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Why post- Leaving Certificate students in Ireland from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to proceed to third-level education

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Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Mumhan
Munster Technological University

*Why post- Leaving Certificate students in Ireland from
disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to proceed to third-
level education.*

A thesis submitted to Munster Technological University Cork for the degree of Master
by Research in the Department of Applied Social Studies

Edward Hayes

Supervisors

Professor Margaret Linehan

Dr. Judith Butler



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Name: Edward Hayes (██████████)

Date: August 2022

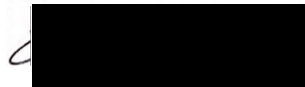
Abstract

Educational disadvantage continues to be a cause for concern, and addressing it remains at the forefront of education policy in Ireland (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019; Weir *et al.*, 2017). This research extended across the academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 and during the period of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which imposed public health measures, and enforced an emergency online digital learning environment. A socio-economic profile of Ireland's student body registered an attainment gap between rich and poor, finding that young people from backgrounds of disadvantage continue to be underrepresented at third-level when compared to their middle-class counterparts (HEA, 2020). The primary aim of this research is to investigate the choices and routes taken by sixth-year students after completing their Leaving Certificate, and what lies in front of them. A range of potentially influencing factors was investigated, including socio-economic background of the student, familial culture and value of education, and type of school a student attends accompanied by its culture of learning and expectation of student achievement. A qualitative methodological approach was implemented through the use of in-depth interviews that sought to ascertain the unique viewpoints of twelve professional educators, across three differing demographic school types: non-DEIS community colleges, DEIS schools, and fee-paying schools. Thematic analysis was applied to these findings. The findings suggest a myriad of barriers that can impact on a student's overall educational experience and may deter students from lower socio-economic backgrounds from progressing to third-level. A significant finding of this research is that the premise of equality of education opportunity for every young person, regardless of their background of origin is not being realised. Through inclusion in the scheme, DEIS schools receive a range of targeted interventions. This research has found these additional resources are inadequate to mitigate for the concentrated levels of disadvantage, experienced by those students attending DEIS schools. Additionally, non-DEIS schools receive no such targeted interventions to support their students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is expressed at policy level by the lack of fairness within an education system that neither recognises nor responds to the fundamental, deep-seated relationship with broader economic inequalities, across Irish society (Fleming and Harford, 2021). Arising from this current research, recommendations for policy and practice are suggested, including the need for DEIS to be individualised, person-specific and therefore inclusive. Furthermore, this study finds that Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) should be fully funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and available in every school regardless of the socio-economic demographic of the school.

Declaration

I, *Edward Hayes*, hereby certify that all the material presented in the following research study, entitled *Why post- Leaving Certificate students in Ireland from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to proceed to third-level education*, which is now being put forward in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master by Research for the Department of Applied Social Studies, Munster Technological University, Cork is solely the work of my own. Any work that is not of my own has been recognised and referenced accordingly.

Signature of Candidate:



Date: 13th June 2022

Signature of Supervisors:



Date: 14 June 2022



Date: 14th June 2022

There are much broader issues for society that need to be solved and without them educational disadvantage experienced will not be going away any time soon. We need to eradicate food poverty, introduce a standard living wage. Society and the government ultimately need to address these issues so our society can be sustainable for everyone.

(Participant 1).

Acknowledgements

To begin with my acknowledgements. I would like to give my sincere gratitude to my supervisors Professor Margaret Linehan and Dr. Judith Butler for their continuous advice, support, encouragement, and expertise throughout the duration of my research. My journey could not have been possible without your patience, understanding and on-going support from beginning to end, and I thank you for it.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research to my family, friends and loved ones for their zest for life through loving and learning.

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List of Abbreviations

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Definition</u>
BA	Bachelor of Arts
CAMHS	Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CAO	Central Admissions Office
CIT	Cork Institute of Technology
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
EDC	Education Disadvantage Committee
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Definition</u>
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HP	Hasse Pratschke
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
INTO	Irish National Teacher's Organisation
IofT	Institute of Technology
IPE	Initial Professional Education
IPPN	Irish Primary Principles Organisation
JCSP	Junior Certificate Schools Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
MD	Material Deprivation
MTU	Munster Technological University
NBP	National Broadband Plan
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Parent Association
PE	Physical Education
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate
PPCT	Process Person Context Time
PPOD	Post-Primary Online Database
PUP	Pandemic Unemployment Payment

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Definition</u>
SA	Small Areas
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SES	Socio Economic Status
SCL	Student Centred Learning
SCLT	Social Cognitive Learning Theory
SCP	School Completion Programme
SLT	Social Learning Theory
SSP	School Support Programme
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and maths
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TESS	Tusla Education Support Service
TD	Teachta Dála
TY	Transition Year
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Background

This chapter outlines the research background, the aims and objectives of the study and explains the theoretical underpinning, which seeks to understand why post-Leaving Certificate students in Ireland from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to proceed to third-level education. Finally, a structure of the thesis is presented.

Education is a human right, and according to Article twenty-six of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* ‘everyone has a right to an education’ (UN, 1948, p. 7), the provision of which is free to a prescribed level, protected and bound by both domestic and international law. Furthermore, and highly relevant to this study, education has also been identified as a vital prerequisite to access all other human rights (UNESCO, 2016). History records Irish people as always displaying an appetite for education; desiring and valuing it even in the most difficult of economic, political, and social circumstances (Dowling, 2011). Successive governments and legislators of the day have recognised that education has far reaching consequences for all branches of society, nationally, internationally, and globally, and can be embraced as protection against a range of social risks that include illness, poverty, social and unemployment (Lahtinen *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2017).

Education makes an essential contribution to the quality and well-being of all in Irish society allowing people to live a ‘good life’ and has a crucial role to play in tackling social exclusion, providing full access to life chances, and avoiding and breaking the cycles of disadvantage (Social Justice Ireland, 2016). O’Connor and Staunton (2015) report the more equal a society, the greater its performance within a range of social indicators that includes education. However, despite a range of interventions, economically generated inequality continues to be a major discriminatory factor in the outcomes for those from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage. The over-arching premise of a state-funded education is the intention to mediate for the influence of background resulting in an ‘equal playing field for all’. However, equality is not always about treating individuals in the same way, rather more it is concerned with treating all people fairly and in a way that ensures their outcomes can be the same. Within the Irish context, Delivering Equality

of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) aims to intercede and mitigate for disadvantage by ensuring all students have access to supports and resources and can benefit equally from the educational system (Department of Education and Skills, 2005). Although, it would be one dimensional to suggest that education is the answer to all issues in society, completing post-primary education in the first instance, and subsequently achieving a third-level qualification has been identified as an effective tool by which individuals can confer advantages not only on themselves but that are also of long-term benefit to society (Rowley *et al.*, 2020; Baum *et al.*, 2016). Although impacted upon by other factors, there is a clear link between pupil attendance patterns and absenteeism in schools, related to student educational outcomes and long-term engagement with education (Smyth *et al.*, 2015). This is embodied within the DEIS scheme by the School Completion Programme (SCP), which keeps a purposeful watch over students considered to be at risk of disengaging from their studies, and as a result leaving school early without maximising their educational potential (Smyth *et al.*, 2015). A recently published ESRI study reported overall 6% of students in Ireland leave school early however, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds experience much greater early school leaving rates than their more advantaged counterparts (Carroll and McCoy, 2021). Furthermore, according to the DES (2020) there persists an unwavering gap between the school completion rates of DEIS and non-DEIS schools, one that has continued to expand in recent years (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). A central concern of this study focuses on why equality of opportunity and fairness within education is not being realised for all learners.

At times of crisis, it is often those who are marginalised or experiencing pre-existing disadvantage that is especially adversely affected (Doyle, 2020; OECD, 2020). In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared a COVID-19 global pandemic. Following public health guidelines and in an effort to control transmission of the virus, the Department of Education directed all Irish schools to close on 12 March 2020. In total, there were two enforced periods of closure, the first during the concluding part of the 2019/2020 academic year followed by a second period of mandated closure in the early months of 2021. To mediate for the disruption of in-person learning time and to accommodate for very different learning experiences, the Leaving Certificate in 2020 was cancelled and replaced with an accredited grading system based upon school assessment of the likely performance of a student in each of their subjects (Émon *et al.*, 2021; Quinn

et al., 2021). The timing of this decision by the Irish government was highly contentious. The final announcement only being made in May 2020 in respect of the upcoming Leaving Certificate written exams scheduled for following month (Émon *et al.*, 2021). In the subsequent year 2021, matriculation again saw a non-conventional route with the adoption of a blended options route of written examinations, accredited grading, or a combination of both (DES, 2021). With the removal of all COVID-19-related public health restrictions in educational settings since the 28th of February 2022 (Government of Ireland, 2022) schools are only now returning to normality, with a chance to consider and learn from the experiences of the past two years now the ‘eye of the storm’ has passed. This research captures the reflections of post-primary school leaders in order to gain insight into the challenges schools and students faced during these most unprecedented of times. Additionally, it is hoped to explore the views of participants concerning the mental health burden experienced by students and school communities during COVID-19, predicted to have wide ranging ramifications for mental health and wellbeing across all educational settings (Quinn *et al.*, 2021; Lee, 2020). The Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz, 2014) was utilized within this research to present the views of post-primary school leaders drawing on their prolific experiences as professional and long-standing educators. The interview stage of this research coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many similarities can be found between this pandemic and the Spanish Flu Pandemic (1918). However, within the last century the crisis presented by this emergency situation, had never before been experienced by those within the contemporary Irish education sector. The uniqueness of this situation supports the use of CGT as it is considered to be an approach well suited in order to examine emerging topics where little existing data is available (Timonen *et al.*, 2018).

1.2 Rationale

The purpose of this research was to investigate the factors that influence the choices and routes of sixth-year students after completing their Leaving Certificate. Furthermore, this study sought to explore and understand the mechanisms surrounding why equality of opportunity continues not to be realised for students from backgrounds of disadvantage (O’Brien *et al.*, 2019). In Ireland, there are a range of existing structural interventions across the continuum of education such as Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) (DCYA, 2019) and Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) (DES,

2022, 2017, 2005). However, the educational experience, pathways, and outcomes do not appear to be the same for all (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018), and a significant gap remains between the participation and attainment of those from backgrounds of disadvantage when compared their more advantaged counterparts.

In Ireland, despite the privilege and universally shared experience of a free and mandatory education until the minimum age of sixteen years old (DES, 2017), young people from backgrounds of disadvantage continue to be underrepresented at third-level when compared to their middle-class counterparts (HEA, 2020; Byrne and McCoy, 2017). Therefore, school leading to progression to third-level should be both desirable and within the reach of every young person. It was because of these key issues that it was decided to research this topic. Factors that potentially influence the choices and routes of sixth-year students after completing the Leaving Certificate such as socio-economic status and family background of origin, familial value and culture of education, demographic of the school, its culture of learning and culture of expectation influence the choices and routes taken, were explored.

The literature review critiques data, statistics, and socio-economic profiling, as well as educational policy analysis regarding the routes taken by students after the Leaving Certificate. However, a clear gap within information emerged, as being the lack of the first-person voice of the professional educators, who deliver and support the education of their students. This research seeks to rectify this, by exploiting a person-centred approach through the narratives of post-primary school professional educators. Therefore, a qualitative research methodology was adopted to understand the educational experiences of the cohort of post-primary Leaving Certificate students 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, from the perspectives of post-primary school leaders. Further justification for this research emerged from the social context of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the enforced periods of school closures. Within the framework of education, this was an exceptional and never before experienced time, that has presented a unique opportunity for research that can add to the knowledge base and identify potentially useful information for future policy and practice.

1.3 Research Questions

A clear relationship and interconnectedness of social systems between poverty reduction and education exist, with socio-economic factors and social origin found to be strongly associated with educational disadvantage (Loftus, 2017; Iannelli, *et al.*, 2016; Hartas, 2011).

The overarching primary research question is: *Why are post-Leaving Certificate students in Ireland from disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to proceed to third-level education?* Evolving from this general query, the following sub-research questions are also posed:

1. How does socio-economic disadvantage affect student choices post-Leaving Certificate?
2. How does familial culture and value of education impact upon student engagement and choices post-Leaving Certificate?
3. How do the demographic of the school and the culture of learning impact on engagement and choices post-Leaving Certificate?
4. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, how have students and schools been affected, and how can this learning influence delivery of education in the future?

1.4 Aims and Objectives

This research originates with the first person ‘lived’ understandings of professional educators, drawing on their narratives and unique viewpoints. Twelve post-primary school leaders were purposefully recruited, four from each of three differing co-educational school-types; non-DEIS community college, DEIS schools and fee-paying schools. Through reporting the voice of the students from the perspective of school leaders, this research aims to provide a unique insight into the barriers and day-to-day challenges that influence students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, within the continuum of the Irish education system. In tandem, this research also acknowledges the contextual positioning and uniqueness within the global COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, this research seeks in part to explore how successful are the existing policies

and interventions in schools in relation to promoting academic achievement and attainment, by addressing the research questions and overarching aim of the study. Examining the experiences of experts working in the post-primary sector is a vital component of the study objectives which aim to:

1. Provide an in-depth study of post-primary sector stakeholders' experiences of why and how social disadvantage impacts student progression to third-level post-Leaving Certificate.
2. Determine what is good practice in relation to supporting students from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage in their course and career choices.
3. Explore challenges and the merits of existing supports within schools for students from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage.
4. Contribute to the extant body of literature in relation to the supports and targeted interventions for students experiencing disadvantage with the objective of influencing policy and provision surrounding supports.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis and Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter of this study introduces this research, describing its rationale and background and positioning it within the phenomena of socio-economic disadvantage within the Irish education system. The key aims and objectives are outlined and, additionally this chapter describes the research questions used to gather the primary data, grounding them within the chosen methodology.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The second chapter comprehensively reviews the relevant historical and current literature surrounding educational disadvantages. The accumulated effects of social, economic, cultural, and educational factors are considered with specific reference to student post-Leaving Certificate choices and progression routes in Ireland. The efficacy of the current education policies, supports and interventions are reviewed, with particular reference to Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). Additionally, the theoretical framework for this study embedded within the work of Bronfenbrenner's ecology model of human development (1979), Bronfenbrenner and Morris' bioecological systems theory (2006) and also Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986), are outlined. Finally, emerging data surrounding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health and wellbeing are discussed, as are the challenges encountered in achieving equity of educational access throughout this time.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Methodology is a broad term used to refer to research design. Chapter three introduces and describes quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies. It further outlines the justification behind the selection of the qualitative approach chosen for this study, with particular emphasis on the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews. This research adopts a person-centred approach achieved through interviews conducted on the remote platform of *Zoom* with twelve post-primary school leaders, four from each of three-post primary co-educational school types; non-DEIS community colleges, DEIS schools and fee-paying schools. Aligning with the qualitative methodological approach, the chosen paradigm for this research study is the constructivist paradigm and the philosophical basis including ontology and epistemology is discussed (Kamal, 2019).

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The fourth chapter presents and discusses the primary data findings and subsequent emergent themes arising from the twelve semi-structured interviews. In order to identify meaning across the data, the dynamic and flexible approach of thematic analysis is utilized. Once identified, emerging themes and patterns are coded and grouped together for coherence. The subsequent findings are analysed; compared and contrasted both within themselves and with reference to key literature and existing research previously identified and critiqued in chapter two.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

The fifth and closing chapter provides an overall conclusion to the study, whilst also identifying strengths and limitations of this research. This chapter presents recommendations for policy, practice and future study arising from this current research with the overall aim of contributing to the discussion surrounding the effects and barriers of socio-economic disadvantage within education, 'levelling the playing field' and increasing the numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue tertiary education.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Ireland compares very favourably against European standards with a high rate of students completing their post-primary education (CSO, 2020). This reflects in the attitudes held by many young people who view progressing to third-level as a rite of passage, emulated in college entry rates in Ireland that are at their highest levels ever, with two out of every three post-primary schools sending at least 70% of their students to tertiary level (Donnelly and Maguire, 2018). However, according to the DES (2020) 8% of post-primary students in Ireland exit the education system without having successfully completed their Leaving Certificate. Furthermore, Census (2016) recorded unemployment amongst the group of early school leavers at 24.9%, to be almost double the overall national unemployment rate. Since the severe recession in Ireland in 2008, closely followed in 2009 by an economic depression, there has been a sharp increase in unemployment, particularly amongst the fifteen-to-twenty-four-year-old age group (McGinnity *et al.*, 2014). This finding was further confirmed by the *Economic and Social Research Institute* in a report where Ireland is described as having one of the highest numbers of young people who are neither employed, nor remain within the education sector (ESRI, 2020). Achieving a third-level qualification confers many and potentially long-term advantages not only on the individual but also on society (Lahtinen *et al.*, 2020; Baum *et al.*, 2013). However, there is no avoiding that significant disparities exist between post-primary school attainment levels, and the numbers of young people who progress to third-level education from the most disadvantaged schools (O'Brien *et al.*, 2019). This literature review identifies, and seeks to evaluate relevant historical and existing literature, and accompanying data surrounding the topic of socio-economic disadvantage and its impact on student post-Leaving Certificate choices and progression routes in Ireland. Furthermore, and with particular reference to the Irish context, this chapter reviews current academic literature and data to investigate whether education policies uphold the human right to education, by maintaining fairness and accessibility to all children and young people, regardless of their background of origin. Accommodating and advancing the progress of learners who are at risk of experiencing educational disadvantage is set within the context of the government's National Anti-Poverty Strategy and Social Partnership Agreements, including *Towards 2016* published by the

Department of the Taoiseach (2006) and remains a strategic goal of the Department of Education and Skills within Education Indicators for Ireland (DES, 2020). Additionally, parity of access to third-level education is identified as a core national objective (HEA, 2015). Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is the government's main policy initiative to address educational disadvantage (DES, 2022, 2017, 2005), emanating from previous interventions such as the 1984 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme (DAS) (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017). This literature review seeks to determine the effectiveness of the current education policies, supports and interventions with particular reference to DEIS, through the perspective of educational professionals and school leaders. The theory underpinning this study accompanies an examination of the debate surrounding education and schooling, with reference to socio-economic disadvantage and its position and relationship within educational disadvantage. Additionally, this chapter explores the barriers that may influence post-primary student matriculation, attainment, and post-Leaving Certificate progression routes. These include socio-economic background, familial culture and value of education, and school demographic and culture of learning. Finally, for the cohort of post-primary learners 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, the emerging data concerning the effects of the immediate school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic is reviewed. This includes an exploration of the barriers faced by learners in accessing the virtual learning space, student mental health and wellbeing, and the impact of school closures in relation to families and students accessing social supports. The findings from this literature review are utilized to generate questions and contribute to the research design, including preparation of the semi-structured interview guide.

2.2 Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

Humans are not insular, and their interconnectedness as social animals cannot be ignored (Farmer *et al.*, 2018). Individuals are influenced and learn from observing others, imitating their behaviours, and adopting them for their own (Farmer *et al.*, 2018; Subiaul, 2016). Learned behaviours can take on an intergenerational aspect (Legare and Nielsen, 2015), social stratification and social mobility and the intergenerational transmission of both disadvantages and advantages are well documented and central aspects within sociology and sociological theories (Lareau, 2011; Bourdieu, 1989). Two theoretical perspectives underpin and inform the rationale for this research study: those of Pierre Bourdieu's *Theory of Capital* (1986) and Urie Bronfenbrenner's *Ecology of Human*

Development (1979). Bronfenbrenner was most recognised for his ecological systems theory model of human development (1979) however, he later collaborated with Ceci an American psychologist and together they proposed a bioecological systems theory model (1994). *Nature-nurture reconceptualised in developmental perspective: A bioecological model* (1994) is their human development model that builds on previous work and proposes an individual is further shaped by the interactions between themselves, their environment, the political arena, and society of the day (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). Bourdieu, described by Costa and Murphy (2015) as ‘a political activist devoted to the study of social structures’ (p. 6) is well known for his contribution to the field of social sciences; proposed interrelated concepts of field, capital and habitus have become fundamental to the many approaches to disadvantage and social stratification (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017). Bourdieu’s *Theory of Capital (Social and Cultural Capital)* (1986) and the Bioecological Systems theory of Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) and are critiqued, with particular reference to their positioning within the context of education.

2.2.1 Urie Bronfenbrenner: Bioecological Systems Theory (1994)

The Russian born, American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) believed the context of an individual’s immediate or ‘proximal’ social environment, the people in this setting and their interrelated interactions, wider social, cultural, and institutional influences combine to employ a guiding, life-long and ever evolving effect upon human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Rosa and Tudge (2013) describe the work of Bronfenbrenner as being based on three phases of development. Between 1973-1979 and in the first phase of his ecological approach to human development, Bronfenbrenner describes four interconnected systems with the individual at the centre. The microsystem comprises the immediate relationships between home, school and work (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The mesosystem extends this to the interrelationships between those settings contained within the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1978, 1977). The exosystem encompasses wider institutional and social structures that do not necessarily contain the developing person but do exert an influence upon their immediate setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Finally in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory and earlier work the macrosystem encompasses the rules and laws that underpin society, both written and inherently perceived as a cultural norm (Bronfenbrenner, 1978). Bronfenbrenner believed the macrosystem to be ideological, based upon a system of beliefs that include institutional systems and social influences; culture, society,

economics, and politics, and was therefore essentially different from the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Between 1980 and the middle of 1990s in the second phase of his ecological approach to human development, Bronfenbrenner (1986) recognises the influence of biology and an individual's characteristics within any given setting and adds chronosystem, a fifth system to his original ecological model of human development to take account of human development reflected in changes over time. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) highlight the significance of close in-person and reciprocal interactions within a young person's close environment and how they may also affect developmental outcomes. According to Rosa and Tudge (2013), phase three of Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development occurred between the mid-1990s and 2006 and was the emergence of the Bioecological Systems Theory of human development. This is a Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) structure that recognises 'proximal processes' which he considered to be the leading forces of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner believed these powerful indicators of human development involve the mutual interaction between the developing young person and all 'significant others' in their life as well as objects and symbols in their close environment or proximity (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Bronfenbrenner developed this with his colleagues Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) and Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000). Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory model outlined the interrelated impact on a child's development resulting from the interactions between their home, family, and peer group. The significance of 'proximal processes' became central to Bronfenbrenner's newer version of human development, which fundamentally recognised the importance of the relational role played by a person in their own development.

2.2.2 Bioecological Systems Theory and Implications for Education and Policy

Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintained that by changing an individual's environment, it is possible to alter the life trajectory of that person, thereby placing the school environment in a hugely powerful position for good. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) asserted that developmental competence could be achieved where the 'proximal processes' of an individual 'will be greater in advantaged and stable environments than in those that are disadvantaged (p. 578). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), Bronfenbrenner (2000) and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) consistently reported that in unstable and disadvantaged settings, 'proximal processes' would in fact function by precluding or slowing outcomes of development dysfunction.

Individuals are not only influenced by their environment, but also by their own biology and ultimately the contribution personal characteristics make to the interactive process; Rosa and Tudge (2013) describe how Bronfenbrenner views human beings as ‘not only the product but also the producer of their own development’ (p. 254). A child is an active participant in their own world and is not a passive bystander. Given that Bronfenbrenner (1979) believes it to be impossible for any person to be viewed as a separate entity, but rather more as an individual who is interdependent on those around them, the quality of the environment and the relationships surrounding that child are important. These surrounding social influences, community, culture, household employment settings, parents, peers, and school merge, and confer a combining influence and a governance of an individual’s thought processes, emotions and personal preferences (Ashiabi and O’Neal, 2015). This suggests that planned, sustained public policy based on Bioecology theory has the potential to improve the environments in which human beings live, and can lead directly to developmental outcomes of competence (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner (1986) believed the chronosystem encompasses the dimension of time as it relates to a child’s environment and the influence on an individual’s life-long development when transitioning between different ecological settings. O’Toole (2016) further highlights the importance of relationships within the context of making positive transitions. Therefore, relevant to this study is the developmental impact on a young person starting school, the annual change of a school class and new teacher, moving from primary to post-primary school, and finally progressing to third-level post-Leaving Certificate. The Bioecological model emphasises the interdependent nature of lives that are lived through a system of shared relationships. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner (1986) highlighted the importance of being aware of the impact of changes within a young person’s environment over time. In addition, situations such as the death of a significant person in a child’s life, extreme family situations such as violence or addiction, or changing employment situation within the household could all affect patterns of parent/guardian–child communication, and how these patterns in turn could influence the child’s achievement and social behaviour in school (Felitti & Anda *et al.*, 1998). O’Toole (2016) also considers that the integration of all the elements of their life including home, school, peer group, wider community and social world contribute to a child’s development and furthermore school success. Therefore, a holistic understanding of the

background of every child throughout the entirety of their education journey must recognise the impact of cross contextual influences which are so important within any young person's continuum of success in school.

The Bioecological Systems model (1994) has not been without its critics. Both Richardson (2014) and Hill (2009) believe that it over emphasises the socially situated nature of child development and does not give sufficient emphasis to the influence and complexity of culture, social class, and societal influence. However, aligning well with modern day educational best practice surrounding student-centred learning (SCL), the multi-layered bioecological model also places the child at the centre of the process. SCL is a significant driver of educational policy and practice in the modern day (Coleman and Money, 2019). In Ireland, current educational policy emphasises the developmental nature of education, encouraging the placement of the student at the centre of their own educational journey with a shift away from the historical teacher-led classroom dynamic (DES, 2017; NCCA, 2017). Educational policy from the perspective of the exosystem, supports the idea that policies such as DEIS and other interventions can have an impact. However, the interconnected relationship of Bronfenbrenner's systems suggests that all the elements need to be supported, and there is a large body of evidence recognising the need for education, social and health services to be 'joined up' (Jo Warin, 2015, cited in Costa and Murphy, p.58). In America, Gorski (2014) agrees, having reviewed educational interventions finding gross structural social inequality to be at the root of educational inequality. Gorski (2014) further describes not only unequal access to educational opportunity, but also unequal access to healthcare, safe and affordable housing and living wage jobs. In Ireland, Lynch and Crean (2018) believe that until social class inequality outside of school is addressed with equal access to economic and related resources, there can be no meaningful equality of opportunity in education. The chronosystem takes account of the impact of wider phenomena that can potentially impact an individual, including when major events occur and how the timing of these events can influence a person's life. This is particularly poignant now given the global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) believe that parents inhabiting a middle-class world are themselves more inclined to enjoy and model the knowledge and skills they wish their children to acquire, including having greater access to resources and

opportunities outside of the family that can provide the necessary experiences for their children. As a developmental psychologist, O'Toole (2016) believes that Bronfenbrenner's focus lay more on the child with a lesser emphasis on the element of society in the developmental process of the individual. As a sociologist, Bourdieu and his colleagues, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Bourdieu (1973) and sought to understand the developmental process with a greater emphasis on the influence of society and through their work consider its relationship to education. Bourdieu (1973) believed what he termed as habitus, capitals, and fields, interact advantageously for some but to the disadvantage of others sought through his research and collaboration to uncover 'the most deeply buried structures of different social worlds, as well as the mechanisms that tend to ensure either their reproduction or transformation over time' (O'Toole, 2016, p. 34).

2.2.3 Pierre Bourdieu: Theory of Social and Cultural Capital (1973)

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher who published his seminal work *La Distinction* in 1979. Much of Bourdieu's work is concerned with the theoretical understanding of the relational aspect of the social world, and how relative to their position in time and space, an individual acquires and is grounded by their social natures (Murphy and Costa, 2015; Hilgers and Mangez, 2014). As a vehicle towards theoretical understanding, Bourdieu's work centres on his identification of intrinsically relational core concepts and their applications that he termed field, habitus, and capital; these further divide into economic, social, and cultural capital (Albright *et al.*, 2018; Murphy and Costa, 2015). Bourdieu termed a field to be any social arena in which events, interactions and transactions take place and within which competition and relative power struggles exist by individuals, to determine position within that field (Bourdieu, 1988). Bourdieu believed that a field has boundaries and relevant to this research is that much of Bourdieu's work involved exploring contrasting fields of practise within educational settings and educational policy (Bourdieu, 1988). Furthermore, Bourdieu believed 'social identity is defined and asserted through difference' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 172), with education playing a role in reproducing such differences through social mechanisms such as academic segregation (Bourdieu, 1996). Bourdieu (1993) describes habitus as being 'a product of people's own history' (p. 86) where individuals become socialised by their immediate environment and those that surround them. Habitus refers to an internalized knowledge of how to live and navigate

a particular lifestyle; the outlook and values, the dispositions, and the expectations of particular social groups, which have evolved together through lived and shared experience (Bourdieu 1984). Habitus encapsulates the internalised way an individual conveys their culture, experience and history, and the justification and active decision-making processes that inform their choices and resulting actions (Bourdieu, 1990). Mills (2008) describes how habitus functions at a subconscious level, positioning individuals to act in a particular way within their day-to-day lives, aligning these actions and inclinations, without strictly determining them. Bourdieu (1990) describes this as a way of navigating daily life ‘without consciously obeying rules explicitly posed as such’ (p. 76).

Bourdieu introduced the theory of capital; cultural, economic, and social capital as a descriptor to position individuals within their social space (Bourdieu, 1986). He believed the possession, interactions, and distribution of these forms of capital to be determining factors, relating to a person’s social position, and resulting power within a specific field (Hilgers and Mangez, 2014). Borgen (2015) describes how families with cultural, economic, political, and social capitals influence not only the education of their children but also their transition into the world of work and beyond. Therefore, Bourdieu’s concept of social capital is relevant for this study in terms of the structure of the network and level and amounts of social capital that individuals within a network possess, and how others can gain access to these resources through networking and relationships. Bourdieu *et al.*, (1965) closely link social status as a product of one’s social origin, describing how those with high social and cultural capital engage in cultural practices such attending concerts, visiting museums and with a preference for literature and reading material. Particular tastes therefore postulate to function as a marker of class, being a product of both social origin and educational attainment level (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1965).

2.2.4 Theory of Social and Cultural Capital and Implications for Education and Policy

Research suggests that education reduces the influence of background, resulting in an enforced equalizing effect for all, which ensures that no child is disadvantaged by their family background, educational resources at home and parents’ ability to pay (Lynch and Crean, 2018; GUI, 2016). Education is a thread that runs strongly throughout Bourdieu’s

work being described by Murphy and Costa (2015) as ‘an area of study that cuts across many of the topics to which Bourdieu devoted his research interest’, (p. 3). However, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Bourdieu (1973) believe education to be traditionally associated with the institutionalisation of a system of cultural reproduction, through which the dominant values and ideas become a form of power and symbols of superiority of one social class over another. The application of this perspective to education, understands it to be based upon a system of reproduction of social practices and privileges, with social classes being defined not only in relation to the position occupied in the field, but also through habitus and cultural capital associated with that equivalent position (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Bourdieu utilises the concept of cultural capital as a prism to reveal the inequalities that are present in-home lives and that are exacerbated within education (Bourdieu, 1986). He draws attention to the hidden and complex processes through which cultural capital is transmitted from one generation to the next. By proposing the impossibility of interventions to halt the social reproduction of advantaged and disadvantaged lives, it has been suggested that Bourdieu has a pessimistic determinism of his theories, (Warin edited in Murphy and Costa, 2016). In a Bourdieuan world, where benefits can accrue within socially privileged families, social privilege can therefore be reproduced. Bourdieu developed the cultural deprivation theory which implies higher class cultures are better when compared to working-class cultures; describing how the children from dominant classes having internalised skills and knowledge during their formative school years resulting in their educational attainment being directly related to the amount of cultural capital they possess. Therefore, this translates into middle-class students having higher success rates than their working-class counter parts, because the subculture of the middle-classes is closer to the dominant culture. In summary, the bioecological concepts of Bronfenbrenner and the sociological viewpoint of Bourdieu both agree that even successful and academically able children and young people might not be able to access resources and supports described by Bourdieu (1986) as ‘capital’. In particular, and highly relevant to this study Bourdieu explicitly explores the bearing of cultural capital on educational achievement, describing ‘the domestic transmission of cultural capital’ as ‘the best hidden and most socially determinant educational investment’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 48).

