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Access campus: an intervention challenging educational disadvantage and widening participation in higher education

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**UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH**

**ACCESS CAMPUS: AN INTERVENTION CHALLENGING
EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE AND WIDENING
PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Doctor of Philosophy

UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

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Abstract

Education is important for developing human capabilities, personal, civic, and economic, and is a core objective of public policy in many countries in order to create more inclusive and equal societies. While numerous organisations, policies, and programmes are committed to raising academic achievement, access to education and educational outcomes vary and educational disadvantage is widespread. Of particular concern are the numbers not completing secondary education and progressing to higher education. International and Irish literature shows that educational disadvantage is a consequence of various academic and socio-cultural factors, requiring multifaceted interventions that address all of these factors in a holistic manner. This thesis examines a particular intervention, the AccessCampus Study Club, exploring how it addresses the academic and socio-cultural elements of educational disadvantage identified in the literature. Using a single case study, and drawing on cultural capital theory, in-depth interviews were conducted with former members and parents to explore their experience of mainstream education and the Study Club and to identify examples of good practice in addressing educational disadvantage. The research reveals that while working-class families have appropriated the required embodied cultural capital, their lack of institutionalised cultural capital limits parents' ability to engage with teachers and also, determines both parents' and students' ability to navigate the educational system successfully. Important elements in overcoming the tangible and intangible aspects of educational disadvantage were found to include a positive culture and optimum use of educational resources; tailored academic support in small classes; ongoing aspiration raising, mentoring and career guidance activities; frequent and informal parental involvement and a quiet study environment. The research concludes that supportive educational environments, which recognise and enhance individuals' cultural capital, providing instruction tailored to students' needs and mentoring to overcome soft barriers lead to success in improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and contains no material, which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

John Costello

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mother Mary, and to my late father Noel, your devotion to each other and to us your children has been unfailing. You both gave us every opportunity in life, encouraging and supporting us to grow and develop as individuals. Mam, you are the glue that holds our family together, the centre of our family life. Despite losing Dad thirty years ago, you bravely continued on alone, your strength and fortitude in the face of such great personal sorrow has been an inspiration to us all. I will be forever grateful to you for all that you have done for me, your love has been a constant in my life, along with the many sacrifices that you have made so that I would have the best chance in life. I would not be the person that I am if it were not for your unconditional love.

My father departed this world far too soon, but left each of us with the most amazing memories of what it is to love and to be loved, acts of kindness, and care. To be attuned and attentive to other people's struggles, always available to share his knowledge, wisdom, and advice with all who sought his counsel. He left an indelible impression on each of his children and chief amongst these was his belief in education and the opportunities that it would afford us as we made our own way in the world. His quiet and unassuming personality belied his passion for life, his family, his friends, and his community. The example of your life Dad continues to encourage and guide each of us and your wonderful traits endure in each of your children in unique ways. I dedicate this thesis to them both.

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List of Abbreviations

ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
BTC	Breaking The Cycle
CIL	Computer and Information Literacy
CAO	Central Applications Office
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DAS	Disadvantages Area Scheme
DCU	Dublin City University
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ED	Educational Disadvantage
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESL	Early School Leaving
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ESCS	Economic Social and Cultural Status
EU	European Union
GCEB	Giving Children an Even Break
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route

HEI	Higher Education Institute
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
ICT	Information Communications Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
IS	Intersectionality
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
MEND	Midlands, East and North Dublin
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NAPLAN	National Assessment Programme Literacy and Numeracy
NAPS	National Anti-Poverty Strategy
NCATE	National Council for Accreditation for Teachers
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NEET	Neither Employed in Education or Training
NUI	National University Ireland
PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education
PE	Physical Education
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPAP	Programme Personnalisés d'Aide et de Progres
OPS	Overall Performance Scale

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RASED	Réseaux D'Aides Spécialées pour les Eleves
SCP	School Completion Programme
SDP	School Development Planning
SES	Socio Economic Status
SOS	Student Optimisation System
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
SSP	School Support Programme
TIMSS	Trends in Maths Science Subjects
TY	Transition Year
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UCC	University College Cork
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPE	Universal Primary Education
USA	United States of America
WB	World Bank
WIDE	World Inequality Database on Education

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Education is considered a fundamental human right. Article 42 of the Irish Constitution commits the Irish state to providing access to education for all children. Successive governments' commitment to providing education is evident in various reports and policy documents. Developments such as the Investment in Education Report (1965), the provision of free secondary education to intermediate level for all children in 1967, and the Education Act 1998 highlight the central role of education in Irish society. Article 26 of The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 2007) also highlights the importance of providing education for all children as an issue of global importance.

Education is recognised as vital because it is about the unleashing of human capabilities, personal, civic, and economic, and is widely perceived as a fundamental human right that enables people to live full and rewarding lives. Investment in education is a core objective of public policy in many countries to create more inclusive and equal societies that enable individuals to fulfil their ambitions and participate in the social, economic and democratic arenas. The importance of education is evident in the plethora of organisations, policies, and programmes aiming to raise academic achievement and equip individuals with knowledge and skills (OECD 2012; 2017; Budginaite et al., 2016).

Despite wide recognition of how important education is for personal satisfaction and achievement, social cohesion and economic prosperity, progress is uneven and distinct differences remain apparent within and between countries. For example, education spending among member states of the European Union ranges from 6.8 per cent of gross

domestic product (GDP) in Sweden to 2.8 per cent of GDP in Romania (Clark 2020). Nor is education equally accessible. In Canada, 57% of adults have a tertiary education, but there is a 28% gap between the provinces with the lowest and highest rates. Closer to home, in the most affluent areas of Dublin 2, Dublin 4 and Dublin 6, some 90-100% of students' progress to some form of third-level institution; while Dublin 10 and 11 witnesses much lower progression rates of 42-44% (HEA 2019). More recently, data from the HEA indicates that there are only 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas to every 10 students from affluent areas in Ireland's HEIs (HEA 2020b). Thus, educational disadvantage is widespread, and require interventions to mitigate it.

1.2 The Significance of Educational Disadvantage

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promotes inclusive and equitable education for all children. Goal 4.1 specifically requires countries to 'by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.' Thus, education is both a global and local concern.

There is particular concern about the numbers not completing secondary education and progressing to higher education, since a third level qualification is perceived to significantly increase social and economic mobility. The social and economic costs of educational disadvantage and lack of qualifications include reduced employment prospects, greater dependency on public welfare, and less engagement with civil and democratic processes. UNESCO's World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) demonstrate the salient impact of circumstances, such as wealth, gender, ethnicity and location, which individuals have no control over but nonetheless, exert an significant role in determining their opportunities in education and for outcomes in life (UNESCO 2020).

The reasons for such varied participation rates and outcomes are multifaceted. Educational infrastructure, state investment in education, public policy choices, school organisation, curricula and assessment systems are all significant. Social and economic factors considerably affect participation and outcomes. While progression to higher education has increased in recent times, participation is not spread evenly across social classes. For example, in the UK, the USA, and Australia, affluent students are three times more likely to progress to higher education than their less well-off peers.

Similarly, in Ireland, middle-class students are four times as likely to progress to higher education than their lower SES peers (McCoy *et al.* 2019). Thus, there is a requirement for policies, strategies, and interventions to address the factors that mediate educational achievement and higher education progression. The Covid-19 crisis further underscores the need for such strategies because the pandemic's impact is most severe for marginalised students (OECD 2020; Nolan, 2020).

The literature indicates that learning opportunities, academic success, and higher education progression remain socially differentiated (Budginaite *et al.* 2016). Socio-cultural background continues to play a notable role in academic achievement, with Lynch (2018) referring to 'the class ceiling'. Education systems continue to be characterised by inequalities, and whole social groups persistently under-achieve in education compared to their more affluent peers (EQUALSOC 2011; Ballas *et al.* 2012; Eurydice 2020). Ireland demonstrates significant educational achievements over several decades in terms of attainment rates and reducing early school leaving rates in aggregate terms, but disadvantage persists and reflects the often-disconnected economic, social and educational policies. Many national-level strategies have been implemented, as evidenced in Chapter Three, but there is a dearth of evidence on how these national interventions operate at the local level. This study explores how the macro-level

challenges of unequal access to educational opportunity may be dealt with at the micro-level by examining the performance of a particular educational intervention – a Study Club which combines both academic and socio-cultural elements. Using original data from members and parents, this study contributes to the knowledge of policies, strategies, and interventions that may successfully raise academic outcomes for students experiencing educational disadvantage and promote their progression to higher education.

There has been a tendency to rely on the ‘expert opinion’ of middle-class experts to guide policy on educational disadvantage (Lynch and Lodge 2002). While much has been achieved in the past two decades, there is still some way to go to counter educational disadvantage. The voices of those most affected by educational disadvantage are absent from policies and strategies. If educational disadvantage is to be addressed successfully then we need to include the voices of students and parents experiencing educational disadvantage (O'Donnell 2014). This research draws on these voices to glean ‘insiders’ perspectives of the issues as well as the policy and practice implemented thus far to address these issues, and to identify what more needs to be accomplished in policy and practice. Therefore, this research focuses on students and parents rather than teachers and policy makers whose views and opinions are already well documented in research and policy on educational disadvantage.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The study aims to explore how the AccessCampus Study Club, a pre-entry intervention run by the University of Limerick, addresses the challenges identified in the literature in helping to raise academic achievement and progression to higher education for disadvantaged students. The Study Club is achieving progression rates of approximately 95% to higher education each year. The research provides data on former members' and

parents' educational experiences in traditional classroom settings and at the Study Club. It investigates whether and how interventions tailored to students' specific needs mediate the effects of the academic and socio-cultural dimensions of educational disadvantage identified in the literature presented in Chapters Two and Three. A key objective of the research is an examination of participants' experiences of schools and the intervention in order to identify the elements that are successful, and constitute good practice and may potentially be applied in other settings. The study highlights the components of successful interventions that may guide future policy development to counter educational disadvantage, thereby, enabling and empowering marginalised students to choose and follow an educational pathway they value.

1.4 Rationale and Motivation for Undertaking the Study

The researcher is a practitioner in access to third-level education at the Access Campus, with twelve years' experience as an educational support worker with the intervention under investigation. This involves responsibility for implementing a range of academic and socio-cultural supports to raise the academic attainment of service users and promote their progression to third-level education. Therefore, the researcher has a personal and professional interest in identifying practical strategies and solutions to address the factors, which contribute to educational disadvantage. Through working with the Study Club members and their parents, it is apparent that academic ability is not necessarily the issue hampering progression. Having made this observation over a number of years, I am anxious to gather evidence to support my contention that disadvantaged students require more than just academic support. They need not only academic support and detailed knowledge of the educational system but also the ability to implement this knowledge. This study stems from a wish to identify and interrogate the factors contributing to the

Study Club's apparent success. Accordingly, the study compares and contrasts participants' experiences of the Study Club and schools to identify good practice both in school and at the intervention.

1.5 Main Research Question

The core research question seeks to examine *'Can a targeted intervention improve academic achievement and raise progression to higher education, and if so, what elements of the intervention achieve these outcomes for students experiencing educational disadvantage?'* The research question explores how the intervention under investigation addresses educational disadvantage. The research explores participants' experience of school, and the Study Club and how this may influence their academic achievement and progression to higher education. The research explores academic and socio-cultural dimensions of educational disadvantage. The academic domain includes school factors, numeracy and literacy proficiency and learning in regular-size classes compared to learning in small groups and one to one mentoring with tutors. The socio-cultural domain explores raising aspirations and expectations, parental involvement in education, respondents' cultural capital and the 'soft' barriers to educational progression.

1.6 Situating the Study – Theory and Methodology

The COVID-19 pandemic heightens awareness of social inequalities in education, with disadvantaged students being particularly affected by resource and digital divides. Mohan et al. capture the socio-educational impact asserting that 'students' lower enjoyment of education and belief in its value as well as a lack of family experience with education and capacity to assist students' learning at home are compounded to reduce student engagement' (2020: 68). Educational disadvantage is inextricably linked to social inequality. Therefore, in deciding on a theoretical framework to underpin this study,

several different social theories are considered. These include equality theory, capability theory and cultural capital theory. Cultural capital theory is ultimately selected to underpin this study, as it addresses both the objective and subjective elements of educational disadvantage. As Jager and Karslon (2018) demonstrate, cultural capital may be transformed or enhanced, potentially leading to improved educational outcomes for disadvantaged students.

This research attempts to comprehend the lived experiences of individuals affected by educational disadvantage. Therefore, a constructivist approach is deemed the most appropriate methodology to achieve this goal. The ontological assumptions underpinning this study are derived from the interpretivist paradigm and are used to construct participants' lived experiences of educational disadvantage. The primary data-gathering tool is in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with former members of the Study Club and their parents to explore their experiences of educational disadvantage. This study seeks to learn about participants' lived experiences of education and discover how educational policies and interventions may be adapted to better meet disadvantaged students' needs. A qualitative research approach is considered the most appropriate methodology to achieve those purposes.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

According to the Higher Education Authority, fewer than one in five new entrants to higher education are from working-class backgrounds (HEA 2012; 2017; 2019). The reasons for such an imbalance are complex and multifaceted. Chapters Two and Three explore the reasons for this imbalance and the multidimensional nature of educational disadvantage and efforts by various governments and international organisations to address this issue. In Chapter Two, the international discourse is discussed, drawing on

various academic and institutional sources to set the context on educational disadvantage as a global issue. The literature demonstrates that social class, particularly in reading, maths and science subjects, mediates educational outcomes. The literature indicates that educational disadvantage is a consequence of the intersectional nature of several academic and socio-cultural factors. This chapter reviews the international discourse on education, i.e., the purpose and benefits of education, the causes of educational disadvantage and efforts to counter educational disadvantage in various international jurisdictions. The chapter then explores the academic and socio-cultural dimensions of educational disadvantage in more detail before considering public policies and strategies introduced in various countries to counter educational disadvantage.

Chapter Three begins with an overview of education in Ireland and achievements to-date. Policies and efforts to address educational disadvantage over several decades are reviewed. The causes and impact of educational disadvantage in Ireland are discussed before reviewing efforts to ameliorate educational disadvantage in Irish society. The chapter also explores the intersection of academic and socio-cultural elements of educational disadvantage in more detail as they specifically relate to Irish students. These include internal school and academic dimensions of educational disadvantage such as class size, the curricular dimension, and numeracy and literacy. The socio-cultural dimensions include raising aspirations and parental involvement in education. Efforts to widen participation in education in Ireland are then reviewed, and finally, concluding comments are presented.

In Chapter Four, the theoretical framework underpinning this study is presented. Equality theory, capability theory, and cultural capital theory, theories which feature prominently in discussions on educational disadvantage, are presented. These individual theories are explored and assessed for their suitability as a conceptual lens to examine educational

disadvantage's socio-cultural and academic domains. Chapter Five outlines the methodology and develops the operational framework for the study. The research findings are presented in Chapter Six under the academic and socio-cultural domains emerging in the literature reviews presented in Chapters Two and Three. This chapter presents the participants' experiences of the Study Club and school, including their experience of maths and English tuition and their tuition experience in other subjects at the Study Club. Parents' experiences of being involved in their children's education with teachers/schools and with the Study Club are also explored. Parents' embodied cultural capital is explored along with parental and student access to objectified and institutionalised cultural capital. This chapter includes observations on the findings from a small group of teachers, members of Access Campus Development Board. These teachers provide a useful perspective on the relevance of the academic and socio-cultural supports provided to students at the Study Club, insights which contributed to the final recommendations.

In Chapter Seven, the findings of the research are discussed in conjunction with the relevant literature and the themes/elements guiding the operational framework. This analysis indicates that the design, delivery and duration of the intervention are important to participants and their parents and are crucial to the intervention's effectiveness. The analysis also confirms that the intervention addresses the general issues around educational disadvantage emerging from the literature as well as the issues raised in reviews of widening access interventions in various settings.

Chapter Eight revisits the core research question and the study's aims and objectives before presenting a summary of the study's findings. The recommendations arising out of the findings are presented, and areas for future research are identified. This study's

contribution to the knowledge on efforts to counter educational disadvantage are outlined before presenting final thoughts and conclusions about the study.

1.8 Conclusion

This study explores the concept of educational disadvantage, its causes, impact and the types of strategies designed to mitigate it. By connecting the rhetoric of global aspirations for education articulated by international bodies such as UNESCO and the OECD to the lived experience of a cohort of disadvantaged students, the study contributes to efforts to mitigate educational disadvantage. Its use of primary data to calibrate the elements that underpin an intervention that demonstrates success in raising educational achievement and increasing participation in third-level education provides useful insights for both policy and practice.

In the final phase of this study, a new issue emerged, raising concerns for students experiencing educational disadvantage. The emergence of the COVID -19 pandemic and subsequent shut-down of schools in March 2020 presents additional concerns and issues for students' already experiencing educational disadvantage. Most notable amongst these, are the widening digital and social divides. Significant also is the lack of access to the supports provided by the School Support Programme (SSP) under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), which, according to Mohan *et al.* (2020) will further widen the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The Covid 19 crisis has highlighted the need for innovative strategies and practices to continue engagement with students and parents and to provide supports for students. This study provides a detailed example of an intervention tailored to disadvantaged students' specific academic and socio-cultural requirements. The pandemic increases the relevance and need for such interventions.

Chapter Two: Education and Educational Disadvantage: International Perspectives

2.1 Introduction

The *Equity in Education* report (OECD 2018b) indicates that no country has eliminated educational disadvantage entirely. The report further demonstrates that socio-economic status continues to mediate educational outcomes, particularly in reading, mathematics and science subjects. In the literature, educational and socio-cultural factors that impact on educational outcomes for disadvantaged students have been identified. To address these issues, many countries have turned their attention to identifying the causes of educational disadvantage and then developing policies, strategies and interventions that may raise the educational attainment of disadvantaged students. While national educational systems and contexts differ, there is much overlap in the discourse and the strategies. Educational disadvantage has been conceptualised in terms of economic, socio-cultural, and academic issues. There is a growing recognition that policies and interventions should address all of these issues simultaneously, reflecting the intersectional impact of these issues on educational achievement and progression to higher education.

2.2 The Discourse on Education

Education fulfils several purposes for the individual and society. These purposes include personal development, democratic development, social equalisation, economic opportunity and social modernisation. At a personal level, raising educational achievement may increase an individual's opportunities to improve their knowledge, cognitive and emotional skills and ultimately their earning potential (Biesta 2009; Mitra *et al.* 2016). From a democratic perspective, improving the educational achievement of

marginalised individuals can lead to greater participation in democratic institutions, societal initiatives and organisations (OECD 2010e; Hahn 2015). Greater social equalisation occurs as higher educational attainment addresses inequality in society and is an essential mechanism in improving social and income mobility (Causa and Chapuis 2009). Education is also a key determinant in promoting economic prosperity at the individual level, as it can be employed to reduce poverty and income disparities (Kress 2014; Salmi and D'Addio 2020). At societal level, education can contribute to greater economic prosperity and social cohesion (Woessmann 2008).

Education is also perceived as a means of redressing social inequalities, promoting meritocracy and improving welfare. Governments consider education a public good, a tool for social transformation and a method of fostering social mobility. A dominant discourse in European public policy is the role that education may play in developing human capital. Investing in education and supporting marginalised students can expand an individual's overall skills (human capital), leading to higher productivity and economic growth (D'Addio 2007; Causa and Johansson 2010; Sturgis and Buscha 2015; Betthausen 2017). Public policy in many countries strives to promote the development of the human capital of marginalised individuals, providing them with a better start in life and the additional support they need so that they may contribute to economic prosperity and social wellbeing (Commission 2014b; Marginson 2019). The *Education at a Glance* report 2020 demonstrates that individuals with higher levels of educational attainment 'are more socially engaged, have higher employment rates and higher relative earnings' (OECD 2015: 30). Investing in education is perceived as an investment in human capital, increasing employability, and in turn, the benefits to society include reduced public spending on social welfare and increased tax revenues. Policymakers acknowledge the advantages of investing in education, particularly for disadvantaged students, as higher

academic achievement equates to more significant stocks of human capital which benefit all in society (Eurydice 2020a).

Another purpose of education is to cultivate the positive or socially desirable potential in individuals. An important point to make is that realising potential is culturally bound and moulded by the cultural forces that influence students. Therefore, it may be argued that one of the purposes of education is to cultivate particular possibilities over others, which are socially or culturally desirable. For some observers, the purpose of education is the ‘socialisation function’ (Biesta 2009:40), which refers to the myriad ways education assimilates individuals into various social, cultural and political worlds. The socialisation function of education prepares individuals to partake in specific social and cultural practices and in so doing ensures the perpetuation of traditions and cultures.

Articulation of these multiple educational goals and ever-increasing investment in education is not achieving the anticipated outcomes. The 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results provide evidence of these unequal educational outcomes. PISA is an international study that provides comparative data on 15- year-olds’ performance in reading, mathematics and science. The results inform national and global level education policy discussions and formulation. PISA (2018) showed that ‘the 10% most socioeconomically advantaged students outperformed their 10% most disadvantaged counterparts in reading by 141 score points, on average across OECD countries. This adds up to the equivalent of over three years of schooling’ (Schleicher 2019: 5). Thus, while the numbers participating in education have increased, the evidence shows that not all students have benefited equally.

Increased demand for education results in an increasing number of students graduating from upper-secondary and tertiary education (OECD 2020). Questions remain about the extent to which this expansion has reduced the inequalities experienced by students

from the lower social-classes (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Becker, 2003; Hadjar and Uusitalo, 2016). According to Hadjar and Uusitalo (2016), school environments, while acting as incentive and opportunity structures, can also restrict educational attainment for some subgroups of students. Factors such as the degree of stratification/external differentiation (age of selection, number of tracks etc.), vocational specificity (general versus vocation specific training), the degree of standardisation of schools, and teacher education all influence the degree of educational inequality experienced by working-class students (Pfeffer 2008; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010). While disparities based on race and gender may have been reduced, (Diprete and Buchmann 2006; Breen et al., 2010), according to Hadjar and Uusitalo ‘tenacious social-class inequalities exist in educational systems across the globe’ (2016: 268). The evidence indicates that working-class students are still experiencing disadvantage in education compared to their more affluent peers. The question of why some students do not experience the same benefit from education as others has been the subject of much debate and research in recent decades, as academics and policymakers attempt to identify the causes of disadvantage and implement policy measures to address this issue.

2.3 Educational Disadvantage: Changing Terminology: Enduring Challenges

The discourse on educational attainment is replete with terminology for the differing outcomes evident in educational systems around the world. ‘Equity in education’, ‘educational inequality’ and ‘educational disadvantage’ are the customary terms employed when discussing this phenomenon. In the international discourse on education ‘educational inequality’ and ‘equity in education’ are recurrent themes (Field *et al.* 2007; Woessmann 2008; Causa and Chapuis 2009; Dyson *et al.* 2010; OECD 2012; Savage *et al.* 2013; Healy *et al.* 2016; OECD 2018a). The term ‘educational disadvantage’ is widely

used in academic research (Lynch *et al.* 2016; Thurston *et al.* 2016).

Hadjar and Uusitalo define inequality in education as ‘systematic disadvantages in the access to educational institutions and educational attainment related to certain socially constructed characteristics, such as class or gender, which translate into inequalities in status attainment, labour market chances, occupational status, income, subjective well-being and life expectancy’ (2016:264). With regard to the causes of educational inequality, studies examine how factors such as parental education, occupational status and social class influence educational attainment across countries and over time (Oppedisano and Turati 2015). Equity in education is another dominant theme in the discourse on educational disadvantage. Despite numerous definitions there is little consensus about what equity in education should be (Unterhalter 2009). UNICEF provides the following definition of equity in education: ‘Equity means that all children have an opportunity to survive, develop and reach their full potential without discrimination, bias or favoritism’ (2010: 5). While UNICEF contends that equity and equality are distinct and that ‘equality requires all students to have the same resources’ (2010: 5), the OECD argues that equity in education means ‘that schools and education systems provide equal learning opportunities to all students. As a result, during their education, students of different socio-economic status, gender or immigrant and family background achieve similar levels of academic performance in key cognitive domains, such as reading, mathematics and science’ (OECD 2018b: 13).

Equity, defined in this way, does not imply that everyone should have the same results, nor does it imply teaching the same material or providing the same resources to all students. But rather, it requires the tailoring of resources, curriculum and supports to the individual needs of each student. Equity in education aims to ensure that all students have the opportunity to reach their academic potential regardless of their socio- economic

circumstances (UNICEF 2010). Equity as inclusion guarantees that all students will attain a basic minimum level of skills, assisting students to reach their potential without imposing either formal or informal barriers or lowering expectations. Equity as fairness stipulates that socio-economic and cultural factors such as gender, ethnicity and family background do not impede on students' academic achievement. Ensuring inclusion and fairness, equitable education systems are perceived to counter the effects of serious social and economic inequalities present in many societies (Woessmann and Schutz 2006; Field *et al.* 2007; Faubert 2012).

Agasisti *et al* expand on the equality of opportunity perspective suggesting a definition which sees educational equity focused on '(i) the reduction of disparities in academic achievement among students of the same class, school, region or country, or (ii) the ability of an educational system to reduce the impact of students' background on their academic results' (2017: 1244). Thus, despite terminological differences there is a clear concern with fostering equality of opportunity and an awareness of the function of, resources, inputs and outcomes in achieving this (see Klees and Qargha 2014). Equitable educational systems have a number of common features. While there is no single template guaranteed to ensure equity in education, individual countries strive to devise educational systems that combine plentiful educational resources (human and financial), positive learning environments and socio-cultural responsiveness in an effort to ensure all students benefit from education (Eurydice 2020a). The diverse terminology and conceptualisation of educational disadvantage make it difficult to compare country specific approaches to framing and addressing educational disadvantage. It would be helpful to establish an internationally agreed framework of terms, definitions and concepts that would aid in identifying effective practice to ameliorate educational disadvantage enabling individual countries to formulate more effective policies and strategies to equalise educational

outcomes for all students.

The current discourse also includes a thread on resilience, a concept emanating from psychology. Agasisti et al define a resilient student as ‘someone who, despite his/her disadvantaged socio-economic background, obtains high academic performance’ (Agasisti *et al.* 2017: 1248). They highlight the role of (1) relationships with adults (teachers/parents), (2) positive use of time and (3) motivation in developing resilience. Comerford *et al.* (2015) assert that high self-esteem is crucial for resilience. The OECD states that ‘resilient pupils ... are able to achieve (relatively) good results despite their (relatively) disadvantaged background’ (Agasisti and Longobardi 2017: 918). Consequently, there is growing interest in how education systems can foster resilience and limit the negative impact of student background on academic performance and engagement.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to schools and students, particularly to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Strategies to try to lessen the effects of the pandemic focused on resilience (Reimers and Schleicher 2020). The notion of academic buoyancy is also gaining attention. Defined as ‘an ability to successfully deal with everyday academic adversity’, Martin and March (2009) identify the 5 Cs:

- confidence (self-efficacy),
- co-ordination (planning),
- control,
- composure (low-anxiety),
- commitment (persistence).

These dispositions are perceived as insulating students from the risk factors inherent in the background of disadvantaged students. Resilience and academic buoyancy reinforce the appropriateness of a holistic approach to addressing educational inequity (Martin

and March 2009). The ‘educational disadvantage’ discourse has ebbed and flowed with little conceptual continuity. Until the early 2000s, educational disadvantage tended to be portrayed in terms of deficits displayed by the students or their social milieux. Such interpretations tend to disregard structural factors reinforcing disadvantage. Other attempts at defining educational disadvantage such as that by (Blandon and Gibbons 2006) adopt a broader conceptualisation, which addresses students’ capacity to meet the demands, attitudes and approaches required by the formal education system based on economic, social and cultural factors, which impact on the students’ ability to derive the same benefits from education as their peers. Another stance places the emphasis on discontinuities between students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes, and what is expected of them by schools (Whitty and Clement 2015a). More recently, ‘educational disadvantage’ is portrayed as a multi-faceted phenomenon. In the Netherlands, the debate has centred on the social, economic and cultural factors in the home environment of children, which cause educational disadvantage (Dreissen 2017). Smith and Smith (2018) demonstrate how, in the UK, discussions on educational disadvantage are increasingly concentrated on pupil performance with policies alternating between area-based and individually focused approaches. Access to technology and books is perceived as an indicator of disadvantage. PISA tests gather data on the number of books available to students because of the belief that ‘books at home provide a good theoretical proxy for the educational, cultural and economic background of families’ (Eurydice 2020a: 43).

The literature also demonstrates divergent views regarding indicators of disadvantage and their usage (Dreissen 2017; Gorard 2017). Indicators have been devised which relate to gender, ethnicity, the individual students, their family or peers, the school they attend or the neighbourhood in which they live. The indicators approach is also commonly used by higher educational institutions to target outreach activities and contextualise

admissions (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). It can be argued that such indicators risk reinforcing a student deficit approach. However, there is strong support for using such indicators to identify social disadvantage and structural inequality and increase educational attainment.

The international discourse on educational disadvantage demonstrates that educational disadvantage is a result of inter-related academic and socio-cultural elements. The OECD (2012) acknowledged how the intersection of these elements produce and perpetuate educational disadvantage, and advocates that they should be addressed simultaneously. Growing attention is being paid to the concept of intersectionality as a paradigm through which the complex nature of educational disadvantage and the intersectional nature of economic, socio-cultural, and academic elements to produce more contextualised and nuanced accounts of families and students experience of educational disadvantage.

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw to illustrate how discrimination or oppression is rarely a result of one aspect of an individual's identity. Originating in feminist critical theory, Crenshaw demonstrated that discrimination or oppression is a combination of several identity markers such as race, gender, and social class. Examining the intersection of these various identity markers enables a more nuanced understanding of how discrimination and marginalisation occur. In adopting an intersectional analogy Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) elucidated how discourses of feminism and anti-race frame identities as isolated and mutually exclusive resulting in the theoretical erasure of individuals who hold multiple minoritised identities (Carbado *et al.* 2013). The concept of intersectionality has evolved from the analysis of race and gender as drivers of inequality to include ethnicity, ability, age and sexuality to identify ways of contesting inequality in societies (Thornton-Dill and Zambrana 2009). Further, intersectionality (IS) has been identified as a useful approach to analysing experiences of identity and oppression (Nash 2008). According to Hancock (2007)

intersectionality is one of the principal conceptual and analytical frameworks for examining the nature of processes and structures that create and perpetuate social inequality. Several definitions of intersectionality exist. Davis (2008) defines intersectionality succinctly as ‘the interaction between gender, race, other categories of difference in individuals’ lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power’ (2008: 68). Whereas Saatcioglu and Corus (2014) argue that intersectionality explores the multiple overlapping forms of marginalisation at both the individual (micro) level and institutional (macro) level. Adopting an intersectional approach can generate more contextualised or nuanced accounts of the experiences of marginalised groups in society.

Gopaldas (2013) provides evidence that academics and researchers have expanded the number of categories to include occupation, health, age, and sexuality to explain how individuals may be marginalised in society. Saatcioglu and Corus (2014) advocate for research on marginalisation that includes a deeper examination of the structural processes that create or perpetuate inequality alongside social categories. They argue that intersectionality facilitates this deeper research approach, in which individual (micro level) and external (macro level) conditions interact to disadvantage particular subgroups in society (*ibid*). Intersectionality approaches prompt academics to consider ‘what or who is obscured by this analysis or focus of attention (Harris and Leonardo 2018) highlighting the need to pay attention to the margins of all identity based analysis of inequality. This counters discussions of inequality based on single identities such as social class as it highlights identities that are consistently treated as invisible because they are conceptualised as subsets of social class (Harris and Leonardo 2018).

Furthermore, intersectionality elucidates the complex nature of power enabling academics and researchers to advance beyond constructing single identities or forms of subordination, which may be considered more important than others are. In this way,

intersectionality foregrounds the complexity of social identity and intersubjective experience. As such, intersectionality reveals that marginalisation and inequality are not reducible merely to membership of a particular social class but is a consequence of multiple identity markers that interact to create both inter- and intra-group differences and forms of marginalisation.

The literature review in this chapter reveals that educational disadvantage is multi-faceted and consists of various inter-related elements. Tefera *et al.* (2018) argue that educational disadvantage cannot be reduced to single, static or one-dimensional approaches, which address each element in isolation from the other elements. They assert that adopting an intersectionality approach can generate nuanced and contextualised accounts of how these various elements converge to create unequal outcomes in education. Adopting an intersectional approach allows academics to overcome simplistic and additive approaches to overcoming educational disadvantage by engaging with the multiplicities of students' circumstances within and across educational settings (Tefera *et al.* 2018).

This section has reviewed concepts associated with the perceived deficiencies and inadequacies of education systems, which result in sub-optimal outcomes. Although the literature has demonstrated a multiplicity of terms and interpretations of the phenomenon, there is consensus on the manifestations and effects of educational disadvantage. The term 'educational disadvantage' has been selected for this study since it captures the social, economic and cultural as well as the educational dimensions of the problem. Furthermore, 'educational disadvantage' is the dominant discourse in Ireland. Therefore, it seems the appropriate term for a study which is set within the Irish system.

2.4 The Causes and Impact of Educational Disadvantage

It is evident from the international literature that there is no single cause of educational

disadvantage. Poverty, societal and family factors and aspects of educational systems are regarded as the most pertinent factors that cause educational disadvantage. These are discussed in the following sections.

The link between poverty and educational disadvantage has been well documented (Croxford 1999; Bradshaw 2006; Duncan and Magnuson 2013; Coote *et al.* 2015). Studies in New Zealand, (Gibbs *et al.* 2011), the US, (Duncan and Magnuson 2013) and the UK (Gorard and Siddiqui 2019) demonstrate how poverty influences children's development, particularly school readiness and academic achievement. Academic achievement can be predicted by socio-economic status (Reardon and Portilla 2016). Furthermore, poverty influences parenting behaviour and child-rearing practices (Humphreys *et al.* 2011). Boston argues 'that poverty influences parental role modelling around education and, which in turn can impact students' motivation and ability to gain the full benefits of education' (2013: 11).

Although Raffo *et al.* (2007) concluded that there is no single reason why poverty impacts on education, PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and PISA reports repeatedly point to a strong association between poverty and educational outcomes. The attainment gap between students experiencing poverty and their more affluent peers continue to be persistent issues in educational systems around the world (Goodman and Gregg 2010; Jenson 2013; Wexler 2014; Child Trends Data Bank 2015). Students experiencing hardship are more likely to underachieve academically and leave school early compared to their more affluent peers (Eurydice 2020a). Children growing up in poverty are more likely to have parents who grew up in poverty. Poverty also influences parental educational attainment, as these parents are more likely to have underachieved themselves academically because of the limited economic resources they may have had growing up.

Not only the economic dimension but also the social dimension of socio-economic disadvantage is significant in perpetuating gaps in performance and outcomes among disadvantaged students. They cannot afford the private tuition and extra-curricular activities that enhance middle-class students' likelihood of going to college. Children from disadvantaged areas often lack the social and academic confidence of their wealthier peers. This is particularly evident with regard to progression to higher education affecting both their academic attainment and their ability to navigate the application and transition processes (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; Torotcoi *et al.* 2020). Lack of familiarity with HE requirements, processes and jargon and inadequate support with college applications can be a problem. O'Sullivan *et al.* (2017a) refer to 'college confidence' and highlight the positive impact of mentoring programmes in increasing that confidence. Other social barriers to progression include lack of role models, identity and territorial stigmatisation issues, peer support, social anxiety about making friends in college or fear of alienation from their community peers (McCluskey 2017; OECD 2019). These 'soft barriers' can hinder progression and limit students' ability 'to move in and out of spaces which they perceive to be marked as 'other' because of their lack of cultural capital (Reay *et al.* 2007: 1047).

The proposition that educational disadvantage originates with individuals because of their limitations, i.e. academic ability and economic resources, has become outdated (OECD 2012; Dreissen 2017). Many of the causes of educational disadvantage are increasingly being seen to be rooted in deficient and inadequate schools and education systems. According to Faubert (2012), providing equal access to the same educational opportunity, the 'one size fits all' approach is seen as failing to meet the diverse socio- cultural needs of students. Educational disadvantage is also caused by the schools' inability to meet these needs. School failure is now considered a salient cause of educational disadvantage

and therefore, schools and education systems need to adapt to, and accommodate the socio-cultural needs of all students if educational disadvantage is to be ameliorated (Field *et al.* 2007; Heckman 2011; Faubert 2012; Rowley *et al.* 2020).

Educational practices such as early tracking onto lower academic programmes, repeating years, and lack of student-specific curricula which accommodate students' socio-cultural diversity can contribute to educational disadvantage, with students leaving formal education without any qualifications, thus, limiting their life chances (Bridgeland *et al.* 2006; Eurydice 2020a). Also, teachers' perceptions of, and interaction with disadvantaged students, have been shown to reinforce educational disadvantage. Horgan (2007) provides evidence that teacher perceptions vary by student background, with students from lower socio-economic groups reporting negative interactions with teachers, compared to students from more affluent backgrounds. Taken together, these studies indicate that how schools are organised and engage with students can contribute to educational disadvantage. Schools need to be more inclusive and recognise and accommodate the socio-cultural diversity of all students. Among the ameliorating strategies cited in the literature are: dispensing with predefined perceptions of students based on socio-economic background, implementing curricula and practices which meet the needs and challenges faced by disadvantaged students and promoting equity of educational outcomes. The Eurydice (2020a) report stresses the significance of school factors in promoting equity but also reiterates that schools are embedded in educational systems with varying structures, policies, practices and traditions that frame their efforts to counter disadvantage.

Educational disadvantage impacts on students' prospects, as they lack the necessary skills and knowledge to take advantage of employment opportunities and become engaged citizens, contributing to social, cultural and economic goals of nation states (Ryan *et al.*

2014; OECD 2016b). The costs of educational disadvantage are both economic and social. Students who leave formal education with few or no qualifications are limited in their capacity to secure well-paid jobs. This lack of skills can result in lower initial and lifetime earnings and a higher chance of unemployment. 25-34 year-olds with tertiary education earn 38% more than their peers with upper secondary education; while 45-54 year-olds earn 70% more (OECD 2019). Poorly educated individuals have fewer opportunities to increase their knowledge and develop cognitive, social and emotional skills (OECD 2010d; Commission 2014b; OECD 2017). Poorly educated or skilled individuals limit national economies' ability to produce, grow and innovate. There are further costs to economic prosperity, in that the state must provide financial support to these individuals through unemployment benefits, social housing and public health systems.

Those who have not attained upper secondary education are more likely to be neither employed nor in education or training (NEET). In OECD countries in general, approximately 39% of individuals in the 25-to-29 year-old age bracket that leave school without upper secondary education are NEET, while only 17% individuals with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification are NEET (OECD 2020). Disadvantaged socio-economic background appears to be a strong factor which influences early school leaving (Commission 2011; European Commission 2019). On average, 19% of people under 25 across OECD countries and the EU leave education without an upper secondary qualification (OECD 2018a). In 2011, the European Council adopted a *Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving* leading to the preparation; implementation and monitoring of early school leaving policies in member states. Such policies involve prevention, intervention and compensation measures. Some success has been achieved with the ESL dropping from 17.0% in 2002 to 10.6% in 2018

(European Commission 2019: 13). Countries such as Austria, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland have successfully implemented strategies to adapt upper secondary education programmes to the abilities and needs of youth at risk of early school leaving (Schmid 2020).

The social costs of educational disadvantage include reduced social cohesion and participation in democratic processes and greater criminality with the attendant cost of penal correctional institutions. Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students may promote healthier lifestyles and increased engagement with democratic and social processes, leading to more significant benefits for society as a whole. A growing body of literature indicates that raising educational achievement leads to increased social cohesion and active citizenship (Budginaite *et al.* 2016). The European Council adopted a Resolution on education in January 2020 re-affirming that ‘quality and inclusive education and training enable personal fulfilment, social cohesion and inclusive societies’ (European Council 2020).

2.5 Countering Educational Disadvantage

The previous section has shown that educational disadvantage results in tangible and intangible economic and social costs. The socio-economic, political and cultural contexts, the learning environment and the individual's background all affect educational outcomes. Recognising that educational inequalities result in very different life outcomes for citizens, governments implement social inclusion policies aimed at mitigating the impact of families' socio-economic backgrounds on children's educational attainment. Policies aimed at reducing child poverty and improving health and wellbeing contribute to reducing barriers to educational progress. Educational policies and strategies combine interventions to encourage and enable participation with interventions focused on school structures, resources and curricular content and inclusive education (European EU

2015b). The search also continues into the causes of educational disadvantage. As part of the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ agreement, an expert group has been recently established in Northern Ireland to examine and address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background (NDNA 2020).

The multiple causes, impacts and factors contributing to educational disadvantage described earlier have generated a range of approaches to countering educational disadvantage. Some of these approaches focus on the socio-cultural dimension and use targeted social policies and interventions to overcome aspects of educational disadvantage. Other approaches focus on the education system and school interventions, while others adopt a multi-faceted approach. This section will review some of the strategies that have been implemented in differing contexts.

Efforts to counter the socio-cultural aspects of educational disadvantage include anti-poverty strategies and redistributing financial resources to schools and students experiencing disadvantage. Additional funds have been diverted to, for example, the *Opportunity Areas Programme* in England; *Every Student Succeeds* programme in the USA and the *Unlocking Talent and Fulfilling Potential Plan* in Australia. Free school meals have been made available in many countries, as have other measures such as free book and uniform schemes for disadvantaged children (Eurydice 2020a). Such policies are designed to compensate for perceived structural deficiencies. Nova Scotia, in Canada, operates a *School Plus* programme. This programme is a collaborative inter-agency approach to supporting children and their families, with the school as the centre of service delivery. It aims to provide more coordinated services to youth and their families, thereby addressing multiple aspects of educational disadvantage.

Variations in educational outcomes are frequently linked to factors other than socio-economic status. Attitudes to education, student engagement, parental involvement, the

aspirations of students and parents, teachers' expectations and practices combine to determine educational performance. Various strategies have been implemented to address shortcomings in these important contributors to educational success. In Finland, for example, multi-disciplinary teams work with under-performing students to address various socio-economic and cultural factors which influence their academic outcomes. In Sweden, 'Fryhuset' a community-based programme, addresses cultural diversity issues to raise educational outcomes through the 'Knowledge Centre'. In France, the Programme Personnalisés D'Aide De Progres (PPAP) is designed in partnership with parents to provide a range of academic and personal supports to students. Teachers deliver this programme with extra support provided by the Réseaux D'Aides Spécialées pour les Eleves en Difficulté (RASED) (OECD 2007). Since 2015, Scotland has undertaken the Scottish Attainment Challenge which aims at achieving equity in educational outcomes, with a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

As the preceding examples illustrate, international responses recognise that educational disadvantage is a consequence of multiple interrelated factors. Several countries have implemented integrated policies requiring inter-agency and multi-disciplinary professionals to provide interventions to address educational disadvantage (Field *et al.* 2007; Budginaite *et al.* 2016). The international literature demonstrates that educational disadvantage is a consequence of converging economic, social and cultural factors. Strategies to counter that disadvantage include providing additional resources (financial and human) to schools to reduce class sizes and providing literacy and numeracy recovery programmes (France); programmes and interventions to address cultural diversity factors (Sweden) and parental involvement programmes such as the School Plus programme in Nova Scotia, Canada. Results from international assessments such as PISA and evaluations such as TIMSS (Trends in Maths Science Subjects) indicate that these

policies are achieving some success in raising academic outcomes for disadvantaged students (Schleicher 2019).

Intersectionality (IS) in Educational Equality Research

Intersectionality approaches have been used to direct research toward analysing the relationship between power and inequality in education, and how these influence individual and group identities (Tefera *et al.* 2018). Adopting an intersectionality approach enables academics and researchers to account for complexity and diversity within and across educational systems, and the irreducible multiplicity of intersecting dynamics of educational contexts (*ibid*). In the USA, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Yosso (2005) adopted an intersectionality lens to account for how raced and gendered power relations interact, in complicated ways, to influence learning. Intersectional analysis enabled them to explore students', teachers', and other education stakeholders' identities with real complexity, revealing how unequal power relations shape subjects' experiences and social institutions.

McMaster and Cook (2019) adopted an inter-categorical approach to intersectionality to reveal how social background, gender and ethnicity converge to determine educational outcomes take an 'inter-categorical' perspective on intersectionality, to highlight the combined influence of gender, social background and ethnicity on educational outcomes. In doing so they demonstrate that, an intersectional perspective emphasises the multi-faceted and contextualised nature of educational disadvantage. Buchmann *et al.* (2008) applied intersectionality to examine how inequalities in social-class, race, and ethnicity intersect with gender to produce differential educational outcomes between boys and girls at all levels of educational systems. Heath *et al.* (2008), applied intersectionality to examine how ethnicity interacts with other forms of marginalisation to create educational disadvantage for minority groups in European educational systems. Bhopal (2020),

applied intersectionality to investigate how white privilege and a hierarchy of oppression has resulted in a discourse of denial in which gender is accorded greater significance than race in exploring educational disadvantage in the UK. Bhopal reveals how white privilege dominates equality agendas and that discrimination based on race and ethnicity have remained largely unchallenged at all levels in the educational system.

Tapper (2013) employed intersectionality to teach students to understand themselves both as individuals and members of larger social groups to foster an understanding of individuals' cultural, ethnic, racial, political and religious identities to foster greater equality in education in the USA. These studies demonstrate how power relations and categorisation shape educational systems and how intersectionality approaches in educational research help academics to explore and account for the ways that race, gender, citizenship, and ability amongst other identities influence the structural dynamics of power and inequality in educational systems (Carbado *et al.* 2013; Collins 2015). While these studies examine how a specific identity marker intersects with other categories of differentiation, collectively they demonstrate that inequality in education is complex and multidimensional and advocate that efforts to ameliorate educational disadvantage must address all of these dimensions simultaneously.

Students' opportunities for enriching life experiences are determined by their access to, and participation in education. Individuals who enter the education system at a disadvantage do not have the same access to quality education and require additional assistance to reach the same academic attainment as their more affluent peers. Therefore, educational policies must prioritise initiatives and strategies, like the ones discussed above, in order to compensate for the disadvantages these individuals experience. In addition to the general strategies discussed above, specific school-based strategies are necessary to counter educational disadvantage. Various strategies have been implemented

in different contexts, but a number of common themes arise including class size reduction, curricular adaptation and classroom strategies. These strategies often incorporate several of these themes demonstrating that policy-makers and educationalists recognise that these issues intersect to create educational disadvantage. These will be outlined in the sections 2.6 to 2.9.

2.6 The School Dimension

Both general and specific school factors affect educational outcomes for students. The school culture, atmosphere and reputation influence engagement and performance. The organisation of the school, school policies, curricular options, resource allocation, quality of teaching, stakeholder involvement combine to shape the educational experiences of students (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). In addition, specific factors affect outcomes and engagement as the remainder of this section illustrates.

2.6.1 Class size

The teacher/student ratio strongly influences the learning environment and student attainment. The link between teacher/student ratio and educational achievement has been of particular interest to educationalists and researchers. Studies (Shin and Chung 2009; Schanzenbach 2014; Zyngier 2014) indicate that reducing the teacher/student ratio to less than 1 teacher to 20 students can improve educational outcomes; these benefits can be long-term, particularly for students experiencing educational disadvantage. In the UK, Blatchford *et al.* (2011) provide evidence of the benefits of reducing class size at post-primary level, particularly for low achieving students. Evidence from Australia indicates that reducing class size to 15 produces positive and lasting academic achievement outcomes for disadvantaged students (Zyngier 2014). Despite union opposition, reforms prioritising smaller class sizes have been introduced by President Emmanuel

Macron in a bid to reduce inequality in education and prepare students better for the job market (Reuters 2018).

However, debate continues about the impact of class size. Wossmann and West (2006) found varying effects in European countries, as did the OECD (2020). Alharbi and Stoet (2017) also highlight the lack of consensus on class size and contend that achievement flourishes in large classes. Nevertheless, running through the literature is a recurring emphasis on the benefits of smaller classes for many lower-SES students. Although it is difficult to isolate the impact of class size from other relevant factors, it is clear from the literature that reducing the teacher/student ratio has demonstrable benefits for disadvantaged students and that these benefits last well into the later years of compulsory education. The type of support available to students makes a significant difference. Several countries have focused on reducing class size in primary schools. There is little evidence of such strategies being implemented at secondary level. As the results of international student assessments such as PISA and TIMSS indicate, the under-achievement of many secondary school students in various countries continues to persist. The role of class size reduction strategies at secondary level have largely been overlooked in addressing this issue, and could potentially provide a solution.

The literature portrays classroom behaviour and particularly student engagement behaviours as mediating the relationship between class size and student achievement (Zyngier 2014; Weir *et al.* 2017). Instruction in smaller classes leads to greater achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy. It may be reasonable, however, to assume that achievement in other subjects may increase also. This can be attributed to enhanced teacher/student interactions and instruction specific to the needs of individual students, as teachers have more time to devote to individual students. However, teachers may need support in adjusting their practices to teaching smaller classes (Weir *et al.* 2017). Finn sums up current thinking on the class size issue when he argues that ‘small

classes are effective, not because of the number of students but because they offer personalized conditions (processes) that facilitate learning' (2019: 126).

