

## **The Effect of Education Attainment on Children When Living with an Alcoholic Caregiver.**

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This research project explored the significant effect of education attainment on children when living with an alcoholic caregiver. Although there is a recognised risk for children of alcoholics to be negatively impacted by their caregiver's addiction, little research has investigated those who have succeeded in education, despite their adverse home circumstances. Therefore, this project also aims to explore the reasoning behind those who have succeeded and underachieved in education whilst living with a caregiver with an addiction to alcohol, by highlighting both the possible risk and protective factors available to these children.

### **Literature Review**

Firstly, it is essential to provide a definition of an addiction and the characteristics associated with those who have an addiction to alcohol. This will enable a greater understanding of the potential impact a caregiver's addiction to alcohol may have on a child's education.

#### *Addiction and Its Consequences*

"Addiction is defined as the on-going use of mood-altering substances, such as alcohol, ... despite adverse consequences" (Bettinardi-Angres and Angres 2010, p.31). Characteristics of those addicted to alcohol include preoccupation with alcohol and a great deal of time spent trying to obtain the substance. Therefore, important occupational, social and recreational activities may be reduced or given up because of the substance use. Over time the individual becomes tolerant to the substance and needs to take increased amounts to achieve intoxication (Moss and Dyer 2010). Consequently, alcohol can cause serious harm to both the individual using alcohol and on the immediate family members (Winter 2006), hence why alcoholism has been identified as a family disease (Shannon 2009; Heffner 2003). By employing the family systems theory, research has revealed that family members living in these home environments must undertake additional roles to keep their family system in balance (Lander et al. 2013). As a result many children adopt inappropriate caring role to provide a sense of stability and consistency to their family. This unfortunately has been seen as a contributor for children of alcoholics to be unable to achieve in school due to the demands of their home life (Cochran 2014; Health Service Executive 2011).

#### *Research Exploring the Lives of Children of Alcoholics*

Although alcoholic families are not homogeneous, children who have lived in these home environments are often characterised and defined in a narrow way. These individuals are referred to as "Children of Alcoholics" and in adulthood "Adult Children of Alcoholics" (Walker and Lee 1998). This essentially groups these individuals together who have lived in a home environment where alcohol is an issue, regardless to the fact the same events can lead to totally different outcomes for children (Cairns 2006) and can affect each child differently (Heffner 2003). While this label placed on these individuals may be helpful in providing entry to particular services, for others it may be hurtful and an inaccurate representation of themselves (Dove 2013).

Attached to this label is an extensive list of negative outcomes and characteristics that is associated with this particular group, despite evidence indicating that children of alcoholics

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status alone is insufficient to predict negative outcomes (Dove 2013). These negative outcomes and characteristics could be related to the fact that there has been an extensive body of research which has solely focused on the negative outcomes and characteristic dysfunctions of children of alcoholics. While much less research has explored those who have not been negatively impacted by their experiences (Dove 2013; Schroeder and Kelley 2008). Also the majority of research undertaken to explore the lives of children of alcoholics has used quantitative methods. This signifies the lack of attention given to the individuals' personal experience and fails to capture what it is truly like to live with an alcoholic caregiver and how their experiences have impacted on them (Dove 2013).

Although there are gaps in the research exploring children of alcoholics who have succeeded in education, the concept of resilience has been explored intensively (Mylant et al. 2002). This term of resilience has been applied to children of alcoholics who have defeated the odds and achieved in life, including education. Risk and protective factors that have emerged from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory is a mechanism to attempt to understand why some children of alcoholics are resilient, whilst others are not (Armstrong et al. 2014). Risk factors are defined as "conditions or influences that increase the likelihood of poor outcomes" (Dunst et al. 2014, p.10). While protective factors are defined as "characteristics or conditions that lower the probability of poor outcomes associated with risk factors" (Dunst et al. 2014, p.10). Research has indicated that children of alcoholics with high risk factors and few protective factors are more likely to have difficulties in school. Whilst those who have numerous and adequate protective factors achieve well in school despite being exposed to various risk factors (Werner and Johnson 2004).

#### *Risk Factors and School Underachievers*

Children of alcoholics are constantly exposed to risk factors (Lee 2010) and are considered to be an "at-risk" group (Dove 2013; Winters 2006). Studies suggest living with an alcoholic caregiver is a significant risk factor alone for these children (Díaz et al. 2008). However, due to the complex interactions of their socio-environmental influences, children are exposed to additional risk factors (Díaz et al. 2008; Park and Schepp 2015). A study carried out by Park and Schepp (2015) discovered that children of alcoholics may be subject to inconsistent and negative parenting styles and exposed to severe discipline. Most children of alcoholics are at high risk of having an insecure attachment with their caregiver and are unprotected from their family conflict and violence. From a social level, children of alcoholics are often hidden from society and may receive little or no social support, which ultimately puts them at further risk (North South Hidden Harm Group 2015; Health Service Executive 2011). It is evident that living in a home environment where alcohol is an issue places these children at risk, but unfortunately these additional risk factors in the child's environment which are interlinked with their caregiver's addiction make these children become even more vulnerable (Park and Schepp 2015).