2.3 Education as a Human Right

Education not only enhances the personal development of the individual but confers a collective society-wide advantage (Rowley *et al.*, 2020; House of the Oireachtas, 2019). Significantly, it has been identified as a vehicle to promote an individual's chances in life and help tackle poverty and as a vital prerequisite to access all other human rights (UNESCO, 2016).

Long before the establishment of mass national education, a vast network of outdoor clandestine schools existed that were known as hedge schools (Dowling, 2011), with Suárez (2003) describing how 'the peasants embraced education as one of the possible routes of escape from their poverty' (p. 9). This was a sentiment with which O'Connell (2011) agreed, reporting that even in Ireland's most turbulent times, economically, politically, and socially, education has always been valued and desired by a society that recognises and embraces its potential. As a consequence of the establishment of the National Board of Education in 1831, Irish children were for the first time able to attend a primary school funded by public money, close to their family home place (Fitzgerald, 2013). Until this point, it had been the hedge schools offering informal education and charity-based schools that educated some but not all children. What stands out here is that from the very beginning of educational discourse within the state 'cash is king', and where wealthier families recognised the need for formal education for their children, they paid for it (Lyons, 2016). Profoundly impacted by the economic crisis at the latter end of the 1950s and much informed by the OECD report *Investment in Education* (1965), the 1960s heralded a progressive and expansive time in Irish educational history and policy. At this point, both second level and third-level education was fee-paying and commonly accepted as middle-class territory (Bhreathnach, 2016). September 10, 1966, is noted as a date of historical importance, being the day the landscape of education in Ireland changed forever. Without the authorization of his party, Fianna Fáil Teachta Dála (TD) and Minister for Education Donogh O'Malley bravely announced the commencement of the statutory responsibility of the Irish state, to provide a free and equivalent second-level education for all those under the age of fifteen years old (O'Malley, 1966). The provision of a universally accessible education for all children, which has become central to the experience of childhood (Hatcher cited in Cole, 2017), was until this point characterized by low-participation rates, being the preserve of society's elite and only to be afforded by

the wealthy classes (O'Donoghue *et al.*, 2017). In his announcement, O'Malley noted that one-third of young people in Ireland who until this point received virtually no education beyond primary level, was 'a dark stain on the national conscience' (cited in Fleming and Harford, 2014, p. 648). As his legacy, within ten years of O'Malley's declaration, participation rates in second-level education had doubled (O'Donoghue *et al.*, 2017).

Pre-dating human rights treaties and declarations, article forty-two of the Irish constitution, enshrines in law the widely held and fundamental human right to an education for all its citizens (Glendenning, 2012). Furthermore, article twenty-six of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 10 December 1948, which nearly twenty years later became the International Bill of Human Rights, states that 'everyone has the right to education' which shall be monetarily free to a prescribed level, described as 'fundamental stages' (UDHR, 1948, p. 7). Forty years later, and in Article One of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 which was ratified by Ireland in 1992, a child is defined as being, 'every human being below the age of eighteen years' with Articles Twenty-eight and twenty-nine of that same report relating specifically to education. Additionally, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education recognises 'that both individuals and society are beneficiaries of the right to education' (UN, 47, 2016). UNCRC informs that primary level schooling should be compulsory and free, second-level education should be free and available and accessible to every child, and third-level education should be within the reach of every individual based on capability (UNCRC, 1989).

Article One of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) prohibits any 'exclusion from, or limitation to, educational opportunities', citing economic condition as a discriminatory category (Article 1, 1960). The 'centrality of education in the lives of children' (NCCA, 2022) is not disputed, however the state's fundamental commitment to a 'free' education is highly contentious. This is in part due to the payment known as a 'voluntary contribution' which collected at local level by schools, and widely reported as being covert fees (Ó Riordáin cited in O'Halloran, 2019). In Ireland, the costs associated with 'free education' may be affordable for many, but for families who may struggle to

pay this charge it represents a barrier with the effects of disadvantage further exaggerated within the education system (Barnardos, 2020). For students returning to school in September 2021, mandatory uniforms and footwear, the cost of textbooks, educational material resources and the local voluntary contribution can, according to Irish League of Credit Unions amount to an average cost of €1,491 for a post-primary student (Weston, 2021). Barnardos (2020) reported that a significant proportion of parents are forced to cut back on basic household expenditures including food, borrow from friends or family or take a bank or credit union loan to cover schooling costs. This same report noted that some families are left with no option but to resort to taking a loan from a money lender (Barnados, 2020). Interestingly, the right to free education as a human right is measured differently within different jurisdictions, when for example in the United Kingdom school textbooks and photocopied materials as well as writing equipment and copy books are provided free of charge. The Department of Education (DfE) directs this to be any resources considered to be essential components of a free education ‘if an item or an activity is part of the school curriculum, then the school must provide it free of charge’ (DfE, 2018).

The human right to education, intrinsically linked to equality and equity of access (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017; Viennet and Pont, 2017; UNESCO, 2016) is a substantial element of social policy, that has an enduring impact on an individual’s formative years and beyond (Dukelow and Considine, 2017). According to Hess cited in Viennet and Pont (2017) ‘in education there is a vast difference between policy and practice’ (p. 11) therefore, the right to education is not the debate, rather more the ability to access that education equally for every other child and young person.

2.4 How is Education in Ireland Positioned within Policy?

Recognised as a partnership at the founding point of the state, Article forty-two of the *Constitution of Ireland* identifies the family as the primary educator of the child, mentioning the duties and responsibilities for both parents and the state, in the education of children (Constitution of Ireland, Article 42, 1937). This shared responsibility of education between school and home has been a position supported by research and reflected in Irish educational policy, with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) describing this partnership as ‘an essential strategy of educational policy and practice’ (DES, 2012, 24/91: 1). Irish, as the national language is recognised by the state as the first official language (Constitution of Ireland, Article 8, 1937), and more recently the Official Languages Act 2003 positions education through the medium of Irish language as a constitutional right. The Education Act 1998 put on to a statutory footing the obligation of the state to allow parents the opportunity to seek an education through Irish for their children. Irish-medium (IM) immersion schools at primary level are known as ‘gael scoil’ and at post-primary level are ‘gaelcholáiste’ (Ó’Murchú, 2016). Children begin their eight years of primary education at either four or five years of age, and legally must receive a formal education either in a school or home setting from six years old; around twelve years of age children transition to post-primary school (DES, 2021). In 2000, the school leaving age was raised to its current minimum of sixteen years old, and additionally no young person may leave school until they have completed their schooling to the minimum level of Junior Certificate (Education Welfare Act, 2000). In Ireland, unlike other European countries, the Catholic church has historically influenced the educational offering with approximately one-third of post-primary schools being same sex, and although school admission policies based on faith have undergone recent reforms the Church and education in Ireland remain intrinsically linked, being protected by both the Constitution and the Education Act 1998 (O’Brien, 2018).

Twenty years ago, Smyth and Hannan (2000) argued that education policy placed greater emphasis upon expanding participation rates instead of focussing on and rectifying social class disparities and the ever-growing gap between rich and poor. It is interesting to note that in his analysis of Irish educational policy and legislative process, Cahill (2015) finds that social class is wholly absent in the discussion, which he believes is due to a greater emphasis being placed on international comparison and ‘a consumer-driven philosophy of educational provision mitigates against equality for students from lower socio-

economic groups’ (p. 301). Cahill considers this to be suggestive of an increasing neoliberalist approach being evident within Irish education policy. Fleming and Harford (2021) agree, believing that the influence of neoliberal policies and consumer choice that prevails within the Irish education system is reflective of Irish society, effectively serving to reinforce and perpetuate the values and norms of the more advantaged social classes. Since 1997, Ireland has developed a framework of national anti-poverty approaches to tackle poverty and social exclusion, the most recent being the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 Ambition, Goals and Commitment*. Published in January 2020 by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, this framework takes an integrated whole-of-government department and services approach, citing social inclusion as a core objective within areas such as children and childcare, education, health, and housing. However, within this same jurisdiction, the House of Oireachtas (2019) describes many children and young people in Ireland as being at risk of educational exclusion because the education system is unfair and unequal making education as a human right an aspirational rather than an achievable goal. Piketty (2014) believes ‘the education system is shaped by public policy’ (p. 305) and therefore the solution may lie in an integrated public policy approach to educational inequality that encompasses many government departments (DES, Statement of Strategy 2015 to 2017, 2015). Post-primary schools cannot address the issues of their student cohort in isolation. According to Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) ‘schools are but one arm of a comprehensive policy landscape which also addresses, health, welfare, and housing issues, all of which contribute to pupil success in school’ (INTO, 2015, p.3). Given that teachers are on the ‘front line’, policy makers should take note of this position, which is an established and widely supported view within existing literature (Loftus, 2017; Hartas, 2011). In Ireland, Lynch (2018) and Lynch and Crean (2018) believe there is a wider social issue at play, with the root of the problem to be found in economic inequality. Kavanagh and Weir (2018) agree, reporting that where inequality of educational outcomes exists it ‘has its basis in income inequality’ (p. 29). With unequivocal evidence suggesting socio-economic factors and social background being strongly related to educational disadvantage, families require structured equality of condition to be able to satisfy their statutory right to a free and equivalent education.

2.5 Socio-economic Disadvantage within Education in Ireland

Data compiled by O'Brien *et al.*, (2022) reports that 99.7% of Leaving Certificate students from fee-paying schools progressed to third-level education, this is when compared to 62% of students who have completed their education in post-primary schools of recognised disadvantage (O'Brien *et al.*, 2022). This group of students are not only far less likely to progress to third-level when compared to their middle-class counterparts, but were significantly less likely to progress to the high points and much sought after college courses, including law, medicine, and pharmacy often perceived as being of higher status. This appears to have remained consistent for nearly two decades (Van de Werfhorst *et al.*, 2003).

Whiteman (2014) found socio-economic disadvantage and poverty are interrelated and understanding one brings meaning to the other, however, socio-economic disadvantage is not easy to define as it is without doubt a 'complex, multidimensional problem' (Whiteman, 2014, p. 96). Features of socio-economic disadvantage and inequality linked to social class include low income, unmanageable debt, poor housing conditions, lack of educational qualifications, unemployment and living socio-economically deprived areas (Samaritans, 2017). It has become widely accepted that poverty is a relative construct when measured against the situation and condition of others and is linked to economic and material resources (Carpentier *et al.*, 2008). Described in research and the media alike, there is an understanding that relative poverty varies with the cost of living from country to country, with the criteria in flux and highly dependent on the economy of the day (Westwater, 2019). This is especially relevant at time of writing with surging inflation in Ireland due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain living costs and dramatic fuel and energy increases (Burke-Kennedy, 2022; Byrne and ZeKaite, 2021) now further compounded by the war in Ukraine. In Ireland 'people are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally' (National Anti-Poverty Strategy, Social Inclusion, 1997, p.3). However, socio-economic disadvantage is a broader and more complex notion than poverty alone and includes an individual's access to both material and social resources (Carroll, 2022; Kavanagh *et al.*, 2017). *Think-tank for Action on Social Change* (2016) agree, reporting that economic inequality is not just restricted to having insufficient

income (Hearne and McMahon, 2016). It is one of scope of the material factors that have influential and far-reaching consequences on a person's capability to access social resources and opportunities and to flourish within the context of wider society. Over time, agreement has emerged of three factors that can be used as a minimum to provide a baseline indicator of socio-economic status: parental educational level, parental occupation, and household income (Brese and Mirazchiyski, 2013). This combination of information when taken within the context of the social, cultural, and economic 'norms' of the day, builds a picture of household demographic and socio-economic status of its occupants. Despite the challenges of a robust and all-encompassing definition of socio-economic disadvantage, there is a compelling supporting consensus that there is no one cause of educational disadvantage, but rather a range of present and contributory risk factors. Furthermore, research supports the interconnectedness of social systems with both socio-economic factors and social origin having been found to be strongly associated with educational disadvantage and underachievement in school (Goldthorpe, 2020; Iannelli *et al.*, 2016). Social Justice Ireland (2019) and Lynch (2018) agree, also believing that direct and indirect economic inequalities translate into barriers to accessing formal education accompanied with poorer educational outcomes which in turn perpetuate cycles of poverty.

In a pluralist democracy, economic prosperity, social well-being, and a good quality of life, are goals that should be within the reach of every citizen. Being prosperous and having access to good life chances in society are closely connected to access to participation in and positive outcomes within all stages of education (NCCA, 2022). However, not every child and young person in Ireland enjoys such advantages. The central purpose of a state-funded and equitable education system is the intention to reduce the influence of background, resulting in equality for all (Raftery and Relihan, 2015). Weir and Denner (2016) confirm the relationship between students' socio-economic backgrounds and their educational achievement therefore, to understand the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and education within the Irish context is important to first consider, what the indicators of educational disadvantage are. The concept of educational disadvantage and 'the difference in educational outcomes for distinct social groups' (Rowley *et al.*, 2020, p. 5) is not an afterthought or an add-on, but rather more is an intrinsic part of Irish educational social history. The *White Paper* on educational development published by the government in 1980, acknowledged the negative schooling

experiences of young people from areas of economic deprivation. It further identified the clear need for special measures to be put in place to mitigate this inequality. Central to Irish educational policy and defined in law, section thirty-two of the Education Act, (1998), amended in 2012, outlines the principles underpinning Ireland's educational policy in response to educational disadvantage described as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevents students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools' (Education Act, 1998, 32(9)). Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is the government's main policy initiative to address educational disadvantage, replacing previous interventions such as the 1984 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme (DAS) (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017). A major strength of the DEIS programme was seen as being one coherent strategy 'to bring together a number of earlier and standalone schemes which addressed specific aspects of educational disadvantage' (Smyth *et al.*, 2015, p. 11).

2.6 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

In the Irish context, as in many other countries studies have consistently revealed a strong and enduring relationship between educational achievement and factors that relate to a students' home background (Weir cited in Edgar S. (ed.), 2016). Ireland's acknowledgement of and response to tackling disadvantage in education was the implementation of the DEIS Plan for Educational Inclusion (2005), which was rolled out in schools in the 2006/2007 academic year (DES, 2005). With the underlying rationale described in literature as the 'multiplier effect' (Smyth *et al.*, 2015), DEIS offers a suite of supports and funding distributed to schools that are eligible to take part in the programme. The range of resources are targeted at children from three to eighteen years of age, attending pre-school, primary and post-primary schools, and can be accessed by school meeting the criteria for inclusion in the scheme. Identification of schools eligible for inclusion within DEIS is based on an independent and standardised system that uses Department of Education enrolment data bases 2015/16 (DES, 2020) and more recently 2021/22 as well as data from the 2016 Census combined within Pobal HP Deprivation index (DES, 2022). In 2017, an extensive review was carried out by the Education Research Centre (ERC) on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018), the outcome being that additional schools were included within the DEIS programme. On 9 March 2022, Norma Foley the Minister for Education announced

major funding and a further uplift to the existing DEIS programme. Students who have self-identified with Roma, or Traveller backgrounds of origin, and those residing in direct provision or experiencing homelessness are now specifically accommodated within this new model of provision (DES, 2022). Thirty-seven new post-primary schools will be added to the DEIS programme accompanied by a reclassification of thirty-seven more to take effect from September 2022 (DES, 2022). In primary schools, DEIS operates at three levels or bands, urban band 1, urban band 2 and rural that reflect the scale of disadvantage that exists in a school and its geographical location. Fleming and Harford (2021) and Fleming (2020) note that no similar system that recognises grades of disadvantage exists at post-primary level. These same authors are reported in *Irish Times* as saying, ‘the notion that all post-primary schools serving disadvantaged areas are the same has always been absurd’ (cited in O’Brien, 2022).

Participating DEIS schools can access a range of interventions allocated to respond to and mitigate the inequalities of disadvantage, with post-primary schools included within the DEIS programme divided into two bands. Schools in band 1 assessed as having a greater concentration of disadvantage receive more supports than those in band 2 and since 2017, all post-primary DEIS schools are entitled to a range of supports that include:

- Supplementary DEIS grant that is based on the level of disadvantage and enrolment in the school
- Access to Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) services
- Access to range of supports under School Completion Programme
- School Books Grant Scheme – enhanced funding
- Priority access to Schools Meals Programme
- Access to Junior Certificate Schools Programme
- Access to Leaving Certificate Applied Programme
- Priority access to Centre for School Leadership and a range of professional development supports
- Enhanced guidance allocation of 1.15 of the Pupil Teacher Ratio (non-DEIS allocation is 0.4)
- Expansion of NEPS provision in DEIS schools

- Roll out of Friends Programme to all DEIS schools. (Source: www.education.ie, 2018).

DEIS is goal-focused, and an element of the DEIS is its evaluation component delivered by the Educational Research Centre based in Dublin (Carroll, 2022). As a result of the 2017 evaluation process, schools were required to set targets for school retention and also the numbers of students who progressed to further education. Furthermore, a range of indicators of measurable achievement for DEIS schools across the areas of literacy, numeracy, and science (DES, 2017) using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was established. Although the ERC report of 2018 *The Evaluation of DEIS at post-primary level: closing the achievement and attainment gaps* highlighted some successes and improvements between DEIS and non-DEIS schools since the initial DEIS roll-out in 2005, Gilleece *et al.*, (2020) point out that students attending DEIS schools still achieved significantly lower scores in reading, mathematics and science abilities by comparison to their non-DEIS counterparts. In the area of student retention to Leaving certificate which is of particular interest to this study, Weir and Kavanagh (2018), report some significant gains. When compared to a figure of 61.7% of students in 1995 who completed a Leaving Certificate and attended schools that would now be categorised as DEIS, 82.3% of senior cycle students in DEIS schools now complete their Leaving Certificate. This is compared to 93.2% of students in non-DEIS schools (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018). However, within the context of the Irish education system, DEIS is not without its critics. There are many children from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend non-DEIS schools, so there remains a need to personalise the broader context of socio-economic disadvantage (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). More recently, The Children's Rights Alliance (2020) described 'a significant proportion of students who are disadvantaged are in schools not within the DEIS programme' (Children's Rights Alliance, 2020, p. 20). This is an interesting consideration for future policy making, that of directing funding in a more tailor-made and contextualised fashion. An example of this comes in the form of a finding from a study by O'Sullivan *et al.*, (2018) into widening participation and college access routes, that suggests lone parenthood might be considered a measure of educational disadvantage. In particular, it is widely accepted that single-mother households experience higher rates of poverty when compared to more traditionally placed two-parent households and furthermore low-educated single-mother households are especially economically vulnerable (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018).

Research from Loftus, (2017) found that there is a gradual accumulative process in terms of the relationship between socio-economic and educational disadvantage; effectively those who begin their lives in poverty not only remain that way, but in relative terms it is a situation that only worsens over time. Notably, Hannon *et al.*, (2017) concurred that barriers to progression do not suddenly materialise but are cumulative, and can begin with underperformance at primary and post-secondary level resulting in disengagement from school and education. Williams *et al.*, (2018) further suggests that concerns around intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage may be revealed as a young person moves into post-primary school, impacting upon and determining future educational performance. A number of previous research studies found factors and processes that enable children from disadvantaged backgrounds “beat the odds” may be quite different from their more advantaged counterparts (Sattler and Gershoff, 2019; Gutman *et al.*, 2003).

Bradley (2015) believes that some working-class parents who may not have partaken in third-level education themselves see a degree as desirable for their own children, and it is encouraging to find that students from DEIS schools are being retained in education longer with greater numbers progressing to third-level now than ever before (O’Brien *et al.*, 2021). However, these statistics do not reveal the complete story with young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing the greatest level of educational inequality remain the furthest behind (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018). Despite a major goal of the revised DEIS Plan (2017) being the continued targeting of tailored programmes and supports for schools that have a high cohort of students from disadvantaged communities (DES, 2017), there has been criticism that the financial resources are insufficient to meet the complex needs of the most disadvantaged families (Fleming, 2017).

The social divide remains very apparent when progression rates to third-level are broken down. At one end of the spectrum data shows that in the fee-paying school sector up to 100% of students’ progress to third-level, however this rate falls to 57% amongst DEIS schools, a gap that has not narrowed over six years (O’Brien *et al.*, 2019). It remains to be seen with the newly announced DEIS extension scheme (DES, 2022) what improvements if any, there will be, across the range of indicators. However, OECD (2011) makes clear that disadvantage is not destiny and that students from poor

backgrounds are found amongst the highest performers internationally. Masten (2014) agrees, believing that many young people from backgrounds of disadvantage can do more than just survive, they are resilient and can thrive. The *Growing Up in Ireland Survey* supported this, describing it to be not a foregone conclusion that every child from a background of disadvantage will have negative outcomes (GUI, 2018). Despite the strong links between socio-economic status and academic achievement some children at risk of poverty have been found to be successful in school, and the available literature calls these children ‘resilient’ (Kong, 2020; Perkins, 2018).

2.6.1 Post-primary Education Offerings in Ireland

Within the Irish education system, parents and their children have a range of choices for post-primary education; comprising of a mandatory junior cycle of three years culminating in a state recognised junior certificate, fourth year also known as transition year is often recommended by schools but is not compulsory, and finally two years of senior cycle leading to Leaving Certificate:

- (i) Voluntary post-primary schools under private ownership and managed by religious trustee communities predominantly Roman Catholic or Church of Ireland, boards of governors, private individuals or Educate Together Secondary School. Parents in Ireland have an additional and relatively recent schooling option for their children, that of Educate Together Secondary School. Although still predominantly at primary level, there are now nineteen post-primary Educate Together Secondary Schools located across Ireland. Educate Together Secondary School, is a state-funded and independent registered non-government organisation (NGO) with charitable status in Ireland (educatetogether.ie). It is the patron body for democratically run, equality-based schools and provides a non-denominational, co-educational, and learner-centred approach to education regardless of family and child social, cultural, and religious background. Parents also have the constitutional right to immersion education through the Irish language. Such post-primary schools known as Gaelcholáiste are voluntary operated schools. Voluntary post-primary schools can be both non-fee-paying and fee-paying and historically would have been viewed as more academic educational settings than vocational schools and community colleges.

- (ii) Vocational schools and community colleges are under ownership of the local Education and Training Boards (ETB) and the boards of management of these settings operate as sub-committees of the ETB. Traditionally these schools would have aligned more towards technical and vocational subject areas, but in more recent times offer an academic curriculum alongside a practical one.
- (iii) Community and comprehensive schools were formed in the 1960s, an outcome of the consolidation of voluntary with vocational post-primary schools and they continue to offer a wide-ranging curriculum to young people within their own communities. Managed by boards of management they are financed entirely by DES.
- (iv) Fee-paying grind schools operate outside of the state sector, are privately run, and offer senior cycle and repeat Leaving Certificate only. They are operated as business enterprises and are orientated solely to a level of academic study that prepares a student for the Leaving Certificate strongly aligning towards a third-level route (Smyth, 2009; Lynch & Moran, 2006).
- (v) In a small number of cases and for a variety of reasons, students unable to maintain themselves in a mainstream post-primary setting may be able to attend Youth Reach (between sixteen years old and twenty-one years old) or an alternative learning environment such as Life Centres (corklifecentre.org).
- (vi) A young person may be assessed and considered suitable for compensatory educational home tuition, funded by the DES, delivered in specific circumstances in the young person's own home by a fully qualified post-primary teacher. Eligibility criteria include serious medical conditions, anxiety and depression associated with school phobia and refusal or a young person with special educational needs who are awaiting a suitable long-term in-school placement (DES, 2021).
- (vii) A parent, who is not a qualified teacher, retains the constitutional right to educate their child at home themselves. If the option of home-schooling is decided upon the national curriculum does not have to be followed, however there is a minimum level of education that the child must receive (Education Welfare) Act, 2000).

2.6.2 The Irish Matriculation Process

The *Growing Up in Ireland Report* found that 95.8% of young people are now retained in school until at least fifth year, the first year of the Leaving Certificate programme (DES, 2018). The Leaving Certificate Examination is considered a ‘passport for life-long learning’ (Hyland, 2011, p,7), and doing well in school has lasting implications with studies suggesting young people who have not completed their Leaving Certificate are more likely to have poor physical and mental health outcomes in later life (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Statistically, the trend of young people who are not completing their post-primary education is reducing slightly with 389,488 early school leavers recorded in Census 2011 when compared with 308,908 recorded as completing post-primary education in the Census 2016. However, a student’s choices post-Leaving Certificate are limited by their academic performance and the points they achieve, and despite being under reform the current system remains focussed on academic achievement (Baird *et al.*, 2015). At time of writing and informed by international studies and the *Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report* (NCCA, 2022) the DES announced its intention under The Programme of Government the reform of senior cycle education *Equity and Excellence for All* (DES, 2022). In this proposed model, new and revised subjects will be available for fifth year students for the first time in September 2024 with evaluation to be partly based on an in-school teacher-led assessment component accounting for 40% of the final grade and a traditional written examination satisfying the remaining 60%. After completing eight years of primary school and six years of post-primary schooling, the final and matriculating state examination that the majority of Irish school leavers chose to sit is the established Leaving Certificate. There are two alternative programmes, however they may not be available in every educational setting; Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). In 2020, a total of 60,419 students sat a Leaving Certificate with 57,569 (95.3%) sitting the established Leaving Certificate, 13,470 (22.2%) followed LCVP with 2,850 students (4.7%) opting for the LCA route (DES, 2020). LCVP, first introduced in 1994, offers a vocational component to the established Leaving Certificate that enhances the academic strength of the student. Students must study at least five Leaving Certificate subjects and three additional mandatory and vocation linked modules. LCA is a two-year stand-alone programme that offers a more practical and accumulative credit-based approach that is an employment relevant learning route (DES, 2020).

First examined in 1925, the established Leaving Certificate examination is a points-based rewards system that since 1976 has been centrally administered by the Central Admissions Office (CAO). A student can gain a maximum of six hundred and twenty-five points by counting up to six subjects, which since 2012 affords an additional twenty-five ‘bonus points’ when including and counting mathematics at honours level. Students generally follow a two year ‘senior cycle’ programme of study centred around six to eight subjects, selected from an approved list and dependent on what is offered in their setting. English, Irish and mathematics are universally required (unless a student is in receipt of exemption from Irish), and all subjects can be studied at Ordinary or Higher Level except for Irish and mathematics which are offered at Foundation level (DES, 2020). A new grading system across all subjects was introduced in 2017 (DES, 2020), however these changes have not been universally well received. Research suggests that there has been a causal effect in the choices a student makes in terms of level, ‘with a widening gap between Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and non-DEIS school in higher level uptake’ (ESRI, 2019 p. 13). The present established Leaving Certificate is by its nature orientated towards an academic route regarded by many as a ‘high stakes’ examination process (Mohan *et al.*, 2020; Looney, 2006). Twenty years ago, the OECD (1991) noted the Irish education system to be highly examination centred. By 2015 this was an opinion that still prevailed supported by parents, school leaders and the wider public (Baird *et al.*, 2015; HEA, 2015). This broadly held perception reinforces the view that the ‘high stakes’ nature of the established Leaving Certificate influences teaching and learning to maximise student academic achievement (Smyth *et al.*, 2007; Smyth, 1999). More recently the OECD (2020) went as far as to say that the impact of the final assessment and the way third-level education is accessed appears to influence the delivery of senior cycle education. Ball (2016) believed that education should be detached from what he called the ‘distortion of measurement and comparison’ (p. 24) an idea supported by Coffield and Williamson (2011) who believe that educational settings should be converted ‘from exam factories to communities of discovery’ (cited in Ball, 2016, p. 24). McCoy and Smyth (2011) report that ‘relative entry into university education is strongly structured by social class’ (McCoy and Smyth, 2011, p. 245) and although third-level education is the main route taken by students, it comes with the caveat that attainment in the established Leaving Certificate structures the type of third-level education to which students secure entry (Byrne and McCoy, 2017). McCoy *et al.*, (2014) found that young people from middle-class backgrounds were far more likely to progress to third-level

education than their working-class counterparts, which was by and large due to their better performance in the Leaving Certificate.

2.7 Third-level Education in Ireland

Accommodating and advancing the progress of learners who are at risk of experiencing educational disadvantage remains a strategic goal of the Department of Education and Skills (Education Indicators for Ireland, 2020) and additionally, parity of access to third-level education is identified as a core national objective (HEA, 2014). Progression from an elite to a massified higher education system where the student body ‘reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population’ (HEA, 2018, p. 1) is a key policy strategy. However, according to Barnardos (2016) social inequality is registered and replicated at all levels of the education system, with data showing that in some of the poorest schools, progression rates to third-level are as low as 15% of the student cohort (O’Brien *et al.*, 2019).

The introduction of free post-primary education in Ireland in 1967, was heralded by a period of rapid expansion between 1967 and the mid-1980s and reflected an increase in mass participation. This had an associated effect in the growth and provision of third-level education, which based upon academic achievement became highly sought after (O’Donoghue *et al.*, 2017). Since its foundation in 1971, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has had a constitutional responsibility for both the authority and regulatory supervision of the higher education system in Ireland (HEA, 2021). Between 2005 and 2011 Ireland invested strongly in third-level education and in 1997 post-Leaving Certificate courses was introduced, contributing to one of the largest increases in expenditure per third-level student when compared to OECD member countries (OECD, 2017). However, O’Connell *et al.*, (2006) reported that despite the on-going and wider accessibility to third-level education since the 1960s, not all cohorts of Irish society have benefited in equal measure. They claim that deep-rooted social inequalities in participation and attainment rates remain, which despite a succession of targeted policies and initiatives, highlight wide disparities in universal participation in education. In the last ten years not only has there been a notable decline in the number of young people leaving school early (Smyth *et al.*, 2019), there has also been an accompanying increase in the numbers of individuals obtaining a third-level qualification (Census, 2016). In fact,

Census (2016) found 87.7% of young people follow on to third-level full-time education after post-primary school (CSO, 2016) and 42% of young people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four hold a third-level qualification or above (CSO, 2016; OECD, 2015). Yet, despite these very encouraging statistics, when compared to other OECD member countries, Ireland is reported to have one of the highest levels of youths who are neither employed nor in education (OECD, 2013). Despite a range of investment and policy initiatives those from lower socio-economic backgrounds remain underrepresented at third-level which is described in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* as ‘presenting a fundamental challenge for Irish education policy’ (p. 35). Additionally, and despite being central to government policy, a recently socio-economic profile of Ireland’s student body highlights the gap between rich and poor, finding that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be underrepresented at third-level education level (HEA, 2020). However, on a positive note, in 2018 OECD published a report *Equity in Education* and provided evidence to show that the gap in academic performance between disadvantaged and advantaged students in OECD countries has been slowly narrowing over the course of many years. Therefore, reasoning that inequality can be reversed. In Ireland, the fact remains that DES interventions such as DEIS can have a positive effect, with measurable outcomes including improvements in the numbers of students from less privileged backgrounds participating and being retained in formal education (Carroll, 2022).

Iannelli *et al.*, (2016) believe social origin to be one of the main, if not the most important factors that affect educational attainment, indeed ‘promoting equality of opportunity in higher education is a national priority’ (National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, p.2). Two decades ago, Smyth and Hannan (2000) believed the issue to be the manner in which educational policy is constructed, suggesting this has largely been more concerned with expanding participation rates as opposed to focussing on tackling social class inequalities. Now, twenty years later it would seem that this same issue remains. It would appear this area has still not been addressed, with more recent research suggesting that the implementation of education policy is at risk of failure if not well targeted, because it is a ‘complex and evolving process that involves many stakeholders’ (OECD, 2017, p.7). Hannon *et al.*, (2017) describe that despite considerable increases in participation rates in higher education there is ‘a persistent pattern of inequality of access by low SES students’ (p.2). The *Report on Education*

Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019) found this to be influenced by a number of factors in a young adult's life, including their class, family structure, and familial experience of education all of which to some degree can negatively impact on the likelihood they will complete school and progress to further education. Factors that arise from economic disadvantage encompass the implications of poverty, food poverty, and homelessness and can also influence a young person's route post-Leaving Certificate.

