The famous quote by Einstein highlights a further point concerning constant critical thinking and gradual adaptation: "life is like riding a bicycle. In order to keep your balance, you must keep moving". Or, for those who prefer actors to ethnographers/physicists, then in the words of Matt Damon, who describes the unfamiliar environment of Mars:

> You just begin. You do the *Math*. You solve one problem... and you solve the next one... and then the next. And if you solve enough problems, you get to come home (Kinberg *et al* and Scott 2015, my emphasis).

Does the word 'Math' denote solely or preferably a positivistic approach to studying the social 'reality'? As I see it, if we substitute "Math" with something much more qualitative to capture

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certain meaningful features of the social world with, and “get to come home” with “get thick descriptions”, then we have a setting which might initially seem scary and unfamiliar, but is nevertheless much less unfamiliar than Mars.

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CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this fourth chapter, I outline the main results related to each of the four research questions. *The concluding comments at the end of each research question form the basis for the synthesis and further discussion in the following chapter.*

4.1 School experience

The first research question deals with the participants' perspectives of their school reality. The research question is *'how do girl students define and structure their school experience?'*. Research findings indicate that the girls structured their school experience around two main domains, the educational and the social. These domains were almost always interrelated, but for these girls the educational domain seemed to be very heavily determined and defined by the social domain. In the section which follows, I will lay out and discuss the main findings dealing with this research question.

4.1.1 Educational aspects

The factors which determined the educational sphere of the girls' experience involved the following:

i. Comparison with previous educational experience
ii. Views concerning teachers and learning
iii. Educational choices - decision to come to VET and pick a VET specialisation
iv. Future aspirations
v. Relationship with parents and parental trust

These factors are described in the following paragraphs.

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4.1.1.1 Comparison with Gymnasium/Lyceum

School reality seemed to acquire meaning for the girls when they juxtaposed it with their former positive and/or negative school experience, either from Gymnasium for most of the girls, or from Lyceum for two of the girls (Nelly and Monica). This meaning making sometimes stemmed from comparisons of more straight forward aspects such as:

> **Daniela (year 2):** At Gymnasium they were into recycling, over here we are not. But here it's better because we are situated closer to the sea.

Much more often, however, this school reality was shaped through a reference to the practical skills and work oriented philosophy of VET education.

> **Monica (year 1)**: It will be easier for me to get a job when I graduate because I will get practical traineeship in industry from the third year already.
>
> **Savvia (year 2)**: Lessons here are more practical, at Gymnasium they were only theoretical.

It is important that this practically oriented mind-set was at the forefront of their meaning making both as they entered VET, as an explanation of why they had chosen VET over Lyceum, but also throughout their studies as an often stated conviction of their presence and interaction with the specific context. As a response to a questionnaire in the third year, six out of nine girls answered that they believed that VET students are better than Lyceum students because of the practical training they got, what they often called 'craft skills'. This belief was also reported during our informal conversations, for example:

> **Kassiani (year 3)**: VET students are better because being taught craft skills means that it is easier for us to learn things.
>
> **Marina (year 3):** Here we can learn skills that Lyceum students would need to go to special places in order to learn.

Some of the girls pointed to the fact that the comparison between VET and Lyceum students is only a matter of options:

> **Lucy (year 3):** VET gives you the subjects you want.
>
> **Nelly (year 3):** VET and Lyceum students are the same, it's just that each student chooses where they want to be.

One answer stands out however, and it will be revisited:

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Rallia (year 3): Supposedly (VET students are better) because of the craft skills being taught.

Another big set of comparisons was related to students' behaviour, some positive but mostly negative:

Marina (year 3): Here there are students with all kinds of problems in their lives so we get to see how real life is /…/ I am proud to be part of it because it is a school for real students, with real life problems, who are not afraid to be themselves.

Carmen (year 1): Students are more fun and much more modest here!!! /…/ there (in Gymnasium) I had fewer friends, I engaged in fighting with other girls because they teased me.

Kassiani (year 1): Here you see students out (of the class) all the time whereas there the only times you would see students outside class was either when very few students were too bored to attend class or when a teacher was absent, so another teacher was responsible for recording who is present and perhaps let the students hang out in the school premises. /…/ at gymnasium male students were not allowed to have long hair and teachers were strict concerning students' appearance.

Daniela (year 3): Everyone does whatever they want here! (in a critical tone)

In summary, the comparison of current VET experience to former experience from Gymnasium or Lyceum was a medium through which the girls made sense of their current school reality. Through this medium, their current experiences were assessed as being positive or negative. This meaning making process sometimes stemmed from comparisons of more straight forward aspects such as the poor infrastructure of VET. More often their school reality was shaped through a reference to the practical skills and work oriented philosophy of VET education, which was considered by the girls to be a positive aspect as it aided learning and was stated as the reason they had chosen VET education over Lyceum. For most girls, the practically oriented philosophy of VET was seen as a proof of superiority of VET students, whereas for a few girls the comparison between VET and Lyceum students was simply a matter of a student choosing which subjects suit them best. Another set of comparisons was related to students' behaviour, noting some positive but mostly negative traits. Through this comparison, VET students were described as being more fun, more modest, more genuine and more real, whereas among their negative traits were considered to be their lack of discipline, the fact that they are heavy smokers and that they played truant much very often.

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4.1.1.2 Views concerning teachers and learning

Perhaps the biggest share of comparisons in the girls' mind-set was reserved for issues concerning teachers and lessons taught. Besides Kassiani's assertion that practical training aids learning, seven girls pointed out, during interviews, that lessons are easier and their grades at VET are better.

> **Efterpi (year 1)**: Classes were more difficult in gymnasium.

> **Savvia (year 2)**: Homework is less here. But over here there is a lot to learn for tests and that's difficult for me.

> **Monica (year 1)**: Here it is easier and more effective, with fewer tests, we can achieve much better grades! /…/ classes are very easy and we get no homework - we learn everything in class.

Coupled with their learning experience was very often their relationship and opinions about their teachers. Most of the girls believed that teachers at VET were kinder, simpler, more caring and easier to approach outside class. Having a friendly relationship with teachers as well as freedom of expression around them was highly regarded by the girls. Most of them reported, both orally as well as in written form, that they would miss certain teachers when they would graduate.

> **Monica (year 1)**: Teachers at Lyceum, they are distant and too polite, even when talking to each other, e.g. they won't address their colleague as Maria but Mrs Maria. Even teachers that we don't like here, we won't curse them like we did with teachers at Lyceum.

> **Rallia (year 1)**: Teachers at Gymnasium are worse, students are being bullied by them. I was bullied too, because I was naughtier than most of the other girls.

> **Nelly (year 1)**: Here they (teachers) are simpler, kinder, easier to approach.

> **Marina (year 1)**: Teachers in gymnasium only care about students during the lesson but never outside the classroom. Students cannot have a good relationship with all gymnasium teachers but only with a few whereas in VET a student can always find a teacher to discuss their problems /…/ Here teachers let us express ourselves the way we want.

> **Marina (year 3):** They (our teachers) are all crazy, each stands out for something unique but in general they are good, (they are) our friends and I like talking to them.

Despite all their positive traits, talking too much was seen as a negative teacher trait. The girls did not hesitate to use words such as 'stupid'/'asshole'/'prehistoric' for teachers/members of the administration whom they do not like.

> **Rallia (year 3):** Most teachers are good, some are stupid.

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Kassiani (year 3): Some (of our teachers) are perfect, others are assholes (she laughs, putting her hand in front of her mouth) or some are just relatively good.

Lucy (year 2): Half of them (our teachers) talk too much, the rest are very good!

Marina (year 3): The principal is spastic, he thinks he owns the school /…/ Last year's principal was a 'whatever, wherever' as he didn't really care much about what we were doing.

Many of the girls reported, as a response in a questionnaire that amongst the positive aspects of school is its educational role. Daniela, for example, reported that what she was learning was very important because it would render her capable of helping her own children with their schoolwork:

Daniela (year 3): Because of the skills I learn here at school, I will know how to help my children to study.

Savvia (year 3): School is good for me because I learn things and because I have friends.

Carmen (year 3): VET students are better because of the crafts skills they learn. It will be easier for us to find a job.

Despite these responses, on different occasions *all* of the girls reported that they did not like schoolwork or studying and that they rarely did any homework. Rallia, for example, admitted that she did not study at home and that she usually did not pay attention during lessons.

Maria (year 2): How would you describe yourself as a student?

Lucy: On the one hand good, on the other hand bad… umm… I am lazy. And in some lessons OK I like to write down what the teacher says but in some others, well, I am so bored!

Efterpi (year 2): School is my biggest enemy.

Rallia (year 1): I never study at home and I rarely pay any attention in class, it's sooo boring.

Kassiani (year 2): At the most I take out the books from my bag and change them according to the lessons I have the next day. I never study or do any homework.

Notwithstanding many of the girls' (mostly written) responses that school is good because they learn things, it soon became apparent that this answer concerning the goodness of education was not verified in further oral and written responses, which highlighted the social rather than the educational role of school. On top of that, the girls often criticised school for not offering them knowledge which they considered to be relevant:

Rallia (year 3): The only skill that we have learnt at school is that it has made us more socially adept.

Marina (year 3): Vocational education does not offer information for things that interest us or which will be helpful in the future /…/ School has offered me nothing, as most of the things I know, I learnt outside school /…/

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The best thing that the school has done for me is that I had the chance to meet my friends, who are individuals whom I will never forget /…/ I come to school in order to be with my friends and to have an apolyterion.

Marina's answer contradicts her former answer that VET students are better than their Lyceum counterparts because of the skills/crafts they are taught. It is clear that education is defined by her in terms of graduating ('to have an apolyterion'), not learning. Related to this is the fact that many of the girls were resentful about the fact that school did not offer them the specialisation that they wanted, as described in the following section.

In summary, a big share of comparisons in the girls' mind-set was reserved for issues concerning teachers and lessons taught. Most of the girls noted that lessons were easier and their grades at VET were better. Concerning their teachers, most of the girls believed that teachers at VET were kinder, simpler, more caring and easier to approach outside class. Having a friendly relationship with teachers as well as freedom of expression around them was considered to be a crucial aspect of their school experience. Despite all their positive traits, talking too much was seen as a negative teacher trait. The girls used words such as 'stupid'/'asshole'/'prehistoric' for teachers/members of the administration whom they did not like. Many of the girls reported that amongst the positive aspects of school is its educational role. Despite such responses, it was apparent that the girls rejected mental labour. On different occasions the girls reported that they did not like schoolwork or studying and that they rarely did any homework. Also noteworthy is the fact that notwithstanding many of the girls' responses that school was good because they learn things, this answer concerning the goodness of education was not verified in further responses, which instead highlighted the social rather than the educational role of school. The girls also criticised school for not offering them knowledge which they considered to be relevant. It was also apparent that education was often defined in terms of graduating and their future plans, not learning.

4.1.1.3 Educational choices - decision to come to VET and pick a VET specialisation

Two of the girls came to VET after they attended Lyceum. Nelly attended Lyceum for one year but did not manage to pass the class, so she came to VET to repeat the first year and

move on from there. Monica wanted to study at VET after she graduated from gymnasium but her mother did not let her,

Monica (year 1): /…/ she told me that only good-for-nothings go there.

Monica came to VET after she completed two years at Lyceum. She reported that she did not have good grades there, so she realised that she 'would not be able to enter tertiary education with those grades'. So she decided to start all over again from Year One, even though she could sit entrance exams to enter Year Two or Year Three. Both girls took pride in the fact that they had chased their dream and had decided to start all over again, it was something that they kept repeating on many occasions. Nelly's position that going either to Lyceum or to VET is a matter of personal choice makes sense considering this experience. Even more evident was Monica's sense of pride not only over finally getting the education she wanted, but mostly because she felt that she could be more efficient – doing less but achieving better grades. In her mind, better grades meant certainty over getting into tertiary education.

At the other end of the spectrum of educational choices were the girls who reported that it was not their choice to study in the Goldsmithing and Silversmithing specialisation.

Marina (year 1): I preferred Secretarial Studies but that option was not offered.

Kassiani (year 1): I wanted to follow the Hairdressing specialisation but there were not enough places for everyone.

Nelly (year 3): I am happy with my specialisation.

Kassiani was not accepted in her chosen specialisation because of the student evaluation system introduced due to the numerous enrolments in the specific specialisation. Nelly's mother, however, reported that her daughter was not in the department she initially wanted to follow. Efterpi reported, in Year Two, that she wanted to go to another VET which offered the specialisation of cooking. One afternoon (in Year Two) I went to a coffee shop with some of the girls after school. At some point Efterpi was talking on the phone with her mother so I told her that if she wanted she could invite her to come over, which she did:

Efterpi's mother (year 2): She (Efterpi) is very talented in Graphic Arts but she keeps it a secret and she tells me not to say it (Efterpi covers her face with her palms and looks embarrassed, her mother smiles). I

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told her to follow that (specialisation) and then go to our country to follow some tattoo courses, she refused.
Maria: Is that so darling?
Efterpi: Well, yeees…. But I don't like talking about that talent to other people. And then I wanted to go to the other Technical School to become a cook.
Efterpi's mother: But she can't even cook an egg properly!

On another occasion, however, a year earlier, during an interview:

Efterpi (year 1): I wanted to choose the Hairdressing Department but limited places were available I had to enrol in another specialisation.

Some other girls, on the other hand, reported that it was their decision to study Goldsmithing and Silversmithing and/or that they are happy with their specialisation. For example:

Daniela (year 2): Yes, it was my decision to study Goldmsithing, I like it.

Carmen (year 3): I like my specialisation.

Savvia (year 2): When I found out that there is a Department of Arts here, I realised that this is what I wanted to follow.

All the students of the Department of Arts had to complete the first year and then choose between Interior and Graphic Design or Goldsmithing and Silversmithing specialisation.

Savvia (year 2): I chose Goldsmithing because Interior and Graphic Design is difficult but Goldsmithing is easy.

According to the girls of her class, she never did anything in Goldsmithing and Silversmithing class, as she sat quietly, with the other girls helping her or prompting her to start working. Observation verified this.

Daniela (year 2): She just sits there. Sometimes she smiles but we look around and there is no one there! She talks and smiles to herself! (she laughs). We go there and explain what she has to do but she doesn't do it.

In summary, eight girls enrolled in VET after graduating from Gymnasium. They named the reason for choosing VET as being because they wanted to learn a craft and that this would render them capable of finding a job more easily than Lyceum students. Two of the girls first enrolled in Lyceum before they decided to come to VET. One decided to register at VET because she did not pass the first year at Lyceum. The second initially wanted to enrol in VET but her parents prohibited her due to the negative reputation of VET schools. In the end she enrolled in VET because her grades at Lyceum were not good, and she concluded that in VET

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she is achieving better grades by studying less. Some of the girls were resentful about the fact that school did not offer them the specialisation that they wanted to enrol at, whereas some others reported that it was their own decision to choose the specific specialisation and/or that they were satisfied with their specialisation.

4.1.1.4 Future aspirations

Rallia reported that it was her own decision to study Goldsmithing and Silversmithing, however:

> **Rallia (year 3)**: Yes, it was my decision. But I don't see myself in that profession when I will graduate, because people nowadays do not buy jewellery.

On two occasions, one of Rallia's teachers told me that she was the only one of the girls that would succeed if she ever chose to move on with studies in tertiary education. The same was said by another colleague concerning Monica. Rallia, however, was not sure if she wanted to study at university or college after she graduated.

> **Rallia (year 3)**: I am not sure if I want to go to university or college. Because I know a lot of people who go to university but never succeed in finding a job. /…/ I think I want to become a tattoo artist. IF ever make it.

Carmen, on the other hand, reported that she was happy with the fact that she would graduate because she would go to university. However, as seen in the following table, the professions she saw herself into in the future had nothing to do with Goldsmithing. She also often changed her mind over what she would like to become. Table 6 lists the girls' answers to questions concerning their future plans after graduation, their future job, their dream job, as well as how they imagine themselves in twenty years. These answers were responses to two questionnaires (Appendix E) administered at two different times (some months apart) during the third year of fieldwork.

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Participant	From questionnaire 1 (question 19): Future plans	From questionnaire 1 (question 20): Future job	From questionnaire 1 (question 22): Dream job	From questionnaire 2: In 20 years from now
Savvia	to find a job	goldsmithing and silversmithing	goldsmithing and silversmithing	"alone, not married and working"
Kassiani	further studies	beautician	beautician	"living with Rallia abroad, travelling, being friends with Marina and with Mrs Maria and be happy"
Marina	"I will go abroad to work, make money realise my dreams"	"I don't know, the only certain thing is that I will travel in the whole world"	"to travel and get paid for it"	"having a job related to travelling, being happy with or without a boyfriend, having a close relationship with mom and my brother, enjoying life"
Nelly	get married and find a job	barista or waitress	barista, babysitting	"having my own family, a job and real friends whom I can trust, like Mrs Maria"
Monica	further studies	I don't know	actor	"married, with children, being a teacher, rich, travelling"
Carmen	further studies and get married	I don't know	graphic designer and clothes' designer	"having professional success as a sociologist, having children, family, meeting with the girls and travelling with

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				them”
Lucy	I don't know yet	I don’t know yet	I don’t know yet	“married, with children, rich, having many shoes and purses, having my own goldsmithing business, travelling abroad”
Rallia	“tattoo artist, if I make it”	tattoo artist	“none”	“either a boring housekeeper or activist, saving animals and the planet, a mother, alone and living far away”
Daniela	get engaged and find a job	“whatever job is OK”	hairdresser or manicurist	“being with my husband, having a child and a job”

Table 6: Participants’ future aspirations

As seen from their responses, when asked what their future plans were, three of the girls answered that they would continue with university or college studies – Kassiani, Monica and Carmen. Three of the girls mentioned getting married but the majority of their answers involved getting a job. When asked specifically which profession they would like to follow in the future, only Savvia answered that she wanted to follow Goldsmithing and Silversmithing, despite the fact that she was the only girl who did not do much during that specific practical class. Three of the girls answered that they did not know yet what future job they would like, and the other answered that whatever job is OK/beautician/perhaps something with travelling involved/barista/waitress.

In summary, the girls did have aspirations but a lack of *solid* aspirations was apparent, as well as some confusion and uncertainty concerning their aspirations. Even the girls who

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themselves chose to study for the specific specialisation, did not see themselves in a related profession in the future. An exception to this was Savvia, but her peers believed that her capabilities in the specific specialisation were not good enough. Lucy, another noted exception, did not have specific aspirations for her future profession, however she imagined herself as one day having a successful goldsmithing business and being rich. Daniela, the girl who, according to her teachers, was the most talented in the specific craft, reported that any job in the future would be OK for her. Most of the girls reported wanting to find a job, getting married and having children after graduating, with only a few occasionally considering the possibility of going to university or college but often changing their mind. On these occasions their university aspirations were irrelevant to their chosen specialisation and were often considered by their teachers to be unrealistic and/or vague.

4.1.1.5 Relationship with parents and parental trust

Concerning the girls' relationship with their parents, Carmen and Marina often reported in front of their peers that they were always open and honest with their mother. Marina once also mentioned that she could freely talk to her mother about things like boys and sex. Nevertheless, in Year Three, when she had a gynecological problem and had to visit a doctor, she asked for my and another teacher's advice and asked me to make a call and set an appointment for her. I asked her if she wanted to talk to her mother about it but she preferred not to. Most of the other girls considered their parents to be too strict/old-fashioned/boring. Indicative answers of how they perceived their relationship with their parents are the following:

Efterpi (year 1): I keep secrets from my mom.

Kassiani (year 2, at coffee shop): They (my parents) are very strict and old fashioned. And my mom thinks I 'm her servant, always having to do the housework but she is neeeever happy because I wake up late and I 'm slow when doing the housework.
Rallia: Mine too are strict. /…/ They are always focused more on what people would say instead of on her own daughter and how I feel or if I am well, can you believe that?!!
Marina: For me it's not like that! I have a very open relationship with my mom! We talk about everything, boys, sex, no problem!

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Rallia placed a lot of importance on the role of the school as a place which would keep her away from her parents. Graduating was also deemed by her as another freedom ticket which would keep her away from her strict parents, although she realised that graduating would mean an increase of responsibilities for her:

> **Rallia (year 3)**: With school I escape, because they (my parents) are soooo boring! /…/ Graduating will mean an increase of responsibilities but at least I will be able to go away from home.

Another important result concerning parents is that on numerous occasions throughout the three years of fieldwork many of the girls complained that their parents did not trust them. Sometimes, when I spent time with the girls in after school hours, some of the girls told me that their parents did not believe that they were with me. Whenever the girls asked it, I called their parents and assured them that their daughter was with me. I also always told them exactly where we were, e.g. at which cafeteria or for shopping at which street and invited them to join us if they wished.

> **Rallia (year 2, at coffee shop)**: (With a loud voice, while handing me her phone with her mother waiting on the line) Here we go again! Mrs, can you please tell her we are together?
>
> **Kassiani (year 3, at coffee shop)**: My dad kept asking me, are you sure you will be with your teacher? (she laughs).
> **Daniela**: My dad is like that too! But I told him where we are and he believed me because he will come to pick me up and he said, OK, don't be naughty! Like I'm an infant! (they laugh).

The lack of trust between Efterpi and her mother also became apparent during an incident in the second year when she was asked by the deputy head teacher to come to school to discuss the numerous absences of her daughter. During that meeting Efterpi's mother was very upset:

> **Efterpi's mother (year 2)**: I do not trust you! I will take you for blood analyses to see if you take drugs.

In another of my after school meetings with some of the girls, Rallia told me that her mother, who had just called her, had never been so kind to her before:

> **Rallia (year 1)**: This is a miracle! She even asked me if I had money to pay for my coffee and she said that it's OK, I can stay for as long as I want with you!

Rallia was obviously positively surprised by her mother's reaction and she did not hesitate to try to use her good luck to her advantage; later that afternoon she asked me if she could go away with her boyfriend since her mother would still think that she was with me, but I did not

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accept. I am aware that during the research there might have been some easy but not ethical ways in which I could have gained the girls' trust earlier, however I refrained from doing that on moral grounds and rather considered time as my ally.

The number of absences of a student was noted on the grade report that students got every semester. In one such case, Kassiani had to excuse herself by lying to her parents:

> Kassiani (year 2): I told them that teachers wrongly recorded absences because they confused me with another girl of my class who had the same name as I did.

On another such occasion, at the end of the first semester of Year Three, Kassiani's parents were again upset with her absences.

> **Kassiani (year 3)**: They were very angry and I had to explain why I missed classes. This time I told them the truth. That I stay out of class when I am bored. They told me that I must get in class even when I am bored, and that I am allowed not to participate in the lesson, as long as I stay in class.

This is indicative of the fact that mental truancy (also known as near truancy) was tolerated by some parents.

During the three years of fieldwork only on three occasions did I witness or hear of parents advising their daughters about possible studies in tertiary education (Nelly's, Marina's and Efterpi's mother). In one such case, Nelly's mother told some colleagues (during Year Two) that she would like her daughter to study computing because she succeeded in making a video during a summer camping, something which for her was an indication that she was very talented in that domain. The teachers whom the mother talked to were later wondering how come some parents have "such unrealistic dreams for their children" and one of them commented that the incident made her feel very awkward:

> **Colleague (year 2)**: I didn't know what to say! We know Nelly will never have the potential to achieve something like that, but how do we tell that to parents?

For most parents in the specific context the important thing was to ensure that their child would graduate from secondary school, as in Kassiani's case, rather than what the student would learn. I can still recall how surprised I was and how awkward I felt when Daniela's mother came to school to get her grade report for the first semester of Year Three. When I gave her the report, she looked at it the grades for a few seconds and said:

> **Daniela's mother (year 3)**: And what do all these numbers mean? Are they good?' (while staring at me). /…/ I told her to come to school, it's almost over, what has remained of the school year is ooonly the tail. She will be the only one of her sisters to have finished school!

A colleague who was there later commented:

> **Colleague**: You can understand a lot about these students just by looking at their parents.

In summary, most of the other girls considered their parents to be too strict/old-fashioned/boring. Some girls reported an open relationship with their mother, but observation refuted their claim. Another important result is the lack of trust of the parents towards their daughters, as perceived by the girls. Some girls lied to their parents concerning school related matters such as the reasons for their unjustified absences. It was also observed that mental truancy was tolerated by some parents; for them, as well as for many of the girls themselves, the important thing was to ensure that they would graduate from secondary school in a 'to get it over with' manner, not what they would learn. Schooling did not seem to be for them a bridge towards solid future aspirations.

4.1.2 Social aspects

In the social domain, maintaining a high status among peers was a crucial aspect of the girls' everyday life. The factors which seemed to determine it had to do with:

i. Joking, teasing and marginalising
ii. Friendships
iii. Smoking, drinking and sex
iv. Appearance and reputation
v. Preoccupation with everyday school matters
vi. Resistance

Factors i – v are described in the following paragraphs. The last one, resistance, is dealt with in the next section, as it comprises a research question in itself.

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4.1.2.1 Joking, teasing, marginalising

Joking and teasing was an everyday practice between the girls and it ranged in degree and focus. Often the focus would be the negative reputation and/or the poor infrastructure of the school when compared to their previous schools:

Daniela (year 2, at the school kiosk during break time): Our sports field looks like a swamp. I bet there are a few hares or snakes in there! (the other girls laugh)

Efterpi (year 1, during interview): This school is so notorious that I was literally praying when I first came here. I swear, I was making the sign of the cross as soon as I entered the gate (she starts making the sign of the cross repeatedly, only for the other girls to burst out laughing).

The girls often stressed the necessity for renovations of the old buildings.

Carmen (year 2, in class during supervision when one of their teachers was absent): If we have an earthquake, everything will collapse on our heads! I don't want this kind of death! (she holds her head with her hands to imitate that the ceiling is falling. They start laughing and then they start discussing the necessity for renovations).
Monica (year 3): The geographical position of the school is perfect, but renovations are needed. So that students will want to be here.

On other occasions, the focus of joking or teasing would have sexual connotations and innuendos:

(In the school corridor during break time, year 3) Daniela walks behind Lucy and grabs her rear. Lucy jumps up, screams and starts laughing.
Lucy: You bitch, stop touching my ass!

(During Physics lesson, year 2) Monica walks to the front of the classroom to answer a question on the whiteboard. Rallia stares at her.
Rallia: If only I had THAT ass! (the other girls start laughing).
Me: Monica, this is the last time you go over there, I'm afraid your fan club cannot focus on what is important! (we all laugh)
Marina: Its shape goes against gravity, just look at it Mrs! (the girls keep laughing so it's time for me to intervene sweetly but firmly).
Me: OK darlings! Rallia, after the lesson you can share all the hot details with us. And Marina can tell us about her anti-gravity theories. Lesson now!

Sometimes joking would be addressed to me, in a playful way:

Efterpi (year 2, at coffee shop): I cannot call you Mrs outside school!
Marina: Call her Mary!
Daniela: Maaaryyy!!!!
Me: Yeeees darliiiing??? (we start laughing)

Rallia (year 2, at coffee shop): What will you do in the weekend?

Me: Cycling, of course, and studying.
Kassiani: What do you mean, studying? Don't you know that when you study all the time, you go crazy? (we start laughing)

The frequency of joking and teasing is a proof of how highly regarded it was by the girls. Not being able to tell the 'right' jokes at the 'right' time was seen as a good reason of marginalising whoever seemed to have failed in this highly regarded act, almost always accompanied by exhalations of discomfort and 'rolling' of their eyes as a response. A colleague, as well as the girls, described the peak of such an incident one day in his class, when Marina wanted to visit the gynaecologist concerning a health issue. I have reconstructed the incident in my field notes as follows:

Marina (year 3): I asked if I will I need to have a Pap-test and Nelly asked if a Pap-test is done before or after someone has sex. And Rallia told her that it's after. So she said, aaah, after getting fucked then! Rallia stood up and started shouting at her, where do you think you are, shame on you!

Rallia later told me:

Rallia: I was so embarrassed! I mean, talking like that in front of a male teacher! I have had enough of her, thinking she can be funny (exhales).

In summary, humour and teasing were highly regarded. It was an everyday practice between the girls and it ranged in degree and focus. Often it was a medium through which the negative reputation of the school, the poor infrastructure and the need for renovations were communicated. On other occasions, the focus of teasing would have sexual connotations and innuendos between the girls, whereas sometimes it would be addressed to me, both as a form of familiarity as well as a playful rejection of the mental labour I was known for. Not being able to tell the 'right' jokes at the 'right' time was seen as a good reason of marginalising whoever seemed to have failed in this highly regarded act, whereas what was considered to be the right humour seemed to have the capacity to earn one points of status among peers.

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4.1.2.2 Friendships (versus education)

Although not being able to tell the 'right' jokes at the 'right' time was seen as a good reason of marginalisation, it was also the case that whoever was marginalised was subject to teasing. This, in turn, determined who would be accepted as a friend, but not in a straight forward way, as 'protection' was often also involved. For example, Nelly was being heavily teased by two other students of Class B during the first year, who kept calling her fat and stupid in her face. This continued until one day Efterpi intervened by shouting at them during a lesson. The girls, as well as their teacher, reconstructed the incident during breaktime:

> **Efterpi (year 1)**: /…/ I 've had it! I stood up and told them to shut up and asked them how they would feel if someone did that to them!
>
> **Mr B**: Mind your words, Efterpi! (Efterpi looks at me and rolls her eyes).
>
> **Efterpi**: Sir, if I didn't talk like that they wouldn't understand and they wouldn't stop teasing her! I am the form president. When I talk, they should listen!