2.6.2 Curriculum and Instruction Time

A curriculum that is universal and sets high expectations for all students, with clearly defined learning outcomes is essential to raising the academic achievement of students. (Dumont *et al.* 2010; Faubert 2012). Numeracy and literacy form the core subjects of curricula but the range of non-core subject choices available and the extent and practices of curriculum affect educational outcomes and career options and if limited, are perceived to reinforce social segregation (Smyth 2018). Schools that implement diversity-conscious policies and curricula enhance equity of academic outcomes for disadvantaged students (Budginaite *et al.* 2016). Such policies are proving effective in nurturing positive dispositions to school and advance skills that improve academic performance (Nouwen *et al.* 2015).

Lower levels of literacy and numeracy are widely associated with early school leaving. Unsurprisingly, in the literature, particular attention is paid to the role of literacy and numeracy in countering educational disadvantage. According to the OECD, the importance attributed to mathematics worldwide relates to the development of critical thinking skills. Students with higher levels of proficiency in mathematics general have better developed thinking skills. Well-developed mathematical skills contributes significantly to developing critical thinking skills. Mastering mathematics has both practical and intuitive significance, as proficiency in mathematics enables individuals to develop quantitative literacy skills, which are a pre-requisite for many jobs. Numeracy and literacy exam results are salient factors in progression to higher education (OECD 2016a).

Numeracy has been identified as an area in which students are under-performing.

According to (UNESCO 2014), large numbers of students leave school without the numeracy skills necessary for successful life outcomes. Conway and Sloane found that many students display ‘poor levels of understanding and achievement gaps’ (2005: 15). The rote method of learning mathematics has been identified by Paterson *et al.* (2010) as a significant factor in students leaving school with poor numeracy skills. In 2015, a new curriculum in mathematics was introduced in the UK to ‘develop fluent knowledge, skills, and understanding of mathematical methods and concepts’ (UK 2013). Many countries provide extra supports for mathematics. Greece provides specialist teachers for mathematics in some schools, while Luxembourg offers individual or small group tutoring outside the school day for lower secondary school pupil (Eurydice 2020a). Australia’s Literacy and Numeracy Plan (NAPLAN) found that learning gaps are dramatically exacerbated as students move through the years of schooling and that more help is required for struggling students.

Literacy is recognised as an essential skill to ensure educational success and causal links have been established between families with low literacy levels and educational under-achievement. The literacy achievement gap demonstrated by students from disadvantaged backgrounds has been identified by several studies (Clark and Foster 2005; Clark and Akerman 2006; Bracken and Fischel 2008; Hammer *et al.* 2010;Bojczyk *et al.* 2015). If students do not develop strong literacy skills, then they will not only experience disadvantage in school but also throughout their lives (Merga 2020). Analysis of the most recent PISA results found that ‘achievement gaps tend to be larger in reading literacy than in mathematics’ (Eurydice 2020a: 40). In France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Peru and the Slovak Republic, the gap in reading performance between the 10% most socio-economically advantaged and the 10% most disadvantaged students was over 170 score points – the equivalent of well over four years of schooling (Schleicher 2019: 19). But

there are difficulties in designing effective literacy strategies for teenagers. In England, Andrews *et al.* (2017) report that the gap between disadvantaged 16-year-old pupils and their peers only narrowed by three months of learning over nine years of national policy interventions.

Digital literacy levels also tend to be lower among students experiencing educational disadvantage and the gap is compounded by parental, teacher and infrastructural issues. Regardless of the proxy for socio-economic status ‘students from higher status families perform better in both computer and information literacy (CIL) and computational thinking (CT) tests than their peers from lower status families.’ (Di Pietro *et al.* 2020: 24). The PISA 2018 student questionnaire shows that there are relevant socio-economic differences across European countries with regard to computer access at home, with poorer children having less access. Pisa 2018 data also shows that in most EU countries, teachers who have classes with high concentrations of students from socio- economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to report that they need professional development in the area of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills for teaching (Eurydice 2020b).

The COVID-19 pandemic is perceived to be exacerbating educational disadvantage with pupils from less advantaged backgrounds ‘especially likely to fall behind during this emergency period’ (Di Pietro *et al.* 2020). Such students are less likely to have access to digital learning resources (e.g. laptop/computer, broadband internet connection) and less likely to have a suitable home learning environment (e.g. a quiet place to study or their own desk). Furthermore, their parents are less likely to have the skills to support them in online learning. Additionally, they may not receive as much (direct or indirect) support from their parents as their more advantaged counterparts do. Similarly, an OECD review argues that ‘in particular, learners in the most marginalised groups, who don’t have

access to digital learning resources or lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own, are at risk of falling behind' (Reimers and Schleicher 2020).

Various strategies were put in place to try to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Governments and schools ensured the provision of instructional packages (textbooks, worksheets and printouts), radio education, educational television and online instructional resources and financial support. The Netherlands, for example, made an investment of €2.5 million to ensure pupils and students have the necessary devices for online learning while Germany invested a total of €500 million in a similar scheme. Other measures were also taken to help students in their learning at home. In Luxembourg, the government set up a new support system for students and parents to support home schooling. In Mexico, a telephone line "Your Teacher Online" was used to offer mentoring to students. However, for disadvantaged students, more is required than merely providing hardware and software. As McAleavey et al argue 'Providing a radio or a laptop is not enough. Without frequent quality teacher interaction, disadvantaged students are unlikely to thrive' (2020: 16).

Performance in science is also associated with educational disadvantage. Pisa 2018 found that 15-year-old students in the bottom quarter of the economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) 2 index (the most disadvantaged students) were 2.8 times more likely not to attain the baseline level of proficiency in science (OECD 2019). This has consequences because science-related competencies such as problem solving and quantitative analysis are considered essential in the data-based workplace.

Not only the curriculum but the amount of time spent on learning impacts on disadvantage. The evidence implies that quality, rather than the number of hours spent on learning activities, has the most significant impact on academic achievement (Akkerman *et al.* 2011; OECD 2016b). Yet, as has been borne out by the COVID-19

crisis, the quantity of time spent in school is also significant. It is claimed that during the summer vacation students lose the equivalent of one month of academic year learning; the loss is greater in maths than in reading, and the loss increases with grade. The loss is also greater for lower income students (Reimers and Schleicher 2020: 4). The time spent on learning activities has been consistently shown to influence academic outcomes (OECD 2001; 2004; 2007). While devoting sufficient time to learning is necessary, effective use of learning time requires organising the time spent on learning to take account of individual students' needs and ensure positive teacher/student interaction.

Optimising the time spent engaged in learning activities is an integral factor in improving academic achievement (Carroll 1989; Sheerens and Bosker 1997; Marzano 2003) and is a feature of successful interventions to reduce educational disadvantage (Andersen *et al.* 2016; Cattaneo *et al.* 2017). Tutoring, mentoring, feedback, progress monitoring and cooperative learning have all been found to have a positive impact. The productivity of instructional time is higher among low SES students, implying that increasing instructional time to such students may improve equity (Eurydice 2020b).

2.6.3 Teacher Practices

Teacher practices play a notable role in academic achievement and outcomes (Seidel and Shavelson 2007; Budginaite *et al.* 2016). Teachers may make decisions on pedagogical strategies based on their assumptions about the nature of learning and teaching (Pajares 1992; Beyer and Davis 2008; Speer 2008). Teacher characteristics such as gender, subjects taught, educational attainment, professional development, school and classroom climate all influence teacher practices and expectations of students. Skourdombis goes so far as to assert that 'teacher effectiveness makes the difference to student achievement, to the exclusion of social class and de-centralised school re-structuring' (2014: 113). Many of the recent interventions to counter educational disadvantage and

increase participation promote Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020) to better equip teachers to deal with the differing needs of disadvantaged students.

Teachers need to be aware of the impact their expectations can have on student academic achievement and should be encouraged to develop positive expectations, particularly for disadvantaged students (Archambault *et al.* 2012). Teacher practices are informed by personal experiences that are influenced by cultural norms and can also be mediated by knowledge acquired during initial teacher education (ITE), as well as the social milieu the teacher works in (OECD 2014). The classroom is the focal point of learning (Faubert 2012) and particularly so for disadvantaged students. Therefore, what occurs in classrooms is a vital element of educational achievement.

Faubert (2012) identified specific learning and curriculum practices that cater for all students, but particularly for disadvantaged students, which, if adopted can be beneficial in engaging students and improving academic achievement. Santibanez and Fagiolo (2016) show that classroom level practices can improve learning for disadvantaged students. Combining appropriate learning activities and curriculum requires teachers to develop a vast array of learning strategies tailored to the student needs to ameliorate disadvantage (OECD 2012) and will be discussed in the next section.

Teacher supply and demand reinforces disadvantage with widespread problems attracting teachers to teach in schools in disadvantaged areas. Attracting and retaining teachers in disadvantaged schools and addressing high turnover are priority issues in France, Germany and the UK (Eurydice 2020b). The report also shows that some countries offer financial incentives to teachers. Other countries offer career benefits (e.g. preferential next appointment or faster career progression) while France, Lithuania, Slovenia and Scotland implement both financial and non-financial incentives.

2.7 Raising Aspirations and Expectations

The literature highlights the importance of student aspirations and expectations both for their educational achievement and their progression to higher education. Aspirations combine with cognitive skills and personal and family endowments to determine educational achievement (Rizzica 2018). Recent OECD analysis of international PISA results reminds us that ‘students’ socio-economic background does not just influence their choice of upper secondary programme and their likelihood of completing it, it can also affect their learning outcomes, and their beliefs and aspirations’ (2019: 3). The analysis also reiterates that expectations about the future help shape students’ careers and decision to pursue further education.

Similarly, the Eurydice report asserts that ‘the secondary effects of socio-economic differences are that they impact upon students’ expectations and ambitions’ (Eurydice 2020a: 29). Throughout the literature on educational disadvantage, there are constant references to the way in which societal and educational obstacles and exclusions can negatively shape disadvantaged students’ aspirations (Younger *et al.* 2019; Torotcoi *et al.* 2020). Some of the recent literature is also linking the aspirations discourse to the discourse of ‘possible selves’ (Harrison and Waller 2018) which encourages students to make their visions of the future real, inspiring and linked to their current actions. Student aspirations and expectations are not just personally constructed but are affected by societal, family and school influences. Personal and educational choices are not made in a vacuum. The different social and economic opportunity structures available to students; the type of social interaction prevalent in their communities; and societal attitudes to gender, ethnicity and class all impact on student aspirations (Rizzica 2018). Attitudes towards education and whether education is viewed as a means of social mobility are also significant (Hart 2012; Scanlon *et al.* 2019a). Societal values also influence the curricula

and educational practices which are in place and which frame student aspirations. Weir et al, conclude from their international literature review that ‘parental expectations yielded the largest impact on academic achievement’ (2017: 29). Bashir and Bashir (2016) examined educational aspiration in relation to parental encouragement. They found that where parents support and encourage the children, then aspirations of students towards education are high. Important also are the values and norms (subculture) held by the young people and their parents. Not only parental attitudes but also the home environment affects student aspirations and expectations. As Chapter Four will demonstrate, there is widespread acceptance that ‘habitus’ and the availability of cultural resources in the home have a discernible impact on student aspirations and expectations. It has been argued that there is a direct link between educational achievement and teacher expectations. Gupta and Bashir (2017) found the school environment to be a significant predictor of educational aspiration of the secondary school students. High teacher expectations result in higher educational achievement and lower teacher expectations result in lower academic achievement. Some research indicates that teachers’ expectations of students are associated with their perceptions of those students, based on their socio-economic background (Tauber 1997; Sorhagen 2013; Boser and Wilhem 2014). Perry and Francis (2010) conclude that working-class students are often viewed as lacking in aspiration, that their failure is somehow their fault, ignoring issues such as cultural resources and structural aspects of the educational system that impact on educational achievement and expectations.

The discourse on effective schools argues that a culture of high teacher expectations is necessary to raise educational achievement of disadvantaged students. Sammons *et al.* (2018) cite Mujis and Reynolds’ assertion that that teacher (or classroom) effects are typically larger than those attributable to schools. However, Weir *et al.* (2017) point to the difficulties in measuring teacher expectations or isolating their impact from other

factors in educational disadvantage.

Many of the structured interventions to increase progression outlined later in this chapter include strategies to raise student expectations and aspirations. Harrison and Waller refer to the contribution of aspirational elements to ‘the effectiveness of interventions around increasing parental involvement in young people’s education, mentoring schemes and extracurricular opportunities’ (2018: 919). As Hannon et al assert, it is important to give students ‘an understanding of overcoming barriers to make their aspirations attainable’ (2017: 919). The empirical part of this study explores how a tailored intervention enables this.

2.8 Parental Involvement

Involving parents as partners in the education of their children, both at home and school can have far-reaching advantages for children. Research indicates that involving parents in education translates into better student engagement, enhanced academic achievement and completion of secondary education (Benner *et al.* 2016; Hornby and Blackwell 2018). The empirical evidence points towards a meaningful connection between parental involvement and their children's attainment, demonstrating that parental engagement has a significant impact on subsequent educational achievement (Eurydice 2020a).

Parental involvement varies considerably by family and context, socio-economic status (SES), language and cultural norms (Shen *et al.* 2014). These factors have been shown to mediate both parental and student achievement. The literature on parental involvement indicates that working-class parents experience the greatest difficulty in being involved in their children’s education (Crozer and Reay 2005; Kim 2009; Dotson-Blake 2010) and are most in need of support and resources to complement their children’s learning outside of school. Meta-analytic research by Weir *et al.* (2017) and Boonk *et al.* (2018)

demonstrates that a significant relationship exists between academic achievement and parental involvement programmes. Their findings indicate that parental involvement could contribute to academic achievement indirectly through the influence of other proximal student outcomes, such as motivation, attitudes and learning strategies. The nature of support that teachers provide parents with, has been shown to positively influence academic achievement (Sheldon, 2005; Mapp et al., 2008, cited in Jeynes 2011).

While several countries have provided opportunities for parents to become involved in the education of their children, barriers such as lack of awareness about opportunities to get involved and poor communication between teachers and parents still exist. The nature and level of parental involvement continues to be influenced by socio-economic background (Wilder 2014; Castro *et al.* 2015; Boonk *et al.* 2018). Of particular concern, is the evidence from some studies that promoting certain forms of parental engagement is proving to strengthen power divisions between schools and families and further embed existing educational inequalities rather than eliminate them because 'parental engagement is clearly classed.... and parents differ greatly in terms of their access to forms of material, social and cultural capital. Central to the role of capital in children's opportunities for educational success are issues of power and also the exchange value that their families' capitals possess' (Sime and Sheridan 2014:330). Levels of parental education often determine the efficacy of parental involvement with maternal educational levels being a highly significant factor.

Parental involvement generally takes two forms, involvement with the school and involvement at home. At home, parents can affirm academic achievement and reinforce learning, assist with school-related work, provide academic encouragement and support and encourage positive attitudes. Parental involvement in school often takes the form of assisting with extra-curricular activities or fund raising on behalf of the school. While it

may be argued that this form of parental involvement may address some of the soft barriers to education such as enhancing a sense of belonging amongst these parents in the school community. The trade-off in terms of enhancing parents' ability to actively engage with learning activities and assistance with homework cannot be ignored. Formal protocols exist in several countries to encourage parents and schools to work together (Eurydice 2020a). However, these may prove problematic to implement with disadvantaged groups 'because of linguistic obstacles, lack of time, conflicting work schedules, lack of confidence or because the parents involved see education as either the school's exclusive job or simply unimportant' (Field *et al.* 2007: 104). Furthermore, as Boonk *et al.* argue 'Higher-educated parents appear to be more effective in their involvement activities' (2018: 16). Weir *et al.* (2017) draw attention to the importance of both the obvious and subtle forms of parental involvement arguing that maintaining high expectations of children, communication with children and parental style, strongly influence student achievement.

Parental involvement has been increasingly linked to policy discourses on improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. The belief that parental involvement can be leveraged to improve academic attainment has been linked to a change in policy focus since 2000. Evidence suggests that enhanced parent/teacher engagement leads to higher academic achievement, in countries such as Canada, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United States, where parent/teacher engagement is regular and ongoing. This is unlike the situation in countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Norway, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden and Turkey, which exhibit lower levels of parental engagement and academic achievement (Mullis *et al.* 2003; Benner *et al.* 2016). The disparities between and within countries in terms of parental involvement and how best to harness it, to improve academic outcomes for marginalised students needs to

be more clearly articulated. From my research and practical experience, it is clear that approaches to parental involvement are limited and ineffective. Parental involvement policies need to be underpinned by evidence based good practice, and prioritise improvement in academic outcomes. Policies, strategies, intervention to promote parental involvement need to be clearly defined in terms of aims and objectives, and communicated to all stakeholders in the process. The voice of parents should be included in policy formulation. The gendered nature of parental involvement also needs to be addressed, identifying innovative ways of encouraging greater participation by fathers in the education of their children.

The previous sections indicate that policies that simultaneously address the academic and socio-cultural factors, which mediate academic outcomes for the marginalised are considered best practice. Both the academic literature and international organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO advocate public policy responses that address all of these factors in a co-ordinated and integrated manner if educational disadvantage is to be reduced. Particular attention is perceived to be needed in order to increase progression of disadvantaged students to third level. The next section will provide an overview of contemporary policies that seek to reduce educational disadvantage and widen participation in higher education.

2.8 Policies and Strategies to Address Educational

Disadvantage and Widen Participation in Higher Education.

The international evidence indicates that while enrolments at university have increased, concerns remain that marginalised students continue to be under-represented (Gorard *et al.* 2012; UCAS 2018; Younger *et al.* 2019). Affluent students are three times more likely to progress to higher education compared to marginalised students and the disparities are almost double for prestigious institutions (UCAS 2018). Several causal factors have been

identified for this trend including lack of financial resources, academic underachievement, lower aspirations and lack of social and cultural capital (Whitty and Clement 2015b). Accordingly, alongside policies to address educational achievement at primary and secondary level, recent decades have witnessed growing attention on policies to widen participation in tertiary education for marginalised groups, such as lower-income students, those who would be the first generation in their family to attend university and students from ethnic minority groups.

Governments are investing considerable amounts of public money on policies, strategies, and interventions to increase participation in higher education for marginalised students. For example, in the UK £248 million was invested in widening participation programmes in the academic year 2016/17. The Australian government invested \$271.9 million in 2014/15 (Whitty *et al.* 2015). Yet despite the considerable investment, progress has been modest (HEAT 2018; Rizzica 2018; Church 2018a). Referred to as ‘tertiary preparation’, ‘pathway’, ‘bridging’ or ‘enabling’ programmes, in Australia, ‘access programmes’ in the UK and ‘developmental education’ in the USA; such programmes adopt a range of approaches but there are several common features. Widening participation programmes are typically divided into pre-entry and post-entry programmes. Some schemes include financial support. These include scholarships for minority populations such as refugees in France, indigenous populations in Australia or Roma students in Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. Other financial incentives involve fee waivers.

Many third level institutions run access programmes which provide academic, mentoring and financial assistance for disadvantaged students attending their colleges (O’Sullivan *et al.* 2019a). Foundation Years have become common with even the University of Oxford introducing such a programme. The goal of these programmes is to address the financial, academic, social and cultural barriers to participation in higher education experienced by

marginalised students. The evidence indicates that widening participation programmes which address all of these barriers simultaneously achieve greater success than programmes that deal with financial barriers alone (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). Pre-entry programmes, the concern of this study, generally combine some elements, particularly:

- Academic tuition, and skills development,
- Personal development,
- Career and programme guidance,
- Mentoring
- Parental involvement strategies,
- Campus familiarisation activities,
- Summer programmes
- Collaboration with schools and communities.

Thus, such programmes endeavour to overcome both academic and social barriers to progression. Younger *et al.* (2019), reviewing mainly US schemes, found some evidence of the effectiveness of such ‘black box’ interventions. Usher (2015) found that interventions, which involved empowering students, setting high academic expectations and helping students and parents believe in themselves and in their educational success, had the most effect.

Specific elements of pre-entry programmes have been found to contribute to their effectiveness. This is particularly true with regard to what were described earlier as the ‘soft barriers’ to academic progression. Accordingly, social and personal development, information, advice and counselling are part of most pre-entry interventions. As Torotcoi *et al.*, assert ‘counselling of prospective students can serve as a source of social capital for first-generation students helping them to overcome a lack of social capital, assistance,

and advice from their families' (2020: 10). Similarly, the mentoring activities which form part of pre-entry programmes have been shown to be successful in Spain, UK, Germany and France (Torotcoi *et al.* 2020).

Many interventions involve academic preparation for disadvantaged students. Brunel University and the University of Bath in the UK, for example, have implemented successful programmes to increase academic achievement and raise educational aspirations. While there is widespread acclaim for the interventions, reviewers such as Younger *et al.* (2019) and Torotcoi *et al.* (2020) highlight the difficulty in attributing causality because of problems with isolating the impact of such interventions from other factors.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the international discourse and responses to educational disadvantage. The diverse socio-cultural needs of students are not being met by schools and educational systems which have been proven to be deficient and inadequate. There is a growing acceptance the educational disadvantage is no longer simply the result of limitations imposed by lack of academic ability and economic resources. Approaches such as intersectionality are expanding awareness that factors other than class need to be considered in the fight against educational disadvantage.

Several themes emerged in the literature as contributory factors to educational achievement and progression to higher education which fall into two distinct categories:

- 1) Academic factors including general school factors such as school culture and resources, pedagogical practices as well as specifics such as class size (teacher/student ratio) and curriculum and instruction time which have been proven to mediate educational outcomes for students. Numeracy and literacy also emerged in the literature as significant

mediating factors contributing to educational disadvantage. Consequently, as this chapter showed, international policy responses have accorded priority to raising proficiency in these core subjects, (OECD 2019; Merga 2020).

2) The socio-cultural factors include cultural capital gaps; aspirational and attitudinal issues among students; parents and teachers; parental involvement and ‘soft barriers’ to progression. Evidence from several countries indicates that enhanced parent/teacher engagement leads to higher academic achievement. The chapter demonstrates that parental involvement programmes have a positive impact on addressing educational disadvantage and feature in international policies and strategies to ameliorate educational disadvantage.

This chapter reveals a growing understanding of the complex nature of educational disadvantage and how the various factors intersect. Successful policies to address this phenomenon adopt an intersectional approach which identifies and addresses students’/parents’ diverse socio-cultural needs and school factors which can meet these diverse needs. Chapter Three will explore the causes and impact of educational disadvantage in the Irish context and the efforts to counter that disadvantage.

Chapter Three: Education and Educational Disadvantage: Ireland

3.1 Introduction

The obligation on the Irish State to provide education to its citizens is enshrined in Article 42 of the Irish Constitution. The State's commitment to provide quality education is embodied in the various strategies, which will be discussed in this chapter. The Irish State's educational achievements have been remarkable in aggregate terms. Ireland ranks amongst the top countries in terms of educational attainment and low rates of early school-leaving amongst its population (Byrne and McCoy 2017; OECD 2020). Nevertheless, independent international assessments such as EUROSTAT (2016) indicate that while Irish students exhibit higher educational achievement compared to other countries, educational inequalities persist.

Although Ireland's performance has increased noticeably since 2009, the International Social Justice Index ranked Ireland 29th out of 41 countries with regard to equitable education (ISJI. 2019: 42). The evidence demonstrates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to underachieve in education compared to their more affluent peers (Devine and Li 2013; Bergin *et al.* 2015). Progression rates to higher education for working class students remain at less than 20% despite years of interventions to raise the educational aspirations and outcomes of disadvantaged children (Government of Ireland 2019).

The policies implemented by successive Irish governments, while achieving some success, have not resulted in the level of reduction in educational inequality that was envisaged. So why then, despite the many policies, strategies, and interventions implemented particularly over the last thirty years, do Irish working-class students continue to underachieve academically compared to their more affluent peers? This

chapter will explore the discourse on education and educational disadvantage in Ireland and sketch the main policy themes before examining the causes and impact of educational disadvantage in the Irish context. It will then review the strategies implemented to counter the elements of educational disadvantage identified in the literature and discussed in the international context in Chapter Two.

3.2 The discourse in Ireland: Cherishing all the children equally?

The education discourse in Ireland has frequently focused on the topic of disadvantage, recognising the inequalities evident in the system. Ó’Riain (2015) reminds us that in 1962, children of manual workers were sixty-eight times less likely to enter university than children of the professional classes. The *Investment in Education Reports* (1965 and 1966) highlighted the lack of educational opportunity for poorer children. The rhetoric around the introduction of free second level education from 1967 promoted the goal of equal educational opportunity while recognising the barriers to such opportunity. Similarly, the 1980 White Paper on Educational Development sought to address the needs of the educationally disadvantaged. From the 1960s to the 1980s, there was a strong emphasis on expanding participation rates, while, in the 1980s and 1990s the emphasis was on combating social exclusion. In tandem with developments in Irish legislative and public policy, social justice advocates have been calling for the issue of educational disadvantage to be addressed, in order to create a more equal society. This would require changes in ‘the economic, cultural, political, and affective systems’ (Lynch and Baker 2005: 34). In line with international discourse linking educational disadvantage and poverty, the Committee on Educational Disadvantage (Educational Disadvantage Committee 2005) recommended that policies challenging educational disadvantage should be aligned with social and economic policies, concluding that educational

disadvantage cannot be eradicated, if the issues contributing to poverty are not addressed concurrently. The link between poverty and educational disadvantage continues to be of concern, as evidenced by the submissions to the Oireachtas Committee in 2018. But the dominant and continuing discourse has been that of ‘disadvantage’. For a long time, the ‘deficit model of disadvantage’ determined the approach, with the emphasis on under-performance rather than on structural inequalities. Nowadays, greater awareness is evident of the link between educational opportunities and wider economic, cultural and social policies (Oireachtas 2019).

As elsewhere, a clear and agreed definition of educational disadvantage has proven elusive (Boldt and Devine 1998). Many early definitions of educational disadvantage focused on young people leaving school early without formal qualifications (Crooks and Stokes 1987). This is a rather narrow conceptualisation of educational disadvantage, as it does not provide an in-depth explanation of what educational disadvantage is or how it operates. It is now recognised that definitions of educational disadvantage which focus on early school-leaving are symptoms of educational disadvantage and not definitions themselves (Kellaghan 2001; Tormey 2010).

Other attempts at defining educational disadvantage (Blandon and Gibbons 2006; Smyth and McCoy 2009a) adopt a broader conceptualisation which addresses students’ capacity to meet the demands, attitudes and approaches required by the formal education system based on economic, social, and cultural factors which impact on the students’ ability to derive the same benefits as their peers from education. This is evident in the following definition underpinning Ireland’s National Anti-Poverty Strategy which states that, ‘Educational Disadvantage is considered to result from discontinuities between the school and the non-school experience of children....such discontinuity...involves not only the child’s inability to cope with school but also the school’s inability to cope with the needs

of the disadvantaged child' (cited in Boldt *et al.* 1998: 10). A similar definition is provided by the Department of Education: 'A child may be regarded as disadvantaged at school, because of economic, cultural or social factors, the competencies that he or she brings to school differ from those valued in schools' (DES 2005). Such definitions of educational disadvantage focus on the student failing within the educational system, rather than the educational system failing the student.

Ireland's Education Act (1998) defines educational disadvantage as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education' (*The Education Act 1998*: Section 32(9)). While this definition identifies the impediments, as with the OECD definition, it stops short of offering clarity on how these factors interact to create educational disadvantage. Neither does this definition mention cultural factors nor how they interact with economic and social factors to create educational disadvantage.

Both O'Sullivan (1999) and Tormey (2010) capture the diversity of meanings by identifying six divergent uses of the term 'educational disadvantage'. These refer to personal and systemic features, namely: cognitive limitations of individuals, which assume because they are experiencing educational disadvantage that they possess limited intellectual capacity. Presumed personal deficits, which refer to the social capital of some students being at odds with the education offered in schools; presumed cultural deficits, which manifest as anti-school attitudes and schooling practices which are identified as culturally irrelevant; the material condition (wealth or poverty) of the pupil's community and the broader political economy, which fosters disadvantage for some students. These divergent uses illustrate both the complexity of the concept and the absence of an agreed definition.

The definition proposed by Kellaghan is expansive:

‘A child may be at disadvantage at school if because of factors in the child’s environment conceptualised as economic, cultural and social capital, the competencies and dispositions which he/she brings to school differ from the competencies and dispositions which are valued in schools and which are required to facilitate adaptation to school and school learning’ (Kellaghan 2001: 5)

It offers a broad interpretation of the causes, elements and manifestations of educational disadvantage and captures the complex and multifaceted nature of educational disadvantage. It clearly recognises the intersection of economic, social, and cultural factors contributing to educational disadvantage. It not only identifies the causes of disadvantage but also takes cognisance of the difficulties that students experience in school and at home. Yet, Tormey critiques this definition for its placing of the ‘locus of disadvantage in the factors in the child’s environment’ rather than in the political power which shapes what is ‘valued in school’ (2010: 191). Such criticism echoes the international focus on the political dimension of disadvantage and observations on the dominance of neo-liberal views on education provision.

The global financial crisis and consequent austerity policies in Ireland intensified the neo-liberal turn and helped ensure ‘competition, choice, autonomy and self-steering became preferred options for an Irish education system aligned with these new technologies of governmentality’ (Mooney Simmie *et al.* 2019: 59). However, recent ‘Action Plans for Education’ articulate a more inclusive approach using ‘education and training to break down barriers for groups at risk of exclusion and set the benchmark for social inclusion’ (DES. 2018: 8). The 2019 Education Action Plan *‘Empowering through Learning’* states that ‘we can be measured as a society by how we look after our most vulnerable and by the way we treat and respect each other. Within the education and training sector, we can

influence this in many ways' (DES 2019a: 8).

As the definition proposed by Kellaghan (2001) demonstrates, educational disadvantage is complex and multifaceted. Intersectionality helps understand how these various elements interact to produce educational disadvantage. Chapter Two illustrated how intersectionality (IS) elucidates how multiple social identities (for example, race, class, gender, ability) are created, justified, and perpetuated. IS interrogates how socially constructed identities intersect with macro social structures and systems at the micro level of the individual's lived experience to reveal hierarchies of interconnecting systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Intersectionality illuminates how the arrangement of power and inequality in social structures such as law and public policy including education policy, influence the lives of individuals experiencing inequality. Awareness of the intersectional nature of disadvantage and inequality in Ireland has increased and influenced the discourse on social issues. The campaigns prior to referenda on legislation regarding abortion (2018) and marriage equality (2015) were replete with the language of intersectionality (McKimmons and Caffrey 2021). The Department of Education's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Consultation Advisory Group advocates an intersectional approach. Similarly, a recent twitter thread by An Taisce advocates intersectional environmentalism. Lynch (2018) identified how the relational nature of macro, meso, and micro level barriers are producing and reproducing educational inequality.

While the Irish state has made progress in making the educational system more egalitarian, the intersectional nature of these barriers needs to be addressed to create equality in the Irish educational system. Public policy on housing, health, education and social welfare need to be aligned to achieve equality in Irish society in general, and educational equality in particular (Lynch 2018). Examples of the influence of intersectional analysis in public policy include how nationalism and multiculturalism

intersect in the Irish curriculum to address racism in Irish society (Bryan 2009). The intersection of COVID-19 policy with prejudice and discrimination against children in policies to deal with the pandemic in Ireland (Adami and Dineen 2021).

In the Irish context, intersectionality has been employed to examine a range of specific educational issues. Examples include examining gender and diversity in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), (Heinz *et al.* 2021) and giving a voice to working class women through community education (O'Grady 2018). (Ryan 2019) applied an intersectional framework to examine how social class and disability converge to create disadvantage in higher education. These studies examine how multiple overlapping identities intersect to create complex inequality, oppression and power in the Irish educational system. However, although such studies reveal that educational disadvantage is a consequence of interrelated academic and socio-cultural factors, public policy to address educational disadvantage and widen access to higher education continues to be framed primarily as a social class issue. This is particularly evident in the widening access to higher education policy.

The HEA launched HEAR as a national scheme in 2009. HEAR employs economic, social and cultural factors to assess applicants. In practice however, the HEA employs a single identity marker i.e. social class as the primary indicator of educational disadvantage as is evident in targets to increase participation amongst 'semi-skilled and unskilled/manual workers (social class categories). These targets ignore the fact that educational disadvantage is a consequence of individuals' various identities which are influenced by economic, social, and cultural factors. Similarly, the 2018 DEIS Action Plan falls short of recognising an intersectional perspective and does not highlight the influence of poverty and homelessness, for example on educational disadvantage. The DEIS policy focuses on providing additional financial resources to primary and secondary schools to address the academic elements while largely ignoring the socio-cultural

elements which contribute to educational disadvantage. In doing so, the DEIS policy and HEAR scheme do not challenge the structural inequalities evident in the Irish educational system. The Higher Education Authority 2021 Consultation Paper on access to third level acknowledges the intersectional nature of educational disadvantage, stating that ‘access to higher education should be available to individuals independent of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances’ (DFHERIS 2021: 2).

Insights from intersectionality’s depiction of how the academic and socio-cultural elements of educational disadvantage at the micro level intersect with macro level structural elements reinforced this study’s aim to provide more nuanced and contextualised accounts of the lived experience of educational disadvantage, give voice to the marginalised, and in turn identify policies, schemes and interventions that might address these issues.

3.3 Public Policy/Interventions

In response to the growing awareness of the intersectional nature of educational disadvantage, a range of interventions has been put in place to tackle some dimensions and contemporary formulations of educational disadvantage. Some of the early measures include:

- The *Disadvantaged Area Scheme (DAS)* scheme introduced in 1984 (providing extra teaching posts, book rental schemes, additional capitation grants and a home/school liaison grant).
- Since 1991 secondary schools with designated disadvantaged status have been eligible for the *Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL)*.
- The *School Development and Planning (SDP)* initiative, operating at

second level since 1999, aims to assist disadvantaged schools in developing strategies for combating educational disadvantage.

- Also in 1999, a *Stay-in-School Initiative* was put in place, aimed at keeping pupils in school to Leaving Cert.

An Educational Disadvantage Committee was established in April 2002 under section 32 of the Education Act (1998) in order to ‘advise the Minister on policies and strategies to be adopted to identify and correct educational disadvantage’. Its report ‘*Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage*’ signalled a change in direction in public policy on educational disadvantage. The report argued that educational disadvantage should be defined as ‘the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools’. DES (1998) failed to recognise the findings of national and international research, arguing that the most successful means of ameliorating educational disadvantage was through an integrated approach addressing all factors pertaining to educational disadvantage simultaneously.

After a detailed consultation process, a comprehensive strategy detailing how services, resources and supports were to be delivered was also published in 2005 in ‘*Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools – An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion*’ (DEIS). DEIS amalgamated the eight existing programmes into the School Support Programme (SSP). While previous interventions focused on providing additional human and financial resources to address early childhood education, numeracy and literacy, family and community partnerships e.g., Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) and School Completion Programme (SCP), DEIS reflected the contemporary discourses that educational disadvantage is multi-faceted requiring a multifaceted policy response. DEIS continues to form the overarching response to addressing educational disadvantage

in Ireland to date and has achieved success in raising the academic achievement of disadvantaged students (Weir *et al.* 2017).

In 2014, a new policy was adopted, ‘*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*’ (The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 – 2020). Unlike previous policies, this particular policy is a whole-of-government strategy operating across all government departments, agencies, statutory and non-statutory organisations that have a responsibility for children and young people. ‘*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*’ represents the first overarching national children’s policy framework for young people. Adopting the recommendations of the *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage report, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (2014)* calls for interdepartmental collaboration in addressing issues of poverty and educational disadvantage in a coordinated manner. The policy is guided by five overarching and interlinked national outcomes and under outcome (2) ‘*Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development*’, several key policies have been prioritised by central government to address educational disadvantage. In addition to DEIS, these include:

- A Framework for Junior Cycle (DES 2012a).
- The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011-2020 (DES 2011).
- The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, 2007-2016 (DSP 2007).
- The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 and the Action Plan for Education 2019.

The changing discourse with regard to educational disadvantage encapsulated in the 2016-2019 Action Plan for Education’s ambition to ‘develop a cohesive life-course approach to tackling educational disadvantage, with a policy statement on interaction

between measures to tackle educational disadvantage across the education continuum' (DES 2016: 30) is significant. Although verbose, this statement illustrates the more multi-faceted approach to tackling educational disadvantage. This is reinforced in the 2019 document's ambition to support disadvantaged students to reach their potential. The recent '*Roadmap for Social Inclusion*' states that 'education policy in recent years, particularly at primary and secondary level, has had a core objective of improving the social inclusion of children suffering disadvantage' (Government of Ireland 2020: 48). Thus, social inclusion is still a cause for concern. Poverty also remains of concern as evidenced in submissions to the Oireachtas Committee on Educational Disadvantage in 2018 and in assessments on the impact of COVID-19 (ESRI 2020; SJI 2020). Yet, taken as a whole, the policies and strategies discussed in this section demonstrate the increasing awareness of the complexity of educational disadvantage and a determination to counter it.

3.4 The Causes of Educational Disadvantage

In Ireland as in the other jurisdictions referred to in Chapter Two, the causes of educational disadvantage are multi-faceted. As highlighted in the previous section, poverty has been identified as a major cause of educational disadvantage (Frawley 2014). There is also evidence that socio-cultural resources or lack thereof, can also contribute to educational disadvantage, as students from less advantaged families (in terms of parental education, income and social class) do not participate in the kinds of social and cultural activities that may improve their academic achievement (McCoy *et al.* 2012a; Frawley 2014). As Lynch (2018) points out, cultural capital exhibits a significant mediating influence on educational outcomes in terms of respect and recognition, contributing to the lower educational achievement of poorer students compared to their middle-class peers.

Their educational attainment is affected by school culture and the social mix of students, as well as the curricular options and the pedagogical practices. Banks *et al.* (2018) assert that more needs to be done to support students who experience educational and social disadvantage. With regard to progression to higher education a number ‘of soft barriers’ compound the academic barriers which disadvantaged students must overcome. Hannon and O’Sullivan (2018) refer to impoverished availability of information and guidance. Scanlon *et al.* (2019a) refer to a sense of ‘university entitlement’ exhibited by young people from middle-class backgrounds but which is absent among their working-class peers. Their study highlights subtle but significant barriers to progression. These include lack of role models (see section 3.8); lack of academic and social confidence; lack of familiarity with the HE system; negativestereotypes of the area in which they live; cost implications and concern about the social and relational dimensions of college.

The classed nature of education in Ireland reinforces disadvantage. Canny and Hamilton portray Ireland’s Leaving Certificate system as a mechanism, which perpetuates educational advantage and makes it difficult ‘for working-class students to compete and ultimately succeed’ (2018: 639). They highlight how ‘indirect measures’ (uniform costs, voluntary contributions and extracurricular expenses) can be used to discourage working-class students from applying to predominantly middle-class schools (Canny and Hamilton 2018: 641). They also refer to middle-class families’ ability to use economic capital for extra academic support. Similarly, Hamilton and Deegan see the reputational bias for high examination results and maintaining a good standard of discipline and conduct in middle-class schools ‘as vehicles for social class differentiation and cultural reproduction’ (2019: 1001). Their study illustrates that not only the academic factors reinforce disadvantage but show how ‘the social and cultural reproduction of hegemony and generational transfer of valuable capital is visible in friendship formation and choice’ (2019: 1012).

Beginning in the 1990's, attention turned to the educational system itself and the practices employed in schools (Smyth and McCoy 2009b; Frawley 2014). Socio-cultural characteristics and the social mix of schools have been explored to provide a more nuanced account of why some students derive less benefit from education than their peers. McCoy et al (2012b) and Frawley (2014) posit that teacher/student interactions function to produce a particular type of classroom climate, with students attending DEIS schools experiencing less positive interactions with teachers, compared to students in non-DEIS schools. The evidence suggests that factors such as teachers' perceptions and engagement with disadvantaged students can contribute to educational disadvantage (Lynch 2018).

In the international discussion, teacher/student engagement was shown to be an important factor contributing to countering educational disadvantage. Smyth *et al.* (2015) and Frawley (2014) concur with this position, citing the importance of teacher/student engagement on successful academic outcomes for disadvantaged students. Furthermore, (Lynch 2018) recommends that positive, supportive and non-discriminatory attitudes and expectations among teachers are central to improving the academic achievement of students experiencing disadvantage. This realignment in the discourse on educational disadvantage has implications for public policy on educational disadvantage, as it shines a light on school practices, and how they may contribute to educational disadvantage.

3.5 The Impact of Educational Disadvantage

The ramifications of educational disadvantage continue to be evident in Ireland despite the major policy initiatives and developments in the Irish education system, ranging from *The Investment in Education Report* (1965) to the Departmental guidance on supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage (Barry 2014; Loxley *et al.* 2014). The emergence of the Covid- 19 pandemic has further disadvantaged this cohort of students (Mohan *et al.* 2020). It has long been recognised in Ireland that access to

education is significantly impeded by socio-economic factors (Coolahan 1981; Raftery and Hout 1993). The Higher Education Authority asserted in 1995 that students from the lower socioeconomic groups are significantly less likely to even complete second level education (HEA 1995). Despite such indicators, early school leaving is still a cause for concern with Social Justice Ireland reiterating a ‘need for a continued focus on this cohort (of early school leavers) and on addressing educational disadvantage’ (SJI 2020). Disadvantaged students who remain in education do not show the same rates of progression as more affluent students.

The New Entrant Reports (HEA 2012; 2016; 2017) on progression to third level education indicate that fewer than one in five new entrants are from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds. The HEA’s *Review of Progress on the National Access Plan* shows that only 13.5% of the total number of new entrants to higher education come from DEIS schools (HEA 2019b: 19). The data demonstrates that disadvantaged students are not achieving the same outcomes as more affluent students. CSO statistics show that the median earned income for those with a PhD was nearly five times higher than the median for a person with no education (CSO 2020). The impact of education on earnings is particularly pronounced in Ireland.

The OECD’s latest *Education at a Glance* report on Ireland shows that ‘adults with a bachelor’s degree earn on average 81% more than those with upper secondary education, compared to 44% more on average across OECD countries’ (OECD 2019). The Country Note also shows that ‘the probability of being employed is generally greater for adults who hold a tertiary qualification, even more so in Ireland than on average across OECD countries’ (OECD 2019). A high correlation has also been found between low levels of education and crime. The CSO’s *Employment, Education and other Outcomes* report shows that the highest level of education for more than half (57%) of offenders up to May

2019 was the Junior Certificate or less (CSO 2020). Submissions to the Oireachtas Committee also highlighted the links between educational disadvantage and crime, with the CSO stating its belief that ‘breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage is imperative in educational disadvantage and crime. The Irish Prison Reform report asserts that addressing the issue of wider social exclusion may reduce crime’ (Oireachtas 2019: 5). Growing awareness of these social and economic impacts of educational disadvantage led to various strategies to offset disadvantage being implemented as the next sections will show.

3.6 Countering Educational Disadvantage

Travers et al, reiterate the inter-related factors associated with underachievement:

‘the factors which can contribute to a pupil under achieving at school are complex, involving a myriad of causes: family situations; parental education; economic poverty; poor housing; ethnic or cultural differences; rural isolation; poor attendance; pupil-teacher ratios; under-resourcing of certain schools; the suitability of the curriculum; pedagogy and assessment practices and policies in education’ (2010:29).

Children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage often do not reach their academic potential (Smyth and McCoy 2009b; Frawley 2014) and counter measures are required. These involve both curricular and non-curricular strategies. In 2004, the Educational Disadvantage Committee engaged Archer and Weir (2005) to conduct a review of the international literature on educational disadvantage to inform future policy responses to address educational disadvantage in Ireland. This review identified several key elements

contributing to educational disadvantage which needed to be addressed. These factors include:

- 1) Raising Expectations
- 2) Parental Involvement
- 3) Class Size Reduction
- 4) Improving numeracy and literacy

In their most recent review '*Addressing Educational Disadvantage*' Weir *et al.* (2017) demonstrated that the factors identified in the 2005 study continue to be pertinent factors contributing to educational disadvantage. Various interventions have been put in place to address these academic and socio- cultural factors, generating mixed results. Such interventions have targeted a range of factors which will be discussed in the following sections.

3.7 Inside the School

Because educational credentials are so highly valued in Irish society, schools prioritise performance in public exams (Canny and Hamilton 2018). School culture, curricular options, assessment practices, allocation of human and financial resources generally reflect this concern with exam performance (Banks *et al.* 2018; Scanlon *et al.* 2019a). Nevertheless, there is some evidence of general and specific actions by school to reduce educational disadvantage (Hannon and O'Sullivan 2018; McCoy *et al.* 2019; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2019a). This section discusses some of those themes.

3.7.1 Class Size

Chapter Two showed that students exposed to smaller classes have demonstrated a variety of benefits across a number of indicators. The impact of class size on educational attainment has been recognised in Irish educational policy and strategies countering

educational disadvantage. For example, concessionary teaching posts were introduced under the Designated Areas Scheme (DAS) in the 1980s with class sizes also being reduced under the Breaking the Cycle (BTC) and Giving Children an Even Break (GCEB) in primary schools. Archer and Weir recommend ‘finding innovative ways of providing low-achieving children with one-to-one tuition’ (2005: 32) to improve their academic achievement. However, to date class size reduction have only been implemented in primary schools.

The commitment to reducing class sizes in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students was further endorsed under DEIS in 2005 and continues to be a central element in efforts to reduce educational inequality in Irish schools today but is more common at primary than at secondary level (DEIS 2017). The 2015 review of DEIS concurs with the literature on the benefits of class size reduction strategies in targeting disadvantaged students but highlights the difficulty in differentiating the impact of individual elements of a multi-faceted approach such as DEIS (Smyth *et al.* 2015). The issue of class size is not confined to DEIS schools. The ASTI commissioned research on class size in the Junior Cycle in 2020. The key findings underline that class sizes in Irish second-level schools remain higher than EU or OECD averages (ASTI 2020). The impact of teacher/student ratios on academic achievement is a salient theme in the discourse on educational disadvantage. While class size reduction strategies have been implemented in primary schools under DEIS, teacher/student ratios at secondary level have remained unchanged. Failure to address teacher/student ratios at secondary level limits academic outcomes for marginalised students, undermining the progress these students achieved at primary level. The evaluation of the PISA 2018 data by the ERC in 2020 provides evidence that the failure to reduce class size at secondary level has resulted in DEIS students underachieving compared to non-DEIS students across a range of subjects.

Educational policy and in particular the DEIS policy should prioritise identifying potential strategies and interventions to counter teacher/student ratios at secondary level to reduce the attainment gap between DEIS and non-DEIS students.

3.7.2 The Curricular Dimension

The content and delivery of the second-level curriculum in Ireland evolves continually, reflecting educational developments and government priorities. Changes range from the introduction of new examination subjects such as Computer Science and PE to the institutionalisation of new approaches to teaching and learning with the new Junior Certificate syllabus enabling school/teacher agency regarding the curriculum. However, curricular issues continue to impinge on efforts to counter educational disadvantage as Byrne and McCoy state that ‘social-class and the socioeconomic backgrounds of young people influence not only the probability of making it through the education system but also their location in the curriculum, with implications for future transitions’ (2017: 68). Several issues have arisen, DEIS schools were found to be much more likely to provide the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (Banks and Smyth 2015) and much less likely to provide Transition Year (TY) (Clerkin 2013) than non-DEIS schools. The types of subjects provided within junior and senior cycle vary, ‘with working-class/disadvantaged schools more likely to provide technological subjects and less likely to provide Physics or Chemistry’ (Smyth *et al.* 2015: 69). It has also been found that ‘students in DEIS schools are only a third as likely as their counterparts in non-DEIS schools to take higher level English and only 40% as likely to take higher Irish or Mathematics’ (Smyth *et al.* 2015: 66). Resource issues reinforce the divide, ICT use has been found to vary between DEIS and non-DEIS schools (McCoy *et al.* 2016). Similarly, a study carried out during the Covid-19 lockdown found that that nearly half of the schools experienced difficulties with both high-speed broadband and digital devices and

these issues were more prominent in DEIS schools (ESRI 2020).

The range of subjects and courses offered in schools and the subject choices made by students can reinforce educational disadvantage. Byrne and McCoy (2017) assert that students from working class backgrounds are most likely to opt for the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Iannelli and Smyth found that in Ireland ‘having studied Languages and Business is associated with higher chances of entering a service/intermediate class position’ (2017: 736). The 2015 ‘*Poverty and Social Inclusion in Education*’ review of DEIS schools found that the social composition of the school influences the types of subjects provided within junior and senior cycle. School practices are also influential, for example, DEIS schools are significantly more likely to use streaming than non-DEIS schools, with 40 per cent of DEIS schools using some kind of between-class ability grouping compared with 13% of non-DEIS schools (Smyth *et al.* 2015: 63). Students who take all or most subjects at Ordinary level for the Leaving Certificate will not gain the required points for entry to university. Thus, such curricular differentiation can perpetuate social class differences.