Consequently, these risk factors that children of alcoholics are subject to can cause them to experience a wide range of negative outcomes in their life, including education (Dove 2013). A caregiver's addiction may threaten the achievement of the child's full potential by exposing them to chaotic, stressful and dysfunctional home environments (Winters 2006). Thus, when exploring the performance of children of alcoholics in school the literature does not paint an optimistic picture for these individuals. Children of alcoholics are expected to underachieve in school when compared to those who do not come from an alcoholic home environment (Taylor 2013; Solis et al. 2012; Horgan 2011; Ritter et al. 2002). Time and time again, children of alcoholics have been described as poor school performers (Taylor 2013; Solis et al. 2012; Horgan 2011; Díaz et al. 2008) and portrayed as school failures (Solis et al. 2012; Rice et al. 2006; Casa-Gil and Navarro-Guzman 2002). They are

seen at high risk for repeating grades (McLaughlin et al. 2016; Horgan 2011; Tunnard 2002; Heffner 2003), having poor concentration (Torvik et al. 2011), skipping school (McLaughlin et al. 2016; Taylor 2013; Balsa 2008) and ultimately dropping out of school (McLaughlin et al. 2016; Balsa 2008; Díaz et al. 2008).

Children of alcoholics may not succeed in education due to their caregiver being less attentive to their needs (Lund et al. 2015) and being less supportive and encouraging of their academic success (McLaughlin et al. 2016). While under the influence of alcohol, the caregiver may be unable to monitor their child's school work and provide a supportive environment (McLaughlin et al. 2016; Lander et al. 2013). The child's increased anxiety levels related to a chaotic home environment and lack of sufficient sleep due to unstructured bedtimes, may cause these children to have difficulty with attention and concentration in school. Studies have found children of alcoholics may take days of school to take care of their alcoholic caregiver for fear that something might happen to them when they were gone to school. Whilst others stated that they were ashamed of their caregiver's addiction which ultimately prevented them from attending school in case their friends or teachers may find out (Lander et al. 2013; Balsa 2008).

This indicates the risk factors associated with a caregiver's addiction can lead to negative outcomes in the child's life regarding their education. By a child being unable to attend and participate in school prevents them from receiving the social support they need and inhibits them from acquiring skills and competences which are essential for future employment. However, it would be wrong to assume that all children of alcoholics emerge from their childhoods' scarred or receive inadequate parenting (Allan 2014). But it would be correct to believe that if a child is exposed to numerous risk factors in their life and have little or no protective factors to act as a buffer from the negative effects, it is placing these children at a greater risk for negative outcomes in their lives, including education (Lander et al. 2013).

#### *Resilient Children of Alcoholics and Protective Factors*

Despite the multiple risks factors children of alcoholics encounter, the picture is not one of total despair (Forrester and Harwin 2007). There are gentle reminders in research in relation to children of alcoholics who have successfully achieved academically and who were strengthened by their adverse home circumstances (Tunnard 2002). These individuals who were seen as managing to defeat the odds are referred to as resilient (Rice et al. 2006). "Resilience may be viewed as the ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances" (Share and Lalor 2009, p.260).

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory has been extensively used to explain why some children of alcoholics might be more resilient than others, by exploring the availability of protective factors in the child's environment (Richardson 2008). Essentially, these protective factors in the child's life offset the risk factors and increase the child's resiliency (Hanewald 2011). According to Bernard (1991), protective factors reverse or alter the expected negative outcomes associated with the risks and allow at-risk individuals to adapt and develop successfully (Zhang et al. 2008). Protective factors vary from child to child, however, research indicates that protective factors for these individuals are commonly support networks outside of the family such as their school, teachers, friends, and by having positive relationships with at least one supportive adult. This sense of belonging and support these children receive from their protective factors enables the child to identify and acknowledge more positive aspects of their life (Lee and Williams 2013) and in turn increases the child's resiliency and reduces the impact associated with their caregiver's addiction (Turning Point 2006).

Children who are seen as resilient have a sense of purpose, educational aspirations, set goals and have a sense of a bright future (Benard 1993). For many children of alcoholics,

they reframe their negative experiences (Walker and Lee 1998) and develop resiliency to overcome the problems created by their caregiver's addiction (The National Association for Children of Alcoholics 2001). These children are seen to have the desire to have a better life for themselves (Dove 2013) and view school as a mechanism to improve their quality of life (Park and Schepp 2015).