Efterpi seemed to take pride in the fact that she was elected by the girls to be the form president (both in Years One and Two). It is apparent that she defined her intervention as performing her presidential duties. Marina, on the other hand, explained that she often intervened in class when other students teased Nelly for a different reason:

> **Marina (year 1)**: I do it because I know what it means to be different, I felt it when I first came to Cyprus and everybody stared at me because I was different.

The girls did not usually say things in Nelly's face but they very often talked behind her back, saying that she talked too much, that she was fat, stupid and ugly, that she said silly things and that she was too preoccupied with sex.

> **Kassiani (year 3)**: I mean, she (Nelly) always shows you all these guys in facebook and asks in a silly way, 'is he handsomeeee?', and you just don't know what to respond. I mean, who would ever be interested in her? (Marina and Monica laugh)
> **Monica**: She says she goes to the gym but every break you see her eating like a pig.
>
> **Daniela (year 2)**: Look how she (Savvia) walks! Like a duck! (the other girls laugh)
> **Kassiani**: Shut up, she is coming, she will hear us!

Nelly was thirsty to have friends; she handed her birthday invitation to her classmates in September of their graduate year, with the date of the party being four months later. The girls

laughed at her for doing so. Despite her reminding the girls about the party on numerous occasions (and them always answering ‘we 'll see by then if we can make it'), none of them were present at the party. I was present and she thanked me quite a few times for accepting her invitation. During the party she brought up the matter three times to point out her disappointment.

> **Nelly (year 3)**: I am glad there are still people who respect me. /…/ OK I expected it from the others, but not even Lucy?

Indeed, a recurring theme in Nelly’s perspectives is that of friendships. In a questionnaire (Appendix E), she reported:

> **Nelly (year 3)**: (School's role is) to make students serious and to teach them how to make new friends. Also to forget family problems and loneliness. /…/ I feel happy (that I will graduate) but also sad because I will lose my friendship with Maria and Lucy.

Many times she tried to be friends with girls from other classes since her classmates avoided her, but these students often avoided her too and called her ‘pushy’.

Apart from Nelly, Savvia was also marginalised by the girls. The girls acted in a quite protective way towards her in class, mostly by trying to help her in practical lessons, but avoided her during break times. Savvia was sometimes spotted with other ‘low profile’ girls from other classes during break times. Indicative of her lack of friendships was her response in a questionnaire (Appendix E), where the girls were to complete the sentence ‘my friends at school are…’. Whereas most of the girls answered with phrases such as ‘the best’, ‘the craziest’, she was the only girl to fill in the sentence with a number, ‘5’. On top, this was despite the fact that observation repeatedly revealed that she was sometimes alone during break times. Revealing an abundance of friends as a given fact and as a proof of an active social life was crucial, as it determined a girl’s status among peers.

Status, however, was also determined by preferring ‘cooler’ friends and avoiding certain individuals. I find the complex dynamics of marginalisation and acceptance to be very interesting; protecting the weaker girls was observed during classes or when students from other classes teased the girls, in a ‘performing our duty’ way. But when being exposed to the remaining of the school’s community, being seen hanging out with the ‘right’ friends was equally important. While scheduling a three-day educational trip the girls would participate in with another class (of boys), they told Savvia:

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Carmen (year 3): Better don't go, for your own good!

Monica: It will be unsuitable for you.

Savvia: But I must not get any absences.

Monica: Don't worry, we will tell Mrs X (their deputy head teacher) about it and you can stay at home and they won't register any absences.
Savvia: OK.

At the same time, however, they repeatedly teased her behind her back for things which they considered to be very important, mostly appearance related matters and not acting cool ('she never lets her hair loose', 'she walks like a duck', 'she never plays truant', 'she is 'innocent').

The sphere of friendships seemed to be not only important but even sacred. Marina did not only accompany Kassiani down town on numerous occasions to help her find a part time job as a saleswoman (sometimes taking me to their expeditions as well) but also went out of her way, as she put it, to talk her employer into hiring one of her friends (Monica, Rallia, Kassiani) at her part time job at a local kids' amusement park. On one such occasion Marina complained heavily about Monica's behaviour,

Marina (year 3): You cannot imagine how much I talked to him in order to persuade him to hire her!

Kassiani: We can, I mean you always do nothing but talk!

Marina: Mrs, please tell her to shut up! (we laugh)

Marina: And I persuaded him! And what did she do?? She didn't show up!!! This is the last time I try to help her!

On another occasion in Year Three, to the dismay of the deputy head teacher of the class, Mrs X, Rallia chose to turn down her industry training at a specific goldsmithing studio where she would be taught how to use a very expensive jewellery making software, saying that she didn't mind working at a more modest training position, as long as she would be trained along with her friends (Monica and Marina in that case).

In the questionnaires (Appendix E), friendships were among the most positive school experience being reported, with only three girls reporting the educational aspect of why they come to school.

Kassiani (year 3): (I come to school because) I have to and in order to be with my friends.

Daniela: I am with my friends.

Lucy: I don't want to stay at home and I am with my friends.

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Monica's status amongst her peers seemed to be very important for her as she often took pride in the fact that she was elected "by her friends" to be the form president during the third year. To Monica, this was proof of the fact that no matter the occasional friction between them, they would always form parts of a whole.

> **Monica (year 3)**: It will be one of my best memories and it shows that no matter what, we will always be one.

Rallia was also evidently focused on the social aspect of school versus its educational aspect. In a questionnaire (Appendix E), her response concerning what she thought of the principal was "who cares about him" and her response concerning whether VET students are better than Lyceum students she responded "supposedly, because of the crafts skills being taught". Her everyday school experience revolved around the central theme of socialising and friendships. She grew to be very close to Efterpi, as well as to Marina, Kassiani and Monica. Her friends were a priority for her and in one of the questionnaires (Appendix E) she answered:

> **Rallia (year 3)**: I would avoid getting in a student fight unless it was for defending a friend. If a new student came in her class, I would try to keep her away because I don't like newcomers. /…/ (When I graduate) I will miss my friends and some teachers.

Indeed, the girls often took pride in how tight their friendship bonds were, even comparing themselves to other classes.

> **Marina (year 3)**: I mean, look at the hairdressers and look at us! They always say mean things about each other and quarrel! We are not like that, we are together!
>
> **Monica**: Perhaps it's because we are all girls!

In summary, girls who were marginalised were often subject to teasing and joking. This, in turn, determined who would be accepted as a friend, but not in a straight forward way, as 'protection' was often also involved. Teasing almost never took place in the face of the girls who were being teased. The dynamics of marginalisation and acceptance were not straight forward. Protecting the weaker girls was observed during classes as well as in front of students from other classes. Yet they otherwise marginalised them by not accepting them as their friends, as status seemed to be determined by preferring 'cooler' friends and avoiding certain individuals. Revealing an abundance of friends as a given fact and as a proof of an active social life was crucial, as it determined a girl's status among peers. Protection of otherwise

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marginalised girls was observed in a 'performing our duty' kind of way. Appearing as a whole before other students was considered to be very important for the girls as it assured their hard-core reputation, but at the same time, when being exposed to the remaining of the school's community, being seen hanging out with the 'right' friends was equally important. Finally, the sphere of friendships seemed to be not only important but even sacred, even above and beyond the educational aspects of school.

4.1.2.3 Smoking, drinking and sex

None of the girls wanted to hang out with Nelly except Lucy to a certain degree, who was often seen protecting other weaker girls like Savvia, but it was also observed that on numerous occasions she hung out with Nelly in order to ask her for cigarettes, a situation which two girls themselves called 'smoking friendship'. For Nelly it was obviously more than merely that, as she was devastated with Lucy's absence from her birthday party in Year Three. Smoking, therefore, was an act through which interests were being met for the two girls: exchanging cigarettes for friendship, and vice versa. Related to this is what Nelly once told me:

> **Nelly (year 1)**: I give cigarettes only to Efterpi and Rallia because they are polite, not like those other too who tease me all the time.

Perhaps the protection of Efterpi towards Nelly when she was teased in class by other students may not only have been a result of performing her duties or exposing her status as the form president, but also as an act through which interests were being met: exchanging protection for cigarettes.

Although as an ex-smoker I am now not at all proud of it, on numerous occasions during our meetings at coffee shops and pubs with the girls, we often offered each other cigarettes. It was in fact a strategic move at first in gaining their trust and it was quite successful. Where many other teachers would reprimand them if they caught them smoking in school premises (deputy head teachers also gave them detentions), the girls knew (after repeatedly asking me at first) that not only would I not tell their parents, but also I would not mind when they secretly wanted to light a cigarette when we hung out in the sports field during break times.

> **Monica (year 1)**: You shouldn't have been a teacher. I mean, everyone else would go tell our parents or the deputy head!

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The girls often liked to play a verbal game where each was asked a very personal/embarrassing question by the other girls, in which she had to respond. It was observed that their questions always had to do with sex and getting drunk. It was through repeated observation of that game through which I realised the meaning of 'awkward moments of silence' between the girls. It was on such occasions that when Kassiani's or Nelly's turn came up and they were to be asked a question by the other girls, there were instead awkward moments of silence, which the girls swiftly tried to mask by clumsily forming a question or asking me for help on what to ask. This was never the case when certain other girls would be asked questions, namely those who were more experienced with heavy drinking, smoking and lesbian sex.

All the girls were preoccupied to one degree or another with sexual matters. Kassiani, for example was preoccupied with who was handsome, if the boy she had a crush on looked at her or smiled and always tried to analyse the meaning behind his words.

> **Kassiani (year 2)**: /…/ and I was sitting at the kiosk, pretending that I was seeing something on my phone. Then he made three steps backwards and tilted his head, but when I saw him, he turned his eyes away. What does that mean? Why did he tilt his head? (Marina stares at Rallia – awkward moment of silence).
>
> **Marina**: Here we go again… (exhales) (they laugh)

These however were seemingly considered as 'too innocent worries' by other girls, who in response did not readily know what to ask during their verbal game. On the contrary, skipping awkward moments of silence and shooting questions at more experienced girls was never a problem, always curious to know more about their experience. Secretly bringing alcoholic drinks at Tsiknopempti barbeque school party in Year Two was a central theme in their conversations:

> **Carmen (Year 2)**: We can put vodka in water bottles.
> **Monica**: Or juice bottles.
> **Rallia**: Last year everyone was drinking beers and the teachers didn't tell them anything, we don't need to hide them.

They finally decided to bring alcoholic drinks in disguise and Kassiani got drank.

> **Marina**: She's trying to show off, but it's obvious she isn't used to it! What's the point if she can't take it?
> **Me**: Why don't you tell her?
> **Marina**: I don't know how to tell her.

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It therefore becomes apparent that status between peers was heavily determined by the three factors of drinking, sex and smoking.

Accusations between friends were not absent, and would often revolve around relationships and/or sexual matters. For example:

- In Year Three, Marina and Rallia complained that Monica took advantage of Kassiani

  Marina (year 3): She (Monica) takes advantage of her (Kassiani) but she doesn't get it!
  Rallia: Yes, she pretends she likes her, just to be able to see that guy!
  Marina: So she spends weekends at Kassiani's home and she thinks that it's because they are friends that she is so interested in her!

  Marina and Rallia explained that Monica had a secret relationship with someone from Kassiani's village, so Kassiani was her cover when her formal boyfriend would ask her where she had spent the night. As in the case of Nelly and Lucy, we can see interests being met through the exchange of friendship. This can also be deduced by Monica's understanding of all the girls being friends as a result of the fact that they had elected her to be the form president.
- Marina and Rallia often commented on the fact that Kassiani was obsessed with a specific boy.

  Marina (year 2): And this goes on for two years now, that's so childish! He doesn't even care about her existence! We tell her to move on but she goes on and on!
  Rallia: He is not interested at all.
  Marina: We didn't tell her, but Rallia was once with him, she will kill herself if she finds out!

- Kassiani, Rallia and Marina often accused Carmen of being 'easy' as far as her sexual relationships were concerned.
- Kassiani, Rallia and Marina accused Carmen and Nelly of always talking about sex.

When any of the girls happened to accuse another girl for whatever reason in front of me and asked for my opinion, I tried to be very discrete, neutral and careful not to accuse any girl. For example, when they asked my opinion on whether it is 'normal' that Kassiani is obsessed with a specific boy for more than two years, I answered that perhaps everyone goes through some phases of being obsessed with something, further advising them to talk to her about it if they believed that it was not good for her well-being. As a rule, when they asked for my opinion I would answer 'hmm, very interesting! What do YOU think darling?' It miraculously

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worked every time! Or perhaps, if we don't want to believe in miracles, a very plausible explanation could be based on how thirsty these students were for their voice to be heard…

In numerous discussions with myself over reflexivity, I tried to weigh what was more ethical, offering my honest personal opinion when being asked or trying to be neutral so as not to risk losing the trust of any participant. Although I consider myself to be sincere and honest as a person (often too much so as my friends tell me) and although I am aware that my presence in the field has indeed shaped what has been observed and how it was analysed, in retrospect I still believe that offering my personal views would be too intrusive and would further deviate the setting from one that is as natural as possible. My role was to actively observe and actively listen to the girls as much as possible, in order to emancipate their voices, not confirm mine. This kind of open mindedness is crucial in ethnographic inquiries.

In summary, status between peers was heavily determined by the three factors of drinking, sex and smoking. Smoking in school premises was not merely seen as a 'cool' act, but rather an act through which interests were being met, namely exchanging cigarettes for friendship towards more marginalised individuals, and vice versa. In numerous ways, friendship seemed to be exchanged for other commodities. Moreover, the presence of 'awkward moments of silence' was observed between the girls when a lack of experience on the matters of sex and drinking was perceived, whereas experience in these matters stirred their interest. Accusations between friends were not absent, and would often revolve around relationships and/or sexual matters. These accusations were lively but were never made in the face of an individual. As a researcher, I tried to be very discrete and neutral as a listener of such accusations made in front of me. Offering my personal views would obstruct the setting from one that is as natural as possible and might have alienated the girls.

4.1.2.4 Appearance and reputation

The girls were very interested in their appearance (clothes, makeup, perfumes, weight, jewellery, exercising), for example it was not uncommon for Kassiani to plug Monica's brows during break times. However, none of the girls came to school with heavy makeup, i.e. overt forms of resistance through their appearance were never observed, perhaps with the exception of not always conforming with school uniform, but not in extreme ways. The girls were also

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often critical of school uniform regulations as well as of situations where they considered that they were not being fairly treated by teachers.

Marina (year 3): Teachers need to make their lessons more interesting instead of being preoccupied with how students look and what they wear.

Rallia (year 2): They always fire detentions at me for that stupid school uniform, but look at her (Savvia), she comes to school with a tracksuit too but never gets detentions! It's unfair!

Being feminine and following contemporary trends was also very important, and they showed me, almost on a daily basis, the selfies they had posted in social media, asking my opinion about their makeup and choice of clothes. Not following such trends was seen as boring and/or was criticised. They defined being feminine by traits such as being slim, having large breasts, styling their hair, wearing miniskirts and having a tattoo.

Kassiani (year 3): Of course he broke up with her (Carmen), I mean, she is fat, who would ever want to be with her?

Daniela (year 2): I told her (Savvia) to leave her hair down, to be more feminine, she doesn't get it!

They regularly commented on my appearance too, for example my nail and hair colour and openly gave me relevant advice. Seeing me wearing trainers at school or having an under-cut on my hair was cheered as being 'very cool'. Although I never attempted (and I would never attempt) to fool myself into thinking that I was one of them, I can attest that revealing a part of my uniqueness has greatly contributed in making the girls trust me more easily. Being a woman discussing subjects of appearance with them obviously aided this level of connectedness, with my male students often commenting about my close relationship with the girls:

Boy student (year 2): Mrs, why do your girl students love you so much?

Boy (year 3): You are a woman-magnet, Mrs!

Reputation was also considered to be crucial for the girls. Rallia thrice described, in full detail, an embarrassing moment of stumbling and falling in front of other students and was remembered by her as the worst school incident of her student life.

Rallia (year 2): It ruined my image!

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Reputation also often had to do with sexual matters and it was observed that being sexually assertive and experienced was seen as a positive trait of gaining credits of peer status. Marina and Rallia often joked:

Rallia (year 3): Now that we both broke up with our boyfriends, we are whores! (they laugh)

This was interestingly often coupled with Marina's frequent worry whether others would perceive her as a 'whore'.

Marina (year 3): I feel liberated this year but it worries me, how others may think that I am a whore.

Moreover, although sexual assertiveness was seen as a positive trait, there were at the same time accusations against some girls of the class for being 'too easy' in their sexual relationships and/or of being too preoccupied with sex.

In summary, the girls were preoccupied with their appearance (clothes, makeup, perfumes, weight, jewellery) but overt forms of resistance through their appearance were not observed, perhaps with the exception of not always conforming with school uniform. Being feminine and following contemporary trends was also considered to be very important. Being a woman too, such discussions aided my level of connectedness with them. Not following such trends was seen as boring and/or was criticised. The girls defined being feminine with traits such as being slim, having large breasts, styling their hair, wearing miniskirts and having a tattoo. Apart from their class reputation (wanting to appear as a whole, as previously described), their personal reputation was also considered to be crucial. This often had to do with sexual matters and it was observed that being sexually assertive and experienced was seen as a positive trait of gaining credits of peer status. However, at the same time there were expressed worries about how others would conceive them or accusations against some girls for being 'too easy' in their sexual relationships and/or of being too preoccupied with sex.

4.1.2.5 Preoccupation with everyday school matters

Interestingly, part of many girls' everyday reality was their interaction with canteen ladies. This closeness of the girls with non-educational staff was also reported by their regular encounters with the cleaning ladies, e.g. going to their room in the mornings before the bell

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rang. The girls' long discussions over the canteen ladies were very puzzling to me at first, as I considered it to be a trivial matter. At first it seemed to boil down to the fact that these ladies were interested in the girls and asked them questions about their family and their personal lives, therefore the girls were preoccupied with the matter because of this interest shown in them. In what I call a fortunate stroke of serendipity, one day I listened to the following conversation between Nelly and Lucy:

> **Nelly (year 2, break time)**: Bring me my free sandwich too but don't talk too loudly, I don't want others to hear. (Lucy goes and comes back in a few minutes).
> **Lucy**: She didn't give it to me! She told me, tell Nelly I want to see her first before giving out free sandwiches to other students.
> **Nelly**: What?? That bitch! Oh my God, I will never take a sandwich from them again! And she (the canteen lady) pretended that we were friends!

It was then that I realised my mistake of pre-judging observations instead of trying to be open minded and wait until I made sense of what was going on in the field. Seeing through an ethnographer's eyes is an inevitable fact, but pre-determining and/or rushing into explanations is another. On numerous occasions this research has taught me that patience is a virtue. Since then, I often repeated to myself the phrase "Trivial? Think again!". After that, further observation revealed that the girls who were preoccupied with canteen matters were among the students who had so serious financial problems that got free breakfast from the canteen, as well as packages of food for Christmas and Easter holidays. Getting fed is, of course, far from unimportant… As for Nelly and Savvia, their preoccupation was also a further indication of how thirsty they were for friendships and that is perhaps why they seemed to enjoy the interest these ladies showed in them so much.

Also noteworthy is the fact that twice (in the first and second year) the canteen ladies complained to some of the girls about me, with the incidents being a reminder that no matter how discreet a researcher may try to be, difficulties may arise from unseen fronts.

> **Kassiani (year 2)**: She (the canteen lady) asked me why you took us to the cafeteria and said she could call the Ministry for that!
> **Me**: But it was on a strike day, we didn't skip any lessons! All students had left school and I came to you!
> **Kassiani**: I told her! She said we could have bought drinks from them instead of leaving school. It's none of her business what we do!
> **Me**: OK, look, this is not the first time they complain so if they tell you anything again, tell them we will buy from them next time.
> **Kassiani**: But I don't like their coffee!
> **Me**: Darling, just smile and tell them what they want to hear, and we can still go to the cafeteria when the occasion arises (I wink and she laughs).

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In summary, the girls were also preoccupied with matters which I initially wrongly prejudged as being trivial. A large part of the everyday reality of many girls was their interaction with canteen ladies. Apart from it stemming from the fact that these ladies seemed interested in the girls and asked them questions about their personal lives, further observation revealed that the girls who were preoccupied with canteen matters were among the students who had serious financial problems. These students got free breakfast from the canteen, as well as packages of food for Christmas and Easter holidays. They often accepted these in secrecy, because showing that one was poor was considered to be embarrassing. The incident through which I came to an understanding of the preoccupation of the girls with canteen ladies taught me that pre-determining and/or rushing into explanations is a big ethnographic mistake. The complains of the canteen ladies over why I didn't always choose to buy them drinks from the canteen were a reminder that no matter how discreet an ethnographer tries to be, difficulties may arise from unseen fronts and must be dealt with in an equally discreet way.

4.1.3 Concluding comments

The girls' experience was shaped by a mixture of positive and negative encounters and perspectives in both an educational as well as a social domain. What I consider to be important is not only the fact that these domains seemed to be almost always interrelated, but also that for these girls the educational domain seemed to be very heavily determined and defined by the social domain and not the other way around. Matters such as absences or learning acquired meaning when filtered through a lens of non-educational aspects, yet this process was not enough to erase the meaninglessness of education. In what follows, examples of this position are discussed.

Status - appearing to be cool

Carmen often reported that she had an open relationship with her parents, however one day she handed me a parental absence note and said:

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> **Carmen (year 3)**: I decided to give it to them this time to sign it for a change! (instead of forging their signature).

One day in March of Year Two, I was in class with the girls informing them about their number of absences. When I told Carmen that she had 32 absences, she started laughing:

> **Carmen** (year 2): My mom teases me and tells me, don't you get in class this year? And asks me if I will pass the year.

Considering the fact that the number of absences she accumulated throughout the year was relatively low and that it was only two months before the year's end, I was initially surprised by her remark. This remark may be simply taken to mean that some parents are unaware of the legislation concerning absences (although it is clearly written at the back of the parental absence notes which students take from school for their parents to complete and sign). Going one level beneath the surface, however, I realised that Carmen's remarks were made in class, in front of her peers and in a particularly cheerful way, just like when Marina was commenting on her open relationship with her mother. I concluded that the girls were very preoccupied in determining their social status before their peers; for them, not only reporting mischiefs but also reporting an open relationship with parents (especially when further observation does not validate it and when most other girls hid things from them or reported always forging their parent's signature or being reprimanded by their parents for their absences) are far from neutral statements as for them, they determine how 'cool' they will look before their peers. For the girls, meaning making around educational matters such as absences was reached while looking through the lens of striving to appear 'cool'.

Feelings towards teachers shape the girls' educational growth

The degree of preoccupation of the girls with teacher related matters never ceased to amaze me, especially the degree to which such perspectives shaped their school experience. Daniela had to repeat a year at Gymnasium because she had to sit the September re-examination but she refused to go, as she did not want to see a specific teacher whom she hated. Moreover, as it will become apparent in the discussion of the remaining research questions, their resistance and reactions when they disliked a teacher may have seemed, in some cases, to be extreme for

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outside observers, but for them they were plain natural, as feelings had the power to drive educational outcomes.

The shaping of future aspirations - feeling the pressure as graduation approaches

As seen in table 5, for four of the girls there was some consistency between their dream job and where they saw themselves concerning a future job. Three of the girls had specific opinions about what their dream job was but did not have any firm ideas concerning what profession they saw themselves in the future or answered that whatever future job was OK. Concerning how they imagined themselves in twenty years, six of the girls mentioned getting married and having children, apart from Savvia who stated that she sees herself alone and unmarried. Also noteworthy was the fact that six of the girls mentioned travelling or living abroad, i.e. getting away from their current reality. Three of the girls indicated that keeping social bonds from their present is very important (either by maintaining their friendship with other girls of their class and/or with me). Being rich and having material wealth was also amongst their answers, as well as being happy and enjoying life. Only one of the girls mentioned goldsmithing as being her job in twenty years' time. Given that the last row of the table summarises responses from a questionnaire administered at a different time than the three previous rows, it is worth noting that there is a notable consistency concerning many of the answers, regarding getting married and having children. There are, however, also inconsistencies such as responses including different plans/professions than what was previously mentioned, or 'dreaming big' according to the girls' teachers. The only seemingly fully consistent answer is Marina's, concerning a travelling related job, but even in her case she orally changed her mind numerous times, for example:

Marina (year 3): I want to study to become a social worker.

Marina (year 3): I want to go to (names her country of origin) and work with my brother at the airport.

Marina was very preoccupied with her future beyond graduation, especially in Year Three, and with whether she would make the right choices for her future concerning finding a job. Indeed, after graduation, she managed to succeed in getting a tourism related certificate in

which she takes a lot of pride in because she failed the first time she attempted it but kept trying until she succeeded. Despite the fact that she is currently working as a receptionist at a small local hotel business and she is the only one of the girls who moved out of her parents' house, she keeps trying to find a travelling related job. It is also notable than none of the three girls who mentioned further studies as possibilities for the future have realised such plans to date, almost two years after graduation. A further analysis of these girls' experience and perspectives some years from now is within my future research plans.

In Year Three, Nelly had some aspirations for tertiary education which were ridiculed and seen as unrealistic by some of her teachers. Nelly's mother also had frequent concerns on the fact that her daughter still didn't know what she wanted to study when she would graduate. These observations contradict Nelly's questionnaire answers that her dream job was to become a barista or to babysit children, as well as her answer that the job she would like to do in the future was to work as a waitress. Her future plans, in the same questionnaire (Appendix E), were reported as getting married and getting a job and one day, at the beginning of the third year, she casually mentioned:

Nelly (year 3): Everybody is stressed over what job they want to do after graduation except me!

It is however important to note that her so called 'unrealistic' aspirations for tertiary education did not occur simultaneously with her mother's concerns over future studies. Her mother's concerns were frequently voiced during the second year, at a period when Nelly had a high number of absences. She had accumulated those absences because she could not wake up in time to come to school, as a result of the fact that she was working until late. Once again, we can see the tendency to equalise the lack of school absences as more meaningful chances over future aspirations. Moreover, her mother's concerns over further studies were always coupled with a specific remark, that 'Goldsmithing was not what she wanted to follow'. The meaninglessness of the context they were into gradually started to sink in. Nelly's so called 'unrealistic' aspirations for tertiary education were voiced two months before she graduated...

Related to the above is Carmen's response to the questionnaire (Appendix E) concerning her future plans after graduating, which involved getting married and continuing her studies. Orally, she did indeed often talk about marriage and having children, but never shared any solid plans of future studies. On different occasions, especially in the third year, she changed her mind concerning what profession she would like to get into in the future: clothes

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designer/successful sociologist/graphic designer. These are professions which were far from her chosen specialisation. What is surprising is that since she mentioned designing, she could have chosen the graphic arts design specialisation in the second year but she did not, yet she often talked about wanting to become a graphic designer. An interpretation is offered in the next sections.

Coupled with the above is Kassiani's case, who was increasingly very preoccupied with her future too, concerning whether she would be able to find a job, both a part time one as well as after she would graduate; she often expressed that she felt scared and very insecure concerning the fact that she couldn't speak English, concerning whether there would be convenient bus rides from her village to town and whether her parents would be angry at her if she worked instead of staying at home and doing the housework.

> **Kassiani (year 3)**: What is the point of looking for a job, no one will want me! I cannot speak English, saleswomen need to speak English and Russian.

On numerous occasions we arranged to go down town with her and Marina, so that we would search for jobs for her. It is important to note that the comments she made about her fears became much more frequent during the third year. I believe that all the above are indications of the pressure the girls felt over their future. This pressure increased as the realisation that they would soon graduate gradually started to sink in.

Related to the above are the sociological notions of cooling down and warming up, first used by Erving Goffman in the early fifties. *Cooling out* is a sociological notion used to describe an informal set of practices used by schools to handle students whose lack of academic ability or other resources prevent them from achieving the educational aspirations they have developed for themselves such as attaining a bachelor's degree (Clark, 1960). The purpose of cooling out strategies is to encourage the students to adjust their expectations or redefine failure. These set of practices contrast with *warming up* practices, in which students who aspire to easier educational goals are encouraged to reach for more ambitious ones. Although such sociological notions are very important, for the purpose of this specific research I focus on how the girls themselves defined and shaped their aspirations. A suggestion for future research would be to focus on how cooling out or warming up practices catalyse students' understanding and shaping of their educational aspirations.

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What makes a VET student stand out after all?

As a response to a questionnaire (Appendix E), **Kassiani** stated that VET students were better than Lyceum students because their practical training meant that they were acquiring knowledge faster and that it would be easier for them to find a job. This however was contradicted by numerous observations during fieldwork:

1. Her constant worries of whether she would manage to find a job in the future over the fact that she could not speak English.
2. Complains over work training at industry during Year Three (not happy with the fact that she had to work for seven hours every Friday whereas her friends worked for companies that need them only for two hours).
3. Twice not filling in an answer to questionnaires (Appendix E) concerning ways in which she believes that school is good for her.
4. In a question regarding which skills she thought she had acquired at school, she mentioned socialising, having manners and being polite, i.e. reasons which are not related to education or industry skills.
5. Answering during a questionnaire (Appendix E) that she felt "nothing really" about the fact that she was graduating, as well as her oral remark that she would not miss school because it was a waste of time, instead she would only miss her friends. In the same questionnaire she also responded that she came to school for her friends and because "it's obligatory to go to school". Moreover, she mentioned that what she would miss from school in years to come was her friends, their mischiefs as well as very few teachers.