3.7.3 Literacy and Numeracy

Literacy and numeracy are key factors in educational progression as the discussion in Chapter Two indicated. This is also the case in Ireland (Williams *et al.* 2009; Frawley 2014). Findings from the ‘*Growing Up in Ireland Report*’ (ESRI 2016) indicate that students from lower social backgrounds exhibit lower literacy and numeracy proficiency compared to students from higher social classes, higher income and more highly educated groups. The ‘*National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy*’ stresses the importance of literacy and numeracy provision as key educational components for enhancing the educational outcomes for students experiencing educational disadvantage in its many forms. Mastering literacy and numeracy is one of the most important skill sets that

education can impart to students and ‘no child should leave without having mastered these skills to the best of their abilities... ensuring that all young people acquire these skills is one of the greatest contributions to achieving social justice and equity in our country’ (DES 2011: 5).

Concern about literacy permeates the various interventions aimed at countering educational disadvantage in Ireland and has led to change in initial teacher education programmes, with a clear focus on literacy built into their accreditation requirements. Huge emphasis has always been placed on literacy and numeracy strategies at primary level but more recently, greater attention has been paid at second level. Significantly, the National Strategy *‘Numeracy and Literacy: Learning for Life’* declares that ‘all teachers should be teachers of literacy’ (DES 2011: 47). This is a clear policy statement, placing the responsibility for literacy within the ambit of secondary as well as primary teachers. A framework of ‘Key Skills’ has been developed to underpin subjects and syllabi at both Junior and Senior Cycles. At Senior Cycle, the key skill identified as ‘Communicating’ features ‘competence and confidence in literacy as an essential basic skill for all learners’ (NCCA 2009: 21). A set of specific targets has been identified in literacy and numeracy for DEIS schools, linked to the DEIS Plan 2017. The *‘Action Plan for Education 2019’* pledged programmes to help reduce the gap in literacy achievement between pupils in DEIS and non-DEIS schools, thus acknowledging that gaps persist. Studies on Irish schools demonstrate that social class is a significant factor in attainment in mathematics. Students who attended DEIS schools have a significantly lower mean score in mathematics in comparison to students in non-DEIS schools. This was the case in 2007 (Dooley and Corcoran) and continues to be so, as the 2018 PISA performance indicates. Students who attended DEIS schools have a significantly lower PISA mean score in mathematics in comparison to students in non-DEIS schools (McKeown *et al.* 2019). However, there is some evidence of improvement. The rate of increase in scores

was significantly higher ($p < .001$) in DEIS schools than in non-DEIS schools over the period 2002-2016' (Weir and Kavanagh 2018).

In a study of how mathematics was taught at junior cycle, Lyons et al (2003) indicated an over reliance on didactic and transmission models of teaching mathematics. Their findings concur with international studies, in that 'one's experience of learning mathematics is mediated by the track, stream, set or band to which one is allocated with teacher's approach reflecting the generally low expectations of the bottom stream' (2003: 222). Introduction of the new Junior Mathematics syllabus indicates intent to overcome such issues as 'Project Maths' has had a significant impact on approaches to teaching and learning mathematics in schools and on students' attitudes towards mathematics' (Sheil and Kelleher 2017: 170). The aim of Project Maths is to 'develop essential problem-solving skills for higher education and the workplace' (NCCA 2016). The socio-economic profile of Irish schools remains a salient factor in numeracy outcomes and gaps persist between students in DEIS/SSP and non-DEIS schools. The Project Maths review found that:

- In all three categories of engaging teaching, students in SSP schools have significantly lower scores on overall mathematics than do students in non-SSP schools (Shiel and Kelleher 2017: 67).
- 'Students in SSP schools under DEIS liked learning mathematics less and had lower mathematics confidence than their counterparts in non-SSP schools' (Shiel and Kelleher 2017; xviii).

Thus, although improving the numeracy and literacy achievement of disadvantaged students is a central element of the DEIS programme, these students continue to

underachieve compared to students in non-DEIS schools. The achievement gap is fifteen points between students from unskilled and semi-skilled households and students from higher professional households in numeracy and literacy tests (Government of Ireland 2019). While the DEIS programme is achieving success in raising numeracy and literacy achievement for disadvantaged students, the need for targeted interventions persists. This has come into sharp focus with the release of the latest PISA results by the Educational Research Centre, which demonstrates ‘that 28% of students in DEIS schools are failing to meet the basic level of competency in mathematics compared to 12% of students in non-DEIS schools’ (2020: 31).

Performance in international assessments such as PISA and evaluations such as TIMSS are given high credence in Ireland and intensifies the focus on literacy and numeracy. Ireland’s overall PISA performance, especially in 2018, is high with the percentage of low-performing students in all three domains lower than the average across all OECD countries (DES 2019b). Importantly, progress has been recorded in reducing the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Between 2002 and 2016, there was a narrowing of the achievement gap in Junior Certificate examination (JCE) achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. As measured by the overall performance scale (OPS) ‘The average annual rate of increase in non-DEIS schools from 2002 to 2016 was 0.19 OPS points, but was significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) for DEIS schools, at an average increase of 0.33 OPS points per year’ (Weir and Kavanagh 2018: 10). Nonetheless, gaps associated with educational disadvantage are evident. In 2018:

- Students in the highest ESCS quartile in Ireland achieved a significantly higher reading literacy scores (by 74.8 score points) compared with those in the lowest quartile.
- Students in DEIS schools in Ireland had an average reading literacy score that is 51.2 points below that of students in non-

DEIS schools.

- Reading for enjoyment was significantly less frequent among students in DEIS schools (relative to students in non-DEIS schools). (McKeown *et al.* 2019).

The most recent analysis of PISA 2018 results (ERC 2020) indicates that 22% of students in DEIS schools had very basic reading skills (defined by OECD as likely to be inadequate for future study and work) compared to 9% of students in non-DEIS schools.

3.8 Raising Aspirations and Expectations

As outlined in Chapter Two, the expectations and aspirations of students, parents and teachers impact significantly on educational outcomes. Student aspirations are influenced by home, school and society, as Lynch asserts ‘children in Irish schools are well aware of the economic and social pecking order, and their relative chances of educational success ... Their aspirations and hopes are adjusted accordingly’ (2018: 7). The societal framing and perceived constriction of educational aspirations continues in Ireland. Scanlon *et al.* (2019a) refer to ‘territorial stigmatisation’ felt by disadvantaged students. They also point to the importance of a sense of ‘belonging’, both for HE access and retention. These factors impact on student aspirations and structured interventions are needed to overcome them.

Kellaghan (2001) identified parents’ holding of and communicating high academic aspirations and expectations as a key component of educational cultural capital. Weir *et al.* (2017) draw attention to the importance of both the obvious and subtle forms of parental influence, arguing that maintaining high expectations of children strongly influences student achievement. They conclude from their literature review that ‘parental expectations yielded the largest impact on academic achievement’ (2017: 29). Importance has also been attached to the communication of parental aspirations and expectations for

their children. This communication can take verbal form but is also reinforced (as evidenced in chapter four) by the learning/developmental materials in the home, the behaviours modelled and the interests and activities supported by the parents (Scanlon *et al.* 2019a).

Recognition of the importance of student expectations and aspirations is supported by the DEIS plan's commitment to ensuring 'students' expectations are justified, attainable and enabling for them to meet their potential' (2017: 28). Yet, disadvantaged students often doubt their own potential. Scanlon *et al.* found that 'while young people liked the ideal of college life, this was countered by a lack of confidence in their own ability to access and participate fully in higher education' (2019a: 353). Raising the aspirations of disadvantaged students requires more than just adopting a philosophy that disadvantaged students can and will progress to third level education. It requires pragmatic strategies that provide relevant information and promote positive teacher expectations of students.

Smith (2020) reiterates that the quality of interaction with teachers is strongly related to young people's expectations. McCoy *et al.* (2012b) examined the social characteristics of Irish student's vis á vis academic achievement. They concluded that academic achievement is particularly influenced by teacher expectations and engagement, which results in a particular school climate in disadvantaged schools, as students attending DEIS schools do not experience the active learning evident in non-DEIS schools. As a result, researchers have begun to examine the practices found in DEIS schools in terms of teacher perceptions/expectations and engagement with disadvantaged students to explain disparities in educational outcomes by social class. According to Frawley (2014), the evidence suggests that teachers adopt more proactive teaching styles and engagement with students in non-DEIS schools compared to DEIS schools (McCoy *et al.* 2012b).

As Chapter Two illustrated, studies have found that the nature of engagement between teachers and students, and students' connection with teachers on an emotional level can be a deciding factor in academic achievement for disadvantaged students. In her submission to an Oireachtas Committee, Lynch asserted that 'being working class also leads to misrecognition of one's capabilities and lower expectations among teachers which compounds the impact of lack of resources' (2018: 18). Weir and Kavanagh concluded that 'the finding of the earlier review that teacher expectations tend to be lower than warranted by independent outcome data for students from poor backgrounds was confirmed by the current review (2017: 57). At subject level, this is also significant as at Leaving Certificate level, there are significant differences between DEIS and non-DEIS schools in access to, and take-up of, higher level subjects so high expectations for students also play a crucial role within senior cycle (Smyth *et al.* 2015; ERC 2020). Many of the earlier schemes aimed at countering disadvantage in Ireland failed to include specific interventions to raise teacher expectations of what disadvantaged students can achieve. However, more recent interventions such as the DEIS Plan 2017 take cognisance of these issues and promote professional development and awareness among teachers. Efforts to raise expectations and aspirations seem to be beginning to pay off with Weir and Kavanagh attributing some of the increased take-up of higher level Leaving Cert subjects in DEIS schools to 'raised expectations among themselves and their teachers.' (2018: 20).

Lynch argues that 'one important strategy in implementing and delivering tangible educational career advice and guidance provided to disadvantaged students has arisen in recent years in the Irish context, that of the 'whole school' approach to the delivery of career guidance (ACCS *et al.* 2012). Such an approach should, in theory, ensure that all students have access to career guidance that meets their needs and that this guidance is in depth and comprehensive, and also fosters a culture of positive teacher expectations

for all students. The ‘whole school’ approach, while commendable, lacks specific detail on how teachers should incorporate career guidance into lesson plans or allocate time in class to career guidance with specific students. Furthermore, unless individual schools and teachers coordinate their career guidance activities with particular students, the potential exists that some students may not receive adequate support. The evidence on the effectiveness of the ‘whole school’ approach to date is limited (Hearne *et al.* 2016). This would suggest that there is a need for further research on career guidance and counselling strategies, and the implementation of interventions particularly for disadvantaged students. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015) identifies raising aspirations as a key policy goal. As with the DEIS policy, this plan identifies Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) as a key driver of raising aspirations. However, neither policy explores the potential benefits of collaboration on this issue. When considered in the context of cuts to career guidance hours in DEIS schools, both DEIS and the HEA should explore potential collaborative strategies and interventions to enhance existing career guidance provision in these schools. This study examines an intervention, which champions individual career guidance and mentoring, strategies which help raise student aspirations.

Bruce and Bridgeland (2014) argue that the lack of role models within their own families and their broader communities and social networks impacts negatively on students’ aspirations and likelihood of going to college. This has been identified by McCoy *et al.* (2014b) as a significant barrier to progressing to university for working-class students. To counter this, several of the pre-entry access programmes discussed below have implemented mentoring initiatives to raise the aspirations of under-represented groups in higher education. Current college students are enlisted to mentor secondary school

students, as they explore their higher education options. These mentors provide first-hand experience of selecting courses of study, information on point's requirements and course specific requirements and personal perspectives of studying at university. O'Sullivan *et al.* (2017a) have demonstrated that these mentoring programmes have positive effects on raising students' aspirations to progress to college, as they equip students with the support needed to overcome the barriers to progression.

3.9 Parental Involvement

The issue of limited parental involvement as a contributing factor to educational disadvantage has long been recognised in the Irish context. Various explanations for the lack of parental involvement have been offered. Several academics highlight disparities between the home culture of the family and that of the school/teacher as a significant issue (Travers *et al.* 2010). For example, some parents exhibit lower levels of engagement and involvement with schools/teachers based on their own negative experiences and perception of school. Fleming argues that 'parents' lack of involvement can arise from confusion as to what is meant by involvement, in that their involvement is not specifically defined or linked to particular outcomes' (1995; cited in Travers *et al.* 2010). This was reiterated by Scanlon *et al.* (2019b) who refer to 'a sense of detachment' on the part of some parents which they state 'did not indicate a lack of interest on the parents' part, but rather a lack of familiarity with the educational system and how best to help their children navigate their way through it (2019b: 17). Reviews conducted by Archer and Weir (2005) and Weir *et al.* (2017) emphasise the importance of parental involvement for disadvantaged students whose situation can be improved through increasing parental involvement with homework, providing resources and enhancing parents' own academic skill sets. The literature also highlights the importance of involving parents in classroom activities such as assisting teachers,

consultation on policy issues and serving on boards of management (Weir *et al.* 2017). Documents ranging from the ‘*Anti-Poverty Strategy*’ of 1997 to the ‘*Action Plans for Education*’ 2018 and 2019 have promoted the rhetoric of parental involvement and engagement and various strategies and interventions have been implemented. Since the establishment of the Rutland scheme in the 1980’s, parental involvement has been considered an important contributing factor to countering educational disadvantage. Schemes such as the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) and the School Completion Project (SCP) are dedicated to not only increasing parental involvement but also, addressing the issues on the nature of parental involvement identified in the international literature. Drawing on international research on the benefits of parental and familial involvement in their children’s education, the Educational Disadvantage Committee argued that ‘for a child to engage meaningfully in the education process, parents and families must be supported in being strongly involved in their child’s education, both by the school and the community’ (Educational Disadvantage Committee 2005:21). Conaty (2002) concluded that providing support to parents to enable them to take a more proactive and beneficial role in helping children with homework had become a feature of the HSCL scheme. However, a recent HSCL (Home School Community Liaison) survey found that ‘42% of post-primary coordinators indicated that the scheme had had no impact at all on parental involvement in school activities, compared to just 4% of primary coordinators’ (Weir *et al.* 2018). This is despite the fact that, as meta-analytic research by Weir *et al.* (2017) demonstrates a significant relationship exists between academic achievement and parental involvement programmes.

Chapter Two showed that, internationally, socio-economic status (SES), mediates both parental involvement and student achievement. This is also the case in Ireland. Although

parents have been formally involved in Boards of Management since the 1970s and schools are urged to have Parents' Associations, parental involvement is varied and unpredictable. Furthermore, parents in Ireland tend to have high levels of informal involvement in their child's education, but formal contact between the home and school usually involves parents taking more passive or reactive roles (Brown *et al.* 2020). Parents in disadvantaged areas tend not to be as involved in school activities compared to middle-class parents. But as Drudy and Lynch point out, that lack of attendance at meetings etc. is not an accurate reflection of interest. In their view, 'this problem relates to parents' educational experiences during their own school time' (1993: 155). Scanlon *et al.* (2019b) also found that parents' involvement was strongly influenced by their own school experience.

3.10 Strategies to widen participation in Higher Education

Equity of access to higher education has been a fundamental principle of Irish education policy for over three decades. This principle underpins the '*National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education*' (2015 – 2019). The vision of the plan is 'to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population' (HEA 2015: 7). The National Plan recognises that some cohorts of the population experience economic, social and cultural barriers to participation in higher education and requires universities and institutes of technology to implement policies and interventions to counter these barriers so that under-represented groups may enjoy equitable access to higher education in line with their more affluent peers. It sets out the key aims, goals, and targets for all higher education institutions to ensure that all individuals, irrespective of their socio-economic background should and can progress to higher education if they wish. It also imposes obligations on third level institutions to set targets and provide evidence of widening

participation initiatives. Competitive funding streams are provided by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for HEIs to design and implement evidence-based widening participation initiatives. Even before the recent financial incentives and reporting obligations, Irish universities had made progress in promoting access to higher education. In 2018 a progress review of the National Access Plan was published which acknowledged that while significant increases had been achieved in participation rates for under-represented groups, salient gaps remain with regard to students from the semi-skilled socio-economic group and the traveller community. Based on the review the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 -2019 has been extended until December 2021. In addition, a consultation document has been published inviting interested parties and stakeholders to participate in a consultation process for a new plan rooted in principles of equity and social inclusion. Feedback from this process will underpin the National Access Plan 2022 - 2026. This plan will focus on widening participation in higher education, for groups still under-represented in higher education, particularly students from the semi-skilled and traveller community. The new plan seeks to ensure that the student body in higher education is representative of the diversity of Irish society in general.

While HEI's have achieved success in widening access to higher education for underrepresented groups, this success has largely been framed in terms of numerical targets. The HEAR scheme employs economic, social and cultural indicators suggesting an intersectional definition of educational disadvantage. Employing numerical targets alone, does not facilitate a deeper examination of the target cohort, specific locations of disadvantage and sub-groups within these cohorts. Numerical targets fail to address how the various elements of educational disadvantage intersect to create hierarchies or different levels of educational disadvantage. In particular, numerical targets to measure the effectiveness of the HEAR scheme disregard the complex intersectional nature of

educational disadvantage.

Goal 3.3 of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 – 2019. Goal 3.2 requires the HEA and HEI's to generate statistical data to identify areas of disadvantaged students and track progression and retention rates at third level to inform policy development. Goal 3.6 recognises the importance of including the voices of marginalised students in policy design and implementation. However, there is no connection made between these two data sets or how both the qualitative and quantitative data intersect. Combining these data sets could potentially reveal more contextualised and nuanced accounts of the issues and reasons preventing this particular cohort of students, progressing to and graduating from higher education.

The HEA's *'New Entrants'* evaluations of students entering higher education consistently demonstrate that students from lower SEG backgrounds are under-represented in higher education. Furthermore, these evaluations also indicate that if disadvantaged students do progress to higher education, they are more likely to progress to Institutes of Technology and onto lower points courses compared to students that are more affluent (HEA 2012; 2015; 2017; 2019). This resonates with independent research that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are still less likely to progress to higher education (Scanlon *et al.* 2019a) than students from affluent backgrounds. Financial, social, and cultural factors have been identified as causing lack of progression (Donnelly and Evans 2016; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2019b). Irish universities have implemented pre-and post-entry policies and interventions to raise the academic achievement and progression to higher education of disadvantaged students. The focus of this study is on pre-entry strategies because they are believed to increase 'college confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations', resulting in increased participation (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2017a).

Pre-entry activities vary in nature and structure across Irish universities but are

underpinned by a commitment to addressing the economic, social and cultural factors that mediate academic achievement and progression to higher education. Under the *'National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030'* all Irish universities have implemented schools outreach programmes which are intended to address these barriers to higher education. These programmes have several strands, which, individually and cumulatively, address particular academic and/or socio-cultural barriers to accessing higher education and are outlined below.

The academic supports include courses in mathematics and science subjects to raise academic achievement. Some colleges recruit their students to volunteer at homework clubs to tutor second level students and help them prepare for the state examinations. For example, University College Cork operates the UCC PLUS+ Schools Outreach Programme in partnership with DEIS schools (31 schools in Cork, Kerry and Waterford) to enhance students' academic performance and progression to higher education. NUI Galway offers a secondary school programme, providing a study skills seminar and introduction to various faculties and courses, thereby enhancing these students' study skills and their knowledge of the various courses available to them in higher education.

An interesting development is the College Connect programme implemented by Maynooth University. College Connect is a HEA funded three-year PATH 3 (Programme for Access to Higher Education) project which aims to admit 400 additional students from specific target groups (e.g., socio-economically disadvantaged students, Irish Travellers, one parent families, care experienced young people, people with disabilities, refugees, etc.) who are under-represented in higher education. In conjunction with the MEND higher education cluster, College Connect seeks to change who goes to college by working collaboratively to create a third level student population that reflects and respects the diversity of the region. Trinity College's Access Programme uses a three-

strand approach: (1) Mentoring by university undergraduates or graduates also from a low SES background. (2) Pathways to college activities, for example, visits to a higher-education campus and information sessions (3) Participation in Leadership through Service projects.

DCU's Outreach activities involve 21 schools aiming to bring students from college awareness to college readiness. It has a Transition Year programme designed to increase student engagement in education, raise motivation and career aspirations and to increase progression to third level. It also uses Access Ambassadors drawn from previous cohorts to act as mentors and advisors to aspiring students. UCD employs similar strategies including its '*Future You*' mentoring scheme and tailored activities about life in college and the various entry routes and requirements.

The University of Limerick operates a Study Club deliberately situated in the community. The Access Campus Study Club, the focus of this study, goes beyond the traditional homework club model, providing not only tuition in academic subjects and outreach activities but also personal and social development through mentoring and guidance activities delivered by a team of volunteer students from the university. The programmes outlined above illustrate how universities actively help to overcome the access barriers outlined earlier. The Irish government continues to support such approaches.

Since 2016/7, PATH 3 has supported HEIs to form effective partnerships within their regions and show evidence of how they engage with local DEIS schools, further education providers, community and voluntary groups and local initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage. €7.5 million was allocated for the first three years and in December 2020 a further three-year allocation of €7.5 million was announced. A commendable feature of PATH 3 is the focus on students in primary schools, thus recognising that educational disadvantage begins at entry to the educational system and continues throughout the

educational life cycle. This move towards joined up thinking on educational disadvantage and interventions to address disadvantage at all levels in the educational system is an important step forward in efforts to ameliorate educational disadvantage and equalise educational opportunities for all students.

For many working-class students there is often a lack of role models both within their own families and their broader communities and social networks who have progressed to college. McCoy et al. (2014b) and Scanlon et al. (2019a) have identified this as a significant barrier to progressing to university for working-class students. The pre-entry access programmes listed above help raise the aspirations of under-represented groups in higher education by linking them to role models from their own communities. The earlier literature review indicates that for many working-class parents, being involved in the education of their children can be challenging. Irish universities address this issue through parent information evenings and parent programmes to bridge the gap in parents' knowledge about higher education, funding etc. Evidence indicates that there is a need for these interventions (Scanlon *et al.* 2019b) to enhance parents' knowledge of third level education and position them to be better able to support their children's progression to higher education. Such programmes build the social and cultural capital of these parents by providing information sessions and parents' programmes to increase their knowledge and familiarity with the higher education system and the application process. The literature also identifies academic underachievement as a salient issue for under-represented groups in higher education (Canny and Hamilton 2018). Subject specific tuition, particularly in literacy and numeracy and class size reduction strategies have proven successful in raising academic achievement. Irish universities recognise the value of such interventions, and in many instances, as shown above, collaborate with their linked schools to provide support in raising academic achievement. The interventions to

increase participation in third level are being aligned with the factors contributing to educational disadvantage and non-progression to higher education identified in the literature. They recognise the need for both academic and non-academic approaches with ‘black-box’ interventions becoming the norm. The interventions are evidence of more co-ordinated and collaborative efforts between the second and third level sectors of the Irish educational system to raise academic achievement and increase progression to higher education.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed both the discourse and actions around educational disadvantage in Ireland. Not surprisingly, the concerns echoed those discussed in the international context in Chapter Two. The chapter outlined a growing awareness, over time, of the complexity of educational disadvantage and an evolving understanding of the intersectional impact that class, family, social and economic policies and the learning environment have on educational opportunities.

The chapter found evidence of a range of approaches to countering educational disadvantage which initially focused on classroom issues but have evolved to adopt a more holistic approach, dealing with the social, cultural and economic as well as the academic dimensions of disadvantage. The DEIS programme in its various manifestations was shown to have significant impact but problems persist and as Weir and Kavanagh conclude ‘it is important to continue efforts to address the educational problems experienced by our most marginalised students’ (Weir and Kavanagh 2018: 25).

The strategies to counter educational disadvantage reviewed in this chapter focused on a number of issues. These issues can be categorised into socio-cultural and academic domains with actions being directed at both school and external contexts. Within schools, both general issues such as school culture and specific classroom and support actions are

being addressed. Successful interventions depicted above involved both academic and more expansive elements. One of the recurrent issues in the discourse on education in Ireland, and the resultant actions, is concern about the low numbers of disadvantaged students progressing to higher education. In order to address this, a range of strategies has been implemented involving nationally imposed obligations for institutions, contextual admissions schemes and outreach activities including access programmes designed and delivered by the various third level institutions. Such access programmes embody the academic and non-academic elements which this chapter and Chapter Two have found to be essential to measures aimed at countering educational disadvantage. Accordingly, the empirical element of the study will focus on examining the content, delivery and outcomes of the University of Limerick's Access Programme's Study Club across these socio-cultural and academic domains.

Chapter Four: Theoretical Perspectives

4.1 Introduction

While access to education has increased in many countries, the benefits of education are not spread equally across all socio-economic groups (Huang and Liang 2016). Various theories have been put forward to explain how disparities in access to economic, social and cultural capital mediate academic outcomes for less advantaged students. These theories have been employed to inform policies, strategies and interventions designed to raise the educational achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This chapter will consider some prominent theoretical frameworks employed by academics and policymakers to address educational disparities. Educational disadvantage is often framed as a social issue and examining the phenomenon from a social theory perspective may yield useful insights and provide potential answers to the question of educational disadvantage. This chapter will present three social theory perspectives that are common in research on education: Equality Theory, Capability Theory and Cultural Capital Theory. Each theory is reviewed and its application in research on education is considered before critiquing each theory's suitability to examine the structural or objective issues and individual or subjective issues identified in chapters two and three as contributing to educational disadvantage.

4.2 Equality

The concept of equality has its roots in the principle of justice. The relationship between equality and justice can be traced to the philosophical discussion of Plato and Aristotle. While Plato conceptualised justice as the relationship between individuals, Aristotle proposed two distinct forms of justice, general justice which is the sum of all social virtues, and particular justice which is concerned with equality. Particular justice has two

distinct forms, corrective justice that seeks to address interference with a particular form of equality, while distributive justice seeks to ensure the equal distribution of social goods amongst all members of society.

The fundamental concept underpinning liberal equality is ‘that people should in some sense have an equal chance to compete for social advantages’ (Baker *et al.* 2004:25). Liberal views of equality permit piecemeal changes without making radical changes to the structures and institutions that create inequality in the first place. The quest for social justice is underpinned by a concern for equality. Consequently, democratic societies seek to address the inequalities that arise in social and economic circumstances of individuals’ lives. As social and economic circumstances are dynamic, achieving absolute equality in society can never be fully achieved.

Mathital de Silva (2016) argues that equal protection of the law seeks to promote substantive equality in society. Substantive equality seeks to distribute resources to counter social disadvantage. Distributive justice plays an important role in achieving substantive equality, requiring the state to promote equality by distributing resources to those that are socially or economically disadvantaged. This requires the state to make decisions involving an intricate set of factors and balancing the rights of individuals.

According to Sen (1992: 22) ‘equal consideration for all may demand unequal treatment in favour of the disadvantaged’ to achieve substantive equality. One dominant approach to achieving substantive equality, is equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity directs the state to ensure that disadvantaged individuals have equal access to public goods such as a basic standard of living, healthcare, and education. Equality of opportunity is not taken to imply the same ideal as equality; it is not intended to propose creating an equal society where all citizens share resources equally. Rather equality of opportunity proposes that positions within society should be allocated fairly. It rejects the notion that such positions should be distributed based on gender, race or other

identifiers. According to Arneson (2008:1) ‘when equality of opportunity prevails, the assignment of individuals to places in the social hierarchy is determined by some form of competitive process, and all members of society are eligible to compete on equal terms’. This position assumes that all citizens can compete for privileged positions regardless of social or economic background.

Consequently, the state must establish priorities in distributing resources based on democratic principles. These principles oblige the state to implement affirmative action policies to promote equality of opportunity in providing access to economic, social, and cultural rights of disadvantaged individuals. Thus, equality of opportunity recognises the existence of a range of positions, some of which are more desirable than others, in achieving equality in society. Equality of opportunity strives to create a level playing field among individuals as they compete for socially desirable goods or positions. A core principle of equality of opportunity is meritocracy, which suggests that any inequality is legitimate because it has been arrived at fairly through meritocratic endeavours i.e. ability and motivation will ensure that individuals succeed. Privileged individuals will always find ways to evade any policies implemented to create equality of opportunity. They achieve this through mobilising their economic and cultural resources to create advantages for themselves or protect their advantaged positions in society (Canny and Hamilton, 2018). The positions that individuals achieve are dependent on the principle of meritocracy and that unequal outcomes are acceptable as they are dependent on the individuals’ ability and effort (Roemer 2002). Equality of opportunity promotes fair and equal access to socially desirable positions based on ability and effort and not arbitrary factors such as gender, race, or social class.

Lynch and Crean (2018) advance on this proposition, when they argue that for equality to be achieved, there must be equality of condition. Equality of condition recognises that

inequalities in education results from inequalities in the economic, political, socio-cultural, and effective systems in society. Equality of condition acknowledges the intersectional nature of the economic, political, socio-cultural, and effective domains of social life, indicating that equality in education can only be achieved when equality is achieved in these other domains. By placing the emphasis on social structures, equality of condition/outcome recognises the complex nature of educational disadvantage (Devine *et al.* 2021). However, achieving equality of opportunity in education rather than equality of condition, has been a central policy focus of individual states and international organisations, such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the European Commission. Efforts to achieve equality of opportunity in education will be discussed in section 4.2.2.

4.2.1 Intersectionality and Equality

The literature reviews presented in chapters two and three demonstrated that educational disadvantage is a consequence of multiple and inter-related economic, academic, and socio-cultural elements. How students' experience the interaction of these academic and socio-cultural factors may generate or reinforce inequality for some cohorts of students. Chapter two supported the assertion by Hancock (2007) that intersectionality is one of the principal conceptual and analytical frameworks for examining the nature of processes and structures that create and perpetuate social inequality. The rationale of intersectionality is applicable as an analytical tool to examine, comprehend, and react to the manner in which the diverse elements of inequality intersect (Symington 2004). Substantive equality requires genuine and effective equality in the social, political, and economic conditions of different groups in society (*ibid*).

Intersectionality approaches can provide important insights on issues of equality. As Bailey *et al.* (2019) argued, IS can facilitate the construction of matrices of interlocking forms of oppression and inequality and how they correspond to the lives of marginalised

individuals and groups. These matrices enable researchers and policy-makers to comprehend ‘the complex influences of simultaneous operations of multiple socially constructed categories and social contexts on individuals’ (Carastathis 2016: 55). To achieve equality objectives, attention must also be paid to the lived experience of oppression and the efforts of oppressed groups to resist oppression and domination. According to May (2015) incorporating the lived experience of oppressed groups, particularly their efforts to resist oppression can strengthen the connection between intersectionality and social science inquiry into equality issues. Intersectionality strives to overcome single dimension analysis of the effect of identity markers such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity on inequality to create more contextualised and nuanced accounts of oppression and domination that can guide the design and implementation of equality policies that address these issues more effectively. Goal 3.6 of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2019) highlights the importance of consulting with marginalised groups to gain their perspectives on the issues impeding their ability to access higher education. Intersectionality concepts provide an opportunity to explore and comprehend social class and limited access to economic, social, and cultural capital cumulatively mediate their ability to experience equality of opportunity in educational outcomes compared to more privileged groups in society.

In the context of promoting equality in education, this requires that policy-makers and educationalists acknowledge the intersectional context of disadvantaged students’ experiences. It also requires public policy to recognise and accommodate student differences within educational policies and practices. Applying an intersectional perspective to promoting equality in education would require policy-makers and educationalists to implement co-ordinated policies across not only the educational but also economic, academic and socio-cultural domains. While awareness of the

intersectional nature of disadvantage is growing, there is, as yet, little evidence of intersectional approaches to promoting equality and countering educational disadvantage in Ireland.

4.2.2 Equality and Education

The rhetoric of equality is frequently employed with regard to education. Equality of opportunity is a philosophy frequently advanced in education policy. Equality of opportunity sits generally within a functionalist theory of education, which assumes that the purpose of education is to assign individuals to positions within society. The concept of equality of opportunity asserts that positions of wealth and power are distributed according to acquired attributes such as educational qualifications, which all citizens should have an equal opportunity of attaining.

In many countries, the school is conceived of as an agent for socialisation, providing citizens with the skills needed to function in society and meet the needs of the economy. This functionalist approach fits neatly within the liberal ideology of meritocracy referred to earlier. Schools choose individuals for positions based on their abilities and academic qualifications. This results in a meritocratic society whereby those individuals who make the greatest effort combined with inherent ability will obtain the greatest rewards in terms of employment and status. Such individuals are facilitated to use their economic and cultural resources to create advantage. Evidence of this is found in parents paying for grinds outside of school or sending their children to best performing schools. Similarly, the Irish Times league table of schools published annually assists these parents in choosing schools which will afford their children the best possible chance of going to university.

Policies to achieve equality in educational outcomes in various jurisdictions are underpinned by the principle of equality of opportunity. Examples include the Early Start

Programme (Ireland), Sure Start (UK), and Head Start (USA). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2001 and Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) 2015, Delivering Equality of Educational Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) 2005 in Ireland, and The Education and Equity Policy and Socio-economic scheme in Australia are examples of policies to promote educational equality in various countries. In the Irish context, The Education Act 1998, Objective (C) requires schools to promote equality of access and participation in education. The Delivering of Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) policy strives to achieve equality of educational opportunities for all primary and secondary level students in Ireland. The National Equity of Access to Higher Education Plan 2015 – 2019 and its predecessors have made some progress in delivering equality of access to higher education for marginalised students in Ireland and the plan currently being devised will continue to do so. However, currently, many of the acts, policies, and interventions referred to above focus on redistributing economic resources to schools and students experiencing educational disadvantage. A more intersectional approach would be needed to achieve true equality. However, such policies largely ignore how the structural and cultural elements of educational systems identified in the literature intersect with economic and academic elements to create inequalities in education.

4.2.3 Equality: A Critique

Achieving equality of opportunity in educational terms is about promoting fairness in the competition for advantage (Lynch and Crean 2018: 14). Such a position acknowledges that not every student will succeed in education and thus, there will always be some level of inequality in educational outcomes between different groups in society. In adopting an ‘equality of opportunity’ approach, it may be argued that while marginalised students are accorded the opportunity to access education, it does not provide for equality of participation as the educational system, which is based on the liberal principle of

meritocracy, assumes that these students have equal access to economic, social and cultural resources (Lynch and Baker2005).

Unequal access to these resources ensures that the best-resourced students will succeed, while those students lacking these resources will not achieve parity in educational outcomes. The purpose underpinning equality of opportunities policies is simply to provide a fair basis for managing these inequalities. In effect, equality of opportunity ensures that every student receives the bare minimum to which they are entitled, and ultimately regulating competition for advantage. The problem with equality of opportunity is that it largely ignores the persistence of structural inequalities in the educational system. Equality of opportunity assumes that little, if nothing can be done to address the inequalities between students with regard to their social class status, resources, relationships and power (Cahill and Hall 2014).

Equality of opportunity largely ignores the macro level structural and organisational elements of educational systems that interact with micro level elements of educational disadvantage such as access to economic, social, and cultural capital (Marsh 2011), which are fundamental pre-requisites to succeeding in education. To create more egalitarian educational systems, policy-makers must address the structural and organisational barriers contributing to educational disadvantage. Proponents of the principle of equality of condition claim that educational inequality may be ameliorated by bringing about changes in the economic, political, socio-cultural, and affective domains that underpin the structural and organisational elements of educational systems. In contrast to equality of opportunity, equality of condition focuses on ‘the structures and relations of unequal ownership, control, and distribution of resources’ (Lynch and Crean 2018: 17), and how adjustments should be made at the macro level to create better educational outcomes for students at the micro level. While equality of opportunity emphasises the redistribution

or economic resources to ensure every student has equal access to education, equality of condition acknowledges the influence of social class, gender, care responsibilities, ability and other factors on educational outcomes. As such, equality of condition recognises that educational outcomes are mediated by the intersection of economic, political, socio-cultural and affective elements at both the macro and micro level. This is an important development in efforts to counter educational disadvantage as it moves beyond the one dimensional focus of equality of opportunity on redistributing economic resources to disadvantaged students and schools. However, the various equality perspectives leave the structural and organisational elements of educational disadvantage relatively unchanged. Nevertheless, the insights from equality and intersectionality theories raise our awareness and help our understanding of the intricacy of educational disadvantage.

4.3 Capability Theory

Capability theory proceeds from two central claims: first, that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance and second, that this freedom is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities (Robeyns 2016). Capability theory was developed in the mid-1980s by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and builds on the work of Rawls, Fraser and Young. Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) argue that even though these earlier theorists advanced essential understandings of how social justice can contribute to creating equitable educational systems, their theorising does have shortcomings. In the case of Rawls, for example, they assert that he does not articulate how to convert resources into abilities to function. Young, they argue, focuses on groups as the unit of analysis, which does not pay enough attention to individual difference and agency and how this may be constrained by institutional structures and practices. Robeyns (2016) contends that Fraser's approach does not fully explore individual agency and the lived experience of students.

Sen and Nussbaum assert that adopting a capabilities approach provides a solution to these issues. Sen calls for a conscious focus on reducing injustices in our institutional contexts. The capabilities approach focuses on individuals' well-being. It interrogates the extent to which these individuals can be what they want to be and achieve what they consider worthy of achieving (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011). In the context of education, this would concentrate on what students can be and achieve and to what extent they value education and being educated.

These capabilities refer to the individual's freedom to experience the opportunities they believe necessary and conducive to achieving their goals in life (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000). Student agency is perceived as central to ensuring that the opportunity to achieve is present and available to marginalised students. Capability theory addresses this issue by foregrounding student agency and how it interacts with social structures, institutions and cultural contexts. Capability theory offers a conceptual apparatus that draws together agency and structural issues in what has been described as 'conversion factors' (Sen 1999; Robeyns 2003; Walker and Unterhalter 2007).

Capability theory suggests that social arrangements should be constructed to maximise individuals' capabilities and opportunities to succeed. Sen (1999) asserts that equality is achieved in society when students achieve parity of capabilities to be or achieve what is valuable to them. A central tenet of capability theory is students' functioning, expressed as achievement, while capability is the ability to achieve (Sen 1985; Walker and Unterhalter 2007; Wilson-Strydom 2012). Nussbaum (2011) defines functioning as the ability to achieve the desired outcome. In the context of educational disadvantage, this would require reimagining educational systems in order to promote students' empowerment and engagement with education to achieve the outcomes they consider worthwhile and valuable.

Individuals exhibit diverse traits and characteristics, and it is this diversity that mediates individuals' ability to transform opportunities into achievement (Sen 1999). Even though diversity does not necessarily precipitate inequality, inequality is possible when diversity prevents individuals from accessing opportunities. Various factors mediate the capability to transform opportunities into outcomes, such as financial resources, socio-cultural background and relational perspectives (Sen 1999). Addressing these factors may identify what is required to achieve successful outcomes for disadvantaged individuals (Walker and Unterhalter 2007).

According to Wilson-Strydom (2015), such an approach may prove helpful in educational systems to find means of addressing unequal outcomes for marginalised students. While providing enough educational resources is necessary, in and of themselves, resources are not enough to address educational disadvantage. It is the students' ability to convert available resources into opportunities and successful outcomes that need to be understood. The capabilities approach offers a mechanism to achieve this by emphasising the role of individual agency and choice. However, agency and choice are influenced by several factors such as socio-cultural, economic and political contexts and opportunities that may enhance or limit outcomes for students by social stratification.

4.3.1 Capability Theory and Education

The capabilities approach stresses (a) the importance of comprehending students' lived experiences and how these mediate their educational experiences, and (b) the circumstances that shape this experience, such as personal, socio-cultural and economic influences that enhance or limit educational outcomes. The capabilities approach seeks to identify and comprehend the social context that influences student choice and agency in the educational system. The approach has the potential to reveal inequalities in educational outcomes for students from different socio-economic backgrounds (Walker

2006). If more equitable educational outcomes are to be achieved, then the focus must be on understanding the conditions under which students operate, which may serve to enhance or limit academic achievement and progression to higher education.

The capabilities approach provides a starting point for constructing policies, strategies and interventions to enhance student capabilities and academic success (Wilson- Strydom 2015). The approach implies policies and practices that acknowledge the complexities of students' lived experiences and promotes interventions that compensate for the disadvantages that these students experience while at the same time enhancing their capabilities to succeed academically and progress to higher education. In employing the capabilities approach, researchers have 'developed lists of capabilities that are considered important within education. These include human agency and autonomy, hope and voice, identity and knowledge' (Hannon *et al.* 2017: 1229). Articulating, recognising and developing these capabilities is essential to overcoming disadvantage.

Wilson-Strydom (2015) and Hart *et al.* (2017) demonstrate that interventions are required that address personal and social factors, such as the cultural environment of schools which influence academic achievement, foster confidence and a desire to succeed in school and progress to higher education. Capability theory advances an alternative framework to examine academic achievement and progression. Identifying the capabilities marginalised students require to increase academic achievement and progression to higher education allows policy-makers to set educational goals that are desirable and achievable for under-performing students (Walker 2012).

This requires educationalists to empower under-performing students and provide them with the guidance and information to raise their educational aspirations. Low SES students are often constrained by their limited economic, social and cultural capital. This results in these students modifying their educational aspirations and progression choices

based on what they can achieve (Watts 2012). By focusing on facilitating the conversion of capabilities into functionings, the capabilities theory approach can help promote education policies, leading to 'low-SES students being empowered and informed to choose an educational path they value' (Hannon and O'Sullivan 2018: 7).

4.3.2 Capability Theory: A Critique

The capability theory approach is based on two core claims. Firstly, individuals' freedom to achieve well-being is of primary importance. Secondly, this freedom is predicated on individuals' capabilities. According to Commin *et al.* (2008), capabilities allow individuals to attain the freedom to achieve well-being that they value. The capabilities approach was developed as a counter-narrative to neoliberal discourse and economic rationale, which consigns the individual to the role of actor directed by the state to pursue life trajectories that foreground the state's prosperity over that of the individual.

Capability theory advocates re-orientating public policy to consider the well-being of the individual over national prosperity. It offers a counter-narrative to neoliberal perspectives that enable the purpose and impact of education to be evaluated (Hart 2012; Walker 2012). Walker (2012) argues that capability theory has value in considering how to increase academic achievement and progression to higher education. It prioritises human development/agency and the transformative potential of education over market-driven economic development. This resonates with what Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash (2010) previously identified as the compatibility of capability theory with public policy that focused on raising academic achievement and progression to higher education, as it provided the potential to prioritise the plurality of individuals' lives over economic and market-driven requirements (Walker 2012).

While capability theory promotes equality of opportunity, it falls short of promoting

equality of outcomes. This is so because capability theory fails to fully recognise and assimilate the interdependent nature of social life and the institutions and agencies that guide and direct individuals' lives in particular trajectories. This is evident in Nussbaum's (2011) conception of capabilities theory as promoting capabilities independent of what peoples may desire. This assumes that individuals make decisions on what capabilities to cultivate independently of the socio-economic and cultural contexts that define these individuals. Capability theory extends the liberal notion of social justice promoted by Rawls (1971). Still, like his theory of justice, it fails to take sufficient account of the social and cultural factors which influence individuals' ability to pursue and benefit from certain opportunities.

Equally, capability theory does not address structural issues and barriers that prevent some individuals from enjoying the same benefits from public goods as others may do. Robeyns (2006) criticises capability for being 'radically underspecified' and asserts that it needs to be supplemented by other social theories. However, capability theory acknowledges the redistributive and transformative potential of education and champions student agency. It also recognises the importance of 'conversion factors'; the social factors that enable students to translate resources into capabilities. However, it does not adequately address the socio-economic and cultural factors linked to educational disadvantage. As Robeyns asserts, the theory should not be seen 'as supplanting other approaches, but instead as providing complementary insights' (2006: 373).

The discontinuities between the home and school environments mediate interactions between disadvantaged students/parents and schools/teachers, affecting student performance. Chapters two and three identified the vital role of familiarity with the dominant culture of educational systems. The discontinuities between the home and school environments mediate interactions between disadvantaged students/parents and

schools/teachers. Identifying ways to reduce these discontinuities may lead to more equitable academic outcomes. The following section will show how Bourdieu's concepts serve as a lens to identify and examine the factors framing those discontinuities.

4.4 Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory

Underpinning many of the writings of Pierre Bourdieu is a quest for social justice and an explication of the development and perpetuation of social inequality. Consequently, his theories are frequently applied to educational phenomena. He highlights the significance of relations of power, underlines the role of social and environmental context and stresses the importance of identifying patterns and structures that influence individuals' realities. His writings often frame life as a game (Bourdieu 1977a; 1984; 1997), and his cultural capital theory is widely used to interrogate education systems and practices (Webb *et al.* 2017; Tan *et al.* 2019).

Bourdieu (1973) developed the concept of cultural capital to explain the mediating role of education on social mobility in societies characterised by different social classes. Educational attainment privileges students familiar with the dominant cultural practices while at the same time de-privileging those students not familiar with this dominant culture. Therefore, schools legitimise existing inequalities in society (Huang and Liang 2016). As Bourdieu (1973) observed, non-material resources that cultured families transmit to their children play an important role in educational achievement.

According to Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, variations in academic achievement may be explained by variations in students' cultural capital attributed to their socio-economic backgrounds (Bourdieu 2011). He analyses differences between the social classes based on their stocks of cultural capital and how this influences educational attainment. While participation in education may have increased in many countries, social class stratification has not diminished. This is because the reproduction of existing social structures is

contingent not only on material resources but also on non-material resources such as cultural capital, which is particularly evident in educational systems (Huang and Liang 2016).

Xie and Ma (2019) demonstrate the mediating role of cultural capital between social class and academic achievement in many educational systems around the world. Canny and Hamilton (2018) illustrate how cultural dominance both masks and magnifies cultural dominance in society, particularly in the educational systems. They demonstrate how the competitive nature of the Irish educational system confers advantages on students familiar with the cultural capital to the detriment of those students not familiar with this cultural capital. In Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, he provides a paradigm of class analysis, asserting that social inequalities are reproduced and perpetuated through the effective transmission of parental endowments to their children. These endowments include physical, social and, in particular, 'cultural' capital, which creates inequalities in educational and occupational attainment.

Bourdieu further argues that teachers and schools collude with this process of reproduction by rewarding possession of favoured cultural capital and instituting standards weighted in favour of middle- and upper-class students to the detriment of working-class and disadvantaged students (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu demonstrates how his conceptual tools of cultural capital, habitus and field, which are encapsulated in the formula; [(Cultural capital) (Habitus)] + Social Field = Practice (Bourdieu 1984: 101) interact to reproduce social inequality in schools. People's actions or practice are determined by their habitus, their capital and their ability to navigate a particular field. He argues that practice can only be understood through the three 'thinking tools': capital, habitus and field. Practice, according to Bourdieu, results from 'relations between one's disposition (habitus) and one's position in a field (capital), within the current state of 'play' of that field' (1984: 101).

Cultural capital represents the cultural resources and knowledge individuals have at their disposal and that are necessary to play the game. Habitus embodies individuals' relative positions or feel for the game, while the field represents the social arena in which the game is played. In the educational field, students play the game to satisfy the teachers' values to enable them to move to the next level in the game. To play the game successfully, students must use the cultural capital they have acquired from their parents, peers and prior experience. The following sections elaborate further on crucial elements of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, namely cultural capital, habitus and field.

4.4.1 Cultural Capital

Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital consists of knowledge of the prevalent culture in a given society. Cultural capital exists in three forms, *embodied cultural capital*, which includes a set of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body which manifest in cultural activities such as visiting museums, art galleries, reading habits etc. *Objectified cultural capital* refers to ownership of books, musical instruments and artworks in the home, and *institutionalised cultural capital*, which comprises academic qualifications.

Cultural capital is significant because it may support social reproduction in all three states. The educational system or 'field' takes for granted that students possess the cultural capital dominant in that society. Bourdieu asserts that students from lower social classes are disadvantaged in the educational system when he states:

'By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that the relationship of familiarity with a culture which can only be produced by family upbringing

when it transmits the dominant culture' (Bourdieu 1977b:494).

Bourdieu argues that the educational system assumes that students possess the dominant cultural capital as acknowledged by the school. Displaying the cultural capital that is recognised and rewarded by teachers results in positive feedback and affirmation, which in turn may modify student habitus. This results in students being more favourably disposed to academic endeavour and achievement. However, cultural capital varies by social class, and working-class students, in particular, frequently do not possess the cultural capital and habitus perceived necessary to succeed academically. These students are then placed at a disadvantage because the cultural capital and habitus that exists in schools are alien to them.

Bourdieu also asserts that social inequalities are legitimised by the educational qualifications held by those that are in dominant positions in society. Consequently, the educational system has a central function in maintaining the status quo. Various empirical studies demonstrate how the possession or lack of the dominant cultural capital in schools mediates academic success (Puzic *et al.* 2016; Tan 2017; Canny and Hamilton 2018). The different aspects of cultural capital have direct and indirect influences on educational attainment.

Bourdieu initially employed indicators such as museum and art gallery visits, attending the theatre or ballet and listening to classical music to operationalise embodied cultural capital in his research. More recent studies suggest that the relationship between traditional high-brow cultural practices, social status and social background is on the wane (Pakulski and Waters 1996; Van Hek and Kraaykamp 2013; Notten *et al.* 2015). Explanations for this decline include the popularisation of high-brow cultural activities, growing consumerism, social mobility and alternative cultural activities (Beck 1992;

Prieur and Savage 2013).

Yet, empirical studies indicate that cultural capital still plays a prominent role in class stratification and that social class indicators continue to elucidate cultural behaviour (DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Xie and Ma 2019). Importantly, these studies articulate the role of parents, stating that ‘parents may equip their children with embodied cultural capital through their worldviews (academic emphasis and expectations), cultural participation, parent-child academic discussions, parent-child reading, and home (support for and supervision of children) and school involvement (parent-teacher communication and participation in school activities)’ (DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Xie and Ma 2019). Thus, embodied cultural capital has both a tangible and an intangible impact on students’ outlook, participation and performance.