2.8 Factors that Influence Student Achievement and Progression to Third-Level

For young people from more advantageous social origins, both Montacute and Cullinane (2018) and Goodall (2017) agree that middle-class and professional parents have the financial and cultural resources to be able to gain advantage for their children, at every stage of their education journey. It is, of course, natural that parents want the absolute best for their children, however the problem herein lies the vastly unequal resources available to families in achieving that goal. According to Montacute and Cullinane (2018) a social gradient exists, and the cultural, financial, and social resources parents share with their children vary great across the social class spectrum; for some social class tranches becoming limiting factors for their child's educational attainment. Tongerson *et al.*, (2014) believe familial experience of the student and additionally the indirect effects of social, cultural, and economic disadvantage have an impact on educational progression and choice. A school with a dynamic and nurturing school climate can positively influence students' academic performance (Reynolds *et al.*, (2017). Furthermore, Gentrup *et al.*, (2020) and Papageorge *et al.*, (2020) believe that student educational attainment can be impacted by high teacher expectancy levels. This section examines the relevant literature surrounding the topics of socio-economic disadvantage, familial culture and value of education, school demographic and culture of learning and finally, school closures and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic for the cohort of learners 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.

2.8.1 Influence of Socio-economic Factors on Student Progression Post-Leaving Certificate

There is a large body of existing research highlighting social origin and class to be an over-riding and influencing factor in educational attainment (Durante and Fiske, 2017;

Pickett and Vanderbloemen, 2015). Even though Ireland is a European leader in terms of the numbers of young people opting to progress post-Leaving Certificate, the prevailing issue remains the over-representation of the middle-classes in higher education settings (O'Connor & Staunton, 2015). Strand (2014) believes substantial social class disparities remain a determining factor in the probability of a student progressing to tertiary education, with Crawford and Vignoles (2010) finding these differences for the most part reflect social class variation in academic achievement at post-primary level. According to Iannelli *et al.*, (2017) subject selection in post-primary school may be associated with social origin differences. The same study found that middle-class families who possess, or have access, to greater levels of socio-cultural and economic resources can guide their children along a particular educational pathway, choosing, and studying certain subjects and making the educational choices that ultimately serve to maintain their social advantage and professional success. Share and Carroll (2013) found that in the most academically selective universities the majority of first-year students attended post-primary schools that were fee-paying or private. Bourdieu conceptualizes this as social capital, believing it to be the way an individual takes ownership of the power they can exert for gain or advancement, by virtue of their social position and status (Bourdieu, 1986). Iannelli *et al.*,(2017) agree with the earlier findings of McCoy *et al.*, who describe 'social class differences in aspirations to higher education were evident as early as junior cycle' (2014, p. xv). This study also recommended that in an Irish context, policies aimed at reducing social inequality in higher education should concentrate on tackling inequalities in subject choice and overall attainment in post-primary senior cycle, given its central role in driving access to third-level. Furthermore, Marginson (2016) describes how 'social competition at the key points of transition and selection entry to higher education, entry to professions and occupations enables a fine-grained differentiation of the population' (p. 422). This makes sense, when research indicates children, whose parents are from professional classes, are more likely to select prestigious subjects of medicine and law to study at university (Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2010; Van de Werfhorst *et al.*, 2003). In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority Report (HEA, 2019) revealed 20% of business, engineering, finance, and medicine students were from affluent families, when compared to only 3% who came from backgrounds of disadvantage. So, it would appear that clear and continuing patterns of privilege remain in gaining access to elite professions such as law and financial services (Wakeling and Savage, 2015; Ashley and Empson, 2013), with students from affluent backgrounds often dominating

positions perceived in higher education to be considered of elevated status (Marginson 2016).

Pickett and Vanderbloemen (2015) found that ‘inequalities in educational attainment and outcomes have a social gradient’ (p. 2), describing how educational inequality and achievement do not only impact children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This same report found no clear-cut distinction between children from affluent families doing well and children from poor families doing poorly; it is a relative and hierarchical spectrum of achievement spanning all the social classes, with each social class having better outcomes than those of the social class below.

Serpell and Mashburn (2012) reported that there are a range of academic, personal, and social gains for children, when their families contribute to their education. Rosa and Tudge (2013) believe that Bronfenbrenner’s theory finds families to be important because they have the potential to provide what Yamauchi *et al.*, (2017) describe as ‘significant and positive influences on children’s development’ (p. 19). However, in Ireland not every family has the same starting base, and O’Connor and Staunton (2015) describe that society remains divided by material poverty. They reported the ongoing growth of income disparity simultaneously impacting educational opportunities and attainment for the working-classes. Marx *et al.*, (2015) believe income and educational inequality are intrinsically linked; their study reported greater educational attainment levels being strongly associated with higher earnings and household income, with lower levels of attainment and a reduced skills base being indicative of reliance upon social welfare. Manstead (2018) found ‘the cycle of disadvantage that starts with poor material conditions and ends with lower chances of entering and succeeding in the very contexts (universities and high-status workplaces) that could increase social mobility is not going to be changed in the absence of substantial pressure for social change’ (p. 285). Educational achievement is considered a strong marker of an individual’s social status and thus a central element in the process of social reproduction (Bol and van de Werfhorst, 2016; Dubow *et al.*, 2009). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that ‘the educational norms of those social classes capable of imposing the criteria of evaluation which are the most favourable to their children’ (p. 495) are the ones that prevail and work to exclude the minority classes from participating in higher education. Oxfam calls this ‘opportunity hoarding’, whereby ‘social disparities become permanent’ resulting in

a situation where privileged groups ‘take control of valuable resources and assets for their benefit’ such as ‘access to quality education’ (Oxfam, 2014, p.20). It could be argued therefore, that cultural capital emphasises social inequalities, by the valuing of the cultural capital of the predominant social classes more than those from lower socio-economic grouping. Bourdieu’s cultural reproductive theory postulates that it can be the systems themselves, such as school that both help to preserve and spread inequality (Bourdieu, 1971).

Despite the expansion of the third-level education system, and wide-ranging and on-going initiatives to improve participation levels, the influences of social class and family background on participation and outcome have not been overcome (Webb *et al.*, 2017). McCoy and Smyth (2011) found entry into third-level to be ‘significantly differentiated by social class, with the highest entry rates found among the higher professional group and the lowest among those from semi/unskilled manual backgrounds’ (p. 11). The OECD (2015) have identified a need to reduce disparities in accessing higher education, with social background being a determining factor in attainment levels. However, it is disappointing to discover that at third-level, inequalities linked to family background and economic status persist, influencing the college experience, academic achievement, and ultimately rates of graduation OECD (2014). Furthermore, *Mind the Gap Report: Tackling Social and Educational Inequality* (2015) suggests that parents who experience hardship in their lives, can pass on these challenges to their children through pathways that include poverty of time and resources, domestic abuse, parental mental health issues and substance use (Pickett and Vanderbloemen, 2015). Existing research has found a clear and continuing link between the socio-economic status of a young person’s parents and their own attainment levels within education, meaning that more socially advantaged parents will have children who realise higher educational levels when compared to their disadvantaged counterparts (Weinberg *et al.*, 2019).

2.8.2 Family Culture and Value of Education

Social context has been found to influence the way parents and families function (Smyth and Darmody, 2021), with research suggesting parents with limited material resources, and living in disadvantaged areas experience greater challenges to their ability to be able to effectively parent their children and engage in home-learning activities (Kent and Pitsia, 2018; Kipping *et al.*, 2014). This is an important consideration given that Eurostat

(2016) reported 68% of children whose parents had a low-level of education were at risk of falling into poverty and social exclusion, when compared to 16.4% of children of more highly educated parents. This suggests that parents from advantaged classes place a higher value on education than parents from less advantaged social origin (McGinnity, 2019), however, although parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds may have greater resources at their disposal Koshy *et al.*, (2013) reported that parents from poorer backgrounds may also have high educational aspirations for their children. This was confirmed by the *Growing up in Ireland Report* (2018) which found that parents from all social class backgrounds fostered high expectations for their children (Williams *et al.*, 2018). It is interesting to note the views of McCoy *et al.*, (2014), who believe for young working-class young people, strong parental support was found to be a critical success factor in terms of them progressing on to higher education. It should not therefore be assumed that working-class parents are less interested in their children, instead there may be many reasons and practical level barriers preventing them from engaging with their child's school. Low-income families in precarious employment situations or struggling with childcare may wish to have the opportunity to be involved but find themselves unable to attend parent-teacher meetings or join school committees (Park and Holloway, 2018). Papapolydoru (in Murphy and Costa, 2015) argues that, for working-class parents, it is not because of a lack of interest in their children, but rather more the elements that relate to their background that inhibit them from being able to draw upon social capital, rendering them unable to be fully involved in their education journey of their family. This view is supported by Bourdieu, who proposed that with a framework of scarce resources, working-class parents do not possess the types of cultural and social capital resources of middle-class and upper-middle-class parents. When lacking familiarity with the dominant culture of school and later on the university system, parents from disadvantaged backgrounds find themselves in the position of being unable to successfully transmit the relevant cultural capital to their children (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Furthermore, Webb *et al.*, (2017) believe Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction to be highly influential as a mechanism in the preservation of educational inequality. Bourdieu (1984; 1977) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) believe that those in advantaged socio-economic positions not only take ownership of elevated cultural signals but transmit them to their children, who in turn convert this capital into educational and socio-economic success across the generations. However, for parents from low socio-economic backgrounds their social mobility both within families and between generations is limited. An interesting

aside to the above discussion may be to consider the point of view of Ghate and Hazel (2002) and more recently Park and Holloway (2018). Both believe some families from marginalised backgrounds may believe they have not had positive engagements with services or individuals in other settings and felt treated with disrespect; this may manifest in a lack of confidence and skills to be involved with their children's school. This struggle poses further challenges for parents in terms of recognition, identity and belonging, which is often transferred to their children, and gives rise to differences in the way in which middle-class and working-class children value school.

Sime and Sheridan (2014) describe how some parents of low socio-economic status need support themselves due to their own lack of experience or educational attainment, and this combined with a lack of financial resources, confidence and educational knowledge leaves this group of parents struggling to fully participate in decisions about their child's education (Koshy *et al.*, 2013). McCoy and Smyth (2011) report more highly educated parents who have experienced third-level themselves will have acquired the benefit of an in-depth and wide-ranging knowledge of the education system. McCoy *et al.*, (2014) call this 'insider knowledge' with Atkinson (2011) previously reaching the same conclusion, additionally describing an understanding not only of the rules of 'the game' within education but extending this further to include the nature of social institutions and structures. Bourdieu (1990) believed such first-hand experience to have its foundations in habitus which confers a sense of competence or an ability to 'play the game' enabling an individual to navigate the social world with confidence. If it is the case that parental views and family engagement with school can significantly influence student choices in terms of progressing to third-level education, the disadvantages experienced by families from low socio-economic backgrounds are further compounded. Bourdieu (1987) found that the cultural capital of middle-class families affords them the capacity to be seamlessly involved with their child's school, believing themselves to be equal partners within the education journey of their family. Several studies have reported on the positive effects of parental involvement and discourse with their children's school as being associated with greater academic achievement (Park and Holloway, 2018; Galindo and Sheldon, 2012). Originating from a high social class background was positively associated with more frequent parental involvement in student's education such as attending open days, parent/teacher meetings and speaking to other school parents (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). Park and Holloway (2018) believe this greater level

of parental involvement with a child's school has been shown to be positively associated with academic attainment and especially for students from backgrounds of disadvantage. Since his earliest work, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model recognised the significance of a young person's immediate proximal social environment or microsystems, including family, peers, and school upon their developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1977). However, later in his career and having recognised the central role of the individual within their own development, Bronfenbrenner revised his ecological model into a bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1999; 1994). Montacute and Cullinane (2018) found that parents with higher education levels and from more advantaged backgrounds were 'considerably more likely' to take on representative roles within their child's school such as serving on the Parent Teacher Association or as a member of the Board of Management (p. 38). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) believe the interpersonal relationships and interactions between the microsystems of home and school, known as the mesosystems, can exert a positive or negative affect, depending on the nature of those interactions. This suggests positive interactions between parents and teachers, especially when consistent over time, may beneficially impact upon a young person's academic values and achievement and conversely, there may be a negative effect if parents and teachers do not enjoy positive and open communication (Ashiabi and O'Neil, 2015).

Clifton and Cook (2012) report that 'family income causally impacts educational attainment' (p. 5) and the act of work is a route whereby individuals can be lifted out of poverty (Pembroke, 2018). For many, work outside of the home generally brings income rewards such as access to resources and improved living conditions, which may positively impact on the long-term outcomes for children (Williams *et al.*, 2018). However, not all work is stable and well-paid and many families from backgrounds of disadvantage work in precarious settings. Pembroke (2018) believes that policy makers must take serious note of the connection between an individual's low education attainment levels and the likelihood of being precariously employed. O'Riain (2017) proposes the concept of the 'low learning trap' to show how, when lacking skills and education, precarious employment is not a route to a better life for many, and locks people and families into a cycle of poverty (cited in Pembroke, 2018, p. 5). Parental education level relates strongly to social class (Bourne, 2015) with research suggesting that the likelihood of a parent, or caregiver being in employment correlates strongly with their educational attainment level.

Williams *et al.*, (2018) reported that 35% of individuals with the lowest educational levels were employed when compared to 76% among those educated to the highest levels. Byrne and McCoy (2017) further highlighted that when using the occupational position of parents as a marker, social class is an indicator of educational attainment levels, income levels and overall social position. It would appear from the available literature that the children of professional parents, are themselves more likely to work in professional roles. Triventi (2013) supports this, reporting that ‘individuals with better educated parents have a higher probability of attaining a degree from a top institution, of a higher standard, and with better occupational returns’ (p. 499). Research has found that parental education and status have substantive effects on the next generation’s status (Dubow *et al.*, 2009), an idea supported by Eurostat (2016). The report found 80% of adults whose parents had achieved a high level of education, in turn, also reached high educational levels themselves, this compares to only 28% of adults with poorly educated parents, who will reach high educational attainment themselves. Furthermore, the number of young people in third-level education were greatest amongst those from the highest socio-economic group, with 94.4% of students aged twenty years old whose parents were in the higher professional category, representing the highest percentage of any socio-economic group remaining in education (Census, 2016).

Existing historical research demonstrates the advantageous position middle-class parents hold by comparison to their working-class counterparts, and the nature of the influences allowing them to successfully intervene and shape their children’s education (Reay, 2005b; Ball 2003). The *Joint Committee on Education Inequality, Disadvantage and Barriers to Education* acknowledges the competitive nature of the education system in Ireland, highlighting ‘the hidden costs of education, access to extra-curricular activities, cultural capital and resources which place children at an advantage in the competitive education system’ (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019, p. 14). It can be argued that more affluent parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds can proactively make education related choices for their children based on their advantageous economic capability acquired through having attained high value, higher paying occupations. The *Growing Up in Ireland Survey* (2016) further reported that 49% of young people in senior cycle were availing of private outside of school tuition, or taking grinds, with a further 20% planning to access this outside of school learning prior to sitting their Leaving Certificate. Supplementary learning support outside of formal schooling known

internationally as ‘shadow education’ is a practice that almost 50% of Irish senior cycle students engage with at some stage during their Leaving Certificate cycle (McGinnity, 2012). Termed locally as ‘grinds’ this is a system of private tuition offered either formally in full-time grinds schools or taken in different ways on an individual basis, by those students from families that can afford to pay. Grinds are perceived by many as a requirement to do well in the Leaving Certificate exams, especially since the introduction of project maths for the first time in 2017, accompanied by the availability for twenty-five extra points for any student achieving a pass of 40% or more at honours level (McCoy *et al.*, 2019). Crosnoe and Cooper (2010) found that young people from backgrounds of disadvantage are ultimately constrained by the financial resources of their families who are unable to pay for additional educational supports outside of formal learning, with this capacity to pay being described by Byrun and Baker (2015) as a ‘pervasive’ method that can be ‘practiced even up to higher education’ (p.4).

Social and cultural capital, although closely related, are in essence different; social capital refers to the networks that a person has access to, whilst cultural capital refers to the knowledge, behaviours and skills applied by a particular culture or society (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). Parents’ cultural capital can impact positively on school success and can be utilised in different ways to advantage their children. Papapolydorou (cited in Murphy and Costa, 2015) describe this as ‘transformation of capital into academic advantage; parent’s choice of school; communication between home and school based on share ‘currency’ of values’ (p.38). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) found that enjoying activities such as music and reading, attending concerts, and visiting galleries and museums are all cultural practices closely allied to a more elevated education level and social origin. Bourdieu (1977) conceptualised the meaning of this cultural capital to be wide, encompassing a broader awareness and knowledge of the arts, politics, and history, and a recognition and appreciation language. In the same paper, Bourdieu describes the mechanism by which middle-class parents bestow linguistic and cultural competences upon their children that bestow a greater likelihood of success at school and later at university. Children who come from working-class backgrounds are unable to access such cultural resources resulting in a lack of success for them within the education system (Bourdieu, 1977). Durante and Fiske (2017) agreed with this, believing accents and regional dialects, clothes, tastes, and manners are social class messaging that shape the way an individual engages in social relationships and interacts with others. At third-level,

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) believed that the university system sustains the reproduction of social inequalities by supporting attitudes, behaviours, knowledge, and a way of speaking that is more consistent with the practices of families with a high socio-economic origin than those who come from backgrounds of disadvantage. Furthermore, Fox (2016) believes that students from backgrounds of disadvantage feel the habitus of higher education settings to be unwelcoming. As already discussed, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) highlight the significance of interpersonal relationships and interactions between the microsystems of home and school, known as the mesosystems.

2.8.3 School Demographic and Culture of Learning

Research supports the strong connection between the quality of the relationships between teachers and students and a range of outcomes that include application to schoolwork, levels of disciplinary issues, academic success, and fostering a sense of belonging in the school community (Papageorge *et al.*, 2020; Eccles and Roeser, 2011; Cohen *et al.*, 2009). In Ireland, leaving school early, educational ambition, and under achievement at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels have been found to be strongly associated with negative interaction and relationships with teachers (Smyth *et al.*, 2011; Byrne and Smyth, 2010). There is a large body of existing research, which has remained consistent over time, suggesting teacher expectancy effects exist (Gentrup *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2018; Jussim *et al.*, 2009). Papageorge *et al.*, (2020) agree, reporting that teacher expectations can affect student educational attainment, Existing robust, and coherent evidence demonstrates that teachers hold lower expectations of low socio-economic students than for students who come from middle or high socio-economic backgrounds (Tobish & Dresel, 2017; Timmermans *et al.*, 2015; Minor, 2014). Moreover, it has been reported that students from low-income families and minority groups, are seemingly more vulnerable to the cumulative undesirable effects of longitudinal negatively biased beliefs of teachers (Sorhagen, 2013; Hinnant *et al.*, 2009). It would seem that these achievement expectations are present from the very first days of a child's schooling and can affect overall development and later academic achievement and eventual educational outcomes (Gentrup *et al.*, 2020). Relationships can mediate the effects of cultural and social capital, possessing the power to potentially transform cycles of social disadvantage with Mills (2008) presenting a convincing case for the transformative potential of Bourdieu paradigms. With continuing disparities in social class participation in third-level

education (Flannery and Cullinan, 2014), it has been argued that teachers can become the facilitators of transformation for marginalised students, and improve the outcomes for disadvantaged students (Mills, 2008). De Boer *et al.*, (2018) support this, believing that although the presence of negatively biased teacher expectations can have a detrimental influence on student outcomes, positively biased expectations can operate in reverse. Interestingly, Gentrup *et al.*, (2020) found evidence to suggest that where a teacher challenges student learning at a point that is marginally higher than the students' actual skill-levels learning outcomes are improved, with the same authors believing that a culture of high expectation may be beneficial across all student ability sets. What is clear from research is that the formation of teacher expectations is a complex process, with evidence supporting that teacher expectations may affect student performance by influencing student academic beliefs and motivations (Friedrich *et al.*, 2015). It is therefore important to recognise the positive association between teacher expectations and student self-efficacy perceptions (Vekiri, 2010, Tyler & Boelter, 2008), all competencies needed to be able to move onto third-level.

School type was found to be an influential factor when related to teacher expectations. Students attending technical or vocational educational settings may be perceived to be significantly less capable, whereas students attending schools considered to be more academic are identified as academic themselves (Van Houtte *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, in schools with a greater proportion of students originating from working-class backgrounds, teachers were found to hold lower expectations (Thys & Van Houtte, 2016; Matsuoka, 2014; Rubie-Davies *et al.*, 2012). Existing research find the reputation of the school may contribute to teacher expectations (Al-Fadhli and Singh, 2006) with teachers in high achieving school, basing their expectations on student ability, whereas teachers in low achieving schools base their expectations on student characteristics and profile, including appearance, conduct, parent education levels and familial support. This is interesting when considered within the context of the Irish annual feeder schools league tables of achievement that show the numbers of students who sat the Leaving Certificate and subsequent third-level progression. Internationally, in United States of America where national and state policy makers sought to quantify teacher and student performances (Ravitch, 2010) and similarly, in the United Kingdom (U.K.), since 1992 the government has published what has become known as 'school league tables' (DfE, 2020). These league tables stemmed from the Education Reform Acts of 1980, 1988 and

1992 in the UK, which introduced market forces into the education system by presenting achievement data, based around the standardised national curriculum and high stakes testing (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017). It could be argued that tables of achievement reinforce status and privilege and clearly delineate schools with academic repute and in Ireland, this genre of information is not readily available as successive ministers for education have declined to publish official data. However, with some data limitations a list of ‘feeder’ second-level schools is published annually by the *Irish Times* using information supplied by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). Bourdieu maintained that the education system is a central vehicle for the reproduction of cultural and social inequality (1998). Furthermore, Bourdieu and Passeron, (1990) uphold, that despite the ideology of equality of opportunity and meritocracy, the advantaged social classes have no interest in doing anything other than to ‘reproduce the legitimate culture as it stands and produce agents capable of manipulating it legitimately’ (p. 59-60). Reichelt *et al.*, (2019) agree, believing education to be ‘the main mediator of social reproduction’ (p. 1), an idea also supported by Domina *et al.*, (2017) who describe schools as one of the key institutions that affect status inequality.

Of interest to this study is the previous work of Coldron *et al.*, (2010), who found that across the spectrum of the social divide it is not only the proactive middle-class parent who is making definite choices by seeking out a school populated by like-minded families, sharing backgrounds similar to their own. The same research reported that likewise, the working-class parent will also seek out a school that is most likely to be local to them and will be populated by children from a similar background as their own. In this way, working-class parents are also pursuing what Coldron *et al.*, (2010) describe as the ‘benefits of solidarity’ leading them to ‘opt for segregation’ (p. 16). Social positioning is both a relative and a relational concept, which depends entirely on an individual’s own relationship to the positions of others who share in similar life circumstances, whilst occupying a comparable position within the social space (Pinxten and Lievens, 2014). Therefore, people with similar amounts and compositions of the different forms of capital are closer together in social space, and it is this group of people that retain the potential to become a social class (Bourdieu, 1997).

Where one goes to school and who one goes to school with, seems to matter, with Sacerdote (2011) noting that many believe peer composition to be a significant and

determining element of student achievement. Palardy (2015; 2013) and Konstantopoulos and Borman (2011) also support this view, reporting the socio-economic composition of the student body can influence a range of different student outcomes. Indeed, research supports the substantial negative impact on the achievement levels of students in schools that have a high concentration of pupils originating from poor socio-economic backgrounds (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018). Working-class parents do not tend to employ the same strategies as middle-class parents, tending to choose a school within proximity to their house influenced by the number of primary school friends, or their existing children would already attend. Choice of school can clearly have an impact on student outcomes with McCoy *et al.*, (2014) finding that there was a far greater likelihood of a young person moving on to education or training post-Leaving Certificate, where they had attended a socially mixed school, and this was even more marked if the school was middle-class. However, this means that in areas of social disadvantage, the local school will not necessarily be socially representative. Therefore, when following the guiding principle that schools should be representative of wider social circles, back around to whether interventions should be targeted at schools across the board or at individuals. Although making all schools more socially representative is a priority area identified at third-level also (National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, 2015), Owens (2010) sounds a note of caution here, believing that policy makers need to establish how students originating from different areas can be successfully integrated into the structure and culture of a school. ERSI (2014) cite 94% of students who had attended middle-class schools made applications for higher education courses when compared to 50% of students from schools situated in working-class areas. Smyth and Banks (2012) found that in some schools, moving onto third-level education is a given, although they believe this to be not entirely associated with the social class dynamics within the school. Sime and Sheridan (2014) report that even when working-class students receive positive messaging from school staff promoting and reinforcing a culture of high aspiration and achievement, their background continues to put them at a disadvantage.

Swearer *et al.*, (2009) found an increasing interest in school climate, associating it with a range of significant student outcomes with a range of empirical research confirming the relevance of school climate in influencing the academic achievement of its students (Collins and Parson, 2010; Brand *et al.*, 2008; Chen and Weikart, 2008). Cohen (2009) equated school climate to the day-to-day quality and atmosphere of school values,

including factors such as interpersonal relationships, school management team, and administrative structures and quality of teaching and learning. More recently, Reynolds *et al.*, (2017) found that attending a school with a positive and supportive school climate can impact a student's academic performance. The same study reported that when there is an over-riding school culture of achievement which is encouraging and nurturing, students will positively identify with this and therefore seek to live up to and embody its values and focus on learning and achievement. Research has demonstrated that when access to the forms of social and cultural capital valued by the dominant social classes are restricted, then educational outcomes in turn are limited (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Reay *et al.*, 2010). There is evidence to suggest students from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not have access to a range of experiences and opportunities can be negatively impacted because they lack what Bourdieu describes as 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, it stands to reason that exposing all students to a wide range of school experiences and extra-curricular activities helps promote a positive learning culture which is especially important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and may positively impact their future choices. This is an idea supported by Weinstein and Mayer (1986) who believe in 'the relatively permanent change in a person's knowledge or behaviour due to experience' (p.1040). Participation in extracurricular activities can bring with it a range of positive things such as improvements in self-esteem, self-confidence, self-awareness, social skills, and ultimately academic achievement (Christison, 2013). Research suggests that non-cognitive skills help an individual make more informed decisions about education, health, personal finances, and conflict (Adams, 2011). All traits that it could be argued are lacking in students from disadvantaged backgrounds moving on to third-level.

Previous research by iWISH (2017) and ESRI (2014) found the social class of the school to be more of a significant factor than both the students' family background and the influence of parents and friends, when deciding whether to move on to higher education. Additionally, Williams *et al.*, (2018) believe that a social differentiated student cohort could have significant consequences for later educational outcomes, when considering the possible effect of peer influences, school provision of subjects, subject levels, and teacher expectations. Research found educational expectations to be strongly associated with achievement in school (Lorenz *et al.*, 2019), with this same study describing friendship groups and friends as increasingly functioning as 'significant others' (Lorenz

et al., 2019, p. 643). It can be concluded, therefore, that peer effect and friendship networks can influence the development of academic expectations. *Growing Up in Ireland Report* (2018) describes that as ‘peer and other non-family relationships in the community and neighbourhood substantially increase, as does the significance of the school environment and relationships with teachers and peers at school’ (Williams *et al.*, 2018, p. 25).

Previous work has shown the effects on student educational attainment to be negatively impacted during crisis situations such as earthquakes or flooding (Andrabi *et al.*, 2020; Baez, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted weaknesses in a system that was already under stress, with research suggesting school closures for a long period of time has detrimental social and health consequences for children living in poverty, worsening their existing inequalities (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020), and the enforced shift to remote learning appears to have further exacerbated these social inequalities (OECD 2020; UNESCO 2020; Wayman 2020).

2.8.4 School Closures and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Cohort of Learners 2019-2020 and 2020-2021

The educational landscape in Ireland altered on 12 March 2020, when post-primary schools were directed to close with immediate effect, and this became the last day that any young person was physically present in their school. Overnight, the tangible classroom space became replaced by a virtual one as all schools moved to a digital teaching environment. The immediate and unprepared delivery of emergency online teaching led to significant variations in the quality of the remote learning experience (Mohan *et al.*, 2020) during this first period of lockdown. For the first time since 1924, and in response to the loss of in-person class contact time, the DES took the somewhat late decision in May to cancel the Leaving Certificate of 2020. No written, or oral, examinations took place in June of that year and a predicted grading system ‘State Certified Calculated Grades’ was implemented (Émon *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, students were additionally offered the opportunity to take the traditional form of the Leaving Certificate examination in November of 2020, if they so wished (Government of Ireland, 2020). It has been suggested that Leaving Certificate grade inflation may have contributed to greater numbers of students progressing to third-level, when compared to

previous years with the creation of more places in third-level institutions to satisfy demand (Department of Education, 2021).

In Ireland, post-primary students have experienced two enforced periods of mandated school closures as part of a range of government wide restrictions in order to contain and manage the spread of COVID-19 (Government of Ireland, 2022). The second period of enforced school closures took place when students left for their Christmas holidays in December 2020; sixth year students did not return to school until 1 March 2021, followed by fifth year students on 15 March, and finally first to fourth years returned on 12 April 2021. For the second year in a row, and in recognition of the unprecedented learning situation, the government announced in February 2021 that the traditional Leaving Certificate would again not proceed in June 2021. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) was mandated to facilitate matriculating students to sit both the subject examination and/or opt for assessment in that same subject through an accredited grading system; receiving their final award from whichever form of assessment through which they achieved the highest grade (Government of Ireland, 2021).

According to Van Lancker and Parolin (2020) the pandemic resulted in 80% of school closures worldwide, a figure supported by the UN (UN, 2020). When surveyed by the CSO (2020), 67% of parents of post-primary students reported the learning of their senior cycle children was impacted to a moderate to major extent as a direct result of the initial lockdown. Existing research has found any prolonged school closures, for example summer holidays, can have an impact on students that relates directly to social class; the effects appear to correlate to familial income levels with students from backgrounds of disadvantage experiencing significant declines in school performance ability (Cooper, 1996). In Ireland, students were subjected to a second period of digital learning from January 2021 to March 2021 and although schools were not fully operational across all year groups until 12 April, sixth year students returned on a limited basis from the beginning of March (DES, 2021). Research has suggested that the student learning experience during the second period of remote learning was better than the first (Flynn *et al.*, 2021). However, the OECD (2021) cautions that this may not have been the experience universally, and it is not clear whether students from marginalised social groups participated in, and benefitted from, home learning to the same extent as their more advantaged peers. Flynn *et al.*, (2021) refer to new and unfamiliar virtual home

learning situation as ‘schooling at home’ (SAH) (p. 218). This pattern of challenges was replicated across all levels of society, but it was quickly recognised that marginalised students and families were particularly vulnerable to the impact of school closures (Sahlberg 2020). Culture, demography, politics, and the economy are mirrored within education (Viennet and Pont, 2017), and in addition social aspirations can influence the way the education system and related issues are both recognized and organized (DES, 2016). Viennet and Pont (2017) describe how ‘education policy can be formally understood as the actions taken by governments in relation to educational practices’ (p. 20) and in the Irish context, the government has experienced some criticism for the length of mandated school closures during the pandemic. The OECD reported children and young people in Ireland have lost more school days than any other country in Europe (Bertling *et al.*, 2020).

In terms of supporting home learners, Doyle (2020) observes that a lack of physical resources, time constraints, and parental literacy issues due to lack of academic ability was considered to be challenging. Interestingly Flynn *et al.*, (2021) noted that for second-level students it was the mothers who bore the main responsibility for home-schooling their children. Additionally, there was the barrier of connectivity with recently published research revealing an estimated ten thousand Irish students ‘are at a disadvantage when it comes to access to technology’ (O’Kelly 2020; Social Justice Ireland 2020). Although the Irish government distributed emergency funds to schools to provide them with the resources to buy mobile phone credit/laptops/tablets to help narrow the digital divide (O’Brien and O’Halloran 2020), the ‘evidence to date suggests that the negative impact on students’ learning has been greater for less highly motivated students and in particular those with less ready access to online provision’ (Mohan *et al.*, 2020, p. 50).

Long before the pandemic, food insecurity is identified as a risk factor, overall well-being, and a clear connection has been established between well-nourished students and improvements in educational achievement and attainment (Bitler and Seifoddini, 2019; Schwartz and Rothbart, 2019). UNESCO (2020) describe that not being physically present in school severely impacted the ability of students to access practical supports for example free school meals. Research suggests that children from more advantaged backgrounds were better equipped at a practical level to be able to manage remote learning in an enforced home environment; whereas those young people from low-income

households or those living in precarious housing situations including homelessness, experienced far more challenges associated with home schooling and engagement with academic work (Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020).