According to **Lucy** as well, VET students were better than Lyceum students because they could choose the specialisation they were interested in and also because of the practical training they got. This however contradicted her answers that:

1. what was positive about school was the free periods they got when a teacher was absent and when they missed lessons in order to participate in educational excursions.
2. she felt trapped when in school, everything about school 'sucked' and that she had learned nothing at school. She once commented that if she ever took one photo of what it meant to be at school, it would be her behind bars. She also added that she would not

miss school and that she would be very happy when she would graduate because she would not have to wake up so early. Moreover, she stressed her belief that school must either be banned or at least they should come to school for less time and not every day.

3. she came to school because she would be bored at home and also in order to be with her friends. Once again, social reasons and friendships are crucial meaning makers.

Carmen reported that school's role is equally to educate as well as to allow students to make friends and to express themselves freely. She reported that she came to school because she liked it and that in class she liked to participate in the lesson, something which more often than not, was not observed either by me or by other colleagues. After a colleague once heard her express her future professional aspirations, a colleague commented in the staff room:

> **Colleague (year 3)**: These students cannot realistically assess themselves, they over-estimate their abilities.

Nelly, as mentioned previously, believed that VET students are not better than Lyceum students and that there is no difference because it is just a matter of personal choice of path for every student. None of her questionnaire responses however were directly related to the educational role of school, which is remarkable. For example, her response on how the school can improve did not contain criticisms over infrastructure, like the answer of all the other girls, but was instead about school offering excursions to Greece.

Savvia stressed the educational role of why students come to school, as well as its role in helping the student making friends. In the questionnaire, she answered that she would prefer lessons to be “easy and not boring”; for her “boring” is the opposite of easy; what is difficult is not relevant, therefore it is boring. Indeed, Savvia once told me that she felt relieved by teachers who understand that she finds lessons difficult. It is surprising how contextualised the girls’ discourse and experience are; the power of each student's experience to shape and determine the meaning of words is unparalleled. As previously discussed, lots of educational aspects seemed to be meaningless for the girls therefore their meaning making process involved filtering them through something more familiar – a non-educational lens. The inevitable consequence, as graduation approached, was lack of solid future plans and/or an increased feeling of pressure over their future.

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Related to the above is, as I see it, her answer that she "did not know" whether she would miss school, as well as feeling "happy" about graduating. Whereas all of the other girls mentioned friends to be missed more than anything, for Savvia, who had always been largely alone, there seems to be nothing to miss. The educational aspect is not present, despite her previous answer that school was good because students learn things and make friends. Questionnaires thus seem to be very powerful tools in aiding the exposure of loaded words, which are often not verified by observation. The above are, on the whole, very powerful answers to assumptions that "school and education are inherently good".

Exchanging commodities

Last but not least, there is a trend in the research findings towards a culture of exchanging social commodities. For example, interests were being met through exchanging friendship for smoking or friendship for other personal interests (both aspects of the exchange contributed to status among peers). In a way, perhaps the canteen ladies' criticism makes sense when seen as a part of this specific culture: buying things from them and in exchange not filing a complaint at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth. The discussion of the remaining three research questions will further shed light on this proposition of a culture of exchanging commodities.

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4.2 Resistance

The second research question deals with the participants' patterns of resistance within school. The research question is *'How do girl students define the patterns of resistance they employ to oppose to the hegemony of the dominant order in the school?'*. Results indicate that the enactment of girls' resistance was understood as an expression of entitlement and independency, as an expression of dislike towards a teacher or a lesson and/or as a result of disagreement between peers. The presence of a vicious cycle of resistance is also apparent. In the section which follows I will present and discuss the main findings dealing with this research question.

4.2.1 Means of resisting

During the three years of fieldwork many forms of resistance were observed from boy students, such as setting a fire on P.E. mattresses and on another occasion on a barrel, destroying school property, in-school violence such as fights between students as well as between students and teachers, use of drugs, teasing non-educational staff such as the cleaning ladies, phone conversations while in class, being flâneurs, provoking teachers, etc. Some more covert forms of resistance were also observed, but what stands out is that the boys' more overt forms of resistance were neither reported by the girls concerning themselves nor were the girls observed to engage in them. Focusing to the girl participants, their forms of resistance included:

- Not conforming with the school uniform
- Talking in class and interfering with the lessons
- Not paying attention during lessons, e.g. by listening to music, texting or sleeping.
- Smoking
- Arriving late in class
- Playing truant
- Eating or drinking in class/alcoholic drinks
- Cheating in tests

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These forms of resistance were initiated by the girls and were often described as 'being naughty with the girls' – an act which was reported by many girls as what they would miss most when they would graduate.

Daniela (year 3): I will miss the trouble we got into with the girls.

Kassiani (year 3): I will miss my friends, some teachers, like you, and being naughty with the girls.

The girls seemed to refrain from more overt forms of resistance. In a questionnaire they reported that they would not readily engage in a student fight and would rather not pay attention to it at all or would enjoy watching it, unless it was in order to defend a friend.

Carmen (year 3): (In case of a student fight) I will go check out what is going on and have fun watching.

Rallia (year 3): I will intervene only for a friend, otherwise I won't pay any attention.

It was however also observed that some more overt forms of resistance were firstly initiated by boys, with the girls being prompted to follow. These were:

- strikes over school uniform
- causing uproar during assemblies
- more overt forms of lesson interruption

To sum up, many more incidents of boys' resistance were observed during fieldwork rather than girls'. These were more overt forms of resistance when compared to those of girls. The girls seemed to refrain from more overt forms of resistance, for example they reported that they would not readily engage in a student fight unless it was in order to defend a friend. The more covert forms of resistance which were initiated by the girls were often described by them as 'being naughty with the girls' – an act which was reported by many girls as what they would miss most when they would graduate. Sometimes, when some more overt forms of resistance were initiated by boys, the girls would be prompted to follow.

4.2.2 Characteristics of resistance

The enactment of girls' resistance was understood as:

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- an expression of entitlement and independency
- an expression of dislike towards a teacher and/or a lesson
- a result of disagreement between peers

These characteristics are described below.

4.2.2.1 As an expression of entitlement and independency

The girls often found school regulations to be illogical.

> **Monica (year 3)**: He (the principal) is prehistoric and his rules are absurd.

They regularly employed forms of resistance as a reaction to such regulations. This was coupled with a sense of entitlement, which was often criticised by teachers. The presence of stereotypes concerning some students' origin was also apparent.

> **Efterpi (year 1)**: They tell us that not smoking in school is a matter of respect. What does smoking have to do with respect?
>
> **Rallia (year 2)**: School should be less strict and let us smoke. It is a personal decision which should have been respected.
>
> **Carmen (year 2)**: It's their fault (the school's) that we forge our parents' signatures. They treat us like children. For example Monica is above eighteen, why should she give her mom absence notes to sign?
>
> **Boy student (year 1)**: Look Mrs, we did all this by ourselves (showing the chairs he with some of the girls of Class A had arranged for the upcoming assembly). We are tired, now we deserve to go to the canteen during the assembly.
> **Me**: No, you are not allowed to.
> The students walked to the deputy head teacher of the class, Mrs X, who was standing some metres away and who heard our discussion, and repeated the same.
> **Mrs X**: As Mrs Maria said, the answer is no.
> When the students left, she commented:
> **Mrs X**: This Arab wickedness of that boy is so tiring, asking things in return for helping with the chairs!

Moreover, coupled with the girls' acts of resistance was a sense of independence in their actions.

> **Rallia (year 2)**: No matter what teachers say, each of us will do whatever we want. Last year I knew I might have to sit the September re-examination or even repeat the year, but I took my chances.
>
> **Efterpi (year 1)**: I can choose if I want to be the best student, the worst student or when to be a troublemaker.

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In summary, the girls regularly employed forms of resistance as a reaction to regulations which they found to be illogical. This was coupled with a sense of entitlement, which was often criticised by teachers. The presence of stereotypes from teachers concerning some students' origin was also apparent. Moreover, coupled with the girls' acts of resistance was a sense of independence in their acts. Last but not least, the culture of exchanging commodities seems to manifest itself not only between peers and not only relating to social aspects, but also to extend to school related matters as well as between students and teachers.

4.2.2.2 As an expression of dislike towards a teacher and/or a lesson

The girls' reactions when they disliked a teacher may have been considered by some teachers to be extreme, but for them they were understood as plain natural. For example, in one incident I saw Rallia walking away from school one morning and during break time I heard a colleague complaining about Rallia walking in class with a drink. Later in the day I saw Rallia and we had the following conversation:

> **Me (year 2)**: Darling! What a surprise! I was driving to school this morning a few minutes before the bell rang and saw you walking away, so I thought that I wouldn't see you at all today.
> **Rallia**: /…/ I went to the kiosk to buy cigarettes and my milk, got in class ten minutes late, but at least I got in class! I mean, with her, I never do, you know I don't like her! And I was very enthusiastic, I was smiling, I said good moooorning!!! She (gives the insulting nickname of their English teacher) started shouting like a lunatic because I was drinking my chocolate milk and because I was late again! So I turned around quietly and just walked out of class. I won't let her ruin my day. I'd be crazy if I ever got in her class again.

Rallia's phrase "but at least I got in" once again highlights not only a sense of entitlement but also a culture of exchanging commodities, as she expects to be allowed to carry drinks in class as well as not to get an absence for being late, in return for managing to get in class instead of staying out altogether. Indeed, this culture was demonstrated by numerous other incidences. As an example, during the first year a boy student who was notorious among colleagues for his disruptive behaviour, once told me:

> **Boy student (year 1)**: I don't understand why she gave me such a low grade for the semester. I was copying in my notebook what she was writing on board and even helped her to give the handouts to the students.

When once this boy was referred to the disciplinary committee, Carmen told me:

Carmen (year 1): What a pity! He got 6 days (of detention)! But at least he gets in class, they should have helped him.

During the first school year, much of the everyday life of the class was revolving around frequent complaints by students of Class A and Class B against a specific teacher (Mrs Z) whom they considered to be incompetent. The students frequently visited the principal's office to report their complaints. Their descriptions were very vivid:

> **Rallia (year 1)**: Eleni (a girl student) told Mrs Z that she doesn't understand (the lesson) and the teacher said, 'why don't you understand? It's gypsies who don't understand. Are you a gypsy?' and she (the student) told her 'you are crazy', pushed her and we got out of class /…/ And when we got back in class, she told Eleni, you don't have to come to school anymore because you have too many absences, you will have to repeat the year anyway.
> **Efterpi**: We went to the principal's office and told him about Mrs Z, that we don't understand a thing in her lesson and that she uses offensive language against us. We asked him to bring us another teacher but he said that it's difficult to change the teacher and that in our life we will always have someone whom we won't like. /…/
> **Eleni**: My mom came to see the principal too. The principal asked me if I really pushed Mrs Z and I admitted that I did. And he said, you did well! He read the school regulations from his book and told me that with 270 absences I will unfortunately have to repeat the year. /…/ We told him that we have a video of all the things that go on in Mrs Z's class and that we would give it to him if he didn't refer us to the disciplinary committee.

Rallia and her clique (consisting of Efterpi as well as Eleni and a boy – two students who did not choose Goldsmithing and Silversmithing specialisation in Year Two) were the students who would act in more overt ways when compared to other girls, by interrupting the lessons and repeatedly playing truant at this teacher's classes or leaving from class when they could no longer put up with her behaviour. An excerpt from Mrs Z's written complaint (one of many) to the deputy head teacher of Class A is given below. This excerpt describes the episode previously described by the girls.

> The student (she names the boy) was sitting at his desk and was preoccupied with his phone /.../ I advised him to start working /.../ I pointed out to him that the assumption that we will pass all the students regardless of whether they are trying is wrong. /.../ He told me he doesn't want to work in class, that he is bored, and that he will do everything at home. /.../ I told him, 'here you are not in the mood, so how will you be in the mood at home?'. He got angry, started shouting. He started walking in the class /.../ he took things from my desk /.../ He prompted Rallia, Efterpi and Eleni, who took his side and started interrupting the lesson too. The four of them walked out of class and I registered their absence /.../ Students came from other classes and continued to interrupt the lesson. /.../ All together they entered and exited the class many times. The students who wanted to work were disturbed by these interruptions. It is apparent that he (name of boy student) realises that he is in danger of having to sit a re-examination for the lesson and maybe even having to repeat the year and he therefore wants other students to take his side. In any case, these three girls follow him.

The above is an example of an initiation of a more overt form of resistance by a boy, with the girls being prompted to follow. This suggests that the physically male dominated school

was also characterised by a peer domination of boys towards girls. Moreover, a culture of exchanging commodities is apparent in the incident where the students told the principal that they would give him a video of what is going on in class as long as he did not refer them to the disciplinary committee. The outcome of the incident was that only the students from other classes who entered the class without permission were punished (with six days of detention each), whereas the four students of Class A were not punished.

To summarise, the girls employed forms of resistance when they disliked a teacher, when they were reprimanded by them or when a teacher used offensive language against them. A clique consisting of three of the girls and a boy were the students who would act in more overt ways when compared to other girls, for example by interrupting and causing uproar in the lessons of specific teachers. On these occasions it was observed that there was often an initiation of a more overt form of resistance by the boy, with the three girls being prompted to follow. This suggests that the physically male dominated school was also characterised by a peer domination of boys towards girls. The culture of exchanging commodities was again apparent, for example on occasions were a student expected to be allowed to carry drinks in class and/or not get an absence, in return for managing to get in class instead of staying out altogether. This culture was also apparent in the incident where the students told the principal that they would give him a video of what is going on in their class as long as he did not refer them to the disciplinary committee, as well as in instances where students expected to get good grades or not be punished as an exchange for their presence in class.

4.2.2.3 As a result of disagreement between peers

The clique's ways of reacting towards Mrs Z were considered by some students to be too overt and this caused a disagreement between them. As a result, most of the students of Class A were divided in two opposing groups, literally and metaphorically. This reaction was projected in my lesson. On the one side was Rallia's clique and on the other side the group of students who acted in a more complacent way and believed that they should stay in Mrs Z's classes despite the teacher's behavior, because they did not want to risk having to repeat the year because of too many absences. The following was a very extreme incident during one of

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my classes, which was the peak of their reaction. As their form teacher, I decided to spend half of that lesson to discuss the escalating situation concerning Mrs Z with the whole class.

> When the bell rang, Rallia, Efterpi, Eleni and /…/ (the boy of their clique) sat together on the floor outside the class and started complaining about Mrs Z, calling her a lunatic. I asked them repeatedly to come in class, which they did only after I insisted. In class, they sat together. /…/
>
> **Monica**: They (Rallia, Efterpi and their clique) lie and distort what is really going on in class. It's their fault too!!!
>
> The members of the clique rolled their eyes and exhaled in discomfort.
>
> **Marina**: We too dislike Mrs Z either but we are trying to put up with her because we are afraid that if we don't get in class, we will have a problem with our number of absences.
>
> Other students shared their opinion, taking either of the two sides. /…/ Nelly remained neutral, saying that both sides are right. When Rallia started to talk, Monica interrupted her.
>
> **Monica**: We want to have a lesson now, it's our right!
>
> He (the boy of the clique) stood up and told his team "let's go out". They walked to the door.
>
> I felt scared and instantly realised that I would lose control of the class if I didn't react fast.
>
> **Me**: (shouting) Sit down now! /…/ What kind of team are we, if you (raising my hand and showing the clique) want to get out because you cannot accept others' opinion being different from yours and you (raising my hand and showing the rest of the class) address ME, you say 'they did this or that', when THEY are present! Address THEM! Talk to each other, try to resolve this in a way that is not humiliating for any of us!

We spent the rest of the lesson listening to every student's opinion and trying to answer back in a civilised manner. What I initially planned to take me half a period, took the whole time. By the end of the period, the students managed to develop a plan of action which included writing a letter to the members of the school's Parents' Committee and forwarding it to the principal. The outcome of the incident was not negative, in my opinion, as it taught the students some basic rules in trying to resolve disputes. Despite that, I will forever regret the fact that I completely lost control and started shouting at them. It was an incident which proved that I still had plenty of room for improvement in working out ways not to lose my temper when faced with tricky situations of student reaction.

The conclusion that student resistance was triggered by peer related matters can also be extracted from the following quote by Marina, according to whom Efterpi did not play truant because of incompetent teachers but because of peer related issues.

> **Marina (year 1)**: I believe that it's not because of disliking a teacher that Efterpi stays out of class, not even because of Mrs Z when almost everybody else stays out because they won't stand her, but because of things that have to do with friendships or relationships.

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Marina made this comment in the presence of Efterpi during an interview and Efterpi neither refuted it nor agreed. In any case, it is a remark which is validated by what was observed; when she played truant or was late in class, she would be with her friends (with Rallia on most occasions) or would stay out of class to be with her boyfriend. Even in the incident with Mrs Z, described previously, Efterpi left the class only when the student who initiated the uproar, who was a member of her clique, prompted her and the other two girls of the clique to leave with him. It is therefore evident that Efterpi, like most girls, was indeed preoccupied with issues relating to her relationships with friends, misunderstandings arising between them, as well as issues relating to boys and her sexual orientation. These were recurrent subjects which seemed to be prioritised by her, not merely in her discussions but also concerning her actions:

> Efterpi shows me the marks on her wrists.
> **Me (year 2)**: What are these?
> **Efterpi**: /…/ I did it for her. /…/ She (Rallia) betrayed me.
>
> **Me (year 2, in class)**: Where are Efterpi and Rallia?
> **Monica**: They won't get (in class). They are having problems again, they quarreled about Rallia's boyfriend.
>
> **(Year 1, researcher's diary) (**During the assembly? /…/ I saw Efterpi walking away with her boyfriend. /…/ The principal stood up, walked to the microphone and interrupted the celebration, asking the students to keep their applause for the end. The immediate response of the boys of the third year - within what seemed to me to be nanoseconds - was to start applauding, with my girls following them, cheering and laughing. Then other students followed too. I wanted to laugh too, but I managed to compose myself. The principal remained there, serious, staring at them and waited until they stopped applauding. Only then did he slowly walk back to his seat. For the rest of the celebration, the students kept applauding regularly and definitely more often than needed. Poor man, I wouldn't want to be in his position.

In summary, student resistance was triggered not only as a reaction to teachers who were considered to be incompetent but also by peer related matters such as friendships, relationships as well as disagreements between peers, relating either to educational or to social aspects. One such incident served as a proof that as a teacher, I still had plenty of room for improvement in working out ways not to lose my temper when faced with tricky situations of student resistance. Further examples of student resistance being initiated by boys are apparent, with girls being prompted to react in the same way.

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4.2.3 Concluding comments

Teachers versus deputy head teachers

The analysis of students' patterns of resistance reveals the girls' understanding of the role of teachers versus members of the administration. Many of the girls reported that in case they witnessed a student fight, they would call a member of the administration:

> **Daniela (year 3)**: I will call a deputy head.

Concerning deputy head teachers, time and again the girls expressed their annoyance over the detentions they got from them:

> **Rallia (year 2)**: /…/ my bad luck!! I ran into him (a deputy head teacher) again aaaand, of course, I got 2 more (days of detention due to not wearing her school uniform).

> **Kassiani (year 1)**: He (a deputy head teacher) just walks and shoots detentions around!

However, when I asked them to describe the reaction of their teachers when they got into 'trouble with the girls', most answered that their teachers either never found out or advised them how to better behave.

> **Monica (year 3)**: The teachers advise me not to break the rules so that I will learn not to do it in my life or at work.

> **Kassiani (year 3)**: Teachers either won't find out or they won't pay any attention or they will just make a remark.

> **Daniela (year 2)**: When they (teachers) reprimand us, it's for our own good.

It is apparent that the girls have a different understanding of the role of teachers versus members of the administration; they understand deputy head teachers' role as being to resolve disputes and prohibit resistance, whereas teacher's role to be advisory. Furthermore, whereas they seemed to put up with their teacher's reprimands, they were very critical when reprimands were enacted as punishments by deputy head teachers.

The vicious cycle of resistance

It was observed that sometimes student resistance was triggered by the teacher's reprimands. For example, in the incident with Rallia and her English teacher, if we couple her frequent acts of truancy in that lesson due to disliking the teacher, then a series of negative

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events which build on and reinforce each other can be observed. As depicted in Figure 3, when disliking a teacher, a student may resist (e.g. by playing truant). This may result in reprimands by the teacher, which in turn causes more hatred towards the teacher, and in turn more resistance.

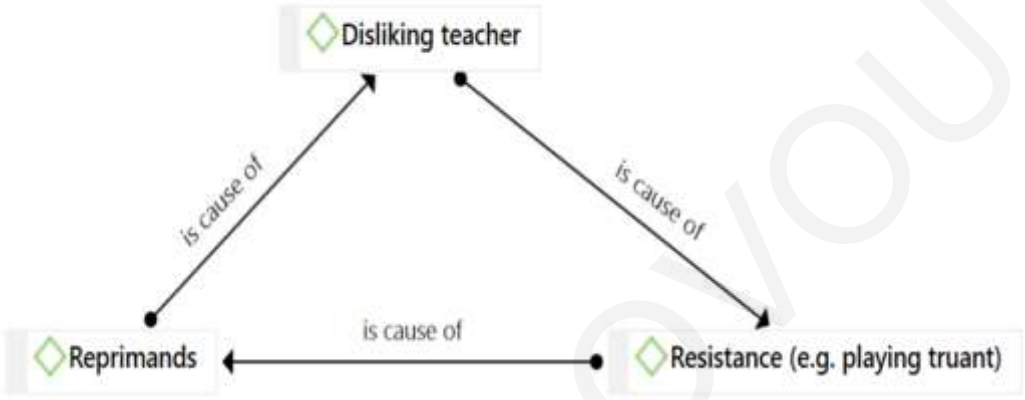

Figure 3: Teacher related resistance

Moreover, students' behaviour, through acts of resistance, seems to be linked both to the school's reputation as well as to students' reputation. This will be further elaborated in subsequent sections.

> **Marina (year 3)**: We (the students of technical schools) have a bad name because people's idea about technical schools is bad. But sometimes it is the students who cause these bad ideas with the things they do.

Teacher role versus researcher role

During Year Two, Nelly once tried to cheat during a Physics test. The following is an excerpt from my field notes:

> I went near her, and in a calm but firm voice asked her to stop writing and hand me the test. Well, at least I was calm! I was upset and felt betrayed, but I knew that I had to handle it as I would in any other class. Being a teacher as well as an ethnographer is tricky and challenging. What if she hates me now? She started crying and did not lift her eyes to look at me. When the bell rang, I asked her to stay in class for a while. She apologised and said that she did it because she did not study for the test but she still wanted to

do well as she believed that I would ‘look down’ on her if she didn't do well 'because we are friends'. I said that I never look down on my students and that if ever she believes that I may look down on her she can just ask me so that I will reassure her that I will not. I told her that what happened would have to be reported to her deputy head teacher despite the fact that we were friends and despite that I liked her. Tomorrow I must tell her that I would much prefer it if she is honest next time and tells me before the test that she has not studied. And that in any case the point is to try to do her best anyway. That will be an opportunity for me to see where exactly she has difficulties so that I can help her anyway.

I knew that my approach might have alienated her and that I was perhaps risking losing her trust or losing a participant, even. I hated that possibility but I had to act in what I considered to be a professional and ethical way, using the guidelines of the administration in case of cheating. The other girls told me that what she did was unacceptable but did not ever provoke her directly in my presence. As always, they said things behind her back.

Monica: She should have been ashamed. Of all teachers, why would she do that to you?!

What I did not expect was that the incident would bring me and Nelly even closer, as evidenced by the frequency and closeness of our communication after the incident. Nelly (just like Kassiani) grew to be a key informant. The incident also served as a nice opportunity to have another honest discussion with the group concerning my dual role. I repeated that yes I liked them, yes we were friends but that would never equal to not performing my teacher duties as I did in all other classes. I also explained that if any of them felt uneasy about that, they had the right to withdraw from the research and that this would of course not affect either our friendship or their grade. I often used the simple analogy of black and white colours when discussing my dual role with them, saying that there were no shades of grey and the two roles are not to be mixed. My advice to researchers with this dual role is to be decisively strict about not mixing their two roles, as well as explicitly explaining this upfront as well as during the research to the participants. Researchers need to know that there may be incidences where they may risk alienating/losing participants with this strict divide between their roles, it is nevertheless rewarding no matter the cost to the research, because it is ethically right with regard to their teaching profession.

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4.3 Truancy

The third research question deals with a specific form of resistance, namely truancy. The research question is *'How do girl students calculate their decision to stay out of class/school? 3a. What processes, according to them, operate within the school which push them out of class/school? 3b. What processes, according to them, operate outside the school which pull them out of class/school?'*. Results have revealed both push-out as well as pull-out reasons for truanting, with the girls considering some of them to be legitimate and some non-legitimate. Another finding is that the girls sometimes played truant with the teachers' consent. Mistakes were often made during the registration of absences. Moreover, there was a tendency from some teachers/deputy head teachers of 'unofficially' deleting unexcused absences, which has revealed a culture of exchanging commodities between teachers and the girls. In the section which follows, I will present and discuss the main findings concerning this research question.

4.3.1 Push-out and pull-out triggers of truancy based on the girls' responses

Throughout fieldwork, the girls' multiplicity of responses concerning why students play truant, are indicative of how multifaceted the phenomenon of truancy is. Their responses point both to push-out as well as pull-out reasons which can trigger truancy. The girls' responses are summarised in Table 7. These responses show that among the push-out reasons are:

- the teacher (disliking a teacher, incompetence of the teacher, teacher putting too much pressure on students)
- the lesson (boring lesson, lack of interest in the specific lesson, difficult lesson)
- peer related issues (quarrels with friends, enticed by friends)

Among the pull-out reasons are:

- practical matters (catching the bus home)
- personal issues (lack of energy, boredom, tiredness, illness)
- family related issues (problems in the family, parents being too strict)

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Participant	Why students play truant
Savvia	• incompetent teacher • boring lesson • difficult lesson • so as a student is at the bus stop on time to catch the bus home **Indicative response (year 3)**: They do it because they find lessons boring.
Rallia	• boring lesson • disliking the teacher • boredom • disliking the teacher • personal issues of the student/wanting to be alone. • tiredness during the last period • too much teacher pressure • freedom time from strict parents **Indicative response (year 3)**: It's OK as long as they don't overdo it.
Nelly	• enticed by their peers • incompetent teachers • being bored • something important happened (family or personal or peer related) **Indicative response (year 3)**: They have their reasons.

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Monica	• boredom • personal problems • tiredness during the last period • too much pressure during classes • lack of self confidence in difficult classes **Indicative response (year 3)**: They do not believe in themselves and they do not try.
Marina	• personal problems/ bad psychology state/ needing some time alone • disliking the teacher • being bored • lack of interest in a specific lesson **Indicative response (year 3)**: They are bored or they don't really care if they will repeat the class.
Lucy	• disliking a lesson • boring lesson **Indicative response (year 2)**: Because the lesson is boring when having three consecutive periods of the same lesson.
Kassiani	• boring lesson • boredom • incompetent teacher • personal problems/ wanting some alone time • disliking a lesson **Indicative response (year 3)**: It's when they find a lesson or a teacher boring or are enticed by friends into doing it.

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Efterpi	• disliking the teacher • being bored • student psychology state/energy levels • too much teacher pressure **Indicative response (year 2)**: It's not a coincidence that every student has at least one absence in specific teachers' lessons.
Daniela	• disliking the teacher • difficult lessons • boring lessons, e.g. consecutive period lessons • boredom • quarrel with their peers • not feeling well **Indicative response (year 3)**: They are harming themselves.
Carmen	• disliking the teacher because she/he is incompetent • form of resistance **Indicative response (year 3)**: They are cool and they are resisting.

Table 7: Participants' opinion of why students engage in truancy

Only two responses see truanting in some positive light (Carmen's response seeing truancy as a 'cool' act of resistance and Rallia's response that it is 'OK' as long as one keeps it under control). Yet numerous answers identify truancy as an act which is harmful on the grounds that it may cause a student to have to sit re-examinations or repeat the year if they pile up too many absences, or not get an apolyterion, which in turn was connected, as the girls saw it, to fewer opportunities for finding a job.

Lucy (year 3): They won't get an apolyterion in order to be able to work somewhere.

Indicative of the negative light in which most of the girls saw truancy in their written or oral responses (in questionnaires and/or interviews) was also how they answered the question 'If a student from your class decides to skip a class, will you try to convince her otherwise or

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into it? How come?'. Most of the girls answered that they would try to stop her for her own good:

> **Carmen (Year 3)**: I will stop her so that she won't have to repeat the year.

> **Lucy (Year 3)**: I will advise her not to because she will not pass the year, she will not do what she wants in life.

Also noteworthy is the fact that many of the girls indicate friendship as the factor which would determine their response towards the student. They indicate that if the student was a friend, they would advise her not to play truant but they would not bother advising her if she were not their friend.

> **Marina (Year 3)**: If she is a friend of mine, I will advise her not to get out of class or I will accompany her. If she is not my friend, then I don't care.

Only two of the girls more readily responded that they would accompany a friend who would want to engage in truancy. In any case, their answers prove that for most of the girls the interplay of social and educational matters in school was such that it is the social factors which shaped the educational ones and not the other way around.