Objectified cultural capital refers to the resources that individuals have available to them in the home. Parents use these cultural objects to instil in their children the outlooks and skills, which schools recognise and reward. Bourdieu used the availability of musical instruments, artworks and educational books as indicators of objectified cultural capital. Since then, measures of objectified cultural capital have evolved. The possession of musical instruments and artworks has decreased in importance. In contrast, factors such as the availability of study facilities, technological resources and educational books have increased in prominence as indicators of objectified cultural capital. Access to study facilities, technology and educational books have been shown to positively influence academic achievement (Attewell and Battle 1999; Jaeger 2009; Byun *et al.* 2012). The availability of these resources in the home is central to student success in education.

Institutionalised cultural capital comprises the educational qualifications or credentials parents and extended family members possess. Bourdieu sees institutionalised cultural capital as conferring on its holder ‘a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with

respect to culture' (1994: 82). Parental educational qualifications are important indicators of institutionalised cultural capital. Individuals can leverage these credentials in several ways to support their children's academic success. Firstly, individuals with higher levels of academic qualifications/credentials are more knowledgeable about educational systems and, therefore, are more confident when interacting with teachers.

Because parents have educational credentials in common with teachers, they are more assertive when advocating for their children. Secondly, their knowledge of the educational system enables these parents to navigate the educational field more successfully, compared to less-educated parents. In addition, they can draw on their social networks for information, advice and guidance on educational issues such as college admission processes and funding applications as they steer their children through the educational system.

4.4.2 Habitus and field

To transcend the dualities of agency/structure, objectivism/subjectivism and theory/practice, Bourdieu produced a set of tools that enabled him to examine various social phenomena, including educational inequality. Paramount among these tools are the concepts of 'habitus' and 'field'. Habitus is used to comprehend the interaction between structure and agency in the context of the historical and external factors, which restrict or promote change in individuals. Habitus 'represents the individual's class position or locus in various fields, which reproduces and maintains hierarchal structures of dominance in society' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 204 - 205).

Bourdieu uses habitus to comprehend 'the internalised behaviours, beliefs, and perceptions that individuals carry with them and which, in part, are translated into the practices they transfer to and from the social spaces in which they interact' (Costa and Murphy 2015). Not only is habitus accumulated experience, but it is also a complex social

process, which individuals engage with to justify their perspectives, actions and social positions. While habitus ensures continuity of individuals' social practices, it may mediate change in these individuals. Thus, habitus is malleable and may be enhanced, given the right circumstances and social influences (Bourdieu 1990; Lareau and Weininger 2003).

For Bourdieu, habitus is the conduit through which practice (agency) is connected to capital and field (structure and/or social space). According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus is activated in a field, and the nature of the field can lead the same habitus to exhibit diverse 'practices and stances'. Habitus is not rigid or fixed; it can adopt new dispositions and practices when exposed to particular social fields. Cultural capital enables people to navigate particular fields because it makes them aware of what is required or valued in that field and aware of the expected and accepted behaviour in that field. Students from disadvantaged homes may not have the same levels of cultural capital as their affluent peers and may need targeted help to enable them to blend in the educational field.

4.4.3 Cultural Capital Theory and Education

Bourdieu's theories have been widely applied in educational settings, particularly concerning social class differences in access and attainment. Canny and Hamilton assert that 'the work and concepts of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) provide a holistic approach from the macro (state and school as structures) to the micro (student groups and individuals) to examine how privilege operates' (2018: 639). As stated earlier, cultural capital represents the cultural resources and knowledge individuals have at their disposal that enable them to play the game of education. Habitus embodies individuals' relative positions or feel for the game, while field represents the social arena in which the game is played. In the educational field, students play the game in order to satisfy the values of teachers and move to the next level in the game.

The different aspects of cultural capital have direct and indirect influences on educational

attainment. Tan *et al.*'s recent study captures the significance of cultural capital in the contemporary field of education. For them, 'objectified cultural capital refers to home educational resources that imbue in students the dispositions, values, perceptions, knowledge, and skills that are valued by teachers in schools' (2019: 2). This highlights the tangible and intangible elements at work in education. Again, Tan *et al.* summarise the essence of embodied cultural capital, which they assert 'comprises academic values, attitudes, tastes, and preferences; and mastery of academic competencies and skills emphasised in schools' (Tan *et al.* 2019: 2). For Tan *et al.*, 'institutionalised cultural capital is formed when embodied cultural capital is publicly recognised as a marker of social distinction e.g., parental educational attainment' (Tan *et al.* 2019: 2).

Empirical studies demonstrate how the possession or lack of possession of the dominant cultural capital in schools mediates academic success (Puzic *et al.* 2016; Tan 2017; Canny and Hamilton 2018). Many interventions to counter educational disadvantage focus on building the cultural and social capital of students and their families. Hannon *et al.* highlight the non-academic impact of such interventions, finding that 'interventions aimed at broadening the social and cultural capital of low SES students do impact upon their capability set and students perceive their abilities differently as a result of more autonomy, hope and knowledge' (2017: 1242).

With an increase in the number of researchers using quantitative methods to examine issues of educational inequality (Tan 2020), cultural capital has taken on a new significance. Aspects of cultural capital are now used as indicators for the internationally comparative PISA assessments. PISA employs an index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS), this is a composite rating that combines the financial, social, cultural and human capital resources available to students. This rating includes parents' education attainment and occupations. The rating also includes an index of specific familial possessions as indicators of material wealth and cultural capital,

including possession of a car, the availability of a quiet room to work, access to the Internet, the number of books and other educational resources available in the home (OECD 2019).

While habitus is inculcated in the home in early childhood, individuals undergo constant reconstruction as they interact with the world outside their families and home environments. This has implications for students' aspirations and parents' ability to be involved in the education of their children. The habitus of schools is evident in the organisational norms and processes and teaching and guidance practices, which are valued. Awareness of the significance of habitus can lead educationalists to implement strategies that help disadvantaged students to adapt to the habitus of the dominant culture. In the educational field, teachers/schools may foster more positive dispositions towards education, through expressing positive expectations, encouraging and motivating students to achieve their potential.

Similarly, parental dispositions towards involvement in the education of their children may be influenced positively or negatively. Hamilton and Deegan demonstrate how the concept of habitus captures 'the interplay of dispositions, structures and practices' (2019: 1003) even in student friendships. The work of Scanlon *et al.* (2019a and b) provides empirical evidence of the reality and perceptions of habitus-related barriers which limit access to higher education. The concept of habitus is widely used when exploring the transition from second to third level (Smyth and Banks 2012; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2019b). Habitus is central to the barriers experienced by disadvantaged students in their quest for educational advancement. Widening participation activities seek 'to facilitate effective 'transition' to the habitus of the dominant culture' (Hannon *et al.* 2017: 1229). Such strategies help by lessening the discordances between the habitus of low SES students and the university environment. As shown in Chapters Two and three, the interventions

to counter these discordances being implemented by universities in Ireland and elsewhere are proving effective.

4.4.4 Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory : A Critique

While Bourdieu was interested in examining how cultural capital and habitus shape educational outcomes, his early research tended to focus on the reproductive nature of cultural capital and habitus, a tendency criticised by many commentators such as DiMaggio (1982), Sullivan (2002) and Davies and Rizk (2018). However, Bourdieu's later writings demonstrate that cultural capital and habitus could be modified or enhanced through exposure to new agents and fields (Bourdieu 1990). While some people have criticised Bourdieu's theories for being deterministic (Kettley and Whitehead 2012), his use of the concept of game-playing is certainly dynamic, not static (Hart *et al.* 2017).

Criticisms have been made about the way in which Bourdieu's theory has been applied, particularly where research has tended to concentrate on only one of the three conceptual tools of cultural capital, habitus, and field. Such an approach ignores Bourdieu's underlying argument that all three concepts should be operationalised together to comprehend their inter-connectedness and mutual dependency (Webb *et al.* 2017). As Kettley (2007) argues, research on educational disadvantage requires an understanding of the inter-relationship between social causation and social formation. Therefore, all three of Bourdieu's conceptual tools are required to elucidate how capital and habitus interact in the field to mediate educational outcomes.

Another criticism of Bourdieu's Cultural Capital theory arises from the inconsistent operationalisation of cultural capital and habitus. One strand of research operationalises cultural capital as familiarity with the dominant culture in society (De Graaf 1986; Crook 1997; Sullivan 2001; Dumais 2002). Others concentrate on Bourdieu's research on

lifestyles, which is assumed to be indicative of their attachment to the dominant culture (DiMaggio 1982; Aschaffenburg and Mass 1997). Another strand of research argues that parental engagement with cognitive activities is a better indicator of cultural capital than involvement with high-brow cultural activities (De Graaf and Kraaykamp 2000; Sullivan 2001; Barone 2006). The different approaches to employing the conceptual tools make it difficult to draw comparisons between different strands of research. When Bourdieu's tools are employed simultaneously (as he advocated), more nuanced accounts of how cultural capital and habitus interact with the field are revealed. More recently, Webb *et al.* (2017) advocate employing all three forms of cultural capital to elucidate how public policy may be developed to ameliorate educational disadvantage. Gale and Parker, for example, assert that 'cultural capital explains differences in student retention between nations, social groups and institution types' (2017: 89), indicating that cultural capital theory is as relevant today as when Bourdieu first developed it in the 1960s, in explaining variations in academic outcomes between social groups.

4.5 Selecting a Theory

The preceding sections have explored three theoretical perspectives, which may be used to examine the issue of educational disadvantage and offer insights and guidance in designing policies, strategies and interventions to address the issue. Equality theory elucidates how a fair society should be constructed, with economic resources distributed fairly, so that everyone can benefit and attain whatever position they choose to occupy in society. Equality theory and particularly equality of opportunity perspectives have concentrated on redistributing resources to the less well off in society to mitigate unequal educational outcomes attributed to the unequal distribution of economic resources. Economic considerations and imperatives underpin equality policy in many national jurisdictions. Furthermore, as Grimaldi (2012) argues, equality continues to be a

contested concept and lacks clarity in terms of what educational outcomes to achieve and the degree to which they should be spread across society. As Kremakova (2013) argues, equality theory currently pays little attention to the complexity of the lived experience of marginalised students, the focus being on systems, structures and the redistribution of economic resources. A point reiterated by Kennedy and Smith (2019), who state that educational disadvantage in the Irish context has until recently been conceptualised almost exclusively in socio-economic terms. Nevertheless, the evidence from the literature suggests that higher socio-economic status not only provides a boost in terms of educational attainment but confers other benefits such as access to social and cultural capital, which provide benefits in accessing the labour market (Zuccotti *et al.* 2017).

Capability theory attempts to bring together the socio-cultural and economic factors that mediate educational outcomes for disadvantaged students by examining the social context that guides student choice and agency in the educational system. It can be applied to a wide variety of social issues and contexts and has been cited as providing a counter-narrative to neoliberal economics and neoclassical theories of progress. But, despite its championing of conversion factors, capability theory tends to focus too much on individual agency and not enough on the systems and structures that make up the education system (Hartley 2009). It has also been criticised for being difficult to operationalise and ignoring the interdependence of individuals, the public sphere and the repressive nature of capitalism.

Cultural capital theory presents another perspective, which attempts to draw together the economic and socio-cultural factors that mediate educational outcomes. Bourdieu presents important theoretical concepts, which influence educational outcomes. Habitus and embodied cultural capital address the socio-cultural factors, and objectified and institutionalised cultural capital are mediated by the availability of economic resources.

The theory focuses on both socio-cultural and economic factors and accords equal attention to both individual agency (cultural capital and habitus) and systemic and structural issues (field). Familial processes have been identified as a salient factor in determining academic outcomes (Tan 2017), and scholars have turned to Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory to explore how familial processes may influence academic outcomes by social class. A meta-analysis of Bourdieu's conceptual tools indicates their usefulness in conducting research (Burnard *et al.* 2016).

It is the possibility for transformation and enhancement of cultural capital and habitus, which suggests that cultural capital theory, may be a helpful lens through which to examine the issue of educational disadvantage. The theory is pertinent because of its focus on ways in which disadvantaged students can identify and adapt to the demands and requirements of the educational field and, in the process, increase their academic achievement and progress to the next level of the game, i.e., third level education. It is particularly appropriate as a theoretical lens for this study because Bourdieu's conception of practice is 'a rich and generative tool for soliciting an understanding of students' (Stahl *et al.* 2017).

The Irish educational system is increasingly competitive because of the strong association between educational qualifications and labour market success (Barry 2014) and resulting in a socially segregated second-level state-supported system (Lynch and Lodge 2002; McCoy *et al.* 2014a). Social class is entrenched in both the organisation and the culture of the school, but more importantly, in inherent expectations regarding progression to higher education (Reay 2006). This has resulted in strong competition between parents to guarantee their children's success (Iannelli *et al.* 2016), requiring them to access every form of capital at their disposal to improve their children's chances of educational success (Canny and Hamilton 2018). Canny and Hamilton (2018) provide evidence of the

continuing relevance of Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction in the context of the competitive Irish education system, which acts as a micro-structure, facilitating dominant groups to succeed academically, perpetuating enduring educational inequalities. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) provide a lens to understand what is happening in the Irish educational landscape in relation to the existence of a competitive culture within schools, underpinned by the state Leaving Certificate (LC) examination. Banks and Smyth (2015) describe the LC examination as high stakes because access to tertiary education is based on grades achieved in the LC. Lynch and Moran (2006) previously demonstrated that children from middle-class backgrounds performed significantly better than their working-class counterparts.

Bourdieu believes that educational success is connected to the domestic transfer of capital (economic, cultural and social) from parents to children (Symeou 2007). This continuous hereditary transmission of capital facilitates social reproduction in systems like education. These actions and practices reproduce the social and cultural capital that leads to some students being included while excluding others (Canny and Hamilton 2018), illustrating how difficult it is for the disadvantaged students to compete on a level education field (McCoy *et al.* 2009).

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined three theoretical perspectives that are commonly used in research on educational disadvantage: equality theory, capability theory and cultural capital theory. Each theory has been discussed in terms of the context in which it evolved, its application in the literature on educational disadvantage and finally, a critique of each theory. While all three theories have merit, each has limitations. Each can be difficult to operationalise due to vagueness in the constructs used and a variety of alternative

approaches employed in different research designs.

While equality theory and capability theory have made significant contributions to the issue of educational disadvantage, both have lacunae. On the one hand, equality theories recognise and promote basic equality issues as well as equality of outcome and equality of condition, thereby acknowledging relational and some structural factors but do not pay enough attention to subjective and intersectional factors. On the other hand, capability theory has been criticised for focusing too much on individual agency and not enough on the structural or objective issues that also contribute to educational disadvantage.

Cultural capital theory endeavours to address the limitations of equality and capability theories by focusing both on student agency and structural factors that converge to influence educational outcomes by social group. While Bourdieu concentrated on the reproductive nature of cultural capital and habitus, others such as DiMaggio (1982), Horvat and Davis (2011) and Jager and Karslon (2018) highlight the potential for transforming cultural capital and habitus, which may provide helpful insights when designing policies and interventions to raise the academic achievement and progression to higher education for disadvantaged students. Consequently, cultural capital theory will serve as the theoretical underpinning for this study.

Chapter Five: Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the operational framework, methodology and research methods that underpinned this research project. The chapter opens with a brief statement of the research problem. The operational framework which emerged from the literature and frames the empirical research is then presented. The research design and approach are then discussed, explaining how the research was conducted. The ontological and epistemological stance and the methodology underpinning the study are described. The case selection, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, verification procedures and the study's limitations are also presented.

5.2 Research Problem

As Chapters two and three indicated, targeted interventions for marginalised students are expected to improve academic achievement and increase progression to higher education. Yet, students from working-class backgrounds continue to be under-represented in third-level education. December 2020 data from the HEA indicates that there are only 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas compared to every 10 students from affluent areas in Ireland's HEI's (HEA 2020). Furthermore, affluent students are more likely to progress to high point courses in the most prestigious colleges at 35% compared to disadvantaged students at 5%. Based on 94% of the higher education student population, the data highlights significant stratification in access to and progression to higher education in Ireland.

This study asks, *'Can a targeted intervention improve academic achievement and raise*

progression to higher education, and if so, what elements of the intervention achieve these outcomes for students experiencing educational disadvantage?’ The research sought to investigate a specific intervention designed to address educational disadvantage and whether and how it improved academic achievement and progression to higher education for working-class students. The research site selected was the Access Campus Study Club, an initiative developed by the University of Limerick to support academic achievement and progression to higher education. In addition to its academic elements, the intervention devotes considerable attention to mitigation of the effects of socio-cultural disadvantage. This approach resonates with insights from the literature on educational disadvantage.

5.3 Operationalising the study’s concepts

The review of the literature on educational disadvantage identified several elements, which influence educational outcomes for students. These elements are associated with the learning environment's socio-cultural and academic domains and may impede academic achievement and reduce the likelihood of students progressing to higher education. The socio-cultural domain includes elements such as raising aspirations, parental involvement, cultural capital/habitus and the ‘soft’ barriers to educational progression. The academic domain spans school factors, mentoring, class size and instruction, particularly in numeracy and literacy. The review also identified strategies that have been used to counter educational disadvantage across these domains in various national contexts. These elements will frame the empirical aspects of this research project.

Socio-Cultural Domain

Research has highlighted that the socio-cultural discontinuity between home and school

contributes to educational disadvantage. This viewpoint has informed interventions to address educational disadvantage, resulting in targeted interventions to tackle disadvantage which have had varying degrees of success. This study investigates how interventions designed to mitigate the disparities between home and school environments contribute to student progress, paying particular attention to strategies to raise aspirations and involve parents in their children's education.

Cultural Capital/Habitus

Cultural and social processes impact the educational opportunities of all students. Disadvantaged students lack the educational and cultural advantages and credentials, skills, dispositions and material belongings enjoyed by wealthier students (Reay *et al.* 2010; Hannon *et al.* 2017). Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus inform the study, serving as a lens to examine how working-class students and their families navigate the 'educational field'. This study explores how one particular intervention addressing educational disadvantage mediates the effects of socio-cultural disadvantage on educational achievement and progression to higher education for working-class students. This study assesses parents and students' experiences in the research site regarding a set of indicators detailed in the operational framework.

Raising Aspirations

The literature has highlighted the importance of student aspirations and expectations for their educational achievement and their progression to higher education. Student aspirations and expectations are not just personally constructed but are affected by societal, family and school influences. The different social and economic opportunity structures available to students, the type of social interaction prevalent in their communities and societal attitudes to gender, ethnicity and class all impact student aspirations (Rizzica 2018). Weir *et al.* concluded from their international literature

review that ‘parental expectations yielded a significant impact on academic achievement’ (2017: 29).

The literature also identifies teachers' perceptions of students and their families as a salient factor in raising students' aspirations (Sorhagen 2013; Boser and Wilhem 2014; Scanlon *et al.* 2019a). Studies indicate that a lack of the cultural capital recognised and rewarded by schools can have a negative impact on student academic achievement and aspirations. The literature on effective schools contends that a culture of high teacher expectations is essential to raise disadvantaged students' academic achievement (Reay 2004; Perry and Francis 2010; Finnegan and Merrill 2017). Interventions that proactively seek to encourage students to progress to third-level education and purposely set about raising these students' aspirations may help them progress to third-level education. This study will examine whether efforts to raise students' expectations and instil a belief in and value of third-level education, increases progression to third-level education.

Parental Involvement

Involving parents in the education of their children can have positive outcomes for educational achievement. The literature suggests a need to explore the nature of parental involvement in education concerning their actual/perceived roles and how they believe they can and should be involved in their children's education to improve academic outcomes (Weir *et al.* 2017; Hornby and Blackwell 2018). The literature suggests that perceptions of parental roles and involvement in education are stratified by social class. Working-class parents are perceived to be uninterested in their children's education and have no role to play other than being involved in extracurricular and fund-raising activities. Conversely, working-class parents often lack the confidence to engage with teachers/schools because of their lack of academic qualifications and prior experience of

the education system (Drudy and Lynch 1993; Blackmore and Hutchison 2010; Travers *et al.* 2010; Weir *et al.* 2017). This research will investigate the nature of interactions working-class families experience in the school and the intervention under investigation to reveal how these interactions mediate academic achievement and progression to higher education. It examines parents' involvement in the intervention, the differences with their own experience with schools and the extent to which they perceive that participation in the Study Club has affected their children's performance and engagement.

Academic Domain

School factors such as a supportive culture and optimum use of resources are significant in framing academic achievement. The literature review indicates that reducing class size, improving literacy and numeracy proficiency and mentoring in specific subjects are among the most successful strategies to raise disadvantaged students' academic achievement. This study focuses on how such strategies impact as part of a tailored intervention.

Class Size

Class size has received considerable attention as a strategy to improve the academic achievement of working-class students. Several studies indicate that reducing the teacher/student ratio to less than one teacher to twenty students can improve educational outcomes, these benefits can be long-term, particularly for students experiencing educational disadvantage (Schanzenbach 2014; Zyngier 2014; Smyth *et al.* 2015). Therefore, interventions that enable smaller classes would be expected to have a positive impact. However, reducing class sizes alone may not achieve higher academic outcomes; the nature and quality of teacher interactions and teaching resources also play a role in increasing academic achievement and progression to higher education. This study

explores participants' experiences in traditional classroom settings and at the intervention under investigation to identify elements that improve academic achievement and progression to higher education.

Numeracy and Literacy

Numeracy and literacy abilities have been shown to influence students' overall academic achievement and higher education progression (Weir and Kavanagh 2018; McKeown *et al.* 2019). PISA evaluations demonstrate that improvements have been achieved in numeracy and literacy proficiency for Irish students. Aggregate results indicate that achievement in numeracy and literacy is above the OECD average. But analysis of PISA 2018 results reveal a significant achievement gap between students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools. While Irish students over-all achieve above the OECD average, students in DEIS schools lag significantly behind their peers in non-DEIS schools and are achieving below the OECD average (ERC 2020). This study assesses how instructional practices in Maths and English impact student performance. The study explores the nature of tuition that students receive in schools and at the intervention to ascertain from the participants' perspective what helps improve academic performance and progression to higher education.

Mentoring

Progression to higher education is dependent on several factors. One such factor is the types of relationships that young people experience prior to progressing to college. Research indicates that students who have positive role models to help them navigate the educational system are more likely to progress to college than students who do not (Bruce and Bridgeland 2014). More affluent students have greater access to networks of supportive individuals that will encourage them to progress to college compared to less

well-off students (Erickson *et al.* 2009). Mentoring has emerged in the literature as an important strategy to compensate low-income students for the lack of positive role models and supportive social networks that encourage and support these students and assist them in navigating the educational system (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2017b). Critical elements of successful mentoring strategies include trusted role-models that encourage students to aspire to go to college, providing support and guidance when accessing the information on applying to college, college courses and life as a college student. In addition, mentoring can also include tuition and academic support to increase students' academic achievement in specific subjects (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; Torotcoi *et al.* 2020). Such mentoring is a vital element of the Study Club's approach. Besides providing academic support, volunteer tutors mentor club members as they explore college options, provide them with information, and guidance on choosing college courses and insider perspectives on studying at college.

The literature reviews in earlier chapters and the discussion on indicators in this section show how the intersection of social class and levels of economic, social and cultural capital mediates individuals' ability to derive benefit from education. Access to these three forms of capital determines whether students can compete equally or not with other students as they pursue academic credentials. The more economic, social, and cultural capital a student possesses the more advantaged they are educationally. Access to economic resources enables students to acquire additional educational resources outside the formal education system, giving them an advantage in the race for points for college places. The financial costs of attending college are another point of inequality, as the level of state funding to attend college is insufficient to allow students with limited economic capital to do so. Access to social capital, particularly access to social networks that can

provide advice and guidance to parents and students as they navigate the educational system is necessary for progression. Access to cultural capital determines students' ability to play the game of education giving them insider knowledge of the cultural norms that are recognised, and rewarded by schools and teachers. Such inequality in access to economic, social and cultural capital intersects with social class to reinforce equality/inequality in educational outcomes.

The class issues that have been dominant in the discourse on education in Ireland (Lynch, 2018; Kennedy and Power, 2010) influenced the choice of variables for the study. The classed nature of education in Ireland reinforces disadvantage as illustrated by Canny and Hamilton (2018) and Hamilton and Deegan (2019), for example. Likewise, the use of Aggregate Small Area data (a measure of social background) for determining access policy further embeds the class focus. When selecting indicators for this, cognisance was taken of the way in which class intersects with other recognised equality variables. Socio-cultural factors such as access to various forms of capital and the 'soft' barriers identified earlier are inextricably linked to the class stratification evident in Ireland. Similarly, many of the school-related variables highlighted for exploration in the study stem from the class inequality which shapes so many aspects of Irish education.

These socio-cultural and academic themes have been brought together in an operational framework to guide the study. Table 5.1 links the different themes and elements of the research and outlines the conceptual framework, the indicators and sources of evidence along with the interview questions used to elicit the data required to answer the research questions.

Table 5.1 Operational Framework

Domain	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
Cultural Capital/Habitus	Familial reading habits, cultural activities/interests. Rules on T.V./Internet usage.	Bourdieu (2011) Xie and Ma (2018) Huang and Liang (2016) Tan (2015) Lynch (2018)	Members/Parents	Appendix I, Q's 2 – 5, 21 Appendix II, Q's 16 - 25
Raising Expectations	Changing Expectations, Sources of Encouragement, Changed Ambitions	Robinson and Salvertrini (2020), O'Sullivan et al. (2017)	Members	Appendix I Q's 6 - 12
Parental Involvement	Type of Involvement with School Type of Involvement with Intervention.	Hornby and Blackwell (2018) Benner et al. (2018) Weir at al. (2017) Scanlon (2019)	Parents	Appendix II Q's 1 – 14
'Soft' Barriers	Level of academic and social confidence. Level competence re: application processes, campus navigation etc. Feeling supported/unsupported.	Scanlon (2019 a and b), McCluskey (2017), O'Sullivan et al. (2018)	Members/Parents	Appendix I Q's 5, 6, 11 Appendix II Q's 7,8, 14 Appendix 11 Q's 7, 8, 14
Academic Domain	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
School Performance	School Culture. Sense of belonging in school/at intervention. Pedagogies and curriculum. Academic performance.	Zyngier (2014), Weir et al. (2017) Finn (2019)	Members	Appendix I Q's 5, 13 – 20

	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
Class Size	Nature of Learning in School/Intervention (including Peer Learning, Tailored Learning Materials).	Merga (2020) Schleicher (2019) McKeown (2019)	Members	Appendix I Q's 13 – 20
Numeracy and Literacy	Experience of Learning Maths/English at School/Intervention. Preference for learning at school or intervention.	Nouwen et al. (2015) Budginaite et al. (2016) Smyth (2018)	Members	Appendix I Q's 22 – 24
Mentoring	Discussions about college progression and inculcating a sense of belonging in mentee. Detailed advice and information on college courses. Encouragement and support when applying to college, advice and assistance regarding transitions to HE.	Bruce and Bridgeland (2014) O'Sullivan et al. (2019a) Torotcoi et al. (2020)	Members	Appendix I Q's 7, 8, 9, 25
General	Successful Elements of Intervention.	Robinson and Salvertrini, 2020 Scanlon et al. (2019 a & b), McCluskey (2017)	Members/Parents	Appendix I Q's 1, 26, 27 Appendix II Q 15

5.4 Research Design and Approach

The purpose of this section is to explore and justify the methodological approach selected for this study. The philosophical assumptions that underpin this research, i.e., the ontology and the epistemology that informed the research, are set out before the research design, and data collection and analysis methods are outlined. Ontology encapsulates the ‘position’ and beliefs of the researcher about the nature of reality, truth and social phenomena. It is concerned with what the real world is and what can be known about it. Epistemology is the study of knowledge: i.e. the theoretical underpinning of the methods used (Mertens 2010; Bleiker *et al.* 2019). Epistemology encapsulates our view of what can be known and how it can be known (Hay 2006).

5.4.1 Ontology and Epistemology of the Study

The epistemological assumptions underpinning this study are drawn from constructivism. The researcher endeavoured to comprehend participants’ lived experience of education, to analyse these experiences and offer a contribution to knowledge creation. A constructivist approach was adopted to realise this goal. As a theory of knowledge creation, constructivism proceeds from the proposition that knowledge is constructed internally (Cooperstein and Kicevaro-Weidinger 2004). Knowledge in this research was constructed from co-participation (Cobb and Yackel 1996). Knowledge flows from a dialogic engagement (Bakhtin 1984) by interacting with participants and engaging with the literature to consider various theories and how they may illuminate the topic under investigation, subsequently arriving at conclusions rooted in both sources of data. Consequently, a rich body of data was generated, which articulated experiences, priorities and concerns from the research participants’ perspective. The ontological assumptions

underpinning this study were derived from the interpretivist paradigm. By adopting the qualitative (interpretivist) paradigm, the research constructed participants' lived experiences of educational disadvantage. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 15), qualitative research is a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that places value on human experience and human subjectivity as part of the scientific inquiry. From an ontological stance, this researcher argues that an interpretivist qualitative research approach was the most appropriate approach to meet the objectives of the study, as qualitative research concerns itself with contextual findings and the discovery of things, alongside foregrounding the participants' voice in the findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Creswell and Poth 2016).

Qualitative research complemented this researcher's philosophical stance that the human experience is subjective. It cannot easily be portrayed using a quantitative methodology, which does not capture the rich, thick descriptions or meanings that individuals attribute to their lived experiences. A qualitative approach also allowed marginalised individuals to have their voices heard or to contribute to discourses on issues that affected their lives. O'Donnell (2014) highlights the need to include the voices of marginalised individuals in the design and implementation of public policy to address the issues that they experience. This researcher wished to learn about participants' lived experiences of education and discover how educational policies and interventions could be adapted to meet disadvantaged students' needs better. Thus, a qualitative research approach was considered the most appropriate for the study.

5.4.2 Research Methodology: A Case Study

According to Yin the case study is 'an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon

and context are not evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used' (2003: 13). As a research method, the case study can be used in various situations to contribute to our understanding and knowledge of individuals, groups, social, political and related phenomena (Yin 2009). The case study allows the researcher to preserve holistic and significant features of real-life events such as those which influenced the academic achievement and progression to higher education of disadvantaged students. It also allows the researcher to gain insights and perspectives from various actors.

This research sought to investigate if interventions addressing educational disadvantage can increase academic achievement and progression to higher education. This investigation was guided by the concepts that emerged in the literature reviews discussed in chapter two and three and the theory discussed in chapter four. A single case study was selected because it facilitated gathering multiple sources of data on a specific cohort, including interviews, documents and reports. Stake (2005) argues that case studies are useful when investigating significant educational issues to gain a deeper understanding of the issues under investigation. As this study investigated several aspects of educational disadvantage outlined in section 5.3, the case study method was deemed an appropriate means of examining how this phenomenon played out in a natural setting.

While single case studies have been widely used across various disciplines, they have been subject to criticisms regarding their credibility and limitations vis a vis other research methods (Gustafsson 2017). These criticisms arose because of 'conflicting epistemological hypotheses and the intricacy characteristic of qualitative case studies. Scientific thoroughness can be difficult to prove, and any resulting findings can be difficult to validate' (Baskarada 2014). However, case studies are capable of generating detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell 2013). When the

single case study method has been applied correctly, it is capable of capturing and describing the complexity of the phenomenon comprehensively (Siggelkow 2007). The single case study has been shown to be the preferred method when the researcher wishes to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, particularly if the objective of the research is to generate rich descriptions about the topic.

A single case study is the preferred method when studying an individual or group of individuals. It allows researchers to produce a more careful study than other research methods because he/she has spent more time observing the phenomenon (Gustafsson 2017). Several studies have employed single case studies to explore issues pertaining to educational disadvantage in Ireland (Canny and Hamilton 2018; Scanlon *et al.* 2019a; Smyth 2020), indicating that the single-case study method may provide insights on issues that may otherwise not be observed in studies using larger samples.

5.4.3 Case Selection: AccessCampus Study Club

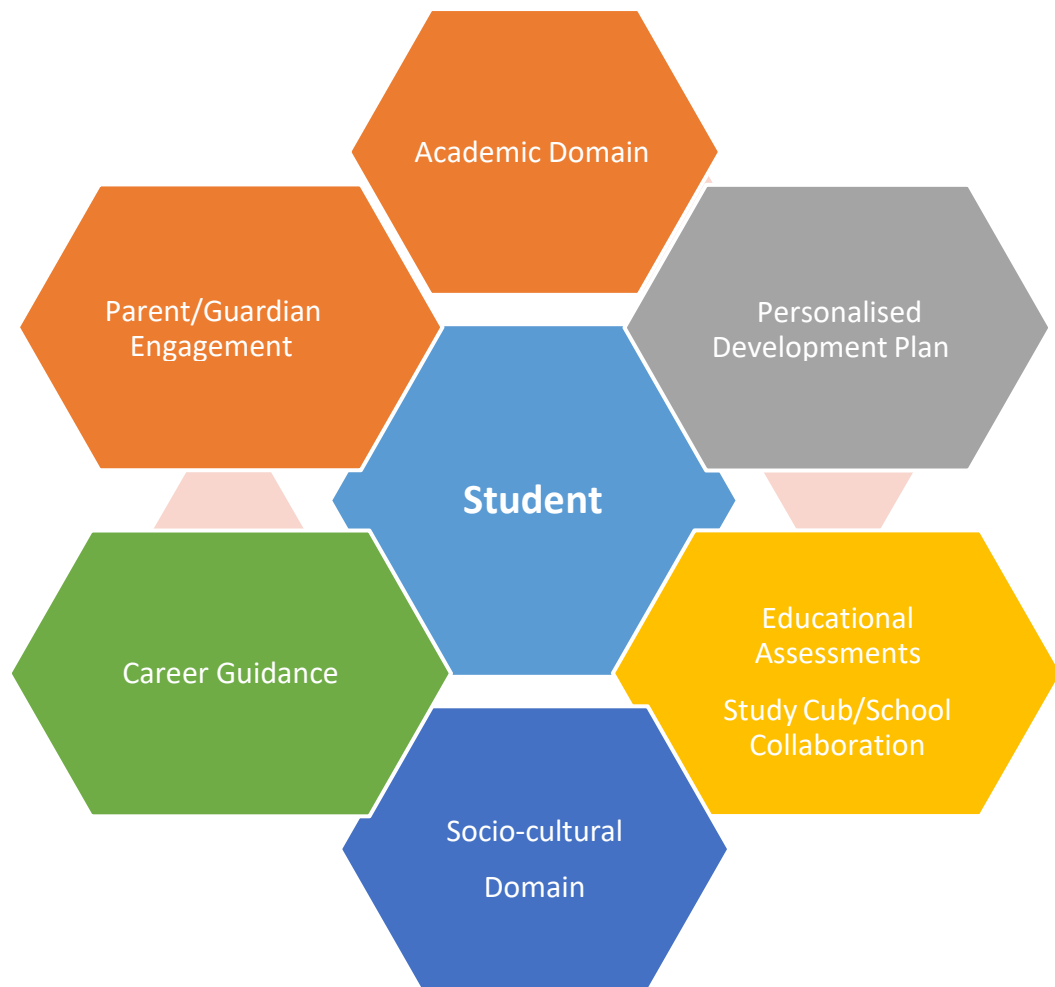
As the issues identified in the literature on educational disadvantage are numerous and complex, a detailed case study was considered an appropriate method for this research as it offered the ability to produce a wealth of data on the concepts under investigation. A case study was employed to investigate how one particular programme addressed educational disadvantage and actualises the strategies identified in the literature on improving academic achievement and increasing progression to higher education. The case selected for this study's empirical element was the Access Campus Study Club, as it facilitated the gathering of rich data and extended the knowledge available on interventions to counter educational disadvantage. The Access Campus Study Club is a targeted and multi-faceted intervention that seeks to improve academic achievement and higher education progression. It does so by combining academic and socio-cultural

elements that resonated with the literature's insights on educational disadvantage discussed in Chapters Two and Three. The Access Campus Study Club has appeared to achieve progression rates for this cohort of students that are above the national average. It places a strong emphasis on student and parental involvement and, therefore, was a compelling case to investigate with regards to how it achieved these outcomes. The Study Club has implemented the SOS (Students Optimisation System), to address these academic and cultural elements of educational disadvantage.

SOS (Student Optimisation System)

The SOS is a system that has been implemented at the Study Club to identify each student's specific academic and socio-cultural requirements. The over-arching principle guiding the SOS is that each student is an individual, requiring unique supports tailored to their particular circumstances. The student is at the core of SOS, which commences at the point of interview for membership of the Study Club. During the interview, each member completes a personal application, detailing the subjects and levels that they are studying and identifying subjects that they require particular support with. Each member provides a copy of their most recent exam results which are used as a baseline to assess each student's specific needs. Based on this information an SOS plan is formulated and tutors/mentors are assigned to the student to address academic and socio-cultural barriers to education. The SOS plan is used to monitor the student's progress and adapted to meet emerging needs and requirements. The members' academic progress is tracked on the SOS using each subsequent set of exam results to ensure that he/she is on target to achieve the required results in the state examinations. Figure 5.1 provides an overview of the SOS plan.

Figure 1: SOS (Student Optimisation System)



Consequently, this study used the Study Club as the research site to gather detailed data on these elements to answer the research question. The Study Club served as an information-rich case with the potential to offer rich, thick descriptions of the issues under investigation (Creswell 1998). Information-rich cases ‘are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research’ (Patton 1990: 169). The Study Club was selected for this study as it was considered to be ‘capable of giving voice to the lived reality from a culturally sensitive insider's view’ (Kumar 1999: 118).

This research sought to identify good practice in addressing educational disadvantage that combined a range of academic and socio-cultural supports to improve academic achievement and progression to higher education, which in turn may yield valuable insights when designing and implementing future policies and interventions. To achieve this objective, the Access Campus Study Club enabled the concepts identified in the literature to be explored from both the perspectives of the marginalised students and their parents. The DEIS (2017) and National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015 – 2019) policies emphasises both parents and students' involvement in developing and implementing policies to address educational disadvantage. While the DEIS policy documents advocate parental involvement in their children's education (2017: 8), their voice is missing from DEIS evaluations. This case study foregrounded both parents and students' voices on issues affecting their experience of educational disadvantage, thereby making a valuable contribution to our understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, the study reflects intersectionality's championing of the voice and 'lived expertise' of often marginalised groups.

As discussed in earlier chapters, teacher input and practices play a notable role in academic achievement and outcomes. The literature also highlights the role of mentors in countering educational disadvantage. However, a deliberate decision was made only to include parents and students in the empirical part of this study because of their direct and ongoing involvement in the Study Club and the research design which was based on achieving of depth through a participant-centred approach.

5.4.4 Case-study design

The boundaries of the case chosen for this study were as follows; the case's temporal boundaries were the academic years 2010/11; 2011/12; 2012/13; 2013/14; 2014/15, and

2015/16. Former club members who sat the Leaving Certificate in those years formed the student cohort for the study population, which ensured a broad temporal and achievement range. The study's potential population was 189 former club members and 189 parents. Following a pilot study, a sample of $n = 20$ former members and $n = 20$ parents were interviewed. When constructing the participant sample for the study, several issues needed to be considered. These included the purpose of the study, time scales and constraints, the research method and instruments used to collect the data (Cohen *et al.* 2007). Cognisant of the issues outlined above, a purposeful sample was deemed the most appropriate for this study. According to Kumar, purposeful sampling is 'the judgement of the researcher as to who can provide the best information to achieve the objectives of the study' (1999: 162). Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to be selective to achieve the objectives of the research. However, as Cohen states, 'it does not represent a complete population, but simply represents itself' (2007: 113). Patton argues that all sampling in qualitative research is 'purposeful sampling, as qualitative research selects samples that are knowledgeable about the topic under investigation' (1990: 169).

In selecting the sample, the researcher sought a group representative of the population under investigation. Potential participants were selected from databases held at the Access Campus, taking into consideration variables such as nationality, age, gender, type of school attended (DEIS/non-DEIS schools), social-class and residential area status. The sample comprised of both female and male participants. The former members ranged in age from eighteen years to mid/late twenties, while parents ranged in age from their forties to early sixties. Sample size in qualitative research has been subject to much debate in recent years. While clear-cut statistics-based rules determine sample size in quantitative research, sample size in qualitative research should be guided by the

methodological, theoretical, epistemological and ideological concerns.

While qualitative experts argue that there are no straight-forward guidelines, Vasileiou *et al.* (2018) indicate that several conceptual developments provide guidance when determining the appropriate sample size. (Lincoln and Guba 1985) advocate that sample size should be determined by ‘information redundancy’, i.e. the point at which no new information is elicited from respondents. Malterud *et al.* (2015) put forward the concept of ‘Informational Power,’ i.e. the more information a sample provides, the smaller the sample needs to be and vice versa. Drawing on these concepts, Vasileiou *et al.* (2018) advocate that the principle of ‘Saturation’, the point at which no new data is produced by subsequent interviews, should determine the sample size. They argue that this principle is the most widely recognised principle to justify sample size in qualitative research. In this research, information saturation was reached by interview seventeen for the former member interviews and at interview 15 for the parent interviews. The researcher deemed that the sample size was adequate to answer the research question according to Vasileiou *et al.* (2018). Tables 5.1 and 5.2 provide an overview of the participants selected using the criteria listed above.

Table 5.2 Former member selection variables

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Age Range	DEIS School Yes/No	Social-Class	Residential Area status
Member 1	Irish	Male	25 – 28	No	Working-class	Working-class
Member 2	Irish	Female	25 – 28	Yes	Working-class	Working-class
Member 3	Irish	Male	25 – 28	No	Working-class	Working-class
Member 4	Irish	Female	23 – 25	Yes	Working-class	Working-class
Member 5	Irish	Female	23 – 25	Yes	Working-class	Working-class
Member 6	Non-Irish	Male	20 – 22	No	Working-class	Working-class
Member 7	Irish	Male	20 – 22	No	Middle-class	Middle-class
Member 8	Irish	Male	20 – 22	Yes	Working-class	Working-class
Member 9	Irish	Male	20 – 22	Yes	Working-class	Working-class
Member 10	Irish	Female	20 – 22	No	Working-class	Rural
Member 11	Irish	Female	20 – 22	Yes	Working-class	Working-class
Member 12	Irish	Female	20 – 22	No	Working-class	Working-class
Member 13	Irish	Male	20 – 22	Yes	Working-class	Middle-class
Member 14	Irish	Male	20 – 22	No	Working-class	Working-class
Member 15	Irish	Male	18 - 20	No	Middle-class	Middle-class
Member 16	Irish	Female	18 - 20	No	Middle-class	Middle-class
Member 17	Irish	Female	18 - 20	No	Working-class	Working-class
Member 18	Irish	Female	18 - 20	No	Working-class	Working-class
Member 19	Irish	Female	18 - 20	Yes	Working-class	Working-class
Member 20	Irish	Male	18 - 20	Yes	Working-class	Working-class

Table 5.3 Parent selection variables

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Age Group	Social Class	Residential Status	Area
P1	Irish	Female	40 - 45	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P2	Irish	Male	45 - 50	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P3	Irish	Female	50 - 65	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P4	Irish	Female	45 - 50	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P5	Irish	Female	40 - 45	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P6	Non-Irish	Male	55 - 60	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P7	Irish	Female	50 - 55	Middle-Class	Middle-Class	
P8	Irish	Male	40 - 45	Working-Class	Rural	
P9	Irish	Male	50 - 55	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P10	Irish	Female	40 - 45	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P11	Irish	Female	45 - 50	Middle-Class	Middle-Class	
P12	Irish	Male	45 - 50	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P13	Irish	Female	45 - 50	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P14	Irish	Female	50 - 55	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P15	Irish	Female	40 - 45	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P16	Irish	Male	40 - 45	Middle-Class	Middle-Class	
P17	Irish	Male	50 - 55	Middle-Class	Rural	
P18	Irish	Male	40 - 45	Working-Class	Rural	
P19	Irish	Male	40 - 45	Working-Class	Working-Class	
P20	Irish	Female	40 - 45	Working-Class	Working-Class	

The literature review and its distillation for the operational framework presented in Section 5.3 resulted in a series of questions for members and parents. These questions were piloted with a sample of former members and parents of the Study Club to assess the interview schedules' suitability to collect the required data. Potential participants were randomly identified and were requested to participate in the research. Two students and one parent were selected for the pilot. Former members were asked twenty-seven questions on the themes which emerged in the literature on educational disadvantage (see Appendix I).

In contrast, parents were asked twenty-five questions about their involvement in the education of their children (Appendix II). The pilot study found that many of the proposed questions were easily understood by the respondents. However, some adjustments were required to both the number and the format of questions. Several questions were eliminated as they elicited similar responses. The final question on the member interview schedule was refined. Instead of asking respondents what elements of the Study Club they considered the most beneficial, they were asked to rank all Study Club elements in importance to them. This resulted in a more explicit account of how the various elements of the Study Club benefited members.

5.4.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Individual, semi-structured interviews with a set of core questions were conducted with participants. These interviews were audio-recorded to allow the researcher to gain their perspectives and insights on education and ascertain the impact of school and the Study Club on their academic achievement and progression to higher education. Semi-structured interviews are an established data collection tool in qualitative case study

research. According to Yin ‘they are particularly useful when interpretivism is integral to making sense of the data collected’ (2009: 106). The use of such interviews has been examined by, amongst others, Creswell (2009) and Bryman (2004), who state that this method facilitates the collection of in-depth data through interviewing those individuals who are involved with the phenomenon under investigation. Semi-structured interviews provide a means of triangulating research and bring robustness and rigour to the findings (Creswell 2009). By seeking information from real life actors on actual life events, they provide unique insights and perspectives which add to our understanding of the social reality under investigation.

The review of the literature on educational disadvantage facilitated the generating of specific areas of interest and questions for the semi-structured interviews as depicted in the operational framework (Table 5.1). Different sets of questions were framed for the club members and the parents (see Appendices I and II). These questions facilitated the investigation of the research topic. The material generated in the interviews was later related back to the literature review and the research questions to determine if the original propositions could be confirmed or refuted. Table 5.4 provides an overview of how the data collection and analysis process was conducted in this research.

Table 5.4 Overview of data collection and analysis

Data Collection Phase	Actions	Outcomes
Primary Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 members and 20 parents at an interview room at the Limerick Enterprise Development Park	Interviews audio-recorded and notes made in a research journal on interviewer’s thoughts and reflections on the interview process
Interviews Transcribed	Each transcript was assigned a unique identifier code to ensure respondent confidentiality and efficient retrieval of the transcript. Interviews were read and categories and themes that emerged were recorded on the transcript. (Newell and Burnard, 2006)	The interviews were then transcribed and saved to a secure hard drive. Categories and themes that emerged were uploaded to NVivo
Data Analysis	Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo	Each interview was analysed using the categories and themes that emerged during the transcription phase. Nodes were developed for each category/theme.
Secondary Data Analysis	HEA (Ire) & NOEAHE (UK) reports were reviewed to identify progression rates & trends for working-class students. Study Club records were analysed to provide evidence of change in student academic performance during membership.	Statistics were compiled and juxtaposed with primary data. Leaving Cert. results for each member were compared with in-school exam results to ascertain the potential benefits of the intervention. Two Independent research reports <i>'Thank You for Her Future'</i> (2010) and the <i>'Southside Community: Planning for the Future'</i> (2015)

The data analysis began with the first interview; the interview schedule was designed to allow time between interviews to reflect on both the interview process and each

interview's content after completion. This reflected advice to 'leave time for reflection as soon as possible after completion on both the process and content of the interview that has been completed' (Redman *et al.* 2005: 44).

The next step consisted of transcribing the interviews. Each transcript was read, and themes/categories that emerged were recorded in the margins of the transcript (Newell and Burnard 2006). Once this process was completed for each transcript, the themes/categories were compiled in a separate document and were worked through to eliminate duplication. This reduced the number of themes/categories considerably. Once this process was completed, the transcripts and categories were uploaded to Nvivo. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software package that helps qualitative researchers to manage, classify, interrogate, and organise qualitative data. The next round of analyses consisted of developing nodes for each theme/category. Each transcript was examined using Nvivo, and data from each transcript assigned to each node. Then the nodes were reviewed, and nodes with similar or overlapping themes were collapsed into one node. Newell and Burnard's multi-stage approach shaped this process. Informed by the operational framework developed during the research, the categories were further refined and reduced in number by grouping them together to create a final set of nodes to analyse the data.

The third phase of the data analysis entailed reviewing secondary sources of data on progression to higher education against data generated in the Study Club. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the National Office of Equity of Access to Higher Education (NOEAHE) in Ireland reports on progression rates and trends for working-class students to higher education. Data from the research site on members' progression rates to higher education was juxtaposed with the national data. The Study Club maintains

records on all students' academic achievements throughout their membership of the club. These records are intended to track each individual student's progress and ensure that they are on track to achieve the points and minimum course requirements for their chosen college course.