### *School as an Escape and Protective Factor*

Despite research indicating that children of alcoholics as a whole are underachievers in school and unlikely to attend. Evidence suggests that children of alcoholics enjoy attending and participating in school just as much as other children (McLaughlin et al. 2015; Werner and Johnson 2004). For many children living in these home environments, school may be an escape (Geringer-Woitz 1983) and can act as a safe haven (Taylor 2013). School in this way can be seen as some form of distraction for them to forget about their difficulties and a gateway for a brighter future (Coombes and Anderson 2000).

As previously stated, the school is seen as a protective factor for children of alcoholics and plays a crucial role in helping them to develop resilience (Cairns 2006), including educational resilience "The heightened likelihood of success in school and in other life accomplishments, despite environmental adversaries, brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (Wang et al. 1994 p.46 cited in Zhang et al. 2008, p.104). The school environment has the power to help children overcome significant risk factors in their lives (Benard 1993) and can act a buffer from the negative effects of their caregiver's alcoholism (Coombes and Anderson 2000; Emshoff and Price 1999).

Schools can provide a stable and consistent environment (Gledhill 2000) providing these children with structure which they may be lacking in their home environment (McCarthy and Galvani 2012). Essentially this structure can make these children feel safer due to the fact that their school life is predictable (*ibid*). School can fundamentally be a stable, safe break from their chaotic home environment (Guiney 2015). Schools can also provide the opportunity for these children to develop meaningful relationships with peers, as well as supportive relationships with adults (Gledhill 2002). By schools supporting these friendships is introducing another protective factor for these children, since peer relationships can be as influential as family relationships (Morgan et al. 2016; Rice et al. 2006). Friends can offer emotional support and can also influence positively on the child's education (*ibid*). The child may wish to attend school to see their friend, spend time with them and take part in activities with them, which enables the child to be free from worry (Guiney 2015).

Teachers also are seen as additional protective factors for children of alcoholics. Children of alcoholics may feel a close connection with their teachers and develop a positive relationship with them (Coombes and Anderson 2000). For many children in these circumstances, they felt that they could open up to a particular understanding teacher about their home life (Allan 2014), which in turn helped these individuals to feel supported and understood (Werner and Johnson 2004). A study carried out by Werner and Johnson (2004) found that resilient children of alcoholics who grew up to be confident and competent could identify at least one teacher who listened to them, believed in them and pushed them to the best of their ability. This clearly indicates the crucial and influential role teachers have in the lives of children of alcoholics.

However, a teacher's role for these children is not only to help develop their academic skills, which will essentially improve their educational attainment and future jobs prospects. Their role is to act as a positive role model for these children. Teachers in this way can play an active role in building the child's confidence and self-esteem, by providing them with encouragement and positive support which the child may initially not be receiving from their alcoholic caregiver (Park and Schepp 2015). In other words, teachers can help compensate

for the lack of parental support and warmth these children may not be receiving at home (McLaughlin et al. 2016) and provide them with what children of alcoholics have described as supportive, caring and stable relationships (Coombes and Anderson 2000).

Numerous children of alcoholics have achieved in school as a coping mechanism and an escape from the unpredictability that exist in their home environment (Hall and Webster 2007). There were a number of studies reporting that adult children of alcoholics are now successful therapists, medical students, doctors and social workers (Templeton et al. 2006), indicating that adults who have lived in these home environments often enter the caring profession (Coombes and Anderson 2000). These studies illustrate that the difficult and adverse home environments that these individuals experienced can be transferred into a positive outcome (Templeton et al. 2006) and provides hope for children of alcoholics that they can succeed in the education system, despite numerous studies reporting multiple negative consequences for these children's future (Park and Schepp 2015).

### *Supportive Figures in the Child's Life*

Another protective and enabling factor for children of alcoholics to achieve in education is the presence of a supportive and stable adult figure per se (Eiden et al. 2004 cited in Horgan 2011). This is not ruling out the caregiver with an addiction to alcohol as a supportive adult, since not all caregivers who misuse alcohol are unsupportive towards their children (Barnard 1999 cited in Kroll 2004). However, another supportive figure in the child's life can be an influential factor for that child to succeed in education (Werner and Johnson 2004) and is another essential component for building resilience (Institute of Health Equity 2014). Since many children of alcoholics may not have a secure attachment with their addicted caregiver, they find secure attachments with others in order to succeed in their adolescence and become self-sufficient young adults (Bickelhaupt 2012). Studies have found that these supportive figures can be their non-alcoholic parent, older siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers and so forth (Werner and Johnson 2004).

A child's relationship with their non-alcoholic parent has a crucial effect on the child's education. Studies revealed that a child who had a supportive and emotionally sufficient relationship with their non-alcoholic parent had the academic and social capability to compensate for the negative effects of the caregiver's addiction (Walker and Lee 1998). These children also had high self-esteem which also had a positive ripple effect on their education. By the non-alcoholic parent being available and supportive towards the child and by checking homework, spellings and ensuring the child was attending school, improved the child's likelihood to succeed in the education system (*ibid*).