In summary, the girls' multiplicity of responses concerning their opinion about students who play truant, were indicative of how multifaceted the phenomenon of truancy is. Some of the girls saw truancy in a positive light, but most of the girls' responses identified truancy as a harmful act, on the grounds that it may cause a student to repeat the year due to too many absences. Not graduating was in turn connected to fewer opportunities for finding a job. Friendship seemed to be at the centre of their understanding, with many of the girls indicating it as the factor which would determine their response towards a peer who would want to play truant. This proves that for most of the girls the interplay of social and educational matters in school was such that it was the social factors which shaped the educational ones.

4.3.2 Push-out and pull-out triggers of truancy based on observation

The reasons for truancy indicated by the girls in their written responses were witnessed during observation too. For example, I rarely witnessed a girl being alone when playing truant. To the contrary, whether spotted within or outside school premises, they were always accompanied by others – either one or two other girls or their boyfriend. For them, out of class

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truancy was largely a peer related act (to hang out with friends); this seemed to be the factor which differentiated out of class truancy with being absent from school altogether.

Monica (year 2): You must be really feeling bad in order to get out of class alone, you may well not come to school at all that day.

Lucy (Year 1): /…/ just sitting with them (friends) or talking with the cleaning lady.

Throughout fieldwork I also noted that what the girls did not mention in questionnaires or semi-structured interviews but was both observed and was also often a topic of our informal discussions, was the existence of yet four other forms of pull-out reasons which kept them out of class/school. These were family related, health related, travel related, as well as job related. *Perhaps these types of absences were not reported by the girls in written form because to their eyes, they were legitimate, whereas the types of absences they reported in questionnaires/interviews were those they considered as 'cheating'. This has implications regarding the definition of truancy, when taking into consideration the voice of the students themselves.* The following are excerpts from field notes:

(Year 2): I told her (Marina) that I had missed her because she was absent from school for two days. She explained: "I had to stay at home to babysit my brother, he was sick but my mom had to go to work".

(Year 2): Nelly was absent from Physics class in the first period. I saw her during second break and, as usual, she said that she didn't manage to wake up on time because she was working until late.

The girls who had difficulties in keeping their absences under control were Rallia, Efterpi, Marina, Nelly and Daniela. Due to a large number of absences, Rallia was referred to the second round of end of year examinations (called re-examinations) at the end of Year One, without having the right to sit the first round with her classmates. Even worse, Efterpi did not pass Year Two and decided to register at another VET school.

Of these five girls, Efterpi engaged in truancy which was mostly triggered by teacher and peer related push-out reasons. Rallia, just like her friend Efterpi, was evidently influenced by such push-out reasons and they were regularly spotted out of class together. Marina, Nelly and Daniela's absences were largely (but not exclusively) due to pull-out reasons. Nelly was often late during first periods, especially in Year Two, because she often worked until late at a bowling club, so she had difficulty waking up in the mornings. Due to this lateness she accumulated a lot of absences (teachers could use their discretion in counting lateness as an

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absence). Daniela often skipped whole days of school, either to stay at home with her fiancé, indicating that she 'was bored', and, during the third year, also due to continuous dental health issues. As evidenced from excerpts quoted previously, during the first and second years, Marina was often absent from school when she had to stay at home to babysit her step brother, who was a toddler. During Year Three, many of her absences were travel related when she wanted to visit her home country for holidays, but it was also observed that push out reasons were more evident and were peer related.

> **Daniela (Year 3):** (I didn't come to school because) I was bored. I prefer staying at home and sleeping.
>
> **Rallia (year 2, sports field, 5th period)**: I was bored (shrinks her shoulders. Efterpi starts telling me about a song she likes).
>
> **Marina (Year 3, cafeteria)**: (We didn't get in class because) we were bored.
> **Me**: I hear that from students very often! What exactly do they mean when they say 'I am bored'?
> **Kassiani**: Lack of energy.
> **Me**: Lack of energy as in having to take a vitamin supplement to get over it? I mean, stemming from within or bored of the teacher or the lesson?
> **Marina**: No, that's different. This is boredom, it's when you have your own thoughts or you are day-dreaming or you simply couldn't care less.

I was always particularly triggered and eager in understanding how the girls defined boredom. As seen in table 7, many of the girls listed 'boring lesson' or 'boring teachers' as a different response to 'boredom' or 'being bored'. Marina's response above validates this. Whereas a 'boring lesson/teacher' directly pointed to push-out reasons for truanting, 'boredom/being bored' in passive voice rather seemed to be a state of being. If a girl stated that she was bored, then by itself this response was within their communication as straight forward as being, for example, thirsty. In the same way that they could have been hungry or sad or drunk or thirsty, they could also be bored. In this light, Marina's explanation indicating other priorities (other thoughts/daydreaming) or 'couldn't caring less' indicate not merely the girls' rejection/resistance towards mental labour but rather its utter meaninglessness.

In summary, the reasons for truancy indicated by the girls either in their written responses or in their responses during interviews, were also witnessed during observation. Friendship did seem to play a central role. For the girls, out of class truancy was largely a peer related act (to hang out with friends). This seemed to be the factor which differentiated out of class truancy with being absent from school altogether. Moreover, what the girls did not mention in questionnaires or semi-structured interviews but was both observed and was also often a topic

of our informal discussions, was the existence of yet four other forms of pull-out reasons which kept them out of class/school. These were family related, health related, travel related, as well as job related. Perhaps these types of absences were not reported by the girls in written form because to their eyes, they were legitimate, whereas the types of absences they reported in questionnaires/interviews were those they considered as 'cheating'. This has implications regarding the definition of truancy, when taking into consideration the voice of the students themselves. In addition, an interesting theme emerging was the girls' definition of 'being bored' as a reason for playing truant. Whereas a 'boring lesson/teacher' directly pointed to push-out reasons for truanting, 'boredom/being bored' rather seemed to be, for them, a state of being. The way they define this state of being seems to indicate the girls' rejection/resistance towards mental labour, as well as its utter meaninglessness.

4.3.3 Suggested measures against truancy

The girls' suggested measures of handling truancy are summarised in Table 8. Their suggestions can be categorised in the three axes of rules/regulations, advice and lesson related recommendations. Concerning the change of school regulations, the girls suggest:

- deleting some absences
- increasing the number of allowable absences
- stricter rules
- less obligatory attendance – not having to come to school five days per week
- abolishing examinations
- abolishing school uniform

The second axis of suggestions comprises listening to what students have to say and advising them:

- advice by teachers and/or deputy head teachers and/or the principal
- advice by peers

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The third axis of suggestions is lesson related and involves changes to be materialised by the teachers:

- The teachers must make the lessons more interesting
- The teachers must allow within-lesson break time
- The teachers must not offend students during the lesson
- The teachers must help students with difficulties regarding the lesson

The girls' specific suggestions regarding their understanding of these axes are given below, along with some indicative answers.

Participant	**What school can do to handle truancy**
Savvia	• deletion of some of students' absences • teachers can ask students why they stay out of class/advise them not to engage in truancy • teachers can let students leave class a few minutes before the bell rings for the end of the last period, so that they can be at the bus stop on time to catch the bus home.
Rallia	• teachers must try to get closer to the students/talk to students
Nelly	• teachers can advise students not to be late in class • peers can advise other students not to play truant
Monica	• less time devoted for lessons in each period – allow time for discussing other issues with the teacher • coming to school four times per week • teachers can advise students **Indicative response (Year 3)**: If I were a teacher, I would teach the student what I do as a teacher throughout the day in order to make time go by faster /…/ or advise her/him not to look at their clock in order to make time go by faster.

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Marina	• teachers can make lessons more interesting, e.g. with the use of technology or by making use of students' hobbies • strict regulations concerning absences can be followed, so that students who will have to repeat the year can learn from their mistakes. • unauthorised absences can be turned into authorised if the student accepted to do some projects/volunteer work. **Indicative response (Year 3)**: I would try to get to know the student and their hobbies and try to involve the student by bringing his hobbies into the lesson taught, e.g. since our classmate Petros (pseudonym) likes drawing, I would let him draw something that has to do with the lesson taught that day /…/ this way (by painting/volunteer work), when they are painting, they would still miss some classes in order to do it!
Lucy	• teachers can make lessons more interesting • lessons must have a more practical nature • a break, e.g. a movie, can be added when the lesson lasts for three consecutive periods.
Kassiani	• teachers can make lessons more interesting • teachers must not offend students and must not complain all the time about students' acts and behaviours • attendance must not be obligatory • no exams • no school uniform
Efterpi	• the principal must not be indifferent and must care more about the students
Daniela	• teachers must talk to students and ask them if they want some help with the lessons • increase number of allowable absences

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	• allow mental truancy **Indicative response (Year 2)**: Making the number of absences limitless is not a good idea, but some increase in their number may be a good idea. If I were the Principal, I would tell students to come in class so that they won't get an absence, but I would tell them that it's OK if they don't want to participate in the lesson or I would let them watch a movie.
Carmen	• deputy head teachers must take students more seriously with regard to their complaints concerning incompetent teachers

Table 8: Participants' suggested measures against truancy

In summary, the girls' suggested measures of handling truancy along the three axes of changing school regulations, advisory role of teachers/peers and lesson related recommendations, indicate their remarkable ability to go beyond the surface of things. Their suggestion of deleting absences or allowing mental truancy indicates that they did not place much importance in the quality of their education. Also evident is their clear suggestion for students' voice to be more actively and genuinely listened to. Last but not least, besides and beyond the material school renovations which they often pointed to, here they clearly point to pedagogical improvements to be enacted by teachers. As I see it, if I must name only one reason why listening to students' voice is crucial through these kind of ethnographic inquiries, it is because through them we, the teachers of the specific educational context, can be held accountable for our role in constructing and/or sustaining the educational exclusion of these - already marginalised by the Cypriot society - VET students. To this end, in what follows I will outline some basic characteristics of the context surrounding the girls in three ways which relate to unjustified absences:

1. How legislation over attendance was enacted by the teachers of the specific context.
2. The phenomenon of 'disappearance' of registered absences
3. Practical understanding of the new legislation concerning absences.

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4.3.4 How legislation over attendance was enacted by teachers

The girls truanted from specific lessons which they had already indicated that they hated and/or that they disliked the teacher, like Mrs Z. It was however also observed that *sometimes teachers were amenable with the girls' absences*. The following is an excerpt from my reconstruction of a school day in Year Two:

> When the bell rang for the fourth period, I went to the lab to prepare an experiment. Ten minutes later I looked out of the window and saw Marina, Monica and Kassiani sitting at a bench near the canteen. I could see that they were talking, eating chips and laughing. A few minutes later I saw Nelly get out of class and walk towards the canteen. I called her and she came near the window. She told me that they had a double period lesson of Public Relations (3rd and 4th period) and that she had asked permission from the teacher to go to the canteen, something which the principal cautions us against. When Nelly left, I called Marina. She came near the window and we high fived. /…/ She then explained that when they have a consecutive period lesson of Public Relations, the teacher lets them get out of class. 'He lets us get out when the bell rings for the second period of the lesson, without registering absences or anything! In any case we never do anything during the lesson!'. Yet some of the girls have complained in the past when I told them their number of absences in the specific lesson.

I set a reminder on my smartphone for their next week's Public Relations lesson, in order to verify the girls' movements through non participant observation.

> Rallia, Marina, Kassiani and Monica are sitting at the canteen. Same bench. The bell rang 12 minutes ago for the fourth period. /…/ 10 minutes before the end of the fourth period, they were not there.

What is noteworthy is that when they played truant without the teacher's consent, they would sit at places where they would be less visible, like the sports field, but in this case they chose to sit in the main yard, perfectly visible. This indicates that, to their eyes, the teacher's consent was what made their class absence legitimate. Weeks later, what was puzzling to me was why some of the girls complained when, as their form teacher, I announced their number of absences in that specific lesson. Again we see the mentality of entitlement.

> **Kassiani (Year 2)**: He allows us to go out and then he registers an absence! The guy is nuts!
> **Me**: Yes but, he allows you to stay out *for how long exactly*? (the girls laugh)
> **Kassiani**: He shouldn't have let us go out at all then. And Mrs OK, we don't go back right away but we do get in class before the end of the period.

The girls laughed with my comment because they understood that I knew that their teacher promised not to register an absence if they stayed out of class *for a few minutes*; I had indeed already asked him about it. Instead, what they did was to take advantage of his promise and

stay out for longer. On top, they complained that the teacher had not kept his promise and they demanded that they should have been excused. *The above may also point to the confusion the girls were into due to the fact that, in practice, there was no strict enactment of the policy concerning what constitutes a 'legitimate' and a 'non legitimate' absence.* I will elaborate on this possibility by referring to other examples.

On some occasions it was observed that *teachers were willing to put up with the girls' absences without punishing them*. In one such case towards the end of the second year, the History teacher of the girls texted me the following:

> **Colleague (Year 2)**: /…/ I was checking their (the girls') absences last night. /…/ please tell Mrs X (the deputy head teacher of the class) that there is no reason for them to have to sit a re-examination (due to many absences), it's a pity.

The way this was handled by the deputy head teacher will be further elaborated at the end of the chapter.

Moreover, under the legislation regarding absences which was in force until the end of Year Two, if absences from the school program "Creativity - Action - Social Work" were twenty-four or more, the student was referred directly to the second round of final examinations, without having the right to sit the first round. This was the case unless she/he engaged in projects and social work assigned by their form teacher, before the first round of examinations. Such 'social work' used to be, for example, painting school walls or gardening. The actual "Creativity - Action - Social Work" program concerned periods where instead of having a lesson, students ought to attend school events like celebrations, e.g. Tsiknopempti, the National Celebration of the 28th of October etc. On an occasion in Year Three, during a break, a colleague prompted students not to come to school for the festivities of Tsiknopempti, telling them the following:

> **Colleague (Year 3)**: Have you ever seen anyone not pass the year because of Creativity-Action-Social Work absences? Even if you have more than 24, they will have you clean the school or paint walls and they will delete the absences.

Moreover, some teachers forced students with challenging behavior to leave class and recorded an absence, as seen in the previous chapter concerning Mrs' Z lessons. On other occasions, teachers let students leave class a few minutes before the bell rang without

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registering an absence, in order for them to be at the bus stop on time to catch the bus home. Although the administration prohibited this, it was a regular phenomenon, especially at the end of the last period. Observation verified that in some cases students could not make it to the bus stop on time, and the bus drivers were sometimes reprimanded by the school administration for leaving students behind. It was thus common practice for students to negotiate with teachers, trying to exchange their good behaviour during the lesson with leaving class before the bell rang, in order to make it to the bus on time. A colleague once told me:

> **Colleague (Year 2)**: They (the students) told me that if I let them leave five minutes earlier, they would behave during the lesson.

This once again points to a culture of commodities being exchanged, as indicated in previous chapters.

Furthermore, during the incident during Mrs Z's lesson which was referred to in the previous chapter, *the teacher seemingly told Eleni that she no longer needed to come to school* because she already had too many absences and she would have to repeat the year.

> **Rallia (year 1)**: /…/ she (Mrs Z) told Eleni, you don't have to come to school anymore because you have too many absences, you will have to repeat the year anyway.

Although the final decision of whether a student would need to repeat the year could only be taken at the end of the year by the Teacher's Association and the approval of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, that was not the only time I observed these phenomena. On one such occasion concerning a student who had both many absences as well as a very challenging behaviour, the principal himself told us during the staff meeting in Year Three that:

> **Principal (Year 3)**: I have called his parents and asked them to come to school to take their son and not bring him back.

Despite colleagues complaining about the fact that according to the legislation, only the Teacher's Association can take that decision, the Principal added:

> **Principal (Year 3)**: Sometimes in order to save the forest, you have to cut a tree.

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A possible explanation of why some teachers and the administration literally pushed some students out of school, is given in Chapter 5.

In addition, according to the legislation, if absences from a particular lesson where above a specific number, then the student did not have the right to sit the first round of end-of-the-year examinations and was instead referred to a second round. In this case, this meant that the teacher would have to prepare an extra exam paper for the second round of examinations, which they would not have prepared otherwise. It was therefore an unwritten rule for some teachers of such lessons to ask deputy head teachers to delete such absences in order to "help the students" as they often put it. They reasoned that it would be a pity for the students not to be able to sit the first round of exams with their peers. One such example was previously mentioned concerning the girls' History teacher. As a result, the students' excess absences magically 'disappeared' in the course of the year, as further explained in the following section. There were numerous instances where teachers openly admitted themselves and/or were accused by other colleagues that they asked deputy head teachers to delete such absences so that they would not have the extra work of preparing an exam paper for the second round of examinations.

In summary, it was observed that sometimes the girls played truant with the teacher's consent. On these occasions, their act of resistance would be less covert as they sat at places where they were more visible. This indicates that, to their eyes, the teacher's consent was what made their class absence legitimate. On some occasions it was observed that some teachers were willing to put up with the girls' absences without punishing them. Research results indicate that the practical application of the legislation and school regulations concerning attendance and absences was such that the laws and regulations were often not strictly followed. *This may indicate a source of confusion for the girls due to the fact that, in practice, there was no strict enactment of the policy concerning what constituted a 'legitimate' and a 'non legitimate' absence.*

4.3.5 Mistakes in the recording of absences and the phenomenon of 'disappearance' of excess absences

In the beginning of each school year, a deputy head teacher was allocated certain classes for which she/he was responsible. This resulted in a close collaboration between the deputy

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head teacher and the form teacher of each class throughout the school year, concerning students' academic achievement, absences and overall well-being. Concerning absences, the school secretary registered each student's new absences daily, at the end of the school day. She registered the absences in the computerised system of school absences (Avakio). Every week, a new record of each student's total absences was issued by the secretary and was handed to each deputy head. The report was then given to the form teacher, who was then responsible to check if there were errors and note if there were absences for which the student had a parental note or a doctor's note or any other reason for which these absences should be recorded as justified. The students were informed about their number of absences weekly, in class, by their form teacher. The amended record was checked and signed by the deputy head and handed by the form teacher to the secretary of the school, who officially registered them in the computerised system.

There were often errors in the record of absences which were detected by the teaching staff, who often commented in the staff room about it and sometimes laughed at the secretary's incompetency in registering the absences.

> **Colleague (year 3, in staff room)**: I have noticed that mistakes are made when the secretary registers absences. And not just once.

> **(field notes, year 2)**: I had a lesson with the girls during the first period. I took the record of absences and informed them about their new total number of absences. Once again they were complaining about errors being made. Lucy, for example, got an absence from her lesson of free choice. She insisted that she was in class. So I told the deputy head teacher during break time and she told me to check it with the secretary. I went to the secretary and asked her about it. She seemed confused and started searching her papers and her computer and kept repeating "give me a moment, I am checking it now". Some minutes passed before she explained that Lucy's absence was registered because she was not present in Public Relations class. When I explained that Lucy does not attend a Public Relations class but a Hairdressing class, she kept looking at her files and her computer once again, evidently confused, murmuring "emmm..." I was polite and told her to take her time. After what seemed to be an eternity, she admitted that "a mistake was made". She told me that she would correct it and that I could check it in next week's record of absences. I thanked her and left her office. The moment I got downstairs, the bell rang. So that's the proof, what seemed to be an eternity up there, definitely was… Back in class, no more break…

> **(Field notes, year 2)**: I got the new record of absences from the deputy head teacher and started checking them. On Thursday 5th period the girls were with me, in class, but for three of them an absence was registered. I even remember where exactly the girls were sitting in class. /.../ She (the secretary) corrected it.

The theme of girls' complaints over their absences being wrongly recorded was recurring. They often compared themselves to other girls to make their point, often laughing about it; I will never forget Daniela's comment, looking at Lucy and laughing,

Daniela (year 1): But Mrs, she skips classes so much more often than me, how can I have more absences recorded than her?!

Far from this theme merely being a method of trying to have a few more absences deleted, as some of their teachers suggested, on many occasions it proved right and other colleagues also mentioned having encountered it. Throughout fieldwork, the occasions where I found that absences were wrongly recorded either by the teachers or by the secretary were the following:

- Absences recorded by the secretary due to wrong filing of which lesson of free choice each student attends.
- Absences recorded for students with an ILP who were withdrawn from their main class for support classes.
- Absences recorded for students who participated in rehearsals of school events, e.g. parades.
- When a girl was absent from school for the whole day (7 periods), sometimes only some of the teachers who got in her class recorded the absence. On these occasions the absences recorded by the secretary at the end of the day were less than seven and in favour of the girls, therefore the girls did not complain.
- In three occasions a teacher was late in class. When he/she made it to the class, he/she recorded absences for all the girls, with them later complaining that they waited outside the class for at least ten minutes;

  Lucy (year 2): The teacher did not show up so we left.

  In one such case the teacher later admitted that it was her fault and she was willing to tell the secretary herself about the mistake.
- Due to the unclear regulation of what exact number of minutes of delay equaled an absence, the girls often complained:

  Daniela (year 3): We were late only for just a few minutes but the teacher had recorded an absence!

During one incident mentioned by the principal during a staff meeting,

Principal (year 2): I found some students playing tavli outside the canteen and asked them why they are not in class, for one of them to answer, “sir, I should have had more absences but they don't record them!”.

The principal used it as an example to urge us to be careful with the record of absences because:

Principal (year 2): If something happens to them at a time they should have been in school and we have no absence recorded for that time, the police will blame US!

During the first two years of fieldwork I collaborated, as a form teacher, with the same deputy head teacher, Mrs X. On numerous occasions I witnessed her unofficial act of making unjustified absences appear as justified before the record was given to me to be handed back to the secretary. This was practiced every week from the beginning of Year One and I witnessed it while being the form teacher of the class of the ten girls. This unofficial practice was already existent within the school culture and was common knowledge between teachers; it was often discussed in staff rooms, and staff members knew that it was practiced by many deputy head teachers and often in collaboration with form teachers. In my form class this was done in the following ways:

- Periods of detentions of a student were registered by the deputy head teacher so that they would coincide with periods of unjustified absences; this way the unjustified absences counted as justified. This was often done for Efterpi and Rallia, the girls with the highest number of absences during the first two years, who also often had detentions from other deputy head teachers for smoking and for not wearing their school uniform.
- In collaboration with the school's career councellor, the deputy head teacher justified a number of absences by noting that the student had been at the career counsellor's office; in this case the absences were not only justified but also deleted.
- By noting that the student had engaged in social work or had been assisting the deputy head teacher; this way the absences were deleted.
- By asking the student to bring fake sick notes from a doctor.
- Each student was allowed a specific number of daily parental absence notes to justify unexcused absences (12 for students of the first and second class, 10 for final year students). Unofficially however, the number of parental notes being accepted was often larger than that limit and it was not unusual for the girls to forge their parents' signature (e.g. Carmen, Efterpi).
- By asking the form teacher not to record an absence for a student at a specific period that the student was not present. As an example, on three occasions my deputy head teacher ordered me not to record an absence for Marina when she was absent in my

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lesson during the first period of the day, because she was at home babysitting her step brother until her mother and her step father returned home. Marina's mother had already come to school to talk to the deputy head teacher about their home circumstances, asking her to be lenient concerning her daughter's morning absences. Other colleagues told me that they were told to do the same concerning Marina's absences. In another totally different incident, Eftepri left the school assembly with her boyfriend. The deputy head teacher was there, she saw them, pointed it out to me but she did not register an absence. The explanation of the rationale behind the leniency of the deputy head teacher, as a response to these different events, will be given in section 4.4.

- By issuing a fake school leaving permit. In one incident, Efterpi and Rallia missed the lessons of the fifth and sixth period, then came and told me that they would miss Physics with me during the seventh period too in order to be able to justify all three absences with a school leaving permit that the deputy head teacher had agreed to issue for them.

In summary, mistakes were often made in the recording of absences. Moreover, I often witnessed an unofficial act by the deputy head teacher of the girls, of making unjustified absences appear as justified. It was common knowledge amongst colleagues that this was practiced by many deputy head teachers, often in collaboration with form teachers. The ways in which this was done was, for example, by registering periods of detentions so that they would coincide with periods of unjustified absences. This way the unjustified absences counted as justified. Another way was through collaboration with the career councellor of the school, with the deputy head teacher justifying a number of absences by noting that the student had been at the career counsellor's office. In this case the absences were not only justified but also deleted. Yet another method was by noting that the student had engaged in social work or had been assisting the deputy head teacher; this way the absences were deleted. Moreover, the girls were sometimes asked to bring fake sick notes from a doctor. Also, unofficially, the number of parental notes justifying unexcused absences which were accepted was often larger than the allowed limit and it was not unusual for the girls to forge their parents' signature. In addition, I and other colleagues were often asked not to register an absence for a student at a

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specific period that the student was not present. Finally, fake school leaving permits were issued by the deputy head teacher in order for unjustified absences to be turned into justified.

4.3.6 Practical understanding of the new legislation concerning absences

The beginning of the third year of fieldwork marked a change in the legislation concerning absences, as well as a change of the school's principal. According to the new legislation, the number of allowed absences was reduced to a total of 120 and the separation of absences into justified, unjustified and "Creativity - Action - Social Work" absences was abandoned. Under the new legislation, any unjustified absence was a disciplinary offence. This change gave rise to various responses and understandings by colleagues as well as by the girls. Firstly, according to the written school regulations given to the teaching staff in the beginning of Year Three, "all absences need to be justified by parents". Each student was allowed a specific number of parental absence notes, however colleagues commented on the fact that this specific number of absences that parents were reported as being allowed to justify with absence notes were not enough to justify the maximum number of absences allowed.

Also, according to this booklet of school regulations, for any absence from school without permission or for leaving school in the middle of the day, a student got two days of detention. This however could still be turned into "useful social work" and in that case absences were not registered. The vague term of social work was often translated in practice into students painting school walls or gardening. Marina, who was previously quoted, commented on the fact that this made no sense, since for students to engage in such work, they needed to be absent from classes. In other words absenteeism resulted in more absenteeism.

According to the booklet of new regulations, in case of delay in a lesson, an absence was to be registered for each delay and the student would stay in class. Whereas in Year Three the administration decided that each delay counted as an absence (without the time of delay being specified), in the previous year the regulation was that every three delays counted as an absence. In the beginning of Year Two, colleagues explicitly asked the administration for a written regulation concerning delays, so that they would know how to handle them. Due to the changes which occurred in Year Three, colleagues believed that the regulation was unclear,

especially since it was left at each teacher's discretion to decide when to count a delay as an absence. In conclusion, both the way the specific legislation was translated within the school regulations, as well as how it was in turn enacted, seemed to be malleable and dependent upon the change in administration. To the eyes of the teaching staff, this catalysed the unclarity concerning the handling of delays.

Moreover, the analysis of the booklet of school regulations revealed that it was a replica of the internal regulations of another school. Not enough care was taken by the administration to make the necessary amendments. For example, in the booklet there was a reference to the school's theater entrance, but the school did not have a theater. A number of colleagues noticed this and they were very critical of it. They translated it as carelessness and sloppiness. One colleague commented while in the staff room:

> **Colleague (year 3)**: If this is how much time and energy they put into it before giving the regulations to us, then that's exactly the amount of energy I will be putting into my work through the year. Why bother?

As another consequence of the change in legislation concerning absences, a few months before the end of Year Three the administration, in collaboration with the IT department, decided to set up a system through which deputy head teachers would send text messages to parents informing them of when their child was not in class. Messages would be sent either on the same day that truancy had occurred or on the next day at the latest. During a staff meeting, the Principal explained:

> **Principal (year 3)**: This method will be very efficient as it will stop parents from pretending to be ignorant concerning the number of absences of their child.

This points to the existence of condoned truancy by parents. In the case of the job related issues within Nelly's absences, as well as Marina's babysitting related truancy, the girls' parents were not ignorant. On other occasions they were indeed ignorant, as evidenced by some of the girls' forging of their parents' signatures. In any case, the new parent texting system had already been in effect for a few days before teachers were officially notified of its existence during the staff meeting. The teachers were, in other words, also ignorant. Some complained about it during the meeting, because some parents called them and asked about the messages that they had received. This took the teachers by surprise as they knew nothing about it.

In the same staff meeting, the principal mentioned that on a single day he counted, through the new texting system, that sixty-eight students were absent from class for one or more periods. During another meeting, a colleague noted that on one occasion a student was late in class but he did eventually get in class. The teacher recorded an absence and his parents were informed through the system, with the student later complaining because his parents would not believe that he did get in class after all and would unnecessarily punish him. The Principal answered:

Principal: This is good, as it will teach the student not to be late in class again.

Related to this unclarity of when a delay equalled an absence and to the miscommunication arising with parents as a result of the message system being put into practice without teachers being adequately informed, is yet another incident. On that occasion, most of the students of the school were on strike concerning the fact that they were not allowed by the administration to wear winter tracksuits instead of their usual uniform during the colder months of the year. The strike lasted for one period and for that period the Principal asked the entire deputy head teachers' team to send text messages immediately, informing the parents that their child was not in class. Even the parents of some of the students who did not take part in the strike and who were in class with their teachers, received a text message. Later during the day Carmen, who was in class with me during the strike, asked to talk to me, being very upset because her father was raging over the text message he received. I had to talk to him in order to explain that it was a mistake and that his daughter was indeed in class with me. During the same incident, an angry father came to school as soon as he received the text message and hit his son in front of his peers (during the strike), yelling at him over the fact that he was not in class. To this day, the student is being teased by his peers concerning that incident.

In summary, the beginning of 2017/2018 school year marked a change in legislation concerning absences. This change gave rise to confusion and various negative responses by the teachers and the girls. The setup of a system through which deputy head teachers sent text messages to parents informing them of when their child was not in class, caused miscommunication between teachers, parents and students.