Once a member joins the club, their most recent summer or Christmas exam results are recorded. These results are used as a baseline to assess their specific academic requirements and supports. Subsequent sets of summer and Christmas results were recorded up to and including Leaving Certificate results. This secondary data was collected to tailor Study Club supports to individual members and was used in this research to assess the impact of the academic supports provided by the Study Club on student achievement and progression to higher education. Each set of exam results was weighted using the Leaving Certificate points system to determine if the member was on track to achieve the necessary points for their desired college course. This data revealed that the majority of members demonstrated improvements in academic achievement over the course of their involvement with the Study Club, which indicated that the academic and socio-cultural supports provided at the Study Club were beneficial.

5.4.6 Ethical Considerations and practitioner as researcher issues

This case study was underpinned by an ethical framework regulated at two levels (Cohen *et al.* 2007). At the institutional level, the study complied with the University of Limerick's ethical regulations. These regulations required all research to be sanctioned by the Ethics Committee before undertaking the research. As this study involved vulnerable groups, a detailed proposal was prepared and submitted for ethical approval. This study was granted ethical approval by the AHSS (Arts Humanities Social Sciences)

Ethics Committee in November 2017 (2017-10-08-AHSS). At a personal level, to ensure ethical rigour, the researcher took great care to maintain reflexivity and exercise professionalism throughout the research.

Ethical and methodological issues are intricately connected in interpretive research on educational disadvantage (Cohen *et al.* 2007). This is particularly relevant as practitioner/researchers may be subject to claims of bias and bad faith (Killeen 1996a). When conducting research on educational issues, the researcher must ensure transparency and deal with contextual, motivation, and methodological concerns (Marris 2003). The ethical issues that arise in interpretive research are like those that occur in the role of educational support and mentoring. In this study, the researcher dealt with professional issues by viewing ethics as an active decision-making process involving discretionary and deliberative judgement when collecting data in the field.

The researcher ensured that participants' rights to anonymity and confidentiality were always upheld to address these issues. An information letter and a consent form were sent to each participant outlining the nature and purpose of the research, their rights and their prerogative to withdraw from the research at any time during the research process. This study was grounded in the belief that the participants possessed valuable insights into the issues under investigation. While it might have been beneficial to interview current members of the Study Club, ethical constraints did not permit the researcher to interview individuals with whom he had a current supervisory/teaching relationship.

In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the primary data were coded and anonymised and stored in a password-protected desktop computer. Personal details remained confidential to the researcher, and only the research supervisors and researcher

had access to the data collected. Participants' names did not appear on any research instruments or transcripts. While a considerable amount of research stems from scholars' real-life experience, they are cautioned against engaging in such research for several reasons. This reluctance is rooted in concerns about the researcher's ability to be objective about a research problem that they are personally invested in. Such proximity to the research problem may potentially undermine the quality and reliability of the findings (Jones and Bartunek 2018). However, if conducted correctly, insider research ensures that the practitioner as researcher bias is managed correctly. This may yield objective and reliable findings, thereby increasing the trustworthiness and enhancing rather than undermining the quality and impact of the findings (Anteby 2013). This researcher was very conscious of best practice in carrying out insider research (Symon and Cassell 2012).

Studies influenced by the researcher's own experiences and interests have the potential to prompt research that meets the call for responsible research and may play a role in influencing and shaping public policy on subjects that are relevant to those who conduct it (Jones and Bartunek 2018). This is so because insider research benefits from the insider researcher's knowledge of both the research topic and the respondents, which may afford greater depth and breadth of practical knowledge, allowing the researcher to ask valuable questions and employ more effective methods of addressing these questions. Practitioner/researchers can overcome barriers to accessing participants and elicit information and make conceptual connections when analysing data more easily because of their insider perspective. For these reasons, practitioner/researcher or insider research may contribute to producing findings that reflect the topic under investigation more accurately. A salient criticism of insider research is its inability to produce objective findings. Practitioners/researchers face claims of being unable to separate their inherent

values and bias from the research (Donaldson 2005). However, insider research is capable of producing objective findings if protocols are implemented to ensure objectivity. These protocols include responsibility to communicate to the reader their connection to the research topic or population under investigation and their responsibility to participants and how the findings will be used. Assuming responsibility in this way creates trustworthiness (Almassi 2017) which lends meaning to objectivity as scholars are responsible and accountable to those whose interests are reflected in research findings (Jones and Bartunek 2018).

Healey (2016) recommends that objectivity can be ensured and bias minimised if the researcher adopts a reflexive approach in the data gathering phase of the research. A reflexive approach requires the researcher to continually reflect on the data gathering process, i.e. seek clarification and confirmation of participant's responses to eliminate potential ambiguity or bias. The researcher should examine and record his/her own thoughts and responses during and after each interview in a research journal. The researcher has read widely about insider research and identified the need for mechanisms to reflect on and ensure best practice in carrying out insider research (Symon and Cassell 2012). Therefore, the researcher:

- Kept field notes, a journal and an individual reflection diary.
- When listening to the recordings of the interviews, examined how his presence or interaction as a researcher may have affected the process.
- Discussed the research process and findings with the research supervisors, thinking critically about the research and any feelings that may affect judgement.

The Use of the Research Journal to Maintain Reflexivity

The research journal aided me as a researcher to maintain a self-reflexive approach throughout this study, which required me to examine my own subjective position at various points throughout the research journey. Initially, my passion for assisting working-class families progress through the education system led me to conduct this research. Having reviewed the international and Irish literature on educational disadvantage I came to the research with pre-conceived assumptions about various elements contributing to the issue. Havercamp (2005) advises that as researcher/practitioners we need to reflect on our values, assumptions, and our relationships with participants. Being an Irish, middle-aged, middle-class man, it was important for me to recognise the socially constructed perspectives, attitudes, and expectations I have consciously and unconsciously absorbed over my lifetime. During the course of the research I had to take a step back and interrogate my own opinions and assumptions as I listened to participants' accounts of their educational experiences. I deliberately reflected on the extent to which those experiences were shaped by class and gender issues. During the data-gathering phase, I was compelled to re-evaluate some of my biases on the nature and causes of educational disadvantage, particularly as it plays out in classrooms.

As I listened to former members' accounts of their experiences in schools, I found myself re-considering my opinion about teachers. Respondents identified the pressures and time constraints that teachers were under to cover the syllabus. This led me to the realisation that teachers per-se were not the issue regarding teacher/student engagement, but rather structural and organisational barriers within the schools themselves were perhaps

preventing teachers from spending more time with individual students. This led me to also consider how this impacted teacher/parent engagement.

In several interviews, parents became emotive recounting their experiences when engaging with teachers. While the literature would suggest that this may be a result of teachers pre-conceived assumptions about working-class parents. As a researcher, I found myself questioning if this was really the reason, or were there other issues at play which respondents had not considered? In reviewing the field notes, I was reminded of how some respondents identified the pressures that teachers were under, leading me to contemplate if this could possibly be the reason for these negative interactions?

The importance of teacher expectations has gained prominence in more recent times. I had assumed that younger teachers would exhibit more inclusive and positive student expectations compared to teachers further along in their careers. However, evidence emerged that older teachers were exhibiting positive expectations of these students also, this led me to question if teacher expectations were in fact a generational issue or influenced by teachers' personal experiences, worldviews and commitment to the education of their students regardless of socio-economic background and what this implies for initial teacher education and more importantly for continuous professional development programmes.

In maintaining reflexivity as I progressed through the research, some of my preconceived views and assumptions on the issues contributing to educational disadvantage changed. However, what was particularly illuminating was the contribution that participants made to examining how current policies, interventions, and practices address educational disadvantage. As I neared the end of the research project, I remained resolute in my

conviction that the voice of individuals experiencing educational disadvantage should be recognised and incorporated in to policy design and implementation.

During the data gathering and explication phase, the researcher maintained conscious reflexivity. While their socio-cultural contexts influence research participants' experiences, it is essential to note that so too is the researcher informed by their socio-cultural context (Bourke 2014). Consequently, the researcher had to consider how his own beliefs and socio-cultural background influenced the research process and findings. Therefore, to maintain the integrity of the study, it was necessary to be reflexive. According to Callaway, reflexivity is 'a continuous mode of self-analysis which required the researcher to identify vested interests, predilections and assumptions' (1992: 33), and simultaneously be 'conscious of how these might impact on the research process and findings' (Finlay 2009: 17).

The research journal provided a useful point of reference after and between interviews to reflect on observations and thoughts during the interview process. In the field notes, references by several respondents to the benefits of peer learning in small groups was a recurring theme. I had never considered that peer learning was equally important to raising academic achievement as one to one tuition. The salient impact of school organisational issues such as timetabling and the volume of work teachers had to get through was something that I had not considered prior to undertaking the research. Consequently, I saw teachers in a new light and came to appreciate the pressures that they were under and how these pressures limited their ability to engage with students and parents.

A significant realisation as researcher was the gendered nature of parental involvement in education. The majority of parents participating in the research were mothers, however,

the fathers that participated in the research were quite informative and very engaged in their children's education. My views on the contributions that fathers can and do make to addressing educational disadvantage were positively affected, I now realise that the voice of fathers should also be included in the discourse on educational disadvantage.

The research journal and field notes proved to be a useful tool in organising the data for analysis, acting as a point of reference to identify and retrieve recurring views and opinions between and across the interviews pertinent to the study.

5.5 Verification Procedures

To overcome any deficiencies during the research, the researcher used several verification procedures advanced by Creswell (1998) to enhance the findings' credibility and reliability and allow the reader to have confidence in the research. In this research, the following verification procedures were utilised: triangulation, clarification of researcher bias as discussed above, and generating rich, thick descriptions.

In this study, the research method, data sources, research sample and the extensive literature review assisted in the triangulation of the findings. The operational framework for the research, both guided and assisted in the analysis of the data collected. Two independent pieces of research, *'Thank You for Her Future'* (2010) and the *'Southside Community: Planning for the Future'* (2015), were triangulated with the primary data to provide reliability and validity.

In the final phase of the study, the views and perspectives of several teachers who sit on the AccessCampus Development Board were sought on the data generated by this study. Because of Covid-19, these discussions were held over the telephone. Five teachers were drawn from schools linked to the Study Club and represented a select and narrow range

of teachers. However, as these teachers had interacted with members of the Study Cub in the classroom, they provided another point of observation and their insights added another perspective on the relevance of the academic and socio-cultural supports provided to these students at the Study Club. Their reaction to the study's findings was helpful both in triangulating the results and gauging the reaction of other stakeholders.

The literature states that generalisability is a view that findings derived from the study may assist in comprehending similar situations (Cohen *et al.* 2007). A *small n* focus, such as that of the current study, permitted rigorous analysis, enabling meaningful operationalisation of concepts and identification of relational explanations. Small samples can facilitate a deeper understanding of how the literature's concepts may influence academic achievement and progression to higher education for marginalised students. The disadvantage of a single 'case' study relates to external validity. There is a risk that failure to deal with opposing cases may impose anecdotal accounts of the phenomena under investigation. A *small n* case does, however, allow for engagement with the specific facts of the case, increasing reliability over external validity. Thus, like the findings from the case studies carried out by Hannon *et al.* (2017) and Scanlon *et al.* (2019a), the findings from this study are 'illuminative rather than generalisable.'

This study's focus was not to compare interventions and policies on educational disadvantage, but, instead, the research explored one intervention to answer the research question by examining in detail how it addressed the concepts influencing academic achievement and progression to higher education. However, the method used and data that emerged from this study may serve as a model for structuring a country-wide study on the content and impact of such interventions.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

This study seeks to investigate how the intervention addresses the concepts identified in the literature on educational disadvantage to improve academic achievement and progression to higher education. However, there are some limitations to the study.

The first limitation relates to the sample size. The merits and caveats of small n studies were discussed above. It is important to note that this research stems from a sample group and does not purport to represent the broader experience of students across society. This concurs with Bryman (2016) assertion that people who are interviewed in qualitative research are not meant to be representative of a population.

Single case-studies are sometimes accused of lacking depth and breadth. However, as Todres and Galvin (2005) point out, depth and breadth are not always about sample size but rather focus. Single case-studies can yield data focusing on precise details within their distinctive context. Depth is thus produced by the density of the rich, thick descriptions generated by respondents, and according to Meier and Pugh (1986) can contribute to knowledge creation by concentrating on individuals in their inimitable context. Single case-studies generate breadth by exploring how individuals make sense of broad and fundamental themes affecting their lives. The value of single case studies in generating this type of breadth and depth has been discussed by Merriam (1988) and Miller (2002). According to Todres and Galvin (2005), the transferability of insights and knowledge generated forgoes empirical generalisation but gains the authentic insights of respondents' living their lives. The data gathered for this study provides such authentic insights.

A second limitation of the study may be that given the diversified nature of educational systems around the world, any conclusions drawn from this study might not be

transferable to international settings. However, the study uses insights from different systems (see Chapter Two) and the case under investigation provides valuable insights on how policy interventions ought to be designed to improve academic achievement and progression to higher education.

This study focused on a specific intervention in a particular setting and did not involve comparison with similar interventions. Now that the number of pre-entry interventions in Ireland has expanded, partly in response to HEA obligations, future research could examine the attributes of these different interventions.

Another limitation of the study was the exclusion of under eighteen-year-olds from the study, as they may have yielded another dimension to the study, i.e. providing the perspectives of students currently in the education system. However, ethical restrictions because of the researcher's professional role, prevented the inclusion of participants under the age of eighteen years of age.

Despite these limitations, the study provided an in-depth illustration of the issues, possibilities and challenges at the micro-level when confronting a macro-level phenomenon such as educational disadvantage.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the research problem and the operational framework which emerged from the literature reviews in chapters two and three. It outlined the researcher's epistemological position which draws on constructivism and allowed the researcher to comprehend the respondents' experience of education as he was external to the respondents' world. The ontological assumptions that underpinned this study were

guided by the interpretivist paradigm which allowed the respondents to construct their lived experience from their own perspective. As the concepts that informed the operational framework were numerous and complex, a single case study was chosen to explore these issues from the perspective of individuals experiencing educational disadvantage. Single case studies are capable of investigating a phenomenon in detail, generating rich thick descriptions of the research topic, eliciting perspectives on the research problem that other research methods may not be capable of eliciting.

The Study Club was selected as the research case as it addresses the socio-cultural and academic domains that emerged in the literature on educational disadvantage in a coordinated manner and was believed to offer potentially valuable insights into how future interventions may be structured. While the research sample was small, the literature cited above indicates that small samples are capable of generating sufficient data to answer the research question. All studies have limitations, and the limitations of this study included the sample size, ethical restrictions on interviewing current members of the Study Club and possibilities for generalisation. The study focused on a specific intervention in a particular setting which may make it difficult to draw comparisons with other interventions. However, as the number of interventions has expanded in Ireland, the granular nature of this study may provide a framework for a cross- institutional study in the future.

The insights from theory and the literature were operationalised in the framework presented at the start of this chapter. Throughout the chapter a methodology for applying that framework was developed. The next chapter presents the case study using the framework and methodology developed in this chapter.

Chapter Six: Research Findings

6.1 Introduction

The International and Irish literature reviews identified socio-cultural factors (cultural capital, raising aspirations, parental involvement, and soft barriers) and academic factors (school culture, class size, mentoring, and numeracy and literacy instruction) that contribute to educational disadvantage and lower rates of progression to college. Access Campus Study Club is a programme run by the Access Office in the University of Limerick to provide support to secondary level students and their parents who experience educational disadvantage. This research sought to explore the direct experiences of former Access Campus Study Club members and their parents of how their schools and the Study Club addressed the factors identified in Chapters Two and Three in order to improve their academic outcomes and enable progression to college. Several expectations/assumptions based on these factors emerged from the literature reviews and are presented at the beginning of the discussion of the findings on each element. Following a brief overview of the background of the Study Club and its achievements, the main body of this chapter reviews the findings of the primary research under each of the factors mentioned above. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

6.2 The Access Campus Study Club: background and achievements

The Access Campus Study Club was established in November 2007, as a partnership between the University of Limerick Access Office and the Limerick Enterprise Development Partnership in response to a need identified by local residents for a Study Club on the Southside of Limerick city. Parents attending adult education courses at the

Access Campus had spoken about the need for a Study Club for their children in the local community. The Access Campus co-ordinator recruited students from the University of Limerick to volunteer as tutors at the Study Club. Initially twelve students joined the Study Club in 2007 and the Study Club operated every Tuesday and Wednesday from 5pm to 7pm. A review of the Study Club was conducted in the summer of 2008 and based on this review; it was decided to operate the Study Club four nights a week (Monday to Thursday) from 5pm to 9pm. In addition, it was decided to extend membership to 2nd years and 5th years.

In October 2008, the Study Club commenced a collaboration with the Faculty of Science and Engineering, whereby, 3rd and 6th year students travelled to the university campus every Tuesday evening, for tuition in maths and STEM subjects. This collaboration continues to be a central pillar of the academic support provided at the Study Club. This was the first of several collaborations with various partners from the University of Limerick, including the Centre for Teaching and Learning (Learning style assessments and study skills workshops), Aonad na Gaeilge (tuition in written and oral Irish). The School of Health Sciences (Occupational Therapy to equip students with the skills to be independent learners, workshops on life/study balance, healthy eating and living, stress management etc.), The Counselling service (parenting programmes on dealing with the challenges of raising teenagers, one to one counselling sessions etc.), and the International Education Division (foreign language tuition).

The Study Club has also hosted 3rd Year B Ed. students on the AEE (Alternative Education Experience) module for several years. In 2018, final year students on the B Ed. programme in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick have undertaken their AEE

module at the Study Club. The Study Club also collaborates with the President's Volunteer Award scheme to recruit tutors across all subject areas to engage with club members and help them prepare for school and state examinations. Another central element of the Study Club is support to engage parents in their children's education. Over the years, parent programmes have included Maths and Irish for parents to equip them with the knowledge and skills to assist with homework, ongoing meetings and information sessions on the CAO process, advice and guidance on applying to SUSI and the HEAR/DARE schemes. In the fourteen years since the Study Club was established, it has evolved from providing academic support to also providing personal and social development supports to members and their parents. Over 1,000 students and their parents drawn from all years (1st year to 6th year) spread over 14 cohorts have attended the Study Club.

Because of its perceived success, the Access Campus Study Club. was deemed a pertinent site for an in-depth single case-study to examine the research question *‘Can a targeted intervention improve academic achievement and raise progression to higher education, and if so what elements of the intervention achieve these outcomes?’* Tables 6.1 and 6.3 illustrate the outcomes achieved by the Study Club between 2010 and 2018 and demonstrate the suitability of the intervention to explore the research question.

Table 6.1 Progression Rates to Higher/Further Education of Study Club Members 2010-2016

Leaving Certificate Results and Progression to Higher/Further Education							
Leaving Certificate Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Number Progressing to Higher/Further Education	20	19	26	41	40	44	37
Non-progression to Higher/Further Education	1	1	1	2	2	1	2
Total Number of Leaving Certificate Students	21	20	27	43	42	45	39
Percentage Progression Rate	95%	95%	96%	95%	95%	97%	94%

The Study Club is achieving a progression rate to higher/further education of 95% on average. The 5% or so of students that did not progress to college represented just one member each year. Several of these did return to higher education as mature students. This progression rate is indicative of the intervention's impact since students in the Study Club did not receive extra academic supports from any other sources, unlike the middle-class cohorts which featured in the studies by Canny and Hamilton (2018) and Hamilton and Deegan (2019), for example.

6.3 Academic Performance

Throughout this study the importance of academic achievement as a facilitator of educational progression has been underlined. Consequently, the assumption/expectation can be made that:

A structured intervention helps improve academic performance

The academic outcomes achieved by Study Club members show evidence of consistent improvement in performance. This section documents the academic performance of Study Club participants as well as their progression rates to higher education. The Study Club draws its students from nine schools, of which five receive special supports under DEIS. Table 6.3 illustrates the progress of Study Club members' vis á vis their school cohort progression rates. When these statistics are viewed in conjunction with respondents' comments, a clearer picture emerges of how structured interventions may operate to raise academic achievement.

'You had your routine set in place, early on in the year. Like ok, on Monday, you are going to get help with biology, on Tuesday

Irish and then you had a break Wednesday and then Thursday we have maths. But at the same time, if you were doing homework and you were looking at it and you just didn't have a clue! You could always throw the hand up and somebody would say I can help you. There was always a plan at the club. It was structured to suit you as an individual. Schools didn't have that system of support or involvement with students. Which I think helped! Well, I'm a teacher now myself' (M18).

'We had a small school, there was 13 in my year I believe even at that it was impossible, ... because of the natural environment of the school. I suppose in the Study Club you had, it was a lot more serious You were there to achieve. You almost felt like you were disappointing your tutor if you got nothing done, because of their effort. Where do you see people staying till half 9 at night just to educate people? Students felt encouraged to give their own opinion not only that, but to grow and not be ashamed of getting the work wrong, they worked at it with you until you got it right' (M1).

'So, like especially if you're learning stuff off by heart then no better place to do it than here say (Study Club) where you literally have your own peace, your own quiet, and you have your help to literally learn everything off and understand it'(M7).

These comments were typical of respondents' views on what constituted interventions to successfully raise their academic performance and achievement. Respondents made reference to the plan that was in place for them at the Study Club and how it benefitted their studies. The SOS

was a central element of how the Study Club structured supports for each student, providing a clear plan for each student that guided their academic progress, signposting what was required of both students and tutors to support the academic progression of members.

Table 6.2 Progression Rates Per School Vis-à-vis Study Club 2010 – 2018

School	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
School A	52%	56%	121%	59%	92%	62%	56%	78%	69%
School B	87%	79%	102%	101%	94%	96%	85%	93%	94%
School C	56%	65%	77%	67%	77%	81%	70%	89%	63%
School D	47%	52%	45%	64%	72%	48%	48%	51%	67%
School E	72%	44%	50%	78%	88%	85%	63%	45%	61%
School F	85%	87%	97%	94%	87%	103%	91%	110%	108%
School G	N/A	N/A	61%	85%	84%	112%	93%	91%	92%
School H	68%	96%	79%	87%	95%	73%	77%	86%	71%
School I	63%	54%	52%	67%	81%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mean School % Progression	66.25%	67%	79%	78%	85.50%	83%	73%	80%	78%
Study Club % Progression	95%	95%	96%	95%	96%	95%	95%	97%	94%

The statistics were compiled independently of the Department of Education by the Irish Times to show individual school progression rates to higher education. The statistics suggest that the Study Club achieves a higher and more consistent progression rate than the school patterns. Diagrams 6.1 to 6.6 below, present Study Club members' academic achievement prior to joining the club and their academic achievement in the Leaving Certificate. These Study Club members did not receive extra tuition or support from other sources such as private grinds or homework clubs at school, and when considered in light of the findings presented in sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.2 it may be inferred that these gains were mainly achieved as a result of being a member of the Study Club. The findings from this study help identify factors connected to the Study Club, which contributed to these increased progression rates. The SOS underpinned how supports were structured and implemented for each member, features which were noted and appreciated by interviewees.

'People pay a fortune for maths grinds and I didn't have the money for grinds. It was the same for everybody at the club. And it's like that even in university now like. People are paying out for grinds' (M5).

Diagram 6.1 Academic Achievement of Study Club Members 2010

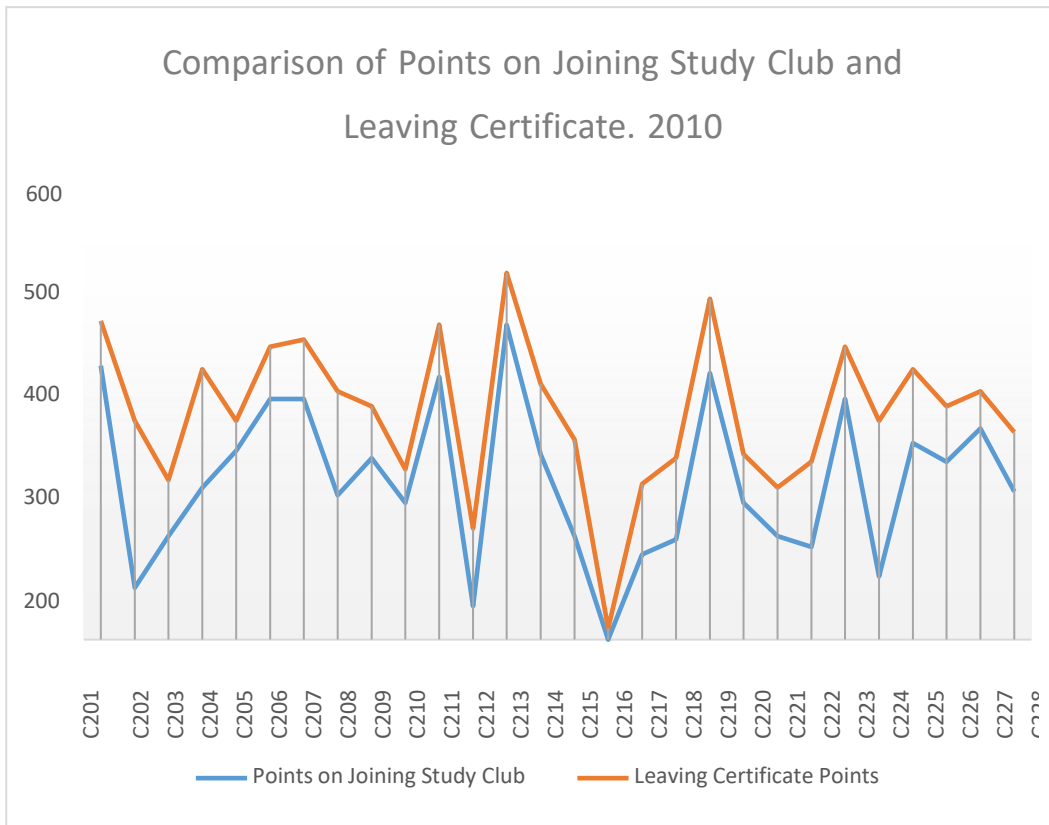


Diagram 6.2 Academic Achievement of Study Club Members 2011

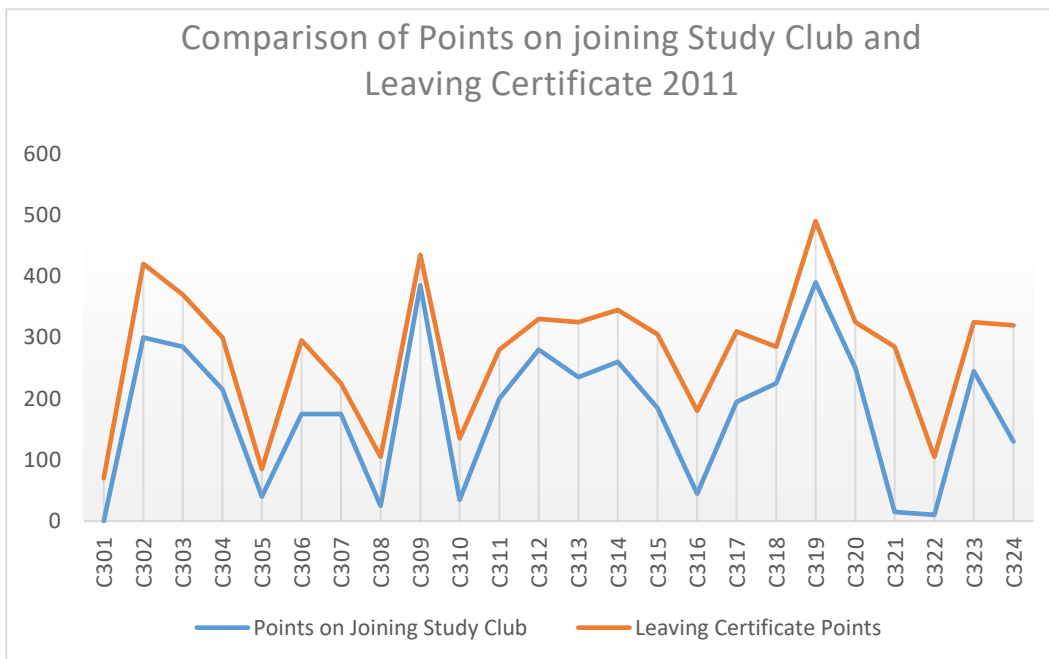


Diagram 6.3 Academic Achievement of Study Club Members 2012

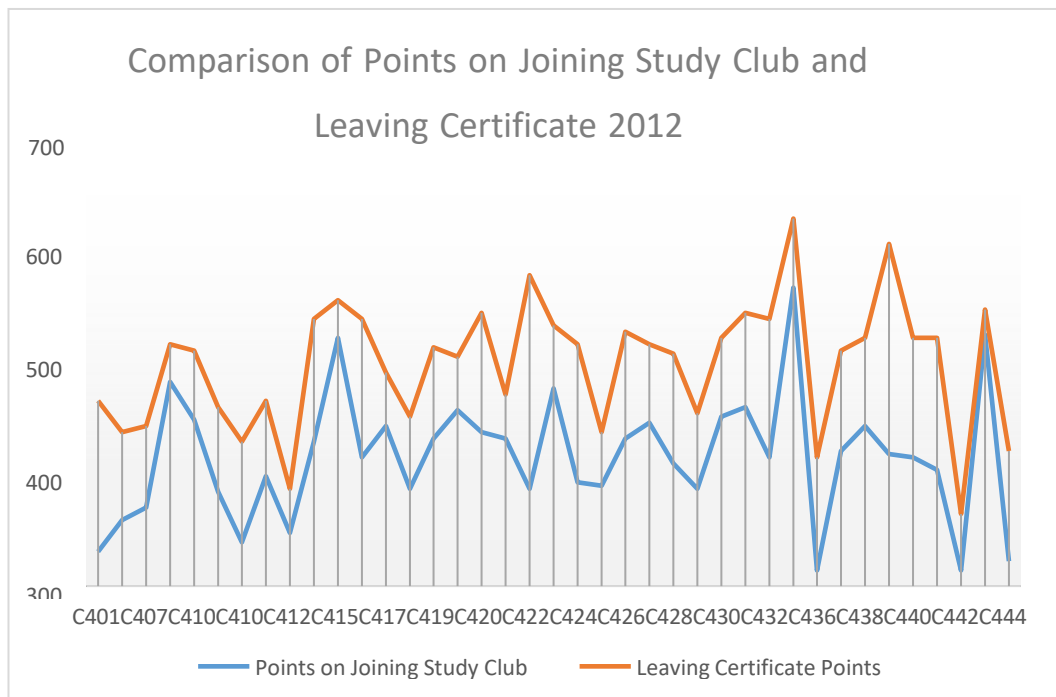


Diagram 6.4 Academic Achievement of Study Club Members 2013

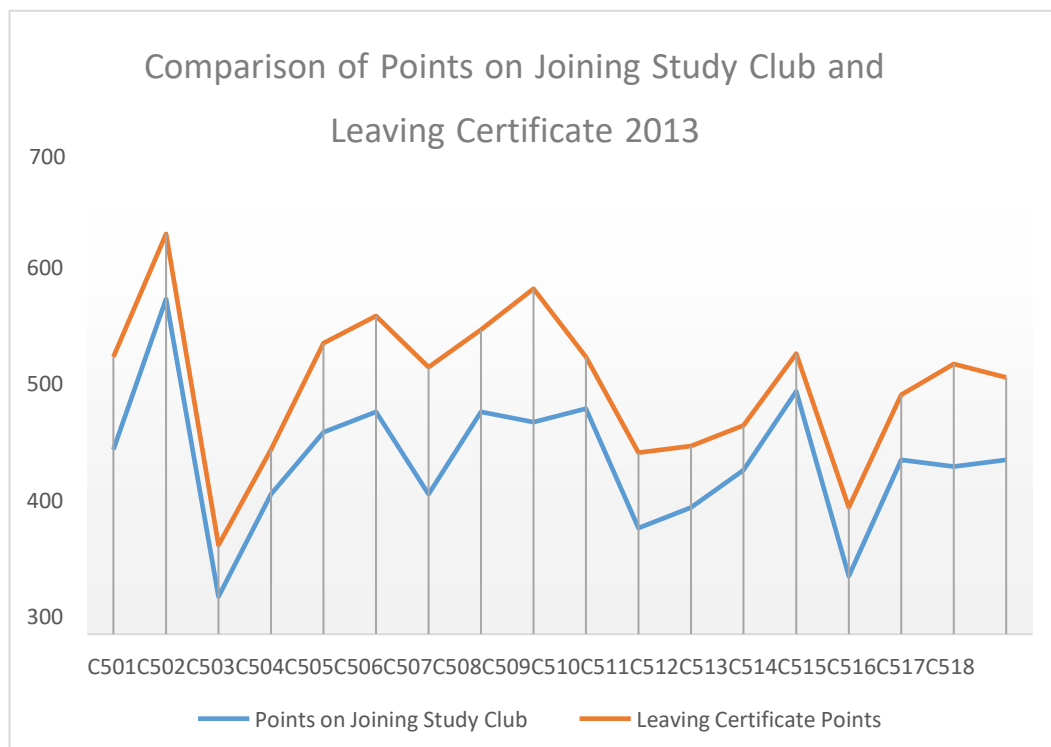


Diagram 6.5 Academic Achievement of Study Club Members 2014

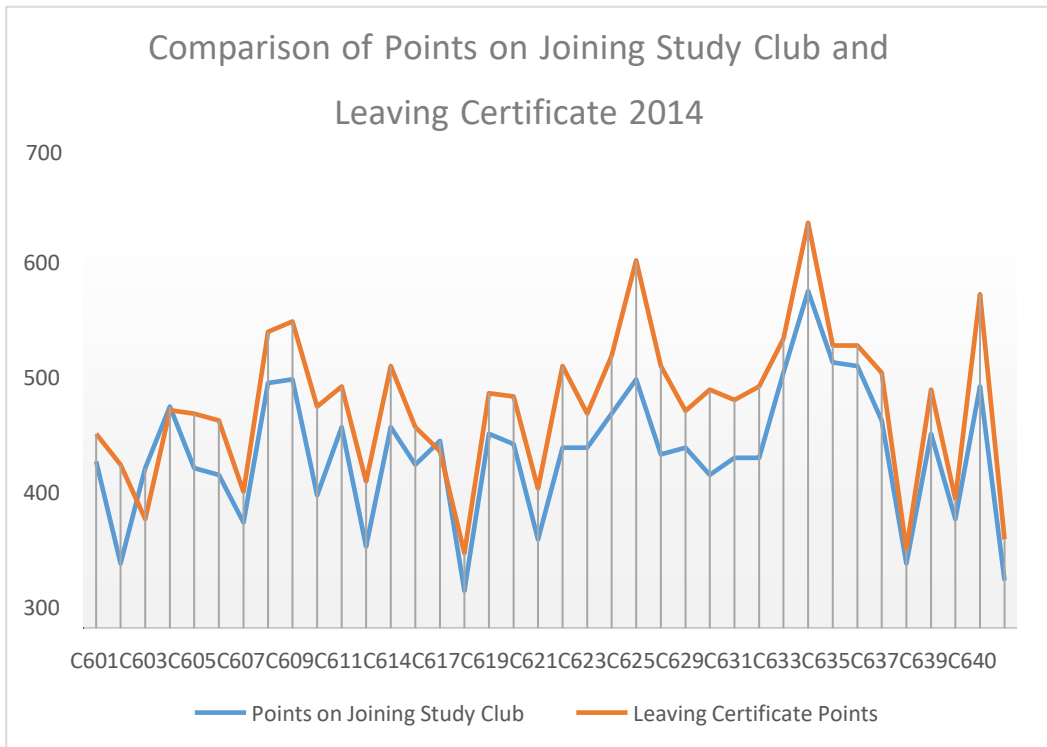
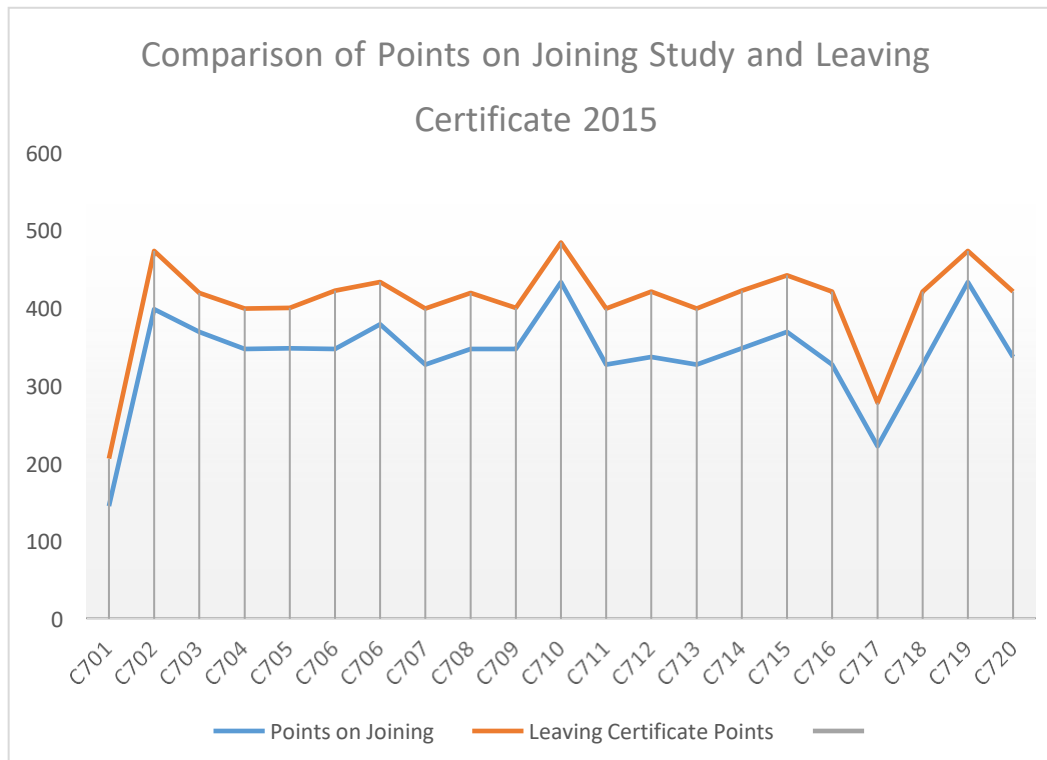


Diagram 6.6 Academic Achievement of Study Club Members 2015



6.4 Conceptual Factors and Operational Framework

Revisited

Table 5.1 in Chapter Five demonstrated the key themes and indicators that emerged in the literature reviews in Chapters Two and Three. These themes and indicators are presented together with the expectations/assumptions that emerged from the literature and how they were operationalised for this study in Table 6.2 below. These themes, indicators and expectations guide the presentation of the findings of the primary data collected and are organised under two headings: socio-cultural and academic elements. The key findings from the anonymised interviews are then presented in line with the components of the operational framework.

Table 6.3 Operational Framework

Themes	Indicators	Expectations/Assumptions
SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS		
Cultural Capital/Habitus	Cultural Interests, External Access to Educational Resources, Familial Educational Attainment	Cultural capital influences Academic outcomes Discontinuities between familial and school cultural capital may be mitigated by structured interventions
Raising Expectations/ Aspirations	Changing expectations, aspirations, ambitions and attitudes Sources of Encouragement	For students to succeed in education, teachers/educators, parents and students need to hold high expectations. Teachers/Educators can provide the motivation and encouragement to succeed by providing students and their parents with advice and support Providing motivation and encouragement can raise student ambitions, aspirations and expectations to progress to HE
Parental Involvement	Type of Involvement with school/intervention Level/Type of Support	The frequency and type of parental involvement affect academic outcomes. The types of support and resources teachers provide to parents influence academic outcomes

Soft Barriers	Level of academic and social confidence Level of competence re application processes, campus navigation etc. Sense of belonging	Overcoming soft barriers to educational progression is made more likely through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning environments that promote confidence in academic ability and social confidence • Providing advice, guidance and support regarding transition to HE • Creating a sense of belonging with supportive teachers/educators and an inclusive atmosphere
ACADEMIC FACTORS		
School	School Culture/habitus Feeling supported	Feeling supported results from tangible and intangible factors such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of belonging • Supportive teachers/educators and targeted use of resources • Inclusive environments
Class Size	Experience of Learning at School/Intervention.	Class size mediates teacher's ability to provide instruction tailored to students' needs
Numeracy and Literacy	Preference for learning at school or intervention Materials & supports	Under-achievement in Numeracy/Literacy is more easily and effectively addressed through targeted strategies delivered in smaller classes
Mentoring	Impact of academic mentoring/Personalised Instruction & peer learning Advice and assistance regarding transition to HE	The mentoring possible in a setting such as the Study Club helps both academic performance and the process of transition to HE
Academic Performance	Changes in performance during participation in Study Club	A structured intervention helps improve academic performance
Successful Elements/Outcomes	Important Elements of Study Club, Rate of Progression	Environment, Tuition, Mentoring

The data was collected using in-depth interviews with former member and parents of the Study Club. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed verbatim and the findings are presented below. During the course of the interviews, respondents sometimes raised their voices or used a stronger tone to emphasis a point. Where this occurred, the text was highlighted in bold to highlight these occurrences.

The current study provided an in-depth exploration of the themes emerging in the literature to elucidate how these experiences and outcomes are being achieved. The findings are presented under the following themes:

- Cultural capital/habitus,
- Raising expectations/aspirations,
- Parental involvement,
- Soft barriers,
- Feeling supported/unsupported
- Class size,
- Numeracy and literacy,
- Mentoring,
- Academic performance, and
- Successful elements of intervention.

6.4.1 Socio-cultural Elements

Cultural Capital/Habitus

Cultural capital theory posits that academic achievement may be attributed to the advantages that individuals can leverage from the cultural capital associated with their socio-economic background. It is argued that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds possess more of the cultural capital recognised and rewarded by schools and therefore, will achieve greater academic outcomes than their less affluent peers (Bourdieu, 1986). As Chapter Four showed, cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied cultural capital which refers to a person's attributes that contribute to positive academic outcomes; objectified cultural capital, which refers to home educational resources that allow students to acquire the dispositions, values, perceptions, knowledge and skills that are recognised and rewarded by schools; institutionalised cultural capital which comprise educational credentials that enable parents to confer advantages on their children as they navigate the educational field. This research explored the types and levels of cultural capital that respondents possessed in its three forms.

The following expectations/assumptions emerged in the literature.

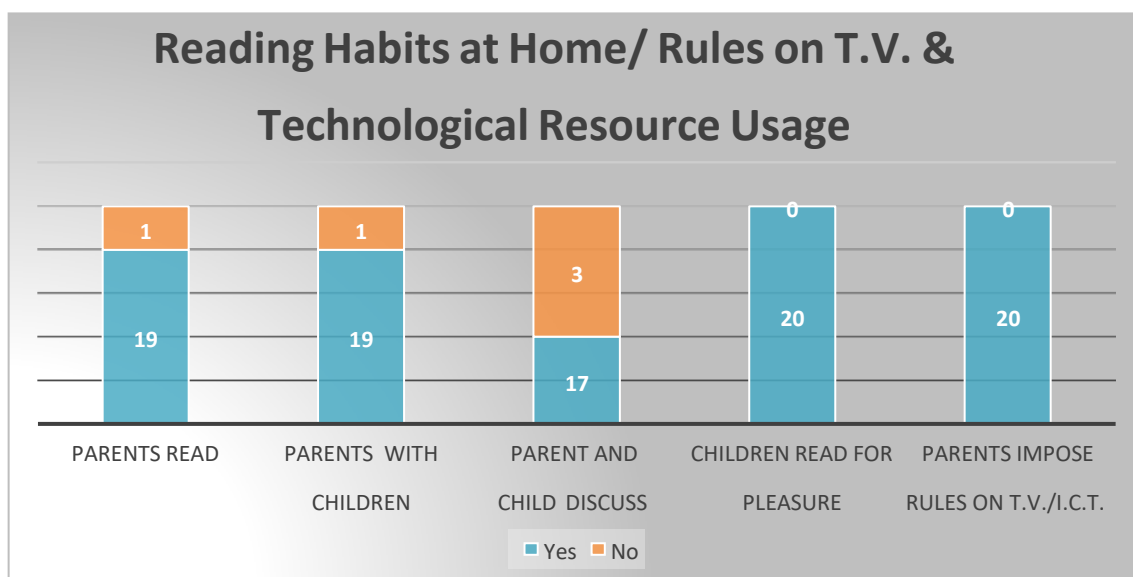
A) The type of cultural capital possessed by students and their families affects academic outcomes.

B) Discontinuities between students' familial cultural capital and that recognised by schools may be mitigated by structured interventions.

Embodied Cultural Capital

As Chapter Four illustrated, contemporary research has moved away from Bourdieu's traditional means of operationalising embodied cultural capital (i.e., visits to museums and art galleries and listening to operatic and classical music) and now considers familial reading habits and T.V. viewing habits, and technological resources as indicative of individuals' embodied cultural capital in modern societies. Therefore, this research explored respondents' reading and T.V. viewing habits and use of technological resources to identify their stocks of embodied cultural capital. Chart 6.1 illustrates respondents reading habits at home and whether they imposed rules on T.V. viewing and technological resources usage.

Chart 6.1



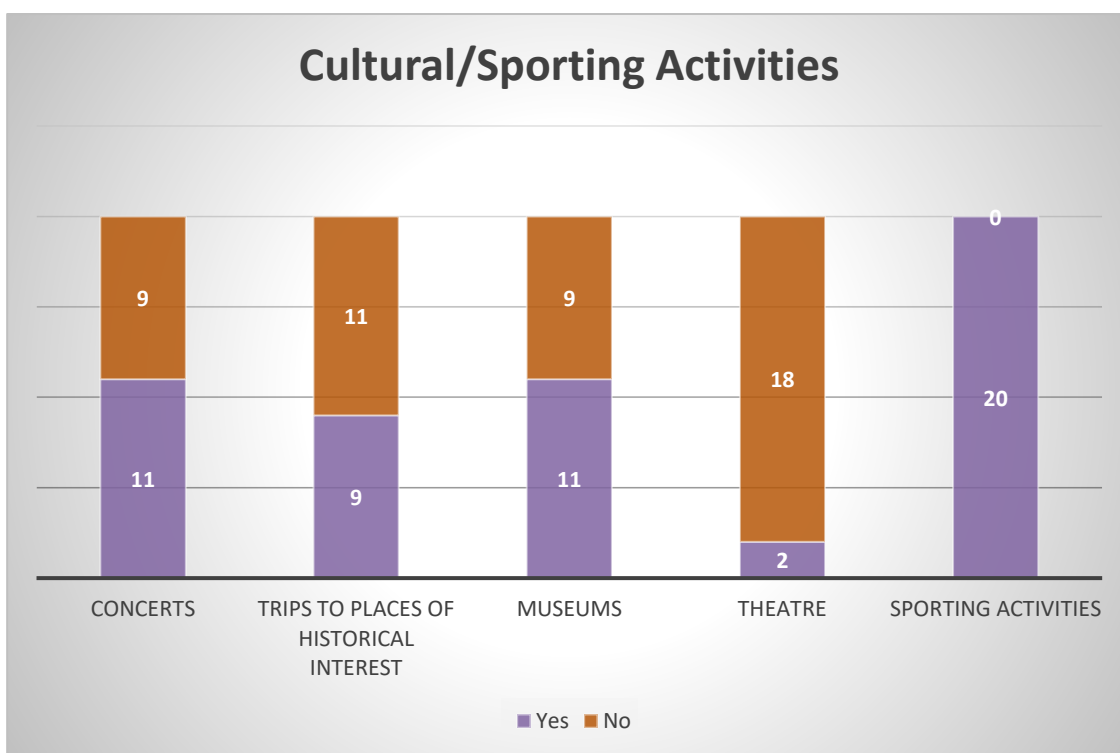
The findings demonstrate that the majority of respondents read at home. Parents also engaged in discussions about what their children were reading, thus encouraging reading amongst their children as they believed in the benefits of reading for their children. Respondents indicated that they imposed rules on T.V. viewing habits and technological resource usage at home, which the literature presented in Chapter Four suggested these parents would not, indicating that they had appropriated embodied cultural capital similar to their more affluent peers. These parents expressed a desire that their children would progress further in education than they themselves had, indicating they exhibited the dispositions and attitudes more closely aligned with middle-class embodied cultural capital.

‘I left school in 5th year, I wanted them to finish college, get a good job not to be trying to think about in a few days time where is the next few bob going to come out of? I wanted them to have better opportunities’ (P7).

'I had hoped that they would go far, further than me, I left school before I sat the Inter. Cert. That they would go on to college. Give them better opportunities than we had. You need education now to get any kind of job. I wanted them to have a better start in life and you need college for that!' (P17)

Respondents' also participated in cultural and sporting activities as a family as illustrated in Chart 6.2 including some evidence of visits to museums and the theatre (traditional indicators of embodied cultural capital).