Regrettably, for some children living in these circumstances they may not have a relationship or any type of contact with their other parent. For some children their siblings may be the only other family member available. Fortunately, siblings are an excellent source of support and can be seen as a build-in resource for the child to cope with the stresses of their home life. It has been found that siblings living in this home environment have encouraged one another to attend school each day, helped one another with homework and is emotionally available for one another (Walker and Lee 1998).

Research conducted by Werner and Johnson (2004), revealed that grandparents, aunts and uncles were also a source of support and motivation for children of alcoholics to achieve in school. The individuals in this study disclosed that their grandparents, uncles and aunts helped them with their school work and were always available to talk and give them advice. Also a number of individuals mentioned that their uncles took them to activities and gave them a break from their chaotic home environment (Werner and Johnson 2004). Another extremely helpful resource for children of alcoholics is Alateen and Al-Anon, which are self-help groups. Children have stated they feel comfortable disclosing information about their



home life to this group, due to the fact that everyone has similar experiences (Cormier 2014). By attending these groups, children of alcoholics affirmed that it has provided them with hope for their future and has helped them gain confidence and improved their self-esteem (*ibid*). This demonstrates how children of alcoholics can rely on a network of supportive and caring adults within and outside their wider family circle to provide them with the support and encouragement they need and require to succeed in education (*ibid*).

### **Methodology**

This research project was undertaken by employing a qualitative approach. This approach was utilised in order to seek and gain an understanding of the experience and personal feelings of the participants of this study. Qualitative research allows the researcher to capture and analyse expressive information about participations' feelings, beliefs and motivations that underlie their behaviours (Berkwits and Inui 1998).

#### *Participant and Sample*

In order for the researcher to successfully explore the effect of education attainment on children when living with an alcoholic caregiver, it was essential to identify those who have lived in these circumstances to obtain relevant information and experiences. The researcher considered obtaining information from professionals in the educational sector, but families struggling with alcohol misuse are often "hidden" (Laslett et al. 2015, p.9), meaning most children suffer in silence (Tominey 2016). Consequently, professionals in this sector may be unaware of the child's home circumstances and therefore unable to describe the effect the caregiver's alcoholism has on the education attainment on the child. Therefore, it was necessary to find those who have lived with a caregiver with an addiction to alcohol during their education.

Two individuals who attend their local Al-Anon meetings were selected to participate in this research. Al-Anon is a self-help group for families and friends affected by their loved one's misuse of alcohol (Timko et al. 2014). The rationale for choosing these individuals to participate was based on applying a non-probability strategy, purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is usually associated with small, in-depth studies, focusing on the interpretation and exploration of experiences (Matthews and Ross 2010). This category of sampling enabled the researcher to select specific individuals from Al-Anon that lived with a caregiver with an addiction to alcohol during their education, therefore best representing this population. These particular individuals have first-hand experience of living with a caregiver with an addiction to alcohol and therefore could share their feelings and thoughts on this topic in question resulting in a textured and rich description (Berg and Lune 2012).

#### *Data Collection*

The method of data collection used in this research project was semi-structured interviews, allowing the researcher to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences and behaviour. Semi-structured interviews allows the participants to talk about the research topic in their own way and gives them an opportunity to elaborate about their experiences, while still ensuring the same topics are covered with both of the participants resulting in the data being comparable (Denscombe 2010). Open ended questions and neutral probes, such as "Tell me about your school life?" were used to ensure the participant responded how they desired and reduced the possibility of the participant giving what they seen as acceptable answers (Matthews and Ross 2010). Each question was focused on a particular aspect of education shaped by the arising themes in the literature.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data collected in this research project was analysed thematically using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within the data which can then be developed into themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) a “theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.10). Thematic analysis can reveal the similarities as well as the differences in the data and can summarise important features of a large body of data. This approach can be broken down into six phases, however, due to its flexibility these six phases were used as a guide to analyse the data collected to fit the research question (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The first phase of thematic analysis involved the researcher becoming familiar with the data by repeated reading of the interview transcripts. The transcripts were read in an active way, searching for patterns and meanings, while noting down any ideas for coding. The next phase focused on generating initial codes from the data. These particular codes highlighted important features of the data and were a way of organising the data into meaningful groups. After the data was coded and organised, the researcher then collated the different codes into potential themes by generating a thematic map of the analysis. Connections and relationships between the various codes began to emerge, which resulted in some codes combining to form an overarching theme (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The next phase of analysis involved refining the existing themes and adding any additional data that may have been missed in the earlier stages of coding. This phase was essential to ensure the themes accurately represented the data collected (Ibrahim 2012). At this point the themes were further defined, defining what each theme was about, which aspect of the data they captured and generating names for each theme (Braun and Clarke 2006). The concluding stages of this analysis involved assembling the identified themes into the research project in a concise, logical and interesting manner to assist the reader to understand the important and predominant themes (Ibrahim 2012).