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4.3.7 Concluding comments

The gravity of social matters in everyday school reality – understanding vs misunderstanding student voices

The gravity of social matters within the everyday school reality of the girls is apparent when we consider the central role that friendship played in truancy related matters. Also apparent, as indicated in a previous chapter, is their preoccupation with everyday practical matters. One such hot topic of discussion was their anxiety and complains over the bus schedule.

> **Lucy (Year 1)**: I have to run when the bell rings (after the end of the last period), because my bus leaves at 13:32, not 13:35. It's not the first time I haven't made it to the bus stop in time. /…/ We told him (the principal) but he does nothing about it. /…/ the buses arrive here for us at 13:30 and then we have to hurry to go to the Lyceum to pick up students from there, they finish school at 13:35. /…/ This stresses me out.
>
> **Kassiani (year 2)**: My village is an hour away by car and both my parents work. How will I get home if I don't catch the bus? I will have to go down town on foot and wait for an afternoon bus or wait for my parents to finish work.
>
> **Me (Year 2)**: So in what ways do you think we can help students who do not get in class? What would you do if you were the principal?
> **Savvia**: I would delete their absences, I would advise them to get in class, I would advise the teachers to let them leave class before the bell rings (so that they will be at the bus stop on time).

On some occasions I witnessed a specific deputy head teacher inspecting the time buses left and it was often an issue which was discussed during staff meetings. By filing complaints to the bus companies, the school administration managed to tone down the frequency of such incidences, yet for the girls it was a topic to be repeatedly talked over throughout the three years of fieldwork. In asking teachers to let them leave class a few minutes before the bell rang for the end of the last period, it is clear that it was indeed outside school factors which determined in school factors and not the other way around. Yet, what was experienced by the girls as a stressing issue which shaped their everyday school experience, was repeatedly decoded by many teachers and members of the school administration as an opportunity for the students to miss part of the lesson. As a result, the principal often cautioned teachers against it during staff meetings:

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Principal (Year 2): It has been noted that some colleagues let their students get out of class before the bell rings, especially in the seventh period. Please note that we are not allowed to do that.

Inquiries in which students' voice is genuinely accommodated may be helpful in highlighting the need for serious attempts to find ways of striking a balance between what teachers are allowed to do and respecting students' rights, such as this very basic one, the right to ensure home transportation.

The girls' understanding of freedom and independence – moving towards an interpretation of the school culture

Analysis has indicated a theme relating to girls' understanding of freedom, which can be seen as a sub-category of their understanding of resistance as a form of exposing their independence, as discussed in the previous chapter. Rallia, who was evidently prone to teacher and peer related push-out truancy, was also predisposed to pull-out truancy, specifically family related.

Rallia (Year 2): When parents at home are very strict and do not let their child go anywhere, then staying out of class is the student's only chance to be free.

Rallia kept repeating this understanding of the reasons behind truancy throughout the three years of fieldwork. This is connected to her previous statement that her parents did not let her go out much to meet her friends during summer, as well as to her regularly stated wish to graduate in order to go away from her strict parents. It is also connected to the fact that all of her (and many of the other girls') absences were seen as the time for hanging out with their friends and/or boyfriend. Rallia's already mentioned attempt to deceive her mother at a time she would think that she was with me after school, in order to meet her boyfriend, verifies this rationale of absence equaling freedom and independence.

What is striking, however, is that there is yet another projection to the girls' understanding of freedom. During the semi-structured interviews of the first year, I asked the girls their suggested measures concerning unjustified absences of students, had they been the school principal. The wording of that particular question was 'How would you handle students' unjustified absences if you were the principal of our school? Do you think the school should change something about the regulation concerning absences, either making it stricter or more

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tolerant?' (Appendix B). I was careful in my wording so as not to lead them in one way or another, but rather let them express their opinions freely. Whereas their suggested measures against truancy were presented in section 4.3.3, what I want to point out here is the connection of what they define as freedom with their understanding of the level of strictness/leniency concerning students' absence regulations. In order to clarify my point, I offer the following indicative answers:

> **Marina (Year 1)**: The school should not count absences. With a lot of freedom (over absence regulations) one may choose not to get in class but they will not pass the class so next year they will come to their senses. /…/ thus in the following school year they will conform to the regulations and be more careful!
>
> **Efterpi (Year 1)**: Too much freedom may be a bad thing, but if one is a 'difficult' person (i.e. disciplined), then they won't get carried away. One does only what they want, not what other people tell them.
>
> **Rallia (Year 1)**: Too much freedom is not a good thing because then how can a student get a job if they are allowed not to come to school as often as they want to? When are they going to learn things?

These responses indicate that some of the girls agreed with more leniency over absence regulations whereas some were against it. The last two answers, from girls who were evidently otherwise rejecting mental labour, as previously shown, was initially very hard for me to interpret. Indeed, Rallia was, for many colleagues, the personification of "the girl who never gets in class". She was the girl who turned down learning a prestigious industry training software, in order to be with her friends. Initially I reasoned that hers, as well as Efterpi's response, being given some months into the first year, may have indicated that it was a rather mechanical answer given before familiarity and trust was built between us and/or that it may have been a repetition of what she has heard from teachers/parents. This may be the case, yet it is not an interpretation which fits Rallia's and Efterpi's profile of perhaps being the most frank and straight forward participants from the very beginning of fieldwork.

Rallia's escape against the strictness of her parents was, repeatedly, to engage in truancy. She, as well as Efterpi and many other girls, saw absences as the time to hang out with friends and or boyfriend. Rallia's and Efterpi's specific response given above indicates, as I see it, the meaninglessness with which they perceived the educational context they were part of and the complete lack of existing connections of education, as they experienced it, with the future. Their response was perhaps a disapproval of what they understood to be a lack of strictness, which was revealed by the process of deletion of absences. What is worrisome is the fact that it was rather easy for them, and for many other girls, to engage in the act of coming in class as often as they want to. The leniency of the context in which this was enacted was one which

reveals not a humane tolerance. Rather, *it reveals a culture of exchanging commodities, one which bears comparison to economic notions which, in turn, points to a culture of de-romanticisation of education*. I will support and further build on this thesis in the following chapters, while always trying to keep a balance between outlining the particularities of the context, explaining and interpreting them, so that the reader can follow and evaluate this thesis, as well as contribute to further possible interpretations.

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4.4 Costs and benefits of the decision to stay out of class/school

The fourth research question deals with the ways participants define and make sense of the positives and negatives of their decision to engage in truancy. The research question is *'What are, for girl students, the costs and benefits of their decision to stay out of class/school?'*. Results indicate that negotiating over their absences was for the girls a cost and benefit situation, for example leniency over excess absences was a desirable trade-off for choosing a specific specialisation, even if that was not the one they were really interested in to begin with. In the section which follows, I will present and discuss the main findings dealing with this research question, in connection with results from the previous research questions.

4.4.1 Outlining the context – dilemmas and war over interests

Delving into the motives behind the practice of making unjustified absences appear as justified, can shed light to how the girls weighed their decision to play truant. The deputy head teacher of the girls once told me:

> **Mrs X (year 1)**: We must help the girls (by deleting their absences) or else a goldsmithing class will not be formed next year, and they will have to be sent to a technical school at Nicosia, which would not be convenient for them /…/ We must help them now that we can, before the end of the semester, because then Avakio is locked and no one will be able to intervene besides the Principal.

Behind this there seemed to be other motives, according to colleagues, who critisised the deputy head teacher on numerous occasions by saying that she is too lenient with students.

> **Colleague (year 1)**: She passes them all.

It was common knowledge that there was an ongoing rivalry between the teachers of the Applied Arts department over persuading first year students to choose between Graphic and Interior Design or Goldsmithing and Silversmithing specialisation. The motive behind this rivalry was that, if a critical number of students did not choose a given specialisation at the end of Year One and did not remain in it for Years Two and Three, then the class would not be formed; teachers of the specific specialisation would have to be moved to other schools or, even worse, would be left without a job. On one occasion a colleague told me:

> **Colleague A (year 2)**: There is no point in not trying to give students high grades or not to illegally delete their absences! What's the point of doing the right thing? Even if students are referred to a re-examination,

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they (meaning the administration of the school) will then beg us to pass them anyway so that classes of certain specialisations can be formed and colleagues will not lose their jobs!

Coupled with this was, however, the recurring subject of many of the teachers' comments on how low achieving the students of the school are. This is how another teacher present in the staff room responded to the colleague A:

Colleague B: Yes, but how can I help (students) if they don't know how much 8 plus 3 is? If I do, they will know that they no longer need to keep trying (to improve). On the other hand, I pity them, some of them just can't (improve). Sometimes you don't know what the right thing to do is!

These kinds of discussions were very regular in the staff room among certain teachers and the dilemmas faced by them seemed to be haunting as well as disheartening:

Colleague B: We laugh (at how low achieving the students are) but sometimes you don't know what the right thing to do is! To be honest, for me these things make me want to give up. I don't blame colleagues who do /…/ The school is on the automatic pilot, everything is left to chance.

The confusion over the "right thing to do" was perplexing and further discussions were always ignited in the staff room after prompts by the principal such as:

Principal (year 3, during staff meeting): Do not give good grades to those who are not interested, but always give good grades to those who attend support classes.
Colleague (in staff room, after staff meeting): They want us to help everyone! Those who attend support classes, those who have family problems, those with 200 absences in order to form their (specialisation) classes. What's the point of assessing them if they are all going to pass anyway?

After the incident in Mrs Z's class in Year One and the clique's meeting with the principal, Mrs X told me:

Mrs X (year 1): I asked to see the principal and told him that the student (Eleni) could file a complaint against the school because of what he told her (that she had 270 absences and that she would have to repeat the year, as quoted elsewhere). The law clearly states that the final decision concerning whether a student passes the year is only to be taken by the teacher's association at the end of the year.

Considering the fact that Mrs X was *not* herself particularly strict about how she put regulations over absences into practice, I can deduce that her words were an expression of her worry that if this student left school after what the principal told her, then her specialisation class for next year might not be formed. Indeed, quite unexpectedly, one day Mrs X told me, while describing the rivalry between colleagues of Applied Arts specialisation:

Mrs X (year 2): It's a shame, there is degradation and corruption. They (colleagues of the Graphic Arts department) will not stop in front of anything! From now on I will be very stubborn concerning the formation of a goldsmithing specialisation class next year.

In summary, making sense of the reasons behind the habit of making unjustified absences appear as justified, sheds light to the question of how the girls calculated their decision to play truant. The motives behind the illegal deletion of absences seemed to be connected to an ongoing rivalry between the teachers of the Applied Arts department. The existing rivalry was over persuading first year students to choose between certain specialisations, as well as to remain in a specific specialisation; if a critical number of students did not choose a given specialisation at the end of Year One and did not remain in it for Years Two and Three, then the specific class would not be formed thus teachers of the specific specialisation would have to be moved to other schools or would be left without a job. This unofficial practice of 'helping' students pass the year left those teachers who tried to do their jobs properly, feeling disheartened and problematised.

4.4.1.1 The tip of the iceberg

During Year Two there was a serious incident which revealed the actions of the girls' deputy head teacher (Mrs X). One day she justified three of Monica's unjustified absences by noting that the student had been at the career counsellor's office. As previously mentioned, by making unjustified absences appear as justified (or by deleting them altogether), it meant that the number of unjustified absences of a student was lowered; therefore the danger for the student of having to repeat the year was less. Another deputy head teacher, (Mr Y), found out that the justification could not possibly be correct because on that specific day the career counsellor was absent from school. Mr Y, who did not belong to the Applied Arts specialisation, had been assigned by the principal to check the absence reports of all classes throughout the school year. He responded by ordering the secretary not to register the weekly amended absence report of the class in the computerised system and to hand it to Mrs X unaltered. Mrs X asked the secretary why the amended absences of the class were unaltered, so the secretary told her what had happened. When Mrs X came in the staff room and stood at the door, she was pale and I wrote in my field notes that I could not recall having seen her more upset ever before, as when she described the incident:

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Mrs X (year 2): What are we going to do? I cannot believe that there are deputy heads who are really so cold as not to help students pass the year! What are we going to do?

The two other colleagues present did not say something. I kept listening to her in my ever attentive way, leaning my head on one side to express my sadness.

Me: What do you think we can do?
Mrs X: /…/ This is my fault, I will fix this. I told Mrs … too (names the school counsellor). /…/ I will have to employ all my female traits for this one (she laughs, I laugh, the other two colleagues laugh).

Next day she informed me:

Mrs X: I feel very relieved as I employed all my female traits to calm Y down! I called him in my office, offered to make him coffee, complimented him on his shirt and asked him to accompany me to an event during the weekend. Then I casually (she winked) asked him 'ah, the amended absences of my class were not registered in the computerised system by the secretary, do you happen to know why?'. He answered that he did not know. I told him that it must have been a mistake and that I would take them back to the secretary. /…/ I asked to see the principal, and told him that as a deputy head I would not accept the reprimands and interferences of any other deputy head concerning my work but only of the principal himself. I assured him that when I put my signature on the absence report then there is always a justified reason. All is good now, we can put it behind us!

A few days after the incident, while in the staff room, a colleague who was the form teacher in a class for which Mr Y was the deputy head teacher, casually asked him to check the absences of their class. Mr Y's answer was strict and sharper than ever:

Mr Y: No, I don't want to check them. I am not checking absences anymore.

The incident described below sheds more light to the war over specialisations. On one of the first days of Year Three, Mrs A came to school, the school's career counsellor for the previous two years. She was very happy to see me and when I asked her if it was her decision to be transferred to another school, she replied:

Mrs A (year 3): Mr Y was behind it!

She explained that during the registration days at the end of Year Two, when students who graduated from high school came with their parents to register at our school, many chose to ask her advice concerning the specialisations the school offered before they would register. Her approach was to explain what each specialisation was about and then prompt them to choose the one that they believed that they are most interested and talented in.

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> **Mrs A (year 3)**: But on many occasions Mr Y forced students to register to other specialisations. I believe that his motive was to accumulate enough students so as certain specialisation classes would be formed. /…/ A student who was very interested in becoming an auto mechanic had registered in the welding specialisation and when I asked why, the student pointed to Mr Y and told me, that teacher over there told me. I immediately went up to Mr Y and asked him why the student did not register in the specialisation he initially said he liked and his answer was, it's none of your business, stop mentioning it if you want to stay in this school!

Because of that incident, she was convinced that it was Mr Y who had caused her transfer. It was indeed common knowledge that for years he was responsible to communicate with the department of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth which was responsible for the school's needs in teachers for the following year and to deal with these issues. Her final words were even more important:

> **Mrs A**: Students do not get in class because they are not interested in the specialisations they were forced to choose.

This was indeed a recurring theme brought up by a number of students throughout the years, as well as a theme which was often discussed in the staff room by colleagues when Mr Y was not present. From the group of girls, three out of ten had indicated to me that Goldsmithing and Silversmithing was not the specialisation they wanted to follow (Kassiani, Efterpi and Monica) and Nelly's mother also reported the same. Of these, Efterpi did indeed have problems with her absences and that is why she did not pass the second year. She then moved to another technical school to repeat Year Two in another specialisation (cooking). After the end of fieldwork she came back to the school and wanted to enrol all over again for the Graphic Arts specialisation. Perhaps Efterpi's 'wandering' from one specialisation to another will stop now that she finally settled for the specialisation she is most talented in. I am very curious and I would like to follow her during the next few years to see the outcome of her educational oscillations.

As quoted elsewhere, Efterpi was talented in Graphic Arts, a piece of information revealed by her mother and which Efterpi wanted to keep secret. Taking this into consideration, perhaps the reason why Efterpi did not choose the Graphic Arts specialisation in the first place may be connected to the deputy head's teacher prompting of first year students to choose her specialisation of Goldmithing and Silversmithing. This, along with the discussion over whether Efterpi was taking advantage of the fact that the deputy head teacher was deleting many of her absences, finds a plausible interpretation if we consider that for her it might have been a cost and benefit situation; she may not have chosen the specialisation she was

genuinely interested in, but for her the generous leniency of the deputy head teacher over her absences was not merely an acceptable but also a desirable trade-off. Nevertheless, the consequences were also there; the feeling of utter meaninglessness, which was one of the triggers of truancy for many of the girls, as previously discussed, may indeed have been one of them.

In summary, some teachers were observed to go to extremes in order to ensure having students choose their specialisation. This often caused complexities in communication between teachers. For the girls' deputy head teacher (Mrs X), a strategy of trying to convince students choose her specialisation was by being lenient over their absences and 'help' them, by illegally deleting many of their absences. The war over specialisations was one in which another deputy head teacher (Mr Y) was also involved, something which was reported as inhibiting the school councellor from performing her duties correctly in advising students to follow the specialisation they were most interested in. Students were instead often forced to choose certain specialisations, something which would ensure that these specialisations would be formed and thus the teachers of these specialisatios would retain their job. *Not choosing the specialisation a student was genuinely interested in seems to have been a defining aspect in triggering feelings of meaninglessness over education, which was in turn one of the triggers of truancy for many of the girls. Moreover, it is apparent that the girls were aware of the war over specialisations; this rivalry seems to have been a determining factor in shaping their school experience and building their negotiation skills, while feeding and sustaining yet another projection of a culture of social reciprocity trends, i.e. a culture of exchanging commodities. For many of the girls, negotiating over their absences was a cost and benefit situation, for example leniency over excess absences was a desirable trade-off for choosing a specific specialisation, even if that was not the one they were really interested in to begin with.*

4.4.2 Negotiating skills

The rivalry between colleagues of the Applied Arts specialisation seems to have been a very fertile ground for shaping the school experience of the girls. This rivalry was common knowledge not only for colleagues but also for the girls; in numerous instances throughout

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fieldwork both colleagues as well as the girls discussed it in my presence. The girls even told me that during the first year the teachers of the two specialisations approached them and tried to convince them to choose their own specialisation.

Colleague (year 1): She passes those who will choose her specialisation.
Carmen (year 1): They (Graphic Arts and Interior Design teachers) are shameless Mrs, they come and smile at us and give us compliments in order to convince us to choose Graphic Arts!

On many occasions the girls' deputy head teacher wondered:

Mrs X: Are we doing the right thing in helping the students with their absences?

The use of 'we' was ethically very disturbing for me. I do however realise that I was part of the context and it was a conscious decision as an ethnographer not to interfere with what was happening, in order to understand the reasons behind it and report on it. I therefore decided to try to appear as neutral as possible before her and tell her that as a deputy head teacher, she knew better what the correct thing to do was. On three occasions however, I did comply with her request not to register an absence for Marina's morning absences. On all three occasions, I waited to see that Marina would indeed come to school during the school day.

The argument of colleagues over students taking advantage of the deputy head teacher's leniency seems not to have been unfounded; the deputy head teacher often wondered, for example:

Mrs X (year 1): Is Efterpi taking advantage of the fact that we help her?

One day in January during the second year, the deputy head teacher came in my class to talk to the girls about being careful with their absences.

Mrs X (year 2): /…/ We won't be able to help forever!
Efterpi: Ooooh Mrs Maria and Mrs X, you will lose your job for meee!!!

Another day Efterpi casually asked me:

Efterpi (year 2): Do you know whether they deleted more of my absences?

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Also, one day in March during the second year of fieldwork, I was in class with the girls and Mrs X came so that we would inform them about their number of absences. When I told Efterpi that she had more than 200 absences, she immediately reacted, staring at the deputy head teacher:

Efterpi (year 2): Next year I am seriously considering registering in Graphic Arts.

Her statement was repeated quite a few times until the end of the year. Taking into consideration the rivalry between the teachers of the Applied Arts department, it seems that Efterpi's reaction was far from a neutral one. The girls knew that they could negotiate being 'protected' and 'helped' with their absences, this way ensuring that there would be enough students in the following school year for certain specialisation classes to be formed/to keep existing. The girls knew that they could have their absences deleted and in exchange they would choose to register in/remain in a specific specialisation, which is what some teachers strived for in order to have their benefits covered, such as to secure their job. Indeed, the deputy head teacher kept ‘helping’ with Efterpi's absences, but it was already too late because her absences were not only numerous but they also kept increasing. The deputy head teacher kept trying to help Efterpi for her own interests, while Efterpi took her chances and was apparently convinced that she would pass the year no matter her ever increasing number of absences, as long as she kept warning that she would move to the rival specialisation.

As fieldwork progressed, I noted that whenever I informed the girls about their number of absences, they would start negotiating, especially the girls who had difficulty in keeping their absences under control:

Rallia (year 1): Is there something we can do about it? Please, Mrs, tell her (Mrs X)!

Efterpi (year 2): But why do I have so many absences? There is a mistake!

Efterpi (year 1): If I start getting in class now on, will you help?

Marina once confessed to me, without excluding herself:

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Marina (year 2): We are doing it on purpose Mrs. We will do everything we can to get what we want.

To the girls' requests, I always answered back with the same statement:

Me: Please circle the specific absences that seem to be registered wrongly so that I can go check with Mrs … (secretary's name), as I always do.

I do realise that a more assertive answer may have helped in making the girls feel that I am 'on their side', however it would not have been ethically correct therefore I decided not to do it. In retrospect, my conclusion is that I took the right decision in making it clear to the girls that my researcher role (more of a close friend) and my teacher role were not to be mixed. Even when our familiarity grew, I noticed that the girls understood these limits as during class time I only rarely had to use the phrase "friendship is friendship but work is work ladies!". Efterpi's choice of word whether I knew if 'they' had deleted more of her absences is perhaps proof that my neutrality was clearly understood by the girls.

During an incident in the second year when Efterpi's mother was asked by the deputy head to come to school to discuss the numerous absences of her daughter. Efterpi started crying in the deputy's head office, in my presence, and kept repeating:

Efterpi (year 2): I don't like that teacher, I don't like him! He always uses offensive language against us, how can I get in class with him?

This response, like in the incident with Mrs Z during the first year, is indicative of the girls' tendency to negotiate the outcome of their truancy related actions. Indeed, in the incident with Mrs Z, when students of the class were divided into two opposing groups, each group was weighing and negotiating the costs and benefits of their actions, and each from its own perspective:

Marina (year 1): And we too don't like Mrs Z either but we are trying to put up with her because we are afraid that if we don't get in class, we will have a problem with our number of absences.

Therefore, for one team, staying out of class meant that their number of absences would increase and that they might risk sitting a re-examination for the lesson or repeating the year. At the other end were the students who successfully negotiated with the principal and convinced him into exchanging a video of what was going on in class as long as he did not refer them to the disciplinary committee, from where they would risk accumulating even more absences. Related to this was some other girls' tendency (those who remained neutral in the

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disagreement) to meticulously count their absences in the specific lesson and ask me about them every week when I took their new absence report in class.

Carmen: I want to see if I can still make more absences without being in danger.

In summary, the rivalry between colleagues of the Applied Arts specialisation seems to have been a fertile ground for shaping the girls' school experience. The girls, being perfectly aware of their deputy head teacher's interests in forming her specialisation class, took advantage of her leniency. The girls knew that they could have their absences deleted and in exchange they would choose to register in/remain in a specific specialisation, which was exactly what some teachers strived for in order to have their benefits covered, such as to secure their job. This context catalysed the negotiation strategies of the girls, especially those who had difficulty in keeping their absences under control. Appearing neutral within this context was a challenging task for me, but rewarding in retrospect as I consider it to have been ethically correct. The girls' negotiations ranged from directly requesting for 'help' over their absences or negotiating over teacher's incompetence. The more complacent girls weighed their options and decided to mostly stay in class in order to reduce the risk of having to sit a re-examination or to not pass the year. Others meticulously counted their absences and made use of as many as possible without taking any risks, whereas others took their chances, while at the same time negotiating with the principal, as well as betting on the efficiency of the deputy head teacher's habit of deleting their absences for her own interests.

4.4.3 The benefits of passing the year

As demonstrated in a previous chapter, the girls focused not so much on learning but on more social aspects of schooling, especially friendships and other social matters. What will be demonstrated below is that they also focused, not on learning, but rather on ensuring that they would pass the year and, eventually, graduate. For example, although, as quoted earlier, Daniela reported that learning would make her capable of helping her own children with their school work, a number of further responses indicate that for her the primary role of school was to enable socialising with friends. Also, Daniela's written response that school is good for her

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because it offers education is contradicted by the increased number of absences throughout her studies, for which on numerous occasions she was 'helped' by the deputy head teacher. Her claim that she often skipped school because it's boring and that she preferred to stay at home and sleep (quoted elsewhere) and the fact that she often missed her industry training during the third year, indicate her lack of interest in mental and practical labour. The deputy head teacher once told me:

> **Mrs X (year 3)**: I don't know what to do about it /…/ She (Daniela) says she doesn't go to work (industry training) because her fiancé does not have money to put gasoline in his car, when she recently got a huge tattoo for 100 euro!

Despite the above, Daniela (and her mother) took pride in the fact that she would be the only one of her sisters who would graduate from secondary school. For Daniela, as well as her mother, what seemed to be more important was not the education and training that Daniela would get at school, but rather the fact that she would graduate, no matter how.

During the first year of fieldwork Rallia had a large number of absences and as a result, she was directly referred to the second round of end of year examinations. During the second year she decided to change habits because she reasoned that:

> **Rallia (year 2)**: I always had to sit the September re-examination in Gymnasium too. But if I continue like that, my parents will no longer trust me and they will forbid me to go anywhere during the summer months in order to sit at home and study! I don't want to lose my summer like that.

In this case too, the way she weighed the costs and benefits of her truancy was dependent on social reasons.

Furthermore, some girls often commented on the fact that they get in class not because they like it or they want to learn but because they fear that if they have too many absences, they will have to repeat the year (like the girls who were against playing truant in Mrs Z's class during Year One). During an assembly in November of the first year of fieldwork, a first grade student came up to me very upset and crying, because his deputy head teacher told him that he had a number of absences which was far greater than the number he had a week earlier. The student kept repeating, while crying:

> **Boy student (year 1)**: is that the way they are trying to help, now that I have changed?

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The student had recently decided to stop playing truant as his deputy head teacher promised him to 'help' with his absences if he got in class from then on, so his distress was caused by the fact that the deputy head teacher did not seem to have kept his promise. What can be deduced is that merely getting in class equalled passing the year in the eyes of many students; the chances of passing the year seemingly had everything to do with absences and nothing to do with academic achievements or learning.

Related to this is the point of view of many girls that getting good grades did not have to do with academic achievement but with social factors:

Kassiani (year 1): My parents will give me 20 euro!!! (after getting a good grade in Physics)

Moreover, factors like staying in class rather than playing truant, being quiet in class and helping the teacher in tasks such as giving handouts to classmates (quoted elsewhere) were seen by students as capable of determining whether they would pass the year or whether they would get good grades. On only two recorded occasions throughout the three years of fieldwork was a girl temporarily and remotely preoccupied with getting a better grade. Rather, the key for them was passing the year and that was mostly linked with their number of absences. Time and again, what they readily negotiated was not good grades but their number of absences.

Finally, according to the law, the Teacher's Association of the school took the final decision concerning whether a student would pass the year or be referred for a re-examination, therefore no matter the number of absences of a student, a teacher could not tell them in the middle of the year that they did not pass the class. However, students with a high number of absences, even higher than permitted by the law, often put pressure on their deputy head teacher or their form teacher to tell them if they would have to repeat the year, on the grounds that there would be no point in keeping coming to school.

Eleni (year 1): The principal told me that I have 270 absences and that I will have to repeat the year. If that's how it is then tell me, there is no point in showing up to school if it's over now! I will only come to see my friends.
Mrs X: No-one knows and it's only at the end of the year that these decisions are taken. He has no right to say that to you.

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Whereas Mrs X's best interest was to keep the student at school at any cost, in the eyes of the student if negotiations over absences failed, then only friendships were a solid a reason to keep her coming to school.

In summary, the girls did not focus so much on learning but on more social aspects of schooling, especially friendships and other social matters. Related to that was their focus on ensuring that they would pass the year and eventually graduate in a 'to get it over with' manner, through means other than learning. What seemed to be more important for the girls was not the education and training they would get at school but rather to manage to graduate, no matter how. Although some girls testified the educational role of school in their written responses, an abundance of further oral responses as well as observations indicated that for them the primary role of school was to enable socialising with friends. Also, their written responses over the worth of education was contradicted by increased number of absences and by claims that through truanting one can avoid bad teachers, can be with friends/their boyfriend or, even, can stay home to sleep. In many instances, getting in class was not because they liked it or they wanted to learn but because they wanted to avoid the cost of having to repeat the year due to many absences. Moreover, merely getting in class equalled a sense of entitlement over passing the year; in the eyes of many students, the chances of passing the year seemingly had everything to do with absences and nothing to do with academic achievements or learning. Related to this is the point of view of some girls that getting good grades did not have to do with academic achievement but with social factors such as getting extra pocket money from their parents as a reward. Finally, factors like staying in class rather than playing truant, being quiet in class and helping the teacher in tasks such as giving handouts to classmates or copying what was on the board, were seen as capable of determining whether they would pass the year or whether they would get good grades. Yet, the key for passing the year was mostly linked to their number of absences as, time and again, what they readily negotiated was not learning or good grades but their number of absences. Where negotiations over absences failed, had they accumulated too many absences, then only friendships were referred to as a solid a reason to keep them coming to school.