Chart 6.2 Cultural/Sporting Activities



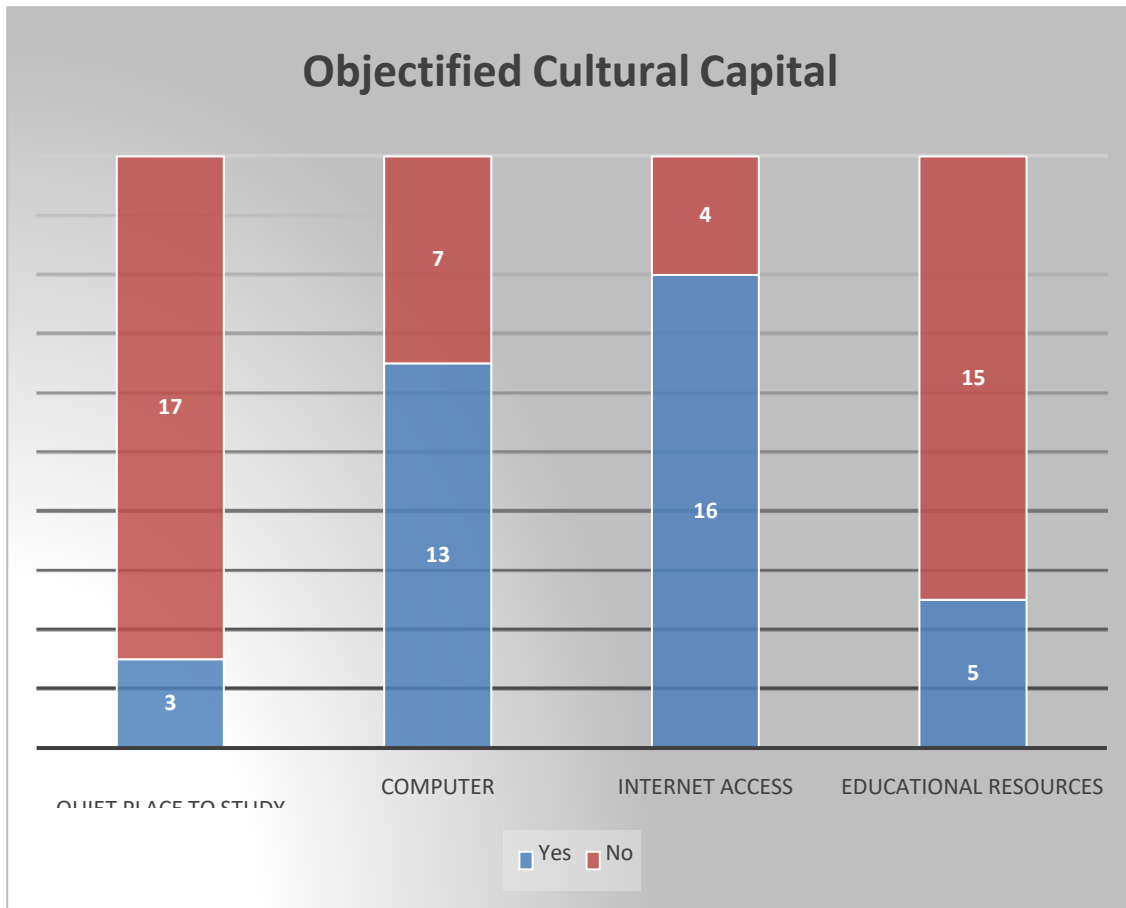
The findings would suggest that these families are attempting to appropriate the type of embodied cultural capital required to navigate the educational field. However, all three types of cultural capital, embodied, objectified and institutionalised are important to

succeed in education and as the findings indicated while respondents had taken steps to enhance their embodied cultural capital, they still experienced barriers to participating fully in the education of their children in schools and engaging with teachers. As section 6.2.3 demonstrates, the Study Club recognised their cultural capital and assisted them to navigate the educational system more effectively.

Objectified Cultural Capital

Objectified cultural capital refers to educational resources students have available at home. These resources allow students to learn the dispositions, attitudes knowledge and skills rewarded in schools, and typically consist of educational books, access to technological resources and a quiet place to study. This research captured the respondents' access to these resources as represented in Chart 6.3.

Chart 6.3



While the majority of respondents had access to computers and internet at home, very few had a quiet place to study or additional educational resources. Not having a quiet place to study posed a significant impediment to studying at home, even if they had access to the other three types of objectified cultural capital. Respondents indicated that the Study Club compensated for their shortfall in objectified cultural capital.

‘I didn’t have access to educational resources or a quiet place to study, coming to the Study Club I was able to avail of the educational resources at the club, and having a quiet place to study at the club was a great help’ (M11).

‘You didn’t really have anywhere to sit to do study. I didn’t have

books or stuff ... At the Study Club I was able to use all the resources, you know books, computers to study, and then again, the Study Club was a quiet place and that was a big help. I had none of that at home' (M2).

'I didn't have a place to study, we had a laptop and internet ... We didn't have any other educational resources at home. The Study Club made up for that, it had everything, a quiet place to get on with your homework, loads of computers and resources that we could use whenever we needed to' (M6).

Institutionalised Cultural Capital

The level of familial educational attainment was used to measure institutionalised cultural capital and is presented in Charts 6.4 and 6.5.

Chart 6.4

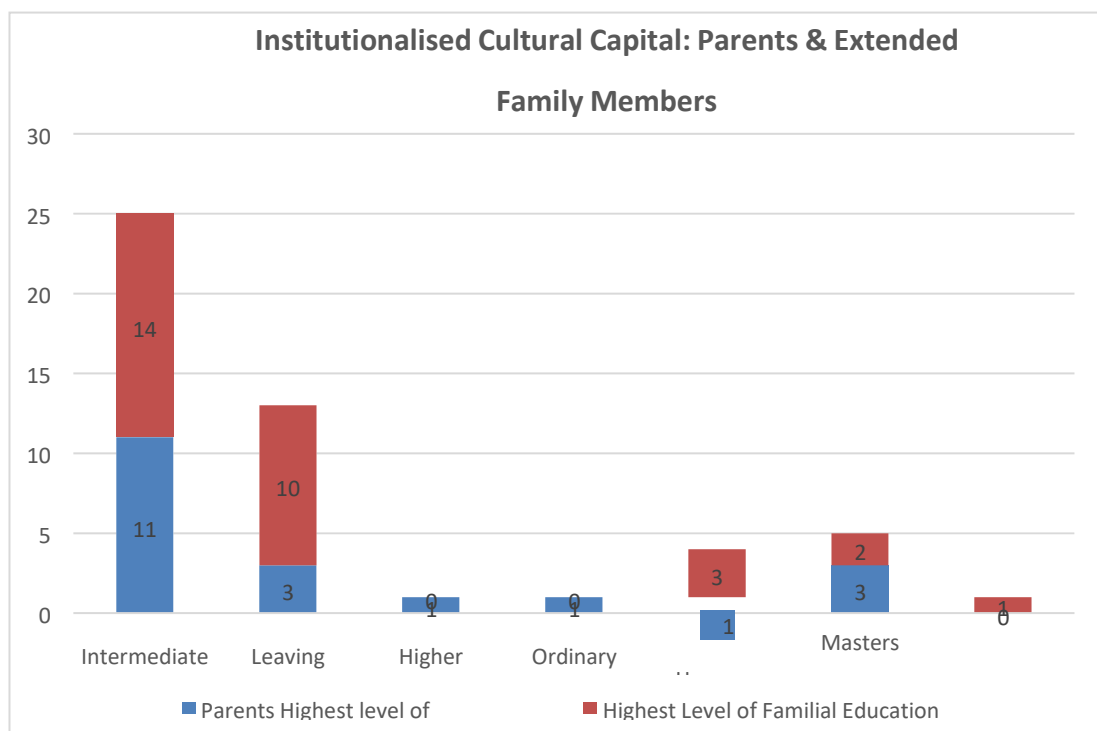
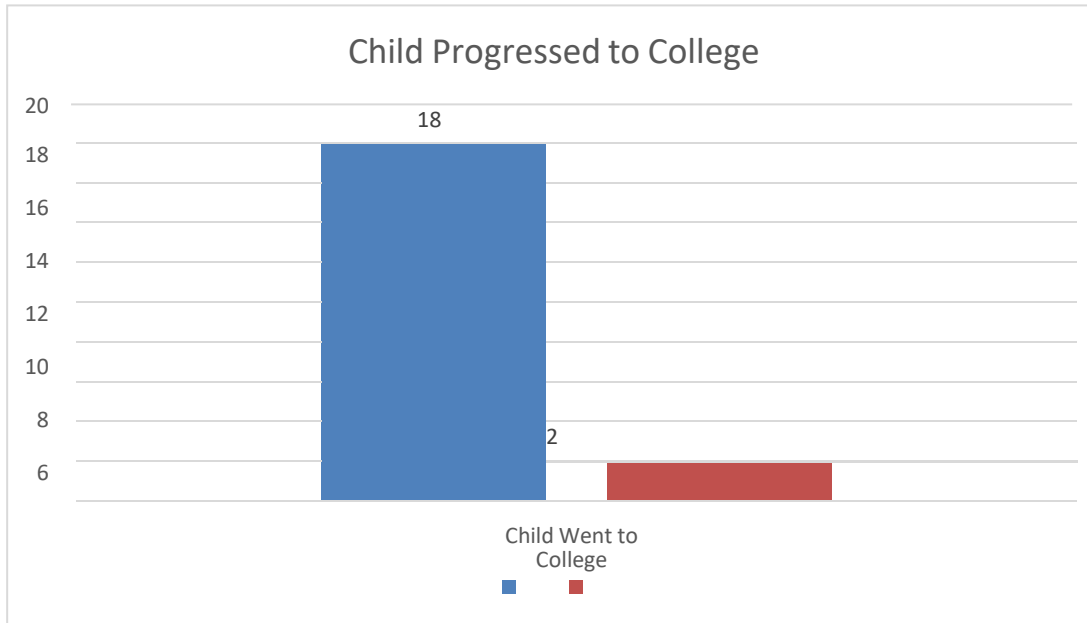


Chart 6.5



The findings suggest that some respondents possessed the type of embodied cultural capital recognised and rewarded by schools, however, they did not have access to the objectified cultural capital required, and in most instances, institutionalised cultural capital fell short of what was required to successfully navigate the educational field. Several respondents perceived their low levels of institutionalised cultural capital as an impediment to being involved in the education of their children. The findings suggest that the Study Club contributed to enhancing objectified cultural capital by providing access to access educational and technological resources, but most importantly, it provided the quiet space not available at home. In terms of institutionalised cultural capital, respondents felt that the Study Club compensated for this in terms of the support, guidance, and advice it provided to members and parents on CAO/HEAR/SUSI applications.

Raising Expectations and Aspirations

Expectations of a student’s ability to progress to college can play a notable role in raising

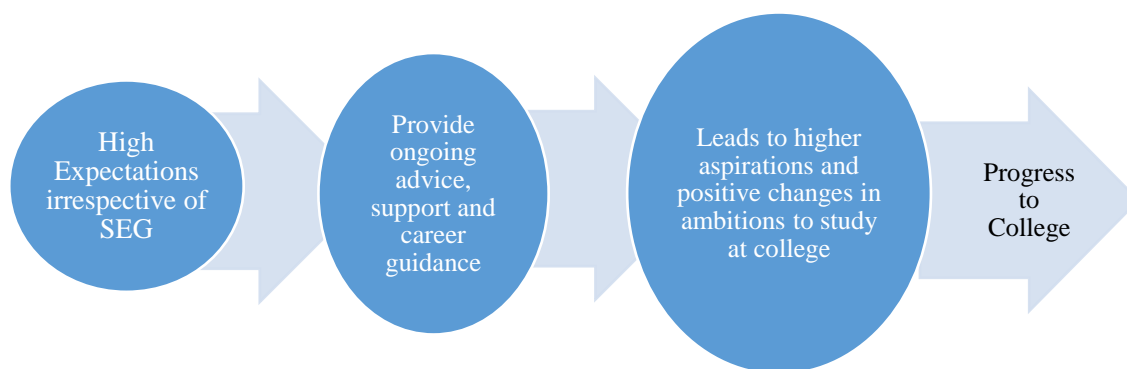
that student's aspirations to study at third level. Expectations and aspirations to progress to college may be influenced by the educational environment. The literature review demonstrated that the educational environment is more than a physical space, it also consists of the social agents that operate in that space i.e. teachers, parents and students themselves. These social agents may hold differing expectations which in turn influence students' aspirations to progress to college. Effective learning environments are those which recognise the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of students while at the same time holding high expectations of all students, so that they may succeed in education and aspire to progress to third level education. Therefore, the following expectation/assumptions emerged from the International and Irish literature reviews presented in Chapters Two and Three. To ensure high expectations and aspirations:

- A) For students to succeed in education, teachers/educators, parents and students themselves need to hold high expectations. Teacher/Educator expectations are particularly influential**
- B) Teachers/Educators can provide the motivation and encouragement to their students to succeed by providing students and their parents with advice and support on educational pathways to higher/further education.**
- C) Providing motivation and encouragement can raise student ambitions and ultimately their aspirations and expectations to progress to higher/further education.**

Raising Expectations and Aspirations

Raising expectations and aspirations is a sequential process. Proceeding from the premise that all students can progress to college, providing students with tangible encouragement through ongoing advice, support and career guidance can raise aspirations and positively to study at college and is illustrated in diagram 6.7 below.

Diagram 6.7 Raising Expectations and Aspirations Process



Expectations that a student will progress to college can play a notable role in whether that student will actually go on to study at third level. These expectations stem from several sources, including students themselves, parents and teachers. The findings suggest that both members and their parents held high expectations that they would go to college, and to a lesser degree some of their teachers also expected that they would go on to college.

“I always kinda knew I wanted to go to university. Even in primary school. I liked studying; I liked being ... I liked getting an A. I was always like that.” (M5).

‘Am, I kinda did, and by the time I got to Leaving Cert. I knew I wanted to go to college.’ (M4)

‘Well, I worked at a young age....I left school in 5th year; I

wanted them to finish college, get a good job not to be trying to think about in a few days' time where is the next few bob going to come out of? I wanted them to have better opportunities.' (P7).

'Amm aah very high [expectations of her going to college] because she, she enjoyed going to school and I would have stayed in school, so I knew a little about the system and knew the difference that it made for me in terms of social mobility and I suppose the background that I was kinda stuck in, so, it would have been that she would have stayed in school, she would have completed it and she would have went on to college' (P1).

Respondents were also asked if anyone outside of their families expected them to go to college:

'My teachers definitely would have expected me to have gone to college and with the way I was progressing, you would have had an expectation of me going to college as well and achieving my goal of getting the points I needed for my, my course. I suppose up here there was a higher expectation compared to my teachers.' (M11).

'Ya in school definitely, like aam, it was kinda an expectation that everyone went to college. AAm, here I wouldn't say like an expectation, but ye knew I wanted to go, so ye encouraged that' (M5).

'Aam, honestly, they both (school and Study Club) really. Like

ye (Study Club) were more focused on like passing our exams, helping us pass our exams and telling us like, ye will get there... Whereas school... It was just a job to them, there was an expectation like, but they (teacher) didn't focus on it as much as the Study Club, and the expectation was always there (in Study Club) that we would go on to college.' (M14).

While teachers held the expectation that they would go to college, some respondents felt these expectations were not sincere:

'Whereas school was more like, they were getting paid to do that...there was no real expectation like, that we have to teach ye and ye will go to college' (M14).

While some respondents acknowledged that teachers were under pressure and could only do so much in the time allocated for career guidance classes and how this impacted them (students):

'The counselling branch of [school] was different to the teachers! Aam, but when you spend one hour a week as opposed to 40 minutes with them and the teachers, it kinda overrides it a small bit.' (M15)

The findings would suggest that while teachers may have expected their students to progress to college, time and resource constraints prevented them spending more time encouraging students by providing career guidance, whereas staff and tutors at the Study Club devoted time to encouraging and motivating students by providing career guidance in their ongoing interactions with Study Club members.

'So like, ye were always focused on helping students where they

wanted to go! And like, obviously like, with school and stuff, they did help and ask like where did we want to go.

... But not with a CAO coz I never filled one out or anything. I was never given one! Basically, it was assumed that I would never go on to college' (M14)

'When I came in here (Study Club) it was spelled out in such clear terms that your education in secondary level was what brought you to that level.... 'Just to be clear, are you saying AccessCampus had a higher expectation than school that you would go to college?' I would say I weighted 4 to 1 in favour of AccessCampus in that regard!' (M15).

In general, students and their parents held expectations that they would go to college. Some teachers expected their students to go to college but were often too busy to provide the level of motivation and encouragement required by students. Some students felt that their teachers were not sincere in their expectations of students going to college. This was echoed in parents' responses, who believed that teachers made assumptions about students or did not have the time to provide guidance to parents. Staff at the Study Club did not operate under the same constraints as teachers and were more available to students and parents to provide guidance and support, which may have influenced member's decisions to go to college. Respondents were asked, who if anyone influenced them to go to college

[Influence on the decision to go to college and changing ambitions](#)

The responses indicate that the staff and tutors at the Study Club, in particular, and parents had a significant influence on them going to college. Most respondents did not state that

their teachers had any discernible influence on them going to college. Respondents generally had ambitions to go to college; however, they felt somewhat lost in school. There did not appear to be a clear plan laid out for them in school about how to achieve their ambitions of going to college, and there were few opportunities for in-depth discussions with teachers about progression routes and suitable courses. Based on the findings, it would appear that the school had minimal impact on increasing their ambitions to go to college. Some respondents believed that being a member of the Study Club changed their ambitions positively about going to college. The culture of high expectations and encouragement and receiving detailed advice and guidance information at the Study Club increased their ambitions to go to college.

'I remember the phone call I got from you when I first did my Leaving Cert. I failed it, and ...I suppose that was the start of what I like to call an awaking period. After that then I kind of still didn't know what I wanted to do (staff member) and he was very aware of that ... I knew I wanted to do my leaving cert and start with there and get good enough grades and give me the opportunity to actually succeed and I suppose after that, Shannon (College of Hotel Management) came in the door' (M1).

'In the Access Campus, they helped you come up with ideas and helped you explore more and see what you were best suited for. They were more personal about it; they would talk to you more about college than they did in school' (M4).

'Definitely the Study Club, I think everyone here has that aim to go to college as well not just the tutors, the supervisors too,

*that everyone was going to make it to college and that expectation was there ya. But that **didn't happen in school**. A lot of my friends didn't go to college because of it, because there wasn't an expectation or encouragement by teachers to have ambitions to go (to college)' (M12).*

*'My ambitions to go to college...when I came in here aam, the Study Club was directly responsible in fact, aam, for me understanding my own abilities. Say prior to coming here, I felt that while I might be ok academically, aam, that was reinforced in me. There was a **self- belief** given to me while I was in here from the tutors and the staff. The Study Club had a direct impact in my ambitions increasing, absolutely 100 hundred percent!' (M15).*

Respondents perceived the ongoing discussions with Access Campus staff and tutors as a positive influence on their decision to go to college. Receiving advice, detailed information and encouragement were cited as reasons why respondents changed their ambitions and aspired to go to college. The findings indicate that parents and Study Club staff influenced their (members') aspirations to go to college, and though less common, teachers also influenced respondents in some cases to go to college. The replies suggest that expectations that an individual will progress to college is the starting point to raising aspirations to go to college. Creating an environment which encourages and motivates students to consider third level education is made more achievable through providing advice, support and ongoing career guidance. This may positively influence these students to change/raise their ambitions to go to college, and consequently raise their aspirations to attend college.

Being a member of the Study Club allowed students to grow as individuals and realise that going to college was achievable. Peer influences were also cited as having a positive impact on members' ambitions.

'I think being in the Study Club changed my ambitions about going to college... Coming here (Study Club) and seeing everyone else working hard to go to college, that encouraged me and made me more ambitious' (M2).

The nature of teacher/student relationships had a bearing on whether teachers encouraged students to go to college or not. Where positive relationships were present, the teachers encouraged their students. Compared to these descriptions, respondents seemed to find Study Club volunteers and staff to be more approachable and supportive alternatives to teachers; indicating that tutors were more committed to helping members achieve their academic goals:

'I suppose in the Study Club you had; it was a lot more serious. You were there to achieve, and the tutors were willing to help you, they would talk to you about the courses on offer and what these courses were like. So you got an insider's view which was a great help' (M16).

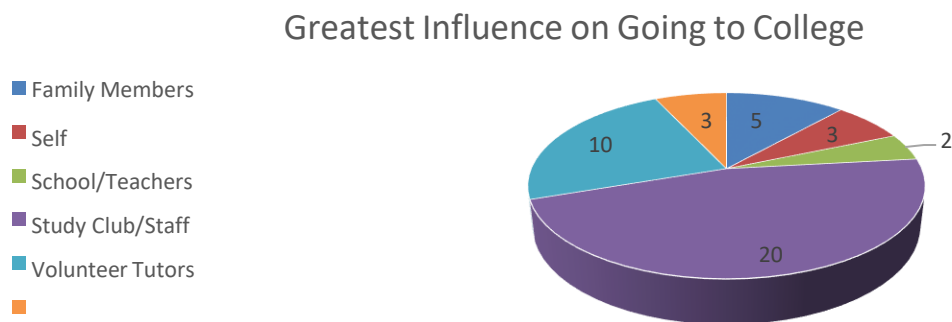
'Very good, they were just so nice. You could get on with them. Like, if you had a problem, in school, outside of school, you knew you could go to them' (M2).

'it was easy to talk to the staff of the Study Club about college, they would just put it on the table, and I found it a great help' (M14).

Discussions with Access Campus staff, being in an environment that encouraged belief in their academic abilities and peer influences, were cited by respondents as reasons why their ambitions to go to college increased. Therefore, creating an environment that encourages belief in one's potential ability to progress to college may be an essential factor in enabling disadvantaged students to progress to college.

Respondents felt more motivated, encouraged and acknowledged at the Study Club, which had the greatest influence on them raising their ambitions/aspirations to progress to college as Chart 6.6 illustrates.

Chart 6.6



The preceding chart illustrates that apart from familial influences, respondents were influenced most in their decisions to go to college by Study Club personnel (Thirty sources of influence) as opposed to their teachers (Two sources of influence).

Parental Involvement

The literature in Chapters Two and Three indicate that parental involvement both at home and at school can translate into long-lasting benefits including academic success. The literature indicates that the nature and frequency of parental involvement in school affects academic achievement and progression in education. This research sought to explore the

nature and frequency of involvement parents experienced with schools and the Study Club. Based on the literature the following expectations/assumptions emerged.

- A) **The frequency and type of parental involvement affects academic outcomes.**
- B) **The types of support and resources teachers provide to parents influence academic outcomes**

Nature of Involvement with School

When asked about their involvement with teachers/schools, parents reported mixed experiences of engagement. Parents recalled more negative than positive experiences of engagement with teachers. They cited teachers' attitudes towards them based on their socio-economic background and level of educational attainment as determining the nature of, and level/type of engagement they experienced with teachers.

'In primary school, yes, but in secondary school not as positive. I felt that they thought I could not contribute anything; I wasn't as educated as them' (P11).

'Generally, it was negative. So, it was never to tell you if they were doing well, or it was never a positive thing. It was, it was always a negative thing when you were brought onto that level to deal with teachers' (P1).

*'And they really had **no interest** in him succeeding or doing well in that school! That was definitely the feeling I had for sure, and they felt my eldest son was just trouble, so, they pre-judged both of them based on a rocky start ... I suggested things **like** a teacher taking an interest, ah, praising them for something they*

had done well! But I think they just saw our address and that was it really' (P13).

Some parents perceived that their own lack of educational attainment influenced how teachers engaged with them, and socio-economic background was a factor in whether teachers engaged with them or not.

'I wasn't really involved because of my own lack of education. The school/teachers didn't think I could play a role in their education' (P6).

'Maybe if I had gone to college, they would have been more willing to engage with me! Teachers would tell you that it was a triangle Teacher/parent/child, and we were all working off the same page. But in reality, it didn't happen!' (P11).

'I think there is attitudes within the schools and aah towards parents of children who come from particular backgrounds, and aam, that attitude is that you can't deal with those parents or those parents aren't interested' (P1).

When asked about the frequency of engagement with teachers, the majority of parents stated that they only met teachers once a year at the parent/teacher meeting. Some parents did report engaging with teachers apart from parent/teacher meetings; however, for the most part, they stated that this contact was usually initiated by teachers if their child was in trouble at school, and never to report positive outcomes.

'The parent-teacher meeting that was the only contact that you

had with teachers, which was basically once a year. And other than that, there was no other contact unless there was a note in the journal, and generally, it was negative' (P1).

'Beyond parent/teacher meetings, they didn't involve me, no! I would have liked to be more involved really because I because aam, I think I would have been able to help (son) more on his you know schoolwork!' (P17).

Parents were asked about the type of supports that they had received from teachers, for example, if teachers had provided them with learning materials or directed them to online resources that they could use at home with their children. Most parents stated that the teachers had not provided them with learning materials or online resources.

'We would have wanted to be involved in any way we could, to help them. I suppose if the school gave us resources to use at home or told us about websites, we could have used at home to help with homework' (P13).

*'But they never gave us any specific advice or guidance on resources to use at home, No, **not** that I am aware of, no!' (P15).*

'In one of the schools there was one teacher, he was fantastic, just in one! Aam, he did give me a site for (son) because he was diagnosed as dyslexic, and he gave me a CD all right to go on. I'm not highly educated myself, so trying to get all these, find out where all these resource things were and look into these and them work on it, it was tough!' (P17).

Socio-economic background was perceived by respondents as a determinant of the type and level of teacher/parent engagement they experienced.

'So I think that there's kind of assumptions already made when you're coming in from a particular area, particular family structure. AAm and you are kind of tracked and guided into particular areas' (P1).

'The teachers that viewed us as working-class were less positive. They showed a little bit more favouritism to a child that was middle-class! There were certain little things you could see! Aam, for example, I think there would have been a little bit of, you know, how would I say it teachers who saw us as middle-class gave us more time than teachers who saw us as working-class' (P16).

'I think social background has a lot to do with it! It could very well be ya, as you know a lot of the children from disadvantaged areas and like that are going to school, a lot of them don't It's not just them, and it could be all of um. But as anyone says, if they (teachers) see that their mothers have money, and their mothers have aah, high up in education. They are the children they are going to focus on! Not the children from the back of beyond like' (P17).

The findings suggest that teacher/parent engagement was influenced by teachers' perceptions of them based on their socio-economic background and their level of

education. In addition, parents suggested that there was not enough time allocated to parent/teacher engagement, and when this engagement did occur, it was formal and often negative. Parents also felt that teachers could have provided them (parents) with additional resources that they could use at home with their children, but this rarely occurred.

Nature of Involvement with AccessCampus

Engagement with parents emerged as an important factor in supporting students in their education at the Study Club, with parents exhibiting a more proactive and confident approach in their engagement with the staff at the Study Club. Parents found Study Club staff to be supportive and non-judgemental. Staff were available to meet parents at any time and listen to their concerns, and these meetings were positive, with parents feeling that the feedback was personalised to the needs of their child. Parents sought advice and assistance from Study Club staff with CAO, HEAR and SUSI applications enabling them to play a proactive role in their children's education and progression to higher education.

'I can talk to [staff member] ... I know that I could approach (staff) and talk to about anything, so that makes the difference. I could drop in anytime and have a chat with the team, and they would keep me informed about how he was doing if he needed extra supports or whatever' (P7).

'The staff were easier to deal with here and more approachable!! Am, MADE themselves available to you at any given time that you wanted to speak to them, you know, does this timesuit you?' (P15).

'the model that you have here should have been the model...in school, and if you had that in school, you know things would have been an awful lot easier' (P1).

Generally, parents articulated a difference between schools and the Study Club, citing the Study Club as a 'friendly' and 'accessible' place where parents could ask questions about school, college, resources and alternative learning options for their children. Parents found the Study Club to be proactive in responding to their needs. They felt like partners with Study Club staff, that they had ownership of their children's education, they had something to offer and that this was recognised by the Study Club. Parents felt respected by Study Club staff, which made it easier to engage and be involved, particularly when seeking advice on applying to college as Chart 6.2 demonstrates below.

Soft Barriers

The literature revealed that soft barriers such as academic and social confidence, familiarity with the college application process and third level institutions themselves mediate academic achievement and progression to higher education. Educational systems and interventions that enhance confidence and familiarity in these areas have been shown to counter educational disadvantages and lead to more positive outcomes for these students. The findings suggest that environments that nurture academic potential and social confidence by providing mentors to guide and support students and their families may be a useful strategy to overcome these soft barriers.

The following assumptions/expectations emerged in the literature:

Overcoming soft barriers to educational progression is made more likely through:

- A) **Learning environments that promote confidence in academic ability and social confidence**
- B) **Providing advice, guidance and support regarding transition to HE**
- C) **Creating a sense of belonging with supportive teachers/educators and an inclusive atmosphere**

Level of academic and social confidence

The literature indicates that disadvantaged students may often lack confidence in their academic and social capabilities to successfully navigate the educational system and require additional supports to enhance their academic and social capabilities to raise academic achievement and progression to higher education. This is enabled by learning environments that promote confidence in academic ability and social mobility.

*'The goodwill from people like here (in AccessCampus) the Study Club. Aah, I think it is a totally different view on your education! I think you were taken. not out of a system, but you're taken aside to the system. To look at it from a different perspective. They showed you a social branch and why education can be beneficial to you here! Aam, and they treated you as am, in the best way possible! I would say there was absolutely **no** difference in treatment. No preferential benefits given to anyone that was inside the club. I grew as a person and my grades improved while I was in the club' (M15).*

'What was great as well was when the Study Club got in people to help you with your subjects, you could ask them about their college course and they would be able to say, it was what I

expected it would be and like with that you didn't just get students that were in their first year of college, you got them the whole way up. So, you were saying ya, like UL has great courses on offer or my friend in Galway I will ask them a few questions and you felt more confident choosing a college course' (M17).

Other respondents felt that the Study Club got the balance of self-direction and supervision right to create an environment conducive to working and studying.

'Just the environment that was given there was very good. ... it was good because it gave you the space to go to do work' (M15).

'Expressive environment, you can be yourself, and voice your opinion, say where you were going wrong, and feel comfortable in doing that and get help from someone there' (M8).

Respondents described the Study Club's environment as a place that was inclusive, where they grew in confidence.

'It was a good environment because everybody knew each other, and everyone sat together like there was no distinction between us and the tutors' (M9).

*'Study Club, like I was more interested because I actually like found a place where I wasn't like **embarrassed** to ask a question. Whereas in school like if you put up your hand, like not just because from a teaching environment but just the whole environment itself! Like if you ask a question, everyone is kind*

of looking at you... Kind of, leave her get on...! Whereas you have your safe place in the Study Club. Where you can actually be like look I don't know what I am doing. Or you can ask someone else! My confidence improved because of the Study Club.' (M14).

The findings suggest that creating an environment that is inclusive, where students can express themselves and feel cared for, safe and free to be themselves had a positive influence on their aspirations to go to college. The findings of the current study reinforce the findings of the previous studies, as the following quotes illustrate.

'It's about the parents feeling good about education, and it's about the kids feeling good about education because it's not cool to be good at school, it's not cool to want to achieve something at school' R1.

'A hesitance and shyness was noted in some students at the beginning of their tuition in UL, but after time they gain confidence both in the campus and themselves. We bus the kids from the AccessCampus to UL. The reason we do that is to get them used to coming onto the campus, they're very shy in the beginning, but by the end of the semester they're off up to Starbucks getting their coffee, and they love it' R2.

Level of competence re application processes, campus navigation etc.

The literature indicate that educational disadvantage may be passed from one generation to the next. Under-performing students often come from families with low levels of parental educational attainment. These parents are often unfamiliar with the educational

system and lack the knowledge to support their children progress through the system.

Therefore, the following expectations and assumptions emerged in the literature.

A) Students and their parents lack the knowledge to successfully progress through the education system.

B) Students and their parents require advice, guidance and support making CAO, HEAR/DARE and SUSI applications

'I really didn't get advice at school, you know they gave us information on courses and stuff, but they didn't take the time to go through all the options or help us figure out what course we really wanted to do. But at the Study Club they were always talking to us about college and the different courses. Even the tutors would give us advice on college courses, you know share their experience of college life on campus and stuff. And that was really helpful, because you got a better insight into what college would be like!' (M20).

'And then the trips away, like UL and to other colleges and stuff, the tutors they are kind of passed the school level now, so they are kind of in the real world. In the real education kind of but they can understand it better, so they can explain applying to college to you better! Whereas some of the teachers they have several different classes, I know the tutors have lectures as well. But they are a bit more geared to helping you, they are more your age groups as well inside in college, so like you know, if you went to the Maths one, whereas you would like have

a student and he would probably be a 2nd or 3rd year you know.

*So they can kind of translate it to you a lot **better**, you know'*

(M18).

Parents stated that they felt like partners with the Study Club in the education of their children, that they received more learning resources from Study Club staff,

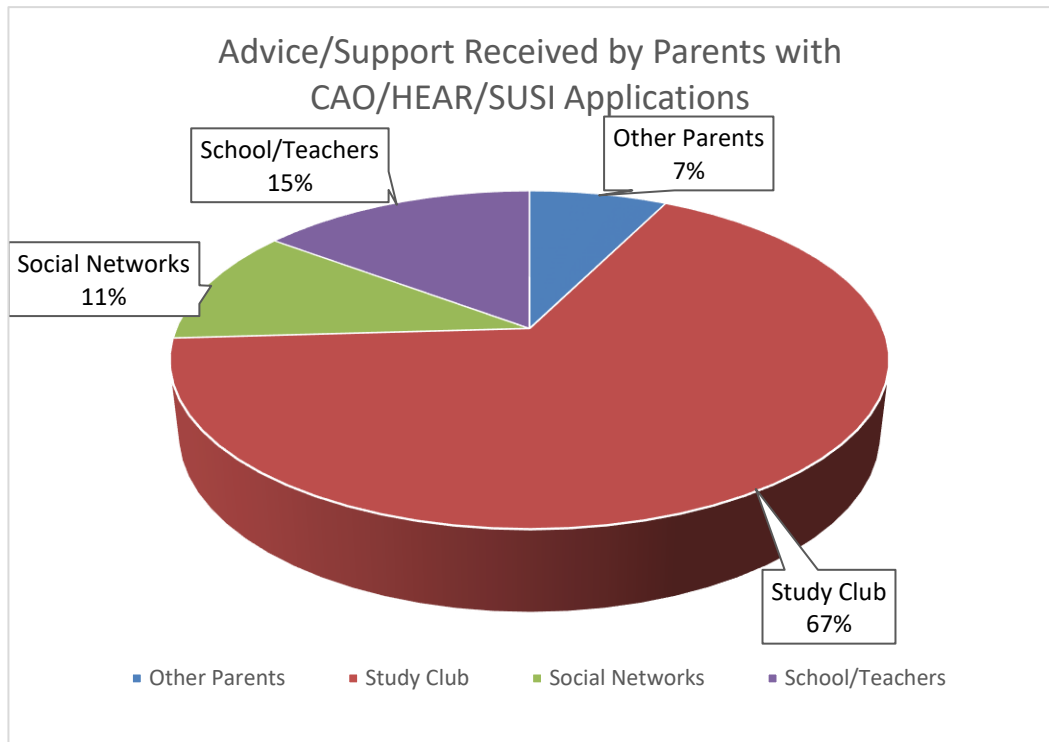
*'I felt I was part of her education here. I was a **partner** in her education, and my opinions mattered, and my voice was heard. I always felt confident going in the see the team. I didn't experience that in her school. They even helped us with the CAO and SUSI applications, that was a great help. We knew nothing about them and the school didn't talk to us about them' (P6).*

'I felt very involved here (Study Club) and (staff member) would meet with my husband and I regularly. It was collaboration really between the Study Club and us as his parents. And that was such a positive experience, we really felt involved, you know, especially with CAO and SUSI (applications), not just on the periphery like we were with the school' (P13).

Respondents from the earlier pieces of research concurred with these findings, citing the assistance parents received for Study Club staff with *'Help with the application forms for CAO and HEAR, all of that, there's a session here [in the AccessCampus] for that'* (R2). The nature of engagement with the members and their families *'It's respect, it's having the time and making the time, it's following up, it's all of those things that should be in any organisation'* (R1). These respondents also mentioned *'Trust that the young people feel when they come to*

the AccessCampus and other family members go through, the trust is amongst all of the family'
(R1), which is conducive to engaging parents in the education of their children.

Chart 6.7



Academic and Social Confidence (Teachers' Perspectives)

Teachers reported improvements in students' academic confidence; they observed that these students grew in confidence and were engaging more in class. They were more self-assured and less anxious as the support they received at the Study Club enabled them to be better prepared for classes.

'While there is a lot of support in DEIS schools for these students, you can see that they would not be as confident or self-assured as other students. But I have noticed these students growing in confidence as they progress through secondary school. They are not as anxious ... and they are more willing to

take part in class. They appear more knowledgeable they tell me that because of the help they get at the club the feel more confident, less anxious about schoolwork And that's a great thing, because a lot of these students ... they lack confidence and self-belief in my opinion' (T1).

'I would notice that the students attending the Study Club are more confident, they seemed better prepared and engage more in class, they would be more confident in their ability, which is a positive thing' (T2).

'Yes, I would notice that these students are growing in confidence, they are more positive in school They are not as anxious about their exams; I believe that that extra one to one help that students get can make all the difference to students' confidence. They start to believe in their ability, that with a bit of extra work they can do better in exams.' (T3).

Social Confidence

Respondents noted that Study Club members were growing in confidence about the probability of progressing to college. Whereas in the past these students may have spoken about potentially progressing to college now these students were speaking with conviction about going to college. According to the respondents, these students were actually talking about which courses they would study at college and that they seemed to possess a lot more knowledge than before about what was required to be accepted onto these courses. They seemed more confident in their likelihood of progressing to college.

'Again, yes I would have to say that they are more engaged

with their teachers and I would hear teachers talking in the staffroom or at meetings and they would comment on particular students and how they have noticed an improvement in their social skills and confidence' (T1).

'I have noticed that they talk about going to college, ... they are actually talking about the course and they appear to be more informed about what is required to get onto that course. They just seem more self-assured for some reason. The career guidance teacher has commented on it at staff meetings, that some students would be more confident about going to college and the specific course that they will apply for. They have this can do, will do attitude about them' (T3).

6.4.2 School and Academic factors

It is evident from the literature review that general and specific school factors influence student achievement and outcomes. School culture and resources as well as specific classroom practices and support actions make a difference. The school's institutional habitus, teaching practices, curricular options (subjects and levels), extra-curricular activities, the type and amount of guidance available and the manner in which parents are regarded, all shape the extent to which students feel supported or unsupported. For some interviewees, the school habitus failed to foster a feeling of being supported.

Feeling supported/unsupported

Learning environments that are inclusive and support all students, irrespective of their background are more conducive to raising academic achievement and progression to higher education. Therefore, the following expectations/assumptions have emerged from

the literature reviews presented in Chapters Two and Three. Feeling supported results from tangible and intangible factors such as:

A) Sense of belonging

B) Supportive teachers/educators and targeted use of resources

C) Inclusive environments

'I remember the phone call saying (Name) would you mind coming down for a general chat ... I suppose that was the start of what I like to call an awakening period, and I got a lot of support from everybody at the club, staff, tutors even the other students there. ... after that Shannon (BA Commerce and Hotel Management) came in the door' (M1).

'no matter what, whether you are having a good day a bad day, they'd give you encouragement to go onto college, it was a very supportive environment and that made all the difference to me' (M4).

'That the staff encouraged them (students) to go to college, they would help you look up college courses and they tutors as well, they would talk to you about the course they were doing and what it was like, what you needed for it, stuff like that, the support really at the club made all the difference. Like you never got that level of support at from teachers' (M13).

'The guidance counsellors were good, you know but they are not trained in kind of, they are not trained in the way that they are kind of helping you in other ways you know. At the Study

Club ya, like at the Study Club it's set up like it's kind of like it's, there to help you as a person not just the school stuff' (M20).

The findings suggest that learning environments that are supportive and inclusive are more conducive to enabling disadvantaged students to succeed and progress through the education system. However, the findings also indicate that such environments were not present in all schools. While the findings indicate that some teachers were supportive and encouraged students to go to college.

'they (teachers) always gave me advice on where I would go and how I would get extra marks' (M14).

'I used to get on with my Spanish teacher like a house on fire. I used to love...Spanish. The teacher was...no matter who you were, no matter where you were from... She didn't care, she helped you in any way she could' (M10).

Other respondents perceived teachers to be too busy or simply unwilling to help them prepare successfully for their exams, often feeling like their background influenced their teachers' perceptions of them which led to feelings of exclusion. That said, respondents also showed an understanding of the pressures under which teachers worked:

'a lot of new teachers didn't understand my background. I just found it harder to talk to them teachers; even when they were teaching, it didn't go as smoothly...they just didn't know the background of students, there was no support in school' (M5).

'teachers...either don't have the time to support you or they don't want to do it, you know. They have other students to help

as well, like its classism, social-class is huge like. You didn't feel like you were there, not part of the class' (M14).

Because respondents felt that they were not being judged by the tutors, whether on socio-economic background or academic ability, they found learning at the Study Club an enjoyable experience and were not afraid of coming to the Study Club, unlike school.

'The Study Club. Our maths class was segregated, so at one side of the class were the ones that would get the AI in it, and they were taught. The other side, we were allowed to listen if we wanted. the ethos of the school was just based on social background ... A lot of the people from my class, their parents, would have been on the parent committee. So, they were taught more than we were' (M12).

Respondents commented positively about their experiences with tuition in various subjects at the Study Club. Tutors were dedicated to the members, non-judgemental and positive in their approach to the tutoring.

'Very positive like, when I was here I would have gotten a lot of assistance with Irish, Biology, and Italian. Biology was an excellent resource here because (staff member) was always on hand if I needed it ... and I found the Irish was fantastic it was, it really helped, kind of get me over the mark for the oral and stuff. It was brilliant, and it was just help I would never have gotten in school!!' (M18).

'My main subjects were metalwork, DCG, woodwork. It is only due to the tutors I had here (Study Club). They went the extra mile ... Dedicated to it, and it didn't matter who you were or

*where you came from, it didn't come into it! **The Study Club** was class-less' (M1).*

Respondents found tutors to be non-judgemental and exceeded members' expectations in terms of the tuition that they received. They credited these tutors with enabling them to get the grades they achieved. It was interesting to note that members perceived the Study Club to be 'classless'. It would appear that the Study Club was oblivious to social background, focusing instead on raising academic achievement.

These findings resonate with the finding of the two independent pieces of research, which noted that there was no judgment about the choice's students were making, and the emphasis was on discussing options on the basis of a student's individual interest and aspirations. Encouragement of young people was viewed by these respondents as key to their progression in education and building their confidence.

'There's no snobbery with the kids you know, regardless of where they want to go, if it's the Limerick College of Further Education then that's absolutely fine you know, and it's not even seen as a stepping stone, it's just fine, every child is different and valued for their individuality' (R2).

'Breaking down the barriers is key, and they were barriers created many, many years ago because of no expectations for people from communities such as Southill and other areas 'how dare we go on and go to college, how dare we go on and become professionals.' That mentality has changed due to the likes of the Access Campus, community organisation, role models, etc.'
(R1).

Academic Elements: Class Size

The literature indicates that smaller class-sizes are associated with higher rates of achievement for students. Teachers have more time to devote to individual students and tailor instruction to their specific learning needs. Research indicates that students from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from learning in smaller groups. The literature suggests that:

Class size mediates teachers' ability to provide instruction tailored to students' needs.

Numeracy and Literacy

The literature indicated that Numeracy and Literacy proficiency are necessary skills to secure employment and improved life chances. Therefore, raising the numeracy and literacy proficiency of under-performing students should be a central element in raising academic achievement and progression to higher education for these students. The following expectations emerged from the literature.

A) Under-achievement in Numeracy/Literacy is more easily and effectively addressed through targeted strategies delivered in smaller classes.

B) Class size mediates teachers' ability to provide instruction tailored to students' needs

Learning in school – impact of class size

The majority of respondents reported negative experiences in school, and learning in regular-sized classes; they cited issues such as the pace of learning being too fast and pressurised because there was not enough time allocated to fully understand the

material or they felt unable to ask questions, and if they did ask questions, teachers would tell them to re-read their notes. Respondents felt that teachers did not provide individualised instruction, particularly if they were struggling with the subject.

*'I felt was that because the course work is so **big**, if there were any areas you are struggling with, you could potentially fall behind. And especially in some of the courses like English like, if you ask questions like that, then you could have been passed over' (M11).*

'If you were stuck on something. It was like, oh, we don't have any more time to go over that. We need to move on to the next chapter. I felt at times that I was playing catch up, and that was pressure' (M13).

'I found it hard, to be honest; ... to keep up with the teachers. ... but there was no time to ask questions, or if you were stuck on something, they wouldn't explain it, they would tell you to read it again ... That didn't help much' (M6).

'It can be hard if you don't understand something to actually get the one-to-one information you need. To ask a teacher a lot of time, especially in class, you are not going to put up your hand when there are 30 other lads in the class' (M3).

Respondents found learning in regular class sizes to be too fast, with not enough time to ask questions or have one to one instruction with teachers. While this was a recurring theme in general, it was especially true of instruction in numeracy and literacy.

'Maths wasn't great because there is only one teacher, you can only get to ask some any questions and answers. You know like

*you said dealing with 30 people in one class, you barely have time. Plus, trying to teach new things for the subject in that time, which is about 40 minutes. That 15 minutes everybody has questions, you know people taking down notes and stuff is not as **efficient** as I would have liked it to be. It didn't really work that well! You got some questions answered but not all of them. And sometimes you didn't have time to ask questions because you were taking notes and other people were asking questions and you would run out of time. And the next thing is the next class! (M8)*

'Maths is tough because it was the time when the new system was coming in, the project maths. It was the first year of the new Maths and the teachers themselves didn't know how to teach it! They couldn't explain it to us. I mean they said project maths would help us to do better in Maths, but it didn't. We were all struggling with it. I think learning Maths in school was difficult' (M12).

Learning at Study Club – impact of class size

Respondents revealed benefits to small group instruction and one-to-one tuition. They identified this type of instructional practice as more inclusive; tutors were able to focus on students' weaknesses and respond with the necessary supports. Instruction and learning proceeded at a pace that enabled students to develop a better understanding of the curriculum and address any areas they were experiencing difficulty with. Respondents felt more motivated in small group tuition because they recognised that tutors were developing learning materials specifically for them, the tutors' interest in their students

encouraged them to work harder and to do the best that they could in exams. Interestingly, respondents were eager to take advice from tutors and act on it. They did not consider tutors' recommendations for topics to study between tuition sessions as homework, but rather helpful and genuine advice to improve their achievement in that subject.

'Obviously it was more enjoyable in the Access Campus because you were learning in a small group ... So not only would you get tuition from a lecturer ... you would always get help from another student that was better at that subject, you would never be ashamed to stick up your hand, were as in school you ... ah look at him an idiot. The club environment is a lot different in that sense' (M1).

'I felt like it was good here ...aaam the maths grinds were good because we did them in small groups as well. It was the same with the English, the tutors would literally ask us and would focus the whole session like they would divide it on what we wanted to focus on individually. We didn't get that in school, Like we were just told go to our own grinds. We have already covered it in the class say' (M7).

'Aam, Maths was brilliant because they tutor or the head of the Maths was a really good tutor. I actually had him when I went to college. He is amazing and the people he picked to tutor were the top. So, they spent a lot of time explaining to us why it works and why the theory works instead of here's the theory that's how you apply it. So we actually got a develop understanding of maths in UL' (M12).

'Well yea the Study Club. I remember going for tuition here. It was more positive here, because I just didn't get along with the maths teacher' (M5).

'I had a lad (tutor) for English one to one, as I was saying a while ago, it was a whole new curriculum for English, and he never read Hamlet before, he ah, am went off and read it and came up with a load of notes and had his own stuff on it and that was only in the space of a week!! ... That interest he took in me, motivated me even more, like that tutor there' (M11).

Mentoring

From the literature review it is clear that mentoring offers huge possibilities for mitigating both the social and academic dimensions of educational disadvantage. Consequently, it is to be assumed that: The mentoring possible in a setting such as the Study Club helps both academic performance and the process of transition to HE

The smaller class size in the Study Club enabled a mentoring approach, which was valued by members. They described learning there as more interactive and enjoyable because of the opportunities for individualised tuition and the pace of tuition which provided them with enough time to understand the topics and ask questions and get individualised feedback from tutors.

'At the Study Club, you would study enough till you got it and then we would move on. ... or did you need more revision within these subjects, that was the main difference' (M1).

'They took the time so that I could understand it, not just memorise it. And that was the important thing, that was the

thing that stood out to me straight away! That I felt like I could ask those questions, and because I could ask those questions, I understood it' (M15).

'Like the Tuesday it was maths, and I did find it helpful, and they went through the exam questions with us, and the tutors in UL went through the exam question with you, and I found that very helpful. They explained the answers, it was just looking at them and they explained where they got certain figures, they equally showed you how they worked it out I found that helpful' (M4).

Respondents cited the ability of tutors to provide individualised instruction that was tailored to their needs. Respondents found this type of tuition to be very beneficial, as it allowed them to actually understand the course material and not just regurgitate it at a later date.

'In English, ten times over, it helped me massively! Am, one on one was in, the lad that was there he was easy going, easy to talk to, he knew his stuff and he kind of, whether he did his own research on, on what type of students were here (Study Club) ... Because he knew exactly what way to lay things out for me. What way to do it' (M1).

'Thanks to this (one on one), I got a more specific knowledge. The tutor did help in every way. She gave me tailored notes and really focussed on what I needed to learn' (M12).

'Yes, because I felt that they were more focused on the five or six people that were in the group. And it was easier for them

to go around one to one to one, rather than trying to shout at the whole class' (M14).