Schools are not just buildings but can also be a safe environment for many, where vulnerable students are protected to some extent from neglect and the effects of abuse and violence in the home (Masonbrink, 2020). The influence of school extends beyond education and includes socio-emotional development and overall wellbeing (Bertling *et al.*, 2020). Some years ago, Kessler *et al.*, (2007) reported that 50% of lifetime psychological disorders are established by mid-adolescence. More recent research found substantial negative effects on mental health and wellbeing of students with feelings of anxiety, depression and isolation being widely reported (Mohan *et al.*, 2020). School may also have to manage substantial challenges to mental health and wellbeing in their student populations after the pandemic has passed (Lee, 2020). School provides an important community for young people, as well as structure for their everyday lives. Although there are widespread negative reports from schools of all demographics, of particular concern are the exacerbated detrimental effects on the mental health and wellbeing of students from backgrounds of disadvantage and those attending DEIS schools (CSO, 2020; Mohan *et al.*, 2020).

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the historical and existing literature, identifying and presenting discussion surrounding a range of barriers that may influence a young person's progression to third-level education. The Bioecological Theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994, 1993; Bronfenbrenner 1986) and Bourdieu's Theory of Social and Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1997, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Bourdieu 1973) were discussed, and their relationship within education and school settings considered, as influenced by wider societal influences such as government actions and policies. Although OECD (2020) believes Ireland to have one of the highest performing education systems as a whole across OECD countries, the fact remains that education and social disadvantage are intrinsically linked, and people from less advantaged family backgrounds acquire considerably less education than their more advantaged counterparts (Kavanagh and

Weir, 2018; Machin, 2006). The OECD (2012) found ‘an equitable education system can redress the effects of broader social and economic inequalities’ (p. 15) and therefore, the impact of a free and fair education system for every child and young person in Ireland must not be underestimated. Lynch (2018) believes that change is required in order to satisfy the structural social inequalities experienced by families in Ireland today, and until these wider societal issues are addressed not every child will be able to access their statutory right to a free and equivalent education. This is a view upheld and a key finding in the report *Mind the Gap: Tackling social and Educational Inequality* (2015), whose authors found that ‘educationally focussed policies and interventions cannot overcome the structural issues of poverty and inequality which are the root causes of educational inequality’ (p. 23). This review has identified gaps in the literature in particular relating to the very recently extended DEIS programme (DES, 2022), which is the Irish government’s main policy application to alleviate the impact of those at risk of or experiencing educational disadvantage. The level of criticism is growing for the need to personalise the broader context of DEIS which currently is applied on a schools-only basis. However, establishing that a school is statistically eligible for DEIS does not answer the question as to why the students within it are disadvantaged in the first place. DEIS is not person-centred, and therefore cannot take account of the many children and young people from disadvantage families who are enrolled in non-DEIS schools (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2020, p. 20).

Darmody *et al.*, (2020) believe that the COVID-19 pandemic may only serve to strengthen poverty among the population already experiencing inequality in health, employment, and education. Students have faced many challenges due to the enforced periods of remote learning. Having the resilience, personal resources and skillset to transition to, and the ability to engage with and remain motivated with a solely independent and online learning environment, a peaceful study area and access to adequate technology, are just some of the areas identified by this literature review as potential barriers to learning during COVID-19. Moreover, research suggests that as a result of the school closures, challenges surrounding mental health and wellbeing for students especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who were already at risk of disengaging from and becoming disenfranchised with their studies, became even more pronounced (Quinn *et al.*, 2021; Holmes *et al.*, 2020). With Holmes *et al.*,(2020)

anticipating the longevity of these effects to be profound, this is an area that demands further research, discussion, and debate.

This literature review has served not only to report upon existing research and data underpinned by theory but has also identified areas of further interest relating to the phenomenon of social disadvantage and third-level progression.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Antwi and Kasim (2015) describe methodology as ‘the method used in conducting the investigation’ (p. 218). This chapter introduces the most suitable paradigm and framework for this study and defends the chosen research method. Practical issues and the process of the research design are presented; quantitative and qualitative methodologies are described, and the justifications for the qualitative approach selected are stated. Furthermore, this chapter considers the elements of the grounded theory method used to gather human experiences, together with its intrinsic incorporation within the flexible data analysis approach, considered appropriate to this study. Moreover, the process and identification of participants and the principles of ethics and confidentiality are outlined. The covid-19 pandemic brought with it many challenges for the qualitative investigator, and at the time the interviews were being conducted, individuals were still unable to routinely meet in-person, therefore this study took place using the remote platform *Zoom*. Semi-structured interviews took place with twelve key stakeholders to fulfil the primary objective of this research study, that of promoting understanding of why students from backgrounds of disadvantage are less likely to progress to third-level education.

Table 1: Research Participants

Participant	Date of Interview	Participant Role	Duration (Minutes)	Post-primary School Type	DEIS vs Non-DEIS Status¹
P1	22/6/21	Deputy Principal	46.03	Community College	DEIS
P2	9/8/21	Deputy Principal	35.14	Community College	DEIS
P3	1/10/21	6 th Year Head	44.46	Community College	DEIS
P4	7/7/21	Principal	43.35	Community College	DEIS
P5	2/9/21	Principal	35.33	Fee-paying	Non-DEIS
P6	14/12/21	Principal	19.19	Fee-paying	Non-DEIS
P7	1/7/21	Principal	44.27	Fee-paying	Non-DEIS
P8	1/7/21	Deputy Principal	34.47	Fee-paying	Non-DEIS
P9	14/12/21	Principal	57.41	Community College	Non-DEIS
P10	22/9/21	Deputy Principal	40.39	Community College	Non-DEIS
P11	15/7/21	6 th Year Head /Guidance Counsellor	44.57	Educate Together Secondary School	Non-DEIS
P12	7/7/21	Guidance Counsellor	36.00	Community College	Non-DEIS

¹ All co-educational post-primary schools

3.2 Philosophy of Research

Kamal (2019) believes that in any research study, the research paradigm is an intrinsic and interrelated component within the philosophical basis (ontology, epistemology, and methodology). A paradigm is a set of assumptions and perceptual orientations shared by members of a research community (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017) and constitutes a collection of abstract beliefs and principles that shape how a researcher sees their world (Kamal, 2019). Therefore, it is important for any researcher to anchor their work within a suitable paradigm in order to ensure a strong research design (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). A researcher needs to be reflective whilst recognising that one's own experiences and interpersonal interactions will shape views and expectations of oneself and the work. Additionally, a researcher must appreciate the co-construction element of knowledge and place importance on the cultivation of a relationship with the participants (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2013; Gubrium *et al.*, (eds.), 2012). The constructivist paradigm informs the basis of this study in so much as the multiple perspectives, experiences and beliefs of the school leaders can be constructed into knowledge based on their unique lived experiences, through the interpretation and consideration of their responses when separately interviewed. Kamal (2017) believes ontology, epistemology and methodology represent the three dimensions of the philosophical foundations of the research process.

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology is described by O'Hara (2011) and Crotty (1998) as the study of 'being' however, within philosophy, the concept of truth is the subject of much debate being concerned with the nature of existence and how reality is structured. From a research perspective, ontology is the term applied to explain the philosophical starting point for inquiry aimed at locating and clarifying what is said to be true, whether by linking cause with effect, or else by seeking an understanding of concepts and ideas (Bleiker *et al.*, 2019). From this position, truth is constructed in and by the mind from psychological processes such as memories and beliefs, social factors, interactions, and experiences (Bleiker *et al.*, 2019). By soliciting the views and opinions of post-primary school leaders, this research seeks to explore participant knowledge and understanding of socio-economic disadvantage, and in particular their socially constructed nature of reality surrounding its relationship within education in their own contexts and settings. Punch (2014) describes this as the human experience. Notwithstanding this, it is important to

appreciate that during last two years the world has lived through the grip of a pandemic, therefore the flexible nature of the interpretative ontology approach where social phenomena and their meaning are not fixed, but are ‘under construction’ and continually evolving, is highly pertinent within this study.

3.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology, is the study of knowledge and from where that knowledge originates, which according to Crotty (1998) presents in three main forms that of objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism. Epistemology is concerned with what we know and the process by which an individual builds on their knowledge base, with Crotty (1998) thereby implying that an individual constructs their own meaning of the world through social interaction with others. Kamal (2019) suggests that knowledge is subjective and cannot be present without persons to construct it. Hesse-Biber and Levy (2004) ponder the question of who can be the knower, which aligns with the later work of Bleiker *et al.*, (2019) who believe the central focus of study comes from the interactions between researcher and participants. These viewpoints reinforced the importance of fostering positive relationships between researcher and participants throughout this study, through a holistic approach with an awareness that both parties can contribute to the knowledge base.

3.3 Quantitative versus Qualitative Methodology

According to Lune and Berg (2017), a primary reason for undertaking social scientific research is to attribute meanings to the underlying patterns. Describing how theories can be understood as interrelated ideas about such patterns can be used to help make sense of the observed patterns and phenomenon. Byrne and McCoy (2017) and Cullinan *et al.*, (2013) report a consistent pattern has been established in that students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Ireland, are less likely to progress to third-level education post-Leaving Certificate than those from more affluent backgrounds. The process of designing this study and selecting the appropriate methodology began with consideration of the question in relation to why this is the case. Bryman (2016) reports quantitative, qualitative and/or mixed methods, the latter being data collection utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, as all being suitable protocols for conducting social research. Whilst

recognising the strengths and limitations of each, all were initially considered for this study.

A quantitative methodological approach is supportive of the belief that the social world consists of a tangible and unmoveable reality which can be objectively quantified by the researcher (Rahman, 2016). It relies on the formal structured gathering of numerical data often from large sample populations, using a variety of collection methods such as surveys, polls, telephone interviews, virtual platforms or scientific experimental research and observation (Stockemer, 2019; Wolf *et al.*, 2016; Engel *et al.*, 2015). The data generated from quantitative social research, permits mathematical and statistical analysis of observable phenomena and the relationships within (Barth and Blasius, 2021). Calhoun *et al.*, (2017) describe how empirical data has historically commanded a position of importance within the discipline of social science however, quantitative research methods do not explore a person's thoughts, feelings, or perceptions, a requirement for this study. Rahman (2017) cautioned that quantitative research data is possibly being more favourably perceived within policy, warning that 'policy-makers may give low credibility to results from qualitative approaches' (p. 5). Colander and Hunt (2019) however, disagree with this viewpoint, believing the qualitative method presents as an authentic scientific research tool because when used within the field of social science it brings meaning to the basic elements of culture which determine general patterns of human behaviour. The highly structured nature of the quantitative method intimates that the depth of data collected may be limited (Spicer, cited in Seale, 2018). This is when compared to the more flexible interpretive approach of qualitative research, which provides a less detached and wider understanding of behaviour and can deliver abundant data concerning real life people and situations (De Vaus, 2014; Leedy and Ormrod 2014).

Qualitative research methodology, on the other hand, is described as having its foundations in the constructive paradigm, where the over-arching principle is concerned with exploration and holistic understanding of human experience and behaviour from an individual's own frame of reference (Levitt *et al.*, 2017; Rahman, 2017; Walia, 2015). The qualitative researcher gathers and processes non-numerical data through the study of targeted populations, attempting to extract and interpret meaning from the data and get to the heart of the matter, by understanding social life and living (Walia, 2015; Yin, 2015; Punch, 2014). This research study is directed to a small population of post-primary school

leaders, in order to explore and attribute meaning, to their lived experiences and beliefs through the process of semi-structured interviews. The paradigm selected for this study is the interpretative, naturalistic approach of qualitative methodology because it recognises the potential of a flexible and changing socially constructed reality, where meaning and not frequency that can be extracted and understood subjectively (Rahman, 2020; Padgett, 2016). Described by Murphy and Costa (2015), Bourdieu was ‘committed to methodological explorations that result in richer sociological explanations’ (p.3), which also in part, informs the qualitative approach adopted for this study. Additionally, Padgett (2016) describes qualitative research as a rounded approach that attempts to represent the complex worlds of respondents through an on-the-ground manner. It is therefore, an approach perfectly suited to the researcher who wishes to ‘capture the lived experience from the perspectives of those who live it and create meaning from it’ (p. 16). When taking a qualitative research approach, researcher and participant generally interact directly with each other, with in-depth semi-structured interviews being one of the most common data collection methods (Bearman, 2019). It is a real-life dynamic research process, generating detailed descriptive data, which lends itself well to an in-depth small group, or individual interview-based (Rahman, 2017) and is complimentary to this study. Qualitative research is therefore well suited as the methodological approach selected for this study, facilitating the opportunity to gain contextual understanding through the diverse nature of educators’ voices grounded in their differing post-primary settings.

3.3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology has its origins in the study of phenomena, underpinned by philosophy, and described by Sundler *et al.*, (2019) as the ‘lived experience’ (p. 2). Phenomenology is a form of qualitative methodological research approach where the central principles are thematically analysed, based on descriptive phenomenology (Sundler *et al.*, 2019). This aligns well with the qualitative research approach Bearman (2019) describes as ‘the systematic study of social phenomena expressed in ways that qualify’ (p. 2). As a methodology, descriptive phenomenology originated with Husserl with later and further developed by Heidegger (Tuffour, 2017) and sought to examine the perception of the human consciousness of the lived human experience (Henriksson *et al.*, 2012). Moran (2011) described ‘Husserl's discussion of the “lifeworld” as the pre-given, universal framework of pre-theoretical experience on which the scientific conception of the world is founded’ (p. 36). Descriptive phenomenological studies explore subjective and lived

experiences of a particular phenomenon, enabling greater understanding and awareness (Creswell, 2014; Rolfe, 2013) surrounding why a particular social phenomenon or program operates as it does within a particular context. In that sense, this research aims to draw on the views and opinions of experienced professional educators in order to investigate the many factors that influence students from lower socio-economic backgrounds progressing to third-level. The twelve participants in this study were invited to effectively tell the story of their setting, from their own perspectives and described by Miles and Huberman (2009) as ‘a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations in identifiable local concepts’ (p. 24).

3.4 Recruitment of Participants

A strength of the decision to select a qualitative methodology for this study, was in part due to its ability to explore and embrace in an in-depth manner, the different lived experiences, perspectives, and viewpoints that individuals may hold, surrounding the same phenomenon (McGrath *et al.*, 2019). According to Hammer and Wildavsky (2018) ‘a social scientist seeks to understand a process by talking to the people involved’ (p. 1) and in any school environment it is the principal or school leaders who will be information rich (Patton, 2015). Moreover, Smith *et al.*, (2009) describe the importance of purposively selecting participants because ‘they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience’ (p. 48). Whilst Hennink *et al.*, (2020) outline the importance of achieving diversity within a qualitative research paradigm, Korstjens and Moser (2017), believe prioritising diversity in participants helps to gain real insight into phenomena and is an important aspect. This finding informed the decision to invite participants from three different co-educational school types; non-DEIS community colleges, DEIS schools, and fee-paying schools to take part to reflect on a range of perspectives, experiences, and information. Twelve participants, four from each of the three school types were specifically-selected purposive samples with principals, deputy principals, and Leaving Certificate year heads included as being considered to be closely informed on the research question. The researcher did not know the participants at a personal level, however professional networking was utilised in some instances for recruitment purposes. Participants were group initially by setting type, tabulated, and assigned an identifying number from one to twelve which was subsequently used to ensure the school profile-type was identifiable, but not the school itself.

3.5 Scope of the Research

Within the context of the Irish education system, existing empirical data indicates students from backgrounds of low socio-economic disadvantage continue to be under-represented within third-level education. This present study sets out to investigate why this is the case, and to explore factors that might influence a student's progression to third-level education post-Leaving Certificate. A qualitative approach will be adopted throughout, and all primary data subjected to in-depth thematic analysis. The scope of this study is restricted to purposive sampling of twelve post-primary school leaders recruited from three differing co-educational school social demographic types, namely non-DEIS community colleges, DEIS schools and fee-paying schools. Each participant will be invited to partake in a semi-structured interview lasting approximate forty-five minutes, via the digital platform *Zoom*. Barriers that deter, or hinder, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds from participating in third-level education relating to socio-economic background of the student, family culture and value of education, demographic of school and culture of learning will be explored. Additionally, in the light of the global pandemic and two enforced periods of school closures in Ireland since, this study aims to contribute to the emerging body of research surrounding the effects of the loss of in-person teaching time and its impact on student engagement with learning, academic attainment, and progression during this unpredicted time. This research originates with the unique viewpoints of post-primary school leaders, used as a route to identify what they believe to be the gaps in policy and provision in post-primary schools in terms of equality of opportunity and fairness in delivery of education and support to all students, regardless of student background of origin.

3.6 Semi-Structured Interviews

Maunder *et al.*, (2012) believe a qualitative method allows the voices to be central to the process, which further supports the choice of the use of in-depth interviews as the preferred choice for data collection for this study. The semi-structured interview process utilised in this study provides the vehicle to collect what Collins and Stockton (2018) describe as the ‘rich and thick descriptions’ they consider to be ‘the cornerstone of qualitative work’ (p. 6). It does not seek to quantify by using such questions as ‘how much’ or ‘how many’, rather more explore a process or event by using ‘how’, ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions (Tuffour, 2017).

Due to the imposed COVID-19 public-health restrictions all interviews were conducted on the virtual platform *Zoom*. Each interview opened with introductory pleasantries to help set the participant at their ease, and at the start an identical administrative script was followed reminding participants of the research working title, ethics, and confidentiality protocols and the approximate duration of the interview. Permission was verbally reiterated at the beginning of every interview to record the audio only. By keeping the research questions in mind at all times a skilled interviewer can encourage participants to elaborate on their answers and generate greater detail by asking follow-up questions (Bhatia, 2018). This was a technique utilized throughout every interview.

3.6.1 Selection of Virtual Interview Platform

Several internet communication platforms were considered for this study including *Skype* and *Zoom*. Existing literature supports the benefits of using *Zoom* for data collection as far outweighing any challenges that might be encountered (Archibald *et al.*, 2019). Given that *Zoom* was the leading digital platform software package used during the pandemic (Iqbal, 2020), it was assumed that the majority of participants would have pre-existing experience with its use, which made its use a practical and easy to navigate choice for this research study. The range of benefits of using *Zoom* include its ability to provide real-time communication without the need for the participants to have an account or download a programme, password protection and the facility to record audio without additional third-party involvement (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016).

Described by Lofland and Lofland (1995) as the ‘gold standard’ (cited in McCoyd and Kerson, 2006, p. 400) in-person interviewing has long been considered the traditional form of qualitative data collection (Reñosa *et al.*, 2021; Archibald *et al.*, 2019, Cresswell, 2013). Some qualitative researchers have discussed their beliefs that barriers to remote data collection such as interactional practical and ethical issues, render it unable to meet the parameters of the research objectives (Seitz, 2016; Weller, 2015). However, Archibald *et al.*, (2019) and Horrell *et al.*, (2015) do not agree, reporting *Zoom* interviews can possibly expand and even improve upon traditional data collection methods. In the event, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed an unprecedented and enforced virtual interview protocol and at point of interview, face-to-face in-person interactions were no longer recommended on the grounds of safety with schools have been advised to continue to strictly limit on-campus visits to essential reasons only (DES, 2020). Therefore, all interviews were conducted using the virtual platform *Zoom*. An additional benefit was that the geographical spread of participants made the use of remote interviews a very convenient and cost-effective approach, as neither researcher nor participants needed to travel to specific locations. Six of the twelve participants were remotely interviewed during term-time but were on their school premises with a stable internet connection, and the remaining six participants were in their own homes having kindly agreed to be take part in this study outside of their school working hours. Of these six, three participants highlighted that they lived in relatively remote locations which became apparent during the interview, as the internet connections was at times unreliable causing the video and audio quality to be poor and in several instances the ‘call’ dropped out completely.

Body language and non-verbal cues have long been acknowledged as particularly important aspects within an interview process (Reñosa *et al.*, 2021). However, where interviewer and participants do not occupy the same physical space, body language and emotional cues may be overlooked presenting challenges for building rapport (Barratt, 2012; Cater, 2011). In an online situation as was the case with this study, these cues may not be so obvious, and therefore the researcher must make additional efforts to build rapport and develop a relationship with the participants prior to the interview itself (Boland *et al.*, 2021). This idea is not universally accepted, with some researchers finding that when using *Zoom* it is indeed possible to build rapport and gather rich data, whilst ensuring a positive participant experience (Gray *et al.*, 2020; Archibald *et al.*, 2019). Previously, Deakin and Wakefield (2013) supported this, describing online participants

can be encouraged to be open and expressive. With this in mind, targeted efforts to promote rapport were made in advance of the remote interviewing process by exchanging emails and telephone calls.

3.6.2 Pre-Interview Procedure

In order to arrange interviews, each participant was emailed in the first instance and invited to take part in the study. A suitable time for a ‘meet and greet’ telephone call was organised. During the first telephone conversation after introductions had been made, the rationale and background to the study were briefly explained and a convenient date and time were agreed upon for the interview. An email was subsequently sent to each participant confirming those arrangements and thanking them again for their agreement to participate. One week before their interview, each participant was emailed a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A) that included the title of the research, purpose of the study, selection criteria of participants and their role in the research, and contact details for this researcher. Each participant was also emailed a Participant Consent and Confidentiality Form (Appendix B) which they were requested to acknowledge and return. The day preceding each interview a short telephone call was made to ensure a level of personal contact and verify participant access to a device capable of supporting *Zoom*. Finally, on the morning of the interview, a *Zoom* link was forward to each participant. Prior to commencement of the interview itself, a short pre-prepared statement was read out reminding each participant of the nature and purpose of this study, verbally reiterating voluntarily consent and a reminder that the interview would audio recorded only. Finally, each participant was warmly encouraged to contact this researcher post-interview should any further clarification be needed.

3.7 Interview Guide

Preparation is key, and the lynchpin of any successful interview is the starting point of informed knowledge (McGrath *et al.*, 2019). The literature review as presented in chapter 2, identified a wealth of information and data from previous research studies relating to the impact of socio-economic disadvantage within the context of education, and more specifically the potential barriers to student progression to third-level post-Leaving Certificate. The literature review identified as notable by its absence in previous research, the first-person voice of school leaders working at grass roots level within the Irish

education system. Exploiting information and identified gaps from the literature review, careful planning for both the scope and focus of the research questions was employed.

Rigorous development of the interview guide contributes to the objectivity and reliability of a study and the credibility of the results (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). The inclusion of every question should be critically evaluated as being essential to the research (Swaminathan and Mulvihill, 2017). It is also important to develop guiding questions using non-technical and easily approachable language (McGrath *et al.*, 2019) which was the protocol followed. The value of the semi-structured interview guide lies in the flexibility of being able to incorporate predetermined questions (typically five to fifteen questions), that allow participants to answer in their own words whilst simultaneously affording the interviewer the scope to probe and look for deeper responses, by asking follow-up questions (Lingard and Kennedy, 2010). Previous research suggests opening the interview with one or two informal warm up questions, which although will not elicit a large amount of detailed information should help establish the context and tone of the interview (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019; Jacob and Furgerson, 2012). According to Adams (2015), a well-designed interview guide remains flexible and ‘should still be considered a work in progress’ (p. 499); a position reflected within this study. Galletta (2013) believed any unanticipated issues should be explored in all further interviews. As this research study progressed some modifications were made to the interview guide to reflect the emergence of several unexpected areas of interest that included lack of a funded Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) position in every setting, “feeder” schools league tables and participants expressing a lack of fairness that third-level access schemes are available only to post-primary students attending DEIS schools.

Research has previously identified the need for care to be taken in ensuring every interview question is not only intricately connected to the research topic, but also can progress a fully in-depth investigation (Galletta, 2013). DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) believe that research questions that typically start with ‘how’, ‘what’ or ‘why’ and are the driving force of a study, linking to every other aspect of the design. Within this study, an open-ended questioning style approach was adopted to elicit information, considered to be the most appropriate technique to produce generative responses by a researcher who aims ‘to understand others’ understandings’ (Silverman, 2016, p. 53). Central to the use of open-ended ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are their ability to elicit information from the

participants that use their own words and therefore allow for ‘verbatim quotations and sufficient context/content to be interpretable’ (Patton, 2014, p. 36). Open-ended questions are a vehicle for deeper learning but do not always result in a straightforward answer. Closed-ended questions set boundaries to the responses (Pate, 2012) and were therefore considered to be unsuitable for this study with this researcher taking the view that insufficient coherent narrative data would be generated. Finally, and according to Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) the very heart of research lies with the asking of what they describe as ‘good questions’ (p.1), that should be structured in such a way as to remain entirely unbiased conveying no opinion either explicitly or implied from the researcher.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

According to Ryen (cited in Silverman 2016) ‘knowledge production comes with a moral responsibility’ (p. 42) with consent, confidentiality and trust the cornerstones of ethical qualitative research. Neuman (2011) unequivocally believes it to be the responsibility of the researcher alone to conduct and behave in an ethical manner in relation to every aspect of the research describing ‘the moral and professional obligation of the individual researcher to be ethical even when research participants are unaware of or unconcerned about ethics’ (p. 143). However, despite the interviewer being the prime vehicle of data collection, neither interviewer or interviewee are passive players within the process, and it remains a central part of the research process to show every participant that their point view is valuable, and crucial to the success of the study (Lingard and Kennedy, 2010). Throughout this research, every participant was treated with the respect they deserved. Their commitment to the study and contributions were appreciated, particularly given the backdrop of the pressures schools were under due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Munster Technological University (MTU) Code of Good Practice in Research most recently updated in June 2019 was used as protocol and followed meticulously.

3.8.1 Informed Voluntary Consent

Berg and Howard (2012) state that researchers must ‘do no harm’ (p. 61) and integrity within all areas of research, ethics, good practice, and the seeking of informed consent prior to the start of any research are all essential aspects within research of any kind (Maxwell, 2013; Cohen, 2011). Additionally, where participants are invited to offer their

views and innermost thoughts and feelings it is especially important to have informed consent (Ryen, cited in Silverman, 2016). An Informed Consent Form is a document written in simple, approachable language that ensures every participant is furnished with the necessary information concerning the research study and are aware of their rights (Lee, 2018). The nature of this research study was formally introduced and outlined to each participant on a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A). Contact details were provided, and every participant was invited to contact this researcher should further information post-interview be required. The same information was also informally reinstated verbally at every opportunity, whilst acquainting with the participants and again during 'housekeeping' at the beginning of each interview. Participants were made aware, both in writing on the pre-interview form and again verbally at the start of each interview they maintained the right to withdraw from this study without judgement, and at any point in time.

3.8.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymity is an important ethical consideration for any researcher and there is a large body of research surrounding the difficulties of maintaining anonymity with so much information readily available and accessible on the internet (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). Markham (2012) takes an interesting viewpoint on this, arguing that 'people may operate in public spaces but maintain strong expectations of privacy (p. 3). Furthermore, Alase (2017, p.17) describes how 'the protection of human participants in a qualitative research study has always been a sacred obligation of the researcher'. A qualitative researcher holds a position of privilege, the very nature of the investigatory process is to gain insights and details about the lived experiences of the participants.

A pre-prepared Participant Consent and Confidentiality Form was emailed to each participant ahead of their interview (Appendix B) seeking confirmation in writing by return that it had been read and all protocols were satisfactory. Every participant in this research was verbally assured of complete confidentiality at the start of the interview and reminded that the information and views they shared would be treated sensitively without judgement and with respect. This was a vital perquisite for all participants to know their views were valued and had confidence in the fact that their contributions would never be disclosed, and their anonymity would be protected. For the purposes of this study, no school or participant was overtly named within the research, instead an identifying

number was assigned to each in line with best practice in the reporting of qualitative data (O'Donoghue, 2018), to enable coding and thematic analysis and discussion. Furthermore, participants were assured that the transcript of each interview would also not include any identifying information. All recordings were saved on a USB data stick designated for this purpose only, along with the interview transcripts and kept securely until after the assessment process. After thesis corrections and final submission, the USB data stick will be destroyed in order to satisfy GDPR and MTU Code of Good Practice in Research (2019).

3.8.3 Elimination of Bias

With the qualitative interview and open-ended questioning technique being widely used to elicit stories of personal experience and attribute meaning (Prior, 2017), the interviewer becomes the most important research tool in face-to-face interviews (Korstjens and Moser, 2017). Any interviewer should be genuine, whilst simultaneously recognising that all researchers bring with them their own belief patterns and thoughts, a process reliant upon the empathetic ability of the researcher to be able to relate to a different reality than their own (Attia and Edge, 2017). Due to the nature of this personal interaction, the interviewer should be both curious and friendly; actively listening and showing open body language will help to develop and maintain a relationship of trust with the interviewee (Attia and Edge, 2017; Bell, 2014). Bourdieu (1999) considers the signposting of active and methodical listening indicates to the participant 'the interviewer's intellectual and emotional participation' (Bourdieu, 1999, p.10). Korstjens and Moser (2017) describe this social process between researcher and participant as a living example of social science in action. Padgett (2016) believes that it is the researcher themselves who is the instrument of data collection, with the establishment of a relationship based on mutual respect between interviewer and interviewee being widely documented within literature (Prior, 2019; McGrath *et al.*, 2018; Bell 2014). To protect the subjectivity and integrity of any study and reduce bias, Wright *et al.*, (2016) caution that the interviewer must show empathy whilst remaining at a distance; a skill that will help to lessen the influence of the researcher on the data collection. Prior (2017) describes the establishment of this relationship as 'rapport', with Reñosa *et al.*, (2021) extending this by describing how as qualitative researchers 'we champion the value and necessity of rapport building' (p.1).

3.9 Pilot Study

Piloting a preliminary semi-structured interview ahead of the main study is an important aspect of any research design and development (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). As such, familiarity with the questions will help the interviewer with pace and tone, giving an impression of confidence and ease (Holmes, 2014; Harding, 2013). Practical matters such as timing can also be addressed at the piloting stage to ensure an overall flow to the interview so that it does not feel either too rushed, or too long, and importantly elicits the information needed to fully answer the research question. Ultimately, piloting provides the opportunity to adjust the questions and check for clarity of language, and as such the interview guide for this research study went through many stages of development. A deputy principal of an urban DEIS school located in an area of recognised socio-economic disadvantage was recruited through personal connection and kindly agreed to be the subject of the pilot interview. The strict interview protocols of ethics and confidentiality were applied. This pilot interview was undertaken using the initial research guide formulation that comprised of sixteen questions however, at an early stage it became clear that this was too many questions and adjustments would need to be made. This number was ultimately reduced to twelve, which allowed the participants a comfortable amount of time without being rushed, to give full responses to the questions that remained in order to maximise the collection of information-rich data. The pilot interview also helped to manage the rhythm of the final interview and revealed the questions where prompts would be helpful to probe and elicit more detailed data.

3.10 Thematic Data Analysis

The thematic data analysis methodology utilized in this research is inductive using a descriptive approach with a focus on the lived experience, such as semi-structured interviews. Questions that seek views and personal opinions, result in large quantities of data being collected (Pope *et al.*, 2000) and thematic analysis is aimed at trying to extract meaning from within the data as opposed to measuring frequency (Sundler *et al.*, 2015). Each interview was transcribed verbatim and re-checked to ensure complete accuracy. This was an especially time-consuming process in some instances because of poor connectivity during several of the interviews which resulted in the *Zoom* dropping out. Once transcribed, the interviews were arranged to the left-hand side of the page and numbered by line to allow notes to be made on the right-hand side of each page in order to assist analysis through the identification of themes. Each interview was analysed without bias and in numerical order of the questions posed; the answers were compared and contrasted in order to extract and explore the patterns and thematic similarities. Similar answers were then grouped together. Analysing data thematically is a useful and flexible process that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Finally, answers were compared with current information with the literature review available for consultation throughout.