### *Ethics*

The importance of ethical consideration in social research cannot be emphasised enough (Denscombe 2010). The reasoning behind this is because social research explores and examines the lives of other human beings (Berg and Lune 2012). Ethical principles in social research tend to be broken down into four main principles, whether there is harm to the participants, invasion of privacy, lack of informed consent and whether deception is involved (Bryman 2001). Therefore, ethics call on the researcher to think of the potential harm that the participant might suffer from as a result of their involvement in the research. This requires the researcher to consider the design and the extent to which the research will be intrusive and tap into delicate issues. The researcher can minimise the risk of harm of the participants by clearly explaining to the purpose and nature of the research and the participants’ involvement, by attaining informed consent and by ensuring confidentiality of the data received in the research (Denscombe 2010).

A primary ethical consideration for this research was to ensure the participants involved were over the age of eighteen to obtain informed consent. The researcher ensured these participants no longer live with their alcoholic caregiver and regularly attend Al-Anon as a support. Another important factor for the researcher was to ensure that the questions in the interviews were specifically regarding the education of the participant, reducing the focus on the caregiver’s addiction. Prior to starting the primary research, the researcher presented the information leaflet, consent form and general list of questions to the supervisor of this research project to receive feedback on the structure and wording of these documents.

The participants of this research were contacted through their local Al-Anon meetings. The researcher attended what is called “an open-meeting”, where the general public

can attend. At these meetings the purpose and nature of the research was explained, as well as the benefits and risks associated with the research. Two individuals from different Al-Anon meetings approached the researcher expressing their interest to participate. The researcher ensured that these individuals were over the age of eighteen, regularly attended their Al-Anon meetings and no longer lived with their alcoholic caregiver. After confirming this, the participants were then given an information leaflet and consent form. This ensured the individuals had adequate information about the research to make a decision to participate or not (Denscombe 2010). Included in the information leaflet was the purpose and method of the research, why they were being asked to participate, the benefits and risk associated with the research, along with information regarding confidentiality and data storage. The researcher and participants got in contact with one another at a later date to arrange a time, date and venue to complete the interview.

Before the commencement of the interview the information leaflet was recited and the participants' gave their informed consent voluntarily. The participants clearly understood the risks and benefits of the research and knew they could opt out of the interview without giving a reason. At the start of the interview the researcher stated to the participants that they were not obliged to answer any questions and they could take a break or end the interview at any stage. After the interviews were completed, the researcher took appropriate measures to keep the data in a secure location. The audio recording of the interviews were deleted from the electronic device after transcription and the transcription of the data was stored by password protected files which was only known to the researcher. The consent forms signed by the participants were stored in a secure cabinet in the researcher's house, which only the researcher had a key to. The names of the participants' and any other names or locations that were mentioned in the interview were changed to ensure confidentiality.

### *Limitations*

As many children of alcoholics are often hidden from society and do not get the support they require, could potentially be viewed as a limitation to this research. Both participants in this study attend Al-Anon meetings which can be viewed as a protective factor. Therefore, their experience may only reflect children of alcoholics that have protective factors available to them and may not fully represent this group. Although the two participants in this research have different socio-economic backgrounds and family structures, future research would entail a more complex mix of socio-economic backgrounds and family structures to enable a greater understanding of other external factors which may inhibit or enable children of alcoholics to achieve in the education system.

### **Findings**

The main findings from the data collected in this research are described in this section. Having analysed the data using thematic analysis, four thematic themes emerged which will be presented below.

#### *Theme One: School as an escape and gateway for a brighter future*

The school environment is seen as a protective factor for children of alcoholics, which can help them to overcome the risks associated with their caregiver's alcoholism (Benard 1993). The findings suggest that school can be a distraction for children of alcoholics to forget about their difficulties and a gateway for a brighter future (Coombes and Anderson 2000).

John [not his real name] and Marie [not her real name] both stated that they enjoyed school and saw school as an escape from their home environment. Whilst in school the participants felt they could switch off from their difficulties and focus solely on themselves. Although attending school for many children of alcoholics may be difficult for various



complex reasons (McLaughlin et al. 2016), both John and Marie explained how their school attendance was never an issue. They both expressed how they did not want to miss a day at school and looked forward to seeing their friends each day. John also added how he likes structure, routine and things to be a certain way. For a child growing up in a home environment where alcohol is an issue, structure and routine may not always be possible (Lander et al. 2013). However, the school environment was able to provide John with this structure and routine which he desired.

When the participants were asked to describe how they felt when they were at home verses when they were in school, they both expressed how school was a distraction from their home life.