According to the respondents, it was this individualised support from tutors including notes and learning resources that were tailored to their specific needs, which gave them a confidence boost.

Important also for the participants was the extent of mentoring with regard to course options and careers and the transition to HE as the following responses illustrate:

'I don't know about school's influence, because in school it's multiple people, whereas in the Study Club it is only a few people that deal with me, so I think the Study Club had a greater influence because they took the time to help me figure out what I wanted to do after school' (M8).

'What I thought was really a benefit and overlooked sometimes we used go to UL to do grinds with the other students. That was really good for me because I knew no one in college and to be able to talk to the UL tutors about college and how the timetable worked and also how to apply for college they could tell you what college was like I wouldn't of known anyone in college. It was really good to talk to people doing different courses and to see what the different courses were about' (M3).

'Coming to the Study Club, I got a lot more information from the staff and tutors about different courses and what they were like. That made me more ambitious about going to college. In school, you were just told to read the prospectus or go online and fill out the CAO... I don't feel they (teachers really believed that I could go to college!' (M13).

Peer Learning

An interesting and unexpected benefit of the small group tuition was the peer learning that occurred during these tutorials. Respondents spoke of the benefits of peer learning and how they would learn from each other and share notes etc. Respondents felt that the Study Club was a space where they could be themselves, seek help when they needed it, and contribute to the learning process. Members also described the Study Club and maths and science tuition at UL as a helpful antidote to feeling embarrassed about asking questions in school and a preference for the peer-learning and the small group study model of the Study Club to their crowded classrooms at school.

'When we did group tuition at the Study Club, we would learn from each other, for example, I might be good on one chapter and others might be good at other chapters so we would help each other too. That was good coz we felt like we were all learning from each other' (M1).

'Am, what I found good about here was that people from different schools and everything was here. So I'm doing the maths question, you are doing the maths question, but totally different ways of doing it. I can show you my way; you can show me your way. And my way could help you, and your way could help me!' (M11).

'It's good to do the small group session because I've done them and you know like you're not...you don't have your own question to ask someone may ask a question and your like ... ooh I didn't think of that ... and whereas you may be strong in

*one point but like you may be weaker in **others**, and it's really good to like kinda get a group effort coz we were learning from each other' (M7).*

Respondents indicated that they shared their knowledge with each other and that it was easier to ask questions without feeling embarrassed in front of other students. Thus, tutor and peer mentoring contributed considerably to student satisfaction with the intervention.

6.4.3 Teachers' Perspectives

As the study was nearing completion, the views and opinions of several teachers were sought as a sounding board. These teachers were chosen because they were members of the Access Campus Development Board, thereby overcoming contributor-selection issues such as school selection, subject specialisms, school role and experience criteria. Due to COVID - 19 guidelines and restrictions on unnecessary social interaction, these teachers were contacted by phone. During the course of these telephone conversations, they were asked for feedback on the data generated by the research. The discussion was framed around the ranking of the intervention's elements by participants and parents. These teachers worked in schools linked to the Access Campus, so they were familiar with the intervention and had taught several members of the Study Club. Although this discrete group represented a very select and narrow range of views, it proved insightful to ascertain their perspectives on the data generated by this study as both teachers and board members. They commented on both the academic and socio-cultural findings.

These teachers agreed that academic confidence is a significant issue mediating educational outcomes for lower SES students, many of whom commenced their post-primary education lacking in confidence (soft barrier) in their academic ability to succeed

in school. *'Yes, I would notice that these students are growing in confidence. They are more positive in school I believe that that extra one to one help that students get can make all the difference to students' confidence.'* (T3). They endorsed the finding that the tangible indications of students' lack of academic confidence often emerged as lack of knowledge and unwillingness to engage in class. Those students who attended the Study Club were more knowledgeable and engaged more willingly in class, and *'I would notice that the students attending ... seemed better prepared, more knowledgeable about the curriculum and engaged more in class.'* (T2). Their social skills have improved, and they are more confident in themselves, *'they are more engaged with their teachers, and they (teachers) would comment on particular students and how they have noticed an improvement in their social skills and confidence'* (T1). They confirmed that when these students received additional academic support, they appeared less anxious *'While there is a lot of support in DEIS schools for these students, you can see that they would not be as confident ... as other students. They tell me that because of the help they get at the club, they feel ... less anxious about schoolwork'* (T1). The teachers also observed increased confidence in these students regarding their potential to progress to college. Whereas in the past, these students might have spoken about potentially progressing to college, now these students were speaking more confidently about going to college and seemed to possess a lot more knowledge about what was required to be accepted onto particular courses. *'As I just said, the students that are members of the Study Club appear to be more aware of the opportunities for advancement beyond the Leaving Certificate. ... They just seem more informed and confident that they will go to college'* (T4)

The teachers observed that in their experience, parents who received additional support through the Study Club appeared to engage more proactively with teachers/schools. *'Over*

time, yes, ... They would ask more questions and take the lead in meetings on occasion. They would even ask about resources if their child was struggling with a particular subject.' (T3). They confirmed that supports and activities that served to enhance parents' knowledge of the education system, including guidance on progressing to college, had a positive impact on these parents. 'They appeared to have a better understanding about what was involved in applying to college' (T3). Such parents appeared more confident 'I would have to say that these parents have grown more confident and knowledgeable' (T1).

The teachers who provided feedback noted the impact of belief in these students' potential to study at college 'The belief that is shown in their potential to study at college by the tutors at the Study Club really does encourage these students to go on to study at college.' (T4). Such belief served as a mediating factor in raising their aspirations and confidence to progress to college. 'What I have noticed, is that the students that attend the Study Club start to talk about college and what course they would like to pursue. Our career guidance counsellor ... has asked them about this, and they would say that at the Study Club, there is a lot of talk about college; tutors give them a lot of information. So yes, I would notice that students that go to the Study Club have more positive attitudes to studying at college' (T1).

One teacher commented that bringing these students onto the university campus for tuition 'normalised' third level education for them, 'I believe the tuition out in UL every week opens their eyes to the opportunities and normalises college for them. A lot of these students would not have stepped inside the gate of UL before joining the Study Club' (T1).

They welcomed the study's evidence that the belief that others demonstrated in these students' potential was a factor in these students growing more confident in their ability to successfully progress to college.

The findings indicated that Study Club members considered career guidance to be the most important element of the Study Club. However, the teachers who provided feedback considered the academic supports provided at the Study Club as the most important element. They referred to the 'points race', a feature of Irish education that served to further disadvantage students from working-class backgrounds, and welcomed interventions that provided tuition to students who could not afford to pay for private grinds. *'The tuition in my view is absolutely essential, not only to augment and support their schoolwork but also to level the playing field in the race for points in the Leaving Certificate' (T1).*

These teachers acknowledged that structural and organisational features of the educational system prevented them from providing more individualised assistance to their students so they welcomed and supported interventions that compensated for these impediments in mainstream educational settings. *'In my opinion, the one-to-one tuition is the most important feature of the Study Club. It gives the students the extra help and individual attention that isn't always possible in class' (T1).*

In these teachers' opinion, the career guidance provided at the Study Club and tuition on the university campus augmented career guidance at school and enhanced students' knowledge of and normalised third level education for their students. *'I believe the career guidance provided at the Study Club is very important for these students. Career guidance hours have been cut drastically in the past decade. There is not enough time to devote to each student to ensure that they are making informed decisions about college' (T5).*

Interestingly one teacher identified the tuition in UL as a positive contributory factor that augmented career guidance activities. *'I would place career guidance and the trips to UL second because in my view they work hand in hand in raising these students' ambitions*

and aspirations to go to college' (T1).

Teachers indicated that providing venues dedicated to studying was also essential to support their students' academic endeavours, especially in light of the evidence emerging because of Covid 19. *'The Study Club itself would be next, you know having a place where they can go to study, as a lot of my students would tell me that it isn't always possible to study at home with everything that is going on there in light of COVID-19' (T2).* Some teachers highlighted a lack of dedicated study facilities at home as an issue for some of their students, *'having a dedicated study place would be third, as a lot of these students do not have access to study facilities at home' (T5).*

As stated earlier, this was a bounded group of teachers. Nevertheless, they provide another point of observation and a useful data source. They identify structural and organisational elements of the education system that mediate their ability to provide individualised support to their students and engage with parents in a meaningful manner that would benefit students. In their opinion, the soft barriers (academic and social confidence) identified in the literature mediate academic outcomes for disadvantaged students. They also note the benefits of dedicated study environments on their students' academic outcomes. These teachers provide a useful perspective on the relevance of the academic and socio-cultural supports provided to students at the Study Club. Their observations reinforce the value of the study, and their insights and reaction to the study's findings contributed to the final recommendations.

Attitudes towards post-school opportunities (Teachers' Perspectives)

This section presents a sample of teachers' views on members' changing ambitions over time. Respondents noted that these students were exhibiting more positive attitudes

towards post Leaving Certificate educational opportunities. Study Club members indicated that at the Study Club there were on-going discussions about college. Members particularly noted the discussions that they would have with their tutors. These tutors were current college students, and the members would talk to them about their particular course and gain more in-depth knowledge about that course. One respondent cited the tuition on UL campus as having appeared to have positive benefits for these students. In her opinion bringing these students onto the university campus for tuition 'normalised' college and the opportunities that a college education provide:

'When they come into first year, they are not really focused on going to college... the students that attend the Study Club start to talk about college and what course they would like to pursue. ... they would say, that at the Study Club there is a lot of talk about college and they get to ask their tutors about their college courses and that these tutors give them a lot of information. I believe the tuition out in UL every week opens their eyes to the opportunities and normalises college for them. A lot of these students would not have stepped foot inside the gate of UL before joining the Study Club. So yes, I would notice that students that go to the Study Club have more positive attitudes to studying at college' (T1).

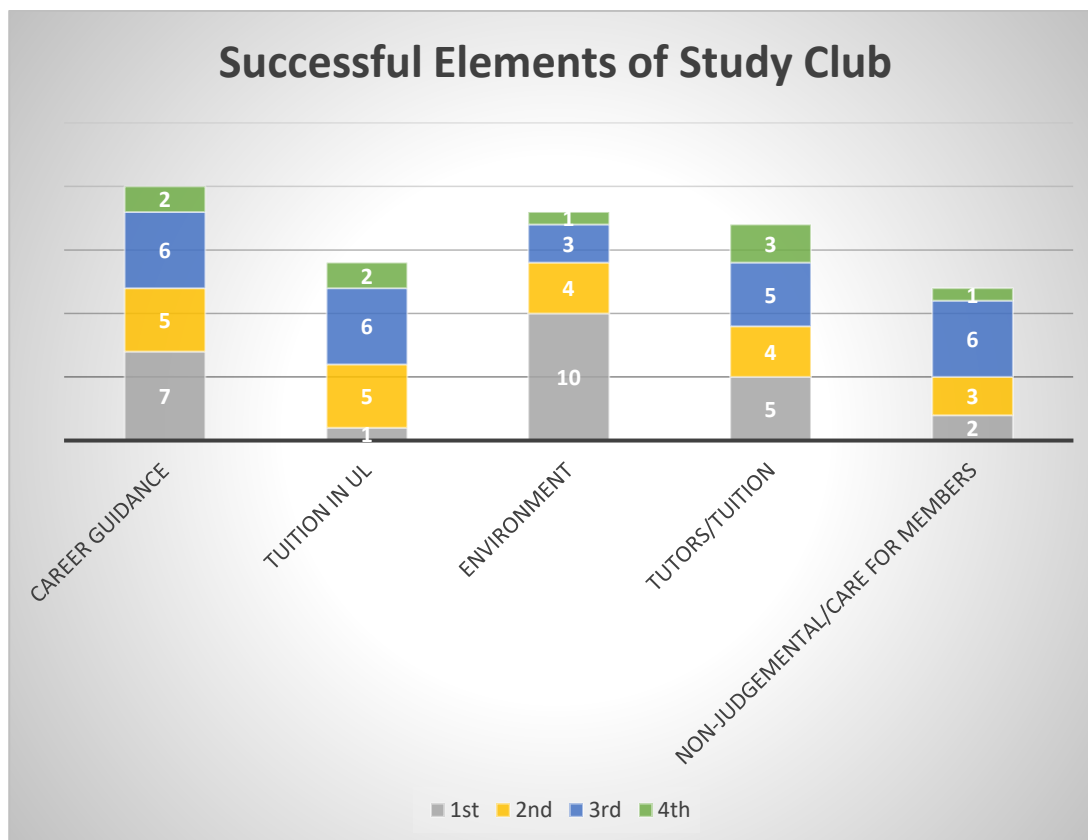
'As I just said the students that are members of the Study Club appear to be more aware of the opportunities for advancement beyond the Leaving Certificate. We would notice that they talk a lot more about college than previously was the case with them. They just seem more informed and confident that they will go to

college' (T4).

6.5 Successful Elements of Intervention

Former members of the Study Club were asked to list the elements of the Study Club, which they found most beneficial to their academic achievement and progression to higher education. Five elements emerged from the findings as being essential to academic achievement and progression to higher education, from the perspective of the respondents and are presented in Chart 6.8 below. In addition, a sample of teachers from these members' schools were asked for their opinion on the most successful elements of the Study Club based on their interactions with these students and these findings are presented at the end of this section.

Chart 6.8 Successful Elements/Supports of the Study Club



The findings revealed that the various elements of the Study Club were equally important. However, it was noted that at different points in the academic cycle, some elements were more important than others and that members were able to access particular elements of the Study Club as and when they needed them. The flexibility of the Study Club and particularly the SOS plan would appear to be important elements of interventions to support students raise their academic achievement and progression to higher education.

'It was a combination of the elements that helped the student to succeed. There is a complete gap of understanding a student totally in school and understanding what a student needs rather than coming in doing your job and going home. At the club you track a student's progress or what you should be doing if you see they are falling behind in an area you should take extra time to help them succeed, not saying you might not get paid for it, but it is your job at the end of the day' (M1).

The following sections explore the elements of the Study Club identified by respondents as being important to their academic success and why, these responses capture the essence of what all respondents considered to be elements that they found beneficial.

Career Guidance

'The Study Club had the greatest influence on me getting into college. I knew what I wanted to do, but I didn't know where to go for resources like! So you guys were the ones to guide me into the whole college mentality. The Study Club had a greater belief in me going to college. But that wasn't the case in school very much!' (M8).

Being able to access resources was an issue for students, and the

trips to UL campus assisted in creating a sense of belonging at college as the following quotes illustrates.

The on-campus factor

'One thing I found very, very good as well, you would go out to UL on Tuesday, and you'd do maths first and then science. Being able to go there for the maths and science tuition from students who were studying these subjects in UL, that was a great help because they were clued into it, so they put in the effort so you would, not like in school' (M11).

Respondents identified the study club environment which was encouraging and put individualised supports and plans in place as an important factor in their educational achievement and progression to higher education.

Environment

*'The environment at AccessCampus! I felt encouraged to learn here. It's an environment that cares. An environment that provides whatever it takes to excel that applies to **you!!** And when you have that environment that gives you a wider base of **support**, you (tutors/staff) were able to understand us from different perspectives and then put a plan in place to help us. Which I found really interesting! And they gave you that that, that better sense of freedom to explore things that you would not understand' (M15).*

The approach to tuition at the study club and the availability of tutors in different subjects and the ease with which members could access tuition support was also an important element contributing to their academic achievement.

Tuition

'But it was the way it was all structured. It wasn't like school you sit at your desk, just do your work that's it. If you had a problem, put your hand up, walk up to someone in the Study Club. You are sitting down having a conversation about a problem, go up and ask him. But it wasn't just the same leaders every day. It was a lot of different people. Like people who were qualified to come in. One person might be good in maths. One person might be good in English, Irish. And they would take you and say right this is what we are going to do' (M2).

At the study club, members believed that the care tutors demonstrated not just for their academic achievement but also their personal and social development was another important element of the study club.

Non-judgemental/Care for members

'I was shy in school the Study Club helped me to come out of myself, they (tutors) pushed you, pushed everybody to do well no matter where they came from. And the staff were a great help too and they got to know you on a personal level so they were trying to get people to fit in, they cared about you, not just your schoolwork, but also on a personal level they cared about how you were doing in general. (M4).

The findings suggest that respondents found the environment to be an essential element of the Study Club. Career guidance was found to be the second most important element. The tutors and tuition were joint third; however, if these scores were combined, then these

elements may be the most important in terms of academic achievement and progression to higher education. Respondents made distinctions between their interactions with tutors and the tuition they received, and therefore the two elements were recorded separately. That said, the two work hand in hand, which may be significant in designing and implementing policies, strategies and interventions to address educational disadvantage. While tuition of a high standard is required, the findings would infer that the nature of interactions between tutors and students is equally important.

Most important elements of the Study Club (Teachers' perspectives)

Respondents identified the tuition provided at the Study Club as the most important element of the Study Club. They believed that this was essential, particularly in light of the growing culture of private grinds. They felt that students who could not afford grinds were further disadvantaged in the 'race for points' Career guidance and the trips to UL campus were also identified by respondents as very beneficial elements of the Study Club. Respondents also identified having a venue dedicated to study as another important element of the Study Club.

'The tuition in my view is absolutely essential, not only to augment and support their schoolwork but also to level the playing field in the race for points in the Leaving Certificate. We have witnessed a huge increase in the numbers of students availing of private grinds outside of school to give them an edge in the race for college places. While I do not agree with it, I can understand parents wanting to give their children the best chance possible. But where does that leave students whose parents can't afford private grinds? I would place career

guidance and the trips to UL second because in my view they work hand in hand in raising these students' ambitions and aspirations to go to college. Having a place to study with access to educational and technological resources third. Finally, a non-judgemental and caring environment' (T1).

'In my opinion the one-to-one tuition is the most important feature of the Study Club. It gives the students the extra help and individual attention that isn't always possible in class. The career guidance would be second, followed by the maths and science tuition in UL. The Study Club itself would be next, you know having a place where they can go to study, as a lot of my students would tell me that it isn't always possible to study at home with everything that is going on there. Finally, the non-judgemental ethos of the Study Club is important to encourage these students' (T2).

Recommendations for supports to foster greater progression to higher education.

(Teachers' Perspectives)

Respondents believed that these students required additional academic supports to improve their prospects of progressing to higher education. Increased career guidance support in schools was also identified by respondents. They cited lack of time to devote to students' individual academic needs and career guidance as significant issues and recommended that more time be allocated to these areas in schools. Respondents also recommend that more support be provided to parents, particularly concerning the CAO and SUSI applications.

'A lot of these students need more academic support. We would all have students that are struggling in particular subjects, but it is not always possible to give them the individual attention that they require. (T1).

'Academic supports definitely, and more supports for parents with the CAO, SUSI etc. I think that career guidance supports need to be increased across the board. Many career guidance teachers are overwhelmed by the numbers of students that they have to work with.. Teachers already have a high workload with their particular subjects and now they are expected to provide career guidance as well within existing timetables. (T2).

It is clear from the various comments on the intervention, its structures, processes and outcomes that students, parents and teachers emphasise the interconnected nature of the various elements and value the cumulative effects.

6.6 Conclusion

This research explored the experiences of former Study Club members and their parents of the experiences of their schools and the Study Club on how these schools and the Study Club addressed the factors identified in the literature reviews in Chapters Two and Chapter Three to improve academic outcomes for disadvantaged students. The intervention selected was the Access Campus Study Club because of the outcomes it has achieved (see Tables 6.1 and 6.3). Based on the qualitative data collected through forty in-depth interviews with former members and parents of former members of the Study Club between 2010 and 2016, it may be concluded that targeted interventions such as the Access Campus Study Club can play a significant role in raising the academic

achievement and progression to higher education for students experiencing educational disadvantage.

The findings suggest that the factors identified in the literature can be addressed to improve academic outcomes and progression to higher education. Aspirations can be raised when teachers hold high expectations of students, providing encouragement and motivation to succeed academically. Respondents identified the advice and career guidance as positively influencing their ambitions to go to college, thereby, raising their aspirations. Respondents perceived that creating an environment that fostered high expectations, encouragement and support, positively influenced their ambitions and raised their aspirations to go to college. Respondents identified teacher/parent engagement strategies that were frequent and informal and provided parents with additional resources, advice and support around applying to college were conducive to students raising their academic achievements and progression to college.

Targeted interventions have the potential to mediate the discontinuities between home and school cultural environments. While these families may have possessed the embodied cultural capital rewarded by schools, they did not possess the required objectified and institutionalised cultural capital to successfully navigate the educational system. Respondents identified the supports provided to both members and their parents at the Study Club as having compensated for their objectified and institutionalised cultural capital deficits. Based on the findings, creating an environment that provides a quiet place to study with access to educational and technological resources plays a role in improving academic outcomes and progression to college. Environment was also identified as playing a role in raising aspirations and therefore, should be one that maintains high expectations of students, encouraging them to go to college and providing the educational

resources and supports to enhance objectified and institutionalised cultural capital.

The findings indicate that numeracy and literacy and learning in smaller classes were inter-related. Respondents suggested that learning in smaller classes was conducive to positive teacher/student interactions, allowing teachers to tailor instruction and provide learning materials specific to student's needs. In smaller classes tuition proceeded at a pace that allowed students to ask question and gain a deeper understanding of the material, which they identified as necessary to improved proficiency in numeracy and literacy.

The findings have implications not only for interventions addressing educational disadvantage, but also for mainstream educational policies too. Educational policy should be designed to ensure initial teacher training and continuous professional development promote high expectations that all students may progress to college, equipping teachers with strategies to raise aspirations to motivate and encourage students to go to college. The findings identify the type and nature of teacher/parent engagement that fosters positive academic outcomes and highlight the importance of providing additional educational resources, advice, support and guidance to parents, so they may support their children's learning at home. The findings also raise issues about school culture and habitus; classroom practices and facilities; deployment of human and financial resources within schools and career guidance and mentoring practices. These issues affect student outcomes and opportunities in all contexts. This chapter presented the findings from the case-study, uncovering a wealth of insights on the different themes. These findings indicate that no single element of the intervention alone would increase progression. What is clear is that the combination of academic and socio-cultural elements positively impacts on student performance, achievement, aspirations and progression.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Analysis of Findings

7.1 Introduction

This study examines educational disadvantage and the various approaches to countering disadvantage and increasing progression to higher education. Earlier chapters explored the causes and manifestations of educational disadvantage, the types of strategies used to counter it and the conceptual lenses through which it has been analysed. Drawing on those chapters' insights, an operational framework was constructed and used to gather rich data from a particular intervention that combined the academic and socio-cultural features identified from the literature. The previous chapter discussed the findings of the study. Using the themes identified for the operational framework, this chapter presents an analysis and discussion of those findings. The findings identified the various impacts of the intervention and the core elements which help counter educational disadvantage and increase progression. This chapter discusses these issues and their implications.

7.2 Academic Performance and Successful Elements of the Intervention

Comparison of Study Club members' exam results upon becoming a member of the Study Club and the results they achieved in the Leaving Certificate revealed that members had raised their academic achievement and progressed to higher education in most cases. Viewed in isolation, they do not reveal much about how these improvements in academic outcomes were achieved. As discussed earlier, attributing causality is problematic in multi-faceted educational interventions. Still, considering that members of the Study Club did not receive extra academic supports from any other sources, it may be inferred that the improvements observed may indeed be due to the intervention. When

these improvements in grades are considered in the context of what respondents identified as the essential elements of the Study Club in terms of their academic achievement and progression to higher education, they reveal some interesting insights into what constitutes good practice to raise academic achievement and progression to higher education. These are discussed in more detail below.

Reflecting on the interview questions, the findings identified five critical elements of the Study Club that respondents perceived to be beneficial to their academic outcomes

- Career guidance
- Environment
- Tuition/Tutors/Mentoring
- Location
- Non-judgemental/Care for Members

Respondents attached differing levels of importance to each element. Overall, the findings revealed that each component was important in terms of benefiting their academic outcomes and progression to higher education but the cumulative impact was also significant. After environment, career guidance stood out as the next most important element. The importance of career guidance resonates with the international reviews, which find that IAG (information, advice and guidance) and career guidance are crucial elements of successful widening participation activities (Hannon *et al.* 2017; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; Torotcoi *et al.* 2020). Bourdieu (2011) emphasises the importance of institutionalised cultural capital and how it enables individuals to navigate educational systems. Respondents in this study came from families with low academic attainment levels and lacked the institutionalised cultural capital necessary for successful transition to third level. Elements of the interventions that enhanced their institutionalised cultural capital proved essential in raising their academic achievement and enabling higher education progression. As the findings reveal, participants' progress was strongly

influenced by an environment that acknowledges their habitus/embodied cultural capital. The findings suggest that interventions and schools may achieve more equitable education outcomes if they create inclusive environments that recognise all students' habitus/embodied cultural capital. The environment was also identified as playing a role in raising aspirations and building all cultural capital dimensions. The intervention examined in this study fostered students' high expectations, encouraging them to go to college and provide the educational and informational resources to support their transition. The findings corroborate Lynch's assertion that 'positive, supportive non-discriminatory attitudes among teachers are crucial for enabling vulnerable children to perform well academically and feel at home in school' (2018: vii).

Tuition and tutors/mentors were also essential elements of the Study Club. This is not surprising considering that the Irish education system is very competitive (Canny and Hamilton 2018). The points system for entry to higher education has led more affluent parents to pay for grinds and extra-curricular activities to give their children an advantage in the points race for college. Parents from lower SES groups do not have access to the economic capital that affluent parents do, placing their children at a disadvantage. The Study Club was perceived to counter this disadvantage and create a more level playing field for disadvantaged students. Respondents distinguished between their interactions with tutors and the tuition they received. While tuition of a high standard is required, the findings would infer that the nature of interactions between tutors/mentors and students is equally important. As the comparison of results indicated, the majority of members demonstrated improvements in exam results during their time as members of the Study Club. The tuition provided at the Study Club played a role in this, but tuition alone may not be enough, as participants' emphasis on the multiple elements of the intervention

indicates. This support for the intervention's multi-faceted nature reaffirms the support for 'black box' interventions in the literature (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). The study also confirms the assertion that it 'is hard to work out which single components were the most effective and/or impactful' (Sanderson and Spacey 2020: 6).

Reference was made earlier to the importance of the quiet space which the intervention provided. Important also for respondents was the delivery of some aspects of the intervention on the university campus. Familiarity with the campus and the insights into college life members obtained from college-going tutors/mentors were cited as essential elements of the intervention. Such an increase in 'college confidence' leads to increased cultural capital and overcomes some of the soft barriers to educational progression experienced by these students. Even one-off activities such as visits or tours are deemed necessary in widening access by, for example, Sanderson and Spacey (2020) and Robinson and Salvestrini (2020). Locating regular tuition on the campus gave participants academic support and increases their social and academic confidence.

Throughout the interviews, respondents underlined the impact of the non-judgemental attitudes and the sense of care for students displayed by personnel at the intervention. The design and delivery of the intervention facilitated such an approach. Small class size, appropriate location, availability of educational resources, dedicated personnel and flexibility of delivery of the various intervention elements were all identified by respondents as essential elements of interventions to raise academic achievement and progression to higher education. The intervention's personal development elements helped students, while parents particularly valued the personalised advice and feedback. Scanlon *et al.* (2019a) and O'Sullivan *et al.* (2019b) are among researchers who highlight the need to acknowledge differences in experience and capabilities and the value of

interventions that help overcome young people's fear of not fitting in. The evidence from this study illustrates how a multi-faceted approach can help overcome those fears.

Black box interventions that combine a range of academic and socio-cultural supports have gained traction in widening participation policies to support students' transition from low SES backgrounds into higher education. In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority has committed under PATH3 funding to promote multi-faceted interventions over those that target individual academic and socio-cultural dimensions of educational disadvantage. Evidence from this study supports such an approach.

7.3 School and Academic Factors

The charts in Chapter Six mapping change in student academic performance show a positive trajectory. The difficulties in attributing direct causality to widening access interventions are well recognised (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2017a; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020), but the consistent improvement in academic performance is noteworthy. This improvement reflects the intervention's focus on academic knowledge (subject assistance) and academic skills, essential factors for educational improvement.

Throughout the interviews, respondents referred to school factors that helped or impeded progress. Some experienced an alienating school culture where they felt their cultural capital was deficient. Many commented on resource limitations as well as specific classroom practices and the constraints on support actions. They thus confirmed the assumption that feeling supported results from tangible and intangible factors such as a sense of belonging, supportive teachers/educators, targeted use of resources and inclusive environments. Students showed unexpected maturity in recognising and understanding how systemic and school-specific factors affected issues such as the time teachers could

spend on individual feedback or the pressures that a crowded curriculum and large classes placed on teachers. These insights could be fed into both practice (similar interventions) and policy.

7.3.1 Class Size and Numeracy and Literacy

Domain	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
Class Size	Nature of Learning in School/Intervention (including Peer Learning, Tailored Learning Materials).	Merga (2020) Schleicher (2019) McKeown (2019)	Members	Appendix I Q's 13 – 20
Numeracy and Literacy	Experience of Learning Maths/English at School/Intervention. Preference for learning at school or intervention.	Experience of Learning Maths/English at School/Intervention. Preference for learning at school or intervention.	Members	Appendix I Q's 22 – 24

Class size and numeracy, and literacy are dealt with individually in the literature reviews presented in chapters two and three and chapter six on findings. The primary data analysis revealed that the resulting academic benefits of reducing class size were mediating factors in students' achievement in numeracy and literacy, in particular, and across other subjects in general. Therefore, the findings on class size and numeracy and literacy will be discussed jointly in this section.

The effects of class size on learning outcomes have received considerable attention in educational disadvantage literature over several decades (Williams *et al.* 2009; Schanzenbach 2014; Zyngier 2014; ERC 2020). Smaller classes enable teachers to spend more time with individual students, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and tailor learning materials to students' specific needs. This relationship mediates classroom behaviour, particularly student engagement behaviours, between class size and student

achievement (Zyngier 2014; Weir *et al.* 2017).

The findings indicated that respondents struggled with learning in regular classes and reported similar experiences across subject-specific classes and in different schools. All respondents believed that there were too many students in each class. This resulted in teachers not having the time to engage with students individually and identify what supports each student required and put those supports in place. Large classes prevented teachers from compiling learning materials specific to each student's needs. Furthermore, respondents revealed that there was very little time to ask questions or seek clarification on topics they had difficulty understanding. These findings were not surprising, as they confirmed the literature's assumptions on the shortcomings of having too many students in the class. In their review of DEIS, Smyth *et al.* (2015) reaffirmed the benefits of class size reduction strategies on countering educational disadvantage. In the Study Club, when students received tuition in smaller groups, tutors could engage with students on a one-to-one basis, enabling tutors to understand each student's strengths and weaknesses better, allowing teachers/tutors to tailor learning materials to students' needs. This mentoring promoted better engagement between tutors and students, leading to improved academic outcomes for these students.

The pace at which learning occurs is another pertinent factor in addressing educational disadvantage. According to the OECD (2011), the pace at which learning occurs mediates learning outcomes for disadvantaged students. The findings revealed interesting differences between learning in large classes and smaller groups. Learning in smaller groups was perceived to be more conducive to adapting the pace of learning to students' needs. Nevertheless, as the findings revealed, smaller groups did not necessarily guarantee that this would occur. One respondent (M1) recounted how there were only

thirteen students in his class at school. Despite this small number, the teachers did not adapt to the pace of learning or engage individually with each student. This resonates with the literature on small classes, reducing the number of students is not enough. It is what happens in a small class that is important. The change in behaviour that may occur is the primary driver of improved academic outcomes for students. This behavioural change relates to increased teacher/student engagement. Respondents appreciated that smaller classes allowed teachers to spend more time with each student individually, identifying the areas where they need help. In turn, students could engage more proactively with teachers, seek help and clarification with particular topics, and take ownership of their learning (Zyngier 2014; Weir *et al.* 2017). An unexpected finding of the study related to the peer learning that occurred in smaller groups. Peer learning did not emerge in the literature on the benefits of class size reduction strategies. It would appear to have the potential to be a significant element of strategies and interventions to raise academic achievement. This study suggests that peer learning is an overlooked resource that may benefit students as they seek to increase their academic achievement. The current DEIS policy implements class reduction strategies at primary level but not at secondary level. This research's findings echo the evidence in the international and Irish literature that teacher/student ratios mediate academic outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students.

The findings suggest that the number of students in the class was a mediating factor for academic achievement in general and numeracy and literacy, particularly substantiating the assumption that class size mediates teachers' ability to provide instruction tailored to students' needs. Respondents reported positive experiences of learning Maths at the Study Club because tuition was tailored to the student's needs. The pace allowed members to

develop a better understanding of Maths. In particular, the findings indicated that Maths tuition on the university's main campus every Tuesday evening was particularly beneficial for several reasons. These include creating opportunities for students to discuss in detail with teachers/tutors where their strengths and weaknesses are in Maths. Teachers/tutors could focus specifically on these issues. Teachers/tutors could tailor lesson plans to address these specific issues, devoting enough time to particular topics to ensure they obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Furthermore, lesson planning that allows flexibility to revisit a topic is fundamental to raising numeracy skills proficiency. This was not always possible in large groups such as traditional classes. Teachers were under pressure to get through the curriculum and did not always have the time to devote to individual students. They did not have the flexibility to revisit particular topics, as was the case in the Study Club. Respondents reported similar literacy instruction benefits, citing the pace of learning, receiving tuition and notes tailored to their specific needs, and providing a fresh perspective on the subject. These outcomes corroborate the assumption that under-achievement in Numeracy/Literacy is more efficiently and effectively addressed through targeted strategies delivered in smaller classes. The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011 – 2020 has set an objective to raise proficiency in literacy and numeracy. Proposals include ensuring that sufficient time is allocated to numeracy and literacy classes. The evidence from this study demonstrates the efficacy of such supports.

7.3.2 Mentoring

Domain	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
Mentoring	Discussions about college progression and inculcating a sense of belonging in mentee. Detailed advice and information on college courses. Encouragement and support when applying to college, advice and assistance regarding transitions to HE.	Bruce and Bridgeland (2014) O’Sullivan et al. (2019a) Torotcoi et al. (2020)	Members	Appendix 1 Q’s 7, 8, 9, 25

The literature reveals that educational disadvantage is a consequence of various academic and socio-cultural factors. These factors have been inextricably linked to socioeconomic status (Reardon and Portilla 2016). Students and families from lower SES groups often lack the academic and social competencies required to navigate the educational system.

Bruce and Bridgeland (2014) argue that students from disadvantaged backgrounds lack role models within their own families, broader communities, and social networks to help them navigate the educational system, a finding echoed by McCoy *et al.* (2014b) for students from lower SES groups in Ireland. Mentoring is one such strategy that has been shown to compensate for these students’ lack of role models (O’Sullivan *et al.* 2019a). Sanders and Higham (2012) concluded that higher education students could provide students with role models to better understand what college life entails and challenge negative perceptions. More recently, the relationship between mentors and mentees was identified as a critical factor in mentees developing increased knowledge of tertiary education, confidence, motivation and positive attitudes towards education

(Aimhigher 2019). When college and secondary students engage in meaningful and continuous mentoring relationships, mentees develop more positive aspirations and attitudes towards higher education. (Sanders and Higham 2012; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2017a).

In this study, students identified both tangible and intangible benefits of mentoring. The tangible benefits included advice and guidance in selecting the right course, the intangible benefits identified by respondents concerned getting this advice and guidance from individuals already attending college. Respondents believed this to be particularly advantageous because, in the absence of social contacts, these mentors could provide students with first-hand knowledge of what it is like to study at college. One respondent pointed out, *'A benefit and overlooked sometimes we used to go to U.L.... That was really good for me because I knew no one in college and to be able to talk to the U.L. tutors about college and how the timetable worked. Also, how to apply for college they could tell you what college was like'* (M3).

Robinson and Salvestrini refer to mentors' potential to 'act as relatable role models, improving students' aspirations and confidence and shattering stereotypes' (2020: 27). Similarly, evidence from empirical studies advocates selecting mentors from similar backgrounds as mentees, as mentees can relate more readily to them. This study found that mentees related to mentors because they represented their aspirations to be college students themselves *'I mean the fact that there were almost as young as me, but because they were in college and I wanted to go to college. I felt that they were on the same level me!'* (M12).

Mentoring has been identified as a beneficial intervention to address these issues in strategies to raise academic achievement and college progression. In Ireland, several

higher education institutions have implemented mentoring programmes, similar to the Study Club, that recruit current college students to mentor second-level students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This research indicates that smaller groups enabled teachers and tutors to develop mentoring relationships conducive to academic and social advancement. Mentors were able to develop a detailed knowledge of mentees and tailor supports specific to their needs. Mentors were able to augment career guidance that respondents received in school and provide a clear and thorough understanding of the courses these students wished to pursue in college. This was not always the case in school, as career guidance teachers did not have enough time to devote to each student because of resource constraints. This study's findings support the Torotcoi *et al.* (2020) assessment that mentoring (information advice and guidance) positively affects students' aspiration-raising and access to higher education.

Participants' responses show that mentors were better able to provide academic support to students because they had more time to get to know students, assess their strengths and weaknesses and tailor tuition, learning materials and personal development assistance to their particular needs. The educational system is structured so that teachers at the secondary level have several different groups of students they engage with for perhaps forty minutes per day and then move onto their next class. This limits the opportunity to provide individual support. While teachers may know that some of their students need additional academic or personal support, they may not be in a position to offer this support because of the demands on their time. Smaller teacher/student ratios are more conducive to developing beneficial mentor/mentee relationships.

The findings demonstrate better academic outcomes may be achieved if mentoring

programmes address both the academic and socio-cultural aspects of educational disadvantage simultaneously. Such approaches have been proven to be successful in other jurisdictions, highlighted by Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) in their international review of Widening Access programmes. The findings from this study suggest that mentoring programmes may be a valuable component of policies and interventions to address educational disadvantage. The study demonstrates how college students can help secondary students gain the knowledge and insights of college life which help them make more informed choices when choosing a college course. navigating the educational system.

7.4 Socio-Cultural Elements

Throughout this study, it has been reiterated that educational disadvantage is inextricably linked with socio-cultural factors. The literature review and the empirical findings reinforced that view, so the analysis examines the socio-cultural and academic factors separately.

7.4.1 Soft Barriers

Domain	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
‘Soft’ Barriers	Level of academic and social confidence. Level competence re: application processes, campus navigation etc. Feeling supported/unsupported.	Scanlon (2019 a and b), McCluskey (2017), O’Sullivan et al. (2018)	Members Parents	Appendix I Q’s 5, 6, 11 Appendix II Q’s 7, 8, 14 Appendix 11 Q’s 7, 8, 14

Level of academic and social confidence

The literature indicates that educational disadvantage is often intergenerational and that

academic achievement is predicted by socioeconomic status (Reardon and Portilla 2016). Many of the literature sources and strategy documents used in this study reveal a dominant focus on class as the primary cause of educational disadvantage. Children experiencing economic hardship are more likely to underachieve academically (Gorard and Siddiqui 2019). This mediates these students' social and academic confidence to progress to college. Banks *et al.* (2018) argue that these children require interventions to raise their social and academic confidence if their likelihood of progressing to college is to be increased. The findings indicate that environments that promoted academic and social confidence successfully raised academic achievement and college progression. The conclusions provided examples of what such environments should entail. Positive environments are ones that, in the interviewees' assessment of the Study Club, are environments that provide support to students across a range of academic subjects, encourage them to seek help, support their personal development and allow them to be themselves and feel comfortable expressing their opinions and asking for advice about options. Respondents reported that they felt more confident in their choices as a result of such environments which operate in the Study Club.

Level of competence re: application processes, campus navigation etc.

As revealed above, most respondents had a minimal history of progression to college within their extended families. Consequently, these families had low levels of competence about college application processes or knowledge of campus life etc. Disadvantaged students are more likely to come from families with no prior history of progression to third level education (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). In this research, eleven parents had not progressed beyond the Intermediate Certificate, while only three parents had completed the Leaving Certificate. Similar progression levels were reported

for their extended families. Only four respondents indicated that a family member had obtained a third level education. Having left the formal education system at a young age, many of these parents did not possess the institutionalised cultural capital or access to social networks that Bourdieu (2011) argues is necessary to enable them to acquire the knowledge needed to navigate the educational system. This, in turn, affected their confidence in supporting their children's progression to third level education. As a result, respondents lacked the confidence and knowledge required to make college applications. This was exacerbated by the fact that there were very few, if any, people in their social networks that could advise and guide them through the college application process. This, in turn, affected students' confidence and knowledge around applying to college. They had very few, if any, people in their social networks who could assist them at this point in their educational careers.

This lack of appropriate institutionalised cultural capital was a mediating factor in interviewees' ability to support their children's higher education progression. This lack of familiarity with HE requirements has been highlighted by McCluskey (2017) and the OECD (2019). They argue that low SES parents and students require additional support to overcome soft barriers such as lack of role models, peer support, social anxiety and fear of alienation from peers and friends. They need extra support, advice and guidance when applying to college and integrating into college life. While respondents did receive career guidance in their schools, they believed that it was not sufficient to allow them to make informed decisions when choosing to apply to college. They recognised that career guidance teachers worked under significant time pressure. Interviewees perceived the Study Club's mentoring as a considerable help in preparing them for the application and transition processes. This echoes the findings of Scanlon *et al.* (2019a), O'Sullivan *et al.*

(2019b) and Canny and Hamilton (2018).

When students had the opportunity to discuss their college options in detail with individuals who were already in college, they felt that they could obtain more detailed knowledge and advice about college courses and what they would be like. This, in turn, enabled students to make informed choices about which course was right for them and they felt more confident in their choices. Similarly, parents felt more engaged and confident in assisting their children in applying to college when they received detailed advice and guidance about CAO and SUSI applications. The findings indicated that these students and their families required more support around college applications than was available in schools and that when they received this support, they engaged willingly with it. In recent years career guidance hours have been cut across all schools in response to budgetary constraints. Both students and their parents require more support than may be available in schools because of these constraints.

The operational framework for this study was linked to the assumption that overcoming soft barriers to educational progression is made more likely through learning environments that promote academic and social confidence; provision of information, advice, guidance and support regarding the transition to Higher Education and creating a sense of belonging with supportive teachers/educators and an inclusive atmosphere. Analysis of the findings shows that assistance in overcoming those soft barriers was of great significance for participants and their parents in this study. Public policy, particularly the DEIS policy, should consider addressing these soft barriers under the School Support Programme (SSP). Two SSP elements already work with students and parents, the HSCL officers and the School Completion Programme. These two programmes could potentially collaborate to address these soft barriers simultaneously

with parents (HSCL) and students (SCP) to ensure better educational outcomes for these students.

7.4.2 Raising Aspirations

Domain	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
Raising Aspirations /Expectations	Changing Expectations. Sources of Encouragement. Changed Ambitions.	Robinson and Salvertrini (2020), O'Sullivan et al. (2017)	Members	Appendix I Q's 6 - 12

The literature demonstrates that both academic and socio-cultural factors mediate educational disadvantage. Rizzica (2018) indicates that a student's aspirations and expectations combine with cognitive ability, personal and family endowments to influence academic outcomes and probability of progression to higher education. Bourdieu and others recognise that students' dispositions or aspirations and expectations are affected by societal, familial and school influences. Consequently, the OECD highlights the importance of the educational ecosystem or environment and the actors that occupy this educational environment, which all combine to influence educational outcomes for students. Raising students' aspirations and expectations relies on all actors present in the student's social field, i.e. school and teachers (Gupta and Bashir 2017; Torotcoi *et al.* 2020), parents (Bashir and Bashir 2016; Weir *et al.* 2017) and students themselves (Harrison and Waller 2018).

This study focused on the Study Club as a targeted intervention to address these and other aspects of educational disadvantage. Concerning raising expectations, the findings of this research identified that when teachers, Study Club staff/tutors, and parents held high expectations of their students, they encouraged them to aim higher in terms of their

academic outcomes. This encouragement took the form of on-going discussions and career guidance with students about their post-secondary options and the creation of individualised study plans and personal development strategies.

Students' responses showed that both the practical advice and the articulation and encouragement of ambitions brought about attitudinal changes. In contrast with the depleted career guidance resources in schools, the structure and staffing of the Study Club enabled the sort of interaction that facilitated surfacing and articulation of student aspirations and expectations. The intervention structure supports on-going, in-depth career guidance and help and advice for students to explore all their higher education options, thereby increasing the likelihood of a successful transition to higher education. The findings did reveal evidence of teachers providing advice, support, and encouragement to their students. Teachers who held high expectations of students and encouraged them and motivated them to do better positively influenced raising these students' aspirations to go to college. However, not all teachers had the time to devote to aspiration raising activities such as in-depth discussion, advice and support in choosing a college course. These findings uphold the assumption that educators who hold high expectations and motivate/encourage and support students can positively influence their aspirations.

The intervention supported the parents' role in raising aspirations. Responses from parents showed that some felt teachers did not have the time to discuss their children's futures with them. Others felt that, based on the families' socioeconomic status, some teachers did not have high expectations of their children and did not actively engage in practical steps to help them progress to college. In the Study Club, parents felt that their ambitions

for their children were anticipated and recognised, and assistance was made available with the information and administrative aspects of college applications. The findings indicate that parents held high expectations for their children's educational outcomes and that they do have a role to play in raising their children's aspirations. However, whether or not parents were encouraged to play this role depended on teachers' perceptions of them based on their embodied and institutionalised cultural capital. Interventions/teachers that do not make assumptions based on these factors may achieve greater success in supporting parents in raising their children's aspirations. Parents also require additional support and guidance, particularly concerning CAO, SUSI and HEAR/DARE applications.

The findings suggest that raising an individual's aspirations is a sequential process and requires the involvement of teachers, parents and students themselves. The tangible manifestation of high expectations involves creating an environment that encourages and motivates students to succeed in education and college progression. This requires teachers, parents, and students to engage with aspiration raising activities such as providing advice, support, and on-going career guidance. This, in turn, raises students' aspirations to progress to college and helps increase student and parental ambitions. This concurs with the findings of Cummings *et al.* (2012). They argued that interventions could raise aspirations in students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Raising students' aspirations can be achieved when teachers/educators, parents and students hold high expectations of the student's potential to progress to college. These expectations can be translated into higher aspirations when all involved actively engage with career guidance activities such as providing sufficient time to explore college course options and having in-depth discussions about college, college life; and the application

process. The findings show that building this ‘college confidence’ was instrumental in increasing and realising students’ ambitions to progress to third level. Creating environments that promote third level education as the norm can help change students’ ambitions and ultimately raise these students’ aspirations. The most recent empirical evidence indicates that aspiration-raising strategies and interventions play a significant role in raising academic achievement and higher education progression (Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). Their evidence and findings from this study suggest that perhaps DEIS should reconsider the potential impact of raising aspiration/expectations strategies and interventions in policies designed to alleviate educational disadvantage in Ireland. Under DEIS, several School Support Programme (SSP) interventions already co-ordinate interactions between teachers, parents, and students. They could provide an opportunity to implement raising aspirations/expectations strategies and interventions with teachers, parents, and students.

7.4.3 Parental Involvement

Domain	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
Parental Involvement	Type of Involvement with School Type of Involvement with Intervention.	Hornby and Blackwell (2018) Benner et al. (2018) Weir et al. (2017) Scanlon (2019)	Parents	Appendix II Q's 1 – 14

The literature in Chapters Two and Three indicates that parental involvement both at home and at school can translate into long-lasting benefits such as better student engagement, enhanced academic achievement, and secondary education completion (Benner *et al.* 2016; Hornby and Blackwell 2018). Recent empirical evidence indicates that parental involvement can significantly impact students’ academic outcomes

(Eurydice 2020a). However, parents from lower SES groups are less likely to be involved in their children's education for several reasons that stem from their lack of educational attainment. These include lack of confidence in dealing with schools and teachers, lack of knowledge on educational resources and where to access them and lack of social networks to access information, support and guidance to enable them to play a more proactive role in their children's education (Irwin and Elley 2011). This lack of familiarity with the educational system stems from parents' lack of educational qualifications or institutionalised cultural capital, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

The interviews provided insights into twenty parents' educational experiences (eighteen women and two men) from low SES groups. These parents came from communities where there was a minimal prospect of studying at college. The majority of these parents left school with only the Intermediate Certificate. Despite leaving school at an early age, many parents spoke of their ambitions that their children could benefit from educational opportunities that they did not have, ultimately studying at third level. This resonates with Lynch (2012), who found that parents from lower SES groups were every bit as interested in their children's education as their more affluent peers. Scanlon *et al.* (2019b) concluded that, while lower SES parents showed high levels of interest in being involved in their children's education, their lack of knowledge about education and how to guide their children through the educational system was a mediating factor in the nature and level of involvement that these parents experienced with schools and teachers. In this research, parents perceived their lack of education as a barrier to accessing educational resources and using them to support their children's schoolwork. Also, they did not have the confidence to engage with teachers as equals, as they believed that teachers were more knowledgeable than they were about educational issues and resources. This lack of

educational qualifications also resulted in these parents being unsure of how to support their children. They were confused about what involvement meant for them as parents; this echoes previous research findings on parental involvement (Travers *et al.* 2010). Scanlon *et al.* (2019b) concluded that this confusion has wrongly been interpreted as a sense of detachment or lack of interest when, in fact, these parents did not know how to engage in a meaningful way in the education of their children. The study also reflected the gendered nature of parental involvement with far more mothers than fathers opting to become involved in the research.