3.11 Conclusion

Education is widely acknowledged as a social tool empowering individuals to escape from disadvantage (Rowley *et al.*, 2020; Weir *et al.*, 2017). The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection *Road Map for School Inclusion 2020-2025*, describes education as having ‘the power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty and break down cycles of disadvantage (p. 45). Therefore, when set against backdrop of Ireland’s changing economy and society, this research is both timely and relevant in light of a number of Irish Government reports for social inclusion and DEIS, particularly the newly extended DEIS scheme (DES, 2022). Both internationally and nationally, a great deal of data, statistics and socio-economic profiling has been previously generated accompanied by educational policy analysis, regarding the routes taken by students after final post-primary matriculation (HEA, 2020; Cahill 2015). However, whilst acknowledging that every statistic represents an individual, there would appear to be very

little person-centred information relating to the reasons and choices behind these decisions, and even less from those professional educators who are supporting and informing their students. The non-numeric data collection method of the constructivist qualitative approach was considered the most suitable research protocol for this study, aligning well as a descriptive data collection method from a narrative. Semi-structured open-ended interviews adopting a person-centred ideographic approach were conducted with twelve educational professionals, from schools of three differing socio-demographic contexts. The over-arching principle of this study sought to understand the perspectives and lived experiences of school leaders, surrounding why young people from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage, are less likely than their more advantaged counterparts to proceed to third-level post-Leaving Certificate. The primary detailed and descriptive data collected through the interview process was transcribed, thematically coded and analysed, in order to fully investigate the research question, and generate statements of value for research purposes and to contribute to the discourse surrounding social and educational policy. The relatively small sample size lends itself to further future work in order to be able to generalise more broadly. *Zoom* made the experience different to in-person interaction and was an added layer of difficulty, however it also revealed that there are many positives to the use of remote platforms for social research particularly where unexpected situations arise. This research offers first person ‘lived’ on the ground data from experienced school leaders with their narratives providing a unique insight into the lives and day-to-day challenges faced by both schools and students. Given the context of the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic, the time frame of this research contributes to new and emerging data surrounding the experiences of schools and their students during this time.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

4.0 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted with post-primary school leaders involved in the delivery of second-level education, across three differing school types. The continuum of disadvantage linked to socio-economic background and its negative impact on children and young people as they progress within the education system in Ireland, is the over-arching discussion in this chapter. Additionally, environmental factors that extend beyond the scope of family socio-economic status that have been identified by this research study as impacting upon student attainment and choices post-Leaving Certificate, are presented. These include; the influence of familial culture and value of education, the effect of the school demographic and culture of learning, and the impact of enforced school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are anchored within existing theory, and further positioned within the literature as previously identified in chapter two. The primary data is thematically analysed and discussed in this chapter, utilising excerpts in the form of direct quotations from interviews in order to analyse some significant findings. Four clear themes emerged from the data:

1. The effects of socio-economic background on post-primary student progression to third-level.
2. Impact of familial culture and value of education upon post-primary student attainment and choices post Leaving-Certificate.
3. The influence of the post-primary school demographic and culture of learning on student attainment and choices post-Leaving Certificate.
4. School closures and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland on post-primary students, families, and schools.

4.2 Effects of Socio-economic Background on Post-Primary Students Progression to Third-level

It was clear from the data that non-DEIS community college participants, and DEIS, and fee-paying participants all recognise that children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face many barriers, that can negatively affect their ability to access, achieve and progress within the education system. The quotations below from participants of each school demographic illustrate these views. A community college principal said:

Without a shadow of a doubt a child's success at all stages of their schooling is reflective of their family's socio-economic status (Participant 9).

A deputy principal from a DEIS school agreed:

Our families face on-going significant and fundamental challenges due to their background that impact on their children throughout their schooling (Participant 1).

These views were further supported by a principal of a fee-paying school, who whilst recognising socio-economic disadvantage as a barrier to education for some, believed it was not an issue within their setting:

We do recognise the reality of socio-economic background as being a challenge for many to access education. That said I am very conscious that we are shielded to an extent from poverty and issues like homelessness and I cannot think of anyone from a very poor background in this school (Participant 8).

Notably, while this does concur with findings from existing literature, it was apparent that participants recognised the continuum of disadvantage experienced by learners to be a complex and multi-faceted issue. Educational disadvantage is not a newly positioned concept within Irish educational policy, and the intention of *Delivery of Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) is an integrated policy approach to inclusion (DES, 2022, 2017, 2005). As previously discussed, schools included within the DEIS scheme receive a suite of supports and resources but at this present time DEIS remains the only policy directed intervention to combat disadvantage in post-primary schools. It was evident from the interviews that when faced with high levels of disadvantage across the breadth of their school communities, all DEIS participants were grateful for the extra resources

that *are so welcome and can be channelled into our students* (Participant 2). However, these four participants expressed them to be inadequate to fully address their needs which highlights the lack of discourse surrounding the level of ‘on the ground’ funding that post-primary DEIS schools require, in order to meet the needs of their students that for the most part originate from the local area. A deputy principal of a DEIS school said:

The DEIS scheme gives us lots of supports and interventions, but we always need more. We could never say we have enough when so many of our students live with huge levels of disadvantage
(Participant 1).

Furthermore, a principal of a DEIS school said:

The challenges for the students are huge and the supports we receive are so welcome, but our needs far exceed what is given through a DEIS situation. Even with DEIS we can find it very difficult to fund and manage things
(Participant 4).

Existing research reporting that the type of post-primary school a young person attends can impact upon their long-term educational outcomes and attainment (Thys and Van Houtte, 2016; Matsuoka, 2014). DEIS schools tend to draw predominantly from within their own communities, and this was a feature identified in this study. A DEIS school year head expressed:

We would find that a lot of our students would be from deprived backgrounds. Our students would mainly be kids who come to us from the local primary schools, they all know each other coming into school because they all come from the locality
(Participant 3).

All four DEIS schools included in this study are located in areas of recognised socio-economic disadvantage. They self-reported a more localised catchment area with a depth of disadvantage spanning the vast majority of their student body, reflective of the social class of the school environs. Previous research found the socio-economic status of a neighbourhood may be reflected in the relative deprivation within schools, and as a consequence those from predominantly disadvantaged areas are being especially negatively impacted (de Vuijst *et al.*, 2017). It was apparent that the DEIS schools in this study had a high concentration of pupils originating from poor backgrounds, which

resulted in greater demands on the school to mitigate the level of disadvantage experienced by their students.

We are embedded in the local community and most of our students, let's say 95% come from the two feeder primary schools, which like ourselves serve the immediate area (Participant 1).

However, the diverse nature of disadvantage does not mean that it is isolated only within DEIS designated schools or limited to schools located in specific geographical areas of recognised socio-economic disadvantage. Community colleges, often with wide catchment areas, are catering for a student body that spreads across all social spectres. A principal of a community college located in a rural area said:

I've come across everything here from sexual abuse in homes, to poor incomes, blended families, to having so-called normal middle-class good families and everything in between. It is the type of school that we are, embedded within the local community and reflective of society in general (Participant 9).

The four non-DEIS community college participants reported upholding the guiding principle that schools should be inclusive and socially representative, which they achieve by drawing from a wide catchment area. Moreover, all four community college participants reported catering for students from *every walk of life* (Participant 12) as a result of their wide and inclusive catchment area that is not restricted to their immediate school vicinities. To illustrate this, one participant from an Educate Together Secondary School within a city centre location, described their broad catchment area with many students travelling long distances to attend:

Our catchment area is wide, we are a city centre school and have students travelling into us from all different areas, suburbs of the city and county. We are very inclusive and have one or two Traveller students as well as students from the Roma community, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students from affluent backgrounds too. We are really a very diverse community (Participant 11).

Existing research reports that no effort appears to have been made to analyse the educational needs of particular areas, their extent, and the resources needed to overcome them (Fleming 2020). This research highlights the importance of the danger of making a judgement in policy that uses the metric of geographical area to judge the student body,

a finding reflected by the views of two community college participants who reported their schools as being situated in predominantly affluent areas. Yet, at the same time their wide catchment areas reflect the *significant numbers of students* (Participant 10) from backgrounds of poverty. To illustrate this, one deputy principal said:

We are a community college and the area where our school is, would be predominantly well-off. That said, we are inclusive, and our wide catchment area means we have significant numbers of students with us who experience a diversity of challenges due to poverty (Participant 10).

There is a well-documented recognition of the importance of a continuum of supports for children and young people from backgrounds of disadvantage. In Ireland, all pre-school children receive two years of free formal pre-school learning before starting primary school through the ECCE scheme. At primary level DEIS schools are designated into three bands and although not specifically student-centred the bands do delineate for the levels of disadvantage within the school, which is then reflected in the supports each setting receives. Not qualifying for DEIS was described as being *hugely detrimental* (Participant 11) with one participant outlining her dissatisfaction of the situation:

We would have a lot of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Not qualifying for DEIS is hugely detrimental to both those students and the school. We are always struggling and don't get the supports we need (Participant 11).

Moreover:

Many of our students would come from areas regarded as socio-economically disadvantaged but because they choose to come to our school, they won't get the additional DEIS-based resources. I think this is very unfair both on those students and on the school (Participant 12).

Furthermore, this same non-DEIS community college participant outlined her strong belief in the inequity of this situation:

I am a believer that DEIS schools almost disadvantage the schools that aren't DEIS, with the facilities and resources that are available to them. You will see the trends here. DEIS gives a lot of funding for stuff that other schools don't get (Participant 12).

In the current funding arrangements, due to the lack of a person-centred model, those schools not recognised as DEIS, receive no additional resources to support their students from backgrounds of disadvantage. This suggests a lack of parity and fairness for every student, and non-DEIS community college participants were united in their criticism of this. This is an interesting finding when taken within the context of the newly revised and recently announced expanded schools' DEIS inclusion list for 2022 (DES, 2022). The timing of this could have potentially offered the opportunity for change in the way supports to schools are delivered. Furthermore, in its current form, both non-DEIS community colleges and DEIS schools reported that principle of action for inclusion required within educational policy is not deliverable at ground roots level. Educational disadvantage and inclusivity are strongly established in research as a deeply ingrained and complex social issue (Demie and McLean, 2019). This research found a consensus of agreement on this matter between participants from community colleges and DEIS schools. This is a facet not recognised by policy makers and therefore not expressed in a realistic way within Irish educational policy. One non-DEIS community college principal believed the overall expectation for inclusivity within Irish education *is a problem* (Participant 9) due to lack of supports, describing:

I think it is a problem endemic throughout all Irish schooling, the level of inclusion that's expected now without supports is ridiculous and especially challenging for non-DEIS schools such as ourselves (Participant 9).

It was apparent that all school leaders recognised socio-economic disadvantage to be marked by increasing diversity, however existing policy in Ireland does not differentiate between a young person from a disadvantaged background who attends a DEIS school or that same young person who attends a non-DEIS school. Fleming and Harford, (2021) believe it is aspirational to suppose the DES could put a tailor-made arrangement to respond to the individual needs of every school. However, in its current form, the vehicle of funding through the DEIS model is not student-centred and therefore inconsistent with the government's overall student centred learning (SCL) policy direction. The reality of not enough funding forces non-DEIS schools to make difficult choices in terms of what they would like to offer, and what the reality of their funding situation allows them to provide. One participant outlined these sentiments:

We would have a lot of students from disadvantaged backgrounds because our catchment area is so wide. It's just that we don't technically qualify for DEIS and there is no doubt that this is to the detriment of the school. In reality we don't get the supports that we need. We know what we need to do, but how do we provide for it?
(Participant 11).

Furthermore, a non-DEIS community college participant described this as being in a situation of constant *firefighting*:

We do our best to make good budgetary choices in school for the benefit of all our students but some days it can just feel like firefighting (Participant 12).

This research finds all DEIS schools and similarly non-DEIS community college participants are dissatisfied with the current DEIS protocol and its positioning within Irish educational policy, with one highly experienced DEIS school principal outlining:

People who work in DEIS schools are very committed, they want to make a difference. But situations can be extreme and without the 'lived experience' no policy maker can really understand the complexities or depth of disadvantage
(Participant 4).

All DEIS school participants whilst grateful for the funding they do receive are critical of the funding model of DEIS as an intervention. They believe there is a lack of recognition of the depth of disadvantage within their local communities which is reflected in their student cohorts. It was therefore interesting to find, non-DEIS community colleges that draw from wide catchment areas but receive no additional funding at all to support their students from disadvantaged backgrounds, were critical of DEIS. This is a finding running strongly throughout this study. This research highlights the belief of all participants who expressed DEIS to be counter intuitive with a lack of recognition of a continuum of individualised support for a young person, throughout the entirety of their schooling. Furthermore, it is evident that participants from every school demographic are aware of the intersectional nature of educational disadvantage. Issues related to socio-economic factors that are faced by their students on a daily basis and derive directly, or indirectly, from educational disadvantage were identified as impacting on student choices and progression routes post-Leaving Certificate. These include homelessness, poverty, and food poverty, students working in paid employment and students in minding and caring roles within their families.

4.2.1 The Implications of Poverty on Student Educational Attainment and Progression Routes Post-Leaving Certificate

Research reports poverty to be central in shaping educational disadvantage, impacting upon children in ways that render them unable to participate in their education on an equal footing with their peers (Lynch and Crean, 2018; Weir *et al.*, 2017). An experienced deputy principal of a DEIS school located in an urban area of recognised socio-economic disadvantage said *poverty in general impacts in ways people can't even imagine* (Participant 4). Furthermore, a DEIS school principal asserted that:

I think every human being on the planet should be made to live on a council estate for a week with €188 and be expected to survive (Participant 4).

All four participants from fee-paying schools highlighted their very limited exposure to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Two such principals reported:

In this school we would have virtually no students from backgrounds of disadvantage (Participant 6).

Moreover:

We are a minority faith-based school so there would be students here who are in receipt of grants to support their attendance and we try to ensure that socio-economic background is not an issue in terms of accessing a place. So, in terms of family poverty, we do recognise it, but looking at the student body as it is right now, homelessness for example is not a significant situation (Participant 7).

The implications of the economic poverty experienced by students can present within schools in a number of ways. Participants in this study reported students from backgrounds of disadvantage lacked material resources including clean uniform and physical education kit, books, and stationery. Schools report finding respectful ways to support their students by offering practical solutions to help, without leaving students or their families feeling as one Educate Together Secondary School participant said, like *I have failed* (Participant 1). This study highlights how the lack of material resources can directly impact long-term attendance and engagement. At a fundamental level Maslow's hierarchy of needs requires that the basic physiological needs of an individual must be successfully met before that person can achieve their full potential (Hopper, 2020). These

are rudimentary needs that include clothing, food, rest, shelter and water. Although it is not the role of a school to clothe their students, it was a finding that DEIS school participants, in particular, recognise that where a lack of material resources is impacting student attendance and also upon the self-esteem of young people, the school must find a practical solution. To illustrate this, two DEIS school participants highlighted the importance of a student having access to a clean uniform, because the ramifications of a broken washing machine, or lack of money to run the appliance can end up as a pattern of non-attendance for the student. In both cases, the schools had washing machines in the home economics classrooms and maintained a supply of school uniforms and shoes. A deputy principal said:

Lack of finances is a thing you know, just a lack of money and having no money. They don't have a clean uniform to wear to school, so they don't want to come. There are just so many barriers. We have a washing machine in the home economic room and discreetly wash uniforms and supply basic items from supplies we have in school (Participant 2).

Moreover, a principal reported:

If you have no money and your washing machine breaks, you can't afford a new one and now you can't wash the kid's clothes. Teenagers these days are very aware, they are self-conscious. They don't want to come to school in a uniform that has not been washed and experience the type of commentary that can go with it. They don't come to school for a day or two, that becomes a pattern of behaviour and that can be very hard for us to break (Participant 4).

This same principal reported sending out a staff member to buy a pair of shoes for a student who was refusing to attend her oral Irish examination because her one pair of shoes had broken, and she only had slippers to wear:

You have a child that's not able to go into their oral Irish Leaving Cert exam because her friend told me that her only pair of shoes broke, and she only has her slippers. So, I sent her off with an SNA and said just go to the nearest shop for shoes and bring her back fed and with shoes, and in time for the afternoon because the examiner isn't going to be here until one o'clock. That sounds extreme but there are so many impacts of having no money and we see them in school every day (Participant 4).

However, DEIS schools and non-DEIS community colleges alike reported that poverty is not always immediately obvious. They describe the need be alert to outward signs, where a simple intervention for a student might help. Pickett and Wilkinson (2015) describe the fundamental social process in which children from impoverished families have a heightened awareness of their own status and social class, within the context of broader society. Outward signals can reflect social class differences that can be used by individuals to evaluate their subjective social rank, and in this study lack of material resources were highlighted by both DEIS school and non-DEIS community college participants as being a barrier to education. One non-DEIS community college deputy principal reported that a student might not like to draw attention to themselves by continually having to ask to borrow a piece of school equipment from their peers. This participant described that the absence of a simple and relatively inexpensive material resource such as a calculator can ultimately result in pattern forming behaviour, the outcome being a student regularly absenting themselves from school:

A scientific calculator can cost €15, kids don't want to keep asking to borrow off a classmate. If that situation isn't addressed, something as simple as that, they start to absent themselves from that class and then next thing is they don't come to school on days they have maths. Maths is a core subject, so that can end up being most days and before you know it a student has just faded away

(Participant 10).

Although schools can bridge these small gaps by washing clothes in the home economics rooms, buying shoes, or providing a new calculator, the findings from the current study suggest that when a child is living in poverty their ability to access education is challenged by their material conditions. *Social Justice Ireland* report one in every five children in the state lives in poverty (Poverty Focus, 2019). However, despite social policies and some person-centred structural interventions such as the back-to-school allowance, this research suggests there has not been enough progress made and poverty remains a major barrier for many students. For any student, being unable to access their education due to structural inequalities means that not every child has the same starting base. It is interesting to note the work of Manstead (2018) who found that cycles of disadvantage begin with poor material conditions and end with lower chances of entering and thriving in different social contexts, including universities and prestigious workplaces. The participants in this study recognise that small interventions such as supplying clean uniforms or providing shoes means they can positively impact upon cycles of

disadvantage, and help their students to stay in school and succeed in education. However, some situations can be extreme, and one DEIS school principal reported that for families living in poverty and surviving *from hand to mouth* (Participant 4) they may be forced to prioritise their daily needs over and above education. Progressing to third-level education has been found to enable individuals to improve the socio-economic status of their parents. However, for some families, this research highlights that without equality of condition, the long-term potential benefits of education cannot be appreciated. One DEIS school principal expressed this belief:

We try and help them see education in their future but where situations are extreme it isn't easy (Participant 4).

Moreover, a deputy principal of a DEIS school put this into context by describing how it might not be the case that a family does not value education but rather more that they have to make practical day-to-day choices:

In this school we have families that are constantly faced with challenges because they are so disadvantaged. Even if they can get the kids to school, they need money for something else, and it's just not there. If you haven't the money for fresh good quality food or electricity, then school isn't a priority (Participant 2).

In Bourdieu's cultural and social reproduction theories, he argues that schools are not institutions of equal opportunity but are in fact mechanisms that perpetuate social inequality (Bourdieu, 1973). This research did not find economic capital to be a significant barrier for students from more advantaged backgrounds, either in terms of accessing post-primary education, or their families having the capacity to manage the financial practicalities of progressing to third-level. All four participants from fee-paying schools reported the majority of their students as coming from backgrounds of high SES, describing them as *well-off* and in some cases from *extremely wealthy backgrounds* (Participant 6). Although some mention was made of students accessing grants and religious bursaries to off-set the cost of school fees, no participant from a fee-paying school reported economics as being a significant barrier to the education of their students at post-primary level and beyond. To illustrate, a principal from a fee-paying school outlined:

The socio-economics doesn't really come into play here and we would have some students from extremely wealthy backgrounds. We do have families very committed to the education of their children and a few would access grants, but they would be in the minority. I would say all can afford the university fee

(Participant 6).

Also, a deputy principal of a fee-paying school reported:

If we are measuring things by finance, we do have a fairly large number of parents who would be financially very well off. We do have a lot of middle-class students that come from traditional two parent professional families, may be both parents working. The vast majority of our students would have the support of their families to go on to third-level

(Participant 8).

Students from more advantageous backgrounds are able to concentrate fully on their studies, free from the daily worries that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds may face. Without economic equality and sufficient social scaffolding and accompanying practical supports for poorer families, schools recognise that the reality for some students is that they have to take part-time work in order to contribute to the finances of the family. One DEIS school participant describes:

There is a big understanding across the staff that some of our students have to work to support their families

(Participant 3).

Bourdieu identified the interconnectedness of social systems and students who need to work to support their families are not benefiting from equality of condition, when compared to their more advantaged counterparts. They are therefore not able to exercise their statutory right to an education. Although some participants remarked upon the capabilities of their students working in paid-employment as well as attending school, in reality, students, who are tired from paid employment will not be able to give their best attention to their school work. Participants also indicated that attendance and retention may be also a problem for this cohort of students. DEIS school participants highlighted that this leaves them facing the challenge of how to help their students see the value of continuing in education, maintain them in senior cycle, and mitigate for the loss of in-school learning time. A deputy principal of a DEIS school said:

There is no question that some of our students are supporting their families. They are losing out on their education because they have no choice but to work. It is of course a very noble thing to do, but for us as a school it is a real challenge

to keep these students in senior cycle. We try to help them see beyond the here and now and see the value in staying in school (Participant 1).

Low-skilled, precarious employment, does not offer a route out of the cycles of poverty and to a better life, and unfortunately previous research has found that the inter-generational transmission of disadvantage is common (Fleming and Harford, 2021; Legare and Nielson, 2015). Bourdieu (1973) proposed that parents transmit social and cultural capital to their children through the mechanism of pathways that enhance both their children's educational and socio-economic success. In households where family members have never worked this can become an ingrained cultural belief which was upheld within this study, with two DEIS participants describing how their students may never have known parents or family members with jobs. A DEIS school principal explained:

We actually have kids in this school who will have never known a parent or family member to have a job (Participant 4).

As previously discussed young people can be very aware of their circumstances. This research highlights how the practical barrier of a family's financial situation can directly impact on a student's educational progression post-Leaving Certificate. Weighing up the cost-benefit scenario that aligns with rational choice theory (Lovett, 2006), may mean the option of third-level is removed for a young person. Instead, due to the more immediate and prevailing needs of their family due to structural economic inequality, a young person from an impoverished family may need to find employment straight from school. A deputy principal of a DEIS school described:

We have a cohort of students who move onto third-level, some progress to PLC and some to apprenticeships. And then we would have a few who would go to the world of work as well, warehousing, delivery, that kind of thing. They may even be the most capable breadwinner and because of their circumstances at home our students have no choice but to go to work and contribute to the family income (Participant 1).

Furthermore, a deputy principal of a DEIS school said:

We have students who might be really bright, very smart, but they just have to get a job and contribute to the family money-wise (Participant 2).

Students who might have started off in low-paid jobs during their school years and worked to supplement the income of their families, are now almost forced into keeping these jobs due to lack of skills and qualifications. However, as several participants highlighted moving on to the world of work straight from school with no additional training or education can leave individuals being forced into a cycle of low-paid employment which perpetuates cycles of disadvantage. A DEIS school principal explained:

Many of our students are getting part-time jobs, cleaning jobs and part-time jobs in petrol stations. I have literally spent so much time pleading with them that if they continue with this model, they will only earn €10 an hour for the rest of their lives. Many of our students have to contribute to the income of their families because of their circumstances, they need the money coming into the household and that is their immediate reality. (Participant 4).

An interesting finding of this research that links to the transitions of young people after they finish school, is one of educational inflation. Across every school demographic but particularly the non-DEIS community colleges and the DEIS schools, there is a recognition of the success for some students in completing their post-primary education. They report that this achievement is not valued within current educational policy. This is further discussed in section 4.4 accompanied by discussion surrounding feeder school league tables. To touch on this here in relation to the need of students to move to the world of work post-Leaving Certificate, two DEIS school participants describe:

We would have quite a few students each year who go straight into work. It's not all about third-level, or at least it shouldn't be. Retaining those students to a Leaving Certificate of some description will have been a huge achievement for us. I'd meet past students in all kinds of places, shops, garages, some may have gone as operators to pharmaceutical companies. For some of those kids they might be the first in their families to ever hold down a job. That is life-changing stuff (Participant 2).

And,

And after school.... training and the world of work may be much more realistic options for these students. For us it's not third-level or bust. We have to be real here too and those are our successes (Participant 4).

It is difficult to see in families where a student must work during their post-primary schooling years, that they are accessing their right to a free and equivalent education.

Despite being presented as free education, families must pay for a range of resources to enable their children to access their education. Meeting the costs associated with post-primary schooling in Ireland can be a real challenge for families from disadvantaged backgrounds living in poverty and *already under such pressure* (Participant 4). With education fundamentally contributing to the quality and wellbeing of society, playing a vital role in the intellectual, cultural, economic, and political life of Ireland, the existence of state-funded, and mandatory education should ensure that no individual is disadvantaged by their background of origin. Three out of the four participants interviewed were from non-DEIS community colleges, and all DEIS school participants raised the issue of ‘free education’ and the ‘voluntary contribution’. These participants agreed that the ‘voluntary contribution’ is a contentious issue. It is reported that this payment can be up to four times more than the annual ‘once-off’ education related social welfare supports parents can apply for, such as the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance’ (Barnardos, 2021). It is evident from these findings that many families are unable to pay this charge. Participants reported adopting flexible ways for parents to pay this so called ‘voluntary contribution’ but also being realistic and understanding that it is just beyond the financial capacity for many. A DEIS school principal outlined:

There is a voluntary contribution, yes. But like last year and the year before that it is hardly paid at all. There is such a lot of social and economic disadvantage in this area, so we don't press it when people are already under such pressure
(Participant 4).

Interestingly, the deputy principal of a community college reported that they are not persistent in collecting the voluntary contribution. This finding suggests the pervasive issue of poverty that can reach across all communities because this research shows that is not only those families attending DEIS schools that may struggle to pay this contribution:

We do have a voluntary contribution of €200 but we don't actively pursue it. We are at pains to say that. Parents that can afford to pay, do so, and those that can't afford to pay, don't
(Participant 10).

DEIS schools and non-DEIS community colleges with concentrated levels of students from backgrounds of disadvantage both reported their reliance on the voluntary contribution to fund extracurricular activities. Again, this suggests that the educational

funding model in Ireland as it currently stands, is not satisfactory within either setting. A community college participant and a DEIS school participant respectively, described:

We try and collect the voluntary contribution from as many parents as possible and there are a few extra charges like for after school study. But we don't go after it, some families really genuinely can't pay. If you can't afford the charge for after school study any student can talk to their tutor, and nice and quietly we will sort that. The teachers supervising after school study don't know who has paid and who hasn't (Participant 12).

And,

Poverty is a day-to-day and very real problem for some families in this school. I would say finding money, for school related things is a real challenge. So, we have adopted a way to pay, and we accept money in dribs and drabs. There is a St. Vincent de Paul fund in this school as well for different things such as help with books (Participant 3).

Participants interviewed from fee-paying schools reported that parents were not separately asked for a 'voluntary contribution' outside of the fee-paying structures adopted within their schools. However, poverty is a day-to-day reality for many families in Ireland and according to Social Justice Ireland over six hundred and sixty thousand people are living in poverty of which two hundred and ten thousand are children (SJI, 2022). This represents over thirteen per cent of the current population. Implicit within this research is the finding that where structural inequality exists families are forced to make stark choices. Non-DEIS community college and DEIS participants alike commented directly on a range of inter-related factors such as poverty and food poverty, homelessness, addiction, and poor health linked to socio-economic factors as all being *significant and fundamental* (Participant 1) barriers impacting upon student post-primary school attainment and progression to third-level. This situation was explained by a participant of an Educate Together Secondary School who said:

A lot of the families in this school would be disadvantaged. We have families with addiction and mental health problems, housing, food poverty and financial stuff. It makes it so hard for their children to succeed (Participant 11).

Furthermore, a deputy principal of a DEIS school described:

Many of the students in this school face significant and fundamental challenges, no question about it. Poverty, food poverty which is incredible to think of in this day and age, homelessness, families living in emergency accommodation, students living in full-guardianship situations and not with their families of origin and students with a lot of social care involvement (Participant 1).

All participants in this study report many of their families experience situations of trauma which directly affect the entire family and also the student. A highly experienced DEIS school principal described how this can have an impact on educational attainment with families too afraid to put any kind of pressure on their children, because they have already lost so much:

Our families are very big on family. I think because there has been a lot of tragedy and suicide in the area that they are very afraid to apply too much pressure on the students. They often say we are not going to put them under pressure. I don't want anything bad to happen to them. There may be a big family bond. But I don't think education is number one. (Participant 4).

Moreover, a principal from a fee-paying school reported that:

We have a very good pastoral care team here, and we also take every opportunity to chat to parents and guardians about how their student is doing. In a causal kind of a thing sometimes. It is a fallacy to think that just because many of our students come from advantaged backgrounds that they might not have anxiety issues, health issues or a family experiencing the trauma of a marital breakup (Participant 5).

Irish Primary Principles Organisation (2019) report school going children living in poverty can suffer from poor physical health and mental wellbeing, struggling with low self-esteem, exhaustion, and experience feelings of isolation. This can impact upon their school attendance, engagement, and ability to participate in education manifesting in feelings of anxiety and disconnect. This study agrees and a deputy principal of a DEIS school reported:

I would say that every single student has anxiety problems. I would ring home and the mother would say "he didn't want to get out of the bed". Families struggling with their parenting, lack of encouragement in the home but also lack of money. Lack of money is a real thing and a living day-to-day reality for many of our families. It grinds them down and plays havoc with their mental health (Participant 2).

Furthermore, a principal of a DEIS school described:

I think issues of poverty impact hugely on a person's wellbeing and mental health. Within our student body these issues are a problem for us to manage and can be extremely challenging. Mental health, depression, anxiety, responses to trauma and family experience of suicide. It can be very complex (Participant 4).

Existing research has found parents from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage may experience feelings of poor self-worth, and negative wellbeing, which can detrimentally impact upon their children (Pickett and Vanderbloemen, 2015). Two community college participants highlighted the importance of supporting parents who find themselves in difficult circumstances, recognising the effect of parents' mental health upon their children. A principal of a community college outlined:

We are a community school so have students from all different backgrounds. We have parents that genuinely cannot afford to pay for uniform and school equipment and for educational trips. We are very much about minding the community, the parents and their children and we do this in a discrete way. I've had parents sitting in front of me in tears because of their circumstances and feeling just terrible. They are in a poor way themselves (Participant 10).

An Educate Together Secondary School participant agreed with this sentiment:

We keep children emotionally safe and healthy, and we also try to help families to get out of things they are in, access the right help and supports, we have even paid for shoes. It is really super important that we make parents feel okay about themselves and that they are not failing because of their circumstances.
(Participant 11).

This finding highlights the importance of schools not only having the capacity and knowledge to support their students who are living with trauma, but also to have the skills necessary to support parents through challenging times. Bronfenbrenner's model of bio-ecological human development goes some way to explain the interrelated aspects of the microsystem, which includes a young person's home and school. Trauma experienced by a child, or young person, within the microsystem of their home will naturally have an impact on other aspects of the microsystem including their school, and manifest in the mesosystem through the relationship of family experiences to school experiences. Participants recognised that even in the most difficult of personal circumstances, the role of the school must be to support their students and their families, whilst continuing to guide them to visualise a future for themselves beyond what one participant described as the *here and now* (Participant 1). Experiences of trauma are of course not just limited to

students from backgrounds of disadvantage. Participants from every school demographic highlighted the adverse conditions and resulting difficult family situations, experienced by some students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is discussed further in 4.5. However, emerging research already suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has widened inequalities both educationally and socially, for those already living with socio-economic disadvantage and poverty (Darmody *et al.*, 2021).

In April 1997, the government first launched the *National Anti-Poverty Strategy* which describes people who live in poverty as not having enough income and resources to enable them to enjoy a good standard living, considered to be generally acceptable to Irish society. In summary, the findings suggest all four DEIS participants reporting a relentless continuum of economic disadvantage and lack of financial resources within their most impoverished families, which in some instances spans generations of the same family. Furthermore, they reported this economic inequality results in poorer educational outcomes for these students, resulting in fewer opportunities for engagement in education post-Leaving Certificate. Ultimately, this situation perpetuates cycles of poverty and educational disadvantage within families. Non-DEIS community colleges, although not facing the same levels of concentrated disadvantage, also self-reported issues related to economic and material capital that can affect a student's ability to engage with their education long-term. It has emerged strongly from this research that the intersectional nature of poverty, that includes income poverty and extends to barriers such as food poverty and homelessness preventing young people from reaching their potential within education and forcing families to make practical choices just to survive. It was the reality of immediate and day-to-day needs of many disadvantaged households that participants in this study believed directly impacted upon and out-weighed any long-term goals a student might have.