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4.4.4 Concluding comments

Unhealthiness and de-romanticisation of education

I have argued elsewhere that the culture of exchanging commodities within the specific context bears comparison to economic notions which, in turn, points to a culture of de-romanticisation of education. Indeed, the motives behind the illegal deletion of absences were not educational but rather practical for the school. Namely, to ensure that specific specialisations would be formed and certain teachers would not lose their job. Moreover, the girls, as part of the context, were of course aware of the war over specialisations. This awareness seemed to be a determining factor in building certain negotiation skills and shaping their actions, school experience and understanding of the value of education. Time and again, what the girls readily negotiated was not learning or good grades but mostly their number of absences. Negotiating over their absences was for the girls a cost and benefit situation, for example leniency over excess absences was a desirable trade-off for choosing a specific specialisation, even if that was not the one they were really interested in to begin with. Also, not choosing the specialisation a student was genuinely interested in, seems to have been a defining aspect in triggering feelings of meaninglessness over education, which was in turn one of the triggers of truancy for many of the girls. Last but not least, some teachers were observed to go to extremes in order to ensure having students choose their specialisation. This often caused complexities in communication between colleagues and accusations among them, which was not in itself a healthy educational paradigm for the girls. Even if the point of de-romanticisation of education may not seem important enough for some, the unhealthiness which arises from it definitely is. In any case, the consequences of the specificities of the context were, evidently, detrimental.

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CHAPTER 5: SYNTHESIS OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings presented in chapter 4, I will now move on to a further synthesis of the results. The themes that emerge in this discussion indicate that reputation was a heavy determinant of the girls' vocational identities. Using students' voices and extensive ethnography to decipher the vicious cycle of the negative reputation of VET, is proved to be of crucial importance for future research concerning VET reputation. Furthermore, it is obvious that the girls' focus on the social domain of schooling downgraded and marginalised the role and value of their formal education. Indeed, the girls focused on gaining points of peer status, with the dynamics of marginalisation proving to be important means of counterbalancing gender power imbalance. Perhaps more importantly, in the specific context a culture of exchanging commodities is revealed, which bears comparison to economic notions and therefore points to a de-romanticisation and unhealthiness of education; teachers often did not adhere to legislation concerning attendance and absences - in order to ensure the survival of their jobs at VET - whereas the girls took advantage of this leniency over their absences, believing that they were in a win-win situation. All of the above point to the need for a re-conceptualisation of the underpinnings of truancy, since the medical model of disability is proved to be insufficient for justifying the girls' acts of truancy. The results also point to a very dangerous form of the sense of pyrrhic victory over social structures; the girls managed to reproduce social structures through their acts, while believing that they were in a win-win situation. This has important implications on the nature of the notion of agency within social structures.

5.1 Reputation as a determinant of vocational identities

The comparison of VET experiences to former experiences from Gymnasium or Lyceum was an important medium through which the girls assessed and made sense of the school reality which shaped their current school experience. This meaning making process sometimes stemmed from comparisons of more straight forward aspects such as the school's poorer infrastructure. More often, their school reality was shaped through a reference to the reputation of practical skills and work oriented philosophy of VET education. This was

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considered by the girls to be a positive aspect on the grounds that it supported learning and it was stated as the reason they had chosen VET education over Lyceum. For most girls, the practically oriented philosophy of VET was identified as a proof of superiority of VET students over Lyceum students. Yet another set of comparisons was related to students' behaviour, with some positive but mostly negative traits being reported. Through this comparison, VET students were described as being more fun, more modest, more genuine and more real, whereas among the many negative traits described were their lack of discipline, their negative reputation, the fact that they are heavy smokers and that they play truant much more often than Gymnasium or Lyceum students.

These findings partly complement those of Ferm, Thunqvist, Svensson and Gustavsson (2018), who found that VET students' learning strategies in the Swedish context are such that reproduce social structures which promote vocational identities. However, whereas according to these authors, vocational identities are promoted through *learning* strategies, the results of this research reveal that factors other than learning have the ability to promote vocational identities as well, namely social factors such as reputation. For most of the girls the decision to enrol at VET was linked to *what they had heard* about the practically oriented philosophy of VET, namely that learning a craft would equal greater opportunities of finding a job.

However, DiMartino and Clarke's (2008) finding that many students cannot see the relevance of what they are being taught, matches this research's finding that some of the girls were resentful about the fact that school did not offer them the specific specialisation that they initially wanted to enrol at and/or reported that the school did not offer them much learning, as they later assessed that they mostly learnt things outside school. A relevant finding is that of Pereira, Fillol and Moura (2019), who have identified that in our society, the overly scholarly view of learning marginalises the knowledge attained by students outside school, in their leisure time and through peer communication, especially through digital platforms. Their research points to the fact that students recognise the gap between these two worlds, as curricular learning does not intersect with what they learn outside school. Future research following the inevitable changes in the gap between these two worlds in a post-Coronavirus era would be useful and interesting to be undertaken.

The findings of this research indicate that *VET reputation is twofold*. On the one hand, this reputation seemed to be positive as the girls reasoned that learning a craft would render them

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capable of finding a job more easily than Lyceum students. This matches international research findings that adolescents see the purpose of school as being to give students a better opportunity with jobs and to prepare them for earning money for a living (McCaw, 2017). At the same time, however, the participants often reported that the school did not offer them much learning, and also they (as well as their parents) mentioned the negative reputation of VET schools concerning the behaviour of its students. Symeou and Efthymiou (2004) have indeed reported that in Technical and Vocational schools in Cyprus, students are often labelled as 'at-risk', 'scamps' and 'peasants'. The label 'good for nothings', often used by the girls, seems to match these stereotypes. Both aspects of this twofold nature of VET reputation were heavy determinants of the shaping and reproduction of the girls' vocational identities. In the literature review, I used the term 'VET students' virtual handbags' differently than the way it has appeared in already existing literature, to describe how the reproduction of social standards metaphorically seems to creep in their real school handbags and be transferred, not so invisibly after all, from their school context to their future lives at the workplace. Therefore, the twofold nature of VET reputation seems to be a heavy determinant of what the girls carry in their virtual handbags. This twofold reputation of VET was consistent throughout the three years of fieldwork, something which confirms its crucial role in the shaping of the girls' vocational identities. The girls' agency within this process of shaping their identities has implications related to the discussion over the capacity of Giddens' structuration theory to explain social reality (Russell, 2011). This will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

5.2 Using students' voice and extensive ethnography to decipher the vicious cycle of the negative reputation of VET

DiMartino and Clarke (2008) suggest that VET students have low ambitions concerning their educational as well as professional future, but I find that position to be rather insufficient. Research findings suggest that girls entered VET context with optimism over their chosen VET path and reported that learning a craft would render them capable of finding a job more easily than Lyceum students. The girls later exhibited a lack of *solid* aspirations concerning their future and/or there was confusion and uncertainty present in their aspirations but this

must not, as I see it, be interpreted as indicating low aspirations. In fact, for the few girls who vaguely considered the possibility of going to university or college, many of their teachers considered their educational and professional aspirations to be not low, but unrealistically high. But the girls did imagine themselves getting married or having children or having a job or travelling or being rich etc., once again often influenced by society's ideas of what is worthwhile. This may be seen as contradicting the claim by Symeou and Efthymiou (2004) concerning low ambitions regarding VET students' educational and professional future.

Furthermore, the finding that the girls entered VET with more optimism, with the pressure they felt over their future increasing as the realisation that they would graduate gradually started to sink in, is an indication of the importance of ethnographic research which follows individuals through longer periods of their lives. This is a method of delving not only into the factors which shape the formation/reproduction of their identities at one moment and one place, but also how, and perhaps why, this identity formation evolves in both spatial as well as temporal terms. Extensive ethnography allows the researcher to examine situations in closer detail, as she/he progressively moves from the position of an outsider towards that of an insider (Papadakis, 2006). This may have a positive impact on the quality of data gathered.

The presence of negative social stereotypes and prejudices is quite evident in the Cypriot culture and is often identified in the work of scholars of Inclusive Education (for example see Symeonidou 2020). Perhaps due to the country's small size, reputation seems to be an important cultural aspect; news travel fast, identification is easy and societal stereotypes can easily feed reputation. In this context, my worry is that research findings which are too generalised or vague, such as the claim by Symeou and Efthymiou (2004) that VET students' ambitions are low, may entail the danger of feeding the negative VET reputation already present in the Cypriot culture. Instead one may ask, VET students have low ambitions according to whom? Low with respect to what? Generalised claims are not, in my opinion, the best method of breaking the vicious cycle of VET reputation, according to which students' behaviour, through acts of resistance, is linked to the school's and the students' reputation. In other words, the right half of Figure 4 below is only half of the story, as societal stereotypes also feed this cycle. Caution is also needed because the word 'vicious' may point only to negative aspects of reputation, but research results indicate that reputation was twofold and for the girls it had positive traits too. Both positive as well as negative traits were *willingly carried*

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in the girls' virtual handbags, that way shaping their vocational identities and catalysing social reproduction of class.

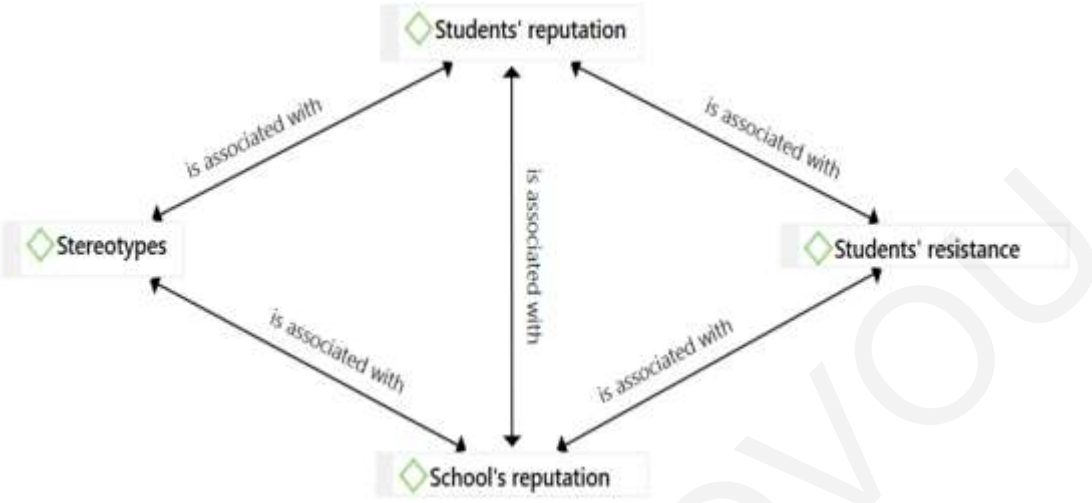

Figure 4: The vicious cycle of VET reputation

Research such as this one, which sheds light on students' voice rather than merely on others' opinion about them is, in my opinion, perfectly suitable for delving a few layers below the surface of social phenomena and gaining a better understanding of them. The prerequisite of trying to deconstruct stereotypes is perhaps firstly trying to better understand them. In the three years of fieldwork, none of the girls ever told me that they have 'low' ambitions for their future. What I know is that they *did* have ambitions and that they also stressed over them as their graduation approached.

5.3 The role and value of schooling and education

Unlike Wilson and Corbett's (2007) finding that for adolescents good learning was when they learned new things and when they were active, many of the girls preferred lessons to be easy and considered not having to do any homework to be an advantage. Idleness, reported as

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'boredom/being bored' seemed to be, for them, a state of being, which indicated not only their rejection/resistance towards mental labour but, perhaps most importantly, its meaninglessness.

Although the girls reported in their written answers that amongst the positive aspects of school is its educational role and especially that its practical nature would render them capable of easily finding a job, it was apparent that the girls rejected mental labour. On different occasions the girls reported that they did not like schoolwork or studying, they felt trapped at school, that what they liked about school was the free periods they got when a teacher was absent, that they rarely did any homework, etc. Notwithstanding many of the girls' responses that school was good because they learn things, this kind of goodness was not verified in further responses. To the contrary, the social rather than the educational role of school was highlighted and some girls even readily criticised school for not offering them knowledge which they considered to be relevant. Education was often excitingly defined in terms of graduating and being independent, not learning, a result which matches Heckhausen, Chang, Greenberger and Chen's (2013) finding that graduating is an exciting time for adolescents, often associated in their minds with increased freedom and opportunities.

Related to the above is the finding that mental truancy was tolerated by some of the girls' parents; for the girls, as well as for many of their parents, the important thing was to ensure that they would graduate from secondary school in a 'to get it over with' manner, rather than what they would learn. Therefore, the girls' ideas about the value of education and schooling have deep roots on cultural aspects outside school, namely reputation as previously discussed, which is also fed by the family's ideas about schooling. The influence of parent involvement on students' educational engagement is indeed attested in academic research (for example see Barger, Kim, Kuncel and Pomerantz 2019; Erdener and Knoeppel, 2018). In conclusion, there are indications that the role of parents is a topic which is fertile for future research.

5.4 Strategies for gaining points of peer status

Research findings complement Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2007) conclusion that adolescents feel pressurised to maintain their status amongst their peers. The girls' strategies for maintaining this status were through joking and teasing, as well as through their approach to drinking, sex and smoking and their appearance. Drinking and/or smoking with peers is

often reported as being utilised by boys' groups for achieving solidarity (Frances and Fanny, 2003; Rumberger, 1987) but this research indicates that it is also utilised by girls. Experience in drinking and smoking in school premises seem to be acts which can be added to those of Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007) concerning girls, as they were not reported by them.

A related result which I find to be important and perhaps rather novice is the fact that smoking in school premises was not merely seen as an act in which an individual engaged into in order to look cool or to gain points of peer status, but also *an act through which interests were being met*, namely exchanging cigarettes for friendship towards more marginalised individuals, and vice versa. In numerous ways, friendship seemed to be exchanged for other commodities.

Furthermore, Ferm, Thunqvist, Svensson and Gustavsson (2018) found that using humour and jokes was a strategy used by VET students in a Swedish context in order to fit in the work community. This strategy, according to the researchers, reproduces social structures which in turn promote vocational identities. In this research too, humour and teasing were highly regarded, however they comprised a strategy used to fit school community; it was a peer related act and never work or industry training related. With that being said, it was related to their school identities but not their vocational identities. Iacovou & Christou (2011) have also identified the point that humour is a strategy of gaining points of peer status, in a research which was conducted in a high school (i.e. a non-VET context).

Among the girls, sexual assertiveness was considered to be a cool behaviour, which again is a finding reported by Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007), however the opposite was also true, as at the same time there were expressed worries by many girls about how others would consider them or they accused other girls of being 'too easy' in their sexual relationships and/or of being too preoccupied with sex. The effect of a cultural tendency of 'being a good girl' (ibid), again stemming from the local community, was therefore also present. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007) report girls' tendency to be more verbal and to spread rumours as a means of 'bitching' other girls and dealing with conflict, unlike more overt bodily enactment preferred by boys, which is verified by the findings of this research.

The girls were also preoccupied with their appearance (clothes, makeup, perfumes, weight, jewellery) but overt forms of resistance through their appearance were not observed, perhaps with the exception of not always conforming to school uniform. This contradicts Russell's

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(2011) findings of more overt forms of resistance concerning appearance and presentation. This is perhaps a matter of cultural differences of the Cypriot context, which does not exhibit eminent youth subcultures of more overt appearance like Emo, Punk etc. In any case, for the girls, being feminine and following contemporary trends was considered important. Not following such trends was seen as boring and/or was criticised. They defined being feminine by traits such as being slim, having large breasts, styling their hair, wearing miniskirts and having a tattoo. Similar preoccupations are reported by Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007).

5.5 The dynamics of marginalisation as a means of counterbalancing gender power imbalance

Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2007) name one of the strategies used by students to maintain their status amongst their peers being to engage in "othering" and labelling students who deviate from the norm. It was indeed apparent that girls who were marginalised were often subject to teasing and joking. This, in turn, determined who would be accepted as a friend. This finding partly supplements Russell's (2011) finding that girls tend to secure their place within the social hierarchy by ridiculing students who conformed to school rules, although in this research what was even more apparent was the tendency of the girls to ridicule students who deviated from what they considered to be the norm in terms of mental or physical impairments or in terms of appearance.

However, the dynamics of marginalisation and acceptance were not straight forward in this research, as 'protection' was often also involved. Teasing almost never took place in the face of the girls who were being teased and protecting the weaker girls was observed during classes or when students from other classes teased the girls, in a 'performing our duty' kind of way. But when being exposed to the remaining of the school's community, being seen hanging out with the 'right' friends was equally important. Appearing as a whole before other classes was considered to be very important for the girls as it assured their hard-core reputation, but at the same time, when being exposed to the remaining of the school's community, being seen hanging out with the 'right' friends was equally important.

The complexity of the dynamics between marginalisation and acceptance, as described above, does not, in my opinion, merely reflect Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2007) finding that girls' resistance is more tacit and not so much through overt bodily enactment which

characterises boys' resistance. Although the more overt laddish protest masculinity (Willis, 1977/1981) was definitely not present in the ways the girls resisted, a hierarchical power imbalance was present as often, when some more overt forms of resistance were initiated by boys, the girls would be prompted to follow. This finding, in itself, contradicts Russell's (2011) finding that girls do not tend to be so influenced by their peers in the way they react or resist.

Teasing and harassing of the boys towards the girls as a means of subordinating them (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2007) was not observed, however since the hierarchical power imbalance was present in other forms, the girls developed ways of counterbalancing them. I believe that this is the angle from which the complex dynamics of acceptance and marginalisation must be approached, as it points to a cost and benefit state of affairs for the girls, depending on the situation they were faced with. On the one hand, revealing an abundance of friends as a given fact and as a proof of an active social life was crucial, as it determined a girl's status among peers. On the other hand, appearing as a whole before other students was considered to be very important for the girls as it assured their hard-core reputation; if we take into consideration the fact that the school was male dominated, retaining a powerful status was crucial within an only girls' class, as a strategy for compensating gender power imbalances. Russell's (2011) finding that girls tend to operate together, as a collective force both inside and outside of the classroom to support their friends and emancipate themselves against certain teachers and the school system is relevant, but what this research supplements is that it also seems to be a means of supporting themselves within a context of gender power imbalances.

5.6 Re-conceptualising the underpinnings of truancy

The girls' multiplicity of responses concerning their opinion about students who play truant were indicative of how multifaceted the phenomenon of truancy is. Their responses pointed both to push-out as well as pull-out reasons which can trigger truancy. These reasons for truancy indicated by the girls either in their written responses or in their responses during interviews, were also witnessed during observation. The underpinnings of truancy seem to

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match Henry and Yelkpieri's (2017) categorisation of truancy into student related, family related and school related. However, unlike Teuscher and Makarova's (2018) finding that there is no correlation between truancy and peer relationships, friendship did seem to play a central role for the girls, as they almost always truanted in groups of two or three – usually with another girl or with their boyfriend. For them, out of class truancy was largely a peer related act - to hang out with friends. This seemed to be the factor which differentiated out of class truancy with being absent from school altogether. Friendship seemed to be at the centre of their understanding, with many of the girls indicating it as the factor which determined their reactions related to truancy; once again it was apparent that for most of the girls the interplay of social and educational matters in school was such that it was the social factors which shaped the educational ones and not the other way around.

What the girls did not mention in questionnaires or semi-structured interviews but was both observed and was also often a topic of our informal discussions, was the existence of yet four other forms of pull-out reasons which kept them out of class/school. These were family related, health related, travel related, as well as job related. The presence of another push-out reason was also apparent – the fact that sometimes the girls played truant with the teacher's consent.

Stearns and Glennie (2006), who have grouped the reasons for truancy in the two distinct categories of pull-out and push-out, explain that the first category (pull-out) refers to family obligations, which may include family creation, work and/or the care of a new-born baby. These reasons, according to these researchers, mainly concern girls but also foreign students and indeed this was verified by the results of this research. The second category (push-out) concerns internal rules of the school, such as zero-tolerance policies, internal rules on disciplinary offenses, and the internal structure of the school. These factors lead some students to conclude that they are not welcome at school. The finding of Jordan, Lara and McPartland (1996), which indicates that that push-out truancy concerns mainly boys, does not seem to be validated by this research.

Reid (2014), Stearns and Glennie (2006), McCormack (2005), as well as Cullingford (1999) also suggest that sometimes through truancy it is possible for schools to 'get rid' of students who were labelled as having disruptive behaviour, so as to focus on educating the more typical students. This was indeed observed, when for example the principal called a

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specific student's parents and asked them to come and get their son, which of course he had no right to do. His reasoning was that in order to save the forest, he was cutting a tree. Within the main focus of this research, which was the girl participants, although the phenomenon was again observed on quite a few occasions, what was emphasised was exactly the opposite, i.e. it was evident that engaging in truancy *was put up with*. Dropping out did not seem to be a desired outcome for the school, not in view of the students' well-being but because a critical number of students was necessary in order for classes of certain specialisations to be formed the next school year. In a way, the school's culture was such that it worked as a mechanism which used truancy in order to ensure its survival. But the collateral damages were massive on many fronts - with regard to the girls' understanding of the purpose and meaning(lessness) of education, with regard to the perpetuation of negative VET reputation and with regard to the reproduction of social structures. This understanding could have been missed had the fieldwork lasted only for a few months or had I been an outsider rather than a teacher in the specific context. This fact points to the necessity of longer lasting fieldwork, as well as to the advantages of the dual role of being a teacher and a researcher.

In this light, the results of this research can be compared to categories of truancy mentioned in the literature review; these are wanton truancy (Reid, 2014; Lever, 2011), truancy due to school phobia (Lever 2011, McCormack 2005, Reid 1999, Phtiaka, 1997) condoned truancy due to parents or teachers (Reid 2014, Lever 2011, Stearns and Glennie 2006, McCormack 2005, Cullingford 1999, Reid 1999), specific lesson absence (Reid, 2014; 1999), culturally motivated truancy (Traag and Van der Velden 2011, McCormack 2005), truancy due to economic reasons (Gennetian, Rodrigues, Hill and Morris 2018, Weiss and Brown 2013, McCormack 2005), blanket truancy (Reid 1999), post-registration truancy (Reid 2014; 1999, McCormack 2005), near/psychological truancy (McCormack 2005, Reid 1999). It becomes apparent that these types of truancy were present in this research, apart from school phobia.

Some of these already existing categories may be re-conceptualised or re-defined, as new understandings emerge from new research results such as this one. I will suggest ways in which the six categories of truancy revealed in this research may contribute to this re-conceptualisation. The six categories of truancy present in the findings were:

- teacher related
- lesson related

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- peer related
- related to practical matters
- related to personal issues
- family related issues

Teacher and lesson related truancy can be considered as forms of push-out truancy, with a contribution of this research being that it has perhaps shed some more light into what exactly it is that girl students do not find welcoming concerning the internal structure of the school; apart from the unwelcoming zero tolerance regulations already mentioned in literature, this research points to serious shortcomings of teacher approach and pedagogical practices which the girls find to be undesirable and for which they explicitly ask for improvements.

Peer related truancy could be considered as another form of culturally motivated truancy, beyond the already existing references of literature that I am aware of, which relate culturally motivated truancy to minority groups or socioeconomic background such as deprived working class backgrounds. Peer related truancy can be considered as a culturally motivated one, as it is related to the particular ideas, customs, and social behaviour of the Cypriot society's youth, which has a high regard of socialising and making friends.

Concerning **peer related truancy**, Russell (2011) and Rumberger (1987) found that in girl groups of truant students, the group cohesion seems to be achieved through their emotional communication. Research findings support this, as well as Russell's (2011) finding that girls tend to exhibit more engaged and collective forms of resistance. However, research findings clearly contradict Russell's findings that unlike boys, girls do not tend to be so influenced by their peers and by the wider community, or that girls are more confrontational and aggressive in their visibility, prominence and tone.

Truancy which is related to practical matters outside school, but unrelated to student's families, as was the ongoing bus issue for the girls, could be categorised among pull-out reasons of truancy. It is however proof of the link between pull-out and push-out categories of truancy, which does not seem to be indicated in existing literature. The bus issue was a sad realisation of the lack of cooperation between the school and other societal bodies within the community. The nature of the issue, as well as the fact that it was on-going and present in all the three years of fieldwork, is a clear evidence of the fact that this particular

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educational context is considered to be a second-class school, for second-class students. Once again, the interplay between societal stereotypes and girls' identities becomes apparent, as a factor outside school had the capacity to shape the girls' school experience.

Finally, regarding **truancy related to personal issues** such as lack of energy, sickness or boredom, research results did *not* reveal any association with truancy due to students' pathology or 'problematic' behaviour, unlike what is suggested by Reid (2016; 2014), Osher *et al* (2003) and Rumberger (1987). The majority of girls engaging in truancy came from deprived working class backgrounds, as it is also reported by Reid (2012). Indeed, in Cypriot VET schools there are students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Symeou and Efthymiou, 2004). However, the finding that 'being bored/boredom' was for the girls a state of being, revealing a cultural rejection of mental labour and expression of its meaninglessness, is sound proof that attributing truancy to student endogenous problems is insufficient, to say the least. These students' challenging behaviour and often their socioeconomic background perhaps misleads teachers into believing that their enacted resistance, for example through truancy, is a result of some inherent problem of the student (medical model of disability) (Oliver and Barnes 2012, Oliver 2009). Reflecting on such behaviours from a more social point of view, taking into account both students' voice and considering the role of the school and the society in inducing or catalysing their acts, is proved to be a powerful step for the development of more inclusive understandings and interventions to truancy.

5.7 The culture of teachers not adhering to legislation concerning attendance and absences

Apart from the numerous mistakes apparent in registering absences, research results also indicate that the practical application of the legislation and school regulations concerning attendance and absences was such that the laws and regulations were not always strictly followed by teachers. Registered absences were unofficially deleted, either when some teachers wanted to avoid the extra work of preparing a re-examination paper (for students who had accumulated many absences) or in order to ensure that enough students would move up a class so that certain specialisation classes would be formed. The culture of 'helping' students

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pass the year was critisised by some teachers and was disheartening for them, as they experienced it as an inhibition in their student assessment process.

The culture of treating students who attend support classes more leniently is already known within the Cypriot context (Iacovou, 2012), but what this research's results indicate is that this culture extends to a bigger number of VET students. Yet these two kinds of practice were different. Students who attend support classes are often 'helped' because they are being pitied; the tragic view of disability stemming from the medical model as well as the charity model of disability is indeed well known in the Cypriot culture (ibid, Phtiaka 2008). In this research too, this backward way of thinking was still apparent in some of the teacher's sayings, despite the internationally promoted and advocated human rights discourse, and this by itself is a worrisome finding. However, *the main reasoning of the culture of 'helping' students was not related to views surrounding disability, but had to do with other interests*, namely the survival of certain VET specialisations and the securement of teachers' jobs. When the survival of VET is materialised within such a context of interests being met, then its unhealthiness is not difficult to miss. Most importantly, since interests were being met through exchanging commodities, the students *can* be seen as agents too. *This is exactly why the vicious cycle of VET negative reputation may be extremely difficult to break…*

5.8 The culture of exchanging commodities and de-romanticisation of education: agency and reproduction of social structures

Both positive as well as negative traits of VET reputation were *willingly carried* in the girls' virtual handbags, that way shaping their vocational identities and catalysing social reproduction of class. This willingness perhaps matches Willis' (1977/1981) notion of the lads' pyrrhic victory. But what this research further suggests is that *this process of reproduction is utilised within a culture of exchanging commodities (being in a win-win situation rather than resisting)*. This underpinning is what aids the maintenance of the status quo and the reproduction of inequality.

Few of the girls reported seeing truancy in a positive light, as an act of resistance which makes a student appear 'cool' and thus elevates her/his image before their peers. However most of them identified truancy as a harmful act, on the grounds that it could cause a student

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to have to sit re-examinations or repeat the year due to too many absences. In turn, not graduating was connected to fewer opportunities for finding a job. But observation did not verify the girls' claim. Instead the girls, being perfectly aware of the fact that their truancy was largely being put up with, tried to use it for their own benefit. They knew that they could have their absences deleted and in exchange they chose to register/remain in a specific specialisation, which was exactly what some teachers strived for in order to have their benefits covered. This culture of exchanging commodities was a very fertile ground for the negotiation skills of the girls to become apparent, especially those who had difficulty in keeping their absences under control.

The above is but one example of the trend revealed in research findings towards a culture of exchanging commodities. Other examples include interests being met through exchanging friendship for smoking or for other personal interests (both aspects of the exchange contributed to status among peers). This culture seemed to manifest itself not only between peers and not only relating to social aspects, but also to extend to school related matters as well as between students and teachers. In a way, perhaps even the canteen ladies' criticism makes sense when seen as a part of this specific culture: buying things from them in exchange for not filing a complaint at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth. As another example, this habitual reasoning was apparent on occasions where a student expected to be allowed to carry drinks in class and/or not to get an absence, in exchange for managing to get in class, even when being late.

It was common practice for students to negotiate with teachers, for example trying to exchange their good behaviour during the lesson with leaving class before the bell rang for the end of the school day, in order to make it to the bus on time. Other negotiation practices ranged from directly requesting for 'help' over their absences to negotiating over teacher's incompetence. The more complacent girls weighed their options and decided to mostly stay in class in order to reduce the risk of having to sit a re-examination or of not passing the year. Others meticulously counted their absences and made use of as many as possible without taking any risks, whereas others took their chances, while at the same time negotiating with the principal, as well as betting on the efficiency of the deputy head teacher's habit of deleting their absences.