“School was really an escape and a distraction. When you were sitting in a class and a teacher was harping on about business or history or French. You weren’t thinking about what was going on at home. You had no one annoying you in school and you could completely switch off”.

“When I was in school I felt like myself. I could relax more and be myself and I only had to look after myself while in school. School was like an escape”.

Although school can be an immediate escape for children of alcoholics, John and Marie also considered school as a gateway for a brighter future. Both of the participants achieved extremely well academically and completed third level education. Throughout the interview John and Marie reflected on their family life, particularly upon their caregiver who had an addiction. Similarly, they both expressed how they looked at the lifestyle their caregiver had and used this as a motivation to achieve in school and create a better life for themselves.

“I’d look at mammy and say I don’t want that life”. “So at home it was hard, but it motivated me, I didn’t want the same life as her... It pushes you on”.

John explained how “he would have seen the study as a means to an end”. When asked what he meant by this, John reflected on his childhood and difficulties associated with his home life and seen how this negative in his life was a driving force for him to succeed in life.

“Money would have been tight in our house growing up and I would have looked at certain things... and from fourteen, fifteen and sixteen I would have been determined that I don’t want this to be me. I was thinking back then I want to get a degree, I want a job, I want to get a qualification. I was thinking when I grow up and have a family of my own I want to have a good standard of living so I would have enjoyed school. I wouldn’t have overly enjoyed the work end of it but for me it was a means to an end. I am a firm believer you can turn every negative into a positive if you want. I had two options...I could have used it as an excuse or I could use it to help me improve and develop as a person. And I decided to use it to improve myself and that’s the path I decided to go down. I was motivated to do well for myself and have a better life”

### *Theme Two: Teachers providing support*

In the interview the participants highlighted the significant role their teachers played in their childhood. Teachers are seen as an additional protective factor for children of alcoholics, which enable them to achieve in education (Coombes and Anderson 2000). Teachers can provide a stable relationship and act as a role model to children of alcoholics. They also can improve a child’s self-esteem, confidence (Park and Schepp 2015) and help compensate for the lack of praise and encouragement the child may not be receiving at home (McLaughlin et al. 2016).

When the participants were asked were there any teachers in particular that they had a good relationship with while they were in school. John answered by giving a lengthy list of teachers he liked from senior infants right up to secondary school. John was then asked what

was it about these teachers that made him get on well with them. He replied how they each teacher supported him in different aspects of his life and he recalled one teacher in particular who he described as having a “massive influence” on his sports.

“They all supported me in different ways, encouraged me, praised me and give me confidence in different areas of my life”.

Later in the interview John explained how his teachers helped compensate for the lack of praise he was not receiving at home.

“Maybe that praise I was getting at school was a substitute for the praise I wasn’t getting at home”.

In the interview Marie was able to identify teachers she felt a special connection with while in secondary school. Marie’s home-economics teacher was “quite motherly” towards her and could be seen as a mother figure she may not have had at home due to her mother’s alcohol use. Another teacher Marie spoke about was her art teacher. He himself experienced alcoholism in his own home and shared his experience with Marie, which she found very beneficial.

“And the art teacher I would have got on well with him because he would have told us that his own father was an alcoholic and I felt the connection there because he would have told you stories of his own life. You’re sitting there thinking... mmm...this is me”.

By Marie’s art teacher sharing his similar experience, enabled her to open up about her home circumstances and helped her to gain confidence and self-belief that she could achieve in school and in her life.

“Someone like him with a good job came from a background like me. In a way I looked up to him, seen him as a role model. Thinking of what I can achieve. I would go to my home-economics teacher for some chats in general like, but with him I opened up to him and told him about mammy’s drinking. He was so supportive of me. And met with me every week, any day I needed him he would meet”.

### *Theme Three: Sport as an Escape*

Another temporary escape for children of alcoholics is their participation in sports. Sports can help provide children of alcoholics with a sense of control (Elkington and Gannon 2013), improve their confidence (McLaughlin et al. 2016) and offers them additional support (Dashper and Fletcher 2016).

John and Marie participated in different sports within and outside of their school environment. However, they both were able to identify sports as another way of escaping their home environment.

“Sport was another escape and opportunity to get out of the house”.

“I would have done camogie and basketball so I would of, but that would have been another hour added on to the evening”.

Even though Marie stated she was good at sports, she also mentioned that she was only taking part in sports to get away from her mother’s drinking.

“Probably at the time I would have been saying oh I love sport, I love it. Looking now I was only doing that because I wanted another hour out of the house and away from mammy’s drinking”.

Although participating in sports was another escape for John, sports meant much more than this for him.

“For me school and sport went hand-in-hand.... It just helps clear the head. It’s something I would like to think I experienced success at is well and it gives me confidence”. “Sports really helped me overcome the problems and motivated me”.