4.2.2 The Implications of Food Poverty on Student Educational Attainment and Progression Routes Post-Leaving Certificate

According to Barnardos (2022, 2016), food poverty affects health and educational inequalities and demonstrates how multiple inequalities can affect a child's life, describing how children who start the school day hungry have a reduced capacity to learn and socialise. This research found food poverty to be an inequality affecting socio-economically disadvantaged families and furthermore impacting on their children's

education. Additionally, students who consume poor quality, processed, and pre-packaged food and less nutritionally-balanced diet were reported to be at risk of health issues that could impact upon their learning (Mendoza and McDonagh, 2022). The findings from this research agree, with one DEIS school participant outlining:

I've been in houses where you could see that there was no fresh food. Some families have no choice, they eat rubbish because it's cheap. Others may not be able to cook for themselves if they are living in direct provision for example. This can have a huge impact on health and health problems can quickly get out of hand. We have a school meals programme here and there is always breakfast in the morning. You can't learn if you are hungry (Participant 2).

In Ireland, between 2009 and 2012 the government introduced a series of cuts to social welfare payments including child benefit and housing benefit. Since that time the numbers of children living in a household experiencing food poverty has doubled, with the cost of a healthy shopping basket for an adolescent, representing 72% of the child benefit payment for an urban young person and 78% for a rural young person (MacMahon and Moloney, 2016). For children, the highest risk of food poverty is experienced by those living in one-parent households, but all households with children are found to be at a higher risk of experiencing food poverty (Drew, 2022). Furthermore, pressure points on family finances such as children returning to school in September has been shown to increase the risk of food poverty in a household. This is before the extremes of a global pandemic which has been found to disproportionately impact lower income families (Barnardos, 2022). The views of two DEIS school participants express their concern that food poverty exists in modern Ireland and that they have students arriving at school each day hungry:

We are more fortunate than many schools because as a DEIS school the funding is available to us for a school meals programme. During the first lockdown many staff actually delivered food parcels such were our worries for some of our most disadvantaged families (Participant 1).

Also,

Poverty is the main problem. I think the impact of poverty is so deep. People simply do not have the means to provide for all their needs. And sometimes those needs would be basic. There are some students in our school who would experience hunger. It is really hard to watch (Participant 4).

Having access to adequate food is a basic human right; children who are hungry are unable to fully participate in class resulting in their cognitive, educational, personal, and social development being negatively impacted (Barnardos, 2016). This research revealed that food, or rather a lack of it, can affect students in numerous ways, and clearly a hungry child is not starting their school day on an equal footing to a well-nourished child. A DEIS school principal reported that a student fainted from hunger, further outlining that he attends school as a way to access food:

We had a boy faint from hunger this year, he literally could not stand up. That boy receives food in school and also, we pop any extra that we can into his school bag quietly, so he can take it home. We know that he comes to school for food not for his education (Participant 4).

This same participant expanded that the recognition of such levels of disadvantage leave her feeling *full of worry* and *hugely concerned* (Participant 11) for their students outside of school hours when the school is not able to support such a basic human need. This participant further described the very real challenges associated with food poverty, describing the struggle to maintain a student in post-primary school before even thinking beyond that:

It kind of shows you, when you are thinking of doing the Leaving Certificate and your mother makes you a nice breakfast and sends you off for your day, making sure that you are ok. That is just not the reality for so many of our children. How can you envisage your future if you are not even sure there will be enough food in the house when you get back from school for your tea? (Participant 4).

In this study, it was predominantly the DEIS school participants who reported widespread food poverty within their school communities, however DEIS funding does provide for a meals programme within some post-primary schools. It was an interesting finding of this study that even where a school has DEIS status, an application *that adds to the burden of school administration* must be made annually to the Irish Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), with the school required to make a case for themselves. Community colleges however, also told of an awareness of food poverty amongst their more disadvantaged students. Having identified the need for an intervention, non-DEIS community colleges reported they lacked the dedicated resources to provide for a breakfast club and/or school meals programme. Providing free-school meals, or food that is subsidised, can benefit students from every socio-economic

background, however in non-DEIS settings the schools reported having no choice but to prioritise and fund, and staff through volunteering, their own food programmes. Two direct quotations from community college participants illustrate these views:

We don't have a breakfast club for example, we don't have the facilities to put one in place. But it is something we are looking into finding a way to fund in the future because there is definitely a need for it but there is only so much money in the pot
(Participant 10).

Also:

We did have a breakfast club in this school, and it was needed and well used by the same students every day. We had to stop it because of COVID as it was run by volunteers and anything voluntary was just cut. We would have a lot of students here from disadvantaged backgrounds, but our problem is that we are not a DEIS school, so we have no school meals programme unless we fund it ourselves
(Participant 11).

The four fee-paying schools in this study have varying proportions of full-time boarding, weekly boarding, and day students, and report having a fully operational and professionally staffed school kitchen on-site. None highlighted issues surrounding food poverty, nor did they separately operate breakfast clubs or identified a blanket need for such clubs. Due to the option of boarding, all meals were available on campus and included within the fee charging structures, with day students offered the opportunity to pay for lunch on campus also. It was therefore, very interesting to note the comments of one highly experienced principal who said that in general terms there was no social need in the school for a school meals programme. However, he noted one or two instances where a student might be experiencing difficulty with attending school, and one successful strategy had been to offer access to breakfast with the boarders. This strategy had positively impacted on their attendance:

One of the strategies that has been successful if there is an individual or a small group of students for whom attendance is proving challenging. We have offered access to breakfast with our boarding students to those families, which has proved to be a most positive support, improving student attendance in particular circumstances. The same applies to lunches. There are financial supports that can be applied for, a trust fund available within the school which can help out for particular students
(Participant 7).

Although not recognised as food poverty, the findings from fee-paying schools do suggest that supplying free, or subsidised food, in all school settings is a way to reach students from every socio-economic backgrounds, even if the benefit is experienced in different ways. All four DEIS schools however, were especially aware of food poverty. They described prioritising home economics lessons across year groups with participants reporting that students are taught how to cook nutritious and cheap meals from ‘scratch’, using basic ingredients generally supplied by the school. Educating students in the safe preparation of food, teaching them about healthy diets and lifestyles is an example of a practical way schools attempt to mitigate for disadvantage and one which can have a positive reach into the family home also. A DEIS school participants head described:

Many of our kids won't be eating fresh food, fruit and veg at home. Their diets are poor, and they eat rubbish. No one can be fit and healthy and able to learn without the right food, it does have an effect, no question. In school our home economics department teaches the kids how to cook basic meals, with cheap but nutritious ingredients
(Participant 2).

Additionally:

We aim for all year groups to cook in school. It is a fantastic thing that our home economics department does. Students are helped with the skills to cook not the fanciest of food, but nutritious food using basic ingredients that everyone has in their cupboards. Everyone has rice, pasta and potatoes, good cheap staples that can be stretched. We can help with ingredients too if necessary
(Participant 3).

Although it has been previously suggested that there is only so much schools can do to tackle the issue of educational disadvantage (Flynn, 2020), this research certainly highlights the willingness of schools to offer practical and far-reaching interventions that can impart life-skills and knowledge. In relation to food, and food poverty, this research highlights that regardless of a student's socio-economic background all schools of every demographic background should have the capacity to provide every student with the skills and knowledge to cook and prepare healthy and cost conscious meals. However, significantly it also highlights the need for extending the conversation surrounding the benefits of the availability of quality and nutritious food in all educational settings to secondary level. Although schools are not in the position of solving every structural inadequacy they are part of the wider fabric of society, and as an institution for good they do have the capacity to offer structural support to some families who are in dire need.

For students who may be living in precarious housing situations, in direct provision, or temporary accommodation, being provided with food in school could contribute to social welfare and have a very positive impact on those households.

4.2.3 The Implications of Differing Housing Situations on Student Educational Attainment and Progression Routes Post-Leaving Certificate

Education is a human right and is identified by Maslow Hierarchy of Needs at the most basic level. Regardless of where an individual lives the state is legally required to provide a free education for every child from the age of six to sixteen. However, with growing numbers and children identified as being especially vulnerable within inadequate housing situations, it has been suggested that the constitutional rights of the child are not being protected (Pollak, 2022). Furthermore, there is a wide body of existing evidence that clearly links precarious housing situations and homelessness with poor educational outcomes. Participants from schools of all socio-economic demographics but particularly non-DEIS community and DEIS school types, described their concerns surrounding the circumstances of students living in precarious and unpredictable housing situations including homelessness, direct provision, and temporary accommodation. Social mobility can be a significant factor within homelessness, with multiple moves and upheavals and with financial and practical difficulties for families in getting their children physically to their school, and home again. The following quotations from a non-DEIS community college and a DEIS school participant respectively, outline their beliefs surrounding the challenging accommodation situations of their students which they see as a fundamental barrier to a student's ability to engage with their schooling:

We have students who face homelessness, I mean, how do you get into school if you are living in a shelter in town having lost your home. For these families school is simply not a priority (Participant 10).

Also:

In this school we have families living in every kind of housing situation and students from the travelling community too. For many, homelessness, temporary accommodation, and direct provision are the norm. It just should not be that way; it is depressing to see it year upon year. Some of our parents are just so defeated that school doesn't even factor (Participant 4).

The educational development of young people has found to be negatively impacted by housing inequality and families at risk of losing their homes or who are already homeless

are considered to be amongst the most vulnerable and at greatest risk of experiencing social exclusion (Focus Ireland, 2020). Especially interesting within this research was the highlighting of homelessness as impending engagement and progress of students attending non-DEIS community colleges, and not just DEIS schools. This is interesting given that consistent attendance at school has been shown to be a basic factor within academic success but for students living in precarious housing situations it is to be expected that establishing and sticking to routines will be challenging. Making friends, experiencing a sense of belonging, and being part of the school community was identified by this study as an issue that young people living in direct provision or temporary accommodation face. A non-DEIS community college deputy principal described students living in vulnerable housing conditions can struggle to find their place within the school community and can find it hard to make friends:

It's hard to settle into school when you don't have a proper home. We have students here who live in temporary bed and breakfast accommodation in town. How can they be asking their friends back home after school? In some cases they may not know where they will be living from week to week (Participant 10).

This research study finds an intrinsic link between homelessness and educational disadvantage, with participants reporting a lack of equality of opportunity; students might have the academic capacity and motivation to do well but are unable to reach their potential due to their housing situations. One non-DEIS community school year head described how the school goes *the extra mile* (Participant 11) to support their students:

We would have a lot of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. A few students in foster care, others living with their families but in temporary accommodation and with no quiet and warm study space. And then I think, how can a student do well in school not just academically speaking but even just showing up? How can you when that is your life? We go the extra mile for these students even though it stretches our resources as a school (Participant 11).

Additionally, a community college participant said:

We have students who come from very comfortable backgrounds and students living in social housing and everything in between. And then those who are trying to live and build a life for themselves from direct provision or emergency accommodation. For the kids and families living in homeless situations, it is very hard for them to reach their potential, even when they want to do well (Participant 12).

Participants describe the practical issues of not having a quiet, warm study space as being a barrier to learning which again implicates structural social inadequacies as being present within every school setting. Described by one participant as *being very hard to see*, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) reported 'school children who are homeless are seriously struggling in school while their teachers struggle to help them to cope' (Nunan, 2018, p. 10). This was a finding echoed in this research, with a number of participants reporting on the worries and concerns experienced by teachers who are supporting children and families living in precarious housing situations. To illustrate those beliefs, one DEIS school deputy principal described:

Parents might come and tell us that they are living in emergency accommodation. When their child arrives at school you know they are going through so much and, yet they are in front of you at 8.30am wearing their uniform. It can be very hard to see, humbling for our staff to be part of that experience for somebody. We do our very best for those children and their families, their resilience is amazing
(Participant 1).

The comments of this participant were interesting when considered alongside those of one non-DEIS participant. She described how the lack of a mandatory uniform in her school was *levelling* and *an asset* (Participant 11) which helped students without permanent homes feel included and not stigmatised. She believed the cost of a uniform to be a barrier for students attending school from an impoverished family, because families in precarious housing situations are often moved into other settings which forces the children to swap schools. This participant described:

Not having a uniform in this school can be levelling and an asset. Every student regardless of where they live and who they are is wearing their own clothes. Uniforms can be expensive and some kids have to move around a lot if they are living in precarious housing situations like direct provision (Participant 11).

Families who are considered to be vulnerable and living on the margins of society, impoverished, or in temporary accommodation, are often forced into precarious employment in order to try and survive and improve upon their current circumstances. This was recognised in particular by participants of community colleges and DEIS schools, who reported that out of economic necessity their students must prioritise their families over their education, for many there is no choice. Three areas in particular were identified; students in caring roles of both siblings or older or disabled families members

and additionally fee-paying participants reported students working in paid employment themselves, recognising the need to save and contribute to third-level expenses.

4.2.4 Students Working in Caring Roles

Research has previously identified Irish single-parents as being more predisposed to experience poverty than their traditional two-parent family household counterparts (Grotti *et al.*, 2017; Watson *et al.*, 2016). Additionally reported, is the particular case of lone-parent families being forced to work unsociable hours in precarious employment situations and in low-paid roles, due to prohibitive child-care costs (House of the Oireachtas, 2019). With the OECD finding that childcare costs in Ireland for lone parents are the highest of any OECD country (OECD, 2015) it is an interesting finding from this study that senior cycle students are involved in childcare roles within their families. This study highlights this to be the case for students attending non-DEIS community colleges and DEIS schools, but not fee-paying schools. In these instances, young people considered old enough by their families to mind their younger siblings were being called on to do so. Two DEIS school participants outline childcare as a factor directly impacting a student's day-to-day engagement with their schooling, affecting both attendance and retention as well as the capacity of senior cycle students in particular to be able to complete homework and study:

All our senior kids are dropping off their siblings, who they have most likely got up and ready for school. When they arrive late to us, we don't make a fuss, at least they are here. So, it's not just minding of yourself, its minding of everybody else too
(Participant 1).

And:

If I look at a family where the father is not present, a single Mom trying her best and very often doing a fantastic job. If attendance drops off with older students sometimes it can be that they are at home minding a sibling if the mom has gone to work. Completing homework and studying for our students can be very tricky in these circumstances because they are to all extents and purposes the 'parent'
(Participant 2).

Additionally, one participant from a non-DEIS community college and one from a DEIS school reported that students may be involved not only in caring for siblings, but also looking after a parent, elderly family members, or siblings struggling with mental or physical health issues:

We know the students, the ones who go to collect a sibling from primary school at 1.30pm or go home at lunchtime to check up on a granny or grandad and then they just don't come back (Participant 12).

And:

We have students who are looking after siblings while their parents are out working and in some instances the student is actually a family carer for. School is their only opportunity to learn because at home that student might carry great responsibility. We make sure to prioritise every learning opportunity for those students (Participant 3).

Participants acknowledged that students working in caring roles are taking on responsibility within their families at a very young age, with schools recognising the physical and emotional impact this can have on their students. Community colleges and DEIS schools alike, widely report offering food, support, and a safe space for these students. Additionally, they describe trying to assist families through different methods, connecting them with agencies and resources that could offer supports. In schools, guidance counsellors are called upon to help students manage their feelings especially where the family is experiencing very traumatic or extreme events. A principal of a DEIS school describes:

Family backgrounds of our students can be very challenging, living with constant disadvantage, living in poverty. Mental health problems, depression, responses to trauma. Our students are dealing with the kind of challenges that adults would find it difficult to deal with, and then go to school as well. In this school our guidance counsellor has a huge case load (Participant 4).

All schools in this study referred to the historical struggle and additional burden placed on school staff in the areas of careers guidance and guidance counselling, after the substantial cutbacks to funding by DES to the ex-quota guidance posts, as a result of the national budget 2012. These services are only just now being reinstated. For students whose families may not have the cultural capital to provide wider life experiences, careers guidance and guidance counsellors can offer support and information to help with exam subject choice selection, information regarding post-Leaving Certificate progression routes and completion of CAO applications. Furthermore, this study found career guidance and guidance counsellors in non-DEIS community colleges and DEIS schools as being a highly valued resource for parents, who had themselves not experienced third-level education.

4.3 Impact of Familial Culture and Value of Education on Post-primary Student Attainment and Choices Post-Leaving Certificate

The second theme to emerge from this research was the impact of familial culture and value of education on post-primary student attainment and choices post-Leaving Certificate. Existing research has found that parental background and socio-economic status may influence and shape the manner in which families engage with their child's schooling (House of the Oireachtas, 2019; Park and Holloway, 2018). In particular, the occupational position of parents has been found to be a social class marker and indicative of educational attainment levels (Dickson *et al.*, 2016), a finding this study agrees with. This research found the work status and occupations of the parents, broadly align with the socio-economic status of the school. In community colleges, with a wide catchment area, and a socially representative student cohort, participants reported every kind of parental work situation ranging from one or both parents not working, to being fully employed and working across a range of unskilled, skilled, semi-professional and professional roles:

Many of our parents would hold a degree. We are in the shadow of the multinationals here; an awful lot of our parents work there, and our students tend to be by and large children of professionals. But we are a microcosm of life so equally we have families facing a diversity of challenges with parents who do not work at all or do not hold a degree and work in trades, manual occupations or on zero-hour contracts (Participant 10).

DEIS schools in this study reported that the majority of their parents were not educated to third-level. The participants from DEIS schools described parents as being influenced by the work available to them in their immediate neighbourhoods and the necessity to earn money in the 'here and now' rather than look towards further education, describing manual, factory type employment rather than professional careers. One participant explained:

They [the parents] wouldn't have been educated to third-level of any sort. We would have had a huge factory down the road and four IDAs with massive factories and manufacturing companies locally. That type of job was always available and was money in the hand, so there were very little career incentives when day-to-day needs dictate (Participant 3).

Additionally, a principal of a DEIS school described that many of their parents may not have completed second-level schooling themselves, which impacts on their work capabilities. When a teenager has grown up in a disadvantaged household they are more likely to be at risk of poverty or imposed deprivation throughout adult life (Social Justice Ireland, 2021). With employment being a widely accepted and protective mechanism by which individuals can lift themselves out of poverty, one highly experienced DEIS school participant described how some of their students might never have known anyone who had completed second-level education or worked. This finding correlates closely with the work of Pembroke (2018), who believes there to be a clear relationship between low attainment in education, and the prospect of being precariously employed. This study highlights the intergenerational component of socio-economic disadvantage and at the same time makes the link between education and possible lack of aspiration for parents for their own children.

We certainly have parents who would have left school early and with no qualifications to speak of. Of course, this spills over to the world of work. We have many single parent families, a lot of unemployment amongst our parents and in fact a good deal of intergenerational unemployment so you (the student) never knew anyone who had a job. For these families finishing school is an achievement and we have to accept that to some extent. Many of our parents have no expectation of educational progression for their children, third-level is a totally alien concept to them (Participant 4).

Without exception, all fee-paying schools reported a well-educated professional cohort of parents with *families coming from middle-class and high achieving educational backgrounds*, additionally describing *professional mothers* (Participant 5) as well as fathers. Intergenerational transmission features strongly in the findings of this research. Although previous research has found education to reduce the influence of background and apply an equalising social effect, a Bourdieuan perspective believes it to be chiefly based on a system of reproduction of social privilege and practise. Middle-class, professional parents, who have completed third-level and have a social and professional circle who are similarly educated, will have raised children who see education and work as a contextual norm. Furthermore, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) believe that the middle-classes aim to preserve their advantaged social position by making educational choices for their children, with the explicit aim of maximising their chances of subsequent entry into middle-class occupations. Within this research, it was apparent that for these

families third-level education is a deeply-rooted facet of their family culture as played out by the expectations of educational progression for their own children. A principal of a fee-paying school said:

90% of the families here would have third-level education or above, professional mothers as well as fathers and as a result certainly have that expectation that their own children will move on to third-level

(Participant 5).

A second principal described:

All our parents come from an academic background themselves. We have parents that are putting their money into the education of their children and are very committed which is reflected in the fact that our progression rate is high, it's expected

(Participant 6).

Well qualified 'socially and professionally' successful parents may look to the annually published 'feeder schools league tables' as a way of assessing the competence of a school in progressing their child to third-level. Schools that perform well may be targeted by parents who value a school climate of achievement. However, it was interesting to note the comments of an experienced principal of a DEIS school who believed that the 'feeder schools league tables' do not accurately reflect their success or otherwise, because they suggest that achievement in education is only to be measured by the number of students a school transitions to third-level education. In a recent whole school evaluation the overall work of this school was acknowledged and praised; however an area of focus and criticism remained the lack of success in *getting them to third-level* (Participant 11). This was a view echoed by non-DEIS community colleges and DEIS school participants alike, who spoke passionately about their strong dislike of 'feeder schools league tables'. One participant of an Educate Together Secondary School said:

It is my belief that the absolute worst thing in Irish education is the league tables. I think they are absolutely appalling, and they are no indicator of success at all. I am absolutely opposed to league tables. I think they are awful and only serve a cohort of people. It is basically all about privilege and money and no reflection of what is actually happening in schools

(Participant 11).

Also, a deputy principal of a DEIS school said:

I would just like to say that I couldn't disagree enough with league tables. The success for us is the students we have kept in school. Those students getting a Leaving Certificate and their five passes is a huge achievement and they may go on to training or a trade apprenticeship. Where are they in the tables and who wants to hear about that? And yet the work and effort that might have gone into a student, their personal commitment and dedication, the resilience of everybody involved including the key staff working with them, that responsible adult, may be a parent struggling against all the odds. That student gets a Leaving Certificate, and you get zero on the league tables (Participant 1).

It is clear from this research that regardless of school demographic participants were united in their condemnation of 'feeder schools league tables', believing them to be unreflective of the true picture within Irish schools today. Participants discussed the covert nature of 'feeder schools league tables' believing them to disguise the human element of education which should be a much broader societal concept than simply assigning value only to third-level. It could be argued that tables of achievement reinforce status and privilege whilst clearly delineating the middle-class schools with academic reputations, an idea that aligns with a Bourdieuan interpretation of education. Manstead (2018) also reflects upon the complexities of the notion that schools are settings where social class inequalities are reinforced. He describes this to be perplexing when considering the premise that schools function on the basis of merit where ability and efforts shape achievement, as opposed to the advantage conferred by background of origin and social class. This is, however, not a new theoretical discussion as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), social reproduction theorists, previously argued, that the schooling system in fact serves to reproduce social inequalities by endorsing and perpetuating middle-class practices and values unfamiliar to those from lower class backgrounds. It was therefore especially interesting in this research to find the fee-paying schools together with non-DEIS community colleges and DEIS schools to be unhappy with the league tables, although as it transpired for very different reasons. A principal from a fee-paying school outlined how *me and the league tables don't get on* (Participant 6) describing how they were *very deceiving* because the categories for inclusion are so inflexible rendering them as *laughable*. This principal outlined her belief:

The league tables are very deceiving. It's quite annoying for us being an academic school, our students who go to UK, Spain or Germany, the Royal College of Surgeons for example, don't feature on the league tables. So, we would often appear as 80% or 85% when in fact we could have 98% who have gone on. We had two students go to Oxford last year, it is laughable that Oxford or Cambridge

don't feature. To me the league tables are annoying. Every year we write in and complain (Participant 6).

A second principal from a fee-paying school explained that 'feeder schools league tables' can actually put pressure on the school from parents who look at the tables, but might be dissatisfied with the schools' place on them:

I'm totally against league tables. They mean absolutely nothing. But what we do find is that we get it from parents, who have looked at the league tables that year and are basically dissatisfied with the 'performance' if you can even call it that, of the school (Participant 5).

It was an interesting finding of this research that a non-DEIS community college principal believed socio-economic status lies at the core of 'feeder schools league tables':

League tables are reflective of socio-economic status without a shadow of a doubt. If you have socio-economic advantage, are mixing with others with that same advantage who all want the same thing, then school is a place to succeed. If you are disadvantaged or facing into a horrible time at home then school is a safe space, a happy place to meet your friends and education is second to all of that (Participant 9).

Socio-economic disadvantage and its relationship within education has historically been at the forefront of decades of research and study. It was interesting in this study, therefore to note the comments above and also those of one non-DEIS community college principal of a rurally located non-DEIS school, who had until recently been a principal of a fee-paying school. It was a belief garnered throughout her career that it is the children of *middle-income* families in schools who are the most disadvantaged. These parents were described as *working really, really hard and prioritising their children's education and may be saving their children's allowance for years* (Participant 9). This same principal described:

If you are a middle-income parent you are screwed, you pay for everything. If I'm working really, really hard and I'm interested in my kids, my average child can get lost in that middle ground. I cannot believe what the kids at the lower end are getting as compared to your normal kid (Participant 9).

This was an idea also supported by several participants from fee-paying schools. A deputy-principal of a fee-paying school outlined that not all their families are wealthy,

and that they have a number of *lower to middle-class* (Participant 8) families who choose to make financial sacrifices, to send their children to the school:

Most of families would certainly have the means to send their kids here. But we do have some lower to middle-class families who are availing of grants and in some cases, making significant financial sacrifices in their own personal lives to make sure they can send their kids to this school (Participant 8).

Although the quotations above suggest that it is not only those from wealthy backgrounds who place premium upon third-level education, there is no mistaking that a social gradient exists in terms of educational inequality. Across all school demographics, this study identifies the need for strong parental support coupled with a familial culture of high expectation in terms of engaging with second-level schooling, as a necessary prerequisite to support student progression to third-level post-Leaving Certificate. Non-DEIS community college participants and DEIS schools alike, described students from backgrounds of disadvantage lacking parental support and with no culture of expectation at home, progressing a student to third-level can be a challenge for the school. A participant of a non-DEIS community college outlined:

I could safely say that sometimes if you bring a parent in here it's the parents that need parenting. If support for the student is not there at home at this stage or the parents just don't care about education, then we are almost fighting a losing battle here. So much of student success has to do with the drive of expectation from home (Participant 9).

Furthermore, a DEIS school principal identified that students from *all walks of life* (Participant 4) need family support to achieve, although she believed this to be particularly essential where disadvantage exists in the home:

I don't know a Leaving Certificate student in this country from any walk of life who does well and whose family wasn't behind them. Whereas if you have disadvantage and chaos in the home or you're expected to have huge responsibilities in the home, I think it's very hard to do well in school and get to third-level (Participant 4).

The findings from this research suggest children of higher socio-economic status families have internalised the knowledge and familial expectation of progressing within education in their formative years, which has become what one participant from a fee-paying school

described as *the norm*. This is an interesting sentiment and one that agrees with the findings of Bandura (1986) and social learning theory, where individuals tend to repeat behaviours through observing others within the context of their environment. A principal from a fee-paying school with a demographic of well-educated professional parents expressed her belief of this shared understanding:

Our parents would come from very academic and professional backgrounds themselves. I suppose we have the problem where some parents think that because they pay fees, we can magic them (students) into doctors or lawyers. But the vast majority of our students are privileged and come from well-educated and supportive families where both sides know that third-level is just the natural and expected step after school

(Participant 6).

Additionally, a principal from a community college agreed, outlining her belief:

If they are from a good socio-economic background, they have better aspirations for their children's education and progression. And the children have it for themselves too, there is understanding there from both sides

(Participant 9).

In more advantaged families from backgrounds of higher socio-economic status, this research found a double component implicated by a shared understanding of progression to third-level. This is not only expected by the parents but is simultaneously accepted by their children. When families talk about benefits of education in the home, and young people see the positive effects it brings in terms of a high level of cultural capital, parents with secure incomes, living in a nice home and taking foreign holidays then they aspire to this themselves. An Educate Together Secondary School participant highlighted her belief of the importance of normalising third-level education and talking about it in the home. She described that where educational progression is not a topic of conversation within families, there is no expectation from either the parents or their children. Interestingly, this participant together with acting as a year head is also a qualified guidance and careers guidance counsellor. She described the importance of the school taking on some level of responsibility to maintain *home conversations* in an effort to do what she describes as *raising its status in a normal way*:

We have students who have never had any mention of going to college at home. It was just never talked about. It's a cultural capital thing, if parents or families are

antagonistic towards education, or they don't believe in it and don't talk about it at home there is no understanding from either side around progressing. We recognise the importance of the home conversations around third-level and we try to involve our parents at every stage (Participant 11).

This study agrees with the previous research of McCoy *et al.*, (2014), finding strong parental support to be a crucial factor in working-class young people progressing to third-level. However, it was encouraging to discover DEIS school participants reporting parental experience of education linked to family culture does not always have to default to the same for their own children. Two DEIS school leaders spoke with significant pride about the families in their schools actively supporting their child in progressing to third-level, an opportunity they may not have had themselves:

We have parents here who might have never finished school themselves. Now their children are in senior cycle and heading into Leaving Cert and with the potential to progress to third-level. These families know they are breaking the cycle, breaking the chain and their child will be the first to go to college ever from their family. And they are rightly proud of it and hugely supportive. It's those parents who I have great admiration for, they are remarkable. To stand up and say I want them to get a new start. I want them to go to college and have the opportunities that I didn't have (Participant 1).

Also:

There used to be a really large factory just down the road, it is closed now but it was a huge employer, money in the hand every Friday. And that was a big draw for many of our families. But it is interesting that in all the parent-teacher meetings it is a subject that comes up. Lots of our parents regret now not going to third-level and some are going into further education later in life. Despite being predominantly a working-class area many of our parents want their children to go on to third-level and they are very supportive (Participant 3).

Previous research finding that parental experience of education has a fundamental effect on the status of the next generation (Eurostat, 2016). It is evident from the beliefs of these participants that it is especially important that schools possess the capability to support parents who lacked educational opportunities and positive schooling experiences themselves. By supporting parents, schools can impart the knowledge and skills they need to promote the educational aspirations of their children. Post-primary schools included within the DEIS scheme and availing of the integrated School Support

Programme have access to Home School Community Liaison (HSCL), a component of which is to improve the outcomes for students who are at risk of or experiencing educational disadvantage by engaging with the leading adults in their lives (Weir *et al.*, 2018). This research found, the four DEIS participants spoke positively about the multi-faceted nature of HSCL as a dedicated and funded role, highlighting the importance of establishing a home-school connection, building positive relationships and promoting parents' own skills and confidence. To illustrate this, two participants of DEIS schools outlined their beliefs:

Our HSCL co-ordinator is essential in helping us to create positive partnerships and we work very hard at communicating with parents and grandparents. So that they know that ultimately, we are all there for the betterment of the students. That human connection and trust is very important. It has allowed parents to feel confident coming to talk to us (Participant 1).

Also:

I absolutely think that having a dedicated HSCL co-ordinator role is really so helpful, a go-to person. He does a lot of work, promoting positive engagement with our families, which has really helped us to develop a trusting partnership situation with parents (Participant 4).

Participants identified a significant strength of the HSCL role for disadvantaged families as not only bringing value to the school but also promoting parent's own long-term capabilities and relationship forming behaviours. One participant from a DEIS school described how parents with continuing and multiple engagements with agencies and individuals such as social workers or the Gardaí can become *wary of sharing information* (Participant 2) with those who they perceive as holding authority over them. In such instances, community college and DEIS participants shared their belief that the continuum of HSCL really pays dividends, with one DEIS school deputy principal detailing how parents can expect to interact and cultivate a trusting and consistent relationship with the same person. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecology model is characterised by strong long lasting and consistent relationships and where schools have access to HSCL, it is again an example of how the reach of the school can have a positive and long-term effect within families. A DEIS school deputy principal described:

Our parents know they can ring the school if they have a problem and want to talk to someone who they know, who knows them and will listen. Our home school co-ordinator is really helpful in those kinds of situations. It's a win-win for everyone
(Participant 2).