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Related to the finding of exchanging commodities is, in my opinion, social exchange theory, which explains how individuals interact within groups. This theory emerged in the 1960s within family sciences, as an approach which applied economic principles to social relationships (Pretsch and Ehrhardt-Madapathi, 2018). As analysed in the literature review, this theory suggests that social behaviour results from a process of exchange based on maximising personal benefits and minimising personal disadvantages (Miller, 2013; Schwimmer, 1977). A basic assumption of this theory is that individuals engage rationally in calculations of costs and benefits in social exchanges, that is, they exist *both as rational actors and as reactors*. Social exchange theory largely attends to issues of decision making, and considers individuals as *agents* in their own decision making (Chibucos, Randall and Weis, 2005), in tune with structuration theory.

Pretsch and Ehrhardt-Madapathi (2018) used social exchange theory and found that the relationship between experiences of justice in school and democratic attitudes are mediated by general trust, which can be interpreted as a social exchange process. They argued that social exchange processes do not have a limited time frame. Rather, they have a long-term perspective and thus they maintain that having experienced justice in school and supporting democracy as an adult may be regarded as a form of social exchange which is based on trust and reciprocity. A question arising from this framework of social exchange theory is what happens when lack of trust impairs reciprocation. As I understood it before this research, if students' resistance is seen as an outcome of lack of trust towards the school system or even, as Scott (1990) sees it, as reciprocation to patterns of domination, it follows that this may have detrimental effects not only on their current school life but also on their future reciprocation of democratic attitudes as adults.

The idea of students reacting to school values or protecting themselves from things they do not like within school has been extensively elaborated in well-known literature long ago (for example see Corrigan 1979 concerning boys' resistance). Apparently, I anticipated something similar for the girls, thus my question concerning what happens to reciprocation when there is lack of trust. Initially it was through the lens of reciprocity to hegemonic oppression that I understood the term of 'reciprocating', i.e. as forms of action and reaction. It is on those grounds that I studied and included in this study literature concerning social exchange theory. But below or beyond reciprocation to patterns of domination, I certainly did not anticipate

witnessing another form of reciprocation, a seemingly perfect mechanism through which, willingly and knowingly, interests were being met. This culture of exchanging commodities was indeed willingly carried in the girls' virtual handbags.

The specific context was such that both *strategies* and *tactics* could be observed; Certeau (1984) made a distinction between *strategies* used by those in power shaping the field and *tactics* used by the weaker to maneuver within the structures set by the powerful. He understands tactics not as a subcategory of strategies, but as an adaptation to the environment, which has been created by the strategies of the powerful. In the specific educational context the school's culture was such that it worked as a mechanism that used truancy to ensure its survival. This was a strategy of the most powerful in the context. Negotiating over their absences was for the girls a cost and benefit calculation, since leniency over excess absences was a desirable trade-off for choosing a specific vocational study area; this can be seen as the girls' tactics. The girls, however, through their tactics/actions, not only did they catalyse the recycling of the vicious cycle of negative VET reputation, but also their own subordinate position. It is very important to note, however, that Certeau's notions of tactics and strategies seem to only offer a partial interpretation of the culture in the specific context. Certeau posits tactics not as subordinate to strategies but as *opposed* to them, whereas in the specific context it was rather revealed that the girls *did not oppose* to school aspects which they did not like. Instead, they actually believed that they were in a win-win situation, which can be more fully interpreted using Social Exchange Theory.

Reproduction theory, resistance theory and structuration theory have made significant contributions to understanding student behaviour. According to reproduction theory, schools serve to maintain an unequal society and comprise an important factor which maintains the status quo, by reproducing the existing relationships between social groups and their cultures. On the other hand, resistance theory maintains that working class individuals oppose intellectual practices and reject school because of their counter-school cultures. Structuration theory, according to Russell (2011), holds that social structures are reproduced by interacting actors. These structures can be viewed both as constraining or enabling. Agents are accounted for their actions, and they are able to change their actions in light of the information gained from discursive awareness. In other words, structuration theory maintains that structures aren't

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perceived as imposing forces which operate beyond the students' control but that students are viewed as operating within them, at times constrained by them but also having the ability to influence their school experience. The awareness of the girls concerning the practice of deleting absences and their subsequent actions and development of negotiation skills may indeed superficially point to structuration theory.

Russell (2011) states, regarding structuration theory,

> (p)upils utilise *the resources given to them* to help shape their own activities and life opportunities, but ironically this can (not always) reinforce the subordinate position of the pupil during and after their school days (p. 49, my emphasis).

But some crucial questions to ask are, what kinds of resources were given to the girls by their school? Were these resources which, when building their acts on, could aid in realising and/or deconstructing their subordinate position? Were these resources emancipating? Could these resources turn them into critical agents? Due to its basic underpinning of considering individuals as decision makers, I initially anticipated that critical theory, in the form of critical pedagogy, apart from shaping my ideologies and research questions, might perhaps also be present somewhere in the research results. It is on those grounds that I included it in the literature review. Sadly, it was nowhere to be found within teacher-student interactions.

When the resources given to the students are not the right ones, then the students' subsequent actions are prone to be equally unhealthy. Not as a reaction to something they don't like, but as an eager reciprocation of the commodities been given to them. Russell (2011) contends that there is a need to move into a focus on individuals seen as creative agents who are able to affect change in social structures. Indeed, participants in this research proved to be particularly creative agents through their cost and benefit calculations, but what they have managed to do was to *reproduce* social structures. The context they were into was there not to inhibit this process, but to catalyse it.

Some teachers within the context were observed to go to extremes in order to ensure having students choose their specialisation. This often caused complexities in communication between colleagues, such as accusations between them. Indeed, the motives behind the illegal deletion of absences were other than educational. The girls, as part of the context, were of course aware of the war over specialisations. This awareness seemed to be a determining factor in building certain negotiation skills, perfecting their cost and benefit calculations and shaping their actions, school experience *and understanding for the value of education*. Time

and again, what the girls readily carried in their virtual handbags and negotiated was not learning or good grades but first and foremost their number of absences and the benefits arising. Negotiating over their absences was for the girls a cost and benefit calculation, since leniency over excess absences was a desirable trade-off for choosing a specific specialisation, even if that was not the one they were really interested in to begin with. However, not choosing the specialisation a student was genuinely interested in seems to have been a defining aspect in triggering feelings of meaninglessness over education, which was in turn one of the triggers of truancy for many of the girls.

Choosing specialisation is part of the career guidance services offered to students. Indeed, young people first come across formally provided career guidance in school (Sultana, 2004). Career guidance contributes greatly in achieving many public policy goals, one of which is social inclusion; it builds confidence and empowers students (ibid) and it ensures that students' decisions are well-informed (Watts and Sultana, 2004). Tragically, research results serve as an affirmation of the importance of career guidance by proving that the inhibition of this guidance catalyses social exclusion. What is also sad is the fact that this inhibition was not related to matters such as the career councelling staff-to-student ratio, which has been reportedly as high as 1:800 in our country (Sultana, 2004). Rather, it was related to ensuring that certain teachers would not lose their job, no matter the cost to the students.

The way absences were handled in the specific educational context was one which revealed neither a humane tolerance nor a pitiful reaction towards students. Rather, *it revealed a culture of exchanging commodities which bears comparison to economic notions which, in turn, points to a culture of de-romanticisation of education*. Even if the point of de-romanticisation of education may not seem important enough for some, the unhealthiness which arises from it definitely is. In any case, the consequences of these specificities of the context were, evidently, detrimental.

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CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS, SUGGESTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

6.1 Conclusions - summary of key findings

In this section I offer some conclusions and a summary of key findings, in order to aid those readers who only want to read the main points of this thesis without entering into details.

The first research question dealt with the participants' perspectives of their school reality. Research findings indicate that the girls structured their school experience around two main domains, the educational and the social. These domains were almost always interrelated, but for these girls the educational domain seemed to be very heavily determined and defined by the social domain. *Factors other than learning were eagerly transferred by the girls in their virtual handbags and had the ability to determine the vocational identities of the girls, namely social factors.*

The second research question dealt with the participants' patterns of resistance within school. Results indicate that the enactment of girls' resistance was understood as an expression of entitlement and independency, as an expression of dislike towards a teacher or a lesson and/or as a result of disagreement between peers. The presence of a vicious cycle of resistance is also apparent.

The third research question dealt with a specific form of resistance, namely truancy. Results reveal both push-out as well as pull-out reasons for truanting, with the girls understanding some of them to be legitimate and some non-legitimate. This finding points to the necessity for reevaluation the definitions of truancy. Mistakes were often made during the registration of absences. Moreover, there was a tendency from some teachers/deputy head teachers of 'unofficially' deleting unexcused absences, which has revealed a culture of exchanging commodities between teachers and the girls.

The fourth research question dealt with the ways participants define and make sense of the positives and negatives of their decision to engage in truancy. Results indicate that negotiating over their absences was for the girls a cost and benefit situation, for example leniency over excess absences was a desirable trade-off for choosing a specific specialisation, even if that was not the one they were really interested in to begin with. *This seems to have been a*

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defining aspect in triggering feelings of meaninglessness over education, which was in turn one of the triggers of truancy. The collateral damages seemed to be massive with regard to the girls' understanding of the purpose of education, the perpetuation of negative VET reputation and the reproduction of their vocational identities.

The idea of the 'virtual handbag' has been used to bring together the concepts and ideas which synthesise the thesis of this dissertation: the girls carried in their virtual handbags and utilised resources given to them in order to shape their own actions, but these resources were often unhealthy. The girls' subsequent interchange of the resources given to them was equally unhealthy, not always as a form of resistance, but as an eager reciprocation of the commodities been given to them. *This was a dangerous form of pyrrhic victory; the girls were particularly creative agents through their cost and benefit calculations and believed that they were in a win-win situation, but what they managed to do instead, was to reproduce social structures.*

6.2 Suggestions

In this section, I provide suggestions for future research foci and educational practice.

These suggestions are related to:

1. Teacher approach
2. Adolescent-parent relationships
3. Valuing students' voice – the use of extensive ethnography in breaking the vicious cycle of the negative VET reputation
4. Use of results in teacher/parent education programmes

I then provide some methodological considerations and suggestions, which are related to:

1. The preoccupation with everyday 'trivial' matters serving as a valuable lesson for the ethnographer
2. The dynamics of the dual role of being a teacher and a researcher

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6.2.1 Suggestions for future research foci and educational practice

Research results reveal that factors other than learning have the ability to shape and reproduce vocational identities. The school's and the students' reputation were identified to be important determinants of the shaping of vocational identities. VET reputation was fed both by stereotypes as well as the students' resistance, as indicated in Figure 4. Students', teachers' as well as parents' acts were identified as factors which contributed in shaping both stereotypes as well as students' acts of resistance. Based on these findings, I provide some suggestions for future research and/or teaching practice, the latter largely based on my previous argument on the advantages of being both a researcher and a teacher.

6.2.1.1 Teacher approach

A big share of comparisons in the girls' mind-set was reserved for issues concerning teachers and lessons taught. Most of the girls in this research project valued having a friendly relationship with teachers as well as freedom of expression around them. Many of the girls believed that teachers at VET are kinder, simpler, more caring and easier to approach, even outside class. Related to this is the finding that girls' resistance was often triggered by teacher reprimands. On these occasions, a series of negative events which built on and reinforced each other were observed; when disliking a teacher, a student resisted (e.g. by playing truant); this resulted to reprimands by the teacher, which in turn caused more hatred towards the teacher and more resistance (see Figure 3).

Past research, as well as this research, have identified the connectedness between students and teachers as being an essential aspect of student engagement. This may serve as a suggestion for teachers who may be concerned over which approaches could possibly be suitable with adolescents who are labelled as having a challenging behaviour, as Cypriot VET students often are. The importance of this issue is reflected in the finding that the girls' feelings towards teachers had the power to shape their educational growth. Perhaps the building of positive relationships could extend outside the classroom environments, not merely during break times but also in the afternoon, e.g. with home visits or other activities such as sports. Although resistance is a multi-faceted phenomenon which must never be

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underestimated, the suggestion voiced by the participants over teacher approach may indicate a possible way in which teachers can interfere with the vicious cycle of student resistance. This may be a valuable addition to teacher education programmes.

6.2.1.2 Adolescent-parent relationships

Related to the above is the finding that there was a multifaceted focus in the girls' parent related thoughts. Based on previous research indicating that parental monitoring in adolescence heavily depends on the maintenance of trust and warmth in adolescents' relationships with their parents, and since these are exactly the attributes that the girls also reported to value concerning their relationship with their teachers, this may serve as a suggestion towards conducting further research in the Cypriot context which will reveal whether these teacher traits contribute to a healthier adolescent-parent relationship as well. The girls reported both lying to their parents and forging their signatures, but in other instances reporting an open relationship with them was a means of gaining credits of status among peers. Parents' views, just like teachers' views, also contributed to the shaping of the girls' educational identities. The existence of this multifaceted focus in their parent related thoughts indicates both its importance as well as the need for future research on this topic.

6.2.1.3 Valuing students' voice – the use of extensive ethnography in breaking the vicious cycle of the negative VET reputation

The findings concerning the processes through which the girls' vocational identities were shaped and reproduced is an indication of the importance of ethnographic research which follows individuals through longer periods of their lives, as a method of delving not only into the factors which shape the formation/reproduction of their identities at one moment and one place, but also how, and perhaps why, this process changes in temporal and spatial terms.

Moreover, the interpretation depicted in Figure 3 was only a partial one, as acts of resistance (playing truant) were also catalysed, year after year, by other factors such as the culture of exchanging commodities. Once again, *this understanding could have been missed*

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had the fieldwork lasted only for a few months or had I been an outsider rather than a teacher in the specific context. This fact points to the necessity of the promotion of longer lasting fieldwork, as well as to research undertaken by teachers-researchers.

Furthermore, research which consistently sheds light on the students' voice rather than merely on others' opinion about them, is suggested to be a powerful future tool in helping us delve under the surface of cultural phenomena. For example, sometimes teachers diminish or ridicule students' aspirations by being single mindedly attached to generalised views or stereotypes which consider students' aspirations to be too low or too high. Rather, teachers must be aware that they can extract these ambitions within specific contexts and consider them as bases to build on and re-shape. The danger of easy identification of research participants is imminent in small communities such as the Cypriot one and must be avoided. Nevertheless, care must be taken so as *to avoid identification of participants, not voices*, as the latter may have the potential to break the vicious cycle of the negative reputation of VET.

6.2.1.4 Use of results in teacher/parent education programmes

The three years of fieldwork and analysis of data led me to the grim realisation of the sad culture of exchanging commodities existing within the school. What I regret is that it is too late to disseminate the results, perhaps through action research, *with these girls*. They have graduated. I was perfectly aware of my role in the context; after all, the researcher is far from invisible and her/his presence in the field through analytic choices, discursive awareness and interaction with the participants is indisputable. Also, as an ethnographer I had to try to be as discrete and neutral as possible in order for the situation not to deviate from one which is as natural as possible. 'Modestly witnessing' therefore had its downsides, firstly on the occasions I complied with the deputy head teacher's request to not register Marina's absences, which was clearly unethical, and secondly in that it took me too long to decipher the culture of exchanging commodities. I owe it to the girls to follow them in a future research with this new knowledge I have gained, but in a way that I will be able to be more active and they will be more empowered. Listening to their voice was the first step, but action research as a teacher-researcher is crucial after that.

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I believe that critical pedagogy can also be a useful tool for undertaking such action research. If following the girls is not possible, then I am hoping for some dissemination of the findings, and other findings from future research in other Cypriot VET schools, in teacher education programmes, so that other teachers in the specific context will be aware of the underpinnings and the consequences of this culture of exchanging commodities. This will enhance teachers' awareness of how their agency can contribute in making or breaking the vicious cycle of negative VET reputation. The two axes targeted in such programmes can be the societal stereotypes and the students' resistance acts, and the ways in which teachers can positively or negatively affect both, which in turn can affect the negative VET reputation. A similar education programme, based on the same two axes, can be targeted towards parents, based on relevant research results that will better reveal parents' agency which was indicated in this research as a determinant of vocational identities.

6.2.2 Methodological considerations and suggestions

6.2.2.1 The preoccupation with everyday 'trivial' matters serving as a valuable lesson for the ethnographer

An unexpected finding was that the girls were preoccupied with matters which I initially wrongly prejudged as being trivial. The incident through which I came to an understanding of what I initially thought to be an obsessive preoccupation of the girls with trivial matters, taught me that pre-determining and/or rushing into explanations is a big ethnographic mistake. A strategy of gradual convergence methodology was used as an attempt to better understand the context without making prejudgments of what information may or may not be important. I urge ethnographers to follow this method with alertness, as a strategy of avoiding bias and reaching more plausible interpretations, which do not shadow participants' understandings.

6.2.2.2 The dynamics of the dual role of being a teacher and a researcher

Barton has argued that sociologists may uncover discriminatory practices either through their research or through personal engagement with the institutions within which they work (in

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Arnot et al, 2010). Sometimes both of these parameters may co-exist, e.g. in the case of teachers researchers. Alexacos (2015) has indicated that:

> (p)erhaps the greatest influence in reshaping how I think of teaching and learning and what constitutes knowledge has been the research I have done in my own classroom. Researching our own practices as teachers contributes to our learning, understanding, and the growth of ourselves and our students. Beyond these obvious benefits, what I have found very empowering and emancipatory is that we as teacher | researchers become the creators of new knowledge and theories from which we, as well as other teachers, can share and benefit (p.1)

While it is clear that the girls valued teacher friendliness and humane approach and despite my firm belief in the benefits of this approach, I want to stress the fact that the double role of being a teacher and a researcher is not always easy or straightforward. On occasions where a girl was accusing another participant, I had to be careful in order to be discrete and neutral as a listener, without at the same time being fake. I refrained from offering my personal views, as I believe that it would obstruct the setting from one that was as natural as possible and might alienate the girls. I instead tried to project the discussion to their own thoughts and opinions.

Moreover, being a teacher as well as a researcher meant that I was professionally involved with other members of the context. As an example, the complaints of the canteen ladies over why I did not always choose to buy the girls drinks from the canteen served a reminder that no matter how discreet an ethnographer tries to be, difficulties may arise from unforeseen fronts and must be dealt with in an equally discreet way.

Relevant to the above was the dilemma arising when I was spotted with students at a time they were out of class, and instead of prompting them, as their teacher, to go back in class, as some other colleagues were seen doing whenever they spotted students playing truant, I would be seen hanging out with them. Despite that, as mentioned elsewhere, I noticed that my lack of criticism concerning their act of truanting made students feel more at ease and trust me to a degree that they could open up and share their perspectives. At the same time, in the staff room I was careful not to alienate colleagues. As a response to colleagues who sometimes asked about my hanging out with students, I explained that it was a pedagogical means of attempting to grasp their own narratives and perspectives as to why they resist, in order to be better able to help them and welcome them to school.

Furthermore, describing a number of illegal acts from members of the staff concerning the 'disappearance' of absences raises at least two problems: first, in terms of describing teachers' acts without giving enough attention to the power relations and systemic antecedents that may

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determine/catalyse such behaviour. One such antecedent may be the marginalised position of VET schools in the Cypriot education system which may influence teacher behaviours into acts of ensuring their jobs' survival. Such a focus on power relations would avoid a seemingly 'teacher-bashing' approach - which has never been my intention - to one that is more sensitive to the fact that teachers are indeed 'victims' of the subordinate status of VET in the Cypriot society. This is indeed crucial; otherwise there is the danger that the only people who may be blamed for what was happening in the school will be the teachers. However, I decided not to shift the focus of *this specific research* from the girls' voices and perspectives, because I hold that they have been underrepresented, both in local and international research. Nevertheless, such a focus on teachers' perspectives and on broader hegemonic power imbalances is equally valid and is a logical and important suggestion for future research. Second, there are ethical issues in terms of the difficulties that will inevitably arise if and when this thesis is made public in the small community of Cyprus, as described in section 3.6. This may have an impact on the specific school and its staff, and besides concern for how I will deal with the fallout, there is also the issue of how this research can actually have a positive impact, given the difficult situations/illegal acts which are described.

Apart from the above dilemmas and ethical considertions, when one of the girls tried to cheat during a Physics test, I decided to act in what I considered to be a professional and ethical way, using the guidelines of the administration in case of cheating. There was a risk that my approach might have alienated her and that I was perhaps risking losing her trust or losing her as a participant. Nevertheless, I was aware that however the situation developed, I had to respect the decision of that girl. My suggestion to researchers with this dual role is to be decisively strict about not mixing their two roles, as well as explicitly explaining this upfront as well as during the research to the participants. Researchers need to know that there may be incidences where they may risk alienating/losing participants with this strict divide between their roles, yet it is rewarding no matter the cost to the research, because it is ethically right with regard to their teaching profession.

Research results indicate that despite the challenges arising from my dual role, gaining valid information from the students was not threatened by my teacher role, which is what other researchers suggest (Russell, 2011; Corrigan, 1979). Students found it novel that they could be open and friendly with a teacher of theirs and it was a trait that they seemed to value. Based on

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these results, my suggestion is for future educational research which utilises teachers-researchers to be promoted as a means of genuinely focusing on students' voices, as well as the disclosure of ethical issues surrounding this dual role.

6.3 Limitations

Limitations are an inextricable part of research and for me personally they also form a sound basis of my adherence to lifelong learning. My analysis and discussion throughout the dissertation only reflects my current understandings on the issues under consideration. It is not an exhaustive analysis nor is it without limitations.

Research findings provide some further insights and knowledge, however none of the results could or should be generalised. External validity (generalisability) is not a characteristic that can be easily attributed to qualitative research (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). After all, a crucial aspect of educational research is the realisation that schools cannot exist in a social vacuum (Phtiaka, 1997; Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley & Goodlad, 2004), therefore in every research there has to be a convergence to a specific educational context (Symeonidou, 2009). Walzer (1983/1997) rightly points out that

> (t)he character of a(n)... institution can be determined only by reference to the social forces between which it mediates. A balance must always be struck, different in different times and places' (p. 402).

Consequently, the aim of this thesis is "not to replace 'error' with 'truth'. Rather, it is to engage in critical reflection to improve our understanding of the social world and our subsequent actions within it" (Bauman, in Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p.14).

Symeonidou (2013) indicates the importance of reflecting on one's background experience which has shaped their current way of thinking. For example, my choice to attempt to write this dissertation in English despite my difficulties with the specific language has been due to a combination of reasons. First, I started writing in English because during the first steps of the research, one of the committee members was English (Professor Len Barton), who later withdrew due to health issues. Secondly, it was an opportunity to challenge myself and try to

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improve my little experience with the language, through practicing. Thirdly, in order to facilitate easier dissemination of the results - while the majority of Greek readers can read English, the majority of English readers cannot read Greek. However, this decision was not without its risks and limitations. Apart from my seemingly never ending grammatical and spelling mistakes, rather poor vocabulary and imminent difficulties when I will be orally defending my thesis, Federici (2011) correctly indicates that translating a local dialect can be difficult. I can confirm that successfully translating quotations from students, who typically used the local Cypriot dialect, without losing the richness in meaning, proved to be time consuming and at times very challenging.

During fieldwork, I preferred to write my field notes as reconstructions rather than on the spot, in order to make the setting of the observation as naturalistic as possible – I did not want the participants to see me scribbling in a notebook. Rather, I wanted my full attention to be in observing, in interacting when the observation was participant and in focusing on the feelings that were arising in me because of observations. On these occasions I almost always forced myself to write down my reconstructions as soon as possible after my meetings with the girls, no matter how tired I might have felt, otherwise I would not have been able to recall details of the conversations. However, in some cases I failed to do that, therefore I am certain that I have missed important information because I was unable to recall what was said; as a rule I preferred to omit such vague reconstructions altogether and instead accepted my shortcoming as a limitation.

Furthermore, I did not do justice to all the voices of the students who contributed to this research. Extensive material from boy participants, colleagues as well as girls from other classes who helped me gain a better understanding of the context was largely omitted, as I focused on girl participants. I cannot help feeling guilty for not including their voice too. Despite that limitation, the data exist and I plan to give them voice in future projects.

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6.4 Epilogue

Both positive as well as negative traits of VET reputation were willingly carried by the girls in their virtual handbags, that way shaping their vocational identities and reproducing social structures. However, this process of reproduction of social structures was also catalysed by a culture of exchanging commodities which bears comparison to economic notions and which, in turn, points to a culture of de-romanticisation and unhealthiness of education. Consequently, attributing truancy to endogenous problems of the student is insufficient. In line with structuration theory, the girls were viewed as operating within structures, utilising resources given to them in order to shape their own actions and identities. These resources, however, were often neither healthy nor emancipating.

Back in the first days of fieldwork, a boy student stared at me when telling me:

> Student (year 1): /…/ the Ministry (of Education) considers us to be numbers; I am not a number.

Although I cannot generalise to what is happening in other educational contexts, I can certainly stare back at this student and reassure him that we, some of his teachers, in that specific context, definitely did consider many students to be numbers, aiming to reach a critical figure which would reassure the formation of certain specialisation classes and the securement of our jobs.

Despite the gloomy picture, and although resistance is a multi-faceted phenomenon which cannot and must not be underestimated, the findings of this research are an indication of the importance of longer lasting ethnographic research, as a method of promoting students' voice and delving into the underpinnings of the shaping of their identities. I believe that research undertaken by teachers-researchers is crucial within this frame. Taking into account students' voice and developing critical awareness concerning the role of the school and the society in inducing students' acts, is proposed to be a powerful step for the development of more inclusive understandings and interventions to truancy.

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MARIA IACOVOU

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MARIA IACOVOU

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PERMISSION FOR PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

(translated from Greek)

SCHOOL YEAR 2015-2016

Dear parent/guardian,

I am Mrs Maria Iacovou, the Physics teacher of your child, and I am also a student at the University of Cyprus. For the purposes of my studies, I want to pursue a very interesting educational research. For the research, special permission has been received from the Principal of the school.

Through this research, I am very interested in finding out about the opinions of the students concerning their school life and their school experience, what they like about school, their future plans etc.! For the purposes of the research, I would like your permission for your child to participate, anonymously. For the purposes of the research, I will need to spend time with your child and their friends both inside and outside class, in break times and perhaps in after school activities if you will allow it. I may need to record their interviews and administer questionnaires too, but your child's real name will not be used in the research results and all the information they share with me will be confidential. If you or your child, at any time, change their mind and want to withdraw their participation, they are entitled and free to do so! Decision to participate or not to participate is entirely optional and will not affect the student's assessment in the lesson that I teach them in class. The research will not affect class time or the teaching of their Physics lesson in any way, as it will be an extra activity we will engage in.

I am at your disposal for more information concerning the research. Please do not hesitate to call me, either at school or on my cell phone at [redacted]

Please fill in the following information:

I ……

the mother/father/guardian of ……

of class ……, **allow / don't allow** my child to participate in this research.

Signature: ……..

Date: ……..

Yours sincerely,

Maria Iacovou

MARIA IACOVOU

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Familiarising

- Thank you for wanting to take part in this study! I am very interested in listening to what you will tell me!
- This study is about your school experiences and your feelings concerning school! My aim is to make known your thoughts about it!
- Anonymity
- What pseudonym would you like to have in the study?
- May I use the recorder?
- You can answer to the questions that you want! If you are tired at any moment, please do ask me to stop. If you want me to stop recording in order to tell me something which you consider very sensitive or confidential, just tell me and I will happily do so, you have all the right!
- I would like to know more about you, where you live, your family and your hobbies!
- When is your birthday?

School experience

- Could you please compare a bit your previous school with this one?
- Which are the things you like in our school?
- Which don't you like?
- What is your opinion about the teachers of our school/ are teachers different in this school compared with your previous school?
- How do you find the classes here? Are they easy or difficult?
- Which are your favourite classes?
- How would you describe yourself as a student?
- Which are your friends in school?
- Whom do you trust to talk to when you have some personal problem?
- Could that person be a teacher?

MARIA IACOVOU

Concerning absences

- I have noticed that some students decide to get out of class and I am interested in knowing how they take that decision without judging them. Why do you think that a student takes that decision not to attend a lesson?
- I saw (you/name of a peer) (when) out of class during the (n^{th}) period. What was she/he/were you up to?
- Do you ever stay out of class?
- How many absences do you have?
- Where do you hang out when you stay out of class?
- Do your friends stay out of class too?
- Do you stay out of class alone or with other students? Who?
- How does it feel like to skip a class?
- How do you take the decision to stay out of class?
- From which lessons?
- Is it something that you share with your parents, about staying out of class and how often?
- Do deputy heads call at home to report on your absences?
- What do your teachers say about you staying out of class?
- Did anyone reprimand you about it?

Future/ if questions

- What would you like to see changing in our school in the future?
- If you were my colleague and you saw a student you really liked skipping classes, what would you do?
- How would you handle students' unjustified absences if you were the principal of our school? Do you think the school should change something about the regulation concerning absences, either making it stricter or more tolerant?
- Which would be the perfect school for you?
- Would you like to add something, state something about you or your school experiences or your future that I may have omitted in this interview?

MARIA IACOVOU

- When I go home, I will listen to our conversation many times and write down the main themes. I will bring these to you if you don't mind, to tell me if I got everything right about these main themes. Is it OK if I come with a few more questions every now and then, if I see that I have anything that I did not understand?
- Thank you!!!