#### *Theme Four: Supportive adults in their lives*

Supportive adults in the lives of children of alcoholics are viewed as an enabling factor for them to succeed in education. Throughout the interview John and Marie mentioned supportive adult’s in their lives that helped them out in their time of need and supported them to overcome their adversity and achieve in education. For Marie her supportive adult was her auntie.

“My auntie, mammy’s sister was great to me. I could go to her house anytime I wanted. My auntie’s mother, so my granny...was an alcoholic too...so she understood me and supported me”, “she was like my rock”.

From research, aunts were found to be an immense source of support and motivation for children of alcoholics to succeed in education by providing them with help regarding their school work (Werner and Johnson 2004).

While John’s supportive adult was his mother, his non-alcoholic parent.

“I was lucky I had good supports... mam was brilliant, she would have been determined that we were all going to get our degrees”. “My mother was the driving force”

The findings suggest that a non-alcoholic parent can improve the likelihood of a child to achieve in education by being supportive towards the child and by checking homework, spellings and ensuring the child was attending school (Walker and Lee 1998).

John also mentioned how his mother protected him from his father’s drinking and describes how caring she was towards him.

“Mam would have made sure we were up every morning, the fire was always lit, the house was always warm, had a good breakfast... always given a good lunch”

When John was asked how he felt he achieved in school regarding his homework, school test and assignments he explained how supportive his mother was in regards to his education.

“Mammy would have been big into checking our homework, asking our spellings every night and making us do our reading. To the extent when we were in primary school she use to make us stay in on a Saturday morning for a couple of hours and during the holidays to do some extra work, extra spelling, extra maths...whenever everyone else was outside playing. I would have resented it at the time but looking back, it was something that definitely stood to me”.

Another supportive adult for children of alcoholics could be their alcoholic caregiver, since not all caregivers who have an addiction to alcohol are unsupportive (Barnard 1999). John and Marie both recognised the support they received from their alcoholic caregiver.

Marie explained,

“Now you’d go home and she would always have dinner ready. She might have been well drunk but the dinner was still on the table”.

While John acknowledged his father's hard work to put him through third level education

"But he would have helped out in different ways even though he did have an addiction. My first year in college he was going into work maybe half five, six o'clock in the morning and working till eight o'clock at night, just to get overtime so I would be able to afford college".

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings from this research suggest that children of alcoholics can be affected by their caregiver's addiction to alcohol in a variety of ways, not just negatively (Dove 2013). Findings propose in order for these children to overcome their adversity and succeed in education, protective factors must be available to offset the risk factors associated with their caregiver's addiction. However, the experience of children of alcoholics is often known as hidden harm (North South Hidden Harm Group 2015). As many children struggling with their caregiver's addiction is often hidden from society and suffers in silence in order to keep their family secret (Laslett et al. 2015). Unfortunately, this hidden harm means many children of alcoholics do not get the support they need, which ultimately reduces the availability of essential protective factors which would enable the child to succeed in education (Tominey 2016; North South Hidden Harm Group 2015).

Unfortunately children of alcoholics are often expected to underachieve in school and are frequently portrayed as school failures within the literature (Solis et al. 2012; Rice et al. 2006; Casa-Gil and Navarro-Guzman 2002). Children of alcoholics' underachievement in school may be directly linked with the risks and the consequences of their caregiver's addiction. Based on the participants' experience which was supported by the literature, suggest that alcoholic caregivers may be less supportive of their child's academic success (McLaughlin et al. 2016) and are unable to monitor their child's school work (McLaughlin et al. 2016; Lander et al. 2013). Another factor that may contribute to children of alcoholics' poor school performance is their inability to concentrate in school due to their chaotic, unstructured home environment (Lander et al. 2013). Also many children of alcoholics undertake inappropriate caring roles within their home, which again makes it difficult for them to succeed in education due to the demands of their home life (Cochran 2014; Health Service Executive 2011). These findings highlight the difficulties and risks that children of alcoholics are exposed to, which can prevent them from succeeding in education. It is evident that a caregiver's alcoholism can be an inhibiting factor for children of alcoholics to achieve in education and can affect their education attainment.

In contrast to this, both of the participants achieved academically despite the multiple risk factors they encountered, due to their resilience and availability of protective factors (Forrester and Harwin 2007; Tunnard 2002). This label of resilience has been placed on children of alcoholics that have managed to defeat the odds and achieve in life, including education (Rice et al. 2006). Based on the participants' perception of protective factors which was corroborated by literature, indicate that the school, teachers, additional supportive adults and being a member of a sports team can be viewed as protective factors for these individuals (Werner and Johnson 2004). These protective factors essentially offset the risks associated with their caregiver's addiction and help them to achieve in education by providing them with support, praise and encouragement (Dunst et al. 2014). Moreover, these findings suggest that in order for children of alcoholics to succeed in education they must be resilient and protective factors must be available.