Although the provision in DEIS schools of HSCL is highlighted in this research as being a win-win situation, non-DEIS community colleges do not have access to a funded HSCL role with one deputy principal describing:

Bear in mind that some of our families would be having a high level of multi-agency engagement and many may have had bad experiences with those in authority and their own schooling. In these cases, we have to work very hard to build relationships despite the fact that we have no dedicated HSCL
(Participant 10).

With the single exception of one fee-paying school, every school regardless of demographic mentioned HSCL at some point during the interview process. All participants acknowledged that young people regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds are exposed to a wide range of personal and societal pressures, particularly now, as a result of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. A deputy principal of a non-DEIS community college outlined:

We are not a DEIS school and are unfortunately not entitled to HSCL. Just because we don't get that funded doesn't mean to say that we don't need it. HSCL should be in every school. We have created what we call 'home-school connection' with a chain of command grounded within our pastoral care systems. It's not perfect and there is no one system. Year heads take the bulk of the responsibility in our school, and we do our best to build up a relationship with home, but I couldn't say that it is seamless
(Participant 10).

Furthermore, a second participant from a community college said:

We don't have a home school liaison officer, there is no funding for it because we are not a DEIS school but it's a huge disadvantage. It's really tricky if there is not someone specifically assigned to the role. A teacher or year head might get some information about a student, but the challenge is to co-ordinate all that information on a student-by-student basis
(Participant 12).

However, whilst recognising the necessity of the HSCL, non-DEIS schools who lack targeted funding for this role reported the impact of prioritising and assimilating it within existing school structures in the form of care teams and whole school pastoral and

wellbeing policies, can negatively burden other school demands. Fee-paying schools can have quite complicated funding situations. Notably, there was discussion by three of the four participants regarding the role of HSCL and again there was strong mention that role that should unequivocally be funded as a stand-alone post within every post-primary school. A principal of a fee-paying school described:

Of course, as a fee-paying school we have no dedicated home school liaison post, but we should have and recognise the importance of this role in any school. So, we have prioritised this ourselves. Why are our students any different from any other young people, family breakup, drug and alcohol issues, mental health problems? It's all out there (Participant 5).

A second fee-paying principal outlined:

We do not have a formal home school liaison position in this school. We are not allocated one by the department, but it should absolutely be available to every school. Although the majority of our students do not come from backgrounds of disadvantage that doesn't mean that they are not exposed to issues that might affect them, and that we should know about. I'm talking here about student mental health especially in light of COVID, marital break-up, the passing of a parent, societal issues such as alcohol and drug use. These are the issues that can touch every young person, right, regardless of background (Participant 7).

It was interesting to note the principle of equality of education alluded to by this principal from a fee-paying school, who remarked that *there are issues that can touch every young person, regardless of background* (Participant 5). This is logical because the premise of equality applies to all, and therefore every student regardless of their social background of origin should be catered for within the second-level schooling system in Ireland. In this study, all community college and fee-paying school participants identified the importance of a home-school link. This research further highlighted the dissatisfaction of all non-DEIS participants that funding is not provided by the DES. This has effectively forced them to find a way to incorporate the role and burden their current staffing structures. It is therefore, a clear finding of this research that the evidence exists for HSCL to be a DES fully funded unique role in every school, and not just limited to those schools included within the DEIS scheme. This finding is based on the experiences of DEIS schools who clearly acknowledge its success as an intervention. A student-centred and holistic approach to education must be relevant and supportive of every student's social origin and schools need the personnel and funding to be able to implement this.

Participants highlighted their beliefs that understanding the backgrounds of their students, a strength of HSCL, can assist the whole school community in supporting student progression to third-level. Despite wide-ranging and continuing initiatives aimed at encouraging and expanding the participation of those from disadvantaged backgrounds within the higher education system, entry into third-level education remains significantly differentiated by social class (Webb *et al.*, 2017; McCoy and Smyth, 2011). Habitus strongly linked to social class is considered key to the social reproduction of certain behaviours (Bourdieu, 1986), and this research agrees, finding progressing to third-level may not be in the culture and mind-set of families from lower SES backgrounds who consider it to be *a luxury*. DEIS school participants reported many such families maintain the belief that *people like them* just do not go to college. A DEIS school participant said:

We do have parents who tell us quite openly that their kind of people just don't go to college. Part of our problem with getting kids to college is not just getting the grades up but also promoting their confidence, and that of their families. It helps us to understand the context so we can hopefully change things for their children. But engagement at this level takes time and school life can be very demanding. HSCL is vital for this (Participant 3).

Moreover, a DEIS school principal stated:

College is a luxury you cannot afford to have if you are from a disadvantaged background. That's what our families think and feel, that university is for posh people and not for folk like them (Participant 4).

For some working within the education system declare it to be widely acknowledged by society that *people who come from less don't tend to go to college* (Participant 12). A community college participant expressed her belief that this has become an accepted social construct and a *social norm* or *given* describing:

It's a well-known fact that people who come from less, like socio-economic disadvantage, tend to not go to college. Over years and years that has become a social norm, it's a given. It's not good enough that we accept that as a society, but it is hard to break that cycle (Participant 12).

The views expressed above by participants are very interesting for a number of reasons, with this research suggesting there is an ingrained and enduring social construct surrounding the belief that young people from backgrounds of disadvantage tend not to

progress to third-level education. Is it for example that university is portrayed in popular culture as elitist which perpetuates an embedded social attitude that it is as one participant said *not for people like us?* Bourdieu believed that parents from working-class backgrounds are unfamiliar with the prevailing culture of school and university, the result being that families are not in a position to be able to successfully transmit the relevant cultural capital to their children (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). There may also be no spare cash for what Bourdieu calls dominant culture activities such as going to the theatre or visiting an art gallery (Bourdieu, 1973). This research however suggests a more practical reason and one that has its roots in structural social inequality, in that the pressing financial needs of families from backgrounds of disadvantage take precedence over everything. Individuals must make the choices that will ultimately serve them the best, which is a core concept within rational choice theory (Lovett, 2006). Families may be very supportive of their child's schooling, but when they do not know how they *will put food on the table or top up their electricity meter card* (Participant 1), parents do not have the emotional space to wonder what career their child might have in five years' time. This can manifest as a shared understanding within the family, especially by the older children who instead of looking to progress in education realise the importance of an immediate income and job in order to contribute to their family. These findings support Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction as being highly influential as a mechanism in the preservation of educational inequality that limits social mobility between the generations (Bourdieu 1984, 1997).

For students from backgrounds of disadvantage, it was the overriding view of the community college and DEIS school participants that it is the prevailing financial situations of the parents that present the most significant barrier to post-Leaving Certificate educational progression. One DEIS school principal said *at the end of the day it comes down to money* (Participant 3) with two DEIS school participants further discussing the practical element of funding third-level. Both asserted that even with access to Student Universal Support Ireland, and other supports such as provision of a laptop, supported by their second-level school, their students would consider third-level to be an alien environment that their families would be unfamiliar with and is financially *so far out of their reach* (Participant 4). Two direct quotations below from DEIS school participants illustrate this:

Going to college would be so far out of reach for our families and by that, I mean the cost. For many here completing post-primary education is a huge achievement and we have to be realistic about that. For many of our families education stops after school, the natural progression there is the world of work, not more education and all the costs associated with it (Participant 2).

And:

We do work very closely with MTU and UCC, with access programmes and the like, to help our students envisage themselves in college. But the huge challenge remains that even with financial supports and grants and our help with applying for them it is just too much of a challenge for a student from a disadvantaged background to enter in to third-level (Participant 4).

In fee-paying schools, the resounding view of all four participants was that a student's academic ability was the primary determinant to post-Leaving Certificate routes, and not their background or family capacity to fund third-level. A principal of a fee-paying school said:

It is just the basics of academic ability that determines where our students go. Many of our families are extremely wealthy and I would say that all of them could afford third-level and all that comes with it. 95% of our students would go on to university either in Ireland or abroad, that is just a given (Participant 6).

This was a view was further echoed by a deputy principal who reported:

For the most part money may need to be managed but would not present an obstacle to a student accessing third-level education. Academic ability is the driver of college progression in this school. (Participant 8).

In summary, these findings highlight that to progress to third-level post-Leaving Certificate, students from every socio-economic background can benefit hugely from the support of their parents. Some parents may not have experienced tertiary education for themselves, or naturally be exposed to the influence of a positive culture of education through their immediate environment or work in a professional setting. This may, in turn, indirectly lead to a familial lack of expectation and knowledge surrounding progression routes post-Leaving Certificate. These findings suggest therefore, that for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, the school has a huge role to play in advancing learners, equipping them with knowledge surrounding courses choices, third-level

experience and the practical support needed to navigate the CAO and grant application processes. A young person's schooling should never be undertaken in isolation, it should be a collaborative process of partnership between students, parents and the school. Demographic knowledge of the student cohort is essential in order to offer a person-centred approach, which is relevant and supportive of every student regardless of their background of origin. It was acknowledged by all participants that 'feeder schools league tables' have no place in modern Ireland, and are a metric that does not recognise and value the post-Leaving Certificate pathways of all students and at their worst can be socially divisive. Furthermore, all participants believed that the role of HSCL should be funded in every school by the DES.

4.4 The Influence of Post-Primary School Demographic and Culture of Learning on Student Attainment and Choices Post-Leaving Certificate

The third theme to emerge from this research was the influence of post-primary school demographic, and culture of learning on student attainment and choices post-Leaving Certificate. Attending a school with a positive and supportive climate has been found to impact on student performance (Reynolds *et al.*, 2017), and throughout the semi-structured interview process all participants regardless of their school's socio-economic demographic, spoke with enthusiasm and energy about their students and school settings. Participants described the importance of proactively promoting a day-to-day vibrant and inclusive atmosphere within *nurturing* and *caring* school communities, *with a focus on learning and personal and academic achievement*. A non-DEIS community college deputy principal outlined:

We aim to provide a positive and dynamic environment and our students are part of that journey. They feel listened to and heard and that is something that we have worked very, very hard to achieve. We give them every opportunity to learn and importantly be their best self (Participant 10).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) discussed the significance of interpersonal relationships and interactions between the microsystems of school and parents. The findings from this study highlight the importance of a positive school climate where schools are no longer viewed within the wider community as remote and unapproachable institutions, with one DEIS school principal reporting *back in the day, parents wouldn't cross the threshold* (Participant 3) . In modern Ireland, schools report working with

parents to realise their potential to influence positive educational outcomes for children, with a principal of a community college explaining:

If we can inform and influence from school, you are helping at some level to support parents to support their children (Participant 9).

Ball (2016) describes this as ‘educative schooling’ with schools having a responsibility to ‘develop capabilities of parents, students, teachers, and other local stakeholders’ (p.23)’. This aligns with current Irish educational policy, where education is viewed as a partnership between home, school and the wider community. Bourdieu’s cultural capital reproductive theory hypothesises that it can be the systems themselves including schools, that both help to preserve and spread inequality (Bourdieu, 1971). However, this research finds that schools are deeply invested in breaking this cycle, by welcoming parents in, and breaking down the historically held perceptions of a school being a remote institution set apart from the community. Furthermore, it is encouraging to see third-level institutions in Ireland recognising and supporting schools in core practises to embed what is described by the *Trinity Access Programmes Strategic Plan to 2020*, as ‘college-going school culture’ within their schools (TCD, 2020, p. 16). Being embedded within and drawing on the resources of the local community, inviting parents to school on various occasions helps to counsel families in a non-formal way as to the benefits of consistent school attendance and progressing their children within the education system in Ireland. This was acknowledged by one non-DEIS community college participant who described how *the influence of a school within a family cannot be underestimated* (Participant 9) and a DEIS school deputy principal said:

Let’s be realistic, going to college would be really breaking through the socio-economic barrier for many of our families. We need to encourage them by helping the families see that this is possible for their children and offering them all the supports that we can. It’s all about building trusting relationships (Participant 1).

This research acknowledges the proactive and creative ways in which schools across all demographics are reportedly working with students and families to bring about this positive change. By understanding the backgrounds of all their students, schools are uniquely positioned within social structures to be able to influence agency by encouraging students and their families to embrace education. Broadening support to parents was considered by participants in this study to be especially important in the case of families

of low SES, where schools can help banish the previously enduring stigma that college is not for *their kind* (Participant 3). Achieving equality of educational opportunity is not straight forward when such views prevail. By promoting a culture of high expectation and adopting a college-going stance, schools can contribute to the fundamental change in mind-set and attitude that this research believes is held by families from disadvantaged backgrounds in relation to the educational progression of their children.

Research has found that the outcomes for students attending DEIS schools are significantly below those of their peers (Social Justice Ireland, 2020). Yet, inclusion within DEIS enables schools to access a wide ranging supports and initiatives such as Higher Educational Access Routes and other access schemes such as Trinity Access, funded supplementary tuition and college experiences with the sole aim of promoting participation at third-level. However, these are resources and routes to third-level that are not available to non-DEIS schools. Despite an overall trend of improvement in performance and retention in all schools nationally, previous research found this improving trend appeared more marked in DEIS schools around the time that the DEIS programme might have been expected to have its first impact (Weir *et al.*, 2018). A deputy principal outlined some of the interventions that are to the benefit of the students. However, these are only available because the school has DEIS status:

We are very fortunate with our funding situation, for example UCC plus are very generous with the provision of supplementary tuition in support of educational progression. Cork City Partnership also provide us with funding for a homework club for junior cycle and after-school study for senior cycle, free of charge to the students. They generously provide for refreshments too. It's all free and available to every student. The more students we can encourage to stay for study the more it appeals to others too, which has an overall positive impact on the learning climate
(Participant 1).

With such supports available through inclusion in DEIS being well received by schools and proving to be effective, it begs the question as to why they are school-centred and not student-centred? As a result of this lack of recognition non-DEIS community colleges with students from disadvantage are unable to access such additional learning resources. Especially when DEIS schools in this study report that through funding and partnerships with third-level institutions, access schemes and other organisations they are able to eliminate the burden of cost for families. Many extra supports such as after school study, can therefore be provided without needing to leverage a charge and burden families with

an unaffordable expense. However, again, non-DEIS community colleges reported being at a distinct disadvantage due to their lack of DEIS status. A non-DEIS community college participant asserted:

We basically don't get anything special in our school. We have some students who would come from very comfortable backgrounds and then those who are really disadvantaged, a mix is good, shared aspirations and so on. But we are not linked in with UCC plus, or any access programmes in fact, supplementary tuition and so on and we have to levy a charge for after school study for example

(Participant 12).

Students attending non-DEIS schools are unable to universally benefit from localised progression schemes such as Cork Colleges Progression Scheme and HEAR directly through their school. Where a student can show socio-economic disadvantage using a range of indicators including family income, being in receipt of a medical card, socio-economic group and area, may be eligible for individualised support through HEAR. Additionally, children who are cared for by the state can also apply for this assistance (HEAR, 2022). However, all community college participants lamented the fact that as non-DEIS schools they were unable to access many local schemes that are readily available to DEIS schools, describing how they *are doubly up against it because many of the access schemes are not available to us*. An Educate Together Secondary School participant described:

As a non-DEIS school our disadvantaged students are in some ways doubly disadvantaged when it comes to progressing in education after school. We are not eligible for HEAR for example and are not connected to any access programme. We have to bring our students out to UCC, MTU, show them all the different things and expose them to those experiences and probably fund the bus to take them too

(Participant 11).

Furthermore, a community college participant said:

When you are talking to other teachers or principals from DEIS schools they will tell you that "UCC are great and are always bringing us in". But we get none of that which might not be to the detriment of many of our students, but as a community college we have plenty of students from poor backgrounds who need every bit of help to get them to third-level. What is there to say, except it is not fair for everyone

(Participant 12).

The above two quotations again highlight the dearth of student-centred supports available to young people not attending DEIS schools but from backgrounds of disadvantage. Extra individualised supports that aim to widen participation rates at third-level for students from disadvantaged families, but are directed only to those students in DEIS schools, speaks to a lack of fairness and parity for all. Furthermore, this research has found that non-DEIS schools serving diverse communities are basically ‘left to their own devices’ and are expected in policy to transition students to third-level education, but without any of the supports of their DEIS counterparts.

In the Irish context, existing research suggests that the social composition and climate of a school impacts upon academic achievement and student progression levels to third-level education (Smyth, 2016; Smyth *et. al.*, 2011). Indeed, McCoy *et al.*, (2014) found there was a far greater likelihood of a young person moving on to education or training where they had attended a socially mixed school. However, as a caveat to this, Owens (2010) reported that policy makers need to establish how students originating from different areas can be successfully integrated into the structure and culture of a school. The findings from this research suggest that non-DEIS community colleges, who self-reported their social class mix, are already doing this well, and are very committed to making sure that their students from backgrounds of low SES are not *missing out* (Participant 10). Non-DEIS community colleges reported how they attempt to foster a positive school climate by making choices in the ways they use their available funding, *so you ensure that there isn't that inequity in school* (Participant 9), and everyone feels included and has what they need. However, participants recognised the additional burden this places not only school funding protocols, but also on the staff who are often running breakfast clubs or after school study on a voluntary basis. An Educate Together Secondary School participant described:

We know what we have to do, but how do we provide for it? Many initiatives in this school are run by staff on a voluntary basis such as the breakfast club. I know I am asking a great deal extra of my colleagues and that does not always sit well with me
(Participant 11).

Where this is the case and reflected in the findings of this study, student-centred supports that allow schools the power to direct funding and resources on an individual need-by-need basis make a lot of sense in order to realise equality of opportunity for all. With

education shown to promote upward economic and social mobility (Brannstrom, 2007), it was interesting to note the views of one non-DEIS community college principal who believes students from disadvantaged backgrounds should not have different opportunities to their more advantaged peers, but that everyone should have the same:

The best thing you can do is make sure they (the students) are all given the same opportunities in school. No one should have different opportunities because they are from socio-economic disadvantage, or not. It's all about equality of opportunity for everyone (Participant 12).

This non-DEIS participant makes a very good point, however, this is clearly not reflected in current educational policy. Again, interventions aimed at retention and progression such as the Schools Completion Programme (SCP) are not available to be accessed by every school and therefore equality of opportunity is not being realised for all. SCP is a proactive intervention that aims to actively retain a young person within the education system until Leaving Certificate completion or equivalent or reaching a level of educational attainment that allows for transition into further education, training, or employment (Tusla, 2021). One participant from a DEIS school described SCP staff as *a highly valuable asset* (Participant 2). An experienced DEIS school participant stated:

Our SCP HQ is just across the road from us, and they are in and out of our building all the time. They run our breakfast club, after school activities and holiday programmes and so on. Because the local kids would have had the exact same SCP people in primary school then they already know each other coming into secondary school. It is a great set-up for us because of the continuity and information that SCP can give us. For the families they are a friendly and non-threatening face, someone that they know (Participant 3).

Moreover, a DEIS school principal said:

SCP really help us with the students that we would struggle to get to Leaving Certificate, the ones that kind of get lost in the system (Participant 4).

DEIS participants recognised the value of SCP to their school because of the longevity and continuity of relationships established with some families stretching back for years. The positioning of the programme as a school-based intervention but active and visible within the wider community reinforces the 'real face' of the school, helping the message of education to be trusted locally but also by extension, extended to the wider culture of education. To support the continuum of attendance and retention, SCP projects provide

a range of practical and targeted in-school and out-of-school supports. Exposing students to a wide range of experiences and extracurricular activities have been shown in previous research to not only contribute to a positive learning culture, but ultimately promote academic achievement (Christison, 2013). DEIS school participants all highlighted the huge contribution SCP makes in providing opportunities for young people from disadvantage backgrounds with participants describing how on these days of planned activities or excursions with SCP the students are *so excited* and there is a *brilliant atmosphere about the place*. Introducing students to new experiences and broadening of what Bourdieu (1986) describes as cultural capital was highlighted by participants from every school demographic as being important for students from all backgrounds. Bourdieu believed social privilege can accrue and be reproduced (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1965). Therefore, for students of low SES, interventions that provide exposure to wider cultural and social practices that they would not necessarily experience in their home lives help to *broaden their horizons and experiences of the wider world* and can only be viewed in a positive light. A DEIS school year head said:

We see the trips as an important part of learning, so we offer different experiences to all our students. Many of our students would not have access at home to the kinds of outings and activities that we see as so important for their learning and experience of the wider world (Participant 3).

Where students were asked for a contribution towards an educational outing, or school trip but were unable to pay, participants reported the school would discreetly step in to help. To illustrate this a DEIS school year head said:

All our trips are subsidised, and nobody is ever left out, so they (the students) don't see a difference themselves. Everyone is able to do everything and there are funds available for all out of school and extracurricular activities if we know that a family would not be able find the money themselves. No one is ever left out or embarrassed by lack of money even when it is a struggle for us to balance the books (Participant 3).

There are many hidden costs to education and families of low socio-economic status may not possess the economic capital to provide extracurricular activities, and resources to promote the academic capabilities of their children. Extracurricular activities, being part of sports teams, and out of school educational trips can help to stimulate a cohesive and dynamic school community however, sometimes schools have *no choice but to levy a*

charge due to their funding situations in order to recoup some financial component of the outing, such as the cost of a coach. Importantly, these experiences can help to influence future life choices and schools and this research does highlight, the value placed on out of school learning experiences, as witnessed by their respectful financial interventions to relieve payment burdens for families and promote inclusion.

In Ireland, in 1980s and 1990s some efforts were made to reduce educational disadvantage; however, Smyth and Hannon (2000) argue that root of the problem lies with the way education policy is constructed and point out that this has generally been more concerned with expanding participation rates rather than addressing social class inequalities. With Braun and Maguire (2020) and Solbrekke and Sugrue (2018) reporting that those factors such as poverty and disadvantage are largely ignored due to a de-contextualised approach to policy making. Participants reported their belief that third-level should not be the only route to be considered for young people post-Leaving Certificate, and society needs to take a *wider view* beyond that of simply academic achievement. A deputy principal from a DEIS school said:

We can't lose sight of channelling everyone into third-level education at the age of eighteen. As a society we need to be broader than that and value all talents and not just academic achievement. Look at the construction industry for example. Society is faced with a real problem just now; you can't find a plumber or a carpenter for love nor money. That is going to become a problem for this country's development if we insist on placing our value on third-level education. You need people and their skills in all avenues of life (Participant 1).

The views of this participant highlight the importance of valuing routes to training and employment post-Leaving Certificate, together with what may be considered by some as traditional third-level progression. For many learners, this would offer a broader and more context sympathetic approach, rather than recognising third-level progression as the only choice. One non-DEIS community college principal believed educational inflation to be at the root of the issue, expressing his belief that all individuals and not just those that have progressed to third-level, should have the opportunity to have a socially valuable job, *earn a decent wage and enjoy a high standard of living* describing:

We need people in all walks of life and all spectrums of employment. Everyone should leave school with the hope of being able to earn a decent wage and have a high standard of living, but you don't necessarily have to be a university

graduate. Success should not just be about us sending students to third-level. That is the kind of pressure that makes our students drop out through fear of failure. There can be other ways of getting there like taking on a trade or having a skill that is marketable. I often ask myself the question, do we value a degree if everyone has one, do we value a masters, if it is a common thing? These days a degree is barely sufficient, and I don't know what that says about us as a society
(Participant 10).

Furthermore, a non-DEIS community college participant agreed:

I definitely don't think college is for everyone despite policy and the department channelling everyone to third-level. I will encourage students to do what best suits them and their circumstances, whether that is third-level, apprenticeships, or the world of work. We need people in every walk of life to be valued as contributing to society, not only those who make it to third-level
(Participant 12).

Historically, a stereotypical view may have prevailed relating to taking up a traditional craft apprenticeship in trades such as carpentry, construction, and electrical. These more vocational routes were possibly perceived as being for the lower classes, or for young people who did not do well enough in school. However, over-subscribed courses and costs associated with third-level education often represents the long route into the workforce. Professional apprenticeships are now being marketed as vocational routes to professions such as engineering, and in response to market forces are again growing in popularity. For students that opt for an apprenticeship as a post-Leaving Certificate choice, there is no metric recognition in the 'feeder schools league tables'.

This research highlights that schools are committed to providing dynamic learning environments for their students. Furthermore, this study has consistently found that the existence of quality relationships between teachers and learners promotes academic success. Schools that offer student-centred learning pedagogy and promote cultural capabilities by offering extended and inclusive learning opportunities for all students, help to perpetuate a climate of educational expectation, achievement and progression. It was evident from these findings that it was the overriding view of schools, that narrowly focussing on academic performance and progression to third-level post-Leaving Certificate only, does not take account of alternative learner pathways such as apprenticeship programmes or training.

4.5 School Closures and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ireland on Post-Primary Students, Families and Schools

The fourth theme to emerge from this research was that of school closures and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland on post-primary students, families, and schools. Due to the time frame, much of the emergent data surrounding the on-going pandemic is predominantly mixed methods or quantitative approaches adopted by researchers thus far (Flynn *et al.*, 2021; Scully *et al.*, 2021; Mohan *et al.*, 2020). This study addresses this gap by seeking the first hand and lived experiences of senior school leaders during the pandemic. Fundamentally, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global emergency that has affected all tranches of society, however as in many extreme situations those who were already the most vulnerable were disproportionately affected, and existing deep-seated social inequalities were exacerbated (Doyle, 2020).

Participants from every school demographic reported being aware of the financial struggles many of their families faced during the pandemic. Job losses, being unable to attend the workplace as direct consequence of shutdown due to COVID-19, and related sickness were particularly highlighted. The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was available to workers who met the criteria, in the first lockdown it was a blanket payment made to every eligible employee and may not have met the same level as their pre-pandemic wages. In the second period of lockdown, this payment was reviewed and adjusted depending on an individual's usual weekly working hours and was paid at different rates that varied between €203 and €350 (Government of Ireland). However, for many workers particularly in the hospitality industry, even this top rate fell short of their usual wages. History records that during previous economic crisis in Ireland, children have always suffered the worst outcomes on all poverty-related measures (Regan and Maître, 2020). In the DEIS schools already availing of the school meals programme families received grocery boxes. However, these schools also reported *reaching out to our local community* to look for extra fresh food and provisions to socially distance deliver to families identified as being extremely vulnerable. This was also a way to *still be on doorsteps* and *connect with our families*. Two DEIS school participants said:

In lockdown some of our families really faced extreme situations. Our outreach started immediately. Food poverty and fuel poverty is a real thing for some people. We are a part of the schools meals programme here which helped of course. But our staff were amazing, and we were also reaching out to our local

community for extra help, fresh food, coal and so on. All were delivered to our families by school staff, everyone got involved, we all wanted to
(Participant 1).

And,

I must say the school as a team really rose to the challenge. We know our families in here and their circumstances, a lot of it comes down to that. Delivering schoolbooks, food parcels, WIFI dongles meant we could still be on a doorstep and connect with our families. But there were some really desperate situations. If you are poor and things go wrong your life can become pretty desperate very quickly
(Participant 4).

Non-DEIS community college participants reported widespread issues related to poverty amongst their students from backgrounds of disadvantage and also recognised the safe space that school provides to some. Not being a part of the school meals programme *was a problem* but again schools relied on the goodwill of the staff and wider community to help, with one deputy principal reporting:

In the second lockdown we offered ourselves as a haven. Some of our students actually asked for it as their home situations were so tough, and some we identified for ourselves of course. Not being a part of the school meals programme was a problem for us. But yet again our staff and the wider community helped. We looked for actual food, vouchers anything that we could get our hands on. Some families were so grateful for what small things we could do for them, it was really humbling to be a part of
(Participant 10).

The quotations above highlight that for the most socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable households, the COVID-19 pandemic elevated what was already a food poverty issue, to a crisis situation for some families. Poverty is strongly associated with food insecurity, and in pre-pandemic times schools were already meeting this social deficit either systemically through the school meals programme accessed by DEIS schools, or by non-DEIS schools providing whatever ‘ad hoc’ arrangement that they could. In the early days of the first lockdown, DEIS schools participants reported starting *outreach* immediately, and delivering food parcels and fuel to vulnerable families. The immediacy of their response was helped by their wide knowledge base of their family’s circumstances, which again speaks to the value school personnel such as HSCL and SCP. Participants reported asking for, and accepting help from all quarters of their communities, with staff who were considered in these circumstances to be ‘essential workers’ and were social distance delivering food to doorsteps. As the pandemic

progressed students attending DEIS schools were able to receive a weekly delivery to the value of €10 per child of non-perishable food items through An Post who entered into local arrangements with schools to make these deliveries (Government of Ireland, 2020). Participants provided an insight, that for many of disadvantaged families, schools highlighted structural issues that prevented them from accessing food. Not all households can afford to run a car, for example, so had to rely on the often more expensive and smaller local shop, families on low-incomes or relying on weekly social welfare payments could not afford to bulk buy food and public transport options were limited during lockdown. It has to be acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic was both unexpected and unprecedented, but what it has revealed is a lack of planning and policy at institutional level to cope with emergency situations.

Beginning with the first period of mandated post-primary school closures on 12 March 2020, over one million young people of school going age were affected in Ireland, and no longer able to be physically present in their educational settings (CSO, 2020). Borne out of the necessity of the public health emergency, this overnight and unplanned for virtual classroom requirement was the first and most pressing barrier to learning highlighted by all participants in this study, with the many describing it as the *digital divide*. Although existing policy directs for digital literacy to be embedded within all aspects of curriculum delivery, the DES digital strategies roll out (DES, 2015) was only in its first full year of implementation in 2020. Participants from every school demographic reported being completely underprepared for the delivery of a fully online programme across all year groups with one community college participant outlining *it was haphazard at best, I would go as far as to say a complete disaster in schools around the entire country* (Participant 9) with a fee-paying participant further describing *we basically were completely underprepared, it was just awful* (Participant 6). Long before timetabling and delivery could be considered, schools had to identify that all their students had access to a suitable device along with the capability to connect to adequate broadband in their homes. A non-DEIS community college deputy principal described:

In the immediacy of the first lock down we were completely unprepared. We recognised quickly that we had to purchase vast quantities of iPads and Chromebooks which we lent to families. Many of our families didn't have adequate broadband so we helped by providing dongles and in the most extreme

cases for students in homeless situations we brought them into school in a very safe way using individual classrooms and the school broadband
(Participant 10).

Furthermore two DEIS school participants outline:

We have a small enough Leaving Cert group so when lockdown came, we were able to mobilise quickly. We sought sponsorship straight away from all the different partners who had worked with the school previously, with local businesses and any philanthropist actually. We gratefully took help from anyone that we knew
(Participant 1).

We identified as quickly as we could any student who did not have a device, and there were many. They were supplied with a refurbished laptop or iPad from the school supplies. When demand exceeded availability, we begged borrowed and stole around staff, friends and approached companies and organisations in our local community. Lots of our students had no access to the internet so we gave them internet fobs
(Participant 3).

It was evident that DEIS schools and non-DEIS community colleges reported the need for large-scale functional intervention, by mobilising all school resources to remove the physical barrier of connectivity to support their most disadvantaged students. Exam year groups were prioritised. High-speed broadband availability and connectivity varies across Ireland, and although the scope for this is recognised by the government in the National Broadband Plan (NBP) (DCCA, 2019b) including the potential benefits for equality of educational engagement. This study shows there to be a large gap between ambition and reality in terms of equal access opportunity. In relation to digital inequality, there were two overriding factors concerning broadband that were identified by schools in this study. The first being that of affordability, which for some families was an issue because although available in their localities it was either unaffordable, or not prioritized within the home, as mobile telephone packages often include a data allocation with some allowing for computer hot spotting. Secondly, some participants noted that in more rural settings broadband connectivity was poor, 'patchy at best', and in some cases not available at all. Funding connectivity for some households was prioritised by schools, who provided broadband dongles and SIM cards funded directly by schools or received from various telecommunication service providers such as *Three Ireland*. Many school staff were involved in the safe social distance delivery of these resources to homes. This research noted the views of fee-paying schools who expressed their dissatisfaction at the

unfairness of the level of supports they received from the DES relating to the provision of laptops for their students, describing how they were *effectively left to our own devices*. A principal of a fee-paying school described:

Like every other fee-paying school, whatever grants are provided you either don't get at all, or you get at a reduced rate. That would have been the case with a lot of the COVID payments last year, where we received very little. A lot had to be funded by the school, whatever we could afford. We had a lot of laptops refurbished by our IT department which we handed out to kids who needed them. We had to purchase others as well. We have lots of students from rural and farming families, poor internet connections and home computers not needed in their daily lives. I find that you cannot assume that everyone has a computer at home
(Participant 5).