MARIA IACOVOU

APPENDIX C: PRE-SET OBSERVATION SHEET

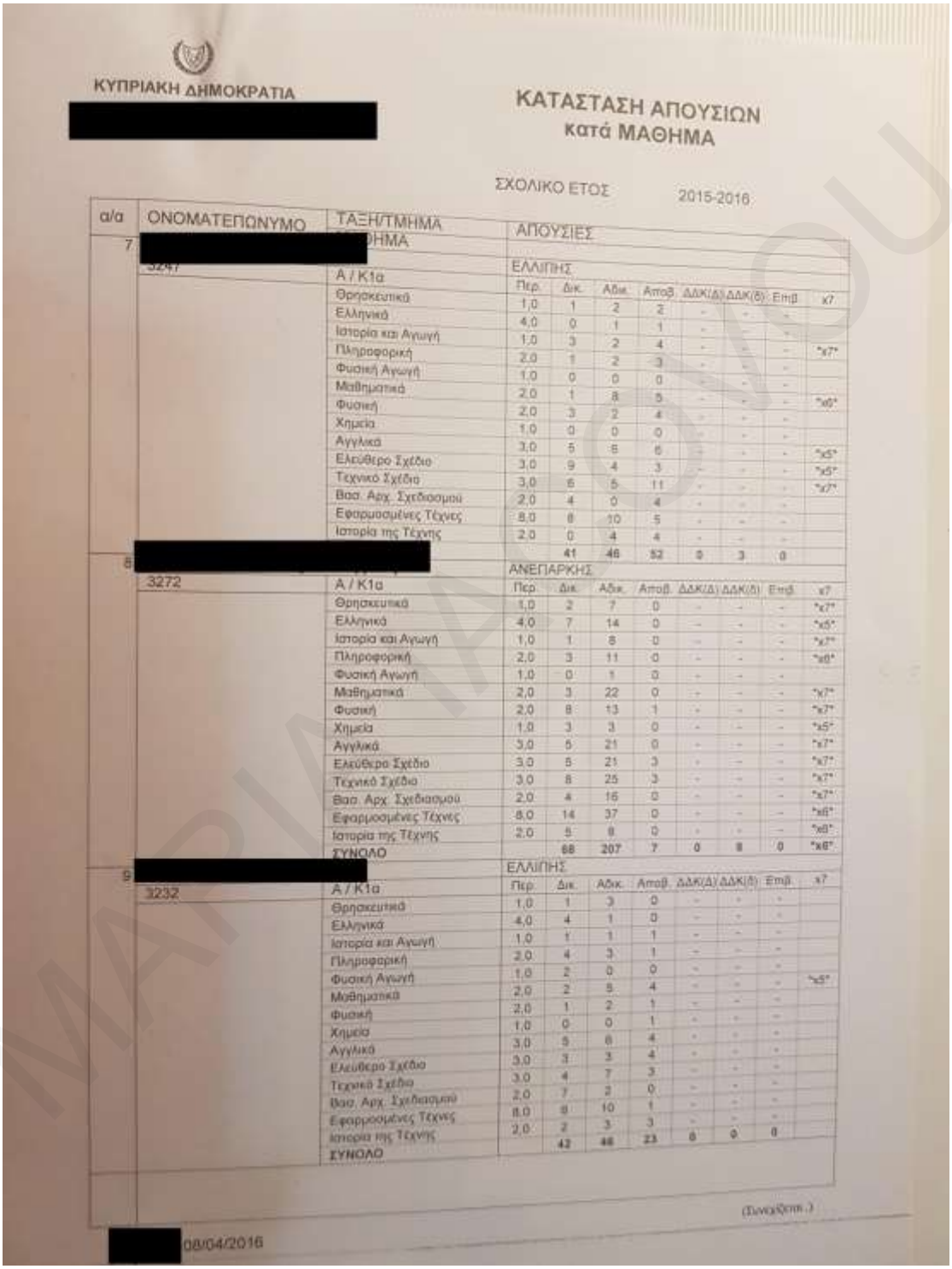
DATE: .....

TIME	WHO	WHERE	OBSERVATION	CODES	OWN THOUGHTS

MARIA IACOVOU

APPENDIX D: ARTEFACTS

a. Samples of students' record of absences



ΚΥΠΡΙΑΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ

[redacted]

ΚΑΤΑΣΤΑΣΗ ΑΠΟΥΣΙΩΝ
κατά ΜΑΘΗΜΑ

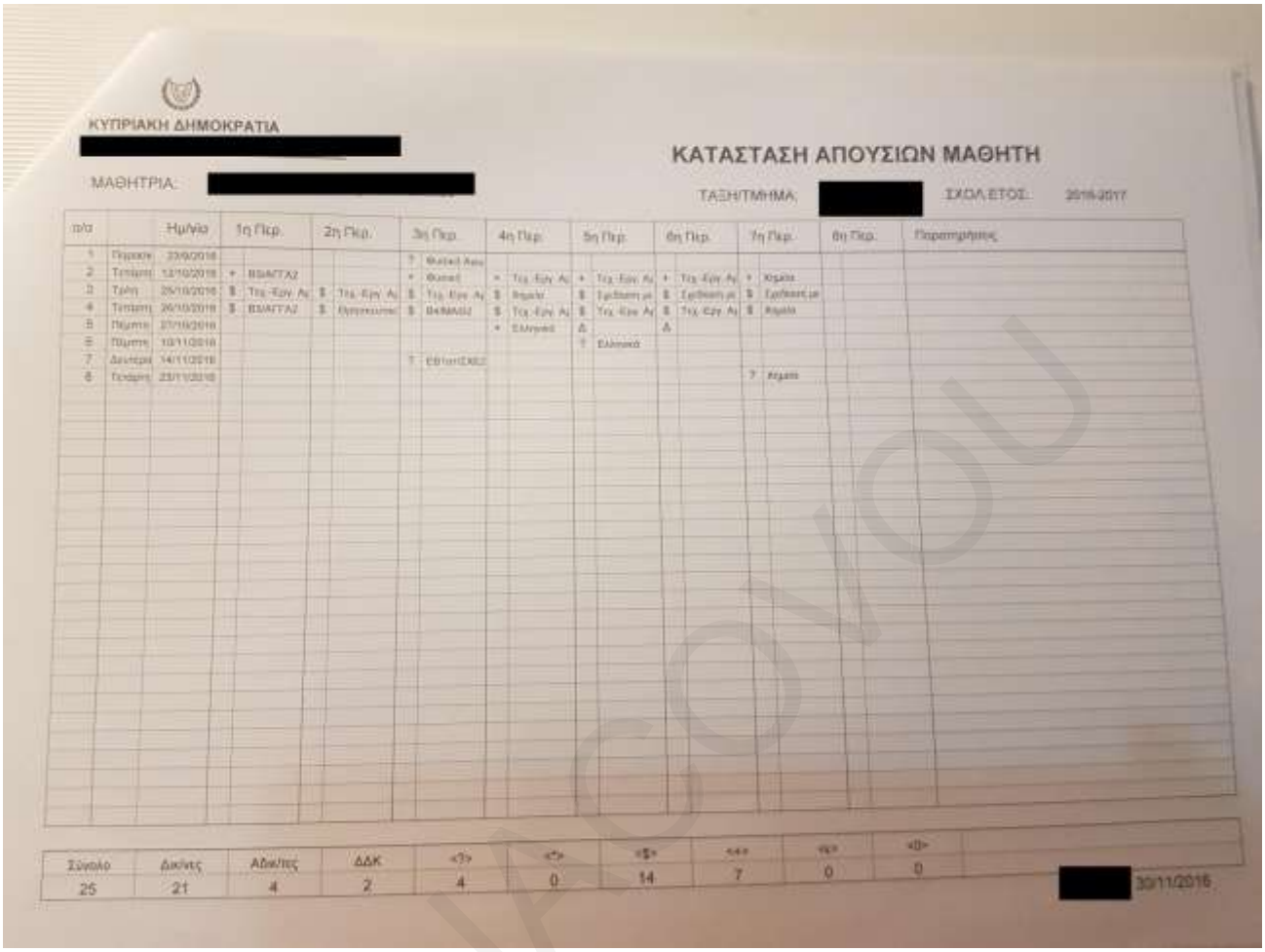
ΣΧΟΛΙΚΟ ΕΤΟΣ 2015-2016

α/α	ΟΝΟΜΑΤΕΠΩΝΥΜΟ	ΤΑΞΗ/ΤΜΗΜΑ ΜΑΘΗΜΑ	ΑΠΟΥΣΙΕΣ							
7	[redacted]		ΕΛΛΙΠΗΣ							
	3247	Α / Κ1α	Περ.	Δικ.	Αδικ.	Αποβ.	ΔΔΚ(Δ)	ΔΔΚ(Β)	Επιβ.	Κ?
		Θρησκευτικά	1,0	1	2	2	-	-	-	
		Ελληνικά	4,0	0	1	1	-	-	-	
		Ιστορία και Αγωγή	1,0	3	2	4	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Πληροφορική	2,0	1	2	3	-	-	-	
		Φυσική Αγωγή	1,0	0	0	0	-	-	-	
		Μαθηματικά	2,0	1	8	5	-	-	-	"κ6"
		Φυσική	2,0	3	2	4	-	-	-	
		Χημεία	1,0	0	0	0	-	-	-	
		Αγγλικά	3,0	5	8	6	-	-	-	"κ5"
		Ελεύθερο Σχέδιο	3,0	9	4	3	-	-	-	"κ5"
		Τεχνικό Σχέδιο	3,0	6	5	11	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Βασ. Αρχ. Σχεδιασμού	2,0	4	0	4	-	-	-	
		Εφαρμοσμένες Τέχνες	8,0	8	10	5	-	-	-	
		Ιστορία της Τέχνης	2,0	0	4	4	-	-	-	
		ΣΥΝΟΛΟ		41	46	52	0	3	0	
8	[redacted]		ΑΝΕΠΑΡΚΗΣ							
	3272	Α / Κ1α	Περ.	Δικ.	Αδικ.	Αποβ.	ΔΔΚ(Δ)	ΔΔΚ(Β)	Επιβ.	Κ?
		Θρησκευτικά	1,0	2	7	0	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Ελληνικά	4,0	7	14	0	-	-	-	"κ5"
		Ιστορία και Αγωγή	1,0	1	8	0	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Πληροφορική	2,0	3	11	0	-	-	-	"κ6"
		Φυσική Αγωγή	1,0	0	1	0	-	-	-	
		Μαθηματικά	2,0	3	22	0	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Φυσική	2,0	8	13	1	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Χημεία	1,0	3	3	0	-	-	-	"κ5"
		Αγγλικά	3,0	5	21	0	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Ελεύθερο Σχέδιο	3,0	5	21	3	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Τεχνικό Σχέδιο	3,0	8	25	3	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Βασ. Αρχ. Σχεδιασμού	2,0	4	16	0	-	-	-	"κ7"
		Εφαρμοσμένες Τέχνες	8,0	14	37	0	-	-	-	"κ6"
		Ιστορία της Τέχνης	2,0	5	8	0	-	-	-	"κ6"
		ΣΥΝΟΛΟ		68	207	7	0	8	0	"κ6"
9	[redacted]		ΕΛΛΙΠΗΣ							
	3232	Α / Κ1α	Περ.	Δικ.	Αδικ.	Αποβ.	ΔΔΚ(Δ)	ΔΔΚ(Β)	Επιβ.	Κ?
		Θρησκευτικά	1,0	1	3	0	-	-	-	
		Ελληνικά	4,0	4	1	0	-	-	-	
		Ιστορία και Αγωγή	1,0	1	1	1	-	-	-	
		Πληροφορική	2,0	4	3	1	-	-	-	
		Φυσική Αγωγή	1,0	2	0	0	-	-	-	
		Μαθηματικά	2,0	2	5	4	-	-	-	"κ5"
		Φυσική	2,0	1	2	1	-	-	-	
		Χημεία	1,0	0	0	1	-	-	-	
		Αγγλικά	3,0	5	8	4	-	-	-	
		Ελεύθερο Σχέδιο	3,0	3	3	4	-	-	-	
		Τεχνικό Σχέδιο	3,0	4	7	3	-	-	-	
		Βασ. Αρχ. Σχεδιασμού	2,0	7	2	0	-	-	-	
		Εφαρμοσμένες Τέχνες	8,0	8	10	1	-	-	-	
		Ιστορία της Τέχνης	2,0	2	3	3	-	-	-	
		ΣΥΝΟΛΟ		43	48	23	0	0	0	

(Συνεχίζεται...)

[redacted] 08/04/2016

ΜΑΡΙΑ ΜΟΥ



ΚΥΠΡΙΑΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ

[redacted]

ΚΑΤΑΣΤΑΣΗ ΑΠΟΥΣΙΩΝ ΜΑΘΗΤΗ

ΜΑΘΗΤΡΙΑ: [redacted]

ΤΑΞΗ/ΤΜΗΜΑ: [redacted] ΣΧΟΛ.ΕΤΟΣ: 2016-2017

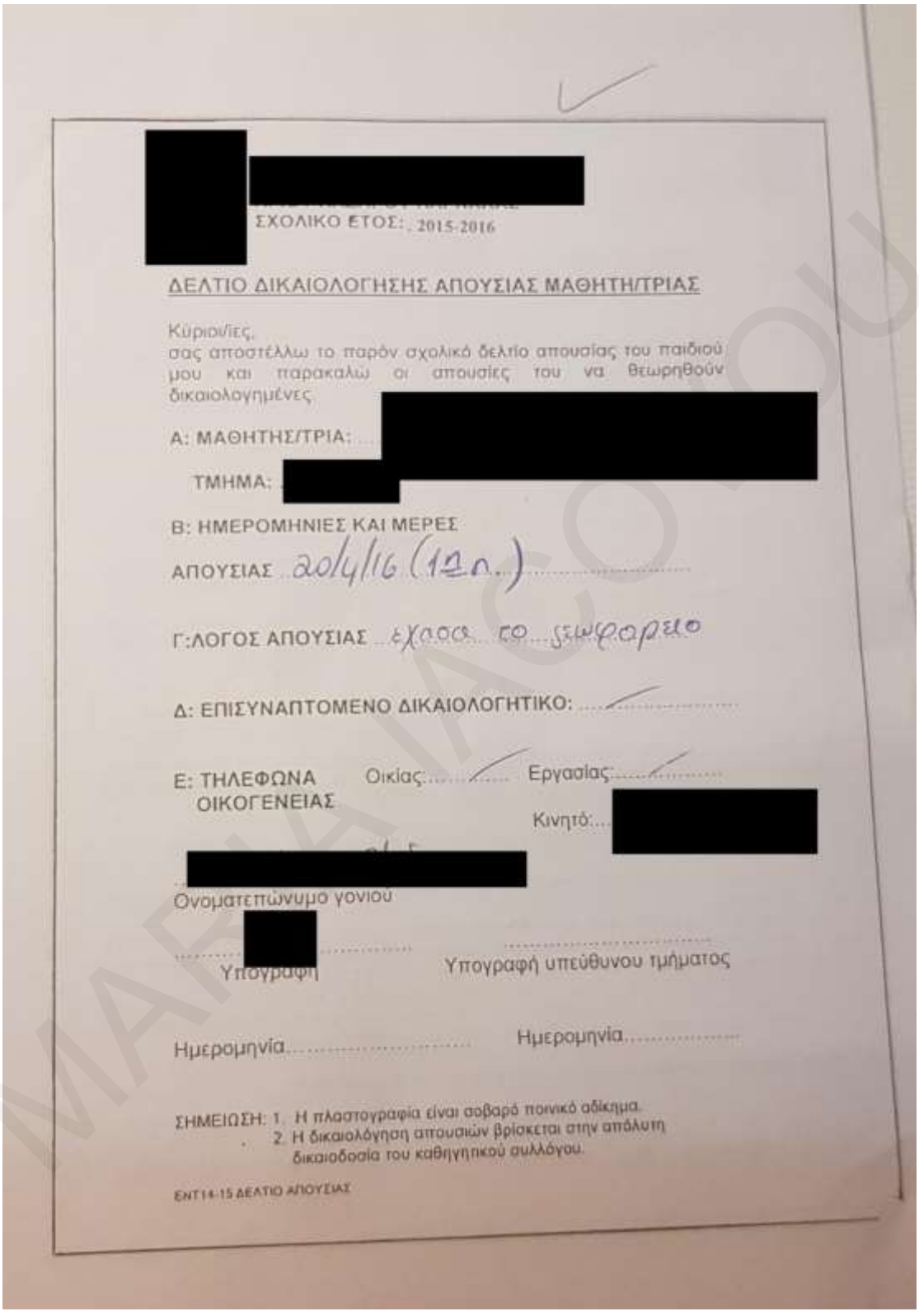
α/α		Ημ/νία	1η Περ.		2η Περ.		3η Περ.	4η Περ.	5η Περ.	6η Περ.	7η Περ.	8η Περ.	Παρατηρήσεις
1	Παρασκ	23/9/2016					? Φυσική Αγω						
2	Τετάρτη	12/10/2016	+	ΒΙΟΛΟΓΙΑ2			+ Φυσική	+ Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	+ Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	+ Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	+ Χημεία		
3	Τρίτη	25/10/2016	$	Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	$	Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	$ Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	$ Χημεία	$ Σχεδιαση με	$ Σχεδιαση με	$ Σχεδιαση με		
4	Τετάρτη	26/10/2016	$	ΒΙΟΛΟΓΙΑ2	$	Οικοκυρικα	$ ΘΕΑΤΡΟΥ	$ Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	$ Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	$ Τεχ.-Εργ. Αγ	$ Χημεία		
5	Πέμπτη	27/10/2016						+ Ελληνικά	Δ	Δ			
6	Πέμπτη	10/11/2016							? Ελληνικά				
7	Δευτέρα	14/11/2016					? ΕΒΠΠΕΚΕΣ						
8	Τετάρτη	23/11/2016									? Χημεία		

Σύνολο	Δικίνες	Αδικίες	ΔΔΚ	<?>	<>	<$>	<+>	<%>	<0>
25	21	4	2	4	0	14	7	0	0

[redacted] 30/11/2016

MARIA IACOVOU

b. Parental note of absence



[redacted]

ΣΧΟΛΙΚΟ ΕΤΟΣ: 2015-2016

ΔΕΛΤΙΟ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΛΟΓΗΣΗΣ ΑΠΟΥΣΙΑΣ ΜΑΘΗΤΗ/ΤΡΙΑΣ

Κύριοι/ες,
σας αποστέλλω το παρόν σχολικό δελτίο απουσίας του παιδιού μου και παρακαλώ οι απουσίες του να θεωρηθούν δικαιολογημένες.

Α: ΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ/ΤΡΙΑ: [redacted]

ΤΜΗΜΑ: [redacted]

Β: ΗΜΕΡΟΜΗΝΙΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΕΡΕΣ

ΑΠΟΥΣΙΑΣ 20/4/16 (1η ω.)

Γ:ΛΟΓΟΣ ΑΠΟΥΣΙΑΣ εχασα το ξενοφωνείο

Δ: ΕΠΙΣΥΝΑΠΤΟΜΕΝΟ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΛΟΓΗΤΙΚΟ: /

Ε: ΤΗΛΕΦΩΝΑ ΟΙΚΟΓΕΝΕΙΑΣ Οικίας: / Εργασίας: /

Κινητό: [redacted]

[redacted]

Ονοματεπώνυμο γονιού

[redacted]

Υπογραφή

Υπογραφή υπεύθυνου τμήματος

Ημερομηνία.....

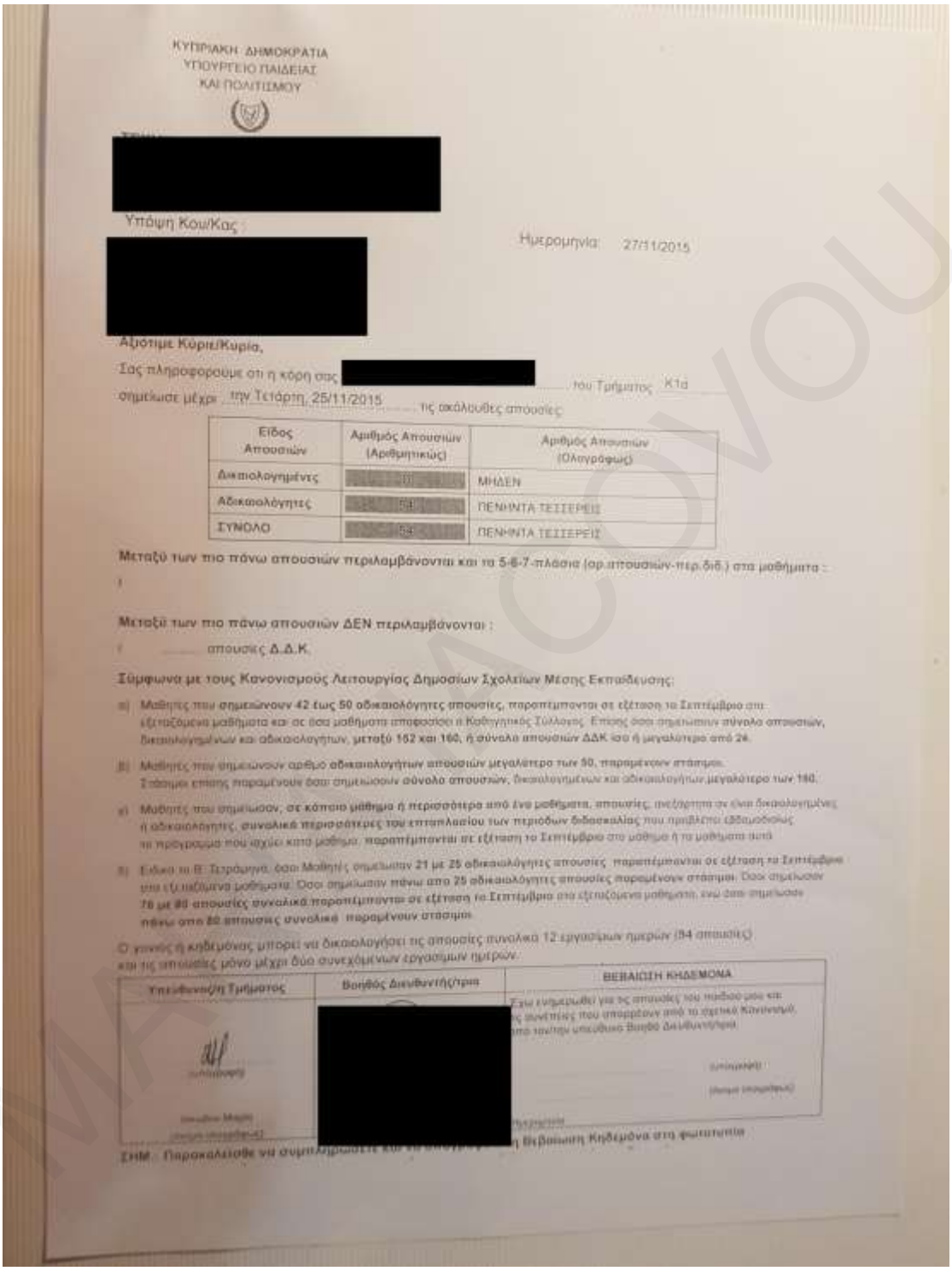
Ημερομηνία.....

ΣΗΜΕΙΩΣΗ: 1. Η πλαστογραφία είναι σοβαρό ποινικό αδίκημα.
2. Η δικαιολόγηση απουσιών βρίσκεται στην απόλυτη δικαιοδοσία του καθηγητικού συλλόγου.

ΕΝΤ14-15 ΔΕΛΤΙΟ ΑΠΟΥΣΙΑΣ

ΜΑΡΙΑ ΙΑΚΩΒΟΥ

c. Sample of letter informing parents about their child's absences and the legislation concerning absences.



ΚΥΠΡΙΑΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ
ΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙΟ ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑΣ
ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ

[redacted]

Υπόψη Κου/Κας [redacted]

Ημερομηνία: 27/11/2015

Αξιότιμε Κύριε/Κυρία,

Σας πληροφορούμε ότι η κόρη σας [redacted] του Τμήματος Κ1α σημείωσε μέχρι την Τετάρτη, 25/11/2015 τις ακόλουθες απουσίες:

Είδος Απουσιών	Αριθμός Απουσιών (Αριθμητικώς)	Αριθμός Απουσιών (Ολογράφως)
Δικαιολογημένες	[redacted]	ΜΗΔΕΝ
Αδικαιολόγητες	[redacted]	ΠΕΝΗΝΤΑ ΤΕΣΣΕΡΕΙΣ
ΣΥΝΟΛΟ	[redacted]	ΠΕΝΗΝΤΑ ΤΕΣΣΕΡΕΙΣ

Μεταξύ των πιο πάνω απουσιών περιλαμβάνονται και τα 5-6-7-πλάσια (αρ.απουσιών-περ.διδ.) στα μαθήματα :

Μεταξύ των πιο πάνω απουσιών ΔΕΝ περιλαμβάνονται :

απουσίες Δ.Δ.Κ.

Σύμφωνα με τους Κανονισμούς Λειτουργίας Δημοσίων Σχολείων Μέσης Εκπαίδευσης:

α) Μαθητής που σημειώνουν 42 έως 50 αδικαιολόγητες απουσίες, παραπέμπονται σε εξέταση τα Σεπτέμβριο στα εξεταζόμενα μαθήματα και σε όσα μαθήματα αποφασίσει η Καθηγητικός Σύλλογος. Έτσης όσοι σημειώσουν σύνολο απουσιών, δικαιολογημένων και αδικαιολογήτων, μεταξύ 152 και 160, ή σύνολο απουσιών ΔΔΚ ίσο ή μεγαλύτερο από 24.

β) Μαθητής που σημειώνουν αρθμο αδικαιολογήτων απουσιών μεγαλύτερο των 50, παραμένουν στάσιμοι. Στάσιμοι επίσης παραμένουν όσοι σημειώσουν σύνολο απουσιών, δικαιολογημένων και αδικαιολογήτων μεγαλύτερο των 160.

γ) Μαθητές που σημείωσαν, σε κάποιο μάθημα ή περισσότερα από ένα μαθήματα, απουσίες, ανεξάρτητα αν είναι δικαιολογημένες ή αδικαιολόγητες, συνολικά περισσότερες του επταπλασίου των περιόδων διδασκαλίας που προβλέπει εβδομαδιαίως το πρόγραμμα που ισχύει κατά μάθημα, παραπέμπονται σε εξέταση τα Σεπτέμβριο στο μάθημα ή τα μαθήματα αυτά.

δ) Εκτός το Β΄ Τετράμηνο, όσοι Μαθητές σημείωσαν 21 με 25 αδικαιολόγητες απουσίες παραπέμπονται σε εξέταση τα Σεπτέμβριο στα εξεταζόμενα μαθήματα. Όσοι σημείωσαν πάνω από 25 αδικαιολόγητες απουσίες παραμένουν στάσιμοι. Όσοι σημείωσαν 76 με 80 απουσίες συνολικά παραπέμπονται σε εξέταση τα Σεπτέμβριο στα εξεταζόμενα μαθήματα, ενώ όσοι σημείωσαν πάνω από 80 απουσίες συνολικά παραμένουν στάσιμοι.

Ο γονιός ή κηδεμόνας μπορεί να δικαιολογήσει τις απουσίες συνολικά 12 εργασίμων ημερών (84 απουσίες) και τις απουσίες μόνο μέχρι δύο συνεχόμενων εργασίμων ημερών.

Υπεύθυνος/η Τμήματος	Βοηθός Διευθυντής/τρια	ΒΕΒΑΙΩΣΗ ΚΗΔΕΜΟΝΑ
[redacted]	[redacted]	Έχω ενημερωθεί για τις απουσίες του παιδιού μου και τις συνέπειες που απορρέουν από το σχετικό Κανονισμό. Από τον/την υπεύθυνο Βοηθό Διευθυντή/τρια.

Σημ. Παρακαλείσθε να συμπληρώσετε και να επιστρέψετε τη Βεβαίωση Κηδεμόνα στη φωτοτυπία

MFA COVOU

APPENDIX E: QUESTIONNAIRES

Questionnaire 1 (questions translated from Greek)

1. Name:
2. Today's date:
3. Birth date:
4. Where do you live?
5. Siblings
6. Parents (e.g. married, divorced)
7. Some ways in which school is good for you:
8. Some ways in which school is bad for you:
9. Number of absences this year up to today:
10. The number of absences you had last year at this time, was approximately less, the same or more than this year's? How come?
11. If a student from your class decides to skip a class, will you try to convince her otherwise or into it? How come?
12. I come to school because…
13. Approximately how many times did you skip a class this year?
14. What is your opinion about students who skip classes?
15. I skip classes because…
16. How do you feel about graduating this year? How come?
17. Do you think you will miss school? How come?
18. Which skills do you think you have gained from school, which will prove useful in your future adult life?
19. What are you thinking of doing after graduating?
20. In what profession do you see yourself in the future?
21. Would you like to stay in that job for a long time or change jobs in the future? How come?
22. Which is your dream job or your dream studies?
23. How do VET students compare to students of Lyceums or Private Schools? How come?
24. If during break time you see two students fighting, what will you do?
25. During the lesson I like….
26. I think that my teachers are…
27. I think that the Principal is…
28. I think that last year's Principal was…
29. Which of the two principals do you prefer? How come?
30. Do you think that your teachers understand you? If yes, in what ways?
31. If a new female student came today in your class, what would you advise her?

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32. When I do something that is prohibited in the school or in class, my teacher…
33. In my free time I like to …
34. During the weekends I like to…
35. Do you listen to music? What kind of music? Name some singers or some songs that you like.
36. What will you remember from school? Name a good and a bad incident.
37. My friends at school are…
38. How would you like to see the school changing in order to be better? What changes should occur in your opinion?
39. Something else that I would like to add which I consider important for this study is…

Questionnaire 2 (translated from Greek)

How do you picture yourself in 20 years from now?

MARIA IACOVOU