The findings indicated that when parents received clear communication on the nature and frequency of their involvement, they felt more knowledgeable and confident about what was required of them. The frequency and nature of parental involvement have been linked to greater academic outcomes for children (Benner *et al.* 2016; Eurydice 2020a). However, Travers *et al.* (2010) found that parental involvement's nature and frequency were influenced by disparities between the home and school cultural environment. In this research, parents' experiences of involvement in education were explored to identify good practice in engaging with parents. Low SES parents favoured frequent and informal contact with teachers and tutors over the formality of the annual parent/teacher meetings that was the norm in many schools. Parents responded more positively to this type of engagement, as they felt more relaxed when meeting with teachers/tutors. They had the opportunity to discuss their concerns and received more helpful advice and support from teachers/tutors, allowing them to play a more significant role in their children's education. Parents favoured the Study Club's open-door approach, where staff and tutors were available to meet with them as and when the need arose, to discuss issues concerning their children's education. Parents believed that teachers engaged more positively in informal

meetings and provided better advice and support to them, involving them in their children's education. However, the study's parents did not report formal involvement in extra-curricular activities such as assisting with after-school activities, fundraising or sitting on parent councils. Instead, they had assumed passive or reactive roles that resonate with recent empirical data (Brown *et al.* 2020).

Providing parents with learning materials and resources enabled them to play a beneficial role in their children's education. Doyle's study of the impact of COVID - 19 found differences in parental education levels. She states that 'children of parents with lower levels of education are statistically significantly less likely to receive resources from their teacher' (2020: 4). Thus, the issues uncovered by this study are widely experienced. Parents spoke about the benefits of the resources made available through the Study Club. Parents welcomed this type of support as it allowed them to play a more proactive role in their children's education. In the cases where schools provided extra resources, this type of parental involvement held both practical and symbolic benefits. The practical benefits consisted of enabling parents to play a hands-on role in their children's education and augment their schoolwork. The symbolic benefits consisted of a more positive perception of teachers by those fortunate enough to be provided with resources by the school. Providing parents with these resources signalled that teachers were committed to their role as educators in the classroom and supporting their students at home. Secondly, when parents received these resources, they felt that their potential to contribute was validated by these teachers, resulting in more positive parent/teacher engagement.

The study confirms the literature's assumptions that the frequency and type of parental involvement mediate student outcomes. The kind of support and resources provided to parents affects academic outcomes and echoes the empirical evidence of other parental

involvement studies (Scanlon *et al.* 2019b). The findings of this study suggest several opportunities to achieve greater parental involvement. Parents from low SES groups favour informal over formal meetings with teachers/tutors as parents feel more confident about their abilities in these types of discussions. Parental involvement activities that provide clear and detailed advice to parents on their roles, and how to access educational resources, and use them at home are more conducive to enhancing parental involvement. Furthermore, parental involvement programmes that feature advice and guidance on college and funding applications can compensate for parents' lack of institutionalised cultural capital. Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) officers are responsible for engaging with and promoting greater parental involvement. The findings suggest that there is a role for HSCL officers to play in implementing parental involvement strategies that address the issues identified in this study and the broader empirical evidence on good practice in raising parental involvement in education.

7.4.4 Cultural Capital/Habitus

Domain	Indicator	Scholarly Support	Sources of Evidence	Interview Questions
Cultural Capital/Habitus	Familial reading habits, cultural activities/interests. Rules on T.V./Internet usage.	Bourdieu (2011) Xie and Ma (2018) Huang and Liang (2016) Tan (2015) Lynch (2018)	Members/Parents	Appendix I, Q's 2 – 5, 21 Appendix II, Q's 16 - 25

Educational disadvantage is rightly framed as a social issue (Lynch 2018). As an indicator of social origin, cultural capital is often used to explain uneven educational outcomes. Although education may be a driver of social opportunity, it does so not only based on academic ability and effort. It is also influenced by the economic and cultural capital that

students bring with them from their home environments. Lynch (2018) asserts that cultural capital exhibits a significant mediating influence on educational outcomes in terms of respect and recognition, contributing to poorer students' lower academic achievement. Bourdieu's writings repeatedly demonstrate that affluent students possess more of the cultural capital recognised and rewarded by schools and teachers and are therefore better equipped to navigate the 'educational field'. Cultural capital in its three forms, institutionalised, objectified, and embodied, has been used in this study as an evaluative lens to examine aspects of educational disadvantage pertaining to both students and parents.

Institutionalised cultural capital comprises the educational qualifications parents, and extended family members possess. The findings indicate that few of the parents had advanced beyond secondary education. According to Tan (2015), parental institutionalised cultural capital mediates academic outcomes for their children concerning educational resources, pedagogical knowledge and interaction with teachers. These assertions were reflected in the study. Parents indicated that their lack of institutionalised cultural capital impeded positive engagement with teachers. Parents felt they did not have the knowledge and confidence to engage with schools and teachers in a manner that would benefit their children's education. They did not have access to social networks that would provide them with advice, guidance, and support for navigating the educational system or engaging with teachers and schools. Respondents indicated that having access to advice, guidance, and support at the Study Club compensated for their shortfall in institutionalised cultural capital.

Objectified cultural capital consists of the resources that allow students to acquire the disposition, values, perceptions, and knowledge recognised and rewarded by teachers

(Bourdieu 2011; Tan 2015). The findings revealed that many respondents did not have access to all of these resources. They considered this an impediment to their academic achievement. Respondents believed that not having access to these resources at home prevented them from acquiring the knowledge and dispositions rewarded at school. Other respondents indicated that while they had educational resources at home, not having a quiet place to study impacted negatively. This concurs with research about the impact of COVID 19 (ESRI 2020; Reimers and Schleicher 2020), highlighting the importance of having a quiet place to study.

It is vital to have access to educational resources and technology if students are to succeed in education but these resources may not be of benefit if students do not have a quiet place at home to use these resources. Respondents identified the importance of having someplace like the Study Club, where they had access to these resources and a quiet environment to benefit from these resources. While some respondents acknowledged that supervised after-school study facilities were available in their schools, those facilities did not have access to the other forms of objectified cultural capital needed. Thus, the findings indicate that all of the elements of objectified cultural capital are necessary if students are to succeed in education. The absence of a suitable home learning environment (e.g. a quiet place to study) was one of the main factors exacerbating educational disadvantage. The literature review showed that embodied cultural capital comprises academic values, attitudes, tastes, preferences and mastery of academic competencies and skills in the sphere of education. Cultural capital theory posits that individuals from lower SES groups generally do not exhibit the embodied cultural capital required to successfully navigate the 'educational field'. However, this study revealed some unexpected findings concerning embodied cultural capital. The findings indicate that many of the parents

interviewed exhibited some of the cultural capital generally associated with middle and upper-class families. This suggests that respondents have appropriated this particular form of embodied cultural capital to better prepare their children to more successfully navigate the 'educational field'. Parents recognised the value of reading with their children both as a joint recreational activity but, more importantly, to better prepare their children for school. Also, parents had imposed rules around their children's T.V. viewing habits and internet usage. Respondents typically viewed T.V. and computers/internet as an aid to their children's academic endeavours firstly and as a form of recreation secondly. The parents interviewed had consciously appropriated some of the embodied cultural capital generally associated with middle- and upper-class families and regarded as necessary to successfully navigate the educational system. This deliberate appropriation of cultural capital may also be reflected in the fact that parents and students voluntarily involve themselves in the Study Club. Members self-select, so willingness to devote the time and effort required to involvement would suggest high motivation and higher embodied cultural capital levels. However, it appears from the findings that although parents' efforts to appropriate embodied cultural capital may have better prepared their children for school, it did not enable parents themselves to engage more proactively with teachers and schools. Parents believed that promoting reading activities at home and imposing rules on T.V. viewing and technology usage impacted their children's schooling positively. Having the literacy proficiency levels necessary to engage positively in school and a better knowledge of educational topics (rules on T.V. and technology usage) ensured that T.V. and technology were first an educational resource and second a recreational resource. However, while efforts to enhance their stocks of embodied cultural capital did appear to benefit their children's education, the findings suggest that it did little

to enable these parents to be more involved in schools and with teachers.

Parents reported that they still found it challenging to engage with teachers based on barriers that they perceived. These included a perception that teachers did not believe that they had anything to contribute to their children's education as they had lower levels of education compared to these teachers and that this somehow created imbalance in parent/teacher engagement. Also, because of their lack of educational attainment, parents had not felt comfortable interacting with teachers. They lacked the level of knowledge that teachers possessed about the educational system and how to progress through it. The findings indicated that while parents' efforts to enhance their embodied cultural capital in line with that recognised and rewarded in schools did benefit their children, it did not appear to benefit these parents in terms of involvement with schools and engagement with their children's teachers.

Interestingly, none of the participants referred to the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme, which is tasked under the DEIS plan to engage with parents and families to promote better links between parents and schools/teachers. This concurs with Chapter Three, which cites an HSCL survey showing that 42 % of post-primary coordinators indicated that the scheme had had no impact at all on parental involvement in school activities' (Weir *et al.* 2018).

The assumptions derived from the literature that the type of cultural capital possessed by students and their families affects academic outcomes and that structured interventions may mitigate discontinuities between familial and school cultural capital were confirmed in this study. The research revealed some interesting findings of how the three forms of cultural capital interact to mediate educational outcomes. While these parents exhibited the embodied cultural capital recognised and rewarded by teachers, their lack of

institutionalised cultural capital posed a barrier to teachers' positive engagement with the parents. Similarly, members reported that while their parents may have cultivated the appropriate forms of embodied cultural capital at home, the lack of institutionalised and objectified cultural capital represented a salient barrier to raising their academic achievement. These findings suggest that all three forms of cultural capital need to be cultivated if working-class students' academic achievement is to be raised. The study underscores that the three forms of cultural capital are interlinked and must be leveraged to increase academic achievement and higher education progression.

7.5 Conclusion

This study examines an intervention that seeks to increase participants' cultural, academic and social capital. It contributes to augmenting academic achievement, increasing progression, and fostering belonging, agency, and social and academic confidence. The operational framework designed for the study emphasised recurrent themes from a broad literature on educational disadvantage and strategies to counter it. The empirical evidence gathered from forty interviews provided particular insights on overcoming educational disadvantage. In analysing those insights, this chapter shows how the Study Club's microcosm deals with the macro issues of educational disadvantage highlighted in the literature. From the analysis, it is clear that the design, delivery and duration of the intervention are important to participants and their parents, an assertion confirmed in the observations of the teachers consulted. The research also indicated that the intervention addresses, in a structured way, the general issues around educational disadvantage emerging from the literature as well as the issues raised in reviews of widening access interventions in various settings.

The intervention design enables a multi-faceted approach incorporating academic support and development; IAG individualised by mentors; personal and social development activities; regular on-campus activities, and on-going involvement of parents. The intervention's delivery helps overcome hard and soft progression barriers because it creates an environment that fosters a sense of belonging; sets and maintains high expectations. It also acknowledges and increases participants' cultural capital, enables personalised academic and IAG support, and takes cognisance of family and community contexts. The intervention duration is also significant because it allows the identification of problems and deficiencies and enables structured support to deal with them.

In analysing the results, it becomes clear that the targeted intervention has positive effects and enhances participants' academic attainment and their knowledge and capabilities. A key message is that it is the totality of the intervention, not individual elements, that matters most. This reinforces the conclusions of international reviews, which suggest that 'black box' interventions appear to be most successful. This has implications for schools, universities and policymakers. Tailored interventions are necessary and beneficial, and both the micro and macro evidence show that resources allocated to such interventions achieve a return. Similar to the international reviews, proving causality from the intervention is not straightforward. The findings and analysis indicate that the intervention's cumulative impact contributes to increased academic performance, enhanced cultural capital, and higher social and academic confidence levels. The compelling and insightful accounts offered by participants of their experience of the educational system, challenge in several ways much of the political and international assessments of the progress made in achieving equality of opportunity in Irish schools. Initial interpretations of international assessments such as PISA suggest that considerable

progress has been made, for example in numeracy and literacy, with Irish students performing above the OECD average. Deeper interrogation of the 2018 PISA results indicates that a significant achievement gap continues to exist between students in DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools. In fact, achievement in numeracy and literacy for students in DEIS schools is below the OECD average.

For these students it would appear that progress is far from satisfactory and more needs to be done to achieve equality of participation and equity of outcomes for these students. A sense of lack of equality of participation, of conditions, and of voice permeated and wove together respondents' accounts of their experience of education. Both students and parents exhibited positive attitudes towards education and its associated benefits. However, this positivity was tinged with a sense of frustration with the educational system. Frustrations concerning lack of involvement, lack of inclusion in decision-making processes, and lack of voice in policies and strategies designed to counter educational disadvantage. Perhaps this is consequence of what Lynch and Lodge identified as a preference 'to call on middle class 'experts' who claim to know and understand the lives of such students and their parents better than they do themselves and thus are granted the authority to speak on their behalf in terms of their challenges and educational needs' (2002: 148). The following chapter presents the study's conclusions and draws on the findings and analysis to make recommendations for similar interventions and broader policies.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This study arose out of the researcher's professional and personal interest in education as a driver of social mobility. The Irish government's commitment to countering educational disadvantage is clear through various initiatives, particularly DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). However, despite these supports and the progress made to date, statistics from the HEA in December 2020 show that there are only 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas to every 10 students from affluent areas in Ireland's HEIs and the proportion in universities is even lower with TCD, UCD and RCSI (all at 5%) having the lowest proportion from disadvantaged areas (HEA 2020). The gap between the achievements and progress made under DEIS and the low progression rates to higher education for this cohort of students, prompted this researcher to consider why this gap in attainment levels exists and how public policy and strategies might respond in order to close this gap in educational outcomes. Furthermore, the review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 – 2019 and ensuing consultation paper and process, highlights that students from the semi-skilled Socio-economic group and travelling community continue to be under-represented in higher education. The HEA seeks submissions from interested parties and stakeholders to address these issues during development of the new National Access Plan 2022 -2026. The consultation document reiterates a focus on equality and social inclusion and indicate that the new plan will aim to provide wider opportunities and routes to higher education. The plan will also seek to ensure that the student body in higher education reflects the diversity of Irish society.

In doing so, this research set out to examine how an intervention tailored to students' specific needs mediates the effects of the academic and socio-cultural dimensions of

educational disadvantage among underrepresented students.

Public policy to counter educational disadvantage has relied on the ‘expert opinion’ of middle class experts. O’Donnell (2014) argued that the voices of those most affected by educational disadvantage needed to be included to successfully overcome educational disadvantage. A key objective of this research was to access and promote those voices by ascertaining the participants’ experiences of a specific type of intervention. Therefore, the voices of students and parents were prioritised, to gain their perspectives on the lived experience of educational disadvantage and existing policy and interventions to identify good practice to counter educational disadvantage.

This chapter presents a brief summary of each chapter, explaining each chapter's purpose and outcomes and how they contribute to the study's design and execution. The research question arising from the literature reviews is addressed and how it contributes to understanding educational disadvantage and potential solutions to countering educational disadvantage for students. The contributions to knowledge on addressing educational disadvantage are then presented. Recommendations for policy and practice in addressing educational disadvantage are made before identifying future research areas.

8.2 Summary of the Thesis

Chapter One set the context for this study, the problem, rationale, and importance of countering educational disadvantage for both individual students and society as a whole. Despite the progress achieved under DEIS, students from low SES backgrounds continue to be under-represented in higher education (HEA 2012; 2015; 2019). Furthermore, analyses of the most recent PISA results reveal that students in DEIS schools lag considerably behind students in non-DEIS schools in numeracy and literacy (ERC 2020). These statistics indicate attainment gaps that continue to exist between students from low

SES backgrounds and their more affluent peers. This has important implications for public policy, strategies, and interventions to promote equality of opportunity for students in the Irish education system.

In Chapter Two, the international discourse confirmed that educational disadvantage is a consequence of socio-cultural and academic factors. Socio-cultural and academic domains mediate educational achievement and progression to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The international literature acknowledged the complex nature of educational disadvantage, demonstrating how socio-cultural and academic domains of educational disadvantage intersect, resulting in unequal outcomes for disadvantaged students' vis-à-vis their more affluent peers. It demonstrated that holistic policy approaches that address educational disadvantage's various socio-cultural and academic domains achieve the greatest success.

Chapter Three explored the experience of educational disadvantage from an Irish perspective, revealing a growing cognisance of the complexity and intersectional nature of educational disadvantage and the intersectional impact that class, family, social and economic policies and the learning environment have on educational opportunities. The chapter revealed evidence that approaches to countering educational disadvantage, initially focusing on classroom issues, have adopted a more holistic approach to address the social, cultural, economic and academic dimensions of disadvantage. While efforts to counter educational disadvantage have achieved success, there was growing concern about the under-representation of low SES students in higher education. Consequently, several strategies have been implemented to widen participation in higher education for this cohort of students under the HEA's '*National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*'.

In Chapter Four, equality theory, capability theory, and cultural capital theory, three theories that have featured prominently in efforts to unpack the issue of educational disadvantage were reviewed and considered. These three theories were explored and assessed, to determine their suitability to underpin an examination of these socio-cultural and academic domains. Cultural capital theory was selected to underpin the study as it demonstrated the ability to address both the socio-cultural and academic domains of educational disadvantage

Chapter Five addressed the research problem and detailed the operational framework that emerged from the literature reviews to underpin the study. Constructivism underpinned the epistemological position, while the interpretivist paradigm guided the overarching ontological assumptions. The Access Campus Study Club was chosen as a single case study to explore numerous and complex issues identified in the literature on educational disadvantage from the perspective of individuals experiencing educational disadvantage. The Study Club pursues a holistic approach to addressing the socio-cultural and academic domains that emerged in the literature, and so, could offer valuable insights into how interventions might be designed and delivered.

Chapter Six presented the case study findings, revealing interesting insights on respondents' experiences of mainstream schooling and the intervention under investigation. Based on the oft-ignored voices of students and parents, the findings revealed thought-provoking examples of good practice in raising academic achievement and progression to higher education. The findings also illuminated the challenges and barriers to successfully navigating the educational system. These findings resonate with both the Irish and international literature on educational disadvantage, while revealing unexpected insights such as the role of peer learning in raising academic achievement for

students, a role which has received little attention in the literature.

The analysis of the findings in chapter seven revealed various examples of good practice in challenging the academic and socio-cultural domains of educational disadvantage. The significance of institutionalised cultural capital and its mediating role in optimising both embodied and objectified cultural capital was revealed. The analysis also provided evidence of strategies and interventions that can stimulate positive parental involvement, the beneficial role of mentoring in countering educational disadvantage, and classroom and instructional practices that can improve academic outcomes for disadvantaged students. The observations of a specific group of teachers supported those findings.

8.3 Addressing the Research Question

In conducting the international and Irish literature reviews, it became apparent that educational disadvantage is a consequence of various socio-cultural and academic domains. Furthermore, the literature revealed that current policies to counter educational disadvantage advocate that interventions should adopt multi-faceted approaches that address these domains in a coordinated manner. Therefore, the research question that underpinned this study was framed as follows. *'Can a targeted intervention improve academic achievement and increase progression to higher education, and if so, what elements of the intervention achieve these outcomes for students experiencing educational disadvantage?'*

The following key findings emerged in the study.

- Informal and frequent meetings with parents and providing them with learning materials/resources were shown to enhance parental involvement in education.
- Raising academic and social confidence and enhancing college application

competency were shown to increase students' probability of progressing to college.

- Inclusive school cultures were found to contribute significantly to students' academic outcomes. Learning in small groups or one to one was found to improve numeracy and literacy proficiency in particular, and increase progress across all subjects .
- The positive impact of peer learning on academic achievement emerged as an unexpected finding in the study.

Mentoring was a key element of the intervention, seen as contributing to improving academic outcomes. Cumulatively, this research's findings supported the proposition that targeted interventions can improve academic achievement and increase progression to higher education if they combine supports to address the socio-cultural and academic domains of educational disadvantage in a coordinated manner.

The significance of cultural capital's mediating role on educational disadvantage's socio-cultural elements emerged in the research. This study indicated that all three forms of cultural capital are essential to improving disadvantaged students' academic outcomes. The importance of compensating for lack of institutionalised cultural capital to encourage parental involvement and enable students and parents to navigate the educational system successfully emerged as a significant finding.

Parental involvement emerged as a vital element of successful interventions to counter educational disadvantage. Parents identified informal and frequent parent/teacher meetings that included the provision of learning resources and advice and guidance to navigate the educational system to be more conducive to increasing their involvement in their children's education. This reflected the findings of Gorard *et al.* (2012), Benner *et*

al. (2016), Weir *et al.* (2017), Hornby and Blackwell (2018), Scanlon *et al.* (2019a), and Eurydice (2020a) who underscored the importance of supporting working-class parents in ways that enhance their capacity to be more involved in their children's education.

Engaging college students to act as mentors demonstrated a positive effect in addressing the academic domains. They possess current knowledge of the curriculum and how to succeed in examinations, knowledge which they could impart to students. Mentors' ongoing career advice to students and parents was identified as an essential mechanism that positively compensated for the lack of institutionalised cultural capital to navigate the educational system more successfully. This aligned with the findings of Torotcoi *et al.* (2020) and Scanlon *et al.* (2019a), who emphasised the importance of interventions that address the wide range of issues that impact higher education progression.

The findings underscored the importance of reducing class size to improve academic achievement among the students. The one to one and small group tuition provided at the Access Campus and on the university campus addressed the structural and organisational barriers in mainstream schools that inhibit teachers from providing individualised instruction tailored to students' specific needs. The participants identified the combination of this with peer mentoring as a critical enabler of building social and academic confidence, which contributed to countering the soft barriers to education.

The Study Club's multiple locations were also an important factor, as respondents identified bringing the students onto the UL campus created a sense of belonging at university among participants' and helped them confront and overcome some of the soft barriers to education that they encountered, resulting in increased confidence and aspirations to study at college.

The findings emphasised that the intervention's design and delivery are vital if it is to improve academic outcomes for disadvantaged students. The SOS system implemented at the Study Club incorporates a holistic approach that coordinates academic support with mentoring activities that address the soft barriers to education. The delivery of the interventions was crucial and involved the SOS instigating transparent structures and processes to monitor and track students' academic progress and actions to address the socio-cultural domains of educational disadvantage.

8.4 Contribution of the Study

The study contributes to addressing some of the gaps identified in the literature. Several experts such as Scanlon *et al.* (2019a) and Torotcoi *et al.* (2020) have called for research, which addresses the wider issues that impact on progression to higher education. By emphasising the socio-cultural dimension of educational disadvantage, this research responds to that call. Similarly, the mentoring strategies described in the study provide evidence of an approach that is effective in countering the soft barriers to education. The study advances understanding of the types of parent involvement activities that were successful at a post-primary level addressing the gap in the literature identified by Kim (2009), Dotson-Blake (2010), and Gorard *et al.* (2012) who argue that working class parents experience the greatest difficulty in being involved in their children's education. Social Justice Ireland asserts that 'addressing our high pupil teacher ratios and class sizes is a policy measure that should be used as part of a suite of policy measures to address educational disadvantage.' (2020: 253). The findings from the study provide evidence to support this assertion. Weir and Kavanagh (2018) stress the need to address the educational problems experienced by our most marginalised students. This study, albeit a small n study, provides a successful model of doing so.

Principle (iii) of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015 – 2019) articulated in Goal, 3.6 requires the HEA and HEI's to consult with students and prospective students to inform the development and implementation of access policy. In prioritising the voices of parents and students to foreground an 'insiders' perspective of the issues and to give voice to groups which seldom feature in research on disadvantage, this study responds to Goal 3.6. By gathering and analysing data which capture the experience and views of parents, disadvantaged students and teachers, the study uncovers not only the perspectives of the marginalised but also an understanding of the specific context which frames those perspectives. The study also highlighted the policies and interventions implemented to address educational disadvantage, providing primary data on their implementation and produced valuable insights for policy and practice designed to achieve greater equality in educational outcomes for marginalised students. Foregrounding the voices of marginalised students and parents contributed to the construction of knowledge on what constitutes good practice and effective strategies from the perspective of those experiencing educational disadvantage and barriers to progressing to higher education. This knowledge generated by the study guided the selection of both general and specific policy recommendations and also, recommendations for practice in efforts to ameliorate educational; disadvantage and widen participation in higher education for this cohort of students.

The research affirmed the applicability of cultural capital theory in contemporary research on educational disadvantage. The theory elucidates how the conceptual elements of educational disadvantage interact and manifest as educational disadvantage in real life settings. The study expands existing applications of cultural capital theory that focus on individual dimensions of cultural capital, revealing the intersectional nature of all three

forms of cultural capital. Institutionalised cultural capital played the most significant role in encouraging parental involvement and enabling parents and students to navigate the educational system successfully.

Empirically, this research provides evidence of how the elements of educational disadvantage manifest in a real-life setting, yielding significant original data that documents the respondents' experience of educational disadvantage. The empirical evidence also identifies the specific elements of interventions that can improve academic performance and increase progression to third level education among underrepresented students, providing many insights for practice. Evidence of how educational disadvantage's socio-cultural and academic aspects converge in a real-life setting and their impact on a particular cohort of students and their parents uncovered both the challenges and the type of strategies that work. Insights for practice emerging from the study's themes include:

- **Raising Aspirations/expectations** requires teachers, parents, and students to hold high expectations of academic success. High expectations can translate into increased aspirations by creating environments that provide ongoing guidance and support. Respondents identified this guidance and support which is an integral element of the Study Club as contributing to improving their academic achievement. This study underscores the salient role of aspirations and expectations on educational outcomes for marginalised students.
- **Parental Involvement** - The study advanced an understanding of the types of parent involvement activities that were successful

among the cohort of disadvantaged parent. The frequent and informal meetings between parents and Study Club staff were identified by respondents as contributing to more positive parental involvement and engagement in the education of their children. The additional learning materials/resources provided by the Study Club to parents, enabled them to actively participate in the education of their children. Parental involvement initiatives that engage parents as co-educators positively influence academic outcomes for marginalised students.

- **Addressing Soft Barriers** – The Study Club’s recognition of and efforts to deal with soft barriers such as lack of academic and social confidence raised student confidence and college application competency, increasing students' probability of progressing to college. The study demonstrates the impact of addressing the soft barriers to education on marginalised students and shows the need for such barriers to be addressed in policies and interventions so as to raise disadvantaged students’ academic achievement and progression to higher education.
- **School Culture/Habitus**– Schools that recognise the culture/habitus of all students irrespective of their backgrounds contribute significantly to improving students' academic outcomes. Culturally inclusive learning environments are important to counter educational disadvantage.

- **Class Size and Numeracy & Literacy** – The benefits of learning in small groups or in one to one situations at the Study Club were identified by respondents reinforcing the belief that disadvantaged students gain significantly from such opportunities. Small group learning environments were found to improve numeracy and literacy proficiency and indeed performance in all subjects. Small group size also led to increased and more positive teacher/student engagement. Teacher/student ratios are inversely related to academic outcomes for disadvantaged students.
- **Peer Learning** – Peer learning at the Study Club emerged as an effective tool to plug gaps in individual students' knowledge by harnessing collective knowledge and academic ability to improve individual students' academic outcomes. Opportunities for peer learning promote better academic outcomes for students.
- **Mentoring** – The ongoing mentoring at the Study Club emerged as a key element in the effectiveness of the intervention. Mentors close in age to the mentees were contributors to student success as they can relate to these individuals more easily. The positive influence of mentors on disadvantaged students helps counter educational disadvantage.
- **Successful Interventions** – The combination of socio-cultural and academic supports provided by the Study Club, that were flexible and responsive to students and parents' requirements and delivered by relevant people in appropriate locations contributed to

improved academic outcomes of the respondents. Interventions to address educational disadvantage should be flexible and coordinate supports to counter socio-cultural and academic elements of educational disadvantage simultaneously.

8.5 Recommendations

The insights and findings from the study suggest a number of general and specific policy recommendations, and recommendations for practice in designing and delivering interventions to address educational disadvantage.

8.5.1 Recommendations for Policy

General Policy Recommendations

- **Continuation and expansion of tailored, multi-faceted interventions** such as the Study Club in order to improve academic achievement and increase progression among disadvantaged students. Review of the after-school programmes and supports provided by School Completion Programmes to identify opportunities to mainstream afterschool study clubs as a core element of their afterschool programmes.
- **Implement and resource an ongoing continuum of support model**, ‘where supports are categorised as available for all, for some and for a few’ (2021:7), as advocated by the DES in their guidelines on how to support continuity in the learning of students at risk of educational disadvantage during COVID-19.

Specific Policy Recommendations

- **Continually review the issues concerning class size, literacy and numeracy**, which affect students experiencing educational disadvantage. Class size reduction is a policy priority under DEIS and has been reduced at primary level but not at secondary level, The Department of Education and Skills should make class size reduction strategies a policy priority at secondary level as part of their ongoing strategy to address educational disadvantage.
- **Restore and expand career guidance provision** to enable the type of personalised IAG shown as effective by this study. The Department of Education and Skills should prioritise the restoration of financial and human resources to DEIS schools to support students and their parents make the transition to higher education. The career guidance teacher/student ratio should be reduced and hours allocated to career guidance increased in DEIS schools as a matter of policy priority.
- **Identify innovative ways to implement raising aspiration strategies and activities** in schools through collaboration between DEIS and the HEA to achieve the National *Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* regarding raising aspirations. Raising aspirations is a central pillar of the DEIS plan; however tangible strategies and interventions have yet to be implemented in DEIS schools. HEA strategies and initiatives should be mainstreamed in DEIS schools to promote and normalise third level education for disadvantaged students.
- **Enable parents to play a fuller role by** (a) widening availability of the

parental engagement components of the HSCL and SCP, which provide advice, guidance and support in the transition to higher education process and (b) enlisting the National Parents Council to increase low SES parents' knowledge of the benefits of higher education. Enlist HEI's under PATH3 to target students and parents in primary schools to promote third level education early in the education life cycle to normalise and demystify it.

8.5.2 Recommendations for Practice

- **Foster a school culture** that is inclusive, thereby addressing some of the socio-cultural aspects of disadvantage. Revise initial teacher training and continuous professional development programmes to highlight the influence of socio-cultural discontinuities between these families' home and school environments.
- **Review and revise curriculum content and timetabling** to maximise the opportunities for individual and small group teaching and engagement between students and teachers.
- **Promote Peer learning by identifying** opportunities in existing school timetables and curriculum content to encourage and promote peer learning amongst students to harness their individual knowledge and strengths so that all students may improve their learning outcomes. Increase emphasis on collaborative project work amongst students to stimulate peer learning.
- **Realign parent/school interaction** to enable a better blend of formal and informal interaction between disadvantaged parents and

schools/teachers. Enlist HSCL officers and School Completion Programme personnel to forge stronger links and regular engagement between parents and schools/teachers.

- **Address the social and personal development issues, which form soft barriers** to progression. The existing SPHE and Wellbeing programmes could be adapted to build academic and social confidence in students and parents. The SPHE and Wellbeing programmes have the potential to develop a framework of values, attitudes, dispositions, and skills towards education that will positively inform their views of the benefits of education and the opportunities higher levels of educational attainment may provide and the positive impact this can have on their futures.

- **Increase the use of mentoring for academic and progression purposes.**

Collaborate with the national ‘Student Volunteer Programme’ to expand the use of HEI volunteer mentoring programmes and AEE (Alternative Education Experience) programmes to provide personalised mentoring to students on progression routes and application process to higher education institutions and tuition to enhance academic outcomes.

8.6 Areas for Further Study

In recent years, similar interventions have been implemented by various HEIs prior to and within the PATH 3 funding from the HEA. Additional comparative research should be carried out on these interventions to determine their effectiveness and pool the learning from the various initiatives. This would augment the transferability and generalisability of the empirical findings of this research. Research is also warranted on the impact of interventions implemented under the School Support Programme (SSP) both on their

intrinsic impact and their impact vis á vis external interventions.

A sample of teachers involved with the AccessCampus development board was interviewed to ascertain their perspectives as educators on the findings of this study. One of the issues they raised was the rise in private grinds which they saw as further disadvantaging these students and they welcomed the Study Club intervention that provided tuition at no cost to enable disadvantaged students to compete with more affluent students for college places. Further study on the prevalence and implications of paid private tuition would be useful, not only for its relevance to interventions such as the Study Club but also, since Canny and Hamilton (2018) cite it as a form of objectified cultural capital among the middle class students who can afford such tuition. Teachers have first-hand experience of the challenges of supporting disadvantaged students within the constraints imposed by the structural and organisational elements of the education system. While they have been involved in evaluations of DEIS, additional research should be conducted with schools and teachers:

- To gain insights into how they perceive the educational system's structural and organisational nature as affecting how they work with and respond to the needs of disadvantaged students and parents
- To ascertain first their views and insights into how their students' participation in external tailored interventions affected engagement in classroom-based learning, participation and educational progression.
- To ascertain teachers' views and input on the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions to address educational disadvantage.

Institutionalised cultural capital emerged in this study as playing a mediating role in

optimising embodied and objectified cultural capital to improve academic outcomes for individuals from lower SES groups. This is particularly relevant to parental involvement and raising educational aspirations. Further research could reveal the intricacies of all three forms of cultural capital's inter-dependent nature and provide significant insights for policy development and implementation, particularly in addressing the soft barriers that influence academic and social confidence necessary to raise academic achievement and progression to higher education.

Due to ethical limitations, it was not possible to conduct research with current students of the Study Club. Future research should be conducted with students presently attending the Study Club to ascertain their experience of educational disadvantage. Such research may reveal how the academic and socio-cultural domains of educational disadvantage manifest in contemporary educational systems and how interventions could be adapted.

8.7 Concluding Comments

The COVID-19 pandemic served to highlight the social inequalities in education, with disadvantaged students being particularly affected by resource and digital divides. Mohan et al. captured the socio-educational impact, asserting that 'students' lower enjoyment of education and belief in its value as well as a lack of family experience with education and capacity to assist students' learning at home are compounded to reduce student engagement' (2020: 68). Lack of access to the supports provided under the SSP served to marginalise these students even further. School closures highlighted the importance of finding innovative ways to provide individualised supports tailored to students' specific academic and socio-cultural requirements.

Responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic confirmed that the socio-cultural

and academic domains of educational disadvantage continue to be salient issues. The educational impact of the crisis reinforces the need for interventions such as the Study Club in countering educational disadvantage and raising academic achievement for marginalised students and families. This study provides a working example of an effective intervention and provides conceptual, practical and policy insights about educational disadvantage, including aspects of disadvantage exacerbated by the pandemic.

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Appendix A

Member Interview Schedule

Interview No. ____ Interview Type ____ Date/Time ____/____

Gender ____ Age ____ Year Completed Leaving Cert. _____

DEIS School Yes/No Yes

Interview Questions (Former members of Study Club)

Section 1: Introduction and Community Context

1. What secondary school did you go to?
2. Did you have any educational resources at home (e.g. educational books, computers, internet access, quiet place to study etc.)
3. Did you engage in any cultural activities with your family (e.g. concerts, trips to museums, exhibitions etc.)?
4. Did you have any cultural resources at home such as musical instruments, art objects etc.
5. What was school like? Did you feel that you fitted in with the other students and teachers?
6. What did you do after the Leaving Cert?
7. Who or what influenced you to go to college?
8. Who did you seek advice from about going to college?
9. Was there an expectation that you would go to college by your teachers and the AccessCampus Staff?

Section 2: Raising Expectations

10. Did your expectations of education change between 1st year and 6th year, please explain?
11. Were you encouraged to go to college, and if so who encouraged you to go to college? (*make sure they take about teachers and study club*)
12. If your ambitions changed, what in your opinion caused this change?

Section 3: Tuition in one to one or small group

13. What was it like trying to learn and study in at school?
14. Was the school environment familiar to you or not? (*make clear not the physical environment*).
15. Did you feel that you had anything in common with your teachers?
16. Tell me about your interaction with your teachers? (*Did you feel comfortable asking for help at school, please explain?*)
17. How do you think this influenced your school work?
18. What was it like trying to learn and study at the Study Club?
19. Tell me about your interaction with tutors at the Study Club? (*Did you feel comfortable asking for help at the study club, please explain?*)
20. In your opinion, did working in small groups improve your academic achievement? (*if so, why?*)

Section 4: Numeracy and Literacy

21. Did you read for pleasure outside of school?
22. What was your experience of learning Maths and English at school? (*Make sure respondents talk about both*)

23. What was your experience of learning Maths and English at the Study Club/UL?
(Make sure respondents answer about both)
24. Where did you prefer to learn maths and English, at school or at the study club, please explain?
25. What was your experience of the tuition in subjects other than maths or English at the Study Club?
26. What element of the Study Club did you believe was most beneficial to your academic achievement and progression to higher education?
27. Was there a single element or was it a combination of elements? *Please explain further.*

Appendix B

Parent Interview Schedule

Interview No. ____ **Interview Type** ____ **Date/Time** ____/____/____ **Gender** ____

Age ____ **Child's Gender** ____

Section Five: Parental Involvement

1. What did you see as your primary role in your children's lives/education?
2. What hopes/expectations did you have for your child's education?
3. What kind of experience did you wish for them to have in school?
4. What did you think would enable them to have this experience in school?
5. What barriers did you believe existed to prevent your children doing well in school?
6. What barriers did you believe existed to prevent your children going to higher education?
7. What role did you wish to play in your children's education?
8. Did you feel you were able to play this role, please explain?
9. What would have helped you to be more involved in your children's education?
10. What was your involvement in your children's education at home?
11. What was your experience of being involved in your children's education in their school/with their teachers?
12. What was your experience of being involved in your children's education at the study club?
13. How would you compare these experiences (between the school and the study club), please explain?
14. Who did you go to for advice on your child's education (e.g. CAO, SUSI, HEAR applications)
15. Did your child go on to college?
16. What kind of leisure activities did you engage in with your children?
17. Can you tell me about your children's television viewing habits?
18. Can you tell me about your reading habits at home, both yours and your children's?
19. Did you read with your children?

20. Did you talk to your children about what you both were reading?
21. Can you tell me about your children's reading habits other than for school work?
22. Can you tell me about your musical tastes?
23. Did you engage in any cultural activities with your children?
24. What educational qualifications do you have?
25. What was the highest level of education in your own family? (*i.e. Your brothers/sisters, cousins, aunts, uncle*)

Appendix C

Teacher Interview Schedule

Class Size/Numeracy and Literacy

Q. What are the challenges of teaching approximately 30 students in one class?

Q. In your opinion, are there benefits to reducing teaching/student ratios?

Q. In your opinion, why do students struggle with numeracy and literacy?

Q. How can numeracy and literacy proficiency be improved?

Parental Involvement

Frequency and Nature of parental involvement, Additional Resources

Q. How would describe the nature of interactions with parents of members of the study club compared to parents whose children are not members of the study club?

Q. Have you ever advised parents about educational resources that they may use at home with their children?

Q. How can parental involvement be improved in your opinion?

Raising Aspirations

Q. What factors influence your expectations that your students will progress to college?

Q. In your opinion, how can teachers raise educational/aspirations of students from lower SES backgrounds?

Q. Can you tell me about the career guidance offered in your schools?

Most Important Elements of Study Club

Q. How would you rank the elements of the study club in order of importance to improving academic achievement and raising progression to higher education?

Appendix D

Member Interview Code Book

Node	Description
Class Size	Learning in regular size classes and in small groups/one to one
Belonging in School	Participants' sense of belonging in school
Class Size	Learning in regular size classes and in small groups/one to one
Belonging in School	Participants sense of belonging in school
Expectations	
In Common with Teachers	Participants' perception of having anything in common with their teachers
Interaction with Teachers	Participants' experience of interacting with teachers
Learning regular classes	Experience of learning in regular size classes at school
Most beneficial element	Element of Study Club most beneficial to academic success
Care	Level of care provided by Study Club staff

Node	Description
One to One tuition	Experience of One to One tuition at Study Club
Expectations	
In Common with Teachers	Participants' perception of having anything in common with their teachers
Interaction with Teachers	Participants' experience of interacting with teachers
Learning regular classes	Experience of learning in regular size classes at school
Most beneficial element	Element of Study Club most beneficial to academic success
Care	Level of care provided by Study Club staff
One to One tuition	Experience of One to One tuition at Study Club
Expectations	
In Common with Teachers	Participants' perception of having anything in common with their teachers
In School after -school study	Experience of study clubs provided in school after normal hours
Influenced to go to college	Source of influence to go to college
Inspiration to other family members and friends	Evidence of inspiring others from same background that they too can succeed academically

Node	Description
Institutionalised cultural capital	Evidence of enhancing institutional cultural capital
Progression to higher education	Evidence of progression to higher education (Institutionalised Cultural Capital)
Raising Aspirations	Did expectations change between 1st year and 6th year for each student
Changing ambitions	If ambitions to go to college, why did they change?
Encouragement	Encouraging students to go to college
Enhanced habitus	evidence of enhancing habitus and social mobility
Environment	Creating an environment conducive to learning
Raising Expectations	Evidence of who raised the expectations of members/students
Advice about going to college	Sources of advice about progressing to college
Small group tuition	Participants' experience of learning in small groups or one to one
Learning Pace	Learning at a pace that suits
Peer Learning	Learning from other students in group
Specific Notes and resources	Receiving notes and resources that are specific to student's needs
Tailored to Student's needs	Tuition specific to individuals needs

Node	Description
Snobbery	Students experiencing discrimination bases on social background.
Teacher Expectations	
Wanting to succeed in education	
Whereas this guy knew! And he didn't go too fast. He made sure we understood the material before we moved on	

Appendix E

Parent Interview Code Book

Node	Description
Advice on COA HEAR SUSI	Parents' explanations of where they go advice on CAO HEAR SUSI
School and Teacher	Parents' primary source of advice from the school and teachers
Social Network	Parents primary source of advice was form social networks
Study Club	Parents' primary source of advice as at the Study Club
Ah, well certainly with my son anyway, there was a special ed. teacher in the school, and she offered to have him taught how to type, and am, you know, she went through how to get his grammatical waivers.	
Allowed to play this role	Parents belief that they could play this role
No	Parents not allowed to play this role
Yes	Parents allowed to play this role
Barriers to education	Parents' perceived barriers to education
Barriers to Higher Education	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education for their children
Cost of education	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education for their children

Node	Description
Lack of career guidance	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education for their children
LCA and PLC	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education for their children
Non-traditional routes	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education for their children
Points system	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education
School Experience	Type of school experience parents wanted for their children
Schools and Teachers	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education for their children
Subject Choice	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education for their children
Supporting Students	Parents' perceived barriers to their children going to higher education
Tracking and Streaming	Parents' perceived barriers to higher education for their children
Child go to College	Parents' children who went on to college
No	Child didn't go to college
Yes	Child went to college
Children's T.V. viewing habits	Parents' rules on their children's' TV viewing habits
Internet usage	Parents' rules on internet usage at home
T.V.	Parents' rules on TV viewing

Node			Description
Cultural Activities with Children			Parents' accounts of the cultural activities they did with their children
	Concerts		Parents' cultural activities with their children
	Festivals		Parents' cultural activities with children
	Museum		Parents' cultural activities with their children
	Panto		Parents' cultural activities with their children
	Theatre		Parents' cultural activities with children
	Theme Parks		Parents' cultural activities with their children
Discontinuity between home and school			Difference between home and school environment
Elements of positive experience on school			How to ensure a positive experience in school
Encouragement from teachers			Support to be more involved
Experience with study club			
	Environment		Parents' experience of the study club
	Individuality		Parents' experience of the study club

Node	Description
Non-judgemental	Parents' experience of the study club
Openness and Willingness	Parents' experience of the study club
Partnership	Parents' experience of study club
Positive	Parents' experience of study club
Relaxed	Parents' experience of the study club
Resources	Parents' experience of study club
Experience with teacher school	Parents' experience of being involved with teachers school in education of their children
Attitudes	Parents' experience of teachers and schools
Arrogance	Parents' experience of teachers schools
Barriers	Parents' experience of teachers schools
Limited	Experience of teachers and schools
Negative	Parents' experience of teachers and schools
Openness and Willingness	Parents' experience of teachers schools
Positive	Parents' experience of teachers schools

Node	Description
Help to be more involved	Parents' views on what help they could have got to be more involved
Better educated	Parents' believe being better educated would allow them to be more involved
Resources	What would have helped parents to be more involved with the education of their children
Support from Teachers	Support to be more involved
Hopes and Expectations	Parents' hopes and expectations for their children in life
Enjoy school	Positive experience in school
Leisure activities	Parents' leisure activities with their children
Cultural activities	Parents' cultural activities with their children for leisure
Physical Activities	Parents' physical leisure activities with their children
Parent role in Education	Role parents would like to have in the education of their children
Active Role	Role parents would like to have in the education of their children
Knowledge of education system	Parental familiarity with educational system
Subordinate	Parents feel subordinate in their role in the education of their children
Parents Education	Highest educational qualification parents hold

Node	Description
Bachelor's Degree	Parents' Highest Educational Qualification
Intermediate Certificate	Parents' Educational Qualifications
Leaving Certificate	Parents' Highest Educational Qualification
Level 5	Parents' Highest Educational Qualification
Level 6	Parents' Highest Educational Qualification
Level 7	Parents' Highest Educational Qualification
Master's Degree	Parents' Highest Educational Qualification
PhD	Parents' Highest Educational Qualification
Parents home involvement	Parents' involvement in their child's education at home
Ability	Parents ability to be involved in the education of their children at home
Active	Parents taking an active role at home
School support	Parents receiving support from school to be involved in education at home
Parents Musical Tastes	Parents' explanations about their musical tastes.
Primary Role	Parents' views on their primary role as a parent
Confidence	Primary role

Node	Description
Reading at home	Parents promoting reading in the home
Reading Habits	Parents' reading habits at home with their children
School V Study Club	Parents' opinions on involvement with school compared to the study club
Collaboration	Parents comparing their interaction with school to their interaction with the study club
Lack of knowledge in school.	Parents comparing their interactions with school and the study club
Model	Parents comparing their interaction with school to their interaction with the study club
Non-comparable	Parents comparing their interaction with school to their interaction with the study club
Proactive	Parents comparing their interaction with school and the study club
Types of interaction	Parents comparing their interactions with school and the study club
Types of relationships	Parents comparing their interaction with school to and their interaction with study club
Social background matters	How social background influenced teacher/student interactions
Social Mobility	Education as a means of promoting social mobility

Node	Description
Teacher expectations	Teacher expectations based on social background

Appendix F

Ethical Approval

Dear Brid,

This email is to confirm that we have reviewed Sean Costello's ethics application (reference: 2017-10-08-AHSS), and it has been approved. He may now begin his data collection.

Best regards,

Scott

Scott Fitzsimmons, PhD

Lecturer in International Relations

Chair of the Postgraduate Committee

Chair of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences Ethics Committee

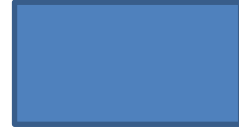
Department of Politics & Public Administration

University of Limerick

Appendix G

Participant Consent Form

Please tick if you consent to be interviewed for this PhD research



- I consent to be interviewed for this PhD research.
- I have read and understand the information letter provided to me.
- I am 18 years of age or older.
- I understand what the research is about and what the information provided will be used for.
- I understand that no one else other than the researcher will have access to the interview transcript.
- I am aware that the researcher currently works for the University of Limerick.
- I know that my participation in the research is totally voluntary and that I may refuse to answer any question(s) I so wish.
- I know that I can withdraw from the interview at any stage without providing a reason.
- I have had sufficient time to read and consider this consent form and the information included in the letter.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about this study.
- I am happy that I received satisfactory answers to all my questions and any other concerns that I may have.

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix H

Participant information Letter and Invitation to Participate in the Research

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Seán Costello and I am a part-time student at the University of Limerick, studying for a PhD in Politics and Public Administration. In this study I am looking to ascertain the perspectives of individuals on the education system. I am particularly interested in learning about how education has served you in the past, and how it may better serve future generations of students.

If you agree to participate in this research, I ask that you participate in a one-to-one interview at a time and place that is suitable and convenient to you. I would like to record the interview, to ensure that the accounts gathered may be accurately represented. The interview should last approximately one hour. If you agree to be interviewed, you may choose not to answer some or any of the questions put to you. Also, should you wish the interview will not be recorded, and please feel free to withdraw from the interview process at any stage without feeling compelled to provide a reason.

I promise to protect your anonymity by ensuring that no one will be able to identify you in any way throughout the interview process and subsequent final thesis report. If you wish to have a copy of the interview, when I have transcribed it, I will be happy to provide you with one. After transcription the recording will be destroyed. In the meantime all data collected during the research process will be stored securely in password protected electronic files, stored on my personal computer. Should you have any concerns regarding this research and wish to speak to someone independently about your concerns, please feel free to contact: **Faculty of Art, Humanities and Social Sciences Administrator, University of Limerick, 061-202700** or fahssethics@ul.ie . If you are happy to be part of the research process, can you please sign the attached form *Consent for Interview*. I look forward to listening to your views and learning from your experience and insights. Your participation in this study may make a valuable contribution to educational research.

Finally, I wish to take this opportunity to thank you most sincerely for giving of your time and for considering being part of this research.

Yours faithfully,

Seán Costello