Although this cost money, the issue was at least solvable. However, for some students and staff living in rural settings, without high-speed broadband, participants reported connectivity was often not good enough to support video conferencing and multiple family member usage. This significantly impacted students' ability to access their learning, engage with their online classes, and in some cases for staff to deliver them. Substantial investment was made by the Irish government in 2013 and 2014 as part of the National Digital Strategy, to roll-out high-speed broadband to all post-primary schools across the country. Existing research shows that DEIS schools tend to draw their students from the immediate locality of the school (Smyth *et al.*, 2015). For the four urban DEIS schools contributing to this study this meant broadband was available to the majority of their students, because they lived in relatively close proximity to the school. With the infrastructure available, issues accessing virtual schooling could be solved by providing the students with laptops and dongles. An excellent example of the need for integrated infrastructure across all social systems including schools, was offered by the principal of a rural non-DESI community college. Despite the government providing funding for computers, the issue was not the hardware but the availability of broadband locally that caused the digital divide. This highlighted the fact that money is not always the answer to every inequality, because even in more affluent rural homes where individuals had the capacity to pay for broadband, it was not available. This principal described:

I think the biggest gap or divide was the broadband in the country. The government threw money at schools for devices, especially after the initial panic of the first lockdown. So, like many other schools we gave out devices to kids that needed them. Which actually was a waste of time in many instances because

broadband is so poor in this area. That is the real inequity here. Huge disadvantage with broadband provision and people in the cities have no appreciation of how bad it is. It is actually scandalous that the broadband is so bad, that disadvantaged our students in a massive way. It made no difference if you could afford it or not (Participant 9).

The findings of this study suggest that, regardless of a young person's socio-economic background, they should be able to access an education 'on the same footing' as every other student. For more rurally located schools which included one non-DEIS community college and all the fee-paying schools which offered their students the option to board and drew from wide and often country farming catchment areas, the schools had to deliver practical solutions to ensure that students received their schoolwork if they could not reliably connect to the virtual learning platforms. In areas of low connectivity, email sufficed but the community college and three of the four fee-paying schools reported having to resort to *the old-fashioned method of posting material out* and following up with regular phone calls to give *academic support*. All these schools prioritized their exam classes but described it as *needing a superhuman effort with inevitability some falling through the gaps*.

In relation to issues concerning access, or not, to broadband and a suitable digital device, was the conversation surrounding students having a quiet, warm, and well-lit study space. Participants from all DEIS schools and some non-DEIS community colleges reported many of their students lacked dedicated workspace giving various different reasons. A non-DEIS community college deputy principal said:

Dedicated study space was a problem for our students especially if they were from a big family. Even where a student has their own bedroom doing your school class from your bed isn't good. Then in the communal space with the dog barking, a brother making a sandwich or your Mum making the dinner and Dad working from home, it's a problem. On top of that many of our families had a lot of worries during COVID, job loss, no money, and the stress of everyone cooped up together (Participant 2).

A DEIS school principal describes:

I called to a house one day with a food parcel and schoolbooks. There was someone sitting on the front doorstep, someone on the steps of the stairs, two other kids on opposite sides of the living room and my Leaving Cert student on the back step of the kitchen and it was freezing. And the Mum saying, "tell me what I can do here, I'm doing my best" (Participant 4).

This research identified that space was particularly challenging for large families living in social housing situations, with students struggling to have personal space and an adequate area in which to study. For many families in Ireland during COVID-19 there were many strains placed upon families with school-age children all needing access to a broadband enabled device, with parents also working from home in the family the space, the inevitable drain on WIFI, and also parents who over-night found themselves with no paid employment so were at home all of the time. There was a consensus across all school demographics that the pandemic was a crisis situation which was reflected in the additional pressures experienced by so many families. Additionally, it was noted that for the most vulnerable students, which included families living in homeless situation for whom staying at home was not an option, or those living in precarious mass housing such as refuge accommodation or bed and breakfast temporary accommodation, the effects of the pandemic were extreme. Participants reported a range of high-risk family situations such as addiction or alcoholism and increased levels of domestic violence for a small number of their students meant that the home was not conducive to study. Although these were cited by participants as barriers to learning, schools, of course, recognised the reality of the safety of their students as a priority for them. Schools were anxious to help, recognising the loss to many of the physical safety that school affords some students. A principal of a non-DEIS community college described:

Some of our students had a really horrible time during COVID. Domestic violence and abuse went up hugely. For the students who come from an area of socio-economic disadvantage it's nearly the second thing to be thinking about their education. School is a place of safety, it's a safe space for a lot of kids
(Participant 9).

Furthermore, a DEIS school deputy principal said:

We have some very disadvantaged families in this school, homes with nothing in them and families needing food. In school we can keep them safe, but COVID made everything worse. Some of our students live in really frightful circumstances with real tragedy in their lives and needed a lot of support during lockdown
(Participant 4).

The highly challenging circumstances of some students were highlighted by non-DEIS community colleges and DEIS schools as seriously affecting the capabilities of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds to engage with their teachers and learning. All

DEIS schools reported using HSCL, SCP and guidance counselling to offer support to struggling students, which was predominantly done through telephone calls. Fee-paying schools also highlighted many of their families also experienced changes in family circumstances due to the pandemic which impacted on their children's capacity to engage with school. Although in the main this research found that they did not relate to socio-economic reasons or experiences of trauma. When working from home, parents needed to prioritize WIFI and thereby protect their incomes, which came above that of schooling, but nevertheless had the potential to impact on students in locations where broadband availability was poor. Although in larger homes where more physical space may have been available for work and study, there were inevitably tensions, with greater numbers of people trying to operate professionally and socially within the same space.

As the periods of school closures in Ireland were extended, all participants were very aware of the negative impact it was having on the mental health of their students. Regardless of socio-economic background participants reported their students feeling lonely and isolated for many different reasons including not feeling safe at home, struggling with worries and concerns for their family members, missing their friends, and losing their routines and ability to remain motivated and engaged with schoolwork. Participants from every school demographic described their students as feeling *distressed*, experiencing feelings of *extreme anxiety and isolation* with one community college participant describing the *mental health of our students was a disaster*. COVID-19 removed the *human connection* and one of the most important aspects to the early days of the pandemic was highlighted by participants as being their pre-existing knowledge and established relationships with families. Where a student's online engagement declined or *dropped away completely* schools developed a number of ways to intervene but in a gentle way. One DEIS school deputy principal described this as *our reach within our community*. Furthermore, a deputy principal of a DEIS school said:

When we felt a student needed extra support, may be their online engagement had dropped off or they were not submitting work our HSCL, or guidance counsellor would ring home and just gently find out what was going on with the student. We never just went ringing up saying "oh your son isn't attending classes" because who knew what was going on in that family

(Participant 2).

A second DEIS school participant described:

All our families were contacted by a year head every week. When permission was given we also spoke to every senior cycle student directly each week too. There was a big understanding across the staff that we had students working to support their family in the local supermarket because jobs had been lost, some students were looking after siblings whilst parents were out in frontline roles. We were always mindful to be gentle and supportive because the mental health of many of our students was so fragile
(Participant 3).

Participants highlighted that during the COVID-19 pandemic some of their students were going out to work and contributing financially to the household, whilst others helped by looking after siblings whilst their parents worked. Both responsibilities have been discussed previously as presenting a barrier to a student's ability to engage with their schooling, but the finding from this research suggest that social structural inequalities were exacerbated during the imposed public health restrictions. Schools in this study, from every demographic reported monitoring student 'attendance' during periods of virtual learning was especially important for exam cycle students in both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate year groups. Schools identified that students unable to engage with their digital learning for a myriad of reasons, would not be able to fulfil their academic potential which could impact upon the progression routes post-Leaving certificate. Participants described prioritising the exam year groups in accessing their teaching and learning, connecting with students who were identified as struggling with all staff taking on extra pastoral responsibilities. Alternative examination protocols were put in place by the DES in June 2020, and again in June 2021, however as institutions of learning schools, have a responsibility to support all their students and had to realise that responsibility. One participant of an Educate Together Secondary School said:

We supported students and families in the best way we could. All our staff had to take on extra responsibility in this area, we all were assigned key students and had regular weekly contact. Where a family was identified as being under pressure or not coping, they were referred on to the next tier of support. So more than just a chat. I did a lot of telephone counselling. Students did not want the face-to-face Zoom counselling. They were so burnt out from online
(Participant 11).

All schools included in this study highlighted that there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction between and within every part of the school community, staff, students, and their families reporting that as time went on *everyone was just so burnt out from ZOOM*. However, an interesting finding of this research emerged from the non-DEIS schools,

who prior to the pandemic may have had few personal interactions with their school families. As a result of the enforced school closures, schools of every demographic reported at least one weekly phone call home as a minimum. Schools were suddenly very well informed about the background lives of their students and interacting with families more regularly than in pre-COVID-19 pandemic times. Staff found this worked to their advantage with a deputy principal of a non-DEIS community college outlined:

Communication was our core strategy throughout lockdown. That is something that we are going to really prioritise with every family when we are back in school. That has been some real learning for us. Every family was telephoned once a week and we were able to gently say “let’s have a frank discussion and figure out where you are at and what your family needs and how can we be of assistance”. We learnt so much about our families. (Participant 10).

Furthermore, a non-DEIS community college participant asserted:

COVID has given us something in this school that we have never had before and that is pretty much an across-the-board engagement with every single family. There is a real link that has been formed there, definitely a positive to have come out of COVID for schools. Speaking to parents every week has given us a real insight into home life, which is good. And in some cases, has answered a few questions for us too. We really hope to keep going with this when we are all back into the school building (Participant 12).

Much of the emerging data from schools surrounding COVID-19 is negative, however the findings of this research highlight that the enforced periods of remote learning did present the opportunity to engage with all families from every socio-economic demographic, which was a real positive. Staffing situations allow, the non-DEIS schools to recognise the value in these enhanced interactions with home and it has emerged that many plan to prioritise this once students physically return to school. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model highlights the significance to a child’s developmental outcomes of the interactions between their proximal social environments including family and school (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The findings of this research again suggest the importance of establishing HSCL in every school, especially as partnership between home and school is a core educational value. Existing research supports this finding, having previously identified improved academic attainment, particularly for students from backgrounds of disadvantage when parents are more directly involved with the school (Park and Holloway, 2017). As the digital learning

environment in Ireland entered a second period at the beginning of 2021, schools reported being in a much better position to manage the situation and in some instances adjusted their timetables to suit emerging demands on students and their families: A principal of a fee-paying school reported:

Second time around we had a full time-table across all year groups in the morning with live classes. And then in the afternoon we tried to keep extracurricular going by keeping them engaged with different activities, challenges and speakers organised (Participant 6).

Moreover, a deputy principal of a fee-paying school also said:

We maintained a high level of engagement during all the periods of remote learning, although it would be true to say that we were much better prepared the second time around. In the vast majority of cases our students are self-directed learners and remained driven and motivated. The parents supported their children to keep a routine of engagement with online classes and the extracurricular activities and we had a full live time-table throughout both lockdown periods (Participant 8).

As school closures across Ireland spanned a second academic year 2020-2021, it emerged from some participants that students struggled to retain focus and stay motivated with their learning. In particular, the interviews highlighted students from backgrounds of disadvantage attending non-DEIS schools, struggled with their self-directed learning. This was also widely reported by DEIS school participants. A non-DEIS participant described how this might impact on student progression to third-level:

The number one issue at the moment, is motivation. Students are struggling to retain focus. I suppose they wouldn't be performing optimally because of the amount of face-to-face time that they have lost. This is going to be a huge obstacle for some of our students in relation to securing a place at third-level. At the end of the day they have not had a normal experience (Participant 11).

Furthermore, a DEIS school participant outlined:

Our sixth years found things really hard, anyone who wasn't engaged we had the year head on the hop ringing home and checking what was going on. But on the whole it was a problem really with motivation. Students here find self-directed learning very hard and they just couldn't maintain the routine of school from their bedrooms (Participant 3).

It is possible that parents who were struggling with practical and social issues themselves may not have been in a position to support the academic aspect of their post-primary child's learning. Furthermore, parents of low socio-economic status may not have the academic capacity to support their child's learning due to their own low educational attainment levels. This sustains the reproduction of social inequalities, which during lockdown periods schools could not physically mitigate for. In more affluent families this seemed not to be the case so much with a principal of a fee-paying school describing coming under some pressure from their parent body in terms of their timetabling with parents having very high expectations about the academic delivery.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of the study, highlighting the beliefs of post-primary school leaders. Whilst young people from backgrounds of disadvantage continue to be underrepresented at third-level there is a social and academic journey that leads to this point. The results of these findings emphasise that poverty is one of the single biggest markers of low educational achievement, furthermore this study finds that inequality is socially divisive. Overall, there was a consensus from participants suggesting students from backgrounds of lower socio-economic origin are negatively impacted by their background, gaining considerably less education than their more advantaged counterparts. Participants reported poverty, food poverty, housing, senior cycle post-primary students working in paid employment or acting as carers for family members and siblings are all issues that can affect their ability to fully engage with teaching and learning. These are factors that hinder completion of senior cycle in school and achievement at Leaving Certificate, and thereby impact upon progression to third-level.

Whilst all participants agreed that the education of every young person should be holistic, person-centred, and grounded in partnership between school, student, and family, some schools reported being better placed than others to deliver on this premise, particularly for those students from backgrounds of disadvantage. Whilst DEIS is the government's main intervention to combat educational disadvantage, DEIS schools currently benefiting from the programme report the intervention as not being sufficient to mitigate for the depth of disadvantage within their schools. Furthermore, non-DEIS community colleges who self-reported a more socially representative student body said that they receive no

additional resources to support their students from backgrounds of disadvantage. This hindered their ability to support this cohort of students. Eleven of the twelve participants identified that the role of HSCL should be available within every school, regardless of its demographic. Finally, participants from every school setting expressed the view that education should be seen as part of the wider social landscape where all members of society are included. Until these broader structural inequalities in Ireland are tackled, participants agreed that educational disadvantaged will remain a barrier for students from backgrounds of disadvantage in progressing to third-level post-Leaving Certificate.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter presents the main conclusions of the research which are derived from key findings and subsequent analysis and discussion. Emanating from these conclusions are recommendations for policy, and future research. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the study are outlined in this chapter.

5.2 Research Strengths

- A significant strength of this research has been the willingness of participants to share generously of knowledge, expertise, and experience. The guarantee of complete anonymity given before, during, and after each interview allowed participants the confidence to speak freely and without judgement. Those from DEIS schools and non-DEIS community colleges spoke at times with great emotion about their students from backgrounds of disadvantage and the many barriers they face in their every-day lives as well as their educational ones. Their frankness and candour contributed hugely to this study
- A further strength of this research is its qualitative methodological approach. In-depth, semi-structured interviews, sought out the first person ‘lived’ perspectives and narratives of experienced school leaders. This rich data is used within this study to provide a unique insight into the lives and day-to-day barriers faced by both students themselves, and schools in progressing their students post-Leaving Certificate.
- A significant strength of this research is the timing of the study itself. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of global emergency that has affected every sector of Irish society. All participants of every school demographic reported their lack of readiness to, respond to, and manage this unprecedented situation. This study contributes to the emerging data surrounding the impact of COVID-19 on post-primary schools and their students, and particularly those effects on students from backgrounds of disadvantage. It provides valuable additional perspective for consideration in future educational policy making.

5.3 Research Limitations

- A primary limitation of this research is reflected by its small-scale. By choosing to interview twelve participants in total from three school demographic types, namely non-DEIS community colleges, DEIS schools, and fee-paying schools, the sample size was reduced to four interviews only, from each category of school.
- A view was taken at the outset of this study to include only co-educational schools, to reduce gender-bias given the relatively small sampling field. Opting for co-educational schools did result in some difficulty with recruitment of participants. Although the educational landscape is changing in Ireland with a greater diversity of schools (ETB/Educate Together Secondary School/Grind Schools), that reflects wider society, many of the faith-based Catholic post-primary schools whether fee-paying or not, remain single-sex. This proved problematic in terms of recruiting participants and maintaining sample diversity, certainly within the fee-paying sector.
- Another limitation of this study related to the timeframe and context in which this research was undertaken. The education sector was under pressure especially during the first lockdown in 2020 and ‘cold calling’ attempts at recruitment of participants yielded few successful outcomes. Ultimately recruitment of participants relied upon professional connections and was enhanced by the snowball sampling technique as discussed in Chapter 3.
- Due to the pandemic, remote interviews were conducted on the digital platform *Zoom*. For the schools and staff located in rural areas internet connectivity was highly variable. All participants agreed to have their cameras turned on however, three participants experienced difficulties with WIFI strength. In order to continue with the interview it was agreed that they would switch off their cameras in order to protect the integrity of the WIFI connection. Not conducting interviews face-to-face meant that non-verbal indicators such as body language and emotional cues were less obvious. Time was invested prior to the interviews in order to establish a relationship with the participants. Whilst conducting each interview, special attention was paid to the visual.

- A significant weakness and difficulty encountered was the recording of the interviews. This was done using a voice recorder loaned from MTU and the *Zoom* recording software. The pilot interview identified the need for the computer's volume to be turned up to its highest level and the recording device to be positioned directly alongside the computer speaker, to ensure the best possible audio recording. Where participants were in areas of poor internet connectivity, the audio recording was also compromised due to the 'knock-on' effect of the unstable nature of the connection.
- When formulating the original plan for this research study the intention had been to include the voice of the student. However, the prevailing COVID-19 global pandemic meant that this was not possible and therefore the base-line data for this study relied solely on the contributions of professional post-primary school leaders.

5.4 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The recommendations below have emerged from this research address factors that contribute to practice in schools, inform future policy making with specific reference to the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

- The first recommendation to emerge from this study is that the Department of Education (DES) should fully fund the whole-time role of Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) in every post-primary setting regardless of school demographic. Currently, this role is only fully funded within DEIS post-primary schools. It was evident from the study that all non-DEIS schools who do not receive funding for this position are forced to prioritise an equivalent role and incorporate it within their existing school structures. This is often to the detriment and burden of everyday school and staffing demands. Therefore, the introduction of a HSCL role within every post-primary school will enable every school to have the capacity to devote sufficient time to building trusting partnerships with parents and guardians.
- The second recommendation to emerge from this study is the need to elevate equality of opportunity across all school demographics by giving all schools the funding they need to ensure all students are treated fairly. This can be achieved by introducing a person-centred, individualised, assessment model of funding that supports and

acknowledges the circumstances of the individual. This would take account of the many students from backgrounds of disadvantage who attend non-DEIS schools that draw from wider catchment areas. Cognisant of the sensitive nature of the information being sought, this study further recommends this new model of individualised data collection to be undertaken by school staff, namely the principal, HSCL and school counsellor

- The third recommendation to emerge from this study is reflective of the professional teaching environment in a modern Ireland. This study recommends that the Initial Professional Education (IPE) of teachers should include training on cultural and trauma sensitive as well as socio-economic pedagogy. Additionally, this study further recommends that existing teachers be offered this training as part of their Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Student experience should be culturally and trauma-sensitive, inclusive, fair, and build on the experiences of the student.
- The fourth recommendation to emerge from this study is that mandatory, and effective IPE of teachers should include training by mental health professionals surrounding the area mental health and wellbeing, including how to identify the outward signs of distress amongst students. Additionally, CPD should be undertaken by all teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) in this area. Information is only now emerging regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the coping mechanisms of young people. This was highlighted in this study as a significant area of concern for schools. It is hoped that improving knowledge and support systems available to students in schools will positively impact attendance, attainment, and long-term progression.
- The fifth recommendation to emerge from this study is the need for students, parents, and schools to take a broader view in terms of how success is measured. This study implicated the view that the annually published ‘feeder schools league table’ is not fit for purpose. In its current format, only third-level progression routes are recorded. This does not take account of post-Leaving Certificate routes of every learner. Therefore, this research recommends that publication of the annual ‘feeder schools league table’ is abolished.

- The sixth and final recommendation to emerge from this study is the need to re-visit the recently announced DEIS programme expansion (March 2022). Notable by its absence is the complete lack of any discussion at policy level surrounding the effects of COVID-19 within education, and in particular its impacts upon the educational attainment and progression of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

- The first recommendation for future research would be a thorough investigation of the model by which post-primary schools are allocated funding to support the teaching and learning of their students from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage. Unlike primary school provision, where three band levels exist, there are no bands within the DEIS structure at post-primary level. Such future research would provide an opportunity to investigate the existing DEIS model and extend the conversation surrounding the dearth of individualised supports currently not provided within the present funding model.
- The second recommendation offered for future research would be to extend the sample size to include greater numbers of schools from each demographic. Larger participant numbers would ensure a greater quantity of data and therefore reduce the gender bias enabling both same-sex and co-educational settings to be included. This would provide a more extensive contrast and comparison within the sample, allowing for a greater representation of beliefs and viewpoints than in this current study.
- The third recommendation would be to extend the geographical sampling area, to give a broader view across Ireland, of the post-Leaving Certificate routes taken by students from backgrounds of disadvantage. A greater geographical range would validate and improve the robustness of the findings and could potentially include some quantitative metrics. Sample size large enough to be significant and questions applicable to yes/no answers and less likely to be subjective.
- The fourth recommendation would be the introduction of a mixed methods research approach. Senior post-primary school leaders could be initially surveyed by email using an expertly developed questionnaire, to be then followed up by a more in-depth

and larger scale qualitative study. Participants who complete and return the survey can be invited at that stage to take part in semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, this might be a more effective way to recruit participants for the qualitative study than the snowballing technique utilised in this current research.

- Finally, future researchers could consider expanding the scope of this study to consider the student voice and additionally seek the views and opinions of parents and guardians. This might add a further dimension to this overall research area and could offer a significant insight into the particular challenges faced by students from backgrounds of disadvantage post-pandemic.

5.6 Overall Conclusion

This research study has investigated and contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-economic barriers that students in Ireland face in relation to accessing third-level pathways. The global COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges to the economy, society, and the individual, with literature on the impact and effects upon young people and their schooling only just beginning to emerge (Émon *et al.*, 2021; Quinn *et al.*, 2021). Whilst the sample size was relatively small, a number of findings have emerged from the analysis. To summarise, it was clear from the interview process that participants maintained a range of varying beliefs, however there was some commonality in beliefs surrounding the barriers students from lower socio-economic backgrounds continue to face in accessing third-level education. A theme that ran strongly throughout this research study related to DEIS, with information shared by participants highlighting their beliefs in flaws and gaps within the existing school-based deficit model. The prevailing view being that in its current form, allocation of supports through DEIS does not uphold the fundamental premise of education being a person-centred, holistic journey based on fairness and equality opportunity for all.

This study finds socio-economic factors and social origin, to be strongly related to educational disadvantage. Without exception, all participants in this study believed that a student's background of origin can impact strongly on their ability to engage and achieve in post-primary school and progress to third-level. Participants reported that students struggled to access their learning when impacted by a diversity of socio-

economically related challenges, and where in some instances not even their basic needs were being met. This study found that equality of opportunity is not being realised for students from less advantaged family backgrounds, who are unable to access their education on the same level of parity as every other student. Students are attending school hungry, living in precarious housing situations, not having clean uniforms, or access to the material resources needed to fully engage with their learning, such as a calculator or ingredients for home economics, were cited by participants as issues. It was a concern that for some students from backgrounds of less socio-economic advantage that life can be very tough; they can become disenfranchised with the education system which may result in disengagement from their studies. This was a key finding of this research and one that schools attempted to mitigate for. The effectiveness of the current social welfare system in Ireland was brought into question by participants from DEIS schools and non-DEIS community colleges with an enrolment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They described their schools as providing an *ad hoc* social welfare service, helping families to access supports, feeding students, supplying shoes and school uniform, and washing clothes.

A key understanding reached from this research was that parents from advantaged backgrounds have a clear familial expectation that third-level is the natural progression route post-Leaving Certificate for their children. What was interesting to note however, was this expectation was not only upheld by the parents but was also a clear cultural construct understood by their children as well. Participants reported that amongst their families from backgrounds of disadvantage there is an engrained and widely held view that third-level is not for them or is inaccessible. Direct and observational experiences may contribute to this internalised belief (Bandura, 1971), with participants in this study reporting many of their students from backgrounds of disadvantage may never have known anyone in their family or friend circle, who has gone to third-level. However, despite the cultural and structural barriers faced by many students from less advantageous backgrounds, an interesting finding of this research was that it cannot be assumed their parents do not have high expectations for their own children. DEIS school participants reported pride in their students who progress to third-level, acknowledging the achievement this represents within many families who have no experience of third-level education themselves. The research findings suggest that schools need to have the

capacity to support such families as they are being instrumental in positively breaking down the intergenerational component of socio-economic disadvantage.

Participants in this study highlighted the importance of every school demographic fostering a positive culture of learning accompanied by a school-wide expectation of achievement. Furthermore, partnering with parents and guardians, and promoting good quality relationships between students and their teachers were deemed to be essential components of a unified school. School leaders suggested all students should be exposed to a broad range of learning experiences, and extra-curricular activities, which they deemed to be particularly important for students from backgrounds of disadvantage who might lack access to this cultural capital. All participants believed these outings promoted school cohesion, fostered a sense of fun, and bestowed an overall positive and lasting school experience. Interestingly, participants found such outings also positively impacted attendance amongst some cohorts of their students. Education policy in Ireland strongly focuses on progression routes to third-level which is reflected in this being the only metric within the annually published schools league tables. However, education is not a 'one shoe fits all'. Whilst reflected in policy, and viewed by many as the prevailing route post-Leaving Certificate, progression to third-level is not a holistic approach that takes account of the backgrounds of all students. It is a finding of this research that alternative routes post-Leaving Certificate including Post-Leaving Certificate Colleges (PLCs), apprenticeships, and traineeships should also be valued and included in the league tables.

This research identified all students regardless of their social origin, were impacted to a greater or lesser extent by the enforced school closures. There was a commonality of views which revealed students suffered from feelings of anxiety and isolation during the periods of lockdown and enforced virtual schooling. However, an interesting finding of this research centres around the differences between students from backgrounds of disadvantage and those from more advantageous backgrounds of origin. Participants from DEIS schools and non-DEIS community colleges with a high enrolment of students from backgrounds of disadvantage, believed that structural social inequalities, including precarious housing situations negatively impacted on the mental health and wellbeing of students; this was a finding not reported by fee-paying participants. The uncertainty and late announcement in May 2020 of the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate, was highlighted by participants from all demographics, as adding significant pressure to

students who were already struggling with their mental health. A significant finding of this research was that all participants believed that schools could potentially help to normalise the discussion surrounding mental health issues, and contribute to its de-stigmatisation. However, at the same time participants recognised that they were not sufficiently equipped with either the staff or skillset, to manage the anticipated long-lasting effects on student mental health and wellbeing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research highlighted that in its current form, DEIS addresses neither the level of depth of disadvantage within post-primary schools. The current model allocation of resources and supports are based on the concentrated level of disadvantage in a school, and do not take account of individual student background. Aligning with the overall spirit of education, the research findings suggest that the provision of supports should not be based on 'blanket need' but ought to be individualised and learner-centred. Additionally, premise of equality of opportunity means that no young person should be disadvantaged within education due to their background of origin, regardless of the school they attend. All non-DEIS community college participants reported that within existing policy structures, disadvantage is not recognised for schools with broad catchment areas and a student demographic that reflects wider society. Furthermore, a significant finding and a prevailing view reflected by eleven of the twelve participants in this study, was the belief that HSCL should be a fully funded DES role and available within every post-primary school regardless of the social demographic of the school. Inherent fairness should be applied to all students and a major component of HSCL is the band width to devote time to the building of relationships between school and home.

6.0 References

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7.0 Appendices

Appendix A

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Research

Why post- Leaving Certificate students in Ireland from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to proceed to third-level education.

Purpose of the Study

The researcher has included below a list of the main objectives of his research.

1. How does socio-economic disadvantage affect student choices post-Leaving Certificate?
2. How does familial culture and value of education impact upon student engagement and choices post-Leaving Certificate?
3. How does the demographic of the school and the culture of learning impact on engagement and choices post-Leaving Certificate?
4. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and with reference to questions 1-3, how have students, their families and schools been affected and how can this learning influence delivery of education in the future?

This research is being undertaken in Munster Technological University, as part of the requirements in order to satisfy the requirements for a Master of Arts Degree.

Why have you been asked to participate in this research?

You have been chosen by this researcher as you fit the relevant criteria needed to research this topic. Principal, Deputy Principal, Home School Liaison Co-ordinator, School Completion, DEIS Co-ordinator.

Do you have to be a part of this research?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary, if you decide at any point, you no longer wish to be involved you maintain the right to withdraw. If a participant chooses to withdraw from this study no negative consequences will follow and all relevant documents, recordings and consent forms will be destroyed.

What is your role in this research?

Participants will be invited to participate in an interview via Zoom which will last a maximum of 45 minutes. The researcher will ask a number of questions relating to your experience on the relevant topic. Prior to the interview you will receive an introductory letter and a research participant consent form to be signed prior to the interview. You will also be provided with a research guide detailing the questions, in advance of the interview.

Confidentiality

All names of participants taking part in this research will be kept completely confidential. The researcher will provide consent forms to all participants to be signed and returned prior to the commencement of the interviews. Information given from participants will be used in the researcher's study, and the researcher guarantees no information will be used that would impact on or identify the participants identity. All information given by the participant will be recorded, typed up and analysed by this researcher. All recordings will subsequently be destroyed. If the participant would like to view the research analysis

it can be collected or accessed after the research has been completed. In the case of the legitimacy of the research being questioned, all transcripts of the interviews will be stored securely and held until the research has been completed and published.

Results of the study

The results found will be compiled and presented in a thesis. The results may be used in the future for other MTU students to view. The results may also be published in academic peer-reviewed journals.

Any questions?

If you have any further questions, or require clarification on the study, or any information provided, do not hesitate to contact this researcher at any point before or after the study has been completed.

Researchers Contact Information

Name: Edward Hayes

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

Email Address: [REDACTED]

Appendix B



Participant Consent and Confidentiality Form

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I have had the purpose and nature of this research explained to me in writing.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I give permission for the interview to be voice recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated respectfully and confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.
- I understand I can withdraw from this interview at any stage.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Contact Information:

Researcher: **Edward Hayes** [REDACTED]

Supervisor: **Professor Margaret Linehan**

[REDACTED]

Supervisor: **Dr. Judith Butler**

[REDACTED]

Appendix C

Interview Guide for Senior Manager

1. Can you tell me about your school?
2. What is the retention/success rate for students from first year to Junior Certificate?
3. Can you talk to me about challenges your school faces, particularly in relation to retention to Leaving Certificate?
4. Describe the ways your school encourages an atmosphere of positive partnership and parental involvement between school and home?
5. What are the most common family challenges experienced by students attending your school?
6. Describe the ways socioeconomic background impacts upon students attending your school?
7. What strategies and interventions does your school have in place to promote educational progression, in students experiencing socioeconomic challenges?
8. Where do your students go after they finish their Leaving Certificate?
9. How do you compare to other schools nationally, in relation to students enrolling in third-level colleges and universities?
10. What are the biggest obstacles that your students face in relation to securing a place at third-level education?
11. Describe the ways in which your school has supported the students and their families during the enforced periods of remote learning?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add which would benefit the study?

Appendix D



Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to thank you for taking the time to speak with me recently in regard to my research study. In these unprecedented times with so many demands on schools, I especially appreciate this.

It was a real pleasure to talk to you and hear the very interesting and informative words you had to say about all your students, in particular within the area of socio-economic disadvantage.

I would once again like to assure you that all information provided by you was done so in complete confidence, no names or identifying information will be included in my final thesis.

May I take this opportunity to wish you well and I hope your whole school community remains safe and well during these unpredictable times.

Please do not hesitate to be in touch with me if you wish to know any more about my study.

Kind Regards

Edward Hayes

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]