The findings from this research highlight the instrumental role of the school in the lives of children of alcoholics. The school can act as a buffer from the negative effects associated with the caregiver's addiction (Coombes and Anderson 2000) and can heighten the child's resilience and educational resilience, helping them to succeed in education (Zhang et

al. 2008). For many children of alcoholics, school can be an immediate escape and distraction from their caregiver's addiction and can be seen as an opportunity to create a brighter future. The findings from this study has shown the importance of the school environment providing these children with a stable, consistent and structured environment which they may be lacking in their home (Gledhill 2000). These findings suggest that the school can alter the negative educational outcomes for children of alcoholics, by helping them to develop their academic skills and by providing them with structure which may be non-existent in the child's home.

The influential role of teachers in the lives of children of alcoholics cannot be underestimated. Although previously recognised that children of alcoholics are often hidden. The findings from this research have shown that even when the teachers were uninformed about the child's home circumstances, they were able to provide these children with much needed support and praise. Alternatively, some children of alcoholics felt they could open up about their home life to a particular understanding teacher (Allan 2014), which helped these children feel supported and improved their self-confidence to achieve in education (Werner and Johnson 2004). It is evident that teachers play a multifaceted role in the lives of children of alcoholics. Teachers can help the child to develop their academic skills and improve their educational success, while also acting as a positive role model and providing supportive, stable and caring relationships for these children (Coombes and Anderson 2000).

The research collected within the literature and findings also suggested the importance of another supportive adult in the child's life to enable them to achieve in education and surmount the hardship associated with their caregiver's addiction. Findings have shown that the secure attachment children of alcoholics have with another adult has a crucial effect on the child's education (Walker and Lee 1998). These supportive relationships allow children of alcoholics to have the social and academic capability to compensate for the negative effects of the caregivers addiction. Findings suggest that these supportive adults have helped children of alcoholics academically, by checking the child's schoolwork and ensuring the child's attendance at school (*ibid*). However, this is not suggesting that the caregiver with the addiction is not supportive towards the child (Barnard 1999 cited in Kroll 2004), as both participants were able to identify the support they received from their alcoholic caregiver. These findings highlight the influential role a supportive adult has on the child's education. Based on the findings, it may be assumed that if a child living with an alcoholic caregiver does not have a supportive figure in their life, they may face even more challenges and difficulties in order to succeed in education. Thus, a supportive adult can be seen as having a huge influence on the child's ability to succeed in education.

Another protective factor for children of alcoholics, which was revealed through the participants' experience, was taking part in stabilising activities within and outside of school such as sports (McLaughlin et al. 2016). Sports can be used by children of alcoholics as a temporary escape from their home environment and as a coping strategy to help reduce the stress associated with their caregiver's addiction (Harris 2006; Haworth and Veal 2004). The sporting environment can provide children of alcoholics with additional support, positive role models and respect (Dashper and Fletcher 2016). Moreover, it is evident from the findings that sports can be viewed as a protective factor for children of alcoholics to overcome the risks and stress associated with their caregiver's alcoholism. However, sports can be seen as a mechanism and enabling factor for them to succeed in education by building on the child's confidence, which ultimately has a positive effect on the child's self-belief to achieve in education (McLaughlin et al. 2016).

## **Conclusion**



This research project has explored the effect of education attainment on children when living with an alcoholic caregiver. The research involved an in-depth exploration of literature, which helped to identify the predicted educational outcomes for children of alcoholics. In order to explore the realities of living with an alcoholic caregiver and the potential impact it may have upon a child's education attainment, two adults who have first-hand experience of a caregiver's alcoholism were interviewed by employing a qualitative method.

The findings from this research revealed how children of alcoholics are often defined and characterised in a narrow way, and are expected to have low educational achievements. However, much of the research concerning children of alcoholics employ a quantitative method, which highlights the lack of attention given to the experience of children living in these home environment. Therefore, there is an apparent need for research to explore the lived experience of children of alcoholics to uncover the consequences behind their caregiver's addiction and the impact it may have on the child and their education. The research also uncovered how many children of alcoholics are hidden from society and do not get the support they require. Thus, a greater effort needs to be made to identify and support children of alcoholics.

The study findings highlight both the potential risk and protective factors children of alcoholics may encounter, which can inhibit or enable the child to succeed in education. The findings suggest that children of alcoholics who are exposed to countless risk factors and have few or insufficient protective factors are likely to have difficulties and underachieve in school. While those who have adequate protective factors, despite being exposed to various risk factors, are likely to achieve and succeed within the education system. The findings also revealed how school can be an immediate escape and distraction for these children from their chaotic home life and a mechanism to enable a brighter future. The school also can help compensate for the lack of structure, praise and warmth which may be non-existent in the child's home. Finally, the research project acknowledged the protective role of the school, teachers and supportive adults in altering the expected negative educational outcomes for children of alcoholics, allowing them to develop and achieve within education